We engage in a conversation about the relevance of practice theory for management. We argue that management educators can use practice theory to help current and future managers develop intuitions that are useful for managing dynamic and complex situations, and we provide management educators with three orientations designed to help make practice theory practical. First, we introduce a way of thinking about practicality that orients to the everyday context of management. Second, we provide a primer on practice theory. Third, we illustrate the potential for the practicality of practice theory through the idea of resourcing and in-depth case examples of resourcing in practice. We conclude with suggestions for further development of this conversation.

PRACTICABILITY AND PRACTICE THEORY

This article makes a case for the practicality of practice theory for management. The intended audience is educators working with current and future managers, and we provide management educators with a basic understanding of the fundamentals of practice theory as well as showing how developing an intuition for the fundamentals of practice theory can alter approaches to management practices.

As we elaborate here, practice theory is a distinct approach that focuses on the dynamic unfolding of constellations of everyday activities or practices in relation to other practices both within the same time and space and across time and space (Ortner, 1984; Schatzki, 2001; Gherardi, 2006; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2012). An idea fundamental to practice theory is that things (including identities, ideas, institutions, and power as well as material goods) take on meaning as they are enacted through practice, rather than having meaning as innate features of their being (Emirbayer, 1997; Osterlund & Carlile, 2005). This idea is often referred to as relationality or the relationality of mutual constitution. We discuss this idea in more depth in our primer on practice.

Applying this fundamental idea to resources provides one application of practice theory that, because of the centrality of resources to organizing, may be a particularly useful entry point for educators as they introduce current and future managers to practice theory. This perspective, which we refer to as resourcing, reveals the dynamism of resources and the way they take on meaning in relation to practices (Feldman, 2004; Feldman & Quick, 2009; Feldman & Worline, 2011; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Quinn & Worline, 2008; Keating, Geiger, & McLoughlin, 2014; Sonenshein, 2014). Resourcing is just one of many applications of practice theory. Other applications that have received considerable attention in management studies include the study of communities of practice (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger 1991; Brown & Duguid 1991, 2001; Thompson 2005); technology use (Orlikowski 1992, 2000; DeSanctis & Poole 1994, Suchman 1987/2007); sociomateriality (Michel, 2011, 2014; D’Adderio, 2014; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014); boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Carlile 2002, 2004; Bechky, 2003); strategy (Whittington 1992,
Practicality As Informing Action

Making a case for the practicality of practice theory requires us to engage with what makes a theory practical. Lewin’s pithy claim that “there’s nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951: 169) has been at the heart of the conversation about the practicality of theory in the social sciences (Van de Ven, 1989). What it means for a theory to be practical, however, is an open question. In psychology, Greenwald (2012) interprets Lewin’s comment about the practicality of theory to mean that its conceptual reach extends beyond the laboratory, suggesting that using experimental labels and logics outside of the experimental space will help reveal the causal ordering of things as they unfold in daily life. By contrast, Gergen (1978) has suggested that the practicality of theories lies not in their conceptual labels or logics, but in the questions they raise. In this view, practical theory offers not an explanation for what is, but a generative capacity “to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted,’ and thereby to furnish new alternatives for social action” (p. 1346). In a related view of practical theory, Weick (1989) suggests that practicality comes from the way a theory shapes connections: “To discover an unexpected connection is to discover a new set of implications” (p. 527). In this view, practicality manifests in seeing new or unexpected connections that offer a new set of implications for action.

Our view of the practicality of practice theory, and more specifically of the practicality of a resourcing perspective, falls in line with views of practicality that emphasize local action, particular knowledge of a context, and seeing how we create social worlds together in ways that enable new actions and new questions. We build on a helpful distinction offered by Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), who take up the conversation about practicality by distinguishing two ways that a theory may be practical. The first of these is a scientific practicality that they call “scientific rationality,” which “exalt[s] ... knowledge generation through detachment” and produces truths that are decomposable, placeless and timeless (p. 341). This is the kind of practicality envisioned by Greenwald (2012). It often shows up in organizations as a logic of measurement that attempts to apply the same measures across widely different local contexts without regard to the importance of those differences (Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998; Noordegraaff & Amba, 2003).
For instance, Oakes, Townley, and Cooper (1998), show how efforts at budget control resulted in applying the standardized categories of a business planning template to a range of Canadian museums located in the province of Alberta. Measuring and planning according to this view of scientific rationality resulted in the homogenization of a variety of sites, including “provincial archives, a world heritage site (designated by UNESCO) documenting Blackfoot history, several large museums, with collections ranging from dinosaur bones to carriages, [and] a number of large and small cultural heritage sites documenting the early fur trade, immigrant settlements, oil sands, and other aspects of Alberta’s history” (p. 258). The use of common categories not only resulted in emphasizing the similarities of each site, but also created these sites as one of many entities “in a large-scale market. It must now compete with Disneyland, local festivals, movies, and videogames” (p. 280).

Sandberg and Tsoukas contrast this with what they call “practical rationality,” which is situated in the specifics of a particular place and time and the actions being enacted in that particular place and time (pp. 343–344). A focus on practical rationality would orient managers and employees not to similarities but to contextuality. We see an example of managing with this form of practical rationality and how it differs from the approach rooted in scientific rationality in Sonenshein’s (2014) description of a large-scale retailer that used centralized purchasing to obtain low prices on goods, but then distributed these goods to local retail “pop-up shops,” where managers and staff had permission to display and market the goods in line with whatever appealed to their local market and the needs of their unique customers. Rather than the intuition that all the stores had to operate by way of the same categories and plans, this approach took account of the differing materials and actions that were relevant in, say, a beach town pop-up shop versus a college-town pop-up shop, enabling greater creativity across the system. This notion of practicality is in line with the use of different questions and different connections that matter in context offered by Gergen (1978) and Weick (1989). This notion of practicality also leaves room for what Noordegraff and Amba (2003) term “interpretive spaces,” where the complexity of practices across different contexts is opened for discussion as part of the management process, and the diversity of practices becomes a resource for fueling creativity at the local level even while maintaining control over purchasing at the central level.

As these two illustrations make plain, these two kinds of practicality are useful in different ways and to different people enacting different roles. Scientific rationality facilitates generalizable predictions across contexts, but may be less practical for exploring options, solving problems, and creatively addressing issues within a specific situated context. Indeed, management theory, which is generally based in scientific rationality, has been criticized as not useful to practitioners (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006: 802). One of the remedies for such irrelevance increasingly proposed by scholars is to base theorizing in practice and in the empirical questions raised by practice (Kondrat, 1992, cited in Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006: 805). Eikeland and Nicolini (2011) call for “a type of theory that helps practitioners articulate what they already do, and therefore somehow know” (p. 169). Such theorizing emphasizes practical rationality “[rather than regarding] practical reasoning and knowledge to be derivative of scientific knowledge” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006: 805).

Practice theory generally offers management educators a way of thinking and explaining that is based in practical rationality. The focus in practice theory is on the rationality or logic that is internal to specific recurrent activities, rather than viewing those activities from a detached outsider view. Coming to see the practical rationality involved in ordering one’s social world allows a new stance toward our own actions. Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) claim that such “practical rationality theories enable practitioners to better understand, engage, and, above all, improve their own practice” (p. 354).

We do not claim to be the first to suggest the practicality of practice theory. Brown and Duguid, in discussing the practicality of communities of practice, argued “that corporations must provide support that corresponds to the real needs of the community rather than just to the abstract expectations of the corporation. And what those needs are can only be understood by understanding the details and sophistications of actual practice” (1991: 45, emphasis added). The community of practice idea emerged from practice theory as related to the empirical research of Suchman (1987/2007), Lave (1988), Jordan (1989), Orr (1996), and Lave and Wenger (1991). Lave’s pathbreaking work on cognition in practice, which challenged the prevailing view that cognition or knowledge is an individual, transferrable thing that resides in people’s heads, provided the basis for understanding cognition in communities of practice (Lave, 1988; see also Michel, 2014). From this new
perspective, learning and knowing are ongoing social activities that both create and are created by communities of practice (Gherardi & Strati, 2012).

Communities of practice emerge when people develop a repertoire of practices that serve as resources for the enterprise in which they are engaged (Wenger, 1998). These practices allow people to know and engage with the enterprise differently. Enterprises take many different forms. For instance, Orr (1996) studied people who repaired photocopying machines and showed that as a community they developed practices that enabled them to fix machines that they could not have fixed based on either their training or on the repair manuals they were given.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977, 1990) and Orr’s study of repair technicians (1996), Brown and Duguid (1991, 2001) showed that communities of practice can be practical for organizations. Managers are not always necessary for communities of practice to emerge. Indeed, in the case of Orr’s study, the community of practice and the way it helped technicians do their work developed in spite of management (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996). Nonetheless, because communities of practice “offer a particularly helpful level of analysis for looking at work, learning, knowledge, and work identity formation” (Brown & Duguid, 2001: 202), when managers are able to promote the conditions that support communities of practice, the organization can reap benefits in terms of an increase in organizational members’ abilities to learn from one another and to solve problems. Further research has shown that management involvement in communities of practice entails a delicate dance. In empirical research on the rise and fall of a community of practice, for instance, Thompson (2005) finds that management efforts successfully seeded the community of practice, but later management efforts to control the community resulted in its demise.

Out of this research came several important and practical ideas for management educators that we draw on here. First, workplace practices are important resources for learning, problem solving, and change. Second, managers can be important sources of seeding these practices. Third, it is important to differentiate seeding practices from control of practices. We take up these ideas in two extended case descriptions below. In the first we show how workplace practices are resources for problem solving and change, and we foreground how a manager seeds those practices. In the second, we show how seeded practices by managers result in unanticipated developments, distinguishing seeding of practices from managerial control.

In the following section we provide a conceptual introduction to practice theory followed by a similar introduction to resourcing as an idea that comes out of practice theory. We provide these overviews in the hope of conveying the background needed to help managers develop new intuitions about how things, ideas, and actions are connected and, thus, how practices matter. To help educators see the intuitions in action and think about how to help their students develop intuitions, we follow the introductions to practice theory and resourcing with two extended examples of resourcing that illustrate the practicality of developing intuitions consistent with practice theory. Although we do not expect that all management educators will become experts in practice theory or in resourcing, we hope that the abstract principles combined with the in-depth examples will enable many educators to see the value of practice theory and, thus, enable them to help managers develop intuitions about how these ideas can be put to use in their organizations.

A Primer on Practice Theory

Practice theory consists of a family of ideas which have been described as an approach (Ortner, 1984; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Gherardi, 2006); a turn (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001); a lens (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011); or an idiom (Nicolini, 2012). Rather than providing a unified theory, this family of ideas places emphasis on practice and the human action involved in practice (Schatzki, 2001). Practices are defined as “an organized constellation of different people’s activities” (Schatzki, 2012: 13). As such, practices are enacted through the actions of individuals but are never simply the actions of an individual. As Nicolini (2012: 2) puts it:

The appeal of … a practice-based approach lies in its capacity to describe important features of the world we inhabit as something that is routinely made and re-made in practice using tools, discourse, and our bodies. From this perspective the social world appears as a vast array or assemblage of performances made durable by being inscribed in human bodies and minds, objects and texts, and knotted together in such a way that the result of one performance becomes the resource for another.
Practice theory focuses on these unfolding constellations of activity or practices and explores how they emerge through time as connected doings and sayings, as well as how they connect with other practices. Any practice is constituted through the actions of many individuals knotted together with the actions of other individuals who may or may not share a common identity and may or may not be aware of one another’s actions. Furthermore, any practice is embedded in a web of practices. For these reasons, the unit of analysis (or orienting concept) is the practice rather than the individual or the collectivity.

Practice theory has many variations, depending on the extent that theorists build on the philosophies of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Schutz, and others, and whether they follow in the footsteps of either Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens, who are “the two leading exponents of practice theory” (Schatzki, 2012: 13). Practice theory approaches also vary in the extent to which they engage the work of scholars such as Foucault, Latour, Garfinkel, or Vygotsky. Nonetheless, we can extrapolate across this variety of practice theorists to posit some identifying features of practice theory.

Relationality

A primary assumption of practice theorizing is its root in the concept of relationality (Osterlund & Carlile, 2005; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). Relationality is captured in the idea of mutual constitution rather than independence and the idea that phenomena (including people, events, ideas, institutions, and material things) have meaning in relation to one another rather than in isolation. Relationality contrasts with a primary orientation to substances or entities (Emirbayer, 1997). People who look at the world from a relational perspective point out that even dynamic processes are often turned into entities. Take, for instance, wind. “We say, ‘The wind is blowing,’ as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if a wind could exist which did not blow” (Elias, 1978: 111–112, cited in Emirbayer, 1997: 283). Wind and blowing are related to one another in such a way that they are mutually constituted rather than independent. There is no wind except when it is blowing and there is no blowing except as it creates wind. This intuition is fundamental to practice theory.

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Practice theorists point out the ways in which social worlds are not entities to be separated but instead are comprised of mutually constituting relations (Ortner, 1984; Emirbayer, 1997; Osterlund & Carlile, 2005; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Michel, 2014). It is a well-known truism that leaders cannot lead without followers. Leaders and followers shape one another. Latour has similarly pointed out that power is not an entity, but rather a dynamic in which “actors” and “others” shape one another in the mutual constitution of power: “[W]hen an actor simply has power nothing happens and s/he is powerless; when, on the other hand, an actor exerts power it is others who perform the action. It appears that power is not something one can possess…” (Latour, 1986: 264).

Knowledge is another concept that has been discussed as if it were an entity, but practice-oriented scholars have shown the relationality of knowledge by demonstrating that it is not an entity that can be transferred from one person to another or one context to another without being transformed (Lave, 1988; Michel, 2014). Lave’s work, for instance, showed that what it means to know math is embedded in practices and is often not transferable across practices (Lave, 1988). Arithmetic drills and story or word problems are math practices common in schools, but even people who are good at these practices may not be able to transfer the knowledge to doing things with math, such as sewing or cooking. Likewise people who are very good at doing things with math in the practices of cooking and sewing may not be able to transfer that knowledge to arithmetic drills and to word problems.¹ Research on knowing-in-practice has redefined knowing as a process (Cook & Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Osterlund & Carlile, 2005; Gherardi, 2006), and made clear that knowing will vary as it is enacted in situ. In other

¹ This insight has had a large impact on math pedagogy (Nasir & Hand, 2008; Gresalfi, Martin, Hand, & Greeno, 2009).
words, although analytically separable, knowing and using knowledge are mutually constituted.

Relationality is central to the way practice theorists understand individuals and systems or structures. Separating individuals and structures lies at the heart of two dominant and competing explanations of social order. Reckwitz (2002) refers to these as homo economicus and homo sociologicus: “The model of the homo economicus explains action by having recourse to individual purposes, intentions and interests; social order is then a product of the combination of single interests” (p. 245). Homo economicus is the foundation for theories of rational action and “great man” theories. On the other hand, “[t]he model of the homo sociologicus explains action by pointing to collective norms and values, i.e. to rules which express a social ‘ought’; social order is then guaranteed by a normative consensus” (Reckwitz, 2002: 245). Homo sociologicus is the foundation for structural-functional theories and institutional theories, which take as primary the existence of social structures.

As different as homo economicus and homo sociologicus theories are, they nonetheless share the fundamental assumptions that (1) individuals and structures are ontologically independent of one another; and (2) either individual economic rational interests or social norms are the primary basis for social action. Breaking with these assumptions, the relationality of practice theory provides a third way to view social reality: that individual interests and social norms can only be separated analytically; in practice, they are always in relation to one another, a mutually constituted duality (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Giddens, 1979, 1984).

The significance of mutually constituted relationality is shown in recent research in which Michel (2014) argues that the identity of individuals in investment banks and the organization of the banks as structures are mutually constituted through practices, such as deal making. She contrasts two banks: the individual bank and the organizational bank. In the individual bank, clients were assigned to individual bankers. Expertise was considered to be an individual, cognitive trait, and each banker was responsible for using his or her expertise to make deals. As a result, bankers became locked into identities based on their individual expertise. In the organizational bank, deals were enacted by teams. Expertise was considered to be a social process in which the team consulted with the client, each other, and other people in the bank to identify the appropriate resources for making this specific deal. Bankers in the organizational bank did not develop fixed identities and were, instead, “surprised to observe new aspects of themselves in different situations” (p. 1101). An important point we emphasize here is that although Michel recognizes that individuals and organizations can be separated analytically—indeed, that has been the norm for centuries—her research shows that in practice, these otherwise dichotomous sources of action are inseparable and mutually constituting. Moreover, viewing identity through practice allows us to see how important organizational practices are to this construct that has often been considered an individual psychological construct.

**Dichotomies, Dualisms, and Dualities**

Practice theoretic studies, like the one just described, often focus on dichotomies or dualisms as conceptual categories that provide opportunities to illustrate how inseparable they are in practice. Indeed, the rejection of otherwise taken-for-granted dualisms in favor of mutually constituted dualities is a hallmark of practice theoretic studies (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 1242). The first two chapters of Bourdieu’s Logic of Practice (1990), for instance, deconstruct objectivity and subjectivity as inseparable from one another. The early chapters of Giddens’ Constitution of Society (1984) similarly show the agency–structure dualism to be a mutually constituted duality. These deconstructions are necessary, as dualisms may otherwise be seen as naturally occurring. As Nicolini (2012: 2) argued, “a practice-based view of the social ... offers a remedy for a number of problems left unsolved by other traditions, especially the tendency of describing the world in terms of irreducible dualisms between actor/system, social/material, body/mind, and theory/action.”

Stability and change is another important dualism that practice theorists have treated as a duality (Farjoun, 2010). Practice theorists do not assume that any situation can be designated as either stable or changed, but that it will always have elements of both stability and change in a relationship of mutual constitution (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). As a result, rather than assuming that stability is the norm and that change has to be explained, practice theorists approach stability as an active accomplishment. Thus, practice theory highlights the production and reproduction of systems through recurring human actions, and practice theorizing rests on “the dynamic of reproduction, recursiveness and
reflexivity” (Gherardi, 2006: xiv). As people repeat practices, systems are reproduced and stabilized, but they are also changed, because “[r]ecursive human practices are repeated again and again, although not identically each time” (Gherardi, 2006: xiv). Through variation in the performance of practices, recurring action can foster not only stability but also flexibility and change (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

Three Principles That Summarize Practice Theory

Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) summarized the features of practice theory we have just described by articulating three principles designed to help orient researchers interested in using practice theory. These three principles may also be useful to management educators as an overview. Practice theorizing rests on (1) the consequentiality of everyday actions in producing the structural contours of social life, (2) the relationality of mutual constitution, and (3) a questioning of the presumption of separateness indicated by dichotomies or dualisms in favor of a presumption of dualities, which are inseparable in practice.2

Slightly reconfigured, these three principles provide three succinct areas of focus for management educators who want to help managers develop their intuition about how practices unfold in context. They not only provide a succinct way of summarizing the longer description of practice theory in this primer on practice, but also help to organize our use of practice theory as either researchers or practitioners. We suggest that as managers and educators we will be well-served to pay attention to these principles and, that we can put practice theory to practical use by asking questions based on these principles. Three types of questions will aid management educators in putting these principles to use: First, in relation to the consequentiality of recurring human activity in our contexts, what are people doing over and over again, and how is this action contributing to the social worlds we are creating? Second, relationality suggests that we must train ourselves and our students to challenge assumptions that things are separable and independent and to ask questions such as how is one aspect of this issue creating another aspect of this issue? What am I viewing as separate that may not be separable? And third, practice theory’s particular focus on seeing the mutually constituted dualities where dichotomies or dualisms may be taken for granted suggests a potent starting point for noticing assumptions about separateness. Although assumptions of separateness can take many forms, opposites (e.g., day/night, black/white, exit/entrance) are a very common form and one that easily leads to generative questions (How would we know day if we knew no night? How would we know “us” if there were no “them”?), such questions are particularly generative when they help us see how our practices are implicated in the production and reproduction of these dichotomies. For instance, in an example we discuss below, how do banking practices assume and reproduce the dichotomy of rich–poor? How would we change our practices if we did not think that there were fundamental differences between rich people and poor people? We refer back to these three principles in the case examples offered below to help illustrate how management educators might see and demonstrate them in classes or discussion.

Putting practice theory to use requires that we consider how all three principles work together and are simultaneously present. No single principle on its own fully describes practices nor provides the potential to influence them. Together, however, these three principles help us develop the kinds of intuitions that may lead to new ideas and creative solutions and to put the theory to use for accomplishing change.

Some Ways Practice Theory Has Been Applied in Organization Theory

Practice theory has been applied in studying many organizational phenomena. For instance, prior to the introduction of practice theory to the study of technology use, the discussion was about whether technologies dictate what we do with them or whether contexts dictate how the technology will be used (Orlikowski, 1992). Neither explanation fit the experience of people who had worked with and created new technologies (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Introducing practice theory and the idea of technology-in-practice reoriented the discussion to the relationality and inseparability of human action, technological capability, and organized context (Orlikowski 1992, 2000; DeSanctis & Poole 1994; Suchman, 1987/2007). The thousands of citations for each publication gives an indication of the tremendous impact this idea based in practice theory has had for other scholars of technology use.
Practices involve not only people, but also material things, such as tools or technology or infrastructure (Orlikowski, 2007) and even the materiality of the bodies of people engaged in practice (Michel, 2011, 2014). Practice theorists point out that what a thing does is determined in practice (D’Adderio, 2014; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014). Work on boundary objects provides an example. Boundary objects are put to use across organizational, functional, expertise, or other socially determined boundaries. Maps, charts, and prototypes are common boundary objects. Research on boundary objects shows that how the object is used in practice shapes what the object becomes and its ability to connect activities across the boundary (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Carlile, 2002, 2004; Bechky, 2003). Boundary objects and other forms of sociomateriality are important to the enactment of practices (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008, 2014). We come back to this idea in the case illustrations of resourcing, below, with examples, such as the billing unit’s “basket of goodies” for clinic visits or the city managers’ use of the master plan.

The new field of strategy as practice is based in practice theory. It focuses on practice as it is enacted through the actions of people at all levels of an organization. Engaging practice theory as it relates to strategy shifts the focus from strategy as a plan that involves senior executives to strategy as practice (Whittington, 1992, 2006; Johnson et al., 2003). Practice theory also offers a different lens for seeing strategies (Michel, 2011, 2014). Practice theory offers new insights for managers about ways to see resources with more dynamism and to undertake everyday actions and interactions with greater attention to how practices create resources by enacting connections between things and ideas.

Resourcing and Practice Theory

Practitioners also offer a different lens for seeing how resources are put to use. When viewed through this lens, we see the creation in use of resources, and we refer to this as resourcing (Feldman, 2004; Feldman & Quick, 2009; Feldman & Worline, 2011; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Quinn & Worline, 2008; Keating et al., 2014; Sonenshein, 2014). Resourcing is a practice theory orientation to resources that combines three central insights about resources with the assumptions of relationality fundamental to practice theory. First is the central insight of resource dependence: that what an organization can do depends on the use it makes of resources in the form of external dependencies (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Second is the insight from the resource-based view of the firm: that resources come not only from the external environment, but are also and significantly generated internally (Barney, 1991, 2001; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece et al., 1997). Third is the insight that the utility of resources depends on the configuration of the field, which comes from institutional theory (Leblebici et al., 1991). Introducing the relational ontology of practice theory gives us the insight that things (resources including people, ideas, material goods) take on meaning through the practices that connect them with other things (rather than having meaning as innate features of their being). Drawing these four insights together in resourcing theory helps us see that resources are enacted in practice and that a resource is defined in relation to what it is connected to (people, ideas, materials) in practice.

Resourcing may be a particularly practical application of practice theory for management educators because it focuses on expanding our view of what it means to become a resource. Resourcing emphasizes that potential resources only become resources when they are used in practice, and what kind of resource they become depends on how they are used (Feldman & Worline, 2011). Resourcing offers new insights for managers about ways to see resources with more dynamism and to undertake everyday actions and interactions with greater attention to how practices create resources by enacting connections between things and ideas.

The shift from noun to verb draws attention to the importance of action as consequential. By definition, resources are things that help us accomplish what we set out to do. Wikipedia defines resource as “a source or supply from which benefit is produced.”
The resourcing lens draws attention to the connection between practices and benefits. What constitutes benefit, however, is a matter of the interpretation of worth. What constitutes a benefit from one perspective may be the opposite from another. For this reason, we use the term *schema* to indicate the interpretation of the benefit. “Schemata ... map our experience of the world, identifying both its relevant aspects and how we are to understand them” (Bartunek, 1984: 355). While the term *benefit* assumes there is value in what has been produced, the term *schema* is more neutral and invites us to think about whether the schema being resourced is valuable and for whom.

“Resourcing is the creation in practice of assets such as people, time, money, knowledge, or skill; and qualities of relationships such as trust, authority, or complementarity *such that they enable actors to enact schemas*” (Feldman, 2004: 296, emphasis added). As such, resourcing draws attention both to what schemas (or schemata) are being resourced and to the way practices do the work of resourcing.

The actions associated with practice are important to resourcing. Just as there is no wind without blowing, there is no resourcing without action. Action brings a potential resource into relation with schema. As a result resources and schema are not separable and independent but mutually constituted. Assets such as material objects, skills, information, time, and money are only potential resources until they are used (Feldman & Quick, 2009; Feldman & Worline, 2011).

Time and money provide good examples of resources that show the relationality to schema. Even though time and money are often seen as quintessential resources, they require some action to bring them into relation with some schema. Consider the difference between using a pile of paper money to make a bonfire to keep warm and using a pile of cash to exchange for other goods. Keeping warm and acquiring goods are fundamentally different schema. Both schema can be resourced by paper money, but the actions that are taken to achieve them are different. Thus, what kind of resource paper money becomes is defined by the actions taken and the schemas resourced as a result of these actions.

While an important part of using a resourcing lens is seeing what schema (e.g., keeping warm vs. exchange) are resourced through current practices, the resourcing idea is particularly powerful when new schema are resourced or when schema that could not be pursued by established practices are made available through new practices. In practice, bringing new resources into use or bringing resources to new uses often involves recognizing and challenging longstanding assumptions about dichotomies. This is one reason that we find the intuitions of practice theory helpful for managers who are embedded in contexts with longstanding challenges or seemingly intractable problems.

The microfinance approach to banking provides an illustration of the power of bringing new resources into use and using existing resources in new ways. Microfinance provides financial services, such as loans, to people who previously did not have access to these services because they are poor. Microfinance transformed two dichotomies that were fundamental to traditional banking practices: material versus nonmaterial assets, and rich versus poor. Dualisms such as material versus nonmaterial assets were embedded in traditional banking practices and shaped assumptions such as (1) potential resources that can be used as collateral are material (e.g., land, houses, boats, etc.) or financial (e.g., money, bonds, etc.); and (2) poor people have no collateral. Since poor people, by definition, do not have financial or material possessions they can use as collateral to assure the bank that its loan will be repaid, traditional banking practices prevented poor people from getting loans. These assumptions contributed to resourcing the following two schemas (among a myriad of others): (1) loans are for rich people; and (2) the way to help poor people is to give aid. Over time and through the efforts of many people, however, a new set of practices has emerged to resource new schema. Microfinance practices use the connections people have with others in their community as a form of social collateral (Bornstein, 2005; Yunus, 2008; Canales, 2014). Microfinance practices, for instance, typically include creating groups that are accountable for one another’s loans. Such practices challenge the dualism of material versus nonmaterial assets that informed traditional banking. This shift also challenged the dichotomy between rich and poor people, as it became clear that poor people often have plenty of social capital. The resulting lending practices resource the schemata that (1) loans are for everyone; and that (2) providing loans is a viable way to help people with material or social collateral achieve their projects. Because traditional banks at first rejected these practices, new financial organizations emerged as NGOs and community-based lending organizations where the practices that used social capital to create accountability were.
The basic ideas of resourcing correspond to the three principles of practice theory articulated by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), which are helpful in developing students' intuitions about practice. The emergence of microfinance practices, thus, illustrates the basic ideas of resourcing and the three principles of practice theory. First, action is consequential in producing the structural contours of everyday life. The example unveils the consequentiality of the action: It is not enough to rethink lending; lending has to be enacted for it to alter structural contours of poverty or of banking. In relation to resourcing theory, action is consequential in that a potential resource (e.g., material, financial, or social capital) only becomes a resource (e.g., collateral) by how it is enacted in practice (e.g., being used as collateral to create accountability for loans).

The example also illustrates the second principle: the relationality of mutual constitution. Banking structures lending practices and these lending practices create and recreate banking. Traditional banking is constituted of traditional financing practices that resource and, thus, reinforce traditional banking. Microfinance is constituted of alternative financing practices that resource, and thus, reinforce microfinance banking. These recurring actions, across many people over time, enabled the development of microfinance as a new approach to poverty alleviation.

The third principle involves the questioning of taken-for-granted dualisms and recognition of the inherent relationship between elements that have often been treated dichotomously. Practices can reinforce dualisms or dichotomies (things taken for granted as separate) or transform them into dualities (unitary wholes comprised of relations between things). In the microfinance example, the rich–poor and material–nonmaterial dichotomies were effectively brought into question and enacted as dualities through the new practices. The generative potential of questioning dichotomies is illustrated as we see that questioning the rich–poor and material–nonmaterial oppositions lie at the heart of moving from the first set of practices (traditional banking) to the second set (microlending). Recognizing the material–nonmaterial and rich–poor dichotomies and asking new questions about them allowed people to take different actions in relation to them.

Although the story of microfinance can be told with a focus on its “heroes,” we have not told this story from the perspective of particular leaders or managers because the practices that have transformed financial institutions in this manner are collective. As noted above, the unit of analysis, or basic orientation, is the practice. These practices emerged over many years and continue to emerge today. And, while the gist of the microfinance story is one of increased potential for poor people, it is also important to recognize that the emergence of new practices brings with it new problems. When it comes to understanding practices, there is no “happily ever after” ending. Nor do we suggest, by emphasizing cases in which shifts in practice have helpful consequences, that this is necessarily or always the case. The transition toward microlending has spurred new practices that both promote and inhibit poverty alleviation and the potential of poor people to participate in economies and develop capacities (Canales, 2011, 2014; Goldsworthy, 2010).

RESOURCING IN PRACTICE: TWO CASES

As the primer on practice theory above makes evident, no manager—indeed no individual—establishes a practice on her own; practices are collective, even when we tell stories that foreground the activities of individuals. In the cases in this section, we foreground the actions of managers. Evidence from learning-in-practice and communities of practice offers the idea that managers are sources for seeding new practices, even though they may have to step back from attempts to control communities in order for those seeded practices to thrive (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Thompson, 2005). This is an important issue for management educators to take up, since it goes to the heart of how managers may need to rethink their roles in relation to practices and change. We use this section of the article to offer two examples that illustrate different roles for managers at a variety of points in the development of new practices. These two cases further illustrate resourcing and the practicality of practice theory, and may be useful as classroom examples.

The first case shows the development of practices within an organizational unit, highlighting the role of a manager in seeding new practices and demonstrating how these seeds did or did not grow into change in collective constellations of activity. While these practices eventually extend to people outside the unit, the story is very much about the emergence of practices within one organization and the way these practices became resources for ongoing change.
This case is based on research in a medical billing context within a community hospital system that has also been described and analyzed elsewhere (Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Worline & Boik, 2006). As a case of effective change in a seemingly resource-constrained environment, we offer this as a highly relevant example for managers who hope to find ways to cultivate change in their local environments working within their own resource constraints.

The second case entails the development of practices among stakeholders who are not employees. While the managers in this case all belong to the same city government organization, they are seeding practices among participants who belong to many different organizations (including businesses, nonprofits, and other government organizations) and people who do not belong to or represent any organization. This second case also offers an example in which the managers’ actions inadvertently resource a schema they had been trying to unresource, highlighting that not all instances of change are necessarily “positive” or “helpful.” While the managers ultimately were able to take action in support of practices that resourced their preferred schema, this example makes clear that resourcing is an ongoing process and that resourcing efforts are not always successful. It vividly illustrates that managers do not control or have a privileged view on how actions unfold or on how their own actions are taken up.

**Interrelated Practices and the Evolution of the Billing Unit**

As a new manager, Sarah took over a hospital billing unit that was performing at the lagging end of its industry, requiring an average of 180 days to collect a dollar of revenue. We focus in this example on how Sarah seeded new practices and how these new constellations of activity took shape over time. Like many managers, Sarah faced an organization laden with regulatory and financial challenges, where financial incentives were limited and capital investment in training and technology was constrained. While Sarah was never formally trained in practice theory, we illustrate how she used intuitions about a focus on how work was accomplished (the work practices) and the relationality of the unit’s quality of life as a work community and its productivity to transform taken-for-granted dichotomies that organized these work practices. With these intuitions, we can see all three principles of practice theory in how Sarah and her unit approached the need for organizational change.

Prior to Sarah’s arrival as the unit manager, and in keeping with industry and institutional norms, billing in this unit was done as an individual task. Billers worked on claims with no interdependence. Other than sitting in the same part of the building, the billers had little interaction. Drawing on an intuition about the relationality of people and communities, and with an inclination to challenge longstanding assumptions about independence–interdependence, Sarah approached managing in the unit by asking what might happen if the unit moved away from accomplishing individual tasks and instead acted as if they were performing collective tasks that could be accomplished by a workplace community. By emphasizing community, Sarah was drawing on a schema that went beyond simply work interdependence; she meant community in the sense that Block (2009) holds it: “Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers. As if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice” (p. 3). Sarah seeded practices of community in many ways, some of which were taken up and grew into constellations of collective activity. For instance, she harvested vegetables from her garden and left the bounty in the communal kitchen. She shopped at a large bulk store once a month and brought in the excess she couldn’t use to be taken up as communal resources. She created a community calendar on which important activities both within the organization, within the broader hospital system, and within the civic community were featured as important ways of marking time and participating in the social world of work.

Shifting from practices that were recreating individualistic work to practices that supported a work community required new ways of gathering and talking, including a daily morning meeting in which Sarah reinforced that the billers could be resources for one another rather than reifying Sarah as an isolated manager who could solve (or not) the unit’s problems. Also in this meeting, the group discussed how to share and distribute the workload, noting explicitly who needed what kind of help and shifting attention to tasks that needed extra attention. As these practices began to develop, a suggestion emerged from the group to work in teams rather than as individuals. Sarah—although not in control of
this suggestion—supported the emergent changes in practice that she had seeded by endorsing and aiding in restructuring the unit into team-based “pods.” These actions highlight the first principle of practice theory, that everyday actions produce the structural contours of social life.

One vivid (and deliberately simplified) example of the kind of change that happened as the group began to approach work as if they were a community comes from an operational shift in handling incoming mail. A bottleneck emerged in the unit regularly on days when mail delivery was heavy, because the claims and correspondence had to be opened, unfolded, sorted, and stamped before work on the claims could begin. On a heavy mail day, it might take some billers half the day just to open, sort, and stamp all the incoming mail, slowing down work considerably. Sarah seeded a new practice by suggesting that the billers bring their mail to the daily morning meeting. When billers piled the mail on the table, the mountain of envelopes became a collective task. Rather than each individual opening the envelopes assigned to them, everyone at the table started opening, unfolding, and sorting. What had been a half-day individual task was transformed into a half-hour collective task, which could be accompanied by talking, laughing together, and accomplishing other work in the meeting. While this change in and of itself could be seen as simple re-engineering of the work flow, this practice was not separate from the community that was being practiced in other ways in the unit. Rather, the talking, laughing, and playful approach to the mountain of envelopes was an extension of practices that were changing the unit from individuals accomplishing individual tasks to a community accomplishing the unit’s tasks. What could have been a burden was transformed into a source of collective engagement with one another. This example, like any single example, is by itself minor. But it was part of a number of changes in practices that, together, resourced a community that became more socially supportive and better at accomplishing work. Over a 3-year period productivity soared; the unit shifted from industry laggard at 180 days to collect a dollar to an industry-leading 60 days. Within this example we see the second principle of practice theory, the mutual constitution of work performance and work community, which began to challenge dualisms such as individual–group tasks and work–play time.

Practice theory suggests that we ask how things that seem separate or dichotomous could be treated as if they are whole and actually create each other—and this intuition was evident in the relationality between work and play in the billing department. Again, Sarah was important in seeding new practices that drew upon the relationality of work and play. Holding an intuition that work would be more focused if people had structured opportunities for play, Sarah began to seed practices such as a random 15-minute “sunshine break,” in which she answered the phones while all the staff went outside to enjoy the (relatively rare) sunshine. Billing, like all data-oriented administrative work, can be characterized by high repetitive strain injuries that are often exacerbated by stress and demands for high performance. As the unit became more and more productive, Sarah seeded a practice of interrupting work when she perceived stress was high. She brought small balls and toys into the unit and tossed them around. She encouraged billers to do the same when they felt the work was stressful. This practice was taken up and evolved into a variety of collective activities. One involved mini-toy water squirts. When someone called out “squirt guns,” billers would get up from their desks and move around squirting each other, often accompanied by riotous laughter. Billers who did not want to be disrupted put up umbrellas to indicate that they were not ready to take a break. An average squirt gun fight would last only a few minutes, but the positive emotion, movement, and change of pace enabled billers to return to work with renewed focus. The members of the billing department developed new ways of talking and thinking about the interrelations of work and play that fueled continued evolution of a constellation of bounded playfulness practices that included decorating cubicles, hosting potlucks, and inventing new ways to dress up a billing department mascot, Lucy, the (ceramic) goose. Again, taking these practices each on its own might seem trivial, but together these practices resourced a schema of a playful work community that contributed to a 0% repetitive strain injury rate and a turnover rate below 5% in the unit. This is a vivid example of the third principle of practice theory—questioning the presumption of a dualism, such as work–play in favor of new questions about their mutual constitution. This kind of practical rationality, recognizing new questions and new connections that are meaningful in the local context, revealed new possibilities for action and generated a different set of outcomes over time.

Resourcing a schema of playful work community over time continued to bring new resources into use.
After the emergence of the teams, the billers began to look for new ways to cut down on collection time. Examining productivity data by team, they noticed variation across the medical areas in the number of rejected claims. Since rejected claims have to be investigated and resubmitted, they are a significant source of delay in collection. While they were tempted to blame the clinic staff for a high number of coding errors that caused rejections, Sarah encouraged the billers to refrain from jumping to conclusions. Sarah seeded a new practice by inviting the billers to extend their playful work community to include the clinics for which they provided services. This offers an example about how the intuitions of practice theory can suggest new courses of managerial action. Rather than tackle the problem by writing memos or creating bureaucratic requests for information, the billers challenged the “our responsibility versus their responsibility” dichotomy that exists in many organizational environments. Imagining that if they knew the clinical staff a bit better, they would have a clearer window into how to reduce the error coding problems, the billers wanted to go see what was happening firsthand by visiting the clinics. But the billers also knew that an us versus them mind-set was widespread in the hospital, and if they came into a clinic looking for errors in the work, their approach could be interpreted as blame. Drawing from their own experience, the billers knew that they liked visitors who came bearing goodies. They put together baskets of treats to take with them on what became known as “clinic visits.” The sociomaterial aspect (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) of this practice is important, as the basket of goodies helped set the tone for a friendly interaction and the metaphor of requesting a “visit” helped reinforce that this wasn’t an inquisition or a blame game.

The clinic visits gave the billers an opportunity to meet the staff doing the coding in the clinics and gain a firsthand view of the work of the clinicians and office assistants. The first clinic visits were so informative and successful that the billers wanted to repeat them, and a practice emerged of going on clinic visits each quarter. The billers used the recurring meetings to build relationships that helped the billers learn about how the clinic environments operate (cf. Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). Because of the mutual constitution of action and structure, as the clinic visits continued over time, the organizational divisions between the units became less strong. Billers could easily call the clinic to ask about a questionable code or investigate a rejected claim. Clinical staff began calling the billers with questions as well, and even some physicians (who had never before had a window into their reimbursement rates) began to see the billing unit as a useful extension of their clinics. While not all seeded practices were taken up, and not all practices evolved into positive or useful changes, this description helps managers see how seeding new practices that challenge us-versus-them or our-responsibility-versus-their-responsibility dynamics so common in many organizations can become a skilled use of the fundamental intuitions of practice theory that enables generative change and endogenous resourcefulness.

This account illustrates several important aspects of what we have called the practicality of practice theory. First, we see how a manager seeded practices that continued to develop over time and how the managerial legitimation of emergent change that resulted from a billing community of practice is different than attempts to direct or control it. In relation to the first and second principles of practice theory—the consequentiality of action and the relationality of work and community—we see how practices enable work to become a resource for community and community to become a resource for work. The practices that transformed individualistic work and resourced the schema of collective responsibility included both work-based practices (daily meetings, formation of teams) and work–life practices such as parties, gatherings, sharing food, communal kitchen, and so on. This is also a potent example of the third principle of practice theory: a managerial intuition challenging an accepted dichotomy of work versus play and transforming it into a playful work community whole that inspires creative mutual constitution of work and play in a variety of ways. Transforming the work–play dualism into a mutually constituting playful workplace community created new potential resources, such as motivation, positive emotion, and creativity that could be put to use in the unit.
Resourcing Participatory Decision Making Among Diverse Stakeholders

"But I’m just a soul whose intentions are good
Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood."3

This section offers a second case study of resourcing, this time among diverse stakeholders who are not employees of a single organization. The case focuses on city managers in a medium-sized city in the Midwest United States (Feldman & Quick, 2009; Quick & Feldman, 2011, 2014) who are seeding practices in the hope of resourcing participatory decision making in their community. Actions by managers are not always taken up in ways that the managers intend, however, and this case illustrates how focusing on what schema they wanted to resource helped these city managers deal with the difference between their intentions and the way their actions were interpreted and taken up by others in the community. The focal events revolve around creating a budget for the city government. The background to this case illustrates that the managers were already seeding practices consistent with resourcing and had developed intuitions consistent with practice theory.

Drawing on the fundamental intuitions of practice theory, city managers in this community questioned a dichotomy in which the city government is considered to be on one side (often referred to as “the city” and often seen as in cahoots with developers) and residents are on the other. Although this us-versus-them schema has long provided the foundation for dealing with governmental power (Arnstein, 1969), in line with the third principle of practice theory, the managers in this city point out that they are also residents and that, while they have relevant skills and expertise, the residents also have relevant skills and expertise. Consequently, they sought to seed practices that engaged residents in a relationality of mutual constitution in which the differences between the perspectives and capacities of residents and city government could be combined in a constructive collaboration. This effort to transform the dichotomy and emphasize the mutual constitution of residents and city government through the ways that they conducted everyday activities of city budgeting, planning, and governing captures the three principles of practice theory as they unfolded in this managerial context.

Among many practices, city managers emphasized innovative and open-ended problem solving with residents. It has become standard to provide opportunities for resident participation in various processes, but the way this city enacts these participatory opportunities is important. To develop a Master Plan, for instance, they held hundreds of meetings involving thousands of residents, and at each of these meetings they had members from different city departments available (e.g., streets and sanitation, parks and recreation, police, etc.), so that issues raised that were not strictly related to the Master Plan could be addressed rather than put aside. This simple but unusual practice drew residents into the master planning process by signaling openness to resident concerns. Specifically, it signaled that although "the city" defined the process as a planning process, the residents did not have to understand what planning meant to city employees nor did residents have to become experts in the city’s ways of categorizing problems into organizational boxes, but instead just needed to communicate their own experiences and concerns.

To further encourage these practices of communicating between residents and city government, city employees provided updates to those who had raised concerns. These practices were reinforced by training the people who answered phones at city hall to translate residents’ concerns to the relevant units in the city government and by training employees in each unit to help the resident find someone who could deal with their concerns if their unit could not. Further reinforcing this practice, the city created and enacted a set of practices called Community Oriented Government (COG) for organizing across government units as well as with nonprofits (including neighborhood associations) and private-sector organizations. COG practices provided a way of coordinating that helped the city to transcend its organizational boxes and figure out ways of responding to resident concerns, illustrating the first principle of practice theory: the consequentiality of everyday actions for producing the structural contours of life in the city. This constellation of practices are just one of many that city managers seeded as a way of resourcing a schema of government and resident collaboration and transforming the us-versus-them dualism into a mutually constituting duality.

When the city faced a budget crisis, the city managers wanted to engage residents in a decision

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process about how to cut funds. They consciously designed a participatory process with an aim of reaching beyond the most active residents hearing from a larger proportion of the population. The city officials landed on the idea of using a survey to allow many residents to express priorities for the city budget. Although the city managers knew that they wanted to hear from more residents, they did not at the outset see that their actions might undermine the collaborative practices they had been putting in place.

**Encountering Unexpected Consequences**

The survey design presented matched pairs of city services and asked people to identify which service in the pair was more important to them, forcing a choice between what might seem like unrelated items. For example, one survey item asked respondents to decide whether swimming pools or police were more important. People identified police (and many other things) as more important than swimming pools. After analyzing the results, the city managers created a city budget that included closing all the swimming pools. The city managers believed that this budget reflected the priorities of the residents.

Upon release of the budget, dissent exploded in the community. The outcry was thunderous. Activists in the city focused on the closing of swimming pools: “How could you do this? You don’t understand what is important to our community—what makes our community work! If we close all the swimming pools, the poorer children have no place to go during hot summer days and that is heartless. We are not a heartless city!” Despite their stated intention to listen to the interests of the public, the managers had created a budget that appeared to be wildly out of sync with those interests and priorities.

Beyond the budget itself, the survey design and the use of a survey as the primary method of participation was interpreted by these vocal critics as reinstating an old practice of excluding the community from the deliberative decision-making process. The city managers had focused on their desire to hear from more residents and failed to see that they were undermining the practices of participatory decision making they had been promoting. To the many residents who had grown accustomed to the idea that joint problem solving entailed practices of open communication, the survey was clearly abrogating the expectations that had been established through practices such as the ones associated with the Master Plan process. In reaction, and in an effort to force the city managers to change the proposed budget, several activists started their own budget deliberations independent of the city managers. The spirit of this effort was adversarial and re-enacted the us-versus-them schema of residents versus “the city.”

Feeling misunderstood, the managers could have defended their intentions and their actions. In fact, this sort of defensive response is common when managerial action is challenged (Argyris, 1985; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Having developed an intuition about the third principle of practice theory transforming dualisms into dualities, however, they saw that their actions in eliciting advice about the budget through a survey had again resourced the us-versus-them dualism they had worked so hard through previous processes to un-resource. Central to the us-versus-them schema was the idea that managers see themselves as decision makers and that residents are, at best, given opportunities to provide input but do not actually collaborate on identifying problems or developing solutions. Also drawing on the intuition about the consequentiality of action, the city managers realized that defending their actions seemed likely to reinforce the idea that the managers viewed themselves as such, and again resource the us-versus-them schema. This helped them decide not to defend their actions, but they still had to figure out what actions they could take that would help them reestablish the collaborative schema.

Consistent with the second principle, the relationality of mutual constitution, the city managers could see that the collaborative schema they had resourced was not an object that would remain unchanged despite their actions and that the way input was elicited (whether a survey or a more deliberative process) affected what the schema of collaboration between residents and city officials meant. Consequently, rather than defending the survey or even explaining their actions, the city managers shifted to actions that put residents firmly in charge. They publicly apologized for using the survey and recruited their most vocal critics as citizen budget advisors. The city managers put this citizen advisory board in charge of designing a new process for making the budget decisions and made it clear they would support the citizen budget advisors’ decisions. When the budget advisory board asked for more or different information, the city managers responded by providing it. When the budget advisors produced budget recommendations, the city managers implemented
them even though they disagreed with some and found some painful.

Although these actions could be seen as the managers capitulating, focusing on what schema the managers were resourcing helped them to avoid further misunderstandings and get back to resourcing the collaborative schema that was important to them. They could have resourced the "we-are-in-charge" schema and, as mentioned above, defending their authority would not be unusual or hard to explain. Had the managers felt that showing that they were in charge was the most important schema to resource, then the actions they took to put the residents in charge would not have worked to generate the kinds of outcomes they desired. As it was, however, they felt that the most important schema to resource was the collaborative schema, and the input of the residents and their acting upon that input were the potential resources that could be enacted. The city managers clearly communicated they valued the residents’ experience and participation in problem solving. Through these actions, they strengthened the practices that resourced the collaborative schema developing prior to the budgeting survey and they have continued to create and recreate to the time of this writing. They credit these practices with having helped them come through an economic crisis and rank well on several Forbes “best” lists (including best places to raise a family, best places for business and careers, happiest places to work, and emerging downtowns), while several other cities in the same state were in decline and some even went into receivership.

This example shows that actions can resource a mutually exclusive dualism (us vs. them) or a mutually constitutive duality (city managers and residents using their differences to work together). The extent to which the managers failed in resourcing their preferred schema (working together) through the survey came as a surprise to them. The extent to which they succeeded in resourcing a different schema through the citizen advisory board was not a foregone conclusion. It is also important to emphasize that although the story may seem straightforward in hindsight, these outcomes were not the result of single actions. Even though their intention was the opposite, in adopting the survey, city managers had inadvertently connected their current actions to a history in which residents had been excluded from decision making. This is a good example of how practices are historically bound and inextricably invested with relations of power and identity (Ortner, 1984; Schatzki, 2001; Osterlund & Carlile, 2005). By apologizing and putting their most vocal critics in charge of creating a budget process, the city managers connected this part of the budget process with other practices, such as the Master Plan process, to create a different relationship between city managers, residents, and decision making.

This case also shows how actions can direct a potential resource toward different schema, enabling it to become a different kind of resource. The managers had hoped the survey would resource a schema of broadening involvement in decision making. Because of the way it connected to the past, however, it resourced a noncollaborative schema instead. Similarly, the anger generated through the survey process was first directed by activist residents into deliberations aimed at forcing the city managers to attend to their concerns. This use of the anger resourced the us-versus-them schema. The city managers later used that same anger when they engaged their most vocal critics in re-resourcing a collaborative schema. The anger of the citizens provided energy that the city managers could build on to generate involvement on the council of budget advisors.

Although this case offers useful examples about how resourcing theory and the intuitions of practice theory can contribute to managerial action that creatively addresses entrenched issues and problems, it also illustrates that there is no guarantee managerial actions will resource the schema managers hope they will. The city managers adjusted course in this example in ways that contributed to resourcing a collaborative schema and building some capacity for working together in the future. But their actions with the survey tapped into a history of practices that made clear it was not guaranteed that working together would be smooth. Indeed, part of the intuition managers can build from practice theory involves its recurrent and ongoing nature, which is evident in this setting in the dynamics of working together that are ever-unfolding and ever-changing. Managers and management educators will benefit from examples like this one which shows that learning from misunderstandings and mistakes is a necessary part of seeding practices (Feldman, Quick, & Narváez, 2014).

**DISCUSSION**

We have suggested that practice theory can be useful for management educators teaching current and future managers how to make sense of the
impact of practices in their organizations and how to encourage changes in these practices. We have argued that the relationality of practice theory helps people see everyday activities differently by challenging existing assumptions and creating the potential for new connections. We have demonstrated this in two extended case examples involving resourcing that offer situated practices in different organizational forms and in relation to different kinds of managerial challenges.

Guiding Principles and Intuitions

This practical rationality is different from the scientific rationality that stands outside of practice and creates generalizable knowledge, which is accurate only when many cases are aggregated. Managers who have to deal with specific issues in their organizations do not tend to find the theorizing based in scientific rationality useful (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). By theorizing practices as they are enacted, practice theorists have provided guiding principles management educators can use to help current and future managers develop intuitions that enable them to assess and engage with the practices in their organizations.

As teachers, we have many options about how to help our students develop useful intuitions to guide skilled practice. It may be useful to think about this in relation to learning a technical concept, such as statistics. Teachers who want their students to be able to use statistics with skill in practice have (at least) the following three options: (1) teaching the mathematics behind statistical procedures; (2) teaching the general intuitions that statistics can provide as a basis for using statistical information for decision making; or (3) teaching students how to use a statistical package. For some students, probably advanced graduate students, the mathematics behind statistical procedures will be practical knowledge. For students who will generally engage statistics to guide decisions, knowing the mathematics will not likely help them develop a sense of what statistics mean in the context of situated decisions. Similarly, students who use statistical packages may be able to produce statistical results without the ability to interpret their meaning in relation to the world where they want to put them to use.

Practice theory presents a similar set of options: (1) teaching practice theory itself; (2) teaching the general intuitions that practice theory can provide as a basis for engaging in and seeding practices as a manager; or (3) teaching “best practices.” The first option is important and practical for scholars and researchers using practice theory but may be more than is necessary for people using the concepts as bases for action. The third option, focused on best practices, may provide a basis for quick action, but risks producing deeply misguided practices because of the lack of basic understanding about the relationality of practice and the common need to challenge fundamental dualistic assumptions to significantly shift practices. For these reasons, we have emphasized throughout this article the middle option of helping managers develop intuitions based in the theory. In regard to the practicality of practice theory for managers, what matters is not the capacity to engage the jargon of practice theory but rather the ability to assess and engage with the practices relevant to their organization. We have illustrated this through two case examples, which may be used as classroom examples, in which managers who did not know the technical aspects of practice theory nonetheless had helpful intuitions about the consequentiality of recurring activities, the need to challenge assumptions about the separability of things in their contexts that are mutually constituting, and the power of questioning taken-for-granted dichotomies to shift practices in a fundamental manner. These cases illustrate how practices as organized constellations of activity are knotted together in particular ways in context, as well as how practices unfold and interrelate over time, and how managers taking new kinds of actions can seed the potential for practices that reinforce different outcomes.

“In regard to the practicality of practice theory for managers, what matters is not the capacity to engage the jargon of practice theory but rather the ability to assess and engage with the practices relevant to their organization.”

Limitations

Our examples here highlight efforts that were ultimately (or ultimately for now) successful. We do not claim that success or otherwise positive outcomes are inevitable (Feldman & Worline, 2011). Indeed, the resourcing idea was first developed by tracing some organizational changes that produced outcomes that many in the organization thought were
Work on communities of practice, for instance, that we discussed briefly in the introduction here was related to work conducted at Xerox PARC. One reviewer noted that the work on the design firm Ideo is based in practice theory. We are also aware of the efforts of Engestrom as director of the Center for Research on Activity, Development and Learning (CRADLE), where practitioners “encounter ‘mirror data’ depicting recurring problems and disturbances in their work, then analyze the history of their activity to identify systemic contradictions that give rise to the troubles” (Engestrom & Glaveanu, 2012: 517).

Concluding Wishes

This article is one effort to engage management educators and managers in using practice theory ideas and intuitions in their day-to-day practice of management. We have engaged in this effort in the hope that we might become better teachers and help our students better develop their own intuitions about the practicality of practice theory. We have also developed the hope that others might follow this example of illustrating specific ways of using practice theory, as we have used the idea of resourcing, to show how these ideas can be practical for people who need to address seemingly unsolvable problems like the ones facing the billing department, seemingly endemic problems like poverty, and seemingly intractable us-them dynamics in complex endeavors like public engagement.

REFERENCES


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