

A Praxiological Approach to Management Research

John Branch
University of Michigan

The purpose of this article is to illustrate a praxiological approach to management research, using a study which explored the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics. The article begins by reviewing the philosophy and methods of praxiology. It then summarizes the research design of the study, emphasizing 1. activity theory, one specific practice theory which views practice as activity, and 2. activity system analysis, a generalized framework for analyzing activities. The article continues by presenting selected results of the study. Finally it discusses the study vis-à-vis management research.

INTRODUCTION

The social sciences in recent decades have witnessed a profound shift in thinking about both the ontological existence of the world and the epistemological knowledge of this world. Known as the practice turn, this shift gives primacy to practice as both the focus of inquiry and the unit of analysis. As summarized by Bueger & Gadinger (2014),

[a] broad movement of scholars across the social sciences has started to think about practice and how the investigation of doing and sayings can provide us with a better understanding of the world. Together these scholars suggest that the attention to practice requires a turn, that is, a practice turn. (p. 3)

The practice turn is inspired by the philosophy and methods of praxiology (or praxeology)—the science of human action—and can be demarcated by analyses which either 1. develop an account of practices, or 2. treat the field of practices as a research site for studying the essence and evolution of specific phenomena (Schatzki, 2001). According to Golsorkhi *et al.* (2010),

[a] focus on practice provides an opportunity to examine the micro-level of social activity and its construction in a real social context or field...Second, the practice approach breaks with methodological individualism by emphasizing that activities need to be understood as enabled or constrained by the prevailing practices in the field in question...Third, the notion of practice allows one to deal with one of the fundamental issues in contemporary social analysis: how social action is linked with structure and agency. (pp. 2-3)

The practice turn began primarily with the study of technology in the early 1990s (Littig, 2013). By the turn of the century, however, the notion of practice had “already been employed in such diverse fields as science studies, gender studies, and organization studies” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 257). Today, the practice turn can be seen throughout the social sciences, with analyses of such wide-ranging phenomena as piracy (Bueger & Stockbrugger, 2012), the tango (Littig, 2013), and telemedicine (Nicolini, 2011).

A praxiological approach to management research intimates an interesting alternative to more traditional approaches to management research, by shifting the emphasis of management from something which is, to something which is done. Indeed, paralleling Karl Weick (1969), who called for more attention to organizing rather than organization, a praxiological approach to management research calls for more attention to managing rather than management. Golsorkhi *et al.* (2010), who likewise reconceptualized organizational strategy as practice, captured the sentiment well:

[i]f taken seriously, this reconceptualization implies a fundamental ontological shift in several respects. First, the world of strategy is no longer taken to be something stable that can be observed, but constitutes a reality in flux. Second, the world of strategy is no longer regarded as ‘located’ on the organizational level; instead it is spread out across many levels from the level of the individual actions to the institutional level. Third, the world of strategy constitutes a genuinely social reality created and re-created in the interactions between various actors inside and outside the organization. (p. 6)

The purpose of this article is to illustrate a praxiological approach to management research, using a study which explored the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics. The article begins by reviewing the philosophy and methods of praxiology. It then summarizes the research design of the study, emphasizing 1. activity theory, one specific practice theory which views practice as activity, and 2. activity system analysis, a generalized framework for analyzing activities. The article continues by presenting selected results of the study. Finally it discusses the study vis-à-vis management research.

PRAXIOLOGY

The philosophical roots of praxiology can be traced to the writings of such social theorists as Bourdieu, Giddens, and Ortner; philosophers Garfinkel, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein; and social philosophers Butler, Latour, and Taylor. Although disparate in their specific outlooks, they all share the common enterprise of understanding the social world through practices. They all give “center stage to the concept of practice, rethinking how it can be theorized and empirically studied” (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014, p. 2).

The result, however, has not been a practice theory, but instead practice theories (Halkier and Jensen, 2011)—multiple vocabularies (Reckwitz, 2002) which “are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects of components of the *field of practices*” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). A practice theory, therefore, can be defined as “a general theory of the production of social subjects through practice in the world, and of the production of the world itself through practice” (Ortner, 2006, p. 16).

Practice theories, however, differ from other cultural theories which arose in the wake of the interpretivist movement of the 20th century (Reckwitz, 2002), and which attempt to explicate the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). First, they stand in stark contrast to mentalist theories (See de Saussure or Lévi-Strauss, for example.), which situate social meaning in the cognitive structures which are constructed about reality...which subscribe to “the idea that mind is a substance, place, or realm that houses a particular range of activities and attributes” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 22). Second, practice theories differ from textualist theories (See Geertz, for example.) which hold that social meaning is not situated inwardly in the mind, but instead reveals itself outwardly in the signs and symbols, in the discourse and other detritus, of society—that which is commonly referred to as the text. Social meaning,

therefore, is not moored in the mind, but manifest in materiality (See Foucault, for example.). And third, practice theories diverge from intersubjectivist theories which posit that social meaning arises at the nexus of the subjects, in the language which is shared between social agents, and which serves as a kind of world 3 (Popper, 1978) which is used to convey the “oversubjective, ‘objective’ realm of meanings” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249).

Practice theories, by taking practice as both the ontological and epistemological starting point, reject the extra-mental and extra-corporal of both the mentalist and textualist cultural theories. Indeed, they privilege neither phenomenology nor discourse (Halkier & Jensen, 2011); meaning is not grounded in the individual nor in the text (Littig, 2013). Instead, practice theories “promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 3), which view “materiality/objects/non-humans in relation to the performing body and the meaning attributed to them and the practice itself” (Littig, 2013, p. 456). As summarized by Strand (2010), practice theories move...

...science away from dealing only with social structures, communicative layers, symbols, and meaning, and with moving sociological theorizing into the physical realm of material objects, nature, bodies. These aims entail new ways of thinking about relations of the social and the material as ‘mutually constituted’ and not belonging to different ontological domains. (p. 114)

Epistemologically, therefore, practice theories do not search for “knowledge articulated in words and images and printed on paper” (Mol, 2002, p. 31). Knowledge of social “phenomena, say practice theorists, can only be analyzed via the field of practices” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 3). Indeed, “practice theories are interested far less in the views, motives or intentions of actors and more in the physical execution of activities and things used to do so” (Littig, 2013, p. 457) because social meaning “is always constituted *in* practice and only gains its existence through performative events or moments” (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 113).

Practice theories likewise reject the intersubjectivist notion of a world 3 in which social meaning is situated. They offer the ontological alternative that objects never exist prior to their enactment through practice (Mol, 2002), thereby rebuking scientists who elevate social phenomena to their own existential form. Instead, practice theories hold that “social practices consist of elements that are integrated when practices are enacted [and] that practices emerge, persist and disappear as links between their defining elements are made and broken” (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 21).

To be fair, practice theories do not exclude the idea of interaction altogether. On the contrary, all practice theories “acknowledge the dependence of activity on shared skills” (Schatzki, 2001, p. 3). And they underline the significance of the shared meanings which are necessary to comprehend this activity (Reckwitz, 2002). A practice, therefore, ought not to “be viewed as a unit circumscribed by given boundaries and constituted by defined elements, but rather as a connection-in-action: that is, as an interweaving of elements which are shaped by being interconnected” (Gherardi, 2012, p. 3). Consequently, Shove *et al.* (2012) argue that practice theories must embrace the interaction between three equally important components: materiality, competences, and meaning. And any analysis of practices must include...

...first materiality, i.e. things, objects, infrastructure that are relevant for carrying out a practice; second, bodies which enact incorporated skills and competencies referring to implicit and explicit knowledge; and third, meaning attributed to bodies, materiality and the practice itself. (p. 457)

Practice theories also differ from other cultural theories by eschewing the dichotomies which have plagued the social sciences (Bueger & Gadinger, 2014). Indeed, there is “no distinction between individual and society, no dualism between mind and matter and no prior distance between thought and

action” (Chia & Rasche, 2010, p. 34). Drawing on post-structuralist ideas, practice theories also introduce power and the individual into the mix (Birtchnell, 2012). And they attempt to address “how agency and structure, and individual actions and institutions are linked in social systems, cultures and organizations” (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). As summarized by Gherardi (2012), practice theories “go beyond the problematic dualisms (action/structure, human/non-human, mind/body), to see reason not as an innate mental faculty, but as a practice phenomenon, and to question individual actions and their status as building blocks of the social” (p. 3).

What is a practice? The definitions are legion, but the basic theoretical assumption is that social systems are “characterized as ongoing, self-reproducing arrays of shared practices, and structured suppositions to generate such practices have been made central to the understanding of social and cultural phenomena of every kind” (Barnes, 2001, p. 17). Practices, therefore, “constitute the horizon within which all discursive and material actions are made possible and acquire meaning” (Nicolini, 2009, p. 1394).

Consequently, a practice can be viewed as a nexus or assemblage of verbal and non-verbal activities (Schatzki, 2001). It is a site of situated accomplishments (Lynch, 2001), the locus “in which working, organizing, innovation or reproducing occurs...an ordering principle as the institutionalization of activities and ways of doing which are sustained by both material and social relations” (Gherardi, 2012, p. 3). A practice is an infrastructure of repeated interactional patterns (Swidler, 2001), the configuration “of a number of theoretically equally important and interconnected dynamics” (Halkier & Jensen, 2011, p. 104). In summary, a practice...

...is a routinised type of behaviour 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, knowhow, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice—a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of other etc.—forms so to speak a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 249–250)

To give an illustration, consider DIY (do-it-yourself), which consists of a complex amalgam of DIY motivations; DIY tools and materials; DIY information and knowhow; DIY activities; DIY rules and norms; the house, yard, or other physical affordances for doing DIY; and the meanings of DIY to DIYers and non-DIYers alike. As a practice, therefore, DIY comes together as a kind of pattern or configuration of various elements, and consequently might be viewed as an entity which can be discussed and also summoned when doing DIY.

Complementing this practice-as-entity view is the claim that practices also exist as performances. These performances are independent, immediate, and recursive. There is also a multi-foldedness to practices (Mol, 2002) because, as a practice is performed by different people, multiplicity necessarily follows. But in these different instantiations of the performance, the pattern which is provided by the practice is found and fortified. Shove *et al.* (2012) provided the logic:

[i]t is through the performance, through the immediacy of doing, that the ‘pattern’ provided by the practice-as-entity is filled out and reproduced. It is only through successive moments of performance that the interdependencies between elements which constitute a practice as entity are sustained over time. (p. 7)

Accordingly, DIY only exists and endures because of recurring performances, each reproducing the interdependencies between elements which make up the pattern.

Practices, however, must also be considered in a permanent state of flux. Indeed, the pattern which is provided by the practice is tentative, never fixed, because the elements of the practice change, and

likewise, because the configuration of these elements change within performances. Continuing with the DIY example, as elements change (new tools, new DIY television shows, new lifestyles, new decorating fashions, for example), the interdependencies between elements change—they are reconfigured—the result of which being that the practice of DIY itself, both as an entity and a performance, also changes.

Turning to methods, it was Mol (2002), in her hallmark book *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, who coined the term praxiography for the approach to studying practices. As explained by Bueger (2014), “while ‘graphy’ signifies the common task of describing, recording and writing about distinct phenomena, in difference to ethnography, praxiography is less interested in *ethno* (culture) but in *praxis* (practice)” (p. 385). Praxiography veers “from understanding objects as the focus point of various perspectives to following them as they are enacted in a variety of practices” (Mol, 2002, p. 152). It “places the interwoven, supra-individual social opacities linked to materiality in the centre of the empirical and theoretical analysis” (Littig, 2013, p. 457).

Praxiography, however, does not subscribe to a specific research method (Mol, 2002), calling instead for a plurality and a degree of flexibility which are commensurate with the range of practice theories. Consequently, praxiography might be considered more of a research orientation than a definitive research method. The procedures of ethnography, however, notwithstanding Mol’s linguistic gymnastics, have provided the methodological foundation for many analyses of practices, influenced greatly by the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1984), who himself was influenced by phenomenology. Phenomenology claims that a person’s lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*) is a socially-contextualized totality in which experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully (Moss, 1989; Valle & King, 1978). But “[r]ather than being a concern for consciousness, it was, for Garfinkel, a concern with ‘embodied activity’ and the everyday ‘practical production’ of world-making ‘accounts in the detail of the concrete talk and behavior that participants co-produce’” (Maynard, 2003, pp. 11-12). Praxiography, therefore, “is a thoroughly empirical enterprise devoted to the discovery of social order and intelligibility (sense making) as witnessable collective achievements” (Rawls, 2000, p. 146). In recent years, however, other interpretive research traditions, including critical discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and biographical methods have also become part of the praxiographic toolbox.

A PRAXIOGRAPHY OF THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

From December 2016 to February 2017, I conducted a praxiography of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics, with an emphasis on its foreign branch campus in Riga, Latvia. It was part of a larger research program on transnational higher education, a specific form of international higher education which considers education as a product which can be packaged and sold abroad. The purpose of the praxiography was to help develop a more essential (as in essence) and dynamic theoretical account of transnational higher education. À la praxiology, I treated the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics not as an entity but as a practice. Indeed, I attended to transnationalizing rather than transnational.

Specifically, I interviewed fourteen research participants following a qualitative interviewing method, which allowed them to articulate the motivations, contributors, tools, regulations, context, actors and their roles, and consequences which constitute the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics. I also collected documents about the Stockholm School of Economics and its transnationalization. I entered verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, the documents, and any other qualitative data into a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software package.

Data analysis occurred in two separate but inter-related phases. First, I analyzed the data at the individual—or emic—level, the aim of which was to explore the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics as it was understood by each research participant in the context of his/her lifeworld. In the second phase, I moved up to the micro-cultural level, exploring the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics as a practice, using 1. activity theory, one specific practice theory which

views practice as activity, and 2. activity system analysis, a generalized framework for analyzing activities.

Activity theory, sometimes called cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), is a “cross-disciplinary framework for studying how humans purposefully transform natural and social reality, including themselves, as an ongoing cultural and historically situated, materially and social mediated process” (Roth *et al.*, 2012, p. 1). It can be traced to the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who, following the October Revolution of 1917, was asked by the new Soviet government to reformulate psychology using the philosophical principles of Karl Marx (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Marx himself had attempted to break free from Cartesian dualism, to “challenge centuries of Western rationalist and mentalist tradition, and to legitimate real activity, what ‘sensuous’ people actually do in their everyday life, as an object of consideration and as an explanatory category” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 29). As written by Marx in *The German Ideology*,

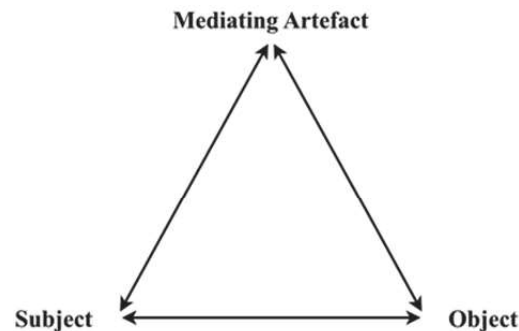
[i]n direct contrast to German philosophy which descended from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from man as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process...men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with their real hesitance, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness is life...Where speculation ends—in real life—the real, positive science begins; the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men. (Marx, 1845, Part 4 Par. 4)

Vygotsky was also troubled by the growing popularity of the behaviorist movement among psychologists, which was spearheaded by his Russian contemporary Ivan Pavlov, whose classical conditioning theory had become a viable (and popular) alternative for explaining human action. Vygotsky’s reformulation of psychology rejected the separation of humans and the environment, arguing instead that humans and the environment are parts of a complex system which co-create human consciousness through participation in an activity (Vygotsky, 1978). He introduced the concept of mediated action, the semiotic process by which humans develop their consciousness.

Mediated action is usually represented as a triad (See Figure 1.), and is often referred to as Vygotsky’s basic mediated action triangle (Cole & Engeström, 1993). The subject in the triangle is the human who is interacting with the environment. The object is the goal of the interaction. And the mediating artifacts include the prior knowledge, social others, signs, symbols, and other cultural means which the human builds and uses at the interface with the environment. Mediated action, therefore, suggests that the...

...relationship between humans and their environment is always mediated by some cultural means such as signs and artifacts (i.e. material devices skillfully built by humans). Mediated means here that all practices are carried out through, and are made possible by, a range of ideational and material apparatuses, devices, and ‘utensils’ that we draw from our cultural heritage or social milieux. (Nicolini, 2012, p. 106)

FIGURE 1
VYGOTSKY'S BASIC MEDIATED ACTION TRIANGLE



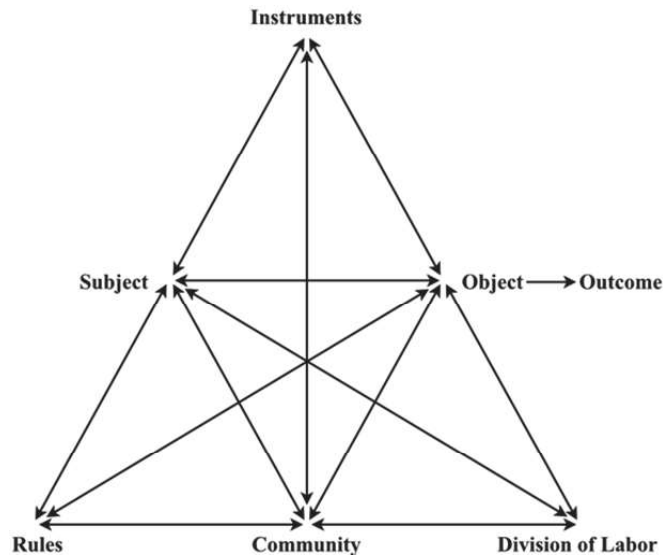
Source: Vygotsky, 1978

Vygotsky's student, Alexsey Leontiev, and his colleagues at the University of Kharkov in Ukraine—who collectively became known as the Kharkovites—continued the work of Vygotsky after his death in 1934. Fearing retribution from the Soviet government which had become increasingly wary of Vygotsky's focus on human consciousness and of other mentalist constructs (Kozulin, 1990), Leontiev switched the focus of his work to the study of human activity, arguing that activity breaks down the distinction between the internal world of the human and the external world of the environment (Wertsch, 1991). Leontiev's work also shifted activity beyond the individual, suggesting that an activity is a collective endeavor by nature. Indeed, as articulated by Nicolini (2012), “‘mind’ and ‘being’ cease to be the property of the individual and become inherently social phenomena” (p. 107). In summary, Leontiev “broadened Vygotsky's mediated action by introducing human activity as the unit of analysis that is distributed among multiple individual's and objects in the environment” (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 20).

It was Engeström (1987), however, who systematized activity theory by introducing the notion of the activity system (See Figure 2.). The activity system is comprised of seven components which, like Vygotsky's basic mediated action triangle, are likewise structured as triads (Foot, 2014). In this framework, an activity can be described by its subject, individual or collective, who is engaged in the activity. Instruments are the tools which are used by the subject to transform the object into an outcome. The formal and informal regulations of the actions and interactions in the activity system are called rules. Community is the social group to which the subject belongs while engaged in the activity. And division of labor refers to the tasks of the activity which are shared among members of the community.

Like Leontiev, Engeström regarded the activity system as the basic unit of analysis for activity theory. Indeed, “the first principle of activity theory is that a collective, artifact-mediated and object-oriented activity system, seen in its network relationships to other activity systems, is taken as the prime unit of analysis” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). He also insisted that an activity system be viewed in terms of its system-ness, emphasizing that an activity “is a collective, systemic, object-oriented formation that has a complex mediational structure and which produces actions and is realized by means of actions, but it is not reducible to actions” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 110). The mediational structure in an activity system is depicted in the model as triangles, intimating that any element has a mediational function between the other two elements. For example, rules mediate the role of the subject within the community. And these rules will be manifest in both tangible instruments (organizational charts, for example) and intangible instruments (organizational culture, for example). And finally, Engeström claimed that a change in any single element of the activity system is likely to be echoed in the other two poles of the triad. A change in the rules, for example, will likely cause a re-negotiation of the subject's role vis-à-vis the community. It is the tension between various elements in the activity system, therefore, which is the source of change and evolution of the activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

**FIGURE 2
THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM**



Adapted from: Engeström (1987)

THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Recall that the purpose of the praxiography was to develop a more essential (as in essence) and dynamic theoretical account of transnational higher education, by treating transnational higher education not as an entity but as a practice. As underlined in Section 3, however, a practice, when viewed as an activity, must be regarded as a dynamic entity—as a series of tentative states of the activity system. Consequently, I propose that the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE) ought to be considered—with a nod to Rostow’s (1960) model of economic development—as evolving through four distinct stages: 1. Linder and Company, 2. Preconditions for Takeoff, 3. Takeoff (and Flying), and 4. Solo Flight. This section presents the first two stages.

Linder and Company

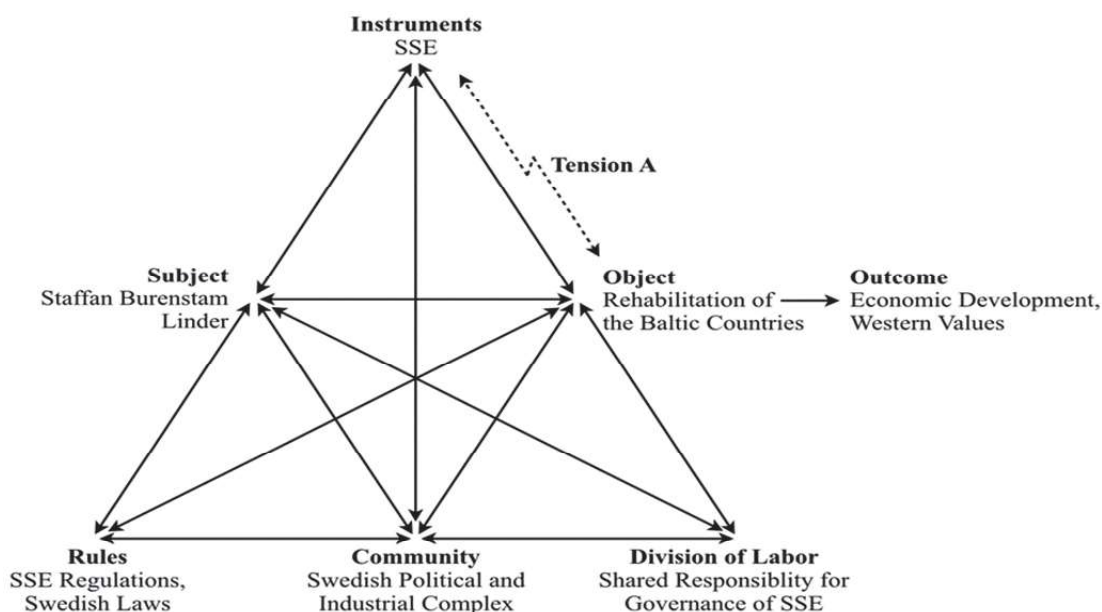
Staffan Burenstam Linder is often credited as the father of the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga (SSE Riga). The more sweeping moniker, father of SSE transnationalization, might also be applied, because the transnationalization of the SSE reached its apex during his presidency from 1986 to 1995. Indeed, the Stockholm Institute for Transition Economies (SITE) was launched in 1989 under Linder, triggered by the changes which were beginning to happen in the U.S.S.R. at the time. In 1991, a three-semester English-language MSc in economics and business was introduced, primarily targeting international students who did not have a Swedish bachelor’s degree. And in 1992, at the height of the Japanese ‘economic miracle’, the European Institute for Japanese Studies (EIJS) was opened.

But Linder cannot take complete credit for SSE Riga...or at least for the idea for SSE Riga, because a foreign branch campus of SSE to serve the Baltic countries was also suggested by Joakim Weidemanis, a Swedish student of Latvian descent who attended SSE from 1991 to 1995. In his first semester at SSE, Weidemanis established the Baltic Exchange Program, which funded Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian students to participate in a summer training and internship program in Sweden. But shortly thereafter, he approached Linder to discuss the expansion of the program to include full-degree opportunities for these students.

Linder’s role as President of SSE, however, is undisputed, thereby qualifying him as both the patriarch of SSE Riga, and the subject of the activity system which was in place at the time of the

dissolution of the U.S.S.R. (See Figure 3.). Linder believed that it was Sweden’s duty to help rehabilitate its Baltic neighbors as they gained independence in 1990. Consequently, Linder began to envisage SSE as an instrument which could be used in service of this rehabilitation of the Baltic countries—more specifically, in service of the rehabilitation of higher education in the Baltic countries, in the disciplines of economics and business. This rehabilitation, he was convinced, would lead to economic development, and to the adoption of Western values, including democracy, capitalism, and civil rights, in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Anders Paalzow, colleague of Linder and current Rector of SSE Riga, captured it well, stating that “Staffan Burensam Linder clearly saw the need to educate the young generations of the Baltic countries in economics and business as the three countries regained their independence in the early 1990s. Seeing it as an attempt to defend freedom, he conceived the idea” (Muten & Paalzow, 2004, p. 7).

FIGURE 3
THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS:
THE DISSOLUTION OF THE U.S.S.R.

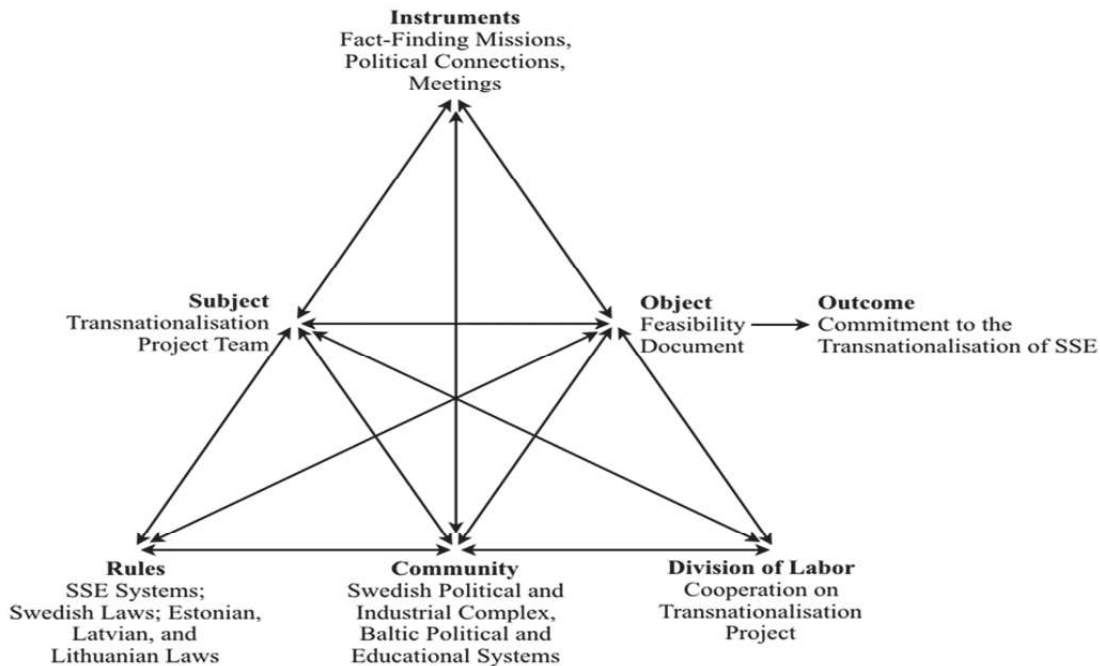


Source: Author

Within the activity system were also SSE’s own formal and informal regulations, and those of Sweden at large. There was a broader Swedish political and industrial complex at play. And although the School’s quotidian operations were led by Linder as President of SSE Riga, its corporate strategy was governed collectively.

This activity system, however, gave rise to a tension between SSE as an instrument, and the rehabilitation of the Baltic countries as the object of the activity. That is to say, it became obvious to Linder that SSE would be unable to act in service of this rehabilitation, in its current form and with its current activities. Indeed, the Baltic Exchange Program, although a laudable and worthy pursuit, could not contribute significantly to the rehabilitation of the Baltic countries. Economic development and the adoption of Western values, therefore, would likewise be limited. This tension, therefore, prompted a project (another activity), the object of which was to produce a feasibility document for the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics to the Baltic countries (See Figure 4.). The intended outcome of this feasibility document was a collective commitment to the enterprise.

FIGURE 4
THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS:
FEASIBILITY DOCUMENT



Source: Author

In this activity system, however, the subject was not Linder alone, but an extended group of people who had bought into the idea of rehabilitating higher education in the Baltic countries, in the disciplines of economics and business. These people cooperated on the research and analysis which buttressed the feasibility document. This research and analysis extended beyond the boundaries of Sweden, to also include the Baltic political and education systems, and Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian laws.

In January 1991, Weidemanis and a group of fellow SSE students led the first fact-finding mission to the Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They toured Tallinn Technical University and the University of Tartu in Estonia, the University of Latvia and Riga Technical University in Latvia, and Vilnius University and Kaunas Technical University in Lithuania. They also visited Western-supported private and semi-private educational initiatives which were underway at the time.

This fact-finding mission was followed in February 1992 with the first mission from an official SSE delegation. The delegation was comprised of Linder, Håkan Herstierna (from SSE Executive Education), and Gunnar Lund (an influential Swedish politician who later became Sweden's ambassador to the U.S.A.). The delegation toured universities in Tallinn, Tartu, and Riga. It attended meetings with ministers of education in both Estonia and Latvia. And it spent time discussing the state of affairs in Sweden's embassies. It ought to be noted that Linder was especially taken with Andris Pielbags, the Latvian Minister of Education, whom he praised as a 'straight-shooter'.

While analysis of the results of the fact-finding and delegation missions proceeded, Linder began networking within the Swedish political and industrial complex, in order to gain political support for the idea. He also nurtured his relationships with Pielbags and Andreas Ådahl, the Swedish Ambassador to Latvia. By mid-year 1992, several conclusions had been reached:

- The Baltic countries suffered from a very low level of education in (market-based) economics and business.
- The Western-supported private and semi-private educational initiatives which were underway at the time were failing, largely due to a lack of commitment.

- There was also a local perception that these educational initiatives were temporary, leading to the use of the term academic tourism.
- A long-term commitment, therefore, including a bricks-and-mortar presence, would be necessary.
- Riga was the preferred site for a new school because of its central location, cosmopolitan nature, and industrial development.
- A new school ought to operate independently of the local university system.
- A new school ought to be equivalent in content and standards to SSE or other leading business schools.
- A new school ought to have a pan-Baltic student body, and be careful not to discriminate against the large ethnic-Russian populations which existed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.
- The Latvian government ought to commit to a new school with resources, and recognize the new degree.
- A new school would require buy-in, and also financial support, from both the Swedish government and Swedish industry.
- A new school ought to be handed over to Latvia at the end of the funding period.

These conclusions led to a set of guiding principles which were adopted by the transnationalization project team, as it continued with its research and analysis in service of buttressing a feasibility document (See Table 1.).

**TABLE 1
GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE PROJECT**

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Objectives | Develop a pan-Baltic school to train students with potential to become high-powered entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs, and to promote economic interaction between the countries. |
| Quality | Create an equivalent of the Stockholm School of Economics in the Baltic region, with the quality and level of the educational program, instructors, and students on par with any Western business school, and with English as the functional language. |
| Status | Establish an independent school—not part of a local university—in order to have the freedom to achieve the objectives, but which is recognized by the relevant Ministries in the three Baltic countries. |
| Values | Recruit on merit, using a combination of test results (similar to GMAT and TOEFL), interviews, and grades, in order to admit students with potential only, and to avoid being swayed by external pressures (Soviet style) or different grading systems in different schools. |
| Instructors | Employ instructors from Western Europe (the Stockholm School of Economics predominantly) and North America during the first years, and immediately start building a local teaching corps by recruiting Baltic scholars who are already abroad, by training local instructors in modern pedagogy, and by ensuring that a critical mass of graduates will pursue an academic career. |
| Students | Open the school to Baltic residents, without skewing away from Russian students because of the significant ethnic Russian population in the region. |
| Facilities | Build a school with world-class facilities, on par with those in Stockholm, and which demonstrate to students and the community the commitment and quality. |
| Sustainability | Work toward self-sufficiency, with ownership of the school eventually transferring to Latvia. |

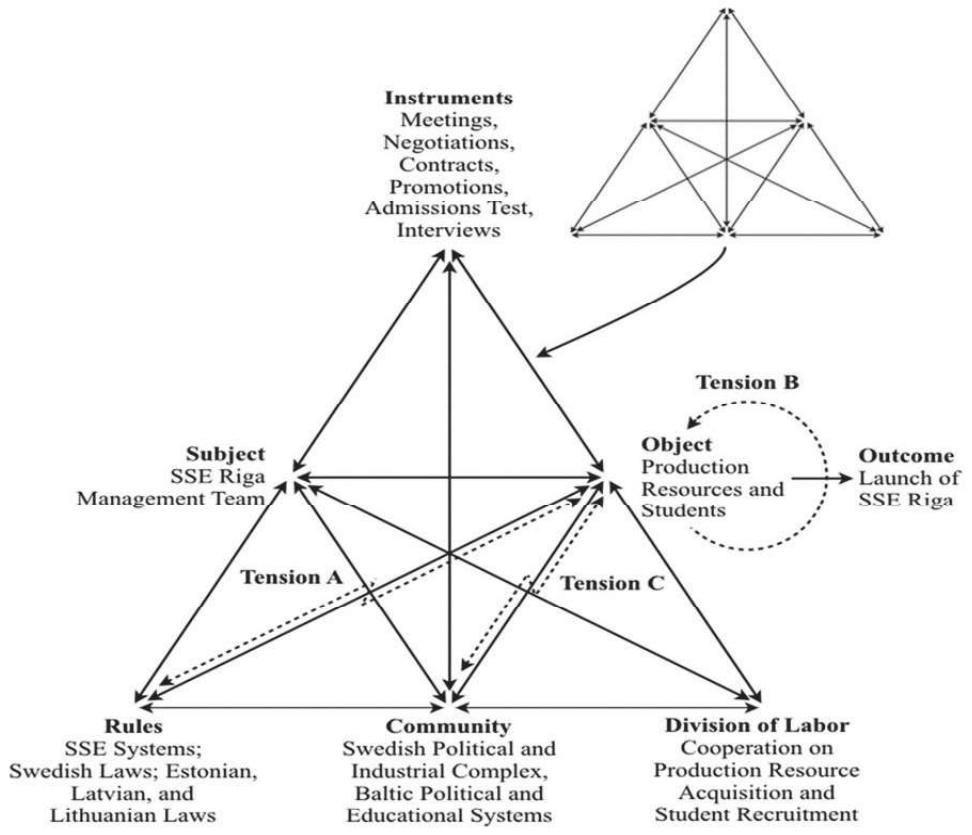
Source: Adapted from Weidmanis & Šadurskis (2004)

In July 1992, Nina Šadurskis, a Swede of Latvian descent, joined the transnationalization project team. Šadurskis had heard Linder speak about the project, and, drawn to the idea of helping her spiritual homeland, she took a leave of absence from the management consultancy at which she worked to author the feasibility document. In December 1992, it was delivered to the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Preconditions for Takeoff

In January 1993, with the feasibility document at the Ministry, and hopes for the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics to the Baltic countries running high, a new SSE Riga management team was formed (See Figure 5.). It included Jan-Erik Vahlne, Professor of International Business at SSE, who was appointed Rector of SSE Riga; he retained a twenty per cent load as Professor at SSE. Māris Slokenbergs, who, in 1944 as a nine-year old boy escaped from Latvia to Sweden with his parents, was hired as the Pro-Rector. The task of the SSE Riga management team was to establish the preconditions for takeoff—that is to say, to 1. acquire the financial, legal, physical, human, organizational, relational, and other production resources which were necessary to launch SSE Riga, and 2. recruit the first cohort of students, which, of course was also necessary to launch SSE Riga.

FIGURE 5
THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF THE STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS:
PRODUCTION RESOURCES AND STUDENTS



Source: Author

Production resource acquisition was influenced by the feasibility document for the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics to the Baltic countries, which was the object of the previous activity. Acquisition of production resources involved multiple meetings, difficult negotiations, and lengthy contracts. Student recruitment involved various promotions and an admissions

test. These acquisition and recruitment activities were shared among the members of the SSE management team, which itself evolved as new employees (SSE Riga administrators) were hired.

In March 1993, the Swedish government granted parliamentary approval for the funding of SSE Riga, initially for a three-year period, and tentatively for a ten-year period (By law, the seated government cannot finance budget items beyond its term limits.). A sum of 122 million SEK was allocated. In the same month, the Latvian Cabinet of Ministers approved the establishment of SSE Riga, and assigned to it the building at Strēlnieku iela 4a in central Riga. And in June 1993, the legal ownership contract was signed, with SSE holding seventy-five per cent of the share and the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science holding the remaining twenty-five per cent.

The development of SSE Riga in Latvia, however, raised two legal problems (See Tension A Figure 6.). First, the SSE Riga management team had set a very aggressive goal of launching the School in January 1994. Latvian law, however, stipulated very firmly that the academic year must begin in the autumn, in line with other higher education institutions in Latvia. The SSE Riga management team acquiesced.

At a more foundational level, SSE Riga did not meet the stringent rules for higher education institutions which Latvia had inherited from the U.S.S.R. Specifically, the proposed length of the program, use of foreign instructors, and language of instruction were all illegal. This tension was ultimately relieved in October 1995, at which time the Latvian Parliament signed the so-called Law on the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, which granted to the School a special status within the Latvian higher education system.

Meanwhile, during the period October to December 1993, the SSE Riga Board of directors was formed, and the SSE Riga management team began to recruit instructors from SSE for the new venture. These instructors attended a specially-designed course in Stockholm, which introduced them to Latvian history, language, politics, economics, and culture. A few local Latvian instructors were also recruited. In February 2014, the Swedish instructors visited Riga, meeting their Latvian colleagues, touring the city, and visiting various government ministries.

Both the course in Stockholm and the visit to Riga helped to strengthen the camaraderie among Swedish instructors, and heightened their resolve to rehabilitate the Baltic countries. But it also strained the relationship with the few local Latvian instructors, who perceived the foreign salary premium as unfair (See Tension B in Figure 6.). Incidentally, this condition remains to this day, and continues to strain the relationship between the locals and foreigners. The challenge of recruiting the few local Latvian instructors also confirmed one of the guiding principles which had been adopted by the transnationalization project team—that SSE Riga must immediately start building a local teaching corps by recruiting Baltic scholars who were already abroad, by training local instructors in modern pedagogy, and by ensuring that a critical mass of graduates would pursue an academic career. Adherence to this principle, however, has been difficult (See Tension C in Figure 6.). Indeed, in the early days of SSE Riga, there were many local Latvian instructors who excelled in mathematics and centrally-planned economics, but few who could meet the world-class standards of SSE Riga. And even today, more than twenty-years on, the number of Latvian—even Baltic—scholars is limited.

In December 1993, renovation of the building at Strēlnieku iela 4a in Riga began. Design services were provided by Scandinavian architectural firm Tengbom, and Sweden-based construction giant Skanska managed the renovations (at a fixed price). Funding was provided by the Swedish government, Swedish industrial partners, and private donors (including George Soros). Seemingly small issues of renovation sometimes escalated to major incidents (See Tension A in Figure 6.). Commercial insurance had yet to develop in Latvia, requiring the intervention of a foreign insurer, Tryg Hansa...which, incidentally, offered the insurance in kind. And parking an industrial crane in Strēlnieku iela required approvals from fourteen different Latvian agencies.

The result of the renovation was spectacular, however. Strēlnieku iela 4a is now considered one of the gems of Latvian architecture, and a permanent fixture on the Art Nouveau walking tour of Riga. At a symbolic level, Strēlnieku iela 4a also signaled that SSE was a serious and committed player—that it was not an academic tourist. It simultaneously broke with the Soviet past, and embraced Latvian history and

culture. And it provided a modern and stimulating academic environment for students and instructors alike.

Despite these positive effects, Strēlnieku iela 4a also kindled envy and distrust within the academic community (See Tension C in Figure 6.). Outreach activities by SSE Riga have gone some way to assuage the detractors. But even after years of operation, and despite the general leveling of the quality of academic facilities across Latvia, envy and distrust persist.

With respect to student recruitment, promotion of the School and of the BSc in Economics and Business program began in earnest in January 1994. Newspaper advertisements, radio spots, and a Latvia-wide road show (The SSE Riga management team decided prudently that the first cohort of students ought to be comprised of Latvians only.) generated 750 applicants for the planned 50 seats. An admission test was held in order to assess logical aptitude, plus mathematics and English-language skills. The top candidates were invited for interviews in March 1994, at which they could demonstrate their character, their experiences, and their motivation. Fifty-eight candidates were offered seats; fifty-six of them accepted.

DISCUSSION

In short, this study which explored the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics illustrates, in line with the purpose of this article, a praxiological approach to management research, especially in terms of both the philosophy and methods of praxiology. Indeed, the study shows the ontological and epistemological shift which results from a practice turn in management, thereby revealing the differences between praxiology and more traditional approaches to management research (including other cultural theories). Methodologically, the study also demonstrates activity system analysis as a workable framework for analyzing activities—in this praxiography, the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics.

To begin, this study, in accordance with praxiology, viewed transnational higher education as a practice, by foregrounding transnationalizing rather than transnational. Consequently, the research results contrast markedly with the tendency in the transnational higher education literature to treat transnational higher education as an entity—to ascribe to it an ontological status which is independent of the transnationalization activity to which the term transnational higher education refers. The research results point out, on the contrary, that transnational higher education is purposeful, planned, and, most importantly, performed—that it only comes into existence in and through the practice of transnationalization. Indeed, the BSc in Economics and Business program at SSE Riga emerged after considerable efforts...and it is sustained to this day through continuing efforts.

Second, the research results show, à la activity theory, that any practice is contextual, bound up in materiality, competences, and meaning. In this praxiography, transnational higher education could not be divorced from the institution, the students, the actors, or the other components of the activity system which was the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics. This idea was exhibited in the legal problems, for example, which the new SSE Riga management team faced during the Preconditions for Takeoff stage of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics.

Third, the research results point to the praxiological notion that practices are not static. In this praxiography, transnationalisation was a dynamic process, bursting with action. Consider the morass of maneuvers and machinations of the Linder and Company stage of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics. Likewise, the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics was also evolutionary in nature, with each stage existing in a state of tentativeness, until it gave way to the next stage in its evolution. And this evolution was situational, both relying on and spawning other activities.

And fourth, the research results also reinforce the tenets of praxiology, including agency, power structures, and the in-distinction between the individual and the social. The transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics, for example, was not the result of happenstance; nor did it occur without intention. On the contrary, it was the outcome of deliberate actions of those people who were

engaged in it. In the Linder and Company stage of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics, it was Linder himself who was the primary agent in the first instance (although acting within a larger social structure), subsequently joined by other people who had bought into the idea of rehabilitating higher education in the Baltic countries, in the disciplines of economics and business. And in the Preconditions for Takeoff stage of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics, agency was transferred to the SSE Riga management team.

Switching to methodology, this study which explored the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics also demonstrates activity system analysis as a workable framework for analyzing activities. Indeed, its multi-elemental, systemic modeling of an activity furnishes a tool for uncovering, logically and methodically, the essence of a phenomenon, thereby helping to reveal its mechanisms, its processes, its workings. In this praxiography, activity system analysis led to a holistic understanding (*verstehen*) of the structure and logic of the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics, and to the *eidos*, or sense, of this transnationalization, from its ideation stage in 1993, through the launch of SSE Riga, to the present day licensing agreement.

To be fair, activity system analysis is not without criticism. As suggested by Nicolini (2012), activity system analysis places a great deal of “emphasis on the notions of ‘system’ and ‘system-ness’ ” (p. 119). These notions are captured in Engeström’s triangular activity system model. But they tend to privilege the structural over the procedural, thereby obscuring less structured, poetic, and spontaneous elements in an activity. Activity system analysis has also been criticized for its emphasis on object-oriented activity—the notion that an activity transpires because the subject, individual or collective, is motivated to transform the object into an outcome. As such, activity system analysis also privileges collaborative activity, thereby neglecting other possible social interactions such as conflict, opposition, and resistance.

Despite these criticisms, this study which explored the transnationalization of the Stockholm School of Economics provides a valuable contribution to the transnational higher education literature by furnishing an alternative perspective on transnational higher education. In combination with activity system analysis, it offers a novel approach to understanding transnational higher education as a practice. And it reveals the constitutive relationship between an institution and its transnationalization, thereby affording a richer understanding of the process by which an institution transnationalizes, and, in turn, of the process by which this transnationalization re-shapes the institution.

As a final thought, I suggest that there is a seemingly limitless scope for applying a praxiological approach (including activity theory and activity system analysis) to other topics in management. Consider entry mode, for example, which, as intimated by its noun form, has traditionally been entified in the international management literature. Paralleling Karl Weick (1969) again, a praxiological approach to negotiations would call for more attention to negotiating rather than negotiations. And following Golsorkhi *et al.* (2010), reconceptualizing leadership as practice might lead to interesting and valuable insights. I encourage other management researchers, therefore, to give praxiology a try...to take a (practice) turn.

REFERENCES

- Barnes, B. (2001). Practice as collective action. In T. Schatzki, K. Cetina & E. von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (17-28). London, England: Routledge.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London, England: Penguin Books.
- Birtchnell, T. (2012). Elites, elements and events: Practice theory and scale. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 24, 497-502.
- Bueger, C. (2014). Pathways to practice: Praxiography and international politics. *European Political Science Review*, 6, 383-406.
- Bueger, C., & Gadinger, F. (2014). *International practice theory: New perspectives*. New York, U.S.A.: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bueger, C., & Stockbruegger, J. (2012). Security communities, alliances and macro securitization: The practices of counter-piracy governance. In M. Struett, M. Nance, & J. Carlson (Eds.), *Piracy and Maritime Governance*. London, England: Routledge.
- Chia, R., & Rasche, A. (2010). Epistemological alternatives for researching strategy as practice: Building and dwelling worldviews. In D. Golsorkhi, L. Rouleau, D. Seidl, & E. Vaara (Eds.), *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice* (pp. 34-46). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, M., & Engeström, Y. (1993). A cultural-historical approach to distributed cognition. In G. Salomon (Ed.), *Distributed cognitions* (pp. 1-46). New York, U.S.A.: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki, Finland: Orienta-Konsultit.
- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14, 133-156.
- Feldman, M., & Orlikowski, W. (2011). Theorizing practice and practicing theory. *Organization Science*, 22, 1240-1253.
- Foot, K. (2014). Cultural-historical activity theory: Exploring a theory to inform practice and research. *Journal of Human Behavior in Social Environments*, 24, 329-347.
- Gherardi, S. (2012). *How to conduct a practice-based study: Problems and methods*. Cheltenham, England: Edward Elgar.
- Golsorkhi, D., Rouleau, L., Seidl, D., & Vaara, E. (Eds.). (2010). *Cambridge handbook of strategy as practice*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Halkier, B., & Jensen, I. (2011). Methodological challenges in using practice theory in consumption research: Examples from a study on handling nutritional contestations of food consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11, 101-123.
- Kozulin, A. (1996). *Vygotsky's psychology: A biography of ideas*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Littig, B. (2013). On high heels: A praxiography of doing Argentine tango. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20, 455-467.
- Lynch, M. (2001). Ethnomethodology and the logic of practice. In T. Schatzki, K. Cetina & E. von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (p.131-148). London, England: Routledge.
- Marx, K. (1845). The German ideology: Part I: Feuerbach: Opposition of the materialist and idealist outlook: Idealism and materialism: The illusions of German ideology. Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/>
- Maynard, D. (2003). *Bad news, good news: Conversational order in everyday talk and clinical settings*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mol, A. (2002). *The body multiple*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Moss, D. (1989). Brain, body, and world: Body image and the psychology of the body. In R. Valle, & S. Halling, (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 63-82). New York, U.S.A.: Plenum.

- Muten, L., & Paalzow, A. (Eds.) (2004). *Stockholm school of economics in Riga: A retrospect 1994-2004*. Riga, Latvia: Stockholm School of Economics in Riga.
- Nicolini, D. (2009). Zooming in and out: Studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections. *Organization Studies*, 30, 1391-1418.
- Nicolini, D. (2011). Practice as the site of knowing: Insights from the field of telemedicine. *Organization Science*, 22(3), 602-620.
- Ortner, S. (2006). *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Popper, K. (1978). Lecture on human values: *Three Worlds*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- Rawls, A. (2000). Harold Garfinkel. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (pp. 122-153). London, England: Blackwell.
- Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, 243-263.
- Rostow, W. (1960). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Schatzki, T. (2001). Introduction. In T. Schatzki, K. Cetina & E. von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp. 1-14). London, England: Routledge.
- Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*. Thousand Oaks, U.S.A.: Sage.
- Strand, D. (2010). Principles for IT praxiography. In J. Carrasquero, D. Fonseca, F. Malpica, A. Oropeza, & F. Welsch (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th international multi-conference on society, cybernetic and informatics*. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/6376323/Proceedings_of_the_4tg_International_Multi-Conference_on_Society_Cybernetics_and_informatics_IMSCI_2010_Vol_2
- Swidler, A. (2001). What anchors cultural practices. In T. Schatzki, K. Cetina, & E. Savigny, E. (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp.74-92). London, England: Routledge.
- Valle, R., & King, M. (1978). An introduction to existential-phenomenological thought in psychology. In R. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 6-17). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Interaction between learning and development*. Cambridge, U.S.A.: Harvard University Press.
- Weick, K. (1969). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, U.S.A.: Addison-Wesley
- Wertsch, J. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, U.S.A.: Harvard University Press.
- Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2010). Activity systems analysis methods for understanding complex learning environments. New York, U.S.A.: Springer.