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## PRACTICE GENEALOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGY AS PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To map the converging principles of the various practice theories and present their implications for the research agenda of the strategy as practice.

**Originality/gap/relevance/implications:** The research program of strategy as practice (S-as-P) is an intellectual heir of the studies based upon practices present in contemporary social theory. Field theoreticians reinforce the importance of a self-conscious application of the theory of practice, an ambition that requires an allegiance to the notion of practice. Facing this situation, the contribution of this work is: 1. to enable a first approach with the philosophical assumptions of the theory of practice; 2. to serve as a basis for a thorough examination of the research agenda of S-as-P; 3. to serve as inspiration for scholars to be concerned about the fundamental concepts of their researches.

**Key methodological aspects:** Theoretical essay elaborated from a systematic review of the literature.

**Summary of key results:** Review of critical concepts for the S-as-P (e.g.: notions of social/organizational reality, practice, agency, strategy and articulation of these concepts with influential visions in the field of strategy), showing their unique aspects – facing the procedural approaches in strategy and previous theoretical perspectives in the social sciences that use the word practice – and stimulating the development of research of ethnographic inspiration, cartographic or similar.

**Key considerations/conclusions:** The effort undertaken is an attempt to bring to surface the assumptions that guide the turn of the practice, avoiding the reproduction of theoretical models, without understanding the principles on which they were drawn up.

## KEYWORDS

Practice. Theory of practice. Strategy as practice. Agency. Organizational ontology.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The strategy as a practice or strategy as a social practice is a recent theoretical current whose institutional framework was the EIASM workshop (European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management), held in Brussels (Belgium), in 2001; organized by teachers Gerry Johnson, Leif Melin and Richard Whittington, in order to reflect on the proposition of a research tradition in strategy focused on micro processes (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008).

In broad terms, the S-as-P is considered an intellectual tradition that plans the setting of the strategy field through breaking the shackles imposed by the modernist<sup>1</sup> detachment and the economic theory and, at the same time, the emergence of an agenda due to a sociological look (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2004; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2004). Its starting point is the claim that the traditional strategy research program neglects the participation of individuals in daily strategy, prioritizing the firm and industry structure as explanatory elements of business performance (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2004). It has been advocated that even procedural inspiration strands - the vision-based resource and the theory of dynamic capabilities, for example - have brought to the center of their analysis the various strategic actors and did not emphasize the strategic action as an event located in time and space, i.e., a socially constructed behavior in interactions among individuals who bring historical links (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

It can be said that the S-as-P defines its analytical focus on strategizing. In this way, the strategy is not defined as a property of organizations (something that organizations have), but something that its members do; strategizing is properly the result (materiality of shares) of the interrelationship between praxis, practices and practitioners (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006), as shown in Figure 1.

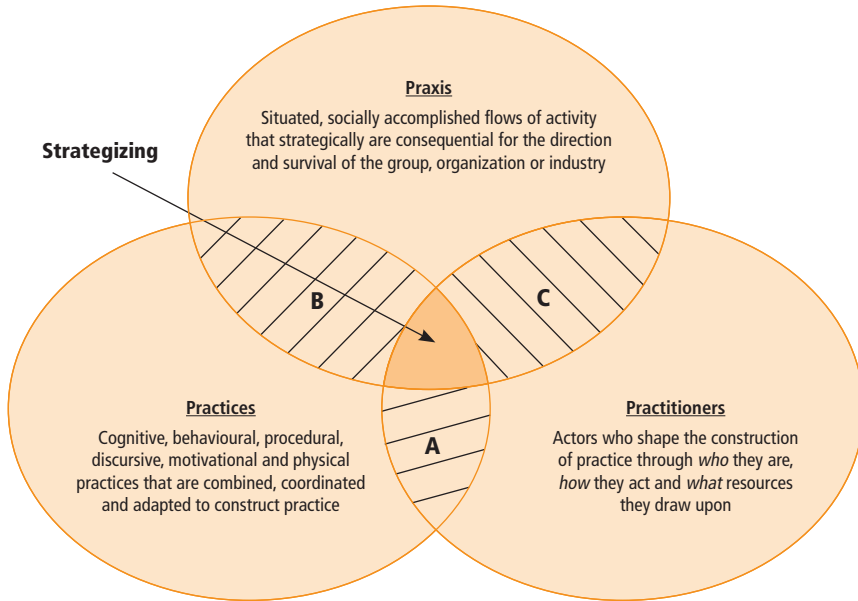
The praxis, practices and practitioners triad is the key framework for conducting research in this approach (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007, Whittington, 2006). Briefly, by praxis (or activity), the work done by strategists to make the strategy should be understood. The term practical refers to the set of constituent elements of praxis, that is, they are the socio-material elements of praxis such as: technology, routines, objects, ideas, logical thinking, etc. Finally, practitioners refer to the senior management traditional strategists, but also include other subjects of organization (Whittington, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Modernism has kept a constrained strategy in epistemological terms; it has been considered the top scientific impartiality to practical engagement, the superior general of the context, and the upper quantitative to qualitative (Whittington, 2004, p. 45).

FIGURE I

S-as-P FRAMEWORK



Source: Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007).

Whittington (2006) makes it clear that such framework is a concept translation of the practical theory field in the social sciences to the strategy field as a social practice. Thus, the movement of strategy as practice is an intellectual heir of practice-based studies present in contemporary social theory (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2004; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007, Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006), called “practice turn” (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005). Whittington (2011) emphasizes the importance of self-conscious application of practical theory and points to a necessary dialogue between the several researches focused on this concept, coming from different academic disciplines, stating that the heart of this trans-disciplinarity is the intellectual loyalty to the notion of practice. Vaara and Whittington (2012) resumed the same question to present obstacles that must be overcome for the advancement of research on S-as-P. A similar movement was made by Seidl and Whittington (2014). Previously, Chia and Holt (2006) had warned that incorporating the theory of practice in management studies involves acquiring a new vocabulary to address the organizational phenomenon and is, therefore, necessary to understand the basics of the practice concept and its consequences.

That being said, the issue that motivates this theoretical essay can be summarized by the question: what are the principles of practice theory and its implications, especially, for the S-as-P field? From there, this essay aims to perform a rescue of converging aspects of the practice theories family that form the backdrop to the S-as-P and related approaches – for an initial contact with the various lines of research that are the practice field studies, see CBEO (2014; 2015). The contribution of this work is: 1. to serve as inspiration for scholars to be concerned about the fundamental concepts of their field of research, so that the practice-based studies – or more specifically those linked to the S-as-P – are not content for automatically reproducing an analytical framework of hegemonic academic articles in the field; 2. to comply with a didactic function, to guide – not limit – a first approximation of interest in the philosophical assumptions of the theory of practice; and 3. to serve as a reflection source for building search schedules for the field of the S-as-P for exploring a greater number of theoretical elements, making the most inventive research. We expect at the very moment that there is some diffusion of studies based on practice, there may be, in the same way, a reflection on the origins of this possibility of research, observations made by Chia and Holt (2006), Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), Gherardi (2015), Seidl and Whittington (2014), Vaara and Whittington (2012) and Whittington (2011). As stated, this intellectual exercise is to function as an escape route for the trap, always imminent in scientific practice, of theoretical models reification.

After this introduction, comments on the theoretical choices that guided the mapping of the converging principles of an/a (im)possible theory of practice follow. Consecutively, the implications of this discussion for the research agenda of the S-as-P are presented. Yet some brief information: throughout the article, we use the theory of practice expression as a reference to a general theoretical framework (a meta-theory), covering the various analytical currents based on the practical study. However, this does not mean that there is a belief in the existence of a conceptual homogeneity around the theme. Hence the topic's title irony 2.1: "Mapping an/a (im)possible theory of practice". What is presented in this study is one of several possible set of principles that it is believed to be linked to a practice meta-theory, so that researchers can think about it, establishing agreements and disagreements with this text.

## 2 RECOGNIZING THE FIELD OF STUDIES BASED ON PRACTICE

The concept of practice in social sciences and philosophy of the twentieth century is heterogeneous; however, there is a reasonable consensus that its foun-

dations are in Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s formulations (Chia & Mackay, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Chia & Rasche, 2009; Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2006; Schatzki, 2005; Schatzki, Cetina, & Savigny, 2001). Reckwitz (2002) mentions that one can find elements of practice theory in researchers who developed their work in the last third of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, it would be a virtually unachievable task to address this issue by rebuilding the particular version of each relevant author on the screen field. It has been chosen, therefore, a comprehensive approach concerned to find common themes to these theoreticians. Use has been made, mainly from contributions from Rouse, Reckwitz and Schatzki – authors linked to the field of philosophy – and a second group of texts, written by Chia, Mackay, Rasche, Holt, Miettine, Sanra-Fredericks, Seidl, Vaara, Whittington, Yanow, etc., linked to organizational studies. That was the path chosen to be the recognition of the practical field of study on the multiplicity of eligible prospects. We share with Rasche and Chia (2009, p. 714), the objective of seeking “[...] the theoretical lineage of the practical approaches without necessarily seeking a singular basis”, an analytic movement also made by Bispo (2015).

## 2.1 MAPPING AN/A (IM)POSSIBLE THEORY OF PRACTICE

There was an effort to map an/a (im)possible theory of practice making use of Reckwitz (2002). For the author, the singularity practice theory is in the way of understanding the real/social: such onto-epistemological aspect does not elect as analysis of the locus for mental qualities, the speech or interactions, but the practices. And what does this assertion mean? The answer lies in the concept attributed to the practices:

[...] [Practice] routinised is a type of behavior, which consists of various elements, interconnected with each other; forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background in the form of knowledge and guidance for understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249).

The concept of practice is anchored in the idea of arrangement or, in its equivalent, the notion of situational context, as in Schatzki (2005). Moving forward,

<sup>2</sup> Miettinen *et al.* (2009) understand that the recent movement coined the “practice turn” consists of the second generation of theoretical practice marked by the contributions of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. First developed during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth through the thought of Hegel, Marx, Charles Pierce, John Dewey, Jean-Paul Sartre and Charles Taylor.

Reckwitz (2002) adds, stating that a practice sets a bundle/set, “[...] whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and the specific interconnectivity of these elements cannot be reduced to one of these elements individually” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249, emphasis added).

This distinction raised by Reckwitz (2002)<sup>3</sup> poses a problem brought by Rouse (2006) on the possible risk of superficiality that surrounds the concept of practice, due to its widespread use. Rouse (2006) believes, however, that there are specificities presented by theoretical practice. The author chose a few idiosyncratic issues, being careful to warn that, in some cases, scholars differ in the treatment given to them. Two of them were highlighted, portrayed in Figure 2 and developed in sequence.

FIGURE 2

## TWO MAIN ISSUES RELATED TO THE THEORY OF PRACTICE



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The first concerns the problem of attribution of meaning to human action, an issue that can be addressed by the bias of the Kantian paradigm of representation or from the pre-representation of logic (or understanding) of Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s inspiration.

There is a line of thinking in the social sciences that is based on the belief that society is governed by institutions, insofar as they are carriers and diffusers of social norms. This idea stems from the Kantian ideal of a normative society in which individuals interpret actions and respond from the meaning assigned to them and the environmental context in which they are inserted (Rouse, 2006). Heidegger and Wittgenstein criticized this conception. Wittgenstein states that the rules are not self-interpretative. Given a rule, there are several possible paths to follow and before interpreting it, understanding it is necessary (Rouse, 2006). Similarly, Heidegger considers that the understanding is a previous notion to the interpretation (or its synonym, representation); the latter is one of the possible ways of understanding, but every interpretation is carried out from an understanding (or

<sup>3</sup> Reckwitz (2002) draws a distinction – somewhat radical in relation to other theoretician mentioned in this essay – between theories that use the concept of practice and those committed to the pursuit of a singular practice theory. In this regard, see the referred article or a brief discussion in Silva (2014).

competence) that is not explicitly articulated, i.e., individuals make decisions and behave in accordance with inherited prior knowledge of lived world experience, but these are information operated thoughtlessly (not articulated, invisible) (Chia & Holt, 2006; Rouse, 2006). For Wittgenstein, this background is formed by arrangements that emerge from the language games (the language in use), while for Heidegger is the doing itself, its own everyday immersion (Yakhlef, 2010).

In this way, interpretation is only possible from a background on the situation, which is prior to a mental content, a reflection, an interpretation, a deliberate action or even a symbolic representation. This line of thinking questions the autonomy of rules (or explicitly articulated meanings and norms) in the direction of human actions (Chia & Mackay, 2007; Chia & Holt, 2006; Rouse, 2006). The following explanation is instructive.

For Heidegger, interpretation occurs whenever someone interprets something “like” something, when someone interprets something like a hammer, using it to drive a nail or making explicit statements about it. In both cases, the interpretation is only possible on a previous understanding of the situation; this previous agreement provides three important contributions to the intelligibility of interpretation. On Heidegger’s hammering example, one must understand the overall context of joinery (the relationship between hammers, boards, nails, buildings or furniture and the various purposes they serve), must have a notion of how to proceed (hammers must be handled by the handle and precise blows should be given, instead of throwing them anyway, you should hit the nail’s head and so on), and its interpretation is governed by a general sense of what you should do to fulfill your task (Rouse, 2006, p. 503).

The second theme proposed by Rouse (2006) is an offshoot of the first and denotes the practice of theory of position in the debate on the relative priority of agency or structure (social or cultural) in the social landscape portrait. There are traditionally the subjects that portray the field of social sciences, a dichotomous logic that seeks to explain life in society by the action of subjects (agency capacity of individuals) or by the action of structures (institutions and norms) (Giddens, 2003). At one pole, there are the propositions that tend to methodological individualism<sup>4</sup>, other applications that make use of a “sociologizing” vision, granting

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<sup>4</sup> The central premise of methodological individualism is to seek explanations for social phenomena in the intentions of actors and their motivations, admitting that human action arises from purposes made by individuals who, in turn, are driven by previous intentional states, dependent on mental representation (Chia & Mackay, 2007; Chia & Holt, 2006), from there, the word individualism is derived, i.e., a reference to the notion of an “isolated” individual as being responsible for their actions. Methodological individualism does not favor the individual on the team, but the individual on the relation, that is, on the understanding that social reality is a bundle of elements that are intertwined.



the social structures the possibility to determine human actions. How does the theory of practice articulate the agency-structure question?

The escape route adopted by the practice theories family is the belief that there is immanent practice logic; the agency capacity is neither given to the actors, nor to the structure (Chia & Mackay, 2007<sup>5</sup>; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002; Rouse, 2006; Schatzki, 2005; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). The individual goals – and the same notion of the individual – and social norms are the result of a process of public and collective construction, triggered by practices, i.e. by individual performances, earning intelligibility due to the existence of a background (pre-representative state quoted above); practices, therefore, constitute this *background*.

Schatzki (2005) calls this background ontology site, a type of situational space-time (or context) that constitutes/anchors human existence, which endows meaning to the sensible reality and that makes us understand what being a human is, for example. The practices are and consist of this background, one portraying intelligibility space that guides human actions – as opposed to the notion that the individual or institutional agencies govern actions. In the practice theory, the agency is “exercised” by the intelligibility of space, that is, the constituent elements of the practice – body, speech, mind, objects, etc.

Agents, so to speak, are the practices themselves (which include – to emphasize this point, again, not only the body but the mental routines). As practices drivers/carriers, they are not autonomous or completely subservient to the rules: they understand the world and themselves and use their know-how and motivational knowledge, according to a particular practice. There is a precise place to the “individual” – distinct from the agent of the place – in the practice theory (although the theoretical hardly address this question): as there are several social practices, and like any agent performs [executes, conducts] one multitude of social practices, the individual is the only point of passage of the practices, bodily-mental routines (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256).

Therefore, thinking from the concept of practice, it implies abandoning the micro-macro duality, as if they were separate analytical levels, and thinking in terms of an instance (one intelligibility space) culturally shared, historically constituted (the result of a trajectory) and forged in everyday actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Miettinen *et al.*, 2009; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). In other words, individuals and context/world are in continuing relationship/ontological equality

<sup>5</sup> Chia and Mackay (2007) make use of the trans-individual expression to highlight the ontological primacy of practice on human agency.

(Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Miettinen *et al.*, 2009; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005; Yakhlef, 2010). One cannot be conceived independently of the other, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the two; this is a key aspect for the family of practical theories (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). It should be emphasized that the idea of background should be understood dynamically – that is, from the notion of constitutive mutuality and not as a rigid structure – through its production / reproduction / transformation in practice and its transmission to new practitioners.

The notion of mutual constitution implies that social orders (structures, institutions, routines, etc.) cannot be conceived without understanding the role of agency in producing them, and similarly, agency cannot be understood “simply” as human action, but rather must be understood as always already configured by structural conditions. The ongoing nature of this constitutive relationship indicates that social regularities are always “in the making”; that is, they are ongoing accomplishments (re)produced and possibly transformed in every instance of action (Gherardi, 2006; Reckwitz, 2002 cited by Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242).

In this sense, the academic research conducted under the practice theory prism should direct attention to the issues (Rouse, 2006): If practices are consolidated standards of activities carried out over time by multiple actors (and may even include more than one generation of practitioners), how are these standards maintained, transmitted and imposed over subsequent performances? How do these standards govern, influence or constitute the actions of individuals and themselves? How are the resistance and change processes forged? What are the power relations involved in this dynamic?

Seidl and Whittington (2014) have written a paper that helps us to further reflections on the treatment given by the practice theories family to the classic problem of agency-structure. Researchers argue that the various perspectives available in the literature can be grouped into two major ontological positions, namely:

- Tall ontology: the focus is on the vertical joints between the micro level, mezzo and macro. Theoretical perspectives linked to this position: 1. Foucault’s discourse analysis and Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA); 2. structuring theory of Anthony Giddens; 3. critical realism of Margaret Archer; 4. narratology (the strategy is seen as the consumption and production of a discursive practice); 5. Pierre Bourdieu’s perspective; and 6. perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language games.
- Flat ontology: the focus moves to the connections (relations) extending laterally between the various human and non-human actors. The macro-social

level, for example, “[...] is not a different kind of stuff to micro; fundamentally it is a set of interactions too” (Seidl & Whittington, 2014, p. 10). Therefore, the researchers “[...] avoid macro features parking in an unexamined and taken-for-granted ‘context’ and are prompted to commit fully to inductive and ethnographic types of methodology” (Seidl & Whittington, 2014, p. 10). The theoretical perspectives related to this program are derived from the sociology of translation (also known as Actor-Network Theory), associated with Michel Callon, John Law and Bruno Latour, among others, which emphasizes the primacy of emerging and contingent actions, as well as changing nature of the social context and the role of improvisation, everyday persuasion and negotiation (Gherardi, 2015).

Such perspectives have in common the fact of denying a polarized view of social action, and seek to break visions parking in micro or macro analytical level, however, theoretical possibilities (private mechanisms) (Seidl and Whittington, 2014) different to the interweaving are presented. The notion of a purely intentional action is also denied (the monopoly of intentional operative rationality to explain human actions is denied) and, it should be noted, finally, that “all these theories insist on the embeddedness of particular episodes in larger social phenomena, but they differ in whether they see these phenomena as bearing down from above or connecting from beside” (Seidl & Whittington, 2014, p. 7). It may be bold to say that both differ with respect to the understanding of causality of social phenomena. The tall ontology tends to assign a causal power to historical and cultural events, while the flat tends to emphasize the assemblages that take place in the “here and now”, without neglecting, of course, the historical and cultural ties. The two ontological positions should be explored by studies based on practice, as supported by Seidl and Whittington, because they have advantages and disadvantages.

The paper is, undoubtedly, an important contribution to the knowledge of convergent principles to practice theory, even recognizing that tall and flat dimensions exist as “ideal types”, not as empirically verifiable realities – for example, Chia and Holt (2006) following the perspective of Guiddens and Seidl (2007) with a Wittgensteinian approach, are shown as belonging to the tall paradigm, but also flat. A worth commenting point, in order to establish a dialogue with the above comments on the subjects 1 (pre-representation vs. representation) and 2 (logic immanent to practice), is that the two ontological positions give the agency an immanent logic to the practice. It is believed that as important as highlighting the ontological difference around the micro and macro social, is to highlight the commitment of the practice meta-theory, in our view, it seems to be the emphasis on lived action (immersion / engagement in activities) and intelligibility required to do so. Everyday actions produce the outlines of social life, as explained by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011, p. 1241),

[...] argues that everyday actions are consequential in producing the structural contours of social life. Although this principle is worked out differently by different theorists, the general principle of consequentiality is found throughout practice theory.

Micro and macro exist as abstract instances, the live plan exists as actual instance; it is in this plan that the practices are located.

Well then, it is clear from the conceptual path traced so far, the notion of social as a nexus of practices that constitute/carry intelligibility spaces (Schatzki, 2005). The social order consists of a field (a mesh) of objects, speeches, relationship with the space, among others, forming a totality crossed by several social orders. Thus, the practices are not only speech acts (speaking or writing), but routinized patterns of the body, behavior, objects and other engagement processes in reality (Reckwitz, 2002). As stated by Gherardi (2015), in principle, researchers agree that, in theory, practices are constituted by this set of “ingredients”, but disagree on the emphasis given to each. Therefore, working with this expanded concept of practice is therefore one of the great challenges of the social sciences. We understand that it is up to the researcher, in each case, to assess the importance given to these elements in the situation under investigation.

## 2.2 AN ATTEMPT AT SYNTHESIS: CONVERGING PRACTICE THEORY PRINCIPLES

Given the plurality of information presented, it has been recovered, in this topic, the central ideas (onto-epistemological principles), exposing them in the form of a summary Chart 1.

CHART 1

### CONVERGENT PRACTICE THEORY PRINCIPLES

Reality is socially built.	The practice theories family believes that reality (the social) is not objectively given, thus, there is no given and unique reality to all ( <i>a priori</i> ) but socially permanently built concepts.
The subject is not seen as an atomized and generic individual.	Individuals are taken as being immersed in a social life, whose skills, nationality, gender and all influence in their way of life (and work). Human actions are understood as directly linked to their context. Therefore, individuals are social beings whose possibilities are defined by the practices in which they are immersed (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

(continue)

CHART I (CONTINUATION)

CONVERGENT PRACTICE THEORY PRINCIPLES

<p>Existence of a background of <i>a priori</i> understanding of human interpretive scheme (pre-reflective dimension / implicit cognition and human action).</p>	<p>Human understanding is a previous operation to the interpretation (or representation), it is a non-explicitly articulated knowledge called background or pre-reflective state, or even culture Interpretation is one of the possible ways of comprehension, but every interpretation is made based on an understanding. As seen, the practices are conductive/carriers of a cultural load, forming the background to the action (Chia &amp; Mackay, 2007); Intelligibility is the space for action (Schatzki, 2005); They are therefore an instance (resonance) of the background. It follows that the historical and cultural characteristics are inherent to the concept of practice and the identification of social practices cannot be confused with mere description of individual activities or organizational routines/processes. In a nutshell, “[...] ‘practice’ implies more than simply practical” (Vaara &amp; Whittington, 2012). This caution was also highlighted by Bispo (2015).</p>
<p>Logical concept of the immanent practice.</p>	<p>Front the structure-agency debate, the practice of theory provides a line of flight that is the belief in an immanent logic of practice. Thus, the agency capacity is neither given to the actors nor to the structure/organization but to the practices. The individual goals and social norms are the result of a public building process and collective triggered by practices. Front the structure-agency debate, the practice of theory provides a line of flight that is the belief in an immanent logic of practice. Thus, the agency capacity is neither given to the actors and nor to the structure/organization but to the practices. The individual goals and social norms are the result of a public and collective building process triggered by practices.</p>
<p>Knowledge emerges from the engagement in the world.</p>	<p>In the practice theory, the possibility of knowledge is given from the experience in the world (immersion in the life plan, the lived). The act of knowing is not separated from doing.</p>
<p>The focus should be on patterns of production, reproduction and changing practices.</p>	<p>From the practical theory framework, the following issues should be focused on: how are the practices maintained, transmitted, modified, and imposed on the subsequent actions? How do these standards govern, influence or constitute the actions of individuals? How do individuals describe/organize their own reality? In answering these questions, researchers should be aware of the merger between the local and global practices, finally the binomial action-context.</p>

(continue)

CHART I (CONCLUSION)

CONVERGENT PRACTICE THEORY PRINCIPLES

Expanded Practice conception.	The practical arrangements are made of speech, body, mental processes, artifacts, knowledge, etc. The sociability is therefore a beam of practices.
Possibility to understand organizations as a bundle of socio-material practices.	In practice theory scope, organizations are less understood by its structural dimension/static (from traditional categories, such as hierarchy, size, efficiency/economic efficiency, functional areas, among others) and more by the relational aspect manifested in the flow of daily actions, which portray practices composed of discursive elements and non-discursive and human and nonhuman.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the following topic, the implications of these principles in the research agenda of the S-as-P will be addressed. We believe that such reflections are to a greater or lesser extent, applicable to related fields centered on the concept of practice.

### 3 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD OF STRATEGY AS PRACTICE

The debate on the “turn-of-practice” in contemporary management science generates relevant insights for research based on the S-as-P. Some of them are discussed below, without, of course, exhausting the subject.

As stated, the practices are routinized patterns of collective actions constituted by activities, speeches, body movements, etc. arising from socio-historical situations. The share is understood as a beam of practices. The S-as-P therefore understands organizations as a beam of practices. The focus shifts from the organization as an abstract analysis locus for discernible patterns through daily interactions between individuals and non-human elements that are part of this relationship.

Indeed, it is believed not being enough to say that the S-as-P is a research program that is distinguished from others by devoting to micro-analytical level, as other theories did so – as an example, VBR, Pettigrew ‘s procedural approach, evolutionary theory – without, however, looking into social practices. Apart from individual agency and organizational plans – and beyond the micro-macro dualism – it is necessary to look at the dynamics of organizations through practices. The identification of social practices cannot be confused with the mere descrip-

tion of the individual or organizational processes activities (an inventory of activities or processes). Johnson, Melin and Whittington (2003 cited by Brown and Duguid, 2000) argue that the practice is something that is within the process. In the first view, this idea differentiates procedural approaches in strategy from those focused on practice, called by post-procedural approaches by Chia and MacKay (2007). Agents and organizational processes are subject to the practices. The practice, therefore, conveys a rationale for action and is culturally absorbed by the social actors. The individuals/organizations are seen more as carriers/drivers of practices than as responsible for determining the actions and events. For Chia and MacKay (2007), this is an important difference in the S-as-P to the procedural approach to strategy carried out by Pettigrew.

In this way, the S-as-P can be seen as a perspective that dignifies the micro level of analysis (understood as the daily plan and not as local level), provided that such a framework does not neglect broader aspects relating to institutions, to the power, the macroeconomic aspects, etc. (this point has been emphasized by the recent literature, see, for example, Coraiola, Oliveira, & Gonçalves, 2012; Coraiola, Mello & Jacometti, 2012; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, Johnson & Melin, 2004). The concern of the S-as-P is that organizations (or the social, in a broader way) are produced/reproduced continuously and therefore research should be concerned about capturing this inventive movement that is daily life (in this regard see the concept of “organizations as they happen” (Miettinen *et al.*, 2009; Schatzki, 2006). Obviously, thinking that way implies expanding the understanding of who the practitioners of strategy are, going beyond those responsible for developing a strategic plan or those who occupy a position of management/coordination. The S-as-P has sought to recognize the existence of a wide range of strategists, questioning the naturalized division of labor in the corporate environment, in which only the high dome (top managers) is seen as able to think strategically and the other actors are taken as executors. This discourse legitimizes certain positions of power and organizational roles, as Vaara and Whittington (2012) warn. Authors argue that the S-as-P should worry about how and why some individuals are part of the strategic process and others do not and how the forces of resistance to this dynamic occur.

The S-as-P also suggests, inspired by Carter *et al.* (2008), to suspend, provisionally, the conventional sense of the word strategy, so that you can reflect on what practices are perceived as strategic, as opposed to other not perceived as such. Empirical research shall give those answers.

Another aspect to be mentioned is the fact that the S-as-P is not the only research program that criticizes the current concept of strategy as a deliberate pattern of actions. This criticism had already been made by Henry Mintzberg

and colleagues, at the end of the 1970s; Mintzberg is known to say that strategies can arise as a result of spontaneous actions (not previously intentional) (Chia & Holt, 2006), called emerging strategies. Chia and Holt (2006) recognize that when attention is drawn to the unintended dimension in the formation of the strategy, Mintzberg approaches the idea that strategy emerges from the practical everyday world confrontation. However, the authors believe that Mintzberg did not explore how the unintentional actions are inserted in consistent patterns of action. Chia and Holt (2006) understand that this gap is caused by inadequate theorizing about the agency problem. Only thinking of the agency linked to the concept of practice, it is possible to conceive how non-deliberate actions respond to patterns of action – we call strategy – which, in turn, admit the possibility of change, that is, we must remember that there is a contradictory nature of a set of practices, responsible for creating a permanent negotiation in organizational routine (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

The organization is both a given structure (i.e., a set of established generic cognitive categories) and an emerging pattern (i.e., the constant adaptation of those categories to local circumstances). Institutionalized cognitive categories are drawn upon by individuals-in-action but, in the process, established generalizations may be supplemented, eroded, modified or, at any rate, interpreted in oftentimes unpredictable ways (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 573).

Naturally, what is meant by strategy is not limited (thus also does not exclude) by the changes that are institutionalized in organizations. If so believed, the daily nuances would be missed, everyday improvisation would be missed, i.e., all human actions are not incorporated into the organizational formal system (the untold!). The study of strategy from the practice of the theory of lenses is not in any of the two poles (hegemony or improvisation). It is the tension between them. Vaara and Whittington (2012, p. 17) report that the size of improvisation (emerging practices) has been neglected in empirical studies and the progress of the investigation with a focus on S-as-P goes to recover this dimension and its dialectic relationship with deliberate strategies:

This neglect is surprising: the practice perspective's ability to pay close attention to what is actually happening in organizations gives SAP researchers a special sensitivity to the informal, unscripted activities through which strategies often emerge. Close studies of strategy emergence is a significant opportunity for advancing SAP research (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 17).



[...]

Thus, this kind of research [one reference to S-as-P] has the potential to elucidate the dialectic of deliberate vs. emergent strategies; i.e. the way in which both deliberate and emergent strategies contribute to the evolution of organizations (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 18-19).

That being said, it is believed that the central problem is not sharing the notion that the strategy is a consistent pattern of actions. The question is being careful to identify these patterns (and their possibilities of change) starting from the practice concept, incorporating the idea of a cultural background to human actions, and that includes knowledge as a content that emerges from the lived experience and, which therefore opens to the importance of inventive events. In this way, the researcher avoids the risk of confusing strategy with a set of decisions taken in a transcendent plan unlinked to the lived. In other words, for S-as-P strategy is understood as an epiphenomenon of socio-cultural practices, which does not mean, again, that such practices do not allow changes. A possible name for this notion is an immanent strategy sense.

This is an important aspect that merits detailed attention. The reader might be asking himself: what about the daily routines of the strategists of an organization? What about their beliefs, values, assumptions, feelings and perceptions? What about the formal planning by the members of the organization? Doesn't all this affect the action of individuals? Aren't these aspects moving the subjects? The forces of change are not, in the words of Chia and Mackay (2007, p. 225), "imposed by the desire of conscious actors"?

The answer is yes and no. It is, because the fact that all these intentional actions are responsible for the decisions and changes made daily cannot be escaped, that is, they form the daily concrete experience, representing what usually we call organizational strategy. However, the answer is also no, because such intended actions are understood as "secondary retrospective rationalization" (Chia & Mackay, 2007, p. 229), in other words, they are the result of a previous stage, called pre-representational, constituted by history, the territory, the cultural mediations, socialization of the individual, internalized habits, mannerisms, etc. (Chia & Mackay, 2007; Chia & Holt, 2006). Thus, in the process of strategic decision making, the intentional actions (planned, deliberate) coexist with unintentional provisions (emerging shares or shares resulting from an internalized *modus operandi*), being the first a result of the latter.

We insist on the relevance of this point of view, for not understanding this theoretical subtlety is the subject of frequent confusion between the terms practice, processes, activities and routines. There is, with some attendance, a colloquial

use of the term practice distinct from what is here proposed. In an attempt to avoid this misunderstanding, use of Chia and Mackay (2007) has been made: to shift the focus of attention to the study of individual activities, events and situations, such as the actions, speeches and the work of strategy practitioners, daily strategist routine and strategic episodes, does not imply removing the centrality of agency power of individuals, that is, it does not imply questioning the autonomy of individuals as decisive-aware actors.

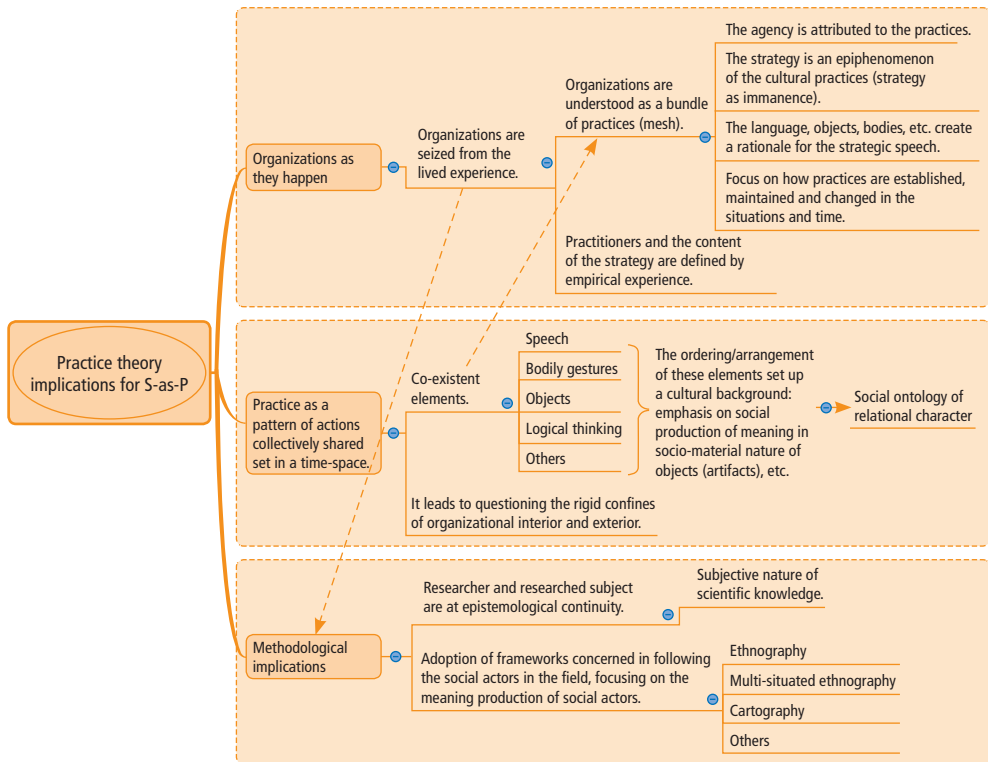
Given these considerations, following Rasche and Chia (2009) and Vaara and Whittington (2012), six research axes have emerged as challenges for future research from the onto-epistemological framework of S-as-P:

- To identify routinized patterns that constitute the organizational agency. Such arrangements shall consist of the following elements: speeches, ways of speaking, walking, greeting, gestural movements, etc. Together they form a network of practices with a degree of stability and instability;
- To articulate organizational and societal practices. The S-as-P has minimized the influence of societal practices, a phenomenon that Seidl and Whittington (2014) called micro-isolationism. Organizations have been addressed in empirical studies as isolated containers, i.e. there is a fragile empirical understanding of the context of organizational practices;
- To be concerned about the mapping of emerging practices and its dialectical relationship with the formal institutionalized practices, seeing organizations as a phenomenon that is made and remade all the time;
- To focus on the use of material artifacts (or lack thereof): it must be described how objects (the use of computers, PowerPoint, etc.) constitute the practices and how they facilitate or limit the same. The meaning of objects is determined by the use made of them (socio-materiality);
- To understand the construction of the identity of the strategy practitioners: engagement in social practices is the identity of individuals and establishes positions of power. There is a recursion between strategy and identity. Strategic practices do more than pointing decision-making paths, they include and exclude, legitimize and delegitimize actors and speeches (Vaara & Whittington, 2012); and
- To undertake critical nature analysis, covering topics such as democratic or centralizing nature and exclusive participation of organizational actors in the strategic process definition, the gender issue (the prevalence of male values in decision-making), the adoption of “organizational fads” and its implications on the strategic practice, among others.

Finally, Figure 3 as a result, is an attempt to summarize the implications of the theory of practice to the field of S-as-P in a conceptual map.

**FIGURE 3**

**POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRACTICE THEORY IN S-as-P RESEARCH**



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

We figured it became clear that the research agenda of the S-as-P reclaims disciplinary approaches (philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, etc.) and imposes methodological challenges. Linking the concept of practice to social production notions of meaning and the immanence demand plan, in our view, the recovery of an ethnographic sensitivity (see Marcus, 1995; Latour, 2006), the cartographic of Deleuze and Guattari (Passos & Barros, 2009; Sousa & Souza, 2014) or related approaches concerned to follow or track social actors and their practices over time. The in-depth consideration of the theoretical and methodological guidelines more adherent to the S-as-P is not the subject of this article (Bispo, 2015). The

aim is to mention general guidelines and make clear the importance of these reflections for conducting research consistent with the onto-epistemological principles of practical theory.

With respect to of the notes made, we believe that this essay fulfills the purpose of contributing to the research agenda of the field of strategy as a social practice and encourage researchers to go deeper on key concepts that underlie their field of work. We reiterate that the reader must not understand the effort being made in an attempt to homogenization around the practical issue, but as a step towards promoting academic research that brings to light the many views on the assumptions that guided the turn of the practice in the social sciences and to investigate how these principles have been and continue to be reflected in the research design, avoiding the trap of rectification/playback theoretical models without understanding the conceptual principles on which they were drawn up.

## GENEALOGIA DA PRÁTICA E SUAS IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A ESTRATÉGIA COMO PRÁTICA

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Mapear os princípios convergentes das diversas teorias da prática e apresentar suas implicações para a agenda de pesquisa da estratégia como prática.

**Originalidade/lacuna/relevância/implicações:** O programa de pesquisa de estratégia como prática (S-as-P, em inglês) é um herdeiro intelectual dos estudos baseados em práticas presentes na teoria social contemporânea. Estudiosos do campo reforçam a importância de uma aplicação autoconsciente da teoria da prática, ambição que passa por uma fidelidade à noção de prática. Diante desse quadro, a contribuição do trabalho está em 1. possibilitar uma primeira aproximação com os pressupostos filosóficos da teoria da prática; 2. servir como base para um exame aprofundado da agenda de pesquisa da S-as-P; 3. servir como inspiração para que acadêmicos se preocupem com os conceitos fundamentais de suas pesquisas.

**Principais aspectos metodológicos:** Trata-se de um ensaio teórico elaborado a partir de uma revisão sistemática da literatura.

**Síntese dos principais resultados:** Revisão de conceitos críticos para a S-as-P (p. ex.: noções de realidade social/organizacional, de prática, agência, estratégia e articulação desses conceitos com visões influentes no campo da estratégia), evidenciando seus aspectos singulares – frente às abordagens processuais em estratégia e às perspectivas teóricas anteriores nas ciências sociais que utilizam

o vocábulo prática – e, dessa forma, estimulando a realização de pesquisas de inspiração etnográfica, cartográfica ou similares.

**Principais considerações/conclusões:** O esforço realizado é uma tentativa de trazer à tona os pressupostos que orientam a virada da prática, evitando a reprodução de modelos teóricos, sem que se compreendam os princípios sobre os quais foram elaborados.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Prática. Teoria da prática. Estratégia como prática. Agência. Ontologia organizacional.

## **GENEALOGÍA DE LA PRÁCTICA Y SUS IMPLICACIONES PARA LA ESTRATEGIA COMO PRÁCTICA**

### **RESUMEN**

**Objetivo:** Mapear los principios convergentes de las diversas teorías de la práctica y presentar sus implicaciones para la agenda de investigación de la estrategia como práctica.

**Originalidad/laguna/relevancia/implicaciones:** El programa de investigación de estrategia como práctica (S-as-P, en inglés) es un heredero intelectual de los estudios basados en prácticas presentes en la teoría social contemporánea. Teóricos del campo refuerzan la importancia de una aplicación autoconsciente de la teoría de la práctica, ambición que pasa por una fidelidad a la noción de práctica. Ante ese cuadro, la contribución del trabajo está en 1. posibilitar una primera aproximación con los presupuestos filosóficos de la teoría de la práctica; 2. servir como base para un examen profundizado de la agenda de investigación de la S-as-P; 3. servir como inspiración para que académicos se preocupen con los conceptos fundamentales de sus investigaciones.

**Principales aspectos metodológicos:** Es un ensayo teórico elaborado a partir de una revisión sistemática de la literatura.

**Síntesis de los principales resultados:** Revisión de conceptos críticos para la S-as-P (p. ej.: nociones de realidad social/organizacional, de práctica, la agencia, la estrategia y la articulación de estos conceptos con visiones influyentes en el campo de la estrategia), mostrando sus aspectos únicos – sobre los enfoques procesales en la estrategia y perspectivas teóricas previas en las ciencias sociales

que utilizan la palabra práctica – y estimulando el desarrollo de la investigación de inspiración etnográfica, cartográfica o similar.

**Principales consideraciones/conclusiones:** El esfuerzo realizado es una tentativa de sacar a la luz los presupuestos que orientan la virada de la práctica en las ciencias sociales, evitando el armadillo de la reproducción de modelos teóricos sin que se comprenda los principios conceptuales sobre los cuales fueron elaborados.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Práctica. Teoría práctica. Estrategia como práctica. Agencia. Ontología organizacional.

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