

**Sales-as-Practice:  
An Introduction and Methodological Outline**

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#### **Abstract**

There are strong indications that sales practices are currently being redefined from the ground up and that many of the inherited conceptual models of selling will not hold into a future that is defined by new selling techniques and technologies (Dixon and Tanner 2012). This paper introduces a research perspective that can provide an important source of insight into how sales work and salespeople are currently being reconstituted: the sales-as-practice approach. In common with ‘practice turns’ evident in other business literature, such as the recent marketing-as-practice or the by now well established strategy-as-practice approach, sales-as-practice requires of researchers to develop a sensitivity toward salespeople’s ways of doing and being in social and material contexts. While acknowledging potential limitations, we identify some significant benefits of adopting this approach for our conceptual understanding of the sales domain, particularly in understanding persistence and transformation in sales practices, in paying attention to the role of material objects in configuring these practices and in appreciating the role of such practices in producing salespeople’s ways of being. Moreover, we argue that becoming more closely acquainted with sales professionals’ life-worlds can aid in bridging the perceived divide between academic and practitioner knowledge in our domain.

**Key words:** practice theory, practice-based studies, sociology, sales, qualitative research.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011, 339) have recently raised a challenge to organizational researchers: “How can organizational and management theories be developed so they better reflect the way actors enact their practice and, thus, are more relevant to practice?” Bringing this challenge closer to the sales research arena, the Special Issue Editors of the anniversary issue of the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* have called for a transformation of the definition of selling from a linear-predictive process to one that considers sales as a contextually situated “phenomenon of human-driven interaction” (Dixon and Tanner 2012, 12). They also pointed out that through the emergence of value co-creation and virtual, solution and multi-person selling, many of our incumbent sales models will need to be fundamentally revisited. With this Special Section note, we would like to outline one research perspective that offers a novel approach to understanding continuity and change in selling and sales management practices.

In outlining a ‘sales-as-practice’ approach, we are following in the footsteps of orientations toward practice in social sciences generally (e.g. Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001) and in business research areas such as strategy (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). In the marketing domain, driven by a concern that marketing research was less preoccupied with exploring how marketing is actually done in organizations than with testing often decontextualized theories of how it *should* be done, a number of parallel initiatives have recently initiated a ‘marketing-as-practice’ program (Araujo and Kjellberg 2010, Skålén and Hackley 2011, Zwick and Cayla 2011). Building on these arguments, we contend that a practice approach can add significantly to sales research knowledge by providing a distinctive and holistic way of understanding sales work.

The practice approach should be positioned alongside existing interpretive approaches to sales research that focus on how sales work is constituted through the social construction of meaning and shared cultural knowledge (e.g. Prus 1989; Workman 1993; Swan, McInnis-Bowers and Trawick Jr. 1996; Hurley 1998; Hollenbeck et al. 2009; Berthon et al. 2010). Where it differs from conventional approaches is in the manner in which cultural knowledge is conceptualized. Specifically, a practice perspective emphasizes embodied practical understandings that are entangled with material configurations of objects/artifacts. For practice theorists knowledge does not reside in people's minds nor in texts or symbols or in social interaction; knowledge resides in socio-material practices that are composed of people and specific configurations of objects. This materialization of the social also foregrounds our own embodied human engagement with the world, which emphasizes the importance of tacit understanding and emotional context in shaping social action. The practice approach is therefore uniquely positioned to conceptualize the current transformation of sales practices, as selling becomes dependent on higher levels of social interconnectedness (e.g. Flaherty et al. 2012) and increasingly mediated through IT artifacts and other material devices (Geiger and Turley 2006; Senecal, Bolman Pullins and Buehrer 2007).

With this note, we are addressing established sales researchers who are interested in broadening their methodological repertoire and PhD students in search of novel conceptual and empirical angles to sales research. Our aim is to open up this perspective and associated literatures for exploration by interested researchers. The remainder of this note will briefly introduce the basic tenets of the practice approach before outlining some methodological implications and a roadmap for future sales-as-practice research. A consideration of the costs and benefits of the approach brings the paper to a conclusion.

## A brief introduction to the practice approach

Practice theory is best understood as a specific variant of cultural theory<sup>1</sup> and is exemplified by the work of (mainly European) thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Harold Garfinkel and Michel Foucault (Reckwitz 2002; Nicolini 2013). It is important to note from the outset that the concept of ‘practice’ should not be taken to refer merely to what people do. Rather, Schatzki (2002) defines practices as bundles of actions that are recognizable by a particular social and material context in meaningful constellations – such as, for instance, negotiation practices, the practice of skateboarding, car racing, baking or, indeed, selling. Reckwitz (2002, 249) defines a practice as:

*“... a routinized form of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”.*

Building on this definition, Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) draw researchers’ attention to three building blocks of practices: ‘competences’, that is people’s ways of engaging in practices through thinking, talking, and their embodied skills; ‘meanings’ - their understanding of the world and their place within it, their emotions and motivations; and ‘materials’ - things and their use, or the ways in which material objects are incorporated into these practices and, in turn, structure or shape them. They argue that practices exist when linkages between these three building blocks develop over time; practices in turn cease to exist when such linkages vanish.

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural theory seeks to understand and explain social action by highlighting the role played by symbolic and cognitive structures of knowledge in orientating it. Reckwitz (2002) identifies four specific variants of cultural theory - namely Mentalism, Textualism, Intersubjectivism, and Practice Theory - which are based on different assumptions about the nature and location of social knowledge.

At the risk of oversimplifying a vigorous debate in certain fields of social science, we follow Shove, Pantzar and Watson's (2012) model in emphasizing four fundamental points about the practice approach as it may become applicable to sales research. First, an emphasis on *competences* draws our attention to the fact that learning, in practice theory, is related to "routinized mental and emotional activities" (Reckwitz 2002, 252), thus breaking the traditional conceptual distinction between mind and body. Competence is seen as a capability to act within specific practices in meaningful ways (Nicolini, Mengis and Swan 2012). Individuals, as body/minds, learn to 'carry' and 'carry out' social practices; human knowledge is regarded as being mainly embodied and practical (i.e. tacit) rather than discursive (Giddens 1984).

Second, conceptualizing *meanings* as part of social practice shows us how, in practice theory, the 'social and the 'individual' are regarded as mutually constitutive. Meaning is negotiated and produced through participation in practices, as shared ways of doing things develop. Alongside meaning, values and power relations develop too (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni 2010). Moreover, just as a practice produces a particular way of understanding the world, this also implies certain "ways of wanting and feeling" (Reckwitz 2002, 253). Goals, desires and emotional states are conceived of as central components of the knowledge and meanings associated with specific practices.

Third, the enactment of a practice always involves *material objects/artifacts* - that is "using particular things in a certain way" (Reckwitz 2002, 252-253). Reckwitz makes the point that "in order to play football we need a ball and goals as indispensable 'resources'". Material objects, tools, infrastructures or hardware are necessary components of many practices, just as important as bodily and mental activities. Indeed, as in Reckwitz's example of football, while the ball and net alone don't make a game, the practice is unthinkable without material objects.

Crucially, these are not viewed merely as passive artifacts/tools that humans use to shape the world; rather, ‘things and their use’ are seen as deeply constitutive of our human modes of being. Thus, the material and the social are regarded as intimately entangled; there is no material that is not social, and there is no social that is not material (Barad 2007). This focus on sociomateriality is one of the biggest hallmarks and potential strengths of a practice-based approach (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Orlikowski 2006).

Finally, as shared social patterns, practices have temporal persistence, but are also prone to *change* over time. Reckwitz states that practices exist as ‘a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions’ (2002, 250). To engage in practices, people must develop know-how, meanings and competencies that allow them to engage in a particular practice in a socially recognizable way (Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012). But because practices are enacted through individuals in specific situations, they are also open to improvisation and creativity, and this over time may change the practice itself.

To summarize this short introduction to some elements of practice-theoretical thinking relevant to sales research, specific practice configurations produce stable ways of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger 1962) or, put simply, of being a salesperson. Moreover, by emphasizing the role of things in social life, the practice approach opens up the prospect of moving beyond a sole emphasis on inter-subjective social relations to also consider the importance of our relationships with objects (see Knorr-Cetina 1997; Nicolini, Mengis and Swan 2012). A practice approach allows us to simultaneously pay attention to how sales activities come to be accepted as the ‘way of doing things’ within a community of practitioners, and how individuals enact and perhaps transform these practices (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). By raising awareness about how people are ‘configured’ or shaped by the practices they engage in, practice research can raise important

questions about the desirability of certain ways of being. It can thus assume a critical and transformative role that is missing from many other business research approaches.

### **Methodological commitments of a sales-as-practice approach**

What are the implications of adopting a practice approach to sales research, and what kinds of methodological commitments are entailed? Most fundamentally, practice theory provides the researcher with a particular lens to understand how the social hangs together, sensitizing them to pay attention to certain elements or building blocks of this world simultaneously - it offers what Anthony Giddens calls a specific and distinctive social ontology. Every approach to social research is, either implicitly or explicitly, underpinned by such a social ontology; what a practice approach offers is a sophisticated sensitizing device that addresses certain problems with more conventional interpretive ways of thinking about the 'social'.<sup>2</sup>

Practically speaking, a practice approach implies, first and foremost, that social practices are taken as the focus, or unit of analysis, of empirical research. This moves the empirical research away from the individual salesperson or sales manager as the primary unit of analysis. While many other qualitative research approaches privilege either individuals or social structures as carriers of meaning in their investigations, practice researchers consider individuals' actions in the context of the ongoing reproduction of social order. Salespeople must always be understood as specific and situated salespeople-in-practice, while the tools they use are always enacted as specific technologies-in-practice.

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<sup>2</sup> See Reckwitz (2002) for a discussion of these problems.



In common with other interpretive approaches, a practice-based study demands depth of engagement with the details of the social world being examined. Practice researchers strive to get ‘up close’ with the phenomena under investigation; to examine them in a granular and situated fashion and over time. Empirical research simply starts with observing and recording, in as much detail as possible, the practices being studied (Flyvbjerg 2006), with the lens focusing attention on embodied forms of knowing (both practical and discursive), ways of feeling and the mutually constitutive relations between people and artifacts. In contrast to other interpretive approaches, however, practice researchers study practices as performative; that is they focus on how engaging in an activity *produces* outcomes rather than being an outcome (for instance of a person’s motivational make-up, emotions, meaning systems or culture) itself. It is therefore important to attend to similarities and differences in how practices are enacted in different contexts and how practices shape these contexts in turn.

Many elements of practice are non-discursive in character, and practice researchers are typically cautious of relying only on the use of surveys, interviews or focus groups as data collection methods. Instead, there is an emphasis on observing what people do and how they do it at first hand. Consequently, ethnographic research tools are very important to the practice researcher (Swan, Mc-Innis Bowers and Trawick Jr. 1996). As the rich body of ethnographic research in sales and marketing has demonstrated, studies utilizing an ethnographic toolkit allow researchers to follow people, practices and events over extended periods of time and, often, across different geographical locales (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Workman 1993; Geiger and Finch 2011). Within this toolkit the shadowing technique, where a researcher literally shadows a practitioner throughout his or her working day, can be particularly beneficial in eliciting often taken-for-granted work practices that may not be detectable via the conventional

ethnographic participant observation techniques (Czarniawska-Joerges 2007). The shadowing technique enables the researcher not only to observe the behavior of the one being shadowed, and of those individuals with whom they interact, but also to ask questions relating to certain activities or events to generate an explanatory commentary, which may allow the researcher to access what otherwise remains ‘invisible’ (Czarniawska-Joerges 2007).

Despite the emphasis on observation, speech and text are a vital part of many practices, and the discursive components of practices need to be captured as well. Gherardi (2012) presents an interesting research technique to elicit ‘talk in and about practice’: the ‘interview with the double’. In this, the participant is asked to imagine the researcher as his or her double, going to the participant’s place of work in the morning. The participant is asked to explain to the researcher exactly what they should do so that no one discovers the switch. This technique prompts the researcher and interviewee to pay close attention to the seemingly irrelevant minutiae of everyday work life, including relationships and feelings associated with certain activities.

The practice concern with materiality and human embodiment means that the positioning and use of bodies and things within practices becomes vitally important. In contrast to other qualitative approaches that consider material objects from a more static perspective as ‘frozen’ cultural artifacts, a practice-based inquiry interrogates how things sustain, or to paraphrase Schatzki (2006, 1865) “causally support” practices, and how they mobilize other actors to take part in these practices (Kaplan 2011). It thereby accords objects a central and active role in constituting practices. In sales research, these ‘things’ could include power point presentations, tenders, sales collateral, people’s body language and how salespeople use distance and proximity during client encounters. A visual capture and analysis of practice arrangements can be very

helpful in this regard (Clark and Pinch 1995). We may note in passing that our consumer research colleagues have long made use of videographies to capture consumption practices, to the extent that their main conference series, the Association of Consumer Research conferences, includes a ‘film fest’. Sales researchers may be inspired by this approach.

Practice researchers are also encouraged to give consideration to how specific practices are anchored in certain locations or made mobile (Latour 1999). A key task for the researcher, then, is to ‘follow the practice’ as it turns up in multiple contexts (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005). Nicolini (2009) points out that such multi-sited ethnographies require constant ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’, where zooming in allows the researcher to focus on the details and local conditions that produce specific practices, and zooming out allows a broader comparison of practices across sites. This also allows the researcher to move between levels of analysis when he or she has identified a sales practice by moving ‘up’ to study how organizational contexts frame or enable the practice and by moving ‘down’ to exploring how an individual fills out that practice in specific situations.

When it comes to analyzing the empirical data collected, the emphasis is on developing insightful ways of thinking and talking about the phenomena under investigation, for both practitioner and academic audiences. The practice researcher will need to get close to their data and be sensitive to recurring patterns of activities as well as individual deviations from these patterns. To do this it can be helpful to search for the ‘building blocks’ of practice such as those discussed in the previous section (competences, meanings, materials, and changes over time) in order to build a picture of the anatomy or texture of the practice in question. Analyzing data for these building blocks should follow a grounded, first-level exploration of the data; using the building blocks as theoretical or higher-level codes can move the analysis from a descriptive

mode into an analytical mode, which will then allow grounded theorizing to take place. As a final layer of analysis, asking the question of the moral accountability of the practice, or ‘What is it that doing the practice does?’ (Gherardi 2009), should allow the transformative potential of practice research to be unleashed.

Theoretical contributions need to strike a careful balance between situational specificity and broader analytical generalization. As a practice-based epistemology emphasizes the embodied, practical and situated nature of knowledge, analytical generalizations are closely tied to contextualized narratives that evoke social phenomena in their full complexity. Moreover, it is important to point out that, unlike its positivistic counterparts, a practice approach makes no claims that the rigorous application of a systematic research method will ensure the production of objective knowledge. Rigor is not produced by one’s adherence to fully specified, systematic method, but by the skilled and mindful situated enactment of complex, but necessarily underspecified, research practices.<sup>3</sup>

Research outcomes are typically judged on the basis of the value of the insights generated both for the researcher’s academic and practitioner audiences. The fundamental epistemological differences between a practice theoretical approach and conventional positivism means that, in effect, practice researchers attempt to produce different kinds of knowledge claims. The emphasis shifts from the production of statistical generalizations to the development of situated insights that can illuminate people’s lifeworlds by offering new ways of framing (that is thinking about, talking about, and responding to) important issues. This emphasis on the specific complexities of local contexts means that so-called member checks - where researchers present

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<sup>3</sup> See Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) for a fuller development of this argument about the relationship between human expertise and method. See also Klein and Myers (1999) for a helpful set of canons of good research practice for interpretive work.

their emerging analytical models to respondents - are an important tool for validation of the research output. This mechanism is even more important if the researcher pursues a transformative agenda, attempting to help practitioners to better understand, critically reflect upon and improve their own practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Flyvbjerg 2001).

### **Sales-as-practice: A research agenda**

In this section, we build an initial research agenda for sales-as-practice by highlighting some research needs that this approach is particularly suited to addressing. We will do so by developing Shove, Pantzar and Watson's (2012) aforementioned definition of practices as linkages between competences, meanings and materials, made and unmade over time, into a broader perspective of sales-as-practice research that will guide us through the remainder of this section. Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual model.

===Insert Figure 1 here=====

### ***Doing***

At the most fundamental level, a practice approach invites the researcher to focus upon the details of everyday activities (Reckwitz 2002). A very simple question to ask in this context is: What do salespeople or sales managers actually *do*, and how does what they do become socially recognized as meaningful activity? In this vein, Darr (2006) examines how sales personnel uses gifting practices to solidify social ties and to create social obligations. Darr and Pinch (2013) study how market stall sellers use finely tuned selling practices such as 'nailing' the client by having them handling the object for sale. Harrison and Kjellberg (2010) explore the on-the-ground segmentation activities of marketing and sales managers in a biosensor company. These studies provide a glimpse of how closely attending to professionals' patterns of activity can

enhance our understanding of how sales and marketing frameworks such as the ‘seven steps of selling’ are enacted in practice. Such nuanced insights into the ‘how’ of sales become particularly important when new sales practices such as ‘value-based selling’ (Terho et al. 2012), ‘social selling’ (Giamanco and Gregoire 2012) or ‘challenger selling’ (Dixon and Adamson 2011) emerge.

### ***Relating***

A practice sensitivity has the potential to add significantly to our knowledge of the social meanings and acceptability of sales practices. While the notion of ‘community of practice’ has found some take-up in sales research to study how tacit knowledge is acquired (e.g. Geiger and Turley 2005), from a practice perspective it may be more interesting to study how specific kinds of communities are established around sales practices (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni 2010), and how these communities in turn interact to define and safeguard what is considered legitimate or justifiable conduct. Over time, participation in social practices creates a context in which relations among people but importantly also meanings and power configurations stabilize. In consumer research, Schau, Muñiz and Arnould’s (2009) study demonstrates how what we can term a community is to a large extent constituted by the acceptance of certain practices as ‘the way of doing things’ and the enacted meanings, values and power relations that go with them. Engaging in a practice thus represents a mode of relating to and ordering the social and material world (Gherardi 2009). Following their lead, we would encourage sales researchers to study how sales communities are constituted and become stable through the manner in which their members engage in and endorse certain practices, which is likely to become increasingly relevant with a higher preponderance of self-organizing teams in many sales contexts.

## ***Being***

Vachhani (2006) observes just how much salespeople are typically invested in their sales work at a personal level. In this context, salespeople's ways of being or presenting themselves need a great deal of research attention. Isolated extant studies with such a focus exist, such as Goodwin, Mayo and Hill's (1997) exploration of how salespeople renegotiate their sales identities after the loss of a major account, which they compare to other negative life events like a job loss or marriage breakup. In a services marketing context, Echeverri and Skålen (2011) have recently shown how a change in the sales or customer service practices in which an individual engages has the potential to alter that salesperson's (and their customers') sense of self, sometimes in profound ways. By considering a person's subjectivity and emotions in a socio-material context, the practice approach departs significantly from traditional psychological conceptions of identity or emotion as originating 'within' an individual's psyche.

Within this realm, the emotions of 'the everyday' (Fineman 2008) are particularly poorly understood in the sales arena. As an example, Boedker and Chua (2013) have recently discussed how accountancy targets play on and exploit employees' passions and emotions. A fruitful and very simple question to ask from this perspective in a practice-based inquiry is: How does it feel to be this (sales)person? How does it feel being a salesperson when engaged in different kinds of sales practices, for instance in 'transactional' or 'relational' or 'consultative' or 'challenger' selling, and how in turn are customers' subjectivities produced through their participation in these sales practices? Positing that emotions and identity are produced through social action, practice theory offers an important entry into a more holistic understanding of the personal investments involved in being a salesperson, an area that has been all but ignored in sales research.

## *Configuring*

To fully utilize the potential that practice theory offers to sales researchers, we would strongly encourage future practice research to focus on the material objects that are employed in a sales setting, as this focus is lacking from most research designs currently in use in the sales research arena (Darr and Pinch 2013). Salespeople are structured or ‘configured’ not only by their relationship with others, for instance their fellow salespeople, their managers or their customers (intersubjective relations), but also by material objects (interobjective relations). Practice researchers are above all interested in those material objects without which a salesperson would not be a salesperson or would not be able to ‘do’ sales, to paraphrase Kaplan (2011) who studied how the use of PowerPoint constituted strategy practices and practitioners. From a practice perspective, these objects cannot be simply reduced to their symbolic content and be treated as mere objects of human interpretation. Rather, objects actively shape our practices (and, hence, our subjectivities). In the case of PowerPoint, for instance, Yates and Orlikowski (2007) illustrate that this is no innocent medium of communication, but instead is implicated in reconfiguring communication practices and associated ways of thinking/doing.

We can mention the increasing importance of smartphone and computer key performance dashboards in the sales setting, which have now become important objects of the practice of sales (performance) management and dramatically changed salespeople’s behaviors as well as their relationships to their customers and managers (Boujena, Johnston and Merunka 2009; da Cunha 2006). Likewise, proof of value calculations and value case studies have become important material elements shaping how salespeople relate to their customers (Terho et al. 2012). Even



seemingly innocuous objects such as the Salesperson of the Month' poster on the wall can play a vital role in enacting status, power relations and group membership in the sales organization. And at the most fundamental level, sales work still revolves around an object to be sold, negotiated over, discussed, shaped and transferred in ownership from seller to buyer (Darr and Pinch 2013). How such objects become part of a sales practice, how individuals interact through these objects, and how these objects shape the interaction represents a remarkably under-researched area of exploration.

### *Change*

Finally, one important contribution of a practice approach overarching the dimensions noted above lies in its capacity to account for reproduction and innovation at a social and individual level (Warde 2005). Practices are often likened with habits or routines, pointing to the fact that they have a considerable degree of inertia. At the same time this inertia is not a given – as Warde (2005, 141) puts it, “practices also contain the seeds of constant change”. Historical accounts in the sales domain are rare, but can be very valuable in understanding the dynamics and tensions of reproduction and innovation in sales practices – that is, when and why they stay the same, and when and why they change, and how this reverberates across being, doing, relating and configuring. Kjellberg (2007) for instance traces the advent of self-service arrangements in supermarkets and the ‘death of the (retail) salesman’ in postwar Sweden, which led to a substantial renegotiation of both the practices involved in retail buying and selling and of the buyers’ and sellers’ identities. Tracing continuity and change in sales practices over time may be of particular interest to any sales researcher currently examining the shifting landscape of sales practice, for instance how social media are presently transforming the traditional salesperson-customer relationship (Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp 2012).

While we have suggested these particular focus areas for research adopting a practice approach, it is crucial to understand that the major advantage of a practice approach over other research approaches lies in considering these areas simultaneously. This distinguishing feature of practice research may also allow sales researchers to shed a new light onto areas where research findings hitherto have been inconclusive. One such area, for instance, is the issue of sales technology. Research findings to date have been mixed in terms of relating sales technology usage to performance (Geiger and Turley 2006; Homburg, Wieseke and Kuehnl 2010; Jelinek 2013). Possible explanations for these findings may be that salespeople have incorporated technology into the wrong sales practices or that research has not looked at the issues at play comprehensively and in particular failed to link technology usage with deeper issues of accountability and power relations (Jelinek 2013). A practice theory is ideally suited to allow for a more encompassing exploration of the various interrelated issues at work in this context.

We could envisage, by way of example, that the introduction of a new computer dashboard at a particular site (*configuring*) will influence greatly what exactly salespeople actually do (*doing*). Its introduction may not just change the way salespeople engage with their managers, but also how salespeople and customers interact; for instance, how much time the salesperson can afford for pleasantries or social talk, or how sales team members engage with one another (*relating*). The object will also influence how salespeople engage with and feel about their work, such as their sense of elation or failure at the sight of their progress against daily goals when opening up their laptop in the mornings. Ultimately, it is likely that such a material change may provoke a reformulation of the salesperson's entire sense of self (*being*) as well as provoking a renegotiation of entire organizational and management practices, or what is considered proper conduct (*change*). As Figure 1 illustrates, the very strength of practice theory

is that it draws researchers' attention simultaneously to actors' situated engagements with each other and with their material environments as well as their emotional and social existence in a holistic manner.

### **Costs and benefits of a sales-as-practice approach**

As outlined in the last section, a commitment to a sales-as-practice sensitivity holds many conceptual, methodological and educational promises for sales researchers who wish to extend existing knowledge in the sales domain in certain areas. From a conceptual perspective, a practice approach allows us to capture sales work in its “meaningful, unfolding totality” (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2012, 341). A practice approach adds to existing ethnographic or interpretive methods in a number of important ways: 1) as practices travel through time and space, practice-based research is finely attuned to capturing change; 2) it explicitly takes into account the materials and things that help constitute practice; 3) practice based research is able to focus on the value and power dimension more than traditional ethnographic research does; it therefore has an explicitly transformative potential.

From an educational perspective, analyzing and understanding practices allows us to significantly extend our engagement with sales practitioners. As Gherardi (2012, 5) points out: “Practices are as opaque to researchers as they are to practitioners but precisely for this reason their description and reflection on practice is a potential means to empower practitioners”. In other words, by capturing what sales professionals, managers and customers do, and by presenting ‘the logic of practice’ (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2012) back to them, practice

approaches allow practitioners to critically reflect on, understand and **transform** their practice in very concrete and realistic ways.

Despite these advantages, it needs to be noted that the practice approach also carries substantial limitations, risks and non-negligible costs that researchers need to carefully consider before adopting this approach. In common with other interpretivist approaches, practice-based studies are lengthy in nature, demand the personal involvement of the researcher, require substantial access to one or several research sites, and depend on the close cooperation of research participants. **More specifically, practice theory challenges researchers to translate the analytical affordance of an ontological lens into concrete methodological strategies, with little guidance from the existing body of work. Material objects and visual data in particular can be difficult to analyze in terms of how they shape the practices they are involved in. For the sales researcher, an additional challenge is that, unlike many other interpretive approaches such as Grounded Theory, the practice approach is virtually new to our arena, reviewers may be unfamiliar with it, and a canon of ‘good practice’ has not yet been established.** Finally, researchers run the risk that by trying to attend to the many dimensions and building blocks listed above simultaneously, they may lose depth in each of them, or alternatively that they remain at the level of merely describing what salespeople ‘do’. **In that case, practice research becomes simply another process-based methodology and loses much of its explanatory power of human action as performative.**

To summarize this brief introduction into a sales-as-practice sensitivity, practices are fundamental to the production of social reality (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). They are also fundamental to what it means to ‘be’ a salesperson, to ‘do’ sales or to ‘manage’ it. Practice theory opens up unique opportunities to study how sales work is jointly produced between a

variety of actors and objects in a rich, contextual, recursive and interactive tapestry of sociomaterial practices. We encourage sales researchers to experiment with this approach in order to extend and enrich our grasp of the complex world of sales work.

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Figure 1: Focus areas of a sales-as-practice approach

