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# An Introduction to Entrepreneurship as Practice (EAP)

Bruce Teague, Eastern Washington University

Richard Tunstall, University of Leeds

Claire Champenois, Audencia Business School

William B. Gartner, Babson College and Linnaeus University

## Introduction

This special issue focuses on a core tenet of *IJEBR* to "advance the study of human and behavioural dimensions of entrepreneurship" by furthering an "entrepreneurship as practice perspective" (EAP) that showcases fieldwork that explores specific entrepreneurial practices in specific settings. As championed by Steyaert (2007), Johannisson (2011) and Watson (2013), the entrepreneurship-as-practice perspective is gaining traction, witnessed by such contributions as De Clercq & Voronov (2009), Terjesen & Elam (2009); Goss et al. (2011), Keating et al. (2013), and the recent special issue of *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* (Thompson, et al., 2020) that was devoted to entrepreneurship as practice scholarship.

All of the articles in this special issue began as working papers presented at the *Third Annual Entrepreneurship as Practice Conference* held at Linnaeus University, April 16-18, 2018. This conference continues to serve (in 2021 the conference will be in its sixth year) as an important catalyst for developing scholarship in the entrepreneurship as practice area, and many researchers interested in pursuing this topic would benefit from an association with this community – (https://www.entrepreneurshipaspractice.com/).

Before describing the articles that appear in this issue, we begin by examining the entrepreneurship as practice perspective. We start by looking at the notion of practice that is central to all work in this field. After highlighting both the breadth and the commonality for those who work from this perspective, we consider the unique contributions a practice perspective brings to the broader conversations taking place in the field of entrepreneurship. We then suggest opportunities for important contributions as the field continues to grow.

## What is a Practice?

Within the entrepreneurship literature, scholars use the term "practice" in three very different ways. Most frequently, "practice" invokes social ontologies and studies grounded in social practice theory literatures (e.g., Dodd, 2014; Johannisson, 2011; Teague et al., 2019). However, "practice" is occasionally used in reference to a category of activity such as a legal practice, medical practice, or marketing practice (e.g., Coviello, Brodie, and Munro, 2000). Finally, "practice" can refer to the verb, that is, the act of practicing, as in deliberate practice and the development of expertise (e.g., Mueller et al., 2013). This latter use of the term draws upon the body of research developed by Anders Ericsson and his colleagues (Anders Ericsson, 2008; Ericsson, 2009; Ericsson et al., 1993). Most commonly, "practice" invokes social ontologies and studies grounded in social practice theory literatures, which consider practice as the fundamental unit of analysis when studying entrepreneurial phenomena (e.g., Dodd, 2014; Johannisson, 2011; Teague et al., 2019).

Entrepreneurship as Practice (EAP) refers exclusively to the first of these three usages. EAP scholars embrace a larger "practice turn" occurring across the social sciences (Gartner et al., 2016). While the term 'practice theory' appears to date back to Ortner (1984) (Hui et al., 2017, p. 1), the study of practices refers to an intellectual tradition emerging from the philosophical foundations of Wittgenstein (1953) and Heidegger (1996), and developed mainly through the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Giddens (1979, 1991), and Lave and Wenger (2019; 1991). Collectively, these scholars are often recognized as the first generation of practice theorists (Hui et al., 2017, p. 1). The foundation established by this first group has been elaborated and refined by a second generation, which includes Schatzki (1996, 2002, 2012), Reckwitz (2002), Gherardi (2000), and (Shove et al., 2012).

A natural outcome of this development is that practice theory, or social practice theory, is not a singular theory, but a group of theories that share ontological assumptions. Differences between theories derive from what is foregrounded (Champenois, Lefebvre & Renteau, 2020). For Bourdieu, emphasis was placed on habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Lave and Wenger place more emphasis on the transmission of practice via their concepts of the legitimately peripheral participants, and their exploration of overlapping communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Schatzki has perhaps been the most systematic with regard to elaborating and theoretically relating the elements of practice (e.g., Schatzki, 1997, 2002, 2010). For Schatzki, social practice theory is a means of understanding how social life plays out (Hui et al., 2017, p. 126). He has used the concept of teleological hierarchies to organize a system of hierarchically nested units of practice. Through his work, a coherent and complete explanation of practice becomes more tractable (Schatzki, 2012).

What practice theories share in common is a primary focus on understanding the practice at hand. A practice is distinct from both the individual and the behavior as units of inquiry. A practice is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds. While both individuals and behaviors can be observed within the practice, it is the practice, itself, that is of primary interest to the practice theorist. Practice theorists eschew individualistic explanations of phenomena in favor of more holistic explanations in which the practice establishes the boundaries of the research space. The preeminence of the practice requires that this focal term be defined. The term 'practice', or 'social practice' (used synonymously in this instance) have been defined repeatedly by scholars grappling this topic (See Table 1). While varying in their specifics, certain points of consensus stand out.

- Practices are repeated patterns of routinized behavior—to the point that the similarities in performance allow for the recognition of a common practice.
- Practices are reproduced across different times and spaces
- Practices involve both doing and saying
- Practices are social—they involve the social interaction of individuals.
- Practices are shaped by culture or field and shape them in turn.
- Practices involve both bodily and mental activity
- Practices are processual in nature.
- Material objects, or the non-human, affect the production of practices

**Put Table One About Here**

Both the definitions in Table 1, and the commonalities identified above, have implications for the study of EAP. As noted, practices are repeated patterns of routinized behavior. They are social and involve "sayings and doings" (Schatzki, 2016). Practices are typically reproduced in particular settings by different practitioners at different times. Finally, the sociomaterial aspects of the practice environment will shape the performance of the practice by reinforcing some behaviors while suppressing others. The result is a complex social pattern of behavior that will involve practiced sayings and doings, spontaneous adaptation of the practice to environmental changes, and the exercise of knowledge that is both recognized and tacit. The involvement of multiple individual practitioners means that a single practitioner may not be capable of accurately describing the practice, and in some cases may not be able to fully describe their own contribution to the practice. In spite of this, practices are observable, and are understandable by the reasonably knowledgeable observer who has experience observing the practice (Reckwitz, 2002).

For example, entrepreneurs who create scalable technology-based companies often pitch to angel investor networks as they transition from proof-of-concept to early traction and growth. A typical angel investor organization will meet on a monthly basis for several months of the year. While behavioral scholars might be tempted to focus solely on the pitch of the entrepreneur for funding and support at an angel investor meeting, practice-oriented scholars will attend to the entire practice. Thus, they will be aware of the role played by the president of the angel organization in attracting investable companies, and in acting as a gatekeeper to those seeking to raise capital. They will be aware of the sociomaterial arrangement of the space and how this influences the performance of the practice they are witnessing. They will notice the broad composition of participants in the audience, including not just potential investors, but local

bankers, lawyers, educators, and others. They will also recognize both commonalities and differences between various examples of the practice. New empirical observations and theoretical insights therefore emerge through this in-depth observational experience with the practice. These novel insights highlighted by practice-oriented scholars have the potential to complement and extend empirical knowledge while identifying new opportunities for theoretical development.

The practice lens—a term often applied when utilizing the group of practice theories—focuses attention on aspects of practice that may not have received attention in research developed using the deductive model. It shares ontological origins with the anthropological method, in which theory emerges from the growing body of empirical evidence. Practice theories do this by foreshadowing different aspects of the field site as the trained observer either observes or participates in the practice. In order to accomplish this, researchers must spend time attuning themselves to the nuances of the practice and must observe the practice being executed by multiple practitioners in the relevant roles. For this reason, empirical practice theory research has traditionally involved qualitative participant observation methods that allow the researcher to develop an intimate familiarity with the site of the practice and with the practitioners.

**Why should scholars embrace the 'practice turn'?**

Thus far, we have described what we mean by the term "practice theory," and by extension, the study of entrepreneurship as practice. However, this is insufficient to justify the growing application of practice theory to empirical study, or the creation of special issues, such as this one, in which the application of this lens is highlighted as a means of moving the field of entrepreneurship forward. What differentiates practice theory approaches from others in a

manner that expands the scholarly conversation and adds to our collective knowledge about entrepreneurship?

Practice theories foreground the importance of activity, performance, and work in the creation and perpetuation of all aspects of social life (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). This focus on practice places emphasis on routine bodily activities and the arrangement and interplay of material arrangements (Reckwitz, 2002). Human practitioners are conceived as carriers of practices, and practice theories leave room for initiative, creativity, and individuality in performance of the practice (Nicolini, 2012, p. 4). Nicolini goes on to argue that within the practice perspective, knowledge is conceived as a form of mastery that is expressed in the capacity to carry out a particular form of social and material activity (pg. 4).

The modern practice turn draws attention to a new set of issues, while also allowing traditional issues to be seen in a new light (Ortner, 1984). Three key areas in which this occurs were identified. First, there is heightened awareness of the relationship(s) between human action and different phenomenon called the system. This relationship is recursive, emergent, and negotiated. It places emphasis on the role of the practitioner in shaping the practice at the same time as the practice shapes the activity of the practitioner. This explains the second difference noted by Ortner: practice theories place emphasis on what people really do. In other words, the focus is on understanding the conditions under which human practices are carried out. Since the performance of practice often involves considerable execution of tacit knowledge, a full understanding of the practice will only be achieved by being present, as an observer of, or participant in, the practice. Third, practice theory directs the researcher to attend to the role of the practitioner, and the often overlooked material arrangements that support and constrain the

production and reproduction of practices. One byproduct of theories is that they shape what researchers observe by influencing what they expect to find.

Reckwitz (2002) summarizes the primary contribution of practice theory when he states that practice theories guide researchers to see that which has not been seen. Teague, et. al (2019) provide an entrepreneurial exemplar of this in their study of entrepreneurs pitching for angel investment. Prior research had generally assumed that the pitch was transactional, and therefore assumed the practice to be singular in nature. This resulted in an exclusive focus on pitches as a means of securing investment dollars. Teague and his colleagues, employing practice theory, observed and documented four different types of pitches, each serving a different relational purpose within the practice site.

Similarly, De Clercq and Voronov (2009b) adopted Bourdieu's approach to challenge existing assumptions that legitimacy gaining and innovating function as separate practices. They demonstrate that entrepreneurship face constraints that require jointly satisfying normative expectations from their field, but also that they innovate and disrupt some elements of their field. As a result, it is their ability to address these contradictory demands that create legitimacy for their venture.

**Important research opportunities**

For scholars seeking to make important research contributions, entrepreneurship as practice offers numerous opportunities to advance knowledge in the field of entrepreneurship, as well as to advance the practice theory literature. This is due to the nature of entrepreneurship research sites. Entrepreneurial ecosystems connect numerous related practices within one broad nexus of practices. In this section, we discuss one of the most promising topics of study for EAP

scholars: opportunities related to the study of variation within a given practice space, as well as between different locations and times in which the same practice is performed.

Hui (2017) identifies variation as an important and underdeveloped area within social practice theory. There is a great need to better understand the variation that occurs from performance to performance of a practice within a common practice space. Entrepreneurship offers numerous study sites in which such variation can be observed and studied across a variety of participants and times. For example, a study of an angel investment organization facilitates observation and analysis of the practice of pitching under conditions in which the participants will naturally change with each performance. Similar opportunities to study variation in practice might be found in studying incubators, accelerators, seed capital funds, governmental agencies such as the USA Small Business Administration, and practices of local chambers of commerce as they relate to supporting new business development. Such studies not only advance our knowledge of these practices within the field of entrepreneurship, but offer the opportunity to offer both empirical and theoretical contributions simultaneously.

A different question related to variation involves the understanding of how the variation between practices relates to their interconnectedness and interdependence (Hui 2017). Geographically proximal entrepreneurial ecosystems often share numerous ties through shared participation and common membership. For example, it is not uncommon for investment organizations (VC or Angel) to communicate frequently about up and coming businesses within the region. Similarly, government funding offices within the same region will interact frequently, share common leadership, and yet act independently within their territories. Entrepreneurship offers many such opportunities to study variation in practice between locations.

The interconnecting relationships between the practice sites allow for the researcher to explore the questions of interdependence and interconnectedness, as encouraged by Hui (2017).

Within practice theory, stability and variation are related concepts. For practices to be intelligible to practitioners, there must be a significant degree of stability to the form, structure, material elements, and performance of the practice (Hui, 2017). This leads to other important questions. For instance, how are elements of stability reinforced to overcome natural variation in performance? Similarly, how much stability is required for a practice to be recognizable to participants? This might lead us to ask what patterns do we see in the emergence of new practices? It seems probable that punctuated equilibria will be observed as new practices emerge. Finally, Hui (2017) argues that we need to learn much more about how tolerable variations of the practice are made meaningful to participants. We suggest the following questions that would stem from pursuing issues related to variation in entrepreneurship as practice:

1. How does variation in the performance of a practice influence the cognitive categorizing of someone as an insider or an outsider to the practice? How do behaviors change towards the individual based on this categorization? How are new inductees to the practice socialized?
2. How do different degrees of involvement with the practice by different individuals affect the performance of the practice? For example, (Hui, 2017: 56) uses the example of people involved in bird watching to describe differences in their practices based on their involvement in the practice of bird watching (e.g., membership in bird watching clubs and organizations).

3. How do practices differ (across related practices, and across performances within a given practice) in terms of the *degree of standardization* expected in the practice?
4. What determines where high degrees of variation in performance of a practice are acceptable, versus where high degrees of standardization are required?
5. How do intersections between practices reveal and relate to variations between the practices? (Hui, 2017: 58)

Besides the implications of variation to the study of entrepreneurial practices, we suggest that scholars might also focus on elucidating the role of the individual within practices, study the material arrangements as they influence practices, and consider the potential for practice scholars to contribute to exploring significant societal and global phenomena.

**Articles in the Special Issue**

The call for papers generated 30 submissions, and, after two rounds of revisions, five manuscripts were selected for publication in this special issue. These five articles demonstrate many of the issues identified in the previous section on variation, as well as showcasing the breadth of: theoretical touchpoints in entrepreneurship as practice, methods that can be used in entrepreneurship as practice, settings where entrepreneurship as practice occurs, and, insights that entrepreneurship as practice research offers to theories of organizing and insights into the specific practices of entrepreneurship. This variety in theory, methods, sites, and practices, is one of the strengths of the entrepreneurship as practice area, and, we encourage future contributions that emulate this diversity.

In Thompson and Illes' (in this issue) "Entrepreneurial learning as practice: A videoethnographic analysis," the authors attend a two-day "Startup-Weekend" for refugees to

observe, document and explore the practices of learning entrepreneurship. By videotaping many of the activities involved among the participants (instructors, students and other individuals, such as coordinators of the program), as well as through participation (direct observation) in the program, and observational and reflexive note taking, the authors describe how entrepreneurial learning occurs through engagement in specific practices, and, that these specific practices are interrelated as a nexus of entrepreneurial practices that are translated through group activities and discussions (doing and sayings). Besides the many implications and insights for the entrepreneurship as practice area, we notice that this article addresses many of the concerns regarding the need for rigor in the use of observational methods for studying entrepreneurial behavior suggested in Bird, Schjoedt & Baum (2012).

In Kimmitt & Dimov (in this issue) "The recursive interplay of capabilities and constraints," the authors identify two distinct pathways of recursive entrepreneurial practices of entrepreneurs engaged in micro-finance activities in Ghana. Based on four years of observation of ten entrepreneurs and interviews with loan officers and others, the authors offer a process model of capability development of understandings, logics and engagements through divergent venturing that is appending, capitalizing and value-based, or convergent venturing that is preserving, amplifying and venture-focused. These second order constructs in the recursive process model are based on detailed observations of the practices of these entrepreneurs, over time, and the article provides ample evidence of the specifics of these categories of practices in these specific situations. The authors demonstrate how practices emerge into capabilities through the intentions of these entrepreneurs as they engage in situations that are both constraints on prospective activities as well as challenges to develop new actions in response to these constraints.

In Reid (in this issue) "The generative principles of lifestyle enterprising: dialectic entanglements of capital-habitus-field," an elegant presentation and use of the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu is provided through the study of the practices of six enterprisers involved in "lifestyle" businesses. While the study recognizes Bourdieu's views regarding field, capital and habitus, the focus is primarily on the various forms of capital (e.g., economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) that form the basis of the habitus that these enterprisers employ throughout the gestation and operation of their businesses. Based on evidence from ethnographic observations and interviews, the study develops a framework of eight types of practices that these entrepreneurs engaged in: (1) using work/life skills; (2) displaying work/life histories; (3) acquiring skills; (4) displaying skills; (5) renovating-building; (6) acquiring tools-of-the-trade; (7) displaying tools-of-the-trade and. (8) working with family and friends. The study points out that a critical aspect of "lifestyle" entrepreneuring involves recognizing that cultural capital employed by these individuals is a way to develop social capital in their enterprises.

In Campbell (in this issue) "Entrepreneurial uncertainty in context: An ethnomethodological perspective," the nature of uncertainty is explored through the use of the ethnomethodological tradition of Conversation Analysis to the interactions among venture team members. The verbal exchanges of members of two-person teams involved in a six-week venture development program were analyzed to show the ways that uncertainty is acknowledged in regards to what is known, who knows what (both within the team and by others), and, the recognition of "not knowing" as an inherent condition of the process of entrepreneurship. The article provides both a method (Conversation Analysis) and the offer to delve into the micro-activities of conversations to generate a richer understanding of the doing of sayings in entrepreneurship as practice.

In Hydle & Billington (in this issue) "Entrepreneurial practices of collaboration comprising constellations," the authors study 42 innovation projects among 32 firms that involved collaboration among various complementary partners. Through an attention to the specific practices of collaboration employed by individuals in these firms, over time, the study explored the modes, purposes and outcomes of these collaborations that resulted in the identification of different constellations of collaborative efforts. Constellations, are therefore, bundles of interrelated practices and material arrangements. Based on oral histories, interviews, and other data collection efforts, the authors generated a framework of three types of collaborative constellations from the practice data: *reciprocal* (distributed tasks are common activities, purposes and ends are coordinated, and rules involve common material arrangements), *alliance* (distributed tasks are shared activities, with a commonly developed purpose and ends and rules involve shared practices and infrastructure) and *confederacy* (distributed tasks are orchestrated, with a shared purpose and ends, and a common and practical understanding of the rules). The reciprocal constellation enhances interdependent innovation, while the alliance constellation incorporates innovation, and the alliance constellation supports independent innovation. The article offers insights, then, not only into identifying three broad ways that collaboration occurs, but, also, identifies specific practices that are undertaken when these constellations of collaboration are pursued.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue provide evidence of how an EAP perspective can enrich entrepreneurship theory and our understanding of entrepreneurial phenomena. They reveal that becoming an entrepreneur pertains to learning idiosyncratic capabilities. They also revisit and rejuvenate key concepts in entrepreneurship theory, namely

uncertainty and innovation. At the same time, they illustrate how these are approached, produced, and maintained by entrepreneurs in situ.

## Conclusion

We hope that the articles in this Special Issue provide the reader with a realization that the entrepreneurship-as-practice perspective is a fertile area of study, open to a variety of theoretical perspectives, across a broad range of methods and sites for studying entrepreneurial practices pursued by a diverse and dynamic scholarly community. The tent is large and welcoming for scholars who are interested in the "doings and sayings" of entrepreneurs and others involved in the entrepreneurial world. Yet, at the foundation of all EAP studies is a recognition of the importance of field work for the collection of data on entrepreneurial practices. Getting close to entrepreneurs is fundamental to the practice of entrepreneurship as practice. As such, we believe an important benefit of such closeness is that important insights will result from this quality of involvement between scholars and entrepreneurs. We suggest that the practice of EAP fulfills many of the goals of Dimov, Schaefer & Pistrui's (2020) call for a second-person stance in entrepreneurship scholarship that better integrates scholarly rigor with practical relevance regarding entrepreneurial problems and concerns that face those practicing entrepreneurship in the entrepreneurial world.

It should not go un-noted that there are many paths that head in the same direction in entrepreneurship research as practice-based scholarship (Gartner & Teague, 2020). While EAP focuses on the practices of entrepreneurship, all entrepreneurial practices invariably involve entrepreneurs, so that research and insights from entrepreneurial behavior scholarship, as well as entrepreneurial process scholarship (both of which focus, in some form, on the "doings and

sayings" of entrepreneurs) should provide a fuller and more detailed picture of the nature of entrepreneurial action. Finally, as Campbell (in this issue) points out in her article, the study of entrepreneurial practices will likely provide insights into the characteristics of entrepreneurial expertise. As we know more about what entrepreneurs "do and say" in specific situations, the more likely we are to develop insights into whether and how these practices might lead to better ways to engage in entrepreneurial action that may generate more beneficial futures for everyone (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Teague & Gartner, 2020).

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Table 1: Definitions of Practice

| Source | Definition of Practice |
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| (Bourdieu, 1977) | *Bourdieu defines practice per the following formula: (Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice* |
| Giddens (1976) | Practice is an ongoing series of practical activities. Regular activities bring together people into social systems, which are reproduced over time through continued interaction. |
| (Schatzki, 2012) | A practice is an open-ended, spatially-temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. |
| (Reckwitz, 2002) | A 'practice' is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. |
| (Nicolini, 2012) | Practice is the real-time doing and saying something in a specific place and time. |
| (Gee, 2010) | A practice is a social recognized and institutionally or culturally supported endeavor that usually involves sequencing or combining actions in certain specific ways. |
| (Scollon, 2001) | A practice is a repeated action: the practice of x exists when the actions of x-ing have been sufficiently repeated as to be recognizable as x-ings. |
| (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) | Practices are entities that combine four elements: material activity; discourse; social relations and processes; and mental phenomena. |
| (Schmidt, 2017) | Practices are processing activities that are conveyed, situated, materially embedded, distributed and interconnected through cultural knowledge and skilled bodily movements. |
| (Shove et al., 2012) | Practices involve the active integration of material, competence, and meaning by practitioners. |