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Reconsidering the ‘Practice Lens’:

**A Plea for an Extension of Institutional Analyses
in the Realm of Structuration Theory**

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests reconsidering a recent trend in organization research with respect to structuration theory in which the focus on practice dominates. By drawing on some accounts from Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) it will be shown that there is still a potential to extend the duality model by theoretically analyzing the interrelations between rules and resources. This paper takes a closer look to issues about technology because in this realm of organization research, structuration theory is one of the main theoretical backgrounds.

Keywords: structuration theory, duality model, organization research

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1. Introduction

This paper suggests to reconsider a recent trend in organization research with respect to structuration theory in which the focus on practice dominates. The dominance on practice not only tends to prefer empirical research but, especially, it tends to omit (and due to its dominance – maybe – to impede) the analysis of the inherent logics of the structural conditions in Giddens' model. It seems that, within the community, the idea reveals that this model might exhaustively be developed without the need to reconsider the implications of this model on the basis of institutional analysis.

By drawing on some accounts from Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) it will be shown that there is still a potential to extend the duality model by theoretically analyzing the interrelations between rules and resources. This paper takes a closer look to issues about technology because in this realm of organization research, structuration theory is one of the main theoretical backgrounds. It starts with some accounts about the emergence of the “practice lens” (Orlikowski 2000). It follows Schulz-Schaeffer's perspective on the institutional implications of the structuration model. The paper ends with some implications for organization research.

2. Missing the Full Potential of Giddens' Duality Model

Aiming to depart from technological determinism and from the idea that technology would embody structure, it was, among others, Orlikowski's (2000) contribution that directed academic research about the organizational role of technology towards a focus on human practice (“technology-in-practice”). Referring to Giddens' (1979; 1984) idea about the mere virtual existence of structures, she abandoned the idea that technology within organizations would be an embodiment of organizational structure. For Giddens as well as for Orlikowski, (organizational) structures need to be enacted by people in order to be existent. Even if technology incorporates “symbol and material properties, it does not embody structures because those are only instantiated in practice” (Orlikowski 2000, p. 406).

In the following, organization research with reference to Information Systems (IS) has followed broadly this perspective (Jones & Karsten 2008; Rose & Scheepers 2001). As a consequence, the focus on human practice has dominated even the rather engineering-driven research stream of IS.

Its domain, the inherent structural conditions of technology within organizations, changed to research towards human practice. Everyday human practice in relation to the technical environment of people also shaped the discussion in other structuration theoretical streams of organization research, for example about the shaping of technology by designers and users, both at the same time (Orlikowski & Barley 2001), or about technology as narrations (Pentland & Feldman 2007). Also, the most recent contributions on the interrelations between technology, human conduct, and organizational structures, an approach named as “sociomateriality” (Scott & Orlikowski 2008), emphasis the realm of practice as an enactment of structure.

To focus on observable social practices and actors’ strategic conduct seems to be obvious with respect to Giddens’ scheme of the ‘duality of structure’ (1984). Giddens insist on structures as mere virtual entities whose existence lies within human subconscious (“memory traces”). Structure, therefore, is strongly bound to the enactment by human practice. However, focusing solely on strategic conduct or everyday practices and practice patterns tend to create some blind spots about institutional characteristics of the symbol and material properties of technology. In this sphere, i.e. in the sphere of institutional analysis, discussions about Giddens’ scheme of duality with respect to technology is rare. Even the IS research community tend to focus on strategic human conduct and conduct questionnaire research in order to investigate the strategies of organization members.

Accounts about the structural conditions of technology, if made at all, in many cases are done with reference to Actor Network Theory (see Scott & Orlikowski 2008). The question, then, arise whether Giddens’ model of the duality of structure might not be adequate for an institutional analysis. A decent institutional analysis would focus on the interrelations between the several structural conditions as they are described in Giddens’s model (interpretive schemes, facilities, norms). Orlikowski herself offered such an institutional analysis when she and her colleague Joanne Yates worked on “Genres of Organizational Communication” (Yates & Orlikowski 1992). Despite her ongoing research on technology in organizations and despite her ongoing reference to Giddens’ model she never (and barely someone else) has been conducting a likely decent institutional analysis like the one she conducted together with Yates. She (and most other researchers following her herein) tend to focus on practice and if it comes to institutional analysis, they tend to refer to other frameworks such as Actor Network Theory.

However, Yates and Orlikowski showed in their genre study (1992) that an institutional analysis is informative. In this historical study they *methodologically bracketed* (Giddens 1979) practice by taking certain social practices as given and exclusively drew on a repertoire of parameters with which the structural elements of Giddens' model (rules and resources) could be described and interrelated. They employed the rhetoric conception of genres as social institutions and reformulated it in terms of structuration theory. With this perspective they were able to describe the reproduction of information processing throughout two centuries – beginning with the business letter and culminating in the technology of email messaging.

In the realm of structuration theory and the study of technology in organizations there have barely been a similarly deep institutional analysis. One reason might be that Yates and Orlikowski were able to draw on a rich literature about rhetoric theories in general (in fact, the institutional properties of rhetoric is a topic since Aristotle). Especially with their reference to the academic discussion about genres, which, for a long time, has also been dealing with the two core elements of structuration theory: rules and resources, the authors were able integrate the elements of genre theories with the highly abstract structuration model. However, it seems that a similar repertoire of middle range theoretical accounts about rules and resources, from whatever academic discipline they might come, is missing when it comes to technology in general.

So how could we address the inherent logic of structures in order to create new models or, at least, to give a thick description about technical artifacts in organizations, their emergence, their changing characteristics, their role in organizational change, etc.? Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) draws on the structural characteristics of rules and resources in Giddens' model and shows an innovative way to describe the technology's own logic.

3. An Institutional Perspective on Technology

First, we must take into account that within an institutional perspective the practice patterns in relation to Giddens' duality model might not be the objects of investigation but, nevertheless, serve as independent variables. This means assumptions about practices are taken-for-granted and need not being challenged (e.g. by empirical evidence, etc.). They are *methodologically bracketed* (Giddens 1979). Schulz-Schaeffer, in his analysis, takes human action for granted but his argumentation, nevertheless, starts with an explicit critique on accounts about the practice orientation of Giddens, who, like the research streams mentioned above do, has tended to focus

on human practice and neglected institutional analysis (Schulz-Schaeffer 1999). The critique also affects Bourdieu's "habitus" conception (Schulz-Schaeffer 2004) because the habitus shows many similarities to Giddens' idea about the virtual characteristics of structures in form of "memory traces".

It follows, first, a short notice about Schulz-Schaeffer's critique on Giddens and Bourdieu in which he introduces the issue about *action orientation*. Based on this account, Schulz-Schaeffer suggests an extension of Giddens' model by another kind of duality, that of resources and routines, which will be presented after the critique. It follows a description about the consequences of this extension of Giddens duality model, especially for the role of codified rules.

3.1 The Practice of Orientation

Giddens' memory traces as well as Bourdieu's habitus, both can be seen as embodied history on which actors more or less implicitly draw while they act. Schulz Schaeffer argues that neither Giddens (Schulz-Schaeffer 1999) nor Bourdieu (Schulz-Schaeffer 2004) would analytically address the issue of *prospection* as a human practice. In fact, both conceptions refer to practices with a *retrospective* orientation. This is the reason why Giddens, following Wittgenstein, can say that codified rules are not the real rules but the practice patterns of the past are. The ability of (consciously or subconsciously) memorizing them and orientate on them constitute the real rules, i.e. the "rules as such" (Giddens 1984, p. 21).

Projective orientated practices, on the other hand, draw on formal, i.e. codified rules. According to Schulz-Schaeffer, both, Giddens and Bourdieu would admit that the practice of *prospection* goes along with the ability to appeal to codified rules (Schulz-Schaeffer 1999, p. 414). Codified rules, however, are a necessary feature of everyday action. The more 'dangerous' (Bourdieu's term) the situation is, the more unambiguous codified rules need to be (Schulz-Schaeffer 2004).

Regarding the "rules as such" as the non-codified structural conditions ("interpretive scheme" and "norms") in Giddens' structuration theory, this would mean that, with respect to action orientation, only the rule aspect is addressed but not the resource aspect ("facility") of action orientation. This is, because the latter needs to be prospective (Schulz-Schaeffer 1999, p. 414).

3.2 Interrelation of Retrospective and Prospective Action

According to Schulz-Schaeffer, the shortcomings of addressing the resource aspects of action orientation in Giddens' and Bourdieu's theories (and, therefore, in many contemporary technology studies) can fairly easily be solved. The question for Schulz-Schaeffer is, how rules and resources are interrelated, i.e. how retrospective and prospective action orientation can be integrated into one single model. With reference to Giddens' (1984) 'duality of structure' and Orlikowski's (1992) 'duality of technology' Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) suggests another duality: 'technology as the duality of resources and routines'.

Technical artifacts are resources insofar as they establish correlations of events that are foreseeable. This means, the more explicated the correlation of events are (as codified rules), the greater might be the distance to implicit social practice patterns. Hence, codified rules may offer an alternative to the common ground. People can appeal to these explications and have, therefore, a secure basis for their decision. "Expert systems" emerge in which secure correlations of events are systematized as foreseeable impact of rules. In systems like these, rules get codified and shaped into instructions or technical artifacts (Giddens 1991). Accordingly, the delegation of rules can happen in two ways (Schulz-Schaeffer 2004): originators can delegate rules to people who execute them (to end-users or to experts in other fields that process the rule further); they also can delegate rules to techniques which mechanically execute them (e.g. to machines or by algorithms to information technology).

The first way, however, needs to include societal factors of rule following. As practice theoreticians in the tradition of Giddens and Bourdieu may know, Wittgenstein's argumentation about the infinite regress of rule formulation calls for some kind of interpretation and enactment by society. This, again, refers to norms and interpretive schemes (Giddens) or habitus (Bourdieu), respectively. It constitutes the routine aspect of the duality in Schulz-Schaeffer's model. There needs to be practice patterns that enact on the codified rules without discussing all aspect of the codification. Wittgenstein (2000, §85) refers to a sign-post as an example of a rule and asks: "But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?" This, according to him, is not a matter of logic but of social practice. The sign-post example, however, is rather clear and does not need to be discussed. It is a routinized practice to interpret the sign-post towards following the finger – at least in the

Western culture. Without this (cultural) routine (here: interpretive scheme according to Giddens) the codified rule of the sign-post would not work.

Hence, experts that formulate rules and constitute expert systems would have problems if they gave practice patterns no credit. But what exactly does it mean to give more credit? An analysis of codified rules and mechanisms of their impact might be necessary.

3.3 Rule-Impact Mechanism

The former chapter made clear that a mere analysis on implicit practice patterns would not describe how codified rules cause efficient outcomes, because the human practice of prospection (conscious orientation and calculus) gets not enough analytical credit. To do this it is necessary to take a close look to the interrelations between the practice of orientation on codified rules on one hand, and implicit practice patterns on the other. In terms of the technical artifact, the mere act of delegating a rule causes some kind of material rule impact whereas delegating a rule to other actors the rule impact refers to the whole complexity of social issues. In this realm, how a rule impacts depends, first, on the knowledge of the community (according to Giddens' model: "interpretive scheme"). Second, it depends on the norms existing within this community. Whether a rule will be followed or not can, according to Schulz-Schaeffer (2004), be a matter of individual calculation. Then, the routine of implicitly following a rule (acting with retrospective orientation according to practice patterns) gets disturbed, the actor inhibits his action and reinterprets the situation. If the calculus turns out positive (i.e. following the rule would prospectively be beneficial), the rule will be followed.

On the other hand, there still needs to be a kind of close relation between implicit practice patterns and the codified rule. With respect to steering a car, an example that Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) suggests, it is necessary to have an idea about cars and use scenarios towards them. Normative codified rules can only be successful if the user is able to follow the instructions. He needs to acquire a certain amount of knowledge about this issue.

Hence, codified rules to be beneficial always need to have a close relation to practice patterns in order to be adequately activated. Be they imprinted in technical artifacts or be they written down as instructions or regulations, codified rules need to have a close relation to the real live of actors. When this conditions are met, codified rules offer prospective orientation. The calculus that goes along with prospection and with the ability to appeal to the rule may protect actors and

the expert system from the unforeseeable and the sometimes arbitrary demands that stems from orientation on action patterns. Because, as stated above, calculating on the latter happens retrospectively or, in cases of deeply routinized behavior, does not happen at all.

The ability of making calculations by drawing on codified rules in order to play safe on future situations on the one hand, and existing practice patterns that stay in close relation to this calculation on the other, are, according to Schulz-Schaeffer's model about the duality of resources and routines, the two sides of the equation that, as a consequence, represents technology.

4. Implications and Conclusion

This short paper has shown that referring to structuration theory by employing institutional analyses (i.e. uncovering the interrelations between rules and resources) is still a worthwhile endeavor because the duality model still offers the potential to be extended and to offer new accounts about organizational reality. Theorizing about the structural conditions means to *methodologically bracket* (Giddens 1979) the perspective on practice by taking certain practice patterns as given. This has been shown with respect to the work of Schulz-Schaeffer (1999) who has worked out an extension of Giddens' model and, by theoretically conducting an institutional analysis, concluded his work with a definition of technology. According to this definition, technology can be interpreted as a resource that enables action with a prospective calculus. But in order to exploit this resource, routines, which are represented by structures of implicit social practice patterns, must be taken into account. This duality of resources and routines can serve as a research perspective that avoids unidirectional orientation on social practice which omits the inherent structural conditions of rules and resources and tends to focus on retrospective action orientation of actors.

The accounts on prospective and retrospective action orientation, shaping the duality of resources and routines, has some implications for organization research. First, even if codified rules are, in the words of Giddens, not the "rules as such" but practice patterns, the former serve as resources not only for those who declare them but also for those who align themselves with these rules. These actors may follow codified rules or deviate from them but in each case they are able to calculate their doings. Codified rule, hence, turns into a resource for both, for the rule maker as an authoritative resource (command over actors), and for the addressee – in form of a

calculus – as an allocative resource (command over objects). Having knowledge about the implicit practice patterns of a community serves also as a resource for the declarer of rules. It enables him to follow the principle that ruling should be limited only to a necessary extend. For example, traffic rules do normally not include minimum speed because it is a common practice not to drive by car on a driveway at walking speed even if someone has much time. Only if this common practice would not exist, a codified rule about minimum speed was necessary. Without this practice pattern and without a codified rule, the traffic would break down (Schulz-Schaeffer 1999). Hence, knowledge about practice patterns enables rule makers to spare traffic signs and, accordingly, makes rule systems easier to align to.

Information systems research may profit systematically from including human practice. Therefore, it is a good sign that IS refers to the “practice lens”. Practitioners implicitly did already. One feature of internet applications and web applications for tablets and smartphones is that they are very easy to apply. Different from computer applications of the 1980s and 1990s, when large books has been published that served as guidance, hardly any guidance is necessary with contemporary applications. Among designers, there happens a lot of thinking about usability and one important part of this thinking is to make effort in anticipating the practice patterns of the users – and, going along with the emergence of social media, the practice patterns of communities. What IS researchers need to do is to anticipate the prospective orientation of actors and the interrelation between codified rules and practice patterns.

Organization researchers with reference to structuration theory may also learn from this kind of *design thinking* in order to investigate the rule system of organizations as well as to develop new questions and research agendas towards the institutional interrelations between rules and resources.

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