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Zofia Patora-Wysocka

University of Social Science, Faculty of Management
Zpatora-wysocka@spoleczna.pl

THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF SPONTANEOUS ACTIONS: INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE TURN IN MANAGEMENT¹

Abstract: The aim of the article is to explore the twofold nature of spontaneous actions in management. The thesis posits that spontaneity is an important category initiating changes in an enterprise in the course of reproduced practices. Research methods included an in-depth interview and non-participatory observations.

The issue of spontaneity can be perceived through the aspect of daily routines as well as from the opportunistic perspective. Business practices constitute some institutional schemas that are recreated on a daily basis. The kind of institution determines the way entrepreneurs cope with the shifting logics of everyday business life. Therefore they recreate practices spontaneously and not in a discursive manner. On the other hand spontaneous actions may imply grasping opportunities. This is particularly important when an organisation operates in a turbulent market.

The findings confirm the dual character of spontaneous activities in the everyday practice of enterprises. Unplanned processes may integrate and strengthen routines that are very important elements of “emerging” perpetuation in an enterprise. They are stimuli to innovation and the adoption of new practices. This processual perspective referring to management practices offers a new framework for an analysis of change and entrepreneurial practice in management.

Keywords: spontaneous actions, routines, Practice Turn, processual approach, institutionalisation.

JEL codes: L20, L21, L26.

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Introduction

Practice turn in management brings a new cognitive insight into organisational change problems. In a very broad sense the processual stream of thought is aimed at unbundling the concept of change in terms of the past-present-future dimension. This kind of view puts forward the notion of experience and organisational learning that captures human daily activities. The practice approach to management and organisations sees them as emergent categories caught in the flow of daily actions. The organisational world is in continuous motion, where some processes are routine and some of them are unplanned. It is presumed that “change is experienced by practitioners as an unfolding process [...]. If we are to understand how change is actually accomplished [Eccles, Nohria, and Berkley 1992], change must be approached from within [...] as a performance enacted in time” [Tsoukas and Chia 2002, p. 572]. The practice research is thus aimed at observing the every-day coping with managerial problems and even completing the daily performance by workers and managers. This is usually related to the adoption of an ethnographic research strategy.

Organisational change may be foreseeable or spontaneous: “our immersion in the continuous flow of spontaneously responsive and expressive, bodily activity in the cultural life-world of our community is essential [...] to our acting and making sense of things in ways that those around us find intelligible and are prepared to treat as legitimate” [Shotter and Tsoukas 2011]. What is at stake in this proposition is not only a claim for the appraisal of spontaneity but also an interpretative approach to organisational change. It also poses the question of the nature of spontaneous organisational changes: they are continuous and preserve some past schemes whilst at the same time being fast and responsive.

The emergence of novelty in organisations may be based on improvisational processes [Garud et al. 2015]. R.K. Sawyer [2015] illuminates this problem by contrasting ritualized and improvised behaviours. D. Yarrow [2015] theorises this issue within the framework of the reflective-practice approach. The aim of this article is to address the problem of the duality of spontaneous action in everyday managerial praxis. The thesis of this article states that spontaneity is an important factor in initiating change in an enterprise.

The article consists of two parts: theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part draws on the processual current in management science and explores issues related to spontaneous actions. The empirical part is based

on a case study of an enterprise operating in the textile and apparel industry.

1. Processual stream of thought

The processual approach in management stems from the interest of ‘practice’ within social theory. In management science it is referred to as a practice-based approach, practice lens, the process theory of organisation² [Jarzabkowski 2005; Hernes 2014]. Practice theories are attributed to the unbundling of such notions as routines, activities and performance in terms of reproducing social structures and processes. Schatzki, Cetina, and Savigny [2005] imply a basic meaning of practice as the very category that composes the gaining of knowledge, human activities, power, language, and institutions [Schatzki, Cetina, and Savigny 2005, p. 2]. Practice has a great potential to allow the understanding of persistence, transformation and erosion of organisations, institutions, policies and processes. Recurrent practices thus reflect socially recognizable patterns of behaviour and response to new social arrangements. They are also carriers and components of these changing circumstances as far as there is clear duality of social structure and practice [Giddens 1984]. The practice-based approach in management makes use of the structuration theory of A. Giddens to a large extent [1984], who noted that social structures and practices are recursively linked: they shape human practices and these practices create and reproduce social systems. Routines play an important role in the Giddensian view of social change. There is a continuous flow of human activities that constitute rules, meanings and artefacts. Giddens emphasises, however, that these forces are neither conscious and voluntarily purposive, nor determined by institutionalised structures [Shove, Pantazar, and Watson 2012, p. 3]. There are some structural categories instead, like rules and resources, that can be harnessed and (re)configured to constitute social life on a daily basis. In this sense, A. Reckwitz [2002, p. 256] introduces the concept of *homo practicus* that, as opposed to *homo oeconomicus* (semi-rational decision-maker) and *homo sociologicus* (rule-follower), offers a new feature in management science, being “a carrier of practices, a body/mind who ‘carries’, but also ‘carries out’ practices”. In as far as organisa-

² Note. A different understanding of the process theory in management is possible, referring to the TQM concept, Business Process Improvement, etc., and failing to distinguish it may lead to a misunderstanding in a literature review.

tions are a kind of social structure, structuration theory can be adapted to the observation of organisational change phenomena. The practice-based orientation is thus a “radical departure from traditional ways of understanding [...] organisations”. This is a theoretical view that can break old schemas of thought and bring a new point of departure [Nicolini 2012, p. 6; Schatzki 2002]. Nicolini postulates a few features of the new orientation:

1. The fundamental units of analysis are practices (also: routines, micro-activities, ‘mundane matters’ of everyday organisational life). The main objects of research attempts are entrepreneurial activities, not entrepreneurs themselves. Here, it comes like a ‘Copernican revolution’ [Nicolini 2012, p. 7].
2. Practice Turn in management is not limited to descriptive methods that just put simply what people do on a daily-basis. It aims to observe change phenomena in terms of ‘meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing’ [Nicolini 2012, p. 7]. Its main objective is the explanation of processes of creation and consolidation of the schemas of action which initiate change in an organisation. In a turbulent market environment it may be of crucial significance to management science.
3. Practice Turn may cut the Gordian knot within the traditional approach to managerial problems as it sees them as stemming from *practices* recreated by *practitioners* located in an organisational context and not from the point of view of their independent decisions.
4. There is discourse and sense-making in the everyday managerial flow of activities. This brings us closer to the interpretative frames of understanding typical of Weick [1979] and Sułkowski [2012].
5. The practice view in management is also rooted in institutional theories. There is a constant flow of organisational structures and institutions. When it comes to new institutionalism there are such assumptions as institutionalisation or deinstitutionalisation that can be traced within the frames of changing practices [Nicolini 2012; Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009].
6. Practice Turn in management postulates that we stop perceiving social phenomena in terms of the superiority of macro-structures over micro-structures [Knights 1997, pp. 7–8]. It associates the problem of organisational change with bundles of interpenetrating activities as well as institutions that they temporarily impose. There is an exchange of practices and routines.
7. Summing up, the process theory in management can make an important contribution to the understanding of organisational problems, the

notion of change in management as well as organisational actors and the way in which they cumulate and make use of knowledge and resources. Routines, artefacts, institutions, and other phenomena that may appear constant are in fact 'on the move'. However an attempt to observe that flow from the perspective of daily micro-activities and routines may not bring 'spectacular' effects in tracing radical change. Organisational changes are rather 'becoming' [Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Hernes 2014, pp. 39–72]. So there is great cognitive pressure to observe managerial reality from the daily-routine level of analysis.

2. The dual nature of spontaneity

The concept of spontaneous change in management has not been sufficiently explored. The issue is partially addressed by Tsoukas and Chia [2002] and Shotter and Tsoukas [2011]. These authors, however, do not deal with the structure of spontaneous change but the context in which it takes place as well as the cognitive value of an analysis of emergent changes. Tsoukas and Chia suggest that "what really exists is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them" [Tsoukas and Chia 2002]. The way the decomposing took place is dependent upon the tendency to rely on reproduced schemas of action. The process of recreating daily processes in an enterprise may be spontaneous in two distinct modes of acting. First of all, it may be a processual manifestation of tacit knowledge [Polanyi 1958] that is located in past experience and routines. Secondly, it may be akin to actions "performed without external influence or stimuli; extemporaneous, impromptu, spur-of-the-moment" [Tokarski 1980]. Thus, this very kind of spontaneity initiates change, sometimes radical and introduced contrary to the ordinary way of taking decisions and completing tasks in an enterprise.

Tsoukas is drawing on the Wittgensteinian stream of thought. He uses the concept of the inherited background [Tsoukas 2010, p. 51] that is very much similar to the concept of performative routines by Feldman and Pentland [2003] and technology-in-use by Orlikowski [2000]. Organisational routines are not "orchestrated from the top" [Tsoukas and Chia 2002, p. 567]. They are "grounded in the ongoing practices of organisational actors and out of their accommodations to and experiments with the everyday contingencies, breakdowns, exceptions, opportunities, and unintended

consequences they encounter” [Orlikowski 1996, p. 65]. From the cognitive psychology perspective it may seem that routines, when derived from explicit knowledge, are performed automatically [Beck 1976]. Nevertheless they may be changed if done reflexively. Lazaric uses an analogy with the cognitive approach in order to unbundle the mechanisms of routine change. The acquisition of procedural knowledge together with the ability to apply it and of declarative knowledge always entails a certain cognitive effort, thinking, and processing information in an intentional and conscious way [Lazaric 2010, pp. 205–227]. This is why one should distinguish between a tendency to automatically reproduce repetitive actions and the ability to introduce deliberate changes in the way they are performed. Thus it can be assumed that routines are processual categories that can be modified in-use. Then if these modifications are unplanned to a relatively negligible extent and are hard to control they may be understood as reproduction of practice (Figure 1). Spontaneity is thus based on automatic and, at the same time, reflexive reproduction of daily activities. Practices are collective categories that shape organisational processual schemas. Shared understanding [Schau, Muñiz Jr., and Arnould 2009, p. 31] is thus an additional aspect of changeability of daily routines. Interactions and participation as well as ties of relationships determine what is and what is not purposive within the daily organisational activity. Practice is based on rou-

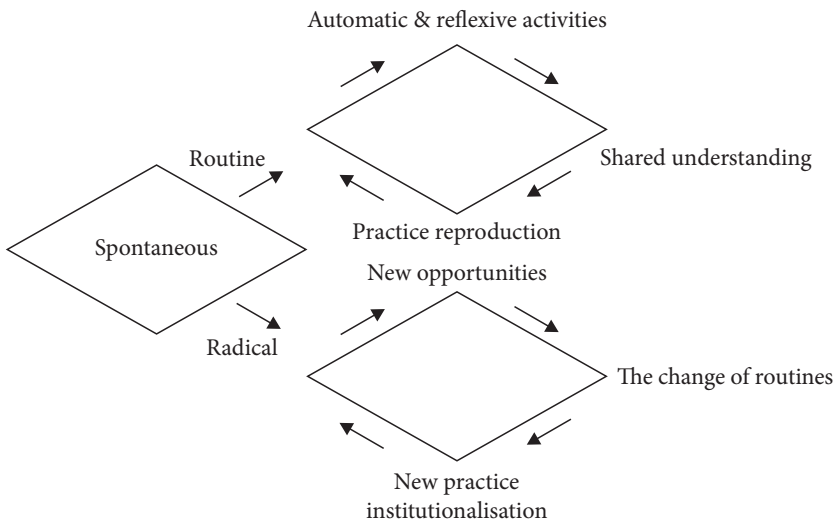


Figure 1. A schema of spontaneous actions' duality

Source: Author's own

tines which comprise repetitiveness and adaptation to norms, rules and resources [Giddens 1984]. The emergence of everyday practice may be linked to product alterations and modifications but it turns out to be bound by procedures and explicit control mechanisms.

However, spontaneity cannot be reduced to reproduction of everyday practice. It manifests itself in the process of initiating radical changes. R.K. Sawyer [2015] refers to emergent improvised performances which occur “every day in all human organisations, even those that are highly structured and designed” [Sawyer 2015, p. 200]. Informal organisations, informal relationships and social networks are important determinants of achieving or impeding the achievement of business goals. However these complex relational structures are hard or even impossible to control, and according to R.K. Sawyer [2015], studying the links between improvisational activities provides a cognitive insight into the integration of formal and informal organisational structures. Creative and innovative organisations are to a certain extent built on spontaneity and improvisation. The very concept of change is a vivid issue in the neo-institutional approach within the organisation theory. W.R. Scott [2008] argues that institutionalism is nowadays more about the change than enduring processes. Thus institutionalisation is the process of “the emergence of orderly, stable, socially integrating patterns out of unstable, loosely organised, or narrowly technical activities” [Selznik 1996, p. 271; Patora-Wysocka 2014]. Institutions gain processual characteristics. However this is still a process of developing relatively solid social categories closely associated with the notion of human actions. “Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” [Scott 2008, p. 48, see Patora-Wysocka 2014]. It may be presumed that there are institutionalisation processes in the realm of spontaneous changes within the everyday practice reproduced (Figure 1). New practice emerges as part of the unplanned process of relatively radical change.

R.K. Sawyer [2015] puts forward four properties of organisations that are of higher-level emergent character:

- 1) relatively large resources of individuals and sub-systems that interact in related networks;
- 2) diffusion of organisational and managerial functions through various levels of the structure;
- 3) difficulty breaking down an organisation into clearly defined sub-systems;

4) inner organisational interactions are based on complex communication tools and language [Sawyer 2015, p. 201].

Loosely structured business organisations are more open to innovation and they are impetuously yet purposively reactive to new opportunities. The ability to grow in the realm of a turbulent environment depends on the adjustment of an organisation to the pace of market change. Observing organisational changes from the point of view of spontaneous actions encourages a new insight into managerial problems.

3. Methodology and sample selection

The article presents the results of a comparative case study. The study was conducted based on the case study method and non-participatory observations. The case study is perceived as purposeful in the realm of practice-based orientation in management [Gherardi 2012]. Thus the processual approach may be deemed congruent with the interpretative paradigm that draws on the methodology of qualitative research [Sułkowski, 2012]. It may seem that the study of practices and routines aimed only at their description would be limited to quantitative enumerating. However any attempt to observe the change of practices and routines “from the outside” [Gherardi 2012] requires an approach explaining “how, in what way, and why?”, and answers to such questions can be obtained as a result of a case study analysis. Textile and apparel enterprises were selected for the study. The sample selection was purposive and its aim was to compare cases characterised by different business models. It was done based on the researcher’s knowledge of the specific nature of local companies operating in this field, acquired thanks to formal and informal relationships with people connected with the fashion industry.

The study included three semi-structured interviews supplemented with the observation of work in a tights’ factory and a fashion shop. Documents and online sources such as sample books, catalogues, online shops, press releases, promotional videos and interviews available on youtube.com were analysed. Interview parameters covered the same issues, including the characteristic and context of the foundation of companies, the process of product development in a seasonal cycle, the way opportunities are seized and marketing activities (as far as they are key areas in the fashion business). The interviews were recorded and supplemented with notes. Those interviewed were a company owner, its manager and the chief engineer in the case of Alfa, and a co-owner in the case of the Beta company.

4. Reproduction of practice vs. new practice emergence

As a result of the study it was possible to show key categories of differentiating spontaneous actions. In the case of routine spontaneous actions there were: automatic and reflexive activities; shared understanding; practice reproduction. In the case of radical spontaneous actions there were: new opportunities; the change of routines; new practice institutionalisation (Table 1, Table 2). As shown in Figure 1, this is comparable with the preliminary model shown in Figure 1.

Alfa is a company that has been active in the tights' market for a long time. The company was set up in the 1980s when the market was different and not so varied as it is today. It has deliberately renewed its brand using a new communication-based marketing model. This resulted in the refreshment of the company's image on the market. Some of Alfa's marketing campaigns are very similar to the controversial Benetton commercials. The Beta company is a young, highly-renowned fashion brand in the market which does not rely on in-house production, however, it controls the product development process and designs its collections. The company was started in Łódź but it operates all over Poland and has made early attempts at internationalisation. Its brand identity is based on Polish design of the 1960s and the 1980s. Formally the company has been operating since 2009, however, the brand concept had been conceived earlier. The leading product of the brand is a T-shirt with a characteristic imprint. Its target group includes inhabitants of large cities aged 18–34. Both companies are vulnerable to fashion trends and market changes [Patora-Wysocka 2015a].

The product development process is grounded in the reproduction of practice that is reflexively recreated by knowledgeable humans. There are small technological changes introduced but they are related to the way technology is used and not to the fundamental issues connected with the way the final product is manufactured. Routines emerge in the course of daily activities and this is a factor allowing organisations to survive and develop. In the process of practice reproduction, shared understanding of organisational values, purposes and identity is of crucial significance. This understanding is not imposed from the top or the bottom but diffuses through the structure. Interactions between experienced workers set business aims more clearly and more vividly. There are some experiments, improvements and exceptions, however, they are customised in a routine way by mechanic in order to produce the required quantity. Spontaneity is thus

Table 1. Key categories of routine spontaneous actions taken from the Alfa company

Key categories	Respondent's opinion
Automatic and reflexive activities (orders filled by the company are very changeable, which can concern patterns, texture, composition and each time this entails the necessity to reflexively reproduce actions by the chief engineer and the knitter staff. In this case change was related to the tights' design – the manufacturing of an untypical design, cut. However the product development process remains unchanged: the use of the product is routinely verified and it is presented in a routine way).	"[...] the chief engineer needs to tell me, well, he needs to tell me... and then, you know, there are tests using different materials... and we check it out, right? We check the characteristics of tights because it's not that we only get it from the dyeworks and that's it. No". "And I'll give you a nice example now, because we do the so-called perforated tights and we have to mull over it a lot. This is the question of stitching. The big toe has to be separated from the other toes. They have to be, I mean the strip that stays on toes can't be too wide because this has to look good in shoes. This has to look good, for example, when you take the shoe off. And now the photographer... And we've produced these tights. And now the photographer is to send us some sample photos: with a bare foot and a foot with a shoe on".
Shared understanding (emergent routines diffuse through to the crew. Cooperation and understanding of purpose are overarching throughout the organisational structure. Moreover in unexpected situations, the company's staff swing into action in order to fill an order).	"A: Step by step: when an order is placed, it is sent to the production, right? Zp-W: To the chief engineer and the production manager. A: That's right. And they need to make some decisions. I'm not talking about classics that are standard, but they have to say whether we're able to produce it, right? Then samples are worked on, and if the product is completely new, this should also be reflected by the delivery date. They manufacture these tights, and then the products go through all stages." "So nearly all of us here... Engineers worked on the machines together with knitters and they reconfigured the machines... Reconfiguration means putting a diskette into the machine, and there is a programme to be set, parameters, so it doesn't take a few moments to reconfigure virtually the whole production [...]. That's what the whole operation looked like".
Practice reproduction (daily routines within the product development process are crucial for the reproduction of practice. The cycle is two-weeks long and it is compatible with fashion market trends. Quantity is the company's priority – big orders make it possible to maintain business operations on a daily basis.	"If, for example, a customer comes today [...] calls us and says he would like to place an order for such and such tights, then we say: you know, if we have them in stock... there are certain models that are constantly available to customers who buy two, three pairs, right? [...] [In the case of a new product:] Let's assume... it all takes two weeks from threading the needle to the end of the process. So we say: you know, we can manufacture this series in two weeks. That's what it looks like [...]. Our priority is the customer who orders a lot, and not the one who picks two pairs at a time, right?"

Source: Author's own.

of an automatic and, at the same time, reflexive character. Daily practices are then categories that give rise to processual schemas.

Table 2. Key categories of radical spontaneous actions taken from Beta company

Key categories	Respondent's opinion
New opportunities (based on the creation of a new situational context, voluntary arrangement and new circumstances that are very different from previous experience, opportunism – using Internet, fairs. Specific foreign markets are still unknown).	“ZP-W: And what gave you the idea that this could also include abroad? B: You know, this is only a kind of a plan, it's not that, that [...] it's only a plan, for, let's say, the next two years. ZP-W: But you already have some contacts that will make it easier or some kind of a situational context? B: No, no, we don't. In fact, we do everything on our own, you know, we try [...]. ZP-W: And what are the potential foreign markets? B: Well, I don't know yet, we'll see how it goes... ZP-W: Over the Internet? B: Yes, yes, yes, but perhaps there will be some distribution... ZP-W: Physical. B: Yes. Definitely some physical distribution. ZP-W: And what about this Bread and Butter fair? B: Well, Bread and Butter, Bright, fairs of this kind”.
The change of routines (the main product is reoriented and redesigned. There is readiness to resign from the consolidated methods of communication based on the Polish language and to look for new graphical elements that could become recognisable abroad).	“At the moment we need to produce more versatile things but everything can be done, for example, we now have those tank tops, a kind of T-shirt with soup vegetables or cucumbers which don't include any signs in Polish”.
New practice institutionalisation (the company has been operating for a relatively short period in a very dynamic industry, so it's impossible to indicate any events that initiated the internationalisation process. The company changes as fast as the market).	“We don't write any business plans, we don't perform any, you know, analyses, we just follow our nose. [...] You know, this is only a kind of a plan. It's not that we... This is a plan for, let's say, the next two years”.

Source: Author's own and [Patora-Wysocka 2015b].

The Beta company is an enterprise relying on a strongly defined brand identity. The very identity leaves product development aside – its crucial characteristic is playing with language. In this context the internationalisation process turns out to be a radical as well as spontaneous activity that changes the previous way of reproducing practice. There is the emergence of improvised performances that are co-created by the owners of the enterprise. However opportunism is strong when the owner seeks new ways of exploring foreign markets (e.g. Bread and Butter fair). A loosely and horizontally-structured enterprise gets involved in new ways of designing. Products are reoriented and so the mundane routines have to be changed. Readiness to withdraw from the fundamental aspect upon which the brand has been built in Poland entails the necessity to change routines. Spontaneous actions are unplanned; no one even knows which markets will be covered by internationalisation. According to the entrepreneur, social networks will form an important part towards building a new organisational structure abroad. The owner of the enterprise says that they “could use some physical distribution”. The context of the interview indicates that people and their involvement are key elements of practice institutionalisation and reproduction. Spontaneous and improvised activities radically change the organisation and the way it recreates its daily processes.

Conclusions

The process of reproducing daily activities in an enterprise is of cognitive importance in management. Its analysis comes down to understanding organisational change: institutionalisation, perpetuation, and the disappearance of processes. It seems that spontaneous activities generate creativity as well as daily practice reproduction. Thus ongoing practice is a category comprised of knowledge, competences, norms, values, resources and meaning and therefore it should be the subject of more in-depth research. Practice is reflected in daily activities. Some of them may seem to be of negligible importance. However an attempt at unbundling their inner structure may surprisingly result in the conceptualisation of organisational transitions in a turbulent market. Nowadays social change is complex. Observing the fundamentals of organisational processes may impose a discourse on the constituents and the inner aspects of change. The research presented in this article pinpoints the role and dual character of spontaneous activities in the everyday practice of enterprises. Unplanned processes may inte-

grate and strengthen routines that are very important elements of “emerging” perpetuation in an enterprise. They are stimuli to innovation and the adoption of new practice. Summing up, spontaneous actions determine the way entrepreneurs explore new opportunities as well as everyday challenges in the realm of the shifting logics of everyday business life.

This study is an exemplification of the phenomena observed. It is of comparative character but it is limited to a relatively small area of everyday practice. Transformation and perpetuation of an organisation may be analysed on various levels of daily activities. I think that any indication of the directions for further research conducted within the processual current should postulate that the research focuses on the observation of actions, resources and norms. On the one hand, this would be an explicit reference to the structuration theory [Giddens, 1984], whilst on the other this would ensure a holistic and explanatory look at the relationships between recreated practices and the structure of an organisation, its identity and change mechanisms.

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