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## What makes a social practice? Being, knowing, doing and leading

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## ABSTRACT

Despite several decades of work on social practice, many open intriguing questions remain about their existence and functions within an organizational context. In this article, we discuss the “inherent logics” of social practice—being, knowing, and doing—to depict the meaning and mainspring of its conservation within an organizational context. We argue that the understanding of social practice in organization and management studies has predominantly focused on the internal workings of social practice, and we propose that a contextualization of the inherent logics of social practice may be a next step in advancing theory and empirical research. We propose a contested coexistence of social practices in organizations and thereby argue that the conservation of social practice protrudes another element belonging to its inherent logics, i.e., leading. We suggest that leadership in distributed and adaptive organizations responds to innovation and competitive challenges with wisdom, care, and fluidity.

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## 1. Introduction

Social practices are not possible to think away in contemporary organization theory. They engulf forms of working and living, provide meaning and direction, afford safety and routine, engender collective standards and instil ambitions. Without social practices, organizations are empty shells likened to long abandoned and decaying factories photographed by Timm Suess (see <http://timmsuess.com/>). One can only imagine the contrast—what they were like and how likeable they were back then, when they pulsed with the rhythmic noise of practising craftsmen working in concert to produce their wares. As organization scholars, we are often impressed by the vigour and energy of social practices: how much more lively they appear than the empty shell of the formal organization housing them. It is not surprising, then, that we are also often prepared to leave our functionalist understanding of organizations behind to turn to social practices and embrace their unfolding dynamics. However, as we complete our “practice turn” and redirect investigations, it may also be too easy to oversee that social practices necessitate organization structure and function, and vice versa (Ben-Menahem, von Krogh, Erden, & Schneider, 2015; Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 2006). At least, as a function of

producing some form of collective good, social practice inspires quality in work and a narrative in the individual's working life (MacIntyre, 1981).

Although many definitions of social practice exist, we draw attention to one by MacIntyre: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 187). This definition sheds light on the role of values, norms, and standards in social practices, and it illustrates the power of social practices for supporting human achievement. It stands to reason, then, that social practices may seek various ways to achieve and redefine standards of excellence.

The “practice turn” in organization studies understands organizational processes and phenomena as manifestations of underlying practices of work (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991; Schatzki, Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). For example, in organization and management research, this perspective shaped the important field of “strategy-as-practice” (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). Accordingly, organizational activities are manifested by “strategizing”, i.e., the practising of strategy making in organizations, examining the underlying organizational activities of the work that is being accomplished. The practice turn also takes another perspective of organizations

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(Erden, Schneider, & von Krogh, 2014). In addition to the distinct types of practising as in “conducting work”, it offers a renewed view of the social entities that constitute the organization that is enabling and conducting the work. The focus turns to the type of practising that is being done, who or what entities are conducting the practising, and how the interplay of the entities might affect organizational dynamics and work in a broader organizational context. Although a first glance at social practice directs our attention to its internal learning and dynamics, a contextualized view of social practice also reveals its conserving side in an organization’s protection of its ways of doing, being and knowing for the production of what it defines as its “internal goods” (MacIntyre, 1981).

Innovation across practice boundaries has proven difficult because of the epistemic, social, and cognitive idiosyncrasy of social practices (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, Wood, & Hawkins, 2005; Swan, Scarbrough, & Robertson, 2002). As an informal organization, a social practice may produce resistance to change enacted by ingrained work routines (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). However, as Gherardi and Perrotta (2011) note, “a practice is always temporary and open to further re-negotiations” (p. 611). Precisely this delicate characteristic of practices may elevate the efforts by practitioners to conserve the status quo and to protect their identity and way of conducting work, particularly if and when confronted with external pressure towards change and re-negotiation. The conserving function of an informal organization is upheld by the social practices in a formal organization. Practitioners in social practices share a historically and socially contextualized identity, which enables them as individuals and collectives to conduct work and thereby to establish a collective meaning-making of that work (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The reach of social practices may go beyond formal boundaries of the organization and occupational jurisdictions; for instance, the practices of medicine, nursing, and caregiving may cross the boundaries of hospitals, homes and doctors’ offices, and practitioners may include doctors, informal caregivers, nurses and other health professionals. A social practice may emerge around the use of a new technology for medical treatment that includes practitioners from different occupational groups—i.e., nurses, surgeons, and radiologists—working intensively on the promotion and defence of its use, which over time percolates into a new shared practice.

Organizations of some size house many coexisting social practices (cf MacIntyre, 1981; Wenger, 1998) that, on the one hand, depend on each other in the context of organizational work and, on the other hand, may compete for scarce resources (cf. nursing and medicine in a hospital). Coexisting practices also need to grapple with the constant pressure for change and adaptation as exerted on members of a formal organization. The core argument we make is as follows: The inherent logic of social practices constitutes a key domain in management and organization studies (Bourdieu, 1990), and has often been examined from an internal perspective (e.g., practising). Researchers have been somewhat less concerned with how the interplay of social practices in an organization may also have a constitutive effect, i.e., influencing the sustainability and conservation of social practice itself.<sup>1</sup> We know how a formal organization may influence social practices by providing encouraging support and the necessary resources and by putting pressure on social practices for adaptation and reform (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Thompson, 2005). The dynamic relation between formal organization and social practices is constitutive for both (Ben-Menahem

et al., 2015; Giddens, 1984). We will add here, however, that the interplay of social practices within the same organizational context may have a similarly important constitutive function. The conserving disposition of social practices, then, might be explained through its protective measures to safeguard what it is (being), what it does (doing), and what it knows (knowing) from other social practices in an organization.

However, we contend that potential goal conflicts—rather than a state of goal congruence or even harmony between social practices—occur in organizational life (Erden et al., 2014). Potential goal conflicts tend to surface around the scarcity of resources or the formulation and development of organization-wide policies and procedures. Note here that rather than speaking of work-related conflict between people embedded in practices (e.g., a doctor and nurse in a hospital, a psychologist and an economist in an academic department), we find it meaningful to argue that the conflicts to some degree originate from inherent conflicts between distinct social practices. Distinction is constitutive of social practices because it elicits boundaries. Being in a social practice simultaneously means not being something else (a practitioner of medicine, not of nursing); knowing something may also mean the rejection of knowing something different (medical knowledge, not aroma therapy); and doing some work is also refraining from doing other work (doing surgery but not patient care). A brilliant analysis that exemplifies this point is Flyvbjerg’s (2001) book on the struggles between the natural sciences and the social sciences. As members of a social practice, for example, many social scientists may reject the notion that (natural) scientists can produce any meaningful knowledge of social phenomena.

The conservation of social practice is about a struggle for relevance and survival against a multiplicity of social practices within the frames of a changing formal organization. A contested coexistence reveals the necessity of social practices that possess a capacity for addressing competing pressure from within an organization to protect their own distinct practice. The capacity for addressing competing pressure, however, needs not only protection but also a sense of balance, coexistence, and integration (Beadle & Moore, 2006). The role of the manager is a difficult one because it often sits between and across social practices (and associated ways of being, knowing and doing). Here, we hope to contribute an angle for discussion and future research. Integrating the work and coexistence of social practices is a leadership challenge: We contribute to building a research agenda for management as a social practice (owing to Beadle and Moore (2006)) and for the role of individual development to accept and to cede authority around the leadership in social practice (Laloux, 2014). We argue that this capacity takes the shape of leadership that differs from traditional formal managerial roles in organizations.

In moments of conflict between social practices, each practice may bring forth a distributed and internal capacity of leadership that is a necessary condition for its absorption of resources and sustainability in the face of change. This capacity for distributed leading in social practice may partly explain why some social practices survive as others decay and wither, leaving empty shells behind. We suggest how (distributed) leading in social practices in a potentially contested organizational context is a complementary part of its inherent logics (being, doing, knowing) and a necessary condition to sustain it. In the following, we briefly discuss the established logics of social practices. Then, we move on to describe the interplay of social practices in organizations and thereby argue for leading as a complementary inherent logic of social practice.

## 2. Inherent logics of social practice

What are the inherent logics of social practices? In other words,

<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions include, for example, Wenger (1998), Kellogg et al. (2006), Nicolini, Mengis, and Swan (2012) who analyzed boundary spanning between practices.

what conditions need to be present before we can meaningfully speak of a social practice? We find it useful to think about how members of an informal organization become practitioners in a distinct social practice through what they are, do and know, reflecting the dimensions of “being”, “knowing” and “doing”.<sup>2</sup>

Practitioners share a socially and historically contextualized identity, a collective being that enables meaning-making in and around work. Meaning-making in practice is constantly (re-)negotiated between practitioners shaped by work and the adaptations in learning and conduct that changing work requires. The being in social practice is not necessarily consistent with professional identity, although it might often be an important element of work-related identity formation (Anteby, Chan, & Dibenigno, 2016). Being in social practices necessarily creates boundaries (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Ferlie et al. (2005) demonstrate how the self-sealing aspect of professional communities of practices resist change from other, identical entities by identifying themselves through social, cognitive, and epistemic boundaries.

The epistemic boundaries making up the knowing of social practice tightly connect to collective meaning-making. Knowing enables the understanding and interpretation of data and information within the context of work (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Castellani & Hafferty, 2009; MacIntosh, Beech, Antonacopoulou, & Sims, 2012; Orlikowski, 2002). Knowing is also the individual and collective potential to act, to solve problems, to make decisions, and to engage with tasks (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). Organizational knowledge resides in and manifests through the social practices of an organization (Nicolini, 2011), and is a tool used to accomplish the work of social practice (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Expertise and interests are considered constitutive parts of social practice (Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006).

Doing is the socially contextualized ongoing accomplishment of work. Being and knowing concurrently (re-)emerge with doing, informing action by collective meaning-making. Again, the dimension of doing of a social practice goes beyond professionally and occupationally bounded categories of work (Swan et al., 2002) because the work done may go beyond and across professional boundaries. Within traditional organizational structures, such as those found in a hospital, we might also see social practices going beyond professional boundaries, as in Kellogg's (2012) study that reveals how reformer alliances emerged across occupational identities. Doing in social practice entails practitioners' engagement in work and their protective efforts to maintain routines (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). The boundaries of social practice function as a stabilizing element in an organization. Doing can be considered constituted by the distinct types of practising, i.e., the conduct of work—whether that is strategizing, planning, executing, managing, or other doing-in-practice. The use of artefacts and tools is another element of doing in social practice (see Kellogg et al., 2006).

The inherent logics of social practices may be thought of as recursive because they emerge in concert, mutually influencing one another. In other words, none of them exists in isolation or prior to the others. They also demonstrate the conserving shadow of social practice—enforcing a singular and distinct social entity of a “constantly disputed terrain”, inhabited by both “sharing and harmony” and “dissent and conflict” (Gherardi 2015a, p. 15). When joining social practices, people socialize by learning to become practitioners whose being, knowing, and doing are tightly intertwined (Gherardi, 2015b) and whose interactive “codes” are necessary to follow for the effective functioning of the practice.

Although social practices can reduce individual uncertainty, improve learning and the sharing of tacit knowledge, tighten routines, and increase efficiency, they may by nature also be conserving. However, within organizations where structural changes may be dramatic or frequent, how do distinct social practices fare? What factors affect their survival?

Think of different occupational groups such as nurses, surgeons and radiologists meeting on a daily basis and conducting their work in collaboration. Although their doings clearly coincide as streams of problems, people, choices, or solutions in a garbage-can-like fashion (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), the practitioners' being, knowing, and doing remain distinct and commonly expressed through a certain collegiality and solidarity, which comes to the fore particularly in conditions of disagreement between them. For example, in a disagreement about the appropriate method of treating a patient, radiologists may favour minimally invasive surgery, and surgeons may favour open surgery, each emphasizing their particular expertise and role allocation in the procedure to be conducted. Such a disagreement may also be expressed as a conflict along the being dimension of social practice. Kellogg (2012) brilliantly shows how surgeons were forced to take a stance between their own practice and the side of reformers in introducing new working hours. The practitioners themselves forced other practitioners to remain part of the practice or to be closed off, using the traditional identity dimension of masculinity to block change and adaptation (Kellogg, 2012).

For the second hospital in the same study (Kellogg, 2012), the conflict did not play out as intensively, possibly blurring the previously clear distinctions between interns and surgeons and decreasing the persistence of traditional values of masculinity. Although the social practice at the second hospital did not dissolve, one might ask what effect a change in being might mean for sustaining the social practice. In other words, how much can being be changed before the practice has to be redefined? As Kellogg's study shows, when change happens in a formal organization, people in social practices may feel threatened. They might turn inward and away from the social practice or run out to seek alliances elsewhere. One option for practitioners is to create what Cyert and March (1963) called a “dominant coalition.” A dominant coalition, however, seems to regard only specific interests of people. When being, i.e., the practice-based identity, is at stake, an informal organization and its practitioners might be expected to attempt to conserve their practice.

The conserving role of a social practice may disclose itself by the lack of formal recognition of its boundaries. Boundaries, as discussed above, result from distinctions in being, knowing, and doing. In addition, the constant renegotiation of the inherent logics inside a social practice makes it more susceptible to external pressure (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2011). The notion of social practices' boundaries calls attention to the contextualization of social practices inside organizations. Social practices have often been studied with a focus on their internal dynamics or boundaries (seminal work includes Carlile, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). To extend the internal view, it may be beneficial to zoom out onto the larger organizational context and then to see how distinctions made by other social practices shape the boundaries of a focal social practice. For example, it may be that medical doctors do not feed or clean patients because they and others define the activities to be within the social practice of nursing. Therefore, medical doctors draw the boundaries around the social practice of nursing by excluding nursing practices from their own social practice.

The literature that examines the coordination of professional groups and entities similar to social practices as defined here offers insight on how work gets done at the intersection of social practices. The seminal research focuses on the transfer and translation

<sup>2</sup> See Coleman and Simpson (2004) for similar distinctions in a brilliant essay on the teaching of anthropology.

mechanisms between practices (Carlile, 2002). Ferlie et al. (2005), for example, examine the cognitive and social boundaries between professional groups that hinder knowledge flows between them. The groups “seal themselves off, even (or perhaps especially) from neighbouring jurisdictions and group identity” (Ferlie et al., 2005, p. 129). Social practices observe themselves and others and draw distinctions between themselves—on the one hand as a means of specializing, and on the other hand as a means of enhancing overall organizational effectiveness. Carlile (2002) sees the coordination of social practices taking place through penetrating boundary objects. According to this view, boundary objects must be subject to negotiation, alteration and manipulation between practices. The boundary objects assist practitioners in “representing their knowledge, learning about their differences and dependencies, then jointly transforming current and more novel knowledge to resolve the negative consequences identified at the boundary” (Carlile, 2002, p. 452f).

The conflict between social practices and their constant striving for making distinctions drive the being, doing, knowing of social practices. Distinctions made from the outside in all dimensions of social practice (e.g., being by being different, knowing by not knowing, doing by not doing) give rise to an ecology of social practices and may explain why an organization, such as a hospital, may house so many practices simultaneously. They also raise the question of the paper: Why do some practices thrive, survive, wither and decay? There may be many reasons to explore in theory and research (Bechky, 2003b; Ben-Menahem et al., 2015; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000). In this paper, we offer one explanation, which involves distributed leading.

### 3. An inherent logic of leading

In the following, we discuss how “leading” has been studied from a social practice perspective in the literature. We then take the argument one step further and show how leading should be considered not just a form of doing in practice but an inherent logic of social practice that is equal to being, knowing and doing due to the pressure exerted on social practices within a changing organizational context.

The discussion on leadership is long established, and it has produced a strain that investigates leadership beyond formal organizations to cover informal organizations and social practices. Leading in an informal organization goes beyond formal managerial roles and responsibilities and takes on a spontaneous, collaborative, and intuitive form of leading that emerges as a shared role of practitioners (Brown & Hosking, 1986; Pearce & Conger, 2002). In social practice, the activities and responsibilities of leading then arise as a result of the (re-)accomplishment of work and are distributed among practitioners (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; von Krogh, Nonaka, & Rechsteiner, 2012). The distribution might take the form of initiative-taking, negotiations, and soft persuasion and splits up intuitively among practitioners according to their knowledge, expertise, engagement and availability (von Krogh et al., 2012).

Melucci (1996), for example, notes that leaders emerge to protect the interests of participants in collective action and to sustain their identity and their engagement. Furthermore, “leadership is not concentrated but diffuse, restricting itself to specific goals. Different individuals may, on occasion, become leaders with specific functions to perform” (Melucci, 1996, p. 114). Melucci (1996) suggests that physical proximity and closeness between practitioners act as prerequisites for such leadership. It can be expected that individual practitioners feel morally obliged to take on leadership activities because they care for their fellow practitioners and the social practice's standards of excellence and goals. Leading in

social practice rests upon social interactions (Fletcher, 2003) and emerges in the relations among practitioners (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Hosking, 2000; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). This approach augments the notion of spontaneous and distributed leadership (e.g., Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2002) into a collective achievement.

To support this view, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) define leading as “a way of being-in-relation-to-others” (p. 1430). Collective and distributed leading involves relational engagement and responsibility as a collective achievement of relating with each other as practitioners within social practices. Wood (2005) shows that it would be correct neither to pinpoint individual leaders nor to see the “object” of leadership in the relations between leaders and followers. Leadership involves, according to Wood (2005), a process of becoming, intertwined in the social context of its practice: “[L]eadership is always enmeshed in social practice rather than in a clear-cut, definite figure” (p. 1116) and takes the form of “a process of individuation, rather than as an individual social actor” (p. 1108). In addition, leadership plays an important role in the distinctiveness of a social practice by drawing boundaries through externalizing, defining or even answering questions related to being, knowing, and doing. Who are we? The spontaneous and emergent nature of leadership in practice answers through initiative-taking, ideas, and role-modelling, similarly to the action of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978).

The relationalist notions of leadership are apparent as a form of practising. Leadership occurs as an activity of organizational work—as part of the organizational doing. Building on this view, we conjecture that leading manifests not purely as a practice of doing but also as a similar inherent logic of social practices in an organizational context. This point becomes clear through the absence of leading. Sometimes, leading means not doing—for example, letting the practice have free reign to explore new things, not influencing relations. By holding back expectantly, posing questions, or even acting differently from what is expected of a “normal being”, leading is constitutive. Leading is more than a particular way of practising, and it “glues” the doing, knowing, and being together when a social practice becomes exposed to a changing context, such as structural or functional change or the depletion of resources.<sup>3</sup>

In the following sections, we want to make the point of how leading is essential to the work conducted at the interplay of social practices within an organization. The relational view on identity formation defined through the distinction of one practice from others, and thereby its contextualization, may provide a particular role for leadership when practices are contested within an organization.

### 4. Coexistence and conflict

Zooming out on the wider organizational context, we become aware of the boundaries between social practices as they meet and interact in an organization. Some form of working consensus and shared meaning-making occurs at the boundaries of social practices in an organization for organizational work to be accomplished, which demands collaboration across those boundaries. Bechky (2003a) argues that a reconciliation of local meanings takes place through transformation—if work is interrupted, a renegotiation of

<sup>3</sup> One objection to putting leading on par with the other inherent logics of social practice—being, knowing and doing—would be that leading could just as well be seen as part of doing. However, as far as leading is a boundary-spanning activity, it should be separated from other internally focused doings-in-practice. As Melucci (1996) observes, leading is an essential element of any form of collective endeavour and, in our view, of social practices.

meaning must happen, and knowledge transforms between practices. Through renegotiation, a consensus can be built, and work between the practices can commence, such that the practice itself seems not to have been in danger. Misunderstandings between practices commonly lead to conflict, as suggested in this work. To transform meaning, a common ground must be found between practitioners.

As in [Ospina and Foldy's \(2010\)](#) study, leadership may be a trigger of organizational coordination. The authors state that leadership practices “prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; engaging dialogue about difference; creating equitable governance mechanisms; and weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships” ([Ospina & Foldy, 2010](#), p. 297) enable collaborative work. The acknowledgement of leadership as a practice ([Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011](#); [Ospina & Foldy, 2010](#)) widens the agency of leading. Turning the tables, we see leading as an inherent logic of social practices.

So why is this trigger necessary? In a social practice, someone must take on the formulation, development, and initiative for coordinative mechanisms (such as rules, schemes, schedules, or routines). Practitioners need to negotiate meaning to accomplish a consensus at the boundaries of social practices. Such distributed leadership is an outcome of team processes ([Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004](#)) and focuses on initiative-taking and negotiating at the boundaries of social practices. An assumed consensus-based leading between practices may, however, be flawed under certain conditions. As [Iedema and Scheeres \(2003\)](#) note, professional identities and boundaries may be challenged because practitioners need to develop a “meta-language” to communicate across practices. Although shared meaning is not always a necessity for a consensus between social practices ([Kellogg et al., 2006](#)), practitioners need to find a working mode that functions for the interactions of social practices ([Ben-Menahem et al., 2015](#)) or, as in [Kellogg et al. \(2006\)](#), find a “provisional settlement.” A reconciliation of meaning ([Kellogg et al., 2006](#)) is not always necessary, and it could even jeopardize social practices if and when it calls for a far-reaching adaptation of the internal meaning-making of one social practice.

[Bechky \(2003a\)](#) refers to the dual use of boundary objects: on the one hand for problem solving across occupational boundaries and on the other hand for defending task areas within occupational boundaries. Similarly, top management may define boundary objects and other measures to encourage cross-practice collaboration, but practitioners cannot be forced to do something they are not ready to do if they perceive such doing as identity-breaking (see [Kellogg, 2012](#)). It follows that a reconciliation of meaning depends on the action of social practice itself, initiated by its distributed leading.

When a consensus between social practices cannot be reached, the existence of some social practices might be endangered. Because a consensus does not always call for a reconciliation of meanings ([Kellogg et al., 2006](#)), the potential for conflict persists. [Kellogg et al. \(2006\)](#) demonstrate such simmering conflicts in organizations over identity, control and expectations of accessibility. Conflicts may arise because of different understandings of direction, values and boundaries of action ([Lindgren, Packendorff, & Tham, 2011](#)), which clearly intervene with the being, knowing and doing of a social practice. [Lamont and Molnár \(2002\)](#) and [Zietsma and Lawrence \(2010\)](#) indicate that boundaries may create resource distributions and opportunities for redistribution, for example, through a practice that now defines itself as doing something that another practice was previously doing. One can imagine many more conditions that make distinct social practices and a formal organization clash: resource scarcity, relocation and turnover decisions, alliances, breakdown of infrastructure, and pay

and incentive systems.

Social movements address conflicts of interest through negotiations (see [O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008](#)), though from a social practice perspective, resolving conflicts may come to be an issue about conserving a practice, not just an interest conflict. The discussion again resembles [Melucci's \(1996\)](#): Social practices act because what they do conflicts with what other social practices do, not necessarily what its practitioners hope to gain. [Zietsma and Lawrence \(2010\)](#) discuss the outcomes of institutional contests with outsiders, which lead to disruptions of the practice by reframing it and its practitioners as illegitimate, and the response by practitioners to these events. Occupational conflicts may also emerge between high- and low-level status groups ([Bechky, 2003b](#)): “[I]nteroccupational conflicts in the workplace are an important means for maintaining and justifying occupational jurisdiction” (p. 747).

We think similar conflicts may take place beyond organizational and occupational boundaries as a demonstration of the distance and differences between social practices. Political tools ([Kellogg, 2012](#)), resources ([Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010](#)), or human capital ([Gimeno, Folta, Cooper, & Woo, 1997](#)) may still remain important for their survival. However, the spontaneous nature of conserving social practice comes as a natural step before the enabling resources and capabilities. Furthermore, the selection of tools and resources constitutes a part of leading in social practice and may affect practice quality, i.e., having and using the right tools.

The above-mentioned literature argues that social practices cannot rely on rules and schedules in the case of conflicts because they refer not to the boundaries of social practice but to the boundaries of a formal organization, such as departments. A two-front conflict may arise between a formal organization and a social practice or between different social practices. Social practices cannot fall back on mechanisms internally developed based on their own demarcation. If a medical practice is scientifically attacked by systems biologists with a cell-based understanding of illness, doctors may be pressed to refute the argument if it does not belong to their knowing and methods. We contend that the nature of social practices implies that they coexist in harmony but that they also sometimes challenge each other's existence, such as in the case when the value of knowledge is contested. Social practices may be more vulnerable than groups and departments, which, through their formal sanction of existence, are protected through institutionalized mechanisms ([Deephouse, 1996](#); [Meyer & Rowan, 1977](#)). Thus, a social practice could fade out of an organization without creating any formal repercussions. Although conditions may emerge in which social practices form coalitions and borrow resources and mechanisms from each other that allow them to increase their bottom-up ability to negotiate their existence in an organization, the conflict potential still lingers on with formal expectations and other social practices acting outside of the coalition.

So how can social practices coexist? We think it may happen through leading for the conservation of practice.<sup>4</sup> Building on the importance of enabling resources and capabilities, as suggested by scholars who write on social practices, we propose that leading precedes the use of tools. Leading functions as an inherent relational capacity of social practices that ensures its survival. Leading becomes a “glue” between being, knowing, and doing; it conserves the coherence of the three logics when changes, external pressure or conflict threaten to tear them apart. In this manner, social

<sup>4</sup> With leading for conservation, we do not intend to exclude leading for change in a practice as a possible action. Change and learning do take place inside a practice, but they do so within the boundaries of conserving the purpose and goals of the practice itself.

practice's capacity for survival may increase. Hence, leading should be considered the fourth inherent logic of social practice and one necessary condition for its existence. In the recursive internal cycle of being, knowing, and doing in social practice, leading encompasses (re-)establishing, (re-)negotiating and (re-)transforming meanings *between* social practices. Thus, we think being, knowing and doing constitute a prerequisite for leading in social practice.

Leading in social practice entails bottom-up pressure on resource allocations because a scarcity of resources means fewer resources for some social practices. Leading involves lobbying for a practice's own goals and the production of its internal goods, sometimes against those of other practices. The conserving element of leading might also take the form of social pressure over the boundaries of a social practice. Other occurrences of leading a practice are persuading individuals belonging to one social practice to switch their practice membership (e.g., physicians who take up Eastern medicine), proposing internal candidates for higher organizational positions (e.g., nurses for the CEO position at a hospital), and facilitating exclusive social arrangements to strengthen the coherence of a social practice (e.g., funded team-building events or incentive trips). In addition to resource and tool selection and internal initiative taking, such elements of leading have great potential to ameliorate the tensions between social practices.

If leading in a social practice fails to conserve its three inherent logics, the social practice should struggle to remain cohesive and may be interrupted in its work towards producing its internal goods, as in MacIntyre's definition. Practitioners may leave a social practice; the social practice might merge with another practice and thereby dissolve as a distinct entity; or it might undergo major changes due to top-down pressure from management, technological change, and so forth. A social practice may also decouple itself from an organization, seeking another organizational home or fading away. Regardless of whether the conserving side of a social practice benefits innovation and an organization's wellbeing, the conserving element is an inherent characteristic of social practices. Without this force, a social practice as an informal organization may not be able to sustain within formal organizations that house competing social practices.

We argued above that a social practice should be considered part of an organizational context composed of agency and structure (Giddens, 1984). Because leading is a movement (Wood, 2005), associated with neither one individual nor a relation, it flows through an organization and works as a glue between social practices. Leading as a movement is neither agency nor structure in these terms. Leading enables collaborative meaning-making across and between social practices in an organization. It is not a movement that is stuck within doing-in-practice or a structural, top-down instruction or negotiation; it moves in and between organizational layers and enables the flow of meaning-making. To paraphrase Foldy, Goldman, and Ospina (2008), leading may emerge at various layers of an organization and thereby needs to move in concert. Leading is considered a "situated organizational interaction" (Lindgren et al., 2011). Leading is not about the management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) but a collective engagement in (re-)constructing, (re-)negotiating and (re-)transforming meaning.

## 5. Implications

Two implications for leadership and social practice research stand out. First, we have advanced a position that leading constitutes an inherent logic of social practice as its movement of sustaining and deepening its collective work. Second, leading in a context of multiple social practices within one organization requires building on bottom-up pressures to sustain and balance the

ways of doing, knowing and being between fragile and shifting associations within one organization. We see potential in further exploring leadership from an individual-centred notion to a collective phenomenon and a dimension of a social practice, which would put leadership theory and research at the forefront of the debate on modern organizations (Gronn, 2002, 2015; Johnson, Safadi, & Faraj, 2015; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; von Krogh & Geilinger, 2015). Our arguments are but a tiny step in casting leadership as an inherent logic of social practices and an attempt to inspire more work in this area.

There are new ways through which powerful insights into social practice and leadership research may be gained. In particular, a fresh perspective on leading practices and leading across organizational boundaries will broaden our understanding in this field. New ways of collaborating, relying increasingly on technology and changing business models in most industries make leading an ever more important topic to investigate and give guidance to management. Synthesizing our arguments above culminates in five areas for future research that present ample opportunities to span innovation and strategy-as-practice research in organization theory (see Table 1). This agenda proceeds from the inside out, from the agency of leadership within a social practice and the patterns of taking the lead and relating to the core drivers of a social practice to research on leadership across social practices to distributed leadership that spans organizational boundaries. Work on research methods should follow suit because it requires updates on how we identify and trace social practices in fast-moving organizational contexts.

First, leading as an inherent logic of social practice mirrors key tenets of leadership research (He, Gersdorf, & von Krogh, *work in progress*; Wood, 2005; von Krogh et al., 2012) as a movement and a convergence of activities that cannot be permanently attributed to one individual or one function (Chambers, Drysdale, & Hughes, 2010; Leslie & Canwell, 2010; Sims, 2010). The actual activities that orchestrate and lead to convergence and agreement need more research, particularly with the internal and external goods of social practices in mind. The values and standards of excellence that are definitive of social practice inform the activities of leadership and may represent an active source of both resistance and support to organizational goals.

Second, the role and agency of leadership in social practice is a puzzle in the eyes of management informed in a traditional, formal sense by organizational economics or design (Erden et al., 2014). The movement that is leadership here undercuts reporting lines, formal hierarchies, and possibly known sources and alliances of power within an organization (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Parallel work on adult development and organizational change advocates for a deeper look into the individual role in handling more fluid and contextually dynamic authority (Laloux, 2014) by demonstrating that different situations require direction or non-direction, steering or non-steering (Harvey, Cohendet, Simon, & Dubois, 2013). Individual agency may need to remain flexible, which represents a serious challenge to the individual's need for security and stability in working environments.

Third, and focusing beyond any one social practice, the relationship between the defining elements of social practices implies various positions between social practices when they enter into conflict or align for an organizational purpose. For example, the hospital represents an institution that houses multiple social practices within one organization and, to function, needs to orchestrate the alignment and complementary performances of nursing, medicine, information systems, hospitality, corporate finance, and many more. Research on leading multiple practices is relevant because it taps into work that is fundamental to the joint and convergent decisions of an organization without structures

**Table 1**  
Future research opportunities.

| Theme  | Research questions  |
|--|---|
| 1 Forms of leading in social practice  | What are the practices of leadership in a social practice, and how do they differ from formal organization?<br>What are patterns of different leadership styles/practices in social practices?<br>What forms of leading support individual motivation in social practices and why? What forms of leading support knowledge sharing and innovation?<br>Is leadership training a necessary task of social practice to ensure its sustenance?<br>Is it feasible for a formal organization to create a leadership forum for social practices in which contested goals and activities can be brought up and settled, without undermining the nature of social practices? |
| 2 Agency through leading in and across social practices                                  | Who embodies leadership (roles, activities) in social practices and why?<br>How is leading (re-)distributed among practitioners?<br>How do leaders in formal managerial roles differ from informal leaders in social practices?<br>What skills make leaders effective in social practices?<br>How do power and leading in social practices interrelate, and how does the interrelation affect the distribution and use of resources?  |
| 3 Relationships between doing, knowing, being and leading in and across social practices | What is the role of leading for knowing, doing and being in a social practice?<br>How is leading in social practice related to the coordination of work in social practice and in a formal organization?<br>How do aspects of the internal good being produced by social practice affect the four inherent logics of the social practice?<br>How do institutional factors affect leading in social practice?<br>What can studies on leadership in social practices tell us about identity work and knowledge work?  |
| 4 Leading in open innovation projects and new forms of collaboration                     | What role does leading play for collaborating across organizations with potentially multiple overlapping social practices involved?<br>What are antecedents of openness and knowledge sharing across different social practices in collaborations?<br>What effect might new forms of collaboration have on the inherent logics of social practice? What about new technologies?<br>How can management as a social practice enhance effective leading in and across other social practices?  |
| 5 Research methods   | Which empirical methods can studies on leadership in social practices and organizations apply to bring forth multi-level findings?<br>How can we study leading in social practices in the long term?<br>How can leading in social practices be identified in empirical settings?  |

that fully align with a formal organization.

Fourth, and more specifically, open innovation and forms of open collaboration are in dire need of a more coherent understanding of leadership because in many settings where this happens, few or no formal structures are in place (in many instances; e.g., Faraj, Kudaravalli, & Wasko, 2015). Open source software development is organized in communities that comprise both individual users and firms, represented by employees (Lakhani & von Hippel, 2003; Levine & Prietula, 2013; Rullani & Haefliger, 2013; Spaeth, von Krogh, & Fang He, 2014). New forms of collaboration (e.g., Börjeson, 2015; Howison & Crowston, 2014; Iturrioz, Aragón, & Narvaiza, 2015) can trigger both updates in social practice and conflict in terms of agenda setting, for the community or for the individual participants in an organization. Leadership research may need to study how organizations can navigate new forms of collaboration and maintain their own interests while balancing the needs and interests of the community (Dahlander & Wallin, 2006; Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011).

Fifth, we anticipate research challenges when engaging with social practices in organizations, not least due to the status attributed to social practices by management, and vice versa (Beadle & Moore, 2006). Who is representing whom, and how do loyalty and identity run across social practice and the organization? How do the being and the doing shape the researcher's ability to empirically distinguish the effect of a social practice on an organization and identify leading as distinct from formal roles and structures?

Given our suggestions, we zoom in on the level of social practice and believe a practice perspective could initiate an important discussion on leadership research (Chambers et al., 2010; McCalman & Paton, 2010; von Krogh et al., 2012). The challenges and opportunities of managers in practice coincide with novel and distributed forms of organization, still impervious to researchers (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016; Börjeson, 2015), and they demonstrate the urgency of revising and further developing leadership research in a direction that is more sensitive to social practices and informal leading. As highlighted by Ahrne et al. (2016), we advocate that the orchestration of collective action in organizations needs to be scrutinized from further angles (in addition to formal organization)

to support management practice accordingly. Indeed, we hope to contribute to fostering the ongoing debate on the future of leadership and help advance our understanding of leading in and across social practices.

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