

Conducting a practice-based study in a novel context: methodological challenges

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Abstract

The methodological issue addressed in this paper is how to conduct a practice-based study in a novel context. We present and build on Korica, Nicolini and Johnson's (2015) proposal to explore managerial work from a practice perspective, and to understand the implications of temporary organisation for management practice (Bakker *et al.*, 2016).

We present an argument for using Schatzki's (2002) site ontology and summarise the key features that are relevant to, and being applied in, a current empirical study. Using the study as an illustration we discuss the methodological implications of a practice-based study and conclude with recommendations for research.

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Key words: social practice; site ontology; managerial work; temporary organisation

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Introduction

Practice-based approaches have contributed to a number of organisation and management fields, such as knowledge and learning (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010), strategy (Whittington, 2006), technology use (Orlikowski, 2007), leadership (Raelin, 2011) and projects (O’Leary and Williams, 2013). The majority of studies are conducted from knowledge and learning or strategy perspectives (Erden, Schneider and von Krogh, 2014). Guidance is available to researchers adopting practice-based approaches in empirical studies, generally (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2013), and from within specific disciplines such as strategy (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2015; Johnson *et al.*, 2007) and leadership (Raelin, 2016). However, as has been stated by practice theorists and researchers, there is no single or unifying practice theory (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2015; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny, 2001), and the extent to which a practice philosophy is adopted in empirical research varies (Carter, Clegg and Kornberger, 2008; Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013).

‘Theory-methods toolkits’ (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2015; Nicolini, 2013) provide frameworks within which to make research design choices, but “the practice approach is largely untested” (Nicolini, 2013, p. 240) and researchers face a broad range of design choices, and challenges, in and out of the field. In this paper we report on some of the choices and challenges faced when adopting a practice-based approach in a novel setting; in particular by applying Schatzki’s (2002) site ontology. We illustrate this account with experiences from an empirical study being undertaken by one of this paper’s authors.

Method and approach to this paper

The methodological issue addressed in this paper is how to conduct a practice-based study. The study in question builds on Korica, Nicolini and Johnson’s (2015) proposal to explore managerial work from a practice perspective, without specifying *a-priori* the categories of managerial work, and to understand the implications of temporary organisation for management practice (Bakker *et al.*, 2016). The context is novel because managerial work and temporary organisation(s) are not often researched as related social phenomena, and not from a practice perspective. Additionally, by focusing on temporariness, the selection criteria for temporary organisational forms facilitates comparison across industries, which may lead to interesting findings about commonalities in management practice.

In the paper, we:

- (1) present Korica, Nicolini and Johnson’s (2015) argument for the benefits and implications of adopting a practice-based approach in the study of managerial work;
- (2) explain the rationale for adopting Schatzki’s (2002) site ontology and summarise the key features of this ontology being applied in the research;

- (3) discuss the methodological implications of a practice-based approach to managerial work, and the site ontology in particular, discuss how these implications have been addressed in the design, and discuss experience with the method so far;
- (4) conclude with recommendations for empirical research, acknowledging that the study is ongoing, and the limitations of attempting to provide recommendations when research is at an early stage.

A practice-based approach to the study of managerial work

Following a systematic review of managerial work literature, Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2015) propose that the development of managerial work research has been restricted by being conducted within the confines of particular research approaches, each with associated analytical and methodological perspectives. The authors argue for the continued relevance of managerial work research, and for adopting the practice-turn (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny, 2001) to developing the field. Following Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2017), a practice-based approach offers the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ‘what, how and, particularly, why’ of managerial work, in ways that retain the ‘integrated job of managing’ (Mintzberg, 1994), and embrace the complexity, ambiguity and social embeddedness of managerial work (Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000; Tengblad, 2012).

Building on Korica, Nicolini and Johnson's (2015) arguments, a study of managerial work in temporary organisations is being conducted. Temporary organisations are chosen for two reasons. The first reason is that research interest in temporary organisations and organising as phenomena in contemporary organisational life (Bakker, 2010; Bakker *et al.*, 2016; Burke and Morley, 2016; Lundin, 1995; Sydow, 2004) is not accompanied by a commensurate interest in the implications for management practice, although implications are acknowledged (Bakker *et al.*, 2016). Rather than a ‘gap’ between two domains (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) we interpret this as an area where management theory may not encompass aspects of what is happening at work (Barley and Kunda, 2001). The second reason is that as “a set of organizational actors working together on a complex task over a limited period of time” (Bakker, 2010, p. 468), temporary organisations ought to provide organisational settings in which practitioners’ reflections on the management practices in which they are engaged (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), and discussion of what is appropriate or good management practice in that context (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017), can be illuminated.

The methodological focus is “everyday work in situ observed as it happens, and the evolving relationship(s) with its material and historic ‘hinterland’ (Law 2004)” (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017). The authors replace ‘context’ with ‘hinterland’ to draw attention to the bundle of historical and material aspects of a setting in which practices emerge, rather than treat ‘context’ as a static structure that influences human activities (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017). This perspective resonates with a site ontology, where practices are inherently tied to the social site in which they transpire (that is, come to be known as such or happen). Schatzki’s (2002) site ontology is, arguably, one of the strongest contemporary social practice theories (Caldwell, 2012; Nicolini, 2013) and we introduce this in the next section.

Schatzki’s site ontology

We draw on Schatzki’s introductions of site ontology to organisation studies (Schatzki, 2005, 2006) and his views on how practices might be uncovered in empirical studies (Schatzki, 2012)

to provide an overview and show its relevance to the study that is underway. Theoretical terms associated with the site ontology are depicted in italics on their first use.

Overview of the site ontology

Schatzki (2005) explains site ontologies as steering a way between two dominant types of social ontology, individualist and societist. Following an individualist ontology, the social world is constructed of individuals and their relations, and the social world can be explained in terms of the properties of individuals, or groups thereof. Following a societist ontology the social world includes social phenomena, such as structures and systems that are additional to people and their relations. In common with societist ontologies, a site ontology means believing that there is more to social life than individuals and their relations, but, rather than explanatory structures or forces, human activity is inherently linked to the 'site', or particular type of social setting in which it transpires. In common with individualist ontologies these social settings are not unconnected with properties of individuals and groups (Schatzki, 2005). Thus, the social world is neither only created in individuals' (or groups') minds, nor does it exist only in external structures. Social practices include human activities, and the meaning associated with human activities, and social practices are closely associated with the materials with which humans conduct their activities. Social structures are created by social practices and also influence the performance of social practices. Social order, as human co-existence (Schatzki, 2002), transpires as a result of nexuses of organised human activities, that is *practices*, and *material arrangements* (Schatzki, 2005). Practices are open-ended, in that they perpetuate, across space and time, and are organised, in that the same structure of activities, rules, ends and means are recognisable to those in a practice, across space and time (Schatzki, 2005).

Three aspects of site ontology are introduced below, as a precursor to discussing the relevance of a site ontology for the illustrative study. The aspects are (1) *actions* (2) structure, or *practice organisation* and (3) *material arrangements*. A brief overview of how interconnected social practices make up the social world follows.

- (1) *Actions* are *doings and sayings*, which are almost always part of higher purposed actions (Schatzki, 2005);
- (2) *Practice organisation* – Items are organised into a practice through four phenomena; these are *practical understandings*, *rules*, *teleoaffective structure*, and *general understandings*. Practical understandings refer to people knowing how to do something within a practice. Rules, whether expressed formally or, for example, in praise or admonishment, prescribe what is acceptable or appropriate in a given practice. Teleoaffective structure refers to combinations of ends, projects, actions and possibly emotions that are accepted in a given practice. General understandings refer to more abstract senses of worth or value that may apply to many practices, rather than the ends or sake for which people act (Schatzki, 2005, 2006, 2012).
- (3) Material arrangements are physical entities, including people. Material arrangements are not part of practices but are often inextricably linked, *bundled*, for example through their use or the physical setting in which people carry on particular practices (Schatzki, 2005). Objects are acknowledged to have power, but not in equal measure to humans, who bear 'responsibility' for acting (Nicolini, 2013).

Schatzki (2005) describes social life as a *web* of practices and orders (human co-existence) that is made up of interconnecting *meshes*, *nets* and *confederation* of practices and material

arrangements, using educational practice to illustrate the concepts. We repeat the example here, not to define these concepts, but to show how interconnecting and overlapping practices and material arrangements cannot be described in terms, for example, of levels of analysis. Teachers and students exist in a mesh of practices and material arrangements. The example of practice is teachers and students asking and responding to questions, for the purposes of teaching and learning. The performance of these actions for those purposes perpetuates the practice (recognisable in performances of the practice elsewhere). The practices are carried on amongst material arrangements, such as classrooms and classroom layouts, in which other practices are performed; therefore, the notion of a mesh.

Schatzki (2005) then describes how such an education practice-classroom mesh interlinks and overlaps with such meshes in other areas, such as administrative departments as nets. These nets interlace with nets of those of other educational institutions, in larger nets, and with those of national education, in confederations of nets. These confederations interlace with those of other countries as webs, and so on. Similarly management practice-arrangement bundles connect and overlap with organisation practice-arrangement bundles, as practice-arrangement bundles emerge, persist and dissolve in the unfolding of social life (Schatzki, 2012).

Relevance of the site ontology

Six features of a site ontology (Schatzki, 2002) have particular relevance and potential for explaining managerial work in relation to temporary organisations. These are: (1) that site ontology explains the world as it is, (2) how context is treated, (3) how structure and agency are treated, (4) how organisations are described and analysed, (5) how what is temporary and what is permanent are treated and (6) practice memory. We address each in turn.

- (1) *Site ontology explains the world as it is* – In literature reviews conducted before the current study, few direct connections were identified between literature on managerial work and temporary organisation(s). Adopting a particular ontology enables managerial work and temporary organisation to be seen, through the same lens, as interrelated social phenomena, rather than conceptions being constrained within the theoretical and methodological perspectives of one or each field. However, the world is not explained in the way that theory explains and predicts, but by providing a plausible account of the social world as it is.
- (2) *Treatment of context* – As discussed earlier in this paper, the sites in which practices transpire and the practices that transpire are mutually constitutive, and context is not restricted to physical sites and places in time (Schatzki, 2005). Whilst we refer to managerial work in temporary organisations, we do not treat the context of temporary organisations as “inert containers” (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017) in which management practices occur, but as social formations that are both the product and context of practices.
- (3) *Treatment of structure and agency* – Schatzki’s theory affords the most human agency of all the practice theories (Caldwell, 2012; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2002). Structure and agency are at work all the time, although not necessarily in equal measure, and it is when humans act and interact that there is potential for change (Nicolini, 2013). This is appropriate for the study of managerial work, where managers, as “potential designers of [working] lives and institutions” (Schatzki, 2012, p. 22) may not be able to determine future events but may aim to create environments where some activities are more or less likely to occur. Activities cannot be predicted because they are happenings, that is indeterminate.

Although human activities (in the present) are connected to the past (peoples' cause to act) and the future (for the sake of which they act), the activity is not fixed until it happens (Schatzki, 2006, 2012).

- (4) *Organisations are bundles of practices and material arrangements* – An organisation, like any social formation, “is a feature or slice” (Schatzki, 2005, p. 473) in the web of interconnecting practices and material arrangements that form the social world. Organisations are bundles of practices and material arrangements that interconnect with other such bundles, and interconnecting practices may cohere or compete (Schatzki, 2005). Conceiving of organisations in this way provides an alternative perspective to drawing boundaries around con(temporary) organisational entities, as is the case with “traditional structural-mechanistic and functional-systemic views” (Nicolini, 2013, p. 2), although the boundaries of organisations are, always have been, and always will be, socially constructed (Nicolini, 2013). Following this argument, what is of interest is which practices cohere or compete, rather than identifying what is ‘temporary’ and what is ‘permanent’ and how they relate, as would be the case from a temporary organisation perspective (Bakker et al., 2016).
- (5) *What is temporary or permanent?* – The previous point does not negate that some organisational forms are created with the intention of being terminated and others are expected to endure. However, being created from existing practices (Schatzki, 2005), a temporary organisation can be seen as a new configuration or bundle of practices and material arrangements, and a ‘conscious intervention’ in organisational activity, where what is appropriate management practice may become a subject of discussion (Schatzki, 2005), or a ‘natural breakdown’ in which practitioners become aware of differences (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). This is the case even where working in temporary organisations is the norm, and where some people have experience of shared practices.
- (6) *Practice memory* (Schatzki, 2006) Practice memory is the incorporation of social memory into practices and expressed in “the persistence of the structure of a practice” (Schatzki, 2006, p. 1869). In new or different configurations of practices and material arrangements, practice memory may be fragmented or interrupted, as practices are carried by people, who may or may not have worked together before, or who have different experiences of having worked together before.

In conclusion, the site ontology provides a means of understanding the social world that appears to be compatible with the phenomena of interest. From this perspective, it offers the opportunity to develop strong and relevant theory about managerial work (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2015; Nicolini, 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), and temporary organisation (Bakker *et al.*, 2016). However, the philosophy is illustrated through secondary sources (Schatzki, 2002) and there are few examples of its application in empirical organisation and management research (Caldwell, 2012; Nicolini, 2013).

We adopt Schatzki's site ontology (2002) and, in support of the aims of the conference, connect management and the disciplines by attempting to show the compatibility of a site ontology with one ‘slice’ of the social world (Schatzki, 2002). Adopting a site ontology provides an ontological and epistemological paradigm within which to conduct the research and the means to address the requirements of a practice-based approach to managerial work, but also raises implications, such as what to look for in empirical studies (Nicolini, 2013) and which empirical methods may be most suitable. Indeed the role of empirical studies is not to provide evidence for an ontology, but the ontology may be defended by the plausible accounts that ensue

(Schatzki, 2002). The potential compatibility of the ontology is discussed further in ‘methodological considerations’, bearing in mind that the empirical study is in its early stages.

The empirical study

Adopting Schatzki’s (2002) site ontology provides a paradigm within which to conduct the research into managerial work, in the context of temporary organisations. This is an ‘open-ended’ enquiry (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017), in that categories of managerial work are not specified *a-priori*. The research strategy is abductive, enabling ‘bottom-up’ theorising about management practices (Blaikie, 2010; Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017). Data is collected on activities (what people say and do), material arrangements, and their purposes.

Broadly, managerial work is the practice(s) (Schatzki, 2005) carried out by human actors with responsibility (Hales, 1999) for ensuring particular social and material arrangements work more or less together (Nicolini, 2013). The situations in which management practices will be investigated are, so-called, temporary organisations. However, temporary organisations are not conceived as “inert containers” (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2015, p. 17) or (just) objective space and time in which something happens (Schatzki, 2005), but as part of a nexus of practice-arrangement bundles, in which management practices transpire.

The aim of the empirical research is to capture management practices ‘as they happen’ (Schatzki, 2005), not just to be ‘close to the phenomena’ (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017), an approach that can be criticised for being a-theoretical (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013), but because human activity is indeterminate (Schatzki, 2012). As activities are ‘happenings’, they cannot be determined in advance, even if the conditions that made them possible are clear after the event (Schatzki, 2006, 2012).

The main sources of data are managers (or other social actors with defined responsibility) and the settings in which they work. All practitioners taking part have responsibility for a defined area of work activity and are deemed answerable for what happens in that area of work (Hales, 1999). The area of work activity is a (or is in a) temporary organisation. Temporary organisations are created to be terminated according to predetermined conditions of time, event or state, everyone involved understands that it will end, and it must be created solely for that purpose. Because practices are temporal-spatial, identified practices are sought in alternative settings.

The research design is ethnography-based, including preparation to enter the research settings, interviews with managers to ascertain what they say about their work, what they say they do, what is important about their work and why. This is followed by shadowing, with related fieldwork methods and techniques (Czarniawska, 2007, 2014; McDonald, 2005; McDonald and Simpson, 2014). Follow-up interviews enable the researcher to clarify any aspects that are unclear or incomplete from the shadowing days, and understanding of events that befall the organisation over the period in which the researcher is present in the organisation.

The role of the researcher is overt, requiring immersion, but not as participant, requiring a balance between the needs of the researcher and researched. The role requires socialisation and sufficient knowledge to be accepted and non-threatening (Arman, Vie and Åsvoll, 2012; Fielding, 2001; McDonald and Simpson, 2014; Neuman, 2003).

All interviews are semi-structured, last between one half hour and ninety minutes and are transcribed verbatim. Particular types of interviews, using instructive language, such as

Interview to the Double (Nicolini, 2009a) were considered, but rejected on the basis that the practitioners involved in the research did not have sufficiently routine days, or regularity in work activities (other than going to meetings of different types).

In preliminary interviews, participants are asked to describe their role, the purpose of the role and what had lead them to their current role. This includes their main responsibilities, contacts and the extent to which people have worked together in the past. Interviewees are then asked about the current stage of their work, that is, what it involves, with whom, where and with what. They are also asked about the work leading to this current stage and what is important about the work right now. During the conversation the researcher pays attention to any particular ways of doing things and what might be different about the current temporary organisation to any that they have worked in previously.

The shadowing (one day initially, extending according to what is happening and with the participant's agreement) involves joining the practitioners at the start of their day, at the designated place of work and following them throughout the day (McDonald and Simpson, 2014). This involves learning from the shadowee (McDonald, 2005), and provides greater opportunity for studying and collecting material aspects of work. Occasionally there are individual meetings at which it would be inappropriate to be present but practitioners are shadowed for most activities, with the opportunity to question them about their work, when convenient (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Shadowing a small number of managers, who interact with one another, has been beneficial in focussing on practices rather than people. Meetings can be observed in the course of a shadowing day or otherwise and, in addition to sayings and doings, provide a focus of practitioner discourse and how practitioners interact with one another (McDonald and Simpson, 2014).

Interviews can be limited in providing a factual account of work, the interviewee interpreting and impression-managing the data (Nicolini, 2009a; McDonald and Simpson, 2014), and the account being distanced from the work (Nicolini, 2009a). However, this can be an advantage for studying practices (Nicolini, 2009). First, it can articulate the moral and discursive elements of practice (Nicolini, 2009a) through the dominant discourse (McDonald and Simpson, 2014). That is, what is 'good' locally, and potentially the rules and general understandings influencing the practice (Schatzki, 2012). Second, what practitioners say about what they do can be compared with what they do in the field, which provides opportunities for questioning the purpose for which they act, to begin to access teleological hierarchies and teleoaffective structures (Schatzki, 2012). Interviews can also help to access more detail about the backgrounds of practitioners before they entered the temporary organisation and their journeys over time through "series of bundles and constellations" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 25), thereby the opportunity to access where people learnt how to do such and such or from where practices have been carried.

Other than the broad areas described above, the elements of site ontology (Schatzki, 2005, 2006, 2012) do not guide the data collection, but they are used in the analysis to code data in preparation for thematic analysis, similar to the Gioia approach (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012).

Because the aim is an 'open-ended' investigation of managerial work (associated risks are discussed in methodological considerations), the data collection is staged, with the methods being refined after each stage and research setting

The overall research design is as summarised in Table 1 and the types of data to be collected from each source is included in Table 2. Note that many of the questions are analytical and

require multiple data sources, or information is available from multiple sources – not to triangulate as much as ‘crystallise’ the findings (Tracy, 2010). The analysis is discussed in the methodological considerations, in relation to the requirements for practice-based research.

Table 1 Overview research design

Element of research design	Approach
Type of research question(s)	<i>What</i> do managers of temporary organisations do and say? <i>How</i> do they do this? <i>Why</i> might this be the case?
Research strategy	Abductive, bottom-up, using the practitioners’ language abstracted in terms of Schatzki’s site ontology
Ontological-epistemological paradigm	Site ontology
Main concepts	Managerial work and temporary organisation as interrelating social phenomena from a site ontological perspective
Data and data sources	So far: (construction industry) preliminary interviews, one day shadowing per participant, follow-up interview and feedback
Case selection	Temporary organisations according to predetermined criteria of intended termination, shared understanding of impending termination and predetermined criteria base on time, event or end-state Participants according to predetermined criteria of responsibility for a defined area of work
Data collection and timing	Short-term longitudinal, historical secondary, ongoing
Data reduction and coding	Code data to activities and material arrangements, and other elements where explicit, from interviews and observations Develop coding and analysis abductively, and from additional sources and settings Analysis ongoing

Table 2 Summary of data and sources

Data (Objects of enquiry/research questions from Korica. Nicolini and Johnson, 2016)	Source					
	Preliminary interviews	Fieldwork				Analysis
		Shadowing practitioners	Meetings	Material entities	R-P interaction	
What do practitioners say they do?	✓				✓	
What do practitioners say is important about what they do?	✓				✓	
What do the practitioners do?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
What do the practitioners say, and to whom?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
With what material entities do practitioners work (with what, where and with whom)?	✓	✓		✓		
How do the practitioners interact with material entities?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
When and where are practitioners' doings, sayings and interactions with material entities performed?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
What purpose(s) and higher-level purpose(s) is (are) served by the practitioners' doings and sayings?					✓	✓
What 'know how' is being shown in practitioners' doings and sayings?		✓	✓		✓	✓
What rules are influencing practitioners' doings and sayings?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What 'end-project-means combinations' are being enacted?		✓	✓		✓	✓

Data (Objects of enquiry/research questions from Korica. Nicolini and Johnson, 2016)	Source					
	Preliminary interviews	Fieldwork				Analysis
		Shadowing practitioners	Meetings	Material entities	R-P interaction	
What abstract senses are being infused and expressed in practitioners' doings and sayings?	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
In what ways are practices and material arrangements related and bundled?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What is the historical and cultural context of the practices being performed? (For example, from where have these ways of doing been carried or where have people learnt how to do such and such?)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What practices are being discussed?		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
What practices are being performed?		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
In what ways are particular practices being carried or changed?		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Methodological considerations

The main focus of this section is a discussion of the design choices and challenges in adopting Schatzki's (2002) site ontology and how they are addressed in the empirical study. First, are the requirements of a practice-based study (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017) generally, and second are the characteristics of the empirical study.

Requirements for a practice-based approach to managerial work

Adopting a practice-based approach to managerial work requires paying attention to five areas. These are (1) the need for an open-ended approach to managerial work, (2) focus on how practitioners conduct their task in the relational whole, (3) adopting a 'strong' practice-based perspective, (4) focus on practice rather than jobs or people, (5) paying attention to the historical and material context in which practices arise.

(1) The need for an 'open' ended approach to the study of managerial work

A particular challenge is that of specifying managerial work in terms of a management practice (or number of management practices). To illustrate this point, other empirical studies following a site ontology include previously defined practices such as accounting practices (Nama and Lowe, 2014), medical interview practices (Manidis and Scheeres, 2013), information sharing practices (Pilerot, 2016), leading in relation to previously studied educational practices (Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015), and espoused and actual human resource management practices (Shapiro and Naughton, 2015).

An open-ended approach is required to keep the 'integrated job of managing' intact (Mintzberg, 1994; Tengblad, 2012) and embrace the complexity, ambiguity and social embeddedness of managerial work (Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000; Tengblad, 2012). This means that the categories of managerial work are not specified *a-priori* (Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017) and management practices under investigation must remain open at the start of the study. However, as practices are everything to the social world, it is necessary to specify the practice(s) of interest (Bjorkeng, Clegg and Pitsis, 2009).

Where organisations are 'bundles of practices and material arrangements' (Schatzki, 2005), management is a particular sort of activity, the purpose of which is ensuring "social and material activities work more or less in the same direction" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 2) and management can be accepted in general terms as a practice, or number of practices (Schatzki, 2005; Nicolini, 2013). As temporary organisations are formed for the achievement of a specific purpose (Janowicz-Panjaitan, Bakker and Kenis, 2009) the focus of our study is the work involved in ensuring social and material arrangements work towards the task for which the organisation is formed. However, although implications of temporary organisation are acknowledged (Bakker *et al.*, 2016) they have not been investigated for some time (Bennis, 1965; Bryman *et al.*, 1987; Goodman and Goodman, 1976; Løwendahl, 1995; Morley and Silver, 1977).

Although Korica, Nicolini and Johnson (2015) are not explicit about methods, the authors recommend 'close to the phenomena' studies; and long-term ethnographical methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) are implied by the exemplar studies cited from other fields (Ho, 2009; Roryvik, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Spee, 2015; Cloutier *et al.*, 2016). The combination of open-ended exploration of practice, in an area where there are few indications of the implications for management practice, and recommendations for long-term ethnography poses a risk to both researchers and researched of long periods 'waiting for something to show

up' (Pink and Morgan, 2013). Shatzki also recommends ethnography "writ large", but he includes under "interaction-observation" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 24), 'direct experience', focus groups, meetings, video-taping practices, and interviews or oral histories. A question for researchers is, therefore, to consider the time in the field in relation to the focus of research and the likelihood of finding relevant phenomena, and to consider the utility of focussed, short-term and long-term ethnographic methods.

The approach adopted was, within an overarching research design, to stage data collection and analysis, with each stage feeding into the next. Participants in the first research setting were interviewed to find out about their work, what work they had conducted leading up to their current work and what was important about their work. This enabled the researcher to prepare for shadowing days and for socialisation into the setting. Follow-up interviews were conducted following the shadowing days to check the researcher's understanding and interpretation. Following this initial stage, analysis was conducted across each source of data and across all sources to identify patterns of activity and material arrangements across participants, compare this with secondary sources and, therefore, identify activities and material arrangements that might be sought in other settings.

(2) Focusing on how practitioners conduct their task within the relational whole

Focusing on both the situated accomplishment of work and its relationship with broader phenomena indicates a broad scope for any study. Nicolini (2009, 2013) suggests that to understand what is happening locally, and how this affects and is affected by broader phenomena, requires iterations of 'zooming in' on the enactment of practices *in situ* and 'zooming out', to their relationships in space and time – expanding the scope of observation and following the "trails of connections between the practices and their products" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 219). The implications of this strategy are iterative stages in research, potentially multiple studies, and theoretical pluralism. Nicolini (2013) suggests that theoretical pluralism is necessary because different theories have benefits and limitations depending on the focus of analysis, research question and whether the focus is immersion, following connections, or investigating how connections are maintained.

It is not within the scope of this paper to offer a discussion on theoretical pluralism but from a site ontology perspective, the focus is on formations and interconnections, rather than identifying specific practice-arrangement bundles and the labyrinths of connections (Schatzki, 2005, p. 477). However, the question of how much can be addressed in the scope of any single study, or stage, is a decision for researchers.

To develop an understanding of how much could be gained through a single study and method, the researcher followed Nicolini's (2013) advice to begin with 'zooming in' on management practice, through observations, and employed Schatzki's (2005) proposals for a site analysis to describe the temporary organisation in which managers work. That is, to try to understand the origins of the organisation and the organisation's activities to identify the interconnections with other bundles or formations. This analysis was conducted on data mainly obtained from interviews (with some secondary data to confirm, for example, key milestones in projects and contracts). Practitioners were asked about their work leading up to the current project. This enabled the researcher to capture and pay attention to aspects of context that might not be identified using other methods and identify interconnecting formations. Potential shapes were identified that 'ran through' the more commonly identified units such as organisations and teams. It is envisaged that following such an approach would enable researchers to identify processes that are *integrated* or *dispersed* (Schatzki, 2002).

Although it is too soon to say in the empirical study, there are indications that a site ontology may be useful in illustrating or understanding why, where interconnecting practices conflict, it appears that some are more persistent than others. In this respect, it is also interesting to note that, despite its potential, the ontology has received little interest in organisation change management (Caldwell, 2012).

(3) Adopting a 'strong' practice-based approach

A 'strong' approach goes beyond a 'common sense' notion of practice (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010) or merely paying more attention to what people do in practice, which is regarded as a-theoretical and based on an assumption that 'what a practice is' is self-evident (Nicolini, 2013; Korica, Nicolini and Johnson, 2017). Adopting a site ontology as a philosophy (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011), should facilitate both detailed description of everyday working life and explanation of organisational life in terms of practices (Nicolini, 2013), and therefore a strong approach. Indeed, a further defence of a social ontology is its ability to underpin high quality empirical research. As will be seen when discussing the need to focus on practice, this may provide a challenge to empirical researchers.

(4) Focusing on practices rather than jobs or individuals

The implication of a site ontology is that, as the fundamental building blocks of social life (Nicolini, 2013), practices are the unit of analysis (Schatzki, 2005, 2006). Although practices are the unit of analysis they cannot be directly observed (Barnes, 2001; Schatzki, 2012). Activities and material arrangements provide an entry point but practices must be uncovered analytically (Schatzki, 2012; Nicolini, 2013); this is because the activities that compose a practice occur in different spaces and times, and the means by which activities are organised as a practice are abstract (Schatzki, 2012). For a practice to be 'managerial' (or an activity to be part of a management practice, and only a management practice), for example, it must be recognisable as such in different contexts and over time.

Taking practices first, Schatzki (2012) proposes that language and lexicon are important clues to identifying what activities and practices exist. Words enable the researcher to grasp, relatively easily, people's sayings and doings. Lexicon is useful because the words used for activities are built into practices, for example, known to and used by the people who carry out that practice. However, identifying sayings and doings, and the language associated with a practice, is easier at the lower levels of action hierarchies. A practice comprises many activities, and activities, particularly lower level activities, can be part of many practices. A practice is a particular nexus of sayings and doings, and for an activity to be part of a practice it must be related by at least one of the abstract forms of practice organisation (that is, practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understandings) and this can only be identified through analysis.

Furthermore, although activities, practices and material arrangements might well be identified, particularly with preparation and additional sources of data, much of how they hang together and connect with other practices, and in which other contexts, how they have developed and how they might develop in the future will be unknown to both researchers and subjects (Schatzki, 2012). This requires ethnographic means or "interaction-observation" (Schatzki, 2012, p. 24). It also requires analytical effort and caution on the part of the researcher.

In the empirical study, data has been coded to *activities* and *material arrangements*, as these can be perceived and their 'existence' recognised through other research settings and sources of data. Other items have been tentatively coded to *rules* (some of which can be confirmed through other sources, for example, if they are industry norms); *ends* (at various levels, through

phrases like ‘because’, ‘so that’, which recur in the same combinations across participants); *practical understandings* (such as how people conduct tasks unreflectively); and *general understandings* (affective words associated with potential practice, such as in relation to time constraints, client objectives or safety). Such coding is tentative until it can be confirmed with additional sources.

Having coded data in this way it is possible to see how, conceptually, items may be organised and enjoined, for example, grouped into teleological hierarchies or teleoaffective structures, and also the degree of overlap between potential practices, which supports the idea and utility of shapes of practices.

(5) Paying attention to the historical and material context in which practices arise

Although the focus of research is what is happening, it is also necessary to understand what is not happening, that is, paying attention to the past and potential future. In some ways this can be understood through asking practitioners about their actions, why they acted, and what their intention was in acting. Practitioners also seemed willing to discuss, unprompted, ways in which they were considering acting. However, whether this is an attribute of practice or people is not clear at this stage.

Conclusions and limitations

At this stage, the conclusions are limited by the study being in its early stages, and the need to retain the anonymity of the small number of temporary organisations and participants involved. However, the study is ongoing and some tentative conclusions about the method are drawn:

- Understanding the origins and activities of temporary organisations and how they might matter is valuable to understanding the situated nature of managerial work, and helps to retain the wholeness of their work.
- Some organised combinations of activities and material arrangements, identified from interviews, shadowing and material entities, can be mapped to existing management practices, in this and other industries, but also indicate potentially ‘new’ (to literature) aspects of some practices.
- Some other potential practices may be confirmed with additional sources (in the existing settings or secondary sources) but other potential practices require confirmation in other settings.
- Methods to understand what is not happening, as well as what is, need to be refined.
- Additional techniques should be evaluated, for example in relation to short-term ethnography.

Overall, the utility of a site ontology offers some utility in the contexts studied and in relation to the phenomena discussed in this paper.

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