

## **SPACE-AS-PRACTICE IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES**

**ARILTON MARQUES FARIA**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO ESPÍRITO SANTO (UFES)  
arilton98@gmail.com

**ALFREDO RODRIGUES LEITE DA SILVA**

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO ESPÍRITO SANTO (UFES)  
alfredoufes@gmail.com

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, many fields of inquiry, including organizational studies, has passed by the so called ‘spatial turn’ (VAN MARREWIJK; YANOW, 2010). In this context, there is an increasing number of publications in recent organizational studies that take space as a central theme. In reviewing these studies, Taylor and Spicer (2007) showed three main tendencies in which the literature has followed: ‘space as distance’, where space is treated in a rationalist way as measurable relation between points; ‘space as power relations’, an approach often guided by Marxian ideas; ‘space as experience’, an approach guided by an interpretive perspective to understand space as the manifestation of imagination.

In reflecting about the three main tendencies, we can observe the absence of a practice approach. With the term ‘practice approach’, we mean a different idiom to read the social world – a practice idiom – that sees the world in flux, where social entities are the result of ongoing activities (NICOLINI, 2012). Practice theory is a cultural theory, which explains “[...] actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms [...]” (RECKWITZ, 2002, p. 245). The practice idiom has guided many organizational studies from many themes, such as strategy, technology and knowledge. However, with exception of some isolated studies that take a more dynamic perspective about space, the practice approach did not reach the area of space research in organizational studies.

We confirmed this absence when looking for such an approach in the publications from the two most recent special issues related to spatiality in organizational contexts (CUTCHER *et al.*, 2015; DELBRIDGE; SALLAZ, 2015). To fill this gap, the following question guides this paper: How can we think about space in organizational studies through the practice idiom? Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to develop a ‘Space-as-Practice’ view to space research in organizational studies.

In achieving the purpose, this work offers some contributions both to the academic research and to society. Regarding to research contributions, this essay expands the scope of the space research in organizational studies, because it takes a different view to understand spatiality, the Space-as-Practice view. Likewise, this paper contributes to Practice-Based Studies (PBS) in focusing on space, something that denotes an important but forgotten dimension in this area. And although this essay focused more on research implications, it also offers, at least indirectly, a contribution to practitioners and society. The approach legitimated here has significant implications for practitioners, because practice idiom is practical, that is, it offers possibilities for intervention in cases of maintenance or change some studied practices (FELDMAN; ORLIKOWSKI, 2011), and this include spatial practices. Thus, this reflection can be used by some interested actors in society, such as policy-makers, activists and managers, in different purposes, such as policy-making about spaces in a city, protests or spatial planning in a company.

Following this introduction, we discuss about the way in which space has been approached in organizational studies, recognizing its highpoints in many studies (DALE; BURREL, 2008; TAYLOR, SPICER, 2007). In the sequence, we discuss the diversity of approaches that constitute the Practice-Based Studies (PBS) (CORRARDI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010). In the end, we confront theoretical contributions of the two fields of inquiry and we offer a path to articulate space and practice through the Space-as-Practice approach.

## 2. SPACE IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

Space is a key element to enlarge the understanding of management and organizational contexts (DALE; BURREL, 2008; TAYLOR; SPICER, 2007). Vergara and Vieira (2005) highlight the relevance of space to organizational studies arguing that many organizational categories (such as structure, technology, decision taking and power) can be better understood if researchers consider the spatial dimension that surrounds those categories. Despite this importance, space has been a forgotten dimension in the most part of the organizational literature (CLEGG; KORNBERGER, 2006; TAYLOR; SPICER, 2007). The reasons for this marginality are not so clear, but some authors (PANAYIOTOU; KAFIRIS, 2011) highlight methodological difficulties to examine space in organizational contexts and the thinking that space is a theme better researched by other fields such as geography and architecture.

In organizational studies, this theme is not so new, because, despite its marginality, this dimension has always been present, although implicitly, in different organizational approaches. Chanlat (2006) shows how space was treated by many approaches since the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the scientific organization movement, the human relations school, the systemic management thinking, the cognitive management thinking, the critical management thinking, the symbolic management thinking and the psychosociology perspective. What these perspectives have in common is the implicit treatment of space in organizational contexts.

In contemporary organizational research, however, many studies about space have been published, resulting in the so called 'spatial turn' in organizational studies (CHANLAT, 2006; MARREWIJK; YANOW, 2010). The spatial turn also occurred in other areas, such as anthropology, geography, sociology and urban studies (MARREWIJK; YANOW, 2010; DALE; BURREL, 2008).

With that 'spatial turn' a bundle of publications treating space explicitly has emerged and three conceptions of space have appeared (TAYLOR; SPICER, 2007, p. 327): "space as distance between two points. [...] space as materialized power relations. [...] space as the manifestation of our imagination". These three conceptions are linked to Lefebvre's theory of the space production. His spatial thought has a significant influence in the spatial turn in organizational studies (BEYES; STEYAERT, 2011). For Lefebvre (1991), space can be conceived (that dominant space constructed by planners, engineers, *etc.*), perceived (that is, the translation of the planned space into material artifacts and bodily gestures) and lived (that dominated space in which the imagination of users appropriate planned spaces through symbols). His philosophical background is bounded in the Marxist tradition, but he adopts an unorthodox Marxism.

Many organizational researchers have applied Lefebvre's approach. An example of application of the Lefebvrian approach to space in organizational context is the study of Wasserman and Frenkel (2011). The authors investigated identity implications of organizational aesthetic through the three Lefebvrian spaces in the context of a new building of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They found that, while managers and planners searched identity regulation and cultural control, workers applied bottom-up processes of guerrilla as a peculiar way of resistance.

This and other researches about space in organizational studies have treated space as an entity or something fixed and stabilized, neglecting the provisional and practical nature of space. The study of Wasserman and Frenkel (2011), nevertheless, applies some insights of the practice theory of Certeau (1984) and thus it does not neglect the practical dimension of space entirely. Even so, the authors do not develop a practice approach to space in organizational studies. Thus, it is necessary to understand space through the practice idiom due to its capacity to offer relevant insights to space research in organizational studies. To do so, it is

necessary navigate by the general statements of the practice-based studies and their implications to organizational studies.

### 3. PRACTICE-BASED STUDIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

‘Practice-Based Studies’ (PBS) is a general label that embraces a range of different studies (CORRADI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010). Instead of discussing the differences in labeling, important is to comprehend how practice approach emerges, which are its general features, how those studies emphasize practice and how they do so. Historically, practice-oriented researches gained force in the third last decades from the twentieth century, reaching many areas of study and themes, such as science, culture and language (NICOLINI, 2009). Practice theories encountered adepts that were dissatisfied with some modern (homo economicus and homo sociologicus) and high-modern (mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism) social theories (RECKWITZ, 2002).

In distinguishing from these social theories, the practice idiom implies a re-conceptualization of some traditional categories present in social thought, such as “body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/ process and the agent” (RECKWITZ, 2002, p. 250). Furthermore, it is a point of consensus that practice theories in general have in common some characteristics. This because the practice idiom is a materialist approach (SCHATZKI, 2001), transcends traditional dualisms in social explanation (FELDMAN; ORLIKOWSKI, 2011) and represents a critique of rationalism (RECKWITZ, 2002; CORRADI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010; GHERARDI, 2009a; 2009b). Moreover, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Nicolini (2009) explain that practice idiom can be an ontological and epistemological project, mainly when Schatzki (2001) develops a distinct social ontology, understanding the social as the field of practices. In this sense, another consensus is that any study with this perspective should focus on practice as the unity of analysis (NICOLINI, 2009).

Despite those common aspects, the practice idiom and the word practice are polysemics. Around PBS, this polysemy, allied to the epistemological differences between theorists, has generated diverse definitions of practice (GHERARDI, 2009a). We meet the two most used definitions of practice in the works of Schatzki (2001; 2002) and Reckwitz (2002). For Schatzki (2002, p. 87): “[...] a practice is a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doing and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structure, and general understandings”. For Reckwitz (2002, p. 249):

A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: 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.

Comparing these two definitions, it is possible to note many similarities. Nonetheless, examining the texts where the definitions came from, we verify many differences in the understanding of practice. Above all, if we amplify the comparison, adding other practice theorists, we will conclude that there is not a unified practice theory (SCHATZKI, 2001; FELDMAN; ORLIKOWSKI, 2011; CORRADI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010; NICOLINI, 2009). For example, Schatzki (2001) defend the nonexistence of a unique practice idiom through the debate about the principle of symmetry. According to this principle, researchers should consider as equal the influences of both human and non-human actors in the social analysis, as the same way as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) suggests. Albeit Schatzki (2002) does not deny the existence of nonhuman agency, he conceives practices as activities of humans and, consequently, he focuses more on humans than nonhumans, adopting a “residual humanism” (GHERARDI, 2015).

The plurality of perspectives in PBS impacts in its translation to organizational studies, because organizational researchers have adopted different practice theorists to their studies since the beginnings. The 'practice turn' in organizational studies, or the return to practice in this area (CORRADI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010), has occurred since the last third decades (NICOLINI, 2009). Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni (2010) argues in your review of PBS in organizational studies that only with the work of Brown and Duguid (1991) that it is possible to note a start of an explicit and renewed interest in practice-based theorizing.

At the same time, the 1990's represented a shift in treating organizations, that is, rather than take organization as an entity, researchers turned to organizing processes (NICOLINI, 2009). In doing so, researchers worked with a new ontological dimension, since organization as an entity represents a being ontology, whereas organizing represents a becoming ontology (DUARTE; ALCADIPANI, 2016). This becoming ontology, and especially the notion of organizing, relates to a post-structuralist epistemology, but it was not born in the translation of post-structuralism in organizational studies (DUARTE; ALCADIPANI, 2016), rather it was developed in the works of Karl Weick about the social psychology of organizing and the sensemaking process (FELDMAN; ORLIKOWSKI, 2011).

Besides the understanding of the organizational ontology, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) show that many studies have applied practice theories in diverse organizational themes, such as strategy, knowledge and institutionalism. Nicolini (2009) adds other themes, such as technology, marketing, accounting, routines, decision making and innovation. Reviewing these studies, Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni (2010) established two dimensions in which researchers have treated practice: practice as an empirical object and practice as a way of seeing (as lens). For example, we find strategy in the first dimension and in the second dimension we find technology and knowledge (CORRADI; GHERARDI; VERZELLONI, 2010).

The practice perspective implied a distinct approach in the strategy literature, known as 'Strategy-as-Practice' (SAP). In his seminal work, Whittington (1996) argues that, different from earlier approaches about strategy (planning, policy and process), SAP approach focuses on how strategic practitioners do strategy in their day-to-day activities. Since this seminal article, the literature about this perspective has gained many contributions. In the last five years, some researchers have dedicated to ontological discussions in the field, such as the work of Seidl and Whittington (2014). These authors argue that, for a progress in the SAP literature, SAP researchers should be rigorous in their ontological choices and pay attention to linkages between micro strategizing and larger social phenomena.

The practice perspective applied to technology redirects the attention to what people do with certain technologies in their situated activities in organizational context (ORLIKOWSKI, 2000). In this perspective, an important concept is that of 'technologies-in-practice', that is, "the particular structures of technology use that users enact when engaging recurrently with a technology" (ORLIKOWSKI, 2000, p. 411). In the case of knowledge, a change in the vocabulary is also necessary, since the practice idiom applied to knowledge makes researchers abandon the noun 'knowledge' and apply the verb 'knowing'. As the same way as technology, it emerges the concept of 'knowing-in-practice', that means "an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted in everyday practice" (ORLIKOWSKI, 2002, p. 252).

In sum, the practice idiom understands the world in flux, where social entities are the result of ongoing work (NICOLINI, 2009). And the renewed interest in practice is not circumscribed to organizational studies, rather the 'practice turn' occurred in many areas of study. Finally, it is important to add that practice idiom is not the true, rather it is just one more way of interpreting the social world (RECKWITZ, 2002). This is one of the effects of the practice idiom, that is, to furnish a theoretical framework to understand the social reality;

another effect is that the adoption of a practice idiom implies a political dimension (RECKWITZ, 2002). This because practice theories help to understand, for example, some dynamics of power, domination and coercion (SCHATZKI, 2001). Also, some authors have developed certain analytical frameworks inside the practice idiom that denounce some exploitative effects of a social practice (GHERARDI, 2009a). In this way, the political aspects of the practice view imply a political understanding of any dimension studied through the practice idiom. Consequently, in the case of space, it implies that space cannot be understood as a neutral setting. We explain this dynamic in the following section.

#### **4. SPACE-AS-PRACTICE**

To construct the cornerstones of the Space-as-Practice view and all its building, it is relevant to reflect upon the nature of space. To direct the discussion to the practice idiom, it is necessary to abandon the understanding of space (a noun) as an entity and to think through the understanding of spatializing (a verb that highlight the spatial practices), that is, space is not a finished thing, rather it is a dynamic process of accomplishment. Space is not a geometric thing, rather it is what actors accomplish in their everyday life. The change in the vocabulary is necessary since a verb represents a more dynamic word than a noun. This is like the transition from organization (ontology of being) to organizing (ontology of becoming), an ontological change (DUARTE; ALCADIPANI, 2016). The ontological shift in the treatment of space results in theoretical and methodological implications.

In theoretical terms, it is necessary to pursue space theorists that go along with that dynamic nature of space. There are some theorists that can be applied in space researches. We wish to detach two examples: Michel de Certeau and Gilles Deleuze. For Certeau (1984), space has two dimensions. In the first dimension, space does not have this denomination yet, because it is called 'place'. In the second dimension, the place is practiced and it becomes a space. According to Certeau (1984), a place represents the prevalence of order and stability, while a space represents a dynamism where ordinary practitioners practice the place from a defaulter way. Above all, Certeau (1984) highlights that, while a place becomes a space, a space can become a place.

We can also find this dynamic in Gilles Deleuze's thought. Space can be found in many parts of all his books. Nonetheless, space was investigated in a more detailed way when Gilles Deleuze joined with the philosopher Félix Guattari. In this partnership, they created the concepts of striated and smooth space. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the striated space is the space of the state apparatus that can be controlled through rationalization, while the smooth space is the space of the war machine and transgression. As the same way as Michel de Certeau's dynamic, a striated space can become a smooth space and vice versa.

In methodological terms, a research on Space-as-Practice needs to focus on specific methodological reflections of practice-based researches. This means that it is required to link the methodological choices with that ontological premise of the practice idiom and the process of becoming. In this sense, some practice researchers have suggested some specific methods to PBS. Bispo (2015), for example, suggests many methods and techniques, which we wish to highlight two: shadowing and interview to the double.

Shadowing can be understood as "a research technique which involves a researcher closely following a member of an organization over an extended period of time" (MCDONALD, 2005, p. 456). This technique is relevant to PBS, because it allows researchers follow practitioners to understand the practices from the movement of zooming in and zooming out (BISPO, 2015), and more important for the Space-as-Practice view, it allows researchers to understand the spatial practices. The interview to the double is defined as "a technique that requires interviewees to imagine they have a double who will have to replace

them at their job the next day” (NICOLINI, 2009, p. 196). Its relevance to PBS, and consequently to Space-as-Practice research, resides in its capacity to offer a multilayered representation of a practice (NICOLINI, 2009).

In sum, these ontological, theoretical and methodological assumptions represent the bases in which Space-as-Practice researches can be conducted. Looking at the literature, it is possible to note that there are some researches with this purpose of trying a practice approach to space in organizational contexts. For example, Thanem (2011, p. 442) conducted a study with the goal of understand “how homeless people may cope with and resist urban planning through the case of two recent reconstruction projects in Stockholm”. The author based your research on insights from Michel de Certeau and Gilles Deleuze to comprehend the micro-politics of spatial practices. He concluded that resistance can be exercised in non-intentional but still subversive ways by practitioners that are usually taken as powerless to do so. Also, the author showed that, despite his study did not offer direct alternatives to impact the reality of the homeless people, his study helped to increase the spatial visibility to voice the practitioners.

Another example is the study of Munro and Jordan (2013) with the aim of investigate how street artists developed tactics for appropriating and socializing the spaces of the center of Edinburgh. The authors also take as base the contributions of Michel de Certeau and Gilles Deleuze. They conducted a mobile ethnography with street artists from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. As a result, the authors found some spatial tactics and specific politics to appropriate public spaces. According to the authors, the contribution of their research was that it developed a more fluid comprehension of spatial organizing, because there was a scarce production with this understanding.

Indeed, these two studies represent a change in the treatment of organizational spatiality, because they are in the direction of what we are purposing in this essay. Nonetheless, in both empirical researches, we did not find profound philosophical concerns about the practice idiom applied to space, because we could note some remanences of the ontology of space as entity in some parts of the paper. Also, even though they try to abandon this ontology, they are isolated in the literature, where the space as entity view is privileged. Therefore, we could not find any constructed community of researchers that treat space based on the practice idiom. It is necessary that more researches about organizational spatiality take this perspective to appear a community. These two empirical examples may be the precursors as studies trying a practice approach to space in the case of success of the promising Space-as-Practice view and we expect that this theoretical essay too.

## **5. FINAL REMARKS**

The purpose of this paper was to develop a Space-as-Practice view for the space research in organizational studies. To do so, we argued about the importance of the spatial dimension to organizational analysis, we showed that this category has been treated in the organizational literature since the twentieth century and we exposed the space researches in organizational studies from recent years. In the sequence, we discussed about the PBS, showing how practice approach appeared, which were its general features and how those studies emphasized practice. Lastly, we explained about the Space-as-Practice view, showing ontological, theoretical and methodological premises underpinning this approach, what it makes me achieve the goal of this paper.

In achieving this goal, this essay may offer some contributions both to the academic research in organizational studies and to society with practical implications. Regarding to research contributions, this paper enlarges the scope of the space research in organizational studies, since it offers a different view to study spatiality, the Space-as-Practice view. Also,

this essay contributes to PBS in focusing on space, something that represents an important but forgotten dimension in this area. And although this paper focused more on implications for research, it also offers, at least indirectly, a societal contribution. The approach legitimated here has significant implications for practitioners, because practice idiom is practical, that is, it offers possibilities for intervention in cases of maintenance or change some studied practices (FELDMAN; ORLIKOWSKI, 2011), and this include spatial practices. Thus, this knowledge can be used by some interested practitioners, such as policy-makers, activists and managers, in different purposes, such as policy-making about spaces in a city, protests or spatial planning in a company.

Finally, we wish to establish a research agenda to future studies in this view about space in organizational studies with four topics. First, future studies need to construct essays about the theoretical possibilities to understand Space-as-Practice. We detached Michel de Certeau and Gilles Deleuze as examples in which researchers can explore their spatial thoughts, but there are other thinkers that can contribute, for example Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger. Second, it is necessary papers dedicated to discussing methodological aspects of the Space-as-Practice view to overcome what Panayiotou and Kafiris (2011) called of methodological difficulties to research space in organizational context. Besides the contribution of PBS' methods, it is relevant to construct specific methods to space research. Third, future works need to pluralize the contexts of empirical studies, that is, many spatial contexts in urban landscape can be studied, such as airports, shopping areas, train stations and fairs, not just private companies' contexts. And fourth, future researches can articulate Space-as-Practice with other organizational approaches in PBS, such as for example the Strategy-as-Practice.

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