



### Through the practice looking glass: Re-viewing workers as practitioners

Journal:	<i>23rd Annual Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference</i>
Manuscript ID:	ANZAM2009-118.R1
Manuscript Type:	Paper
Keywords (Select the keywords for the Track(s) which you have selected on the previous step):	change practice < 16. Organisational Change, change responses < 16. Organisational Change, employee perspectives < 16. Organisational Change, organisational change < 16. Organisational Change

## Through the practice looking glass: Re-viewing workers as practitioners

### ABSTRACT

*This paper argues for adopting a practice lens to organisational research as a complementary balance to contemporary managerial views of work and workers. Drawing from practice theory literature, we re-view workers as practitioners re-crafting practices in organisations, highlighting the contextual, relational and discursive nature of how workers enact and contribute to organisational work. We illustrate how this perspective provides a rich contextualised understanding of work through discussion of workers as practitioners in two Australian organisations. Our analysis of findings demonstrates how the introduction of new work models can both sustain and constrain learning as well as challenge standards of performance that, for some workers, raise questions about their identities and ways of contributing to their organisations.*

Keywords: change practice, change responses, organisational change, employees perspectives.

### THE NEW AGE OF WORK AND WORKERS

In the children's classic *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 1871/2008), Alice experiences an alternative world beyond the looking glass mirror, where things seem familiar yet strangely different in interesting ways. In a world that seems backwards from her usual understandings, Alice discovers, experiences and learns about the world through talking, interacting and participating in the activities of the characters with whom she shares her journey. In this paper, we use a similar analogy of the practice lens through which we re-view workers as practitioners. We present findings from recent empirical work in two Australian public service organisations, *Council* and *Corrections* and show how a practice perspective 1) contributes to understandings of organisational learning and change and 2) complements and enhances conventional human resource views of organised work as jobs, roles and outcomes.

In the 'brave new workplace' (Gephart Jr 2002) organisational structures have become flatter, jobs more broadly defined, employment relationships more flexible and change is a part of everyday work (Chia 1999; Child & McGrath 2001; Kallinikos 2004; Torraco 2005; Weick & Quinn 1999). Workers are often expected to become multi-skilled, flexible, self-managed and to continually learn (Holman & Wood 2003, Sparrow 2003). In a world where we must respond to complex and unanticipated change to survive and

**Deleted:** [Oriana Price](#)†  
 Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
 University of Technology, Sydney†  
 Email: [oriana.price@student.uts.edu.au](mailto:oriana.price@student.uts.edu.au)†  
 †  
 Mary C. Johnsson†  
 Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
 University of Technology, Sydney†  
 Email: [mary.johnsson@uts.edu.au](mailto:mary.johnsson@uts.edu.au)†

prosper (Garrick & Rhodes 2000), it is tempting to simplify theories of work to entities, categories or aggregates that can be 'managed' in prescriptive ways to meet the instrumental interests of organisations (Dunford, Snell & Wright 2001) or the empowered needs of workers (Daboos & Rousseau 2004; Wilkinson 1998). Conventional business literature (e.g. Wernerfelt 1995) and HRM literature (e.g. Dunford et al. 2001; Francis 2006) continue on a track that positions workers as important yet undifferentiated resources (e.g. economic or political assets) used to deliver required outcomes in organisations.

In contrast, our view within this paper is that treating workers as important but generic organisational assets may be too simplistic and rigid in characterising the complex nature of work performed by workers. Within organisations, workers must operate in active engagement with others, learning the practical activities, skills and decisions needed to perform everyday work. Workers are individually administrative assistants, customer service officers, mechanics—people who in practising their daily work customise what they do to meet specific projects or problems encountered by their organisational and industry contexts. Contexts of organisational work not only matter—they are critical in influencing judgements and relationships that are contingent on particular situations, even when individual jobs remain the same (Parker, Wall & Cordery 2001).

Our paper proposes re-viewing workers as *practitioners re-crafting practices*. We believe this is not simply a semantic re-labelling of workers, but an important repositioning that enhances understandings of workers and work in contemporary organisations as dynamic, creative and evolving. We propose using a practice lens to frame the relationship between workers and organisations provides a complementary enhancement to contemporary views of workers as human resources. A practice lens provides a contextually rich and dynamic take on of the 'goings on' of workers and organisations. In the first part of this paper we introduce the theoretical underpinnings of practice literature and its contributions to understandings of organisations, workers and learning. Next we discuss empirical work we conducted within two Australian organisations

that have been undergoing change. Our analysis of findings focuses on how re-viewing workers as practitioners provides richer understandings of the impact of these changes for workers and their learning.

#### **APPLYING THEORIES OF PRACTICE TO ORGANISATIONAL WORK AND LEARNING**

We are not alone in proposing a practice lens for understanding organisations. There are a growing number of researchers who use a practice lens to study and theorise organisational phenomena (see Gherardi 2000; Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow 2003; Jarzbakowski 2004 Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2007). Here, the term 'practice' goes beyond common understandings as counterpoint to theory (Bratton & Gold 2007) or as applications of theory into action (Johnson 2000; Wilkinson 1998). This approach enables the unpacking and bringing to the fore the intricate connections enmeshing workers, their understandings and meanings and enactments of daily work and the organisations in which they work (Gherardi 2000; Schatzki 2005).

Specifically, a practice orientation recognises that workers in doing their daily work learn from each other and develop new forms of practice and practice knowledge and at the same time develop work and social identities (Fenwick 2004; Jenkins 2004). Workers do not simply replicate activities (described in job descriptions or procedural manuals), rather in doing work, workers draw on 'different understandings' (Schatzki 2005: 480) brought with them from elsewhere. By enacting work practices and interacting with others, workers 'acquire knowledge-in-action' (Gherardi 2000: 214) and re-produce and change work practices and associated knowledge in various ways (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Gherardi, Nicolini & Odella, 1998; Weick & Roberts, 1993). Thus a practice lens captures the notion of work and workers as '*always in the making*' (Nicolini et al. 2003: 22), a dynamic, negotiated and provisional characteristic that recognises both its creative evolving and changing nature. Furthermore, a practice lens recognises the *processual* nature of knowing and the requirement of *participation* for learning, which differ from conceptualisations of knowledge as mental objects merely applied to particular situations (Geiger, 2009).

Next, practice *decentres* individuals, not by privileging its opposite (i.e. the social) but embracing a connectedness embedded in the relationality of these shared forms of human life (Wittgenstein 1968). This decentring maintains a sense of history and tradition that individual worker as members of a practice, learn with and from other practitioners, generating a sense of identity and belonging (Lave & Wenger 1991). There is the sense of practice existing before any individual practitioner joins, and an assumption that practice will exist long after that practitioner leaves the practice. For Schatzki, practice encompasses ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings’ (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny 2001: 12). Practices are pre-figured, shaped by the actions of past practitioners (Schatzki 2002) but at the same time maintained and reshaped through current practitioners and passed along to future practitioners (MacIntyre 1984).

In his more recent work, Schatzki has extended the notion of practice to organisations – framing these as ‘bundles of practices and material arrangements’ (Schatzki 2006: 1863) where the worker and the context of work are mutually produced. Through organisational membership and participation in work, practical understandings of work are shared, enmeshed and carried forward. Such understandings are ‘more than just ... activities undertaken by individuals ... but [also have] discursive features that make them [a] collective property’ (Kemmis 2005: 393). Practices often need to be legitimised by organisations in order to thrive; they also cohere and ‘travel’ across organisations, when for example practitioners leave organisations but continue their practice (MacIntyre 1984; see also Moore & Beadle 2006).

Adopting a practice lens in organisational research provides a level of analysis that interconnects the individual worker and the social context of work. It recognises the complexity of negotiations that workers undertake beyond their own individual jobs, in performing their work to meet individual and organisational ends (Price, Scheeres & Boud 2009). Conceptualising organisations as ‘bundles of practices’ (Schatzki 2006: 1863) and workers as practitioners brings to the fore, the context (and site) within which workers and organisations both enact and mutually produce. In this view of organisational work, workers are knowing

subjects, capable of enacting and extending practice by drawing on past experience and knowledge (Kemmis 2005).

Workers as practitioners must constantly negotiate the creative interests of self with practice standards of excellence and the extrinsic goals of organisations in which work is performed. Within organisations, we suggest, that these negotiations often occur within one's peers, but also beyond. Cross-functional organisational imperatives and work processes have created a need for workers to interact, negotiate and work with other workers doing different yet related work. The cross-functional differences create tensions that are often negotiated through discursive processes: 'conversations in practice' – the talk during or preceding acting – and 'conversations on practice', debates about best practice or the virtues of undertaking a particular practice (Gherardi 2006: 86). Such tensions can provide further insights into worker as practitioner knowing and learning. We illustrate these perspectives of practice theory by describing research we recently completed on practitioner work in two public sector organisations undergoing change.

#### **CASE STUDY: WORKERS AS PRACTITIONERS IN TWO ORGANISATIONS**

Our paper combines data from two separate projects that share similarities in intent to uncover the practices and talk of everyday work and their relationship to learning in the workplace. Both projects used a qualitative case study methodology with semi-structured interviewing protocols and a variety of data collection methods including individual interviews, participant observations and reviews of organisational and industry documents. In exploring employees' lived experiences through elicited stories, we paid particular attention to the way participants talked about their jobs, organisations and learning had how these changed over time. We read the interview transcripts in detail in order to examine the key textual characteristics of the data such as themes and key words, with a researcher focus towards uncovering evidence of workers as knowing subjects capable of enacting and extending practices and learning.

We discuss empirical research findings from two organisations, *Council* and *Corrections*. Both organisations are public sector organisations recently experiencing significant organisational change that focused on the ways in which work was being done. *Council* is a large suburban council of over six hundred employees providing services including library and community facilities, road maintenance, waste collection, and compliance services. Consistent with government pressures for new public management reforms, *Council* leadership has restructured to adopt productivity enhancements to its service provision. *Corrections* is a corrections centre that was formed to implement an innovative therapeutic approach to rehabilitate chronic drug offenders. The centre employs approximately fifty professional staff performing medical care, counselling, psychotherapy, education, parole and custody. Recently *Corrections* has adopted a new work model, which required workers to provide integrated interprofessional care.

### **Case 1: Practitioner work in local government practice**

Brian is a *Council* worker who performs the duties of a Ranger in the newly-named Compliance Unit. Rangers are required by the organisation to enforce local government legislation in a number of areas including the keeping of animals, illegal dumping and abandoned vehicles. Part of Brian's work involves being out of the office and patrolling the local government area, investigating customer complaints and being proactive in enforcement of local government legislation. However Brian, who has been a *Council* employee for over thirty years, understands his job (and identity) to be more than the 'enforcement of legislation' outlined in his job description. He understands his job:

... not like any other jobs where you sign off everyday ... [but as] ... providing a service to the community ... [which requires one to be] ... pretty good at talking to people ... [when] you're local government ... you've got to know how to talk.

There appears to be tensions between Brian's understanding of his job as community service and *Council's* imperative of enforcing local government legislation. Furthermore, *Council's* recent change initiative towards modernising and automating the work of Rangers through the introduction of laptops in cars has created further tensions. Brian perceives this new initiative differently:

...they want to get us out of the office ... you put people in the car all the time ... people become a little isolated ... the interaction is not there ... people send each other emails but people don't talk ... it's the interaction [opportunities] to watch and listen to ... [peers and colleagues that will be reduced ]

*Council's* desire to provide an offsite work tool to aid efficiency is seen by Brian as blocking his need to return to the office and a fundamental challenge to his practice. Brian understands the potential isolation from the office as reducing opportunities for talk and interactions he understands to be vital to his practice, as blocking the informal learning he obtains from conversing about life on-the-job with colleagues across *Council's* functional areas. For Brian, being a Ranger (enacting good Ranger practices) requires talk-facilitated actions, often in conjunction with peers from other functional areas.

The importance of interacting with others as a means of developing practice knowledge is seen in the way Stan, a newly-appointed Ranger within the Compliance Unit, talks about learning about his work. Stan describes learning to enact the practices of parking patrol as determining what is relevant within the list of activities stated on his job description and learning acceptable ways to act from his peers. By working alongside peers during his first few weeks on the job, Stan not only learned about the practice of being a Ranger but was also allowed the space to re-craft those practices in ways that reflected his own identity:

[During the first few weeks I shadowed other Rangers]... so I could learn [and] pick what I want from [the more experienced Rangers] and then formulate what's good for me ... there's a thing that's set in stone [i.e. the infringement process, yet shadowing] gives you the opportunity to [to ask and to say] that's pretty good ... that's not so good and then you take [what works for you] ... I think it has paid dividends in my opinion ... [I] look [at my job as] not so much giving people tickets [but] enforcement by presence.

Both Brian and Stan can be described as local government workers but the texture of their daily lives reveals the importance of practice standards, goals and practitioner roles that are constructed in relational ways with others that go beyond simply replicating activities or procedures. In this case, *Council* is experienced by these workers as creating an environment where workers can exercise judgement and negotiate tensions between their own creative interests with practice standards of excellence and the extrinsic goals of organisations, enabling the emergence of the worker as practitioner. At the same time, in its pursuit of chances to modernise and improve efficiency, *Council* is perceived by these workers as limiting their opportunities to interact, reducing opportunities for talk with others which is understood by these workers as essential in sustaining and developing practice and their own identities as practitioners. At

an organisational level, the limiting of interaction among workers within this workplace, takes away from the developmental and learning opportunities that occur through interaction within and beyond one's work group.

### **Case 2: Practitioner work in corrections practice**

Tara is a worker who performs probation and parole functions that typically help offenders re-integrate into the community *after* incarceration. She has nearly ten years' experience in this role. In the newly introduced integrated interprofessional work model, we could describe the changes in Tara's job as an expansion of her duties. In this new model Tara's job now includes working with offenders *before* they are released into the community, allowing her to obtain a new perspective about offenders in the time leading up to release. Tara describes this scope change not only in terms of job activity or organisational outcomes but also in terms of the implications of interactions with other corrections workers with whom she works and learns:

[Traditionally, probation and parole is about] monitoring ... about gaining information from significant others that the person is travelling okay, or if there are any concerns [that] the person may have returned to drug abuse or ... to criminal activity. So that's very much part of parole – that monitoring, surveillance sort of the stuff. As well as work[ing] alongside [the offenders], establishing a good working rapport with them ... gaining some trust and helping them address ... issues ... and advocating in many areas as well ...with government departments and things like that.

... that I'm learning new skills. Working with other disciplines, working side-by-side with them – both correctional officers and alcohol and other drug workers. And I'm getting very good understanding by doing groupwork in a prison [or] ... the things that go on within a prison system. This aspect which I was never really fully aware of in the community. 'Cos you get people giving you some understanding by verbal feedback stuff but I also can match that with seeing things and being a part of it.

[With my colleagues] someone might have a bit more experience with mental health, [others] with homelessness and developmental disability ... so coming together, we're having a lot of input with information and learning. That's very very valuable ... like when I was explaining about parolees who had had an attitude change during supervision ... the [offenders] get to see how we can make assessment on things like that [as well as] the psychologist who may not have supervised anyone in the community.

Here, Tara is not only enhancing her skill set as a probations and parole officer. She is re-crafting her understandings of what characterises a professional practice in probations and parole as contextualised for this particular and different interprofessional work model. If she was to join another prison system, her expectations of what constitutes probation and parole practice would be structured by past experience

(including the new work she is performing at this corrections centre) enmeshed with prior understandings of familiar functions that monitor and provide surveillance of parolees.

This work experience is also providing Tara with an opportunity to develop understandings of what it means to be part of a diversified interprofessional care team, one that is discursively and interactively constructed with other practitioners who bring complementary and influencing practices. Tara goes on to observe:

The beauty of it is that [the director has] got this great theory in her mind, she comes and it's fantastic. But it's requiring all of us to work together to put it into place. It's amazing because it pulls all of us together. It's been a great learning curve for myself ... because ... I can see these are the things that need to be done ... Every day I'm learning more and more about the centre; about what's required of me. I can see where there's a gap: oh, something needs to be done there. I think everyone's doing that which is also good.

A colleague working in the same corrections centre is Christine, a teacher helping offenders develop their vocational skills. She is an experienced teacher with both early childhood and adult learning qualifications but relatively new to the prison system and environment. For Christine, her job description (or lack of it) is seen as a link to previously-understood standards of performance that raises a perception of vulnerability about identity and contribution to the team:

I did ask [my boss] last week ... to give me a job description so I'd know I have a few more parameters. So it's just sort of evolving I guess with the job. Each week something new. ... A Job Description would be really handy (laughs) because it leaves me feeling very anxious about whether I'm not doing the right thing, or I'm overstepping into someone else's boundaries or I'm not sure, you know and I'm kind of ... quite anxious about what am I meant to do, where I am meant to be.

For Christine, having to design procedures 'on the fly' creates an environment of constant change that is, in many ways, de-stabilising, so that she needs to rely on structural mechanisms that are familiar to her practice as a teacher or worker, such as a job description. As she learns to navigate the prison system, she must re-craft her understandings of educational practice to suit the nature of this work environment and in doing so, continue to re-form her identity as a practitioner and member of the educational staff as well as a contributor to the interprofessional care team.

In the *Corrections* case, both Tara and Christine position their work roles relative to the standards of their profession (parole practice or good teaching practice) and how they perceive their work roles to be valued or not compared to other roles in the organisation. For the organisation, it is learning how practices, as enacted by practitioners, must integrate together, not only at key points of coordination, but towards achieving a holistic model of rehabilitating drug offenders.

#### **DISCUSSION: PRACTITIONERS RECRAFTING PRACTICES**

What has using a practice lens enabled us to do in this paper? Analysing our case data using a practice lens has enabled us to uncover added texture (Gherardi 2006) to the work practices that characterise the worker-organisation relationship. For example, Brian's experience of Council's decision to introduce laptop computers into work cars could be interpreted in various ways. Brian's reluctance to accept *Council's* implementation of an offsite tool to increase efficiency might be explained as a worker resisting the organisation's new productivity imperatives. Positioning of workers as political or economic assets provides another perspective on organisational work but in adopting a practice lens, we gain the sense of purpose and drive that workers bring to their everyday work. Aspects of work that could be perceived as inefficient (i.e. coming into the office to access technology), when viewed from a practice lens, are understood as essential elements of work and learning that are a valued element of Ranger practices.

Brian's reluctance may be described as resistance to managerial control - where the laptop computers could be regarded as mechanisms for remote surveillance by organisations through technological means. This resistance may be seen as Brian not fulfilling implied expectations of his employment relationship with *Council*. Although these perspectives are legitimate ways of interpreting Brian's reactions, a practice lens provides insights that account for how workers in these organisations make decisions that influence everyday work and organisational practices – decisions that go beyond reaching agreement between worker and organisation about performance. They illuminate ways in which workers understand their changing work identities and learn how to re-craft and enact their work practices through interactions within peers.

Being or becoming a practitioner imbues a fluid sense of work identity and social identity (Fenwick 2004; Jenkins 2004). It involves discursive processes and interactions among practitioners within and outside work contexts (Gherardi 2006). There is a sense of mutual obligation and commitment in enacting the standards of current practice. For example, what it means to be a Parole Officer for a corrections centre is embedded in the daily practice of parole work and is shaped by relational interactions with colleagues and practitioners from related 'helping' professions. Similarly, what it means to be a Ranger for a local council is embedded in both the identity and activity of Rangers in general, but also in the talk with peers, colleagues and members of the wider community regarding the practices of being a Ranger. These aspects understanding (and being) worker as practitioner are formatively shaped by an individual's life history and particular contextual experiences and ongoing enactments (Kemmis, 2009). The meanings and identities for the workers in our research not only emerge from doing a job, but also from the relational interactions with peers within and beyond one's work group.

In a practice perspective, false dichotomies of individual versus organisation are avoided. Contemporary managerial discourses criticise the bureaucracies of modern organisations in not functioning as 'instrument[s] of self-realisation for their members'; instead, individuals should adopt a 'more enterprising self' by acquiring more 'market-oriented, proactive and entrepreneurial predispositions and capacities' (du Gay 1994: 656, 660-661). The solution is not simply 'a romantic shift from bureaucratic to entrepreneurial forms of management' (Kanter, cited in du Gay (1994: 671)) or the assumption that individual learning will naturally lead to organisational learning, a view that is prevalent in current organisational learning literature (Casey 2005; Popper & Lipschitz 2004). Practitioners view themselves as members of various groups and adopt various roles and identities, only one of which may be as an employee of an organisation. Such roles are nested in complex ways, given the confluence of life histories, situated experiences and the demands of specific practices in which practitioners participate. These roles also adjust when practitioners traverse organisations and take on new organisational priorities. Our discussion of practice and practitioner theories

has highlighted ways that workers, practices and organisations can sustain one another in complex, constitutive ways.

Contemporary organisations must negotiate a balance for coordinated order with opportunities to become more enterprising and market-focused. Our analysis has demonstrated how the introduction of new work models can both *sustain* and *constrain* the learning environment for workers. At *Council*, market-oriented decisions to make the work of Rangers 'more efficient' are understood by the worker-practitioners to be detrimental to the very essence of their craft. In limiting opportunities for talk, the discursive role of practice that sustains practice is reduced. In adopting a practice lens, we are not saying that such innovations should be avoided. Rather we maintain that in adapting a practice lens we are able to provide more textured insights into why such innovations may be resisted or responded in different ways by workers. Alternatively, at *Corrections*, the new work model of rehabilitation has increased the need for talk and integration of activities across disciplines, in order to enhance practice standards and to create new operating procedures. These new requirements challenge previously-understood standards of performance that, for some workers, raise questions about their worker identities and ways of contributing to the new team.

### CONCLUSION

Our paper has discussed how re-viewing and re-positioning workers as practitioners in organisations offers a complementary enhancement to views of workers as human resource or economic assets of modern organisations. Using a practice lens has brought to the fore the contextual, relational, dynamic and discursive nature of how workers as practitioners enact and re-craft work practices in different ways to meet the extrinsic goals of the organisations in which work is performed. Like Alice through the looking glass mirror, seeing things from a different perspective can sometimes offer new insights about phenomena that may otherwise be taken for granted – viewing workers as practitioners offers new insights in the ways in which workers and organisational work may be understood.

### Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge helpful comments and feedback on an earlier draft from David Boud and Paul Hager. Funding for this research has been provided by two Australian Research Council Discovery grants. Empirical analysis of the *Corrections* case was first discussed in Hager and Johnsson (2008).

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