INTRODUCTION

The relevance of management theories for management practice is a topic of frequent debate in management journals and throughout conferences. Over the last couple of years, some topical contributions have been made by authors such as Bennis and O'Toole (2005), Ghoshal (2005), and Mintzberg (2003) with a common theme concerning the shortcomings of management models and management theories in terms of understanding (and guiding) management practice.

Ghoshal (2005), by claiming that bad management theories destroy what otherwise would have been good practice, is perhaps the most outspoken of these critics. Management theories are, he claims, too scientific and rational. In addition to disregarding the importance of human interaction, they are also based on deductive reasoning, biased assumptions, and partial analysis. All in all, management models are claimed to be (1) irrelevant descriptions of what is really going on in organizations and (2) not a sound and solid foundation on which management action should be based.

Given these flaws, it is obviously a concern if management theories become self-fulfilling, which is highly likely as people use theory to guide practice. If self-fulfilling theories are also used in education, their nature as bad theories becomes even more pronounced (Mintzberg, 2003). Therefore, Ghoshal (2005) advised us to be very careful when proclaiming that we have built theory on the very nature of a management phenomenon.

Similar problems are also apparent in project management. Traditionally, project management as examined by researchers has resulted in a number of bodies of knowledge trying to describe what is generally recognized as good practice. Over the past several years, there have been calls for an alternative approach to good practice. Cicmil and Hodgson (2006, p. 14) argued that the iron triangle, which could be seen as the mainstream of project research, bedevils project management research. Furthermore, Smyth and Morris (2007) built on this when outlining weaknesses in dominant research methodologies frequently used in project management studies. Cicmil (2006, p. 36) asserted that project theory would be served by a qualitative approach with a critical interpretive approach that might "generate alternative understandings of what goes on in project practice and how practitioners participate in and manage complex organizational arrangements." Ivory and Alderman (2005, p. 5) argued that project management theory needs to distance itself from prevalent rationalistic assumptions. In a similar vein, Bresnen, Goussevskaia, and Swan (2005, p. 39) concluded that there is still a lot to understand regarding project organizing and that situated events are
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important to understand organizational change. Bredillet (2005, p. 4) highlighted the need and wish for studies that focus on “what we are and where we are going,” while Cooke-Davies (2004) argued that the underpinning theory of project management practice is never or seldom articulated (see, e.g., Cleland & King, 1983; Turner, 2008, for exceptions).

Following these lines of thought, project management is not only an immature field of research, but many of the normative and traditional contributions are also insubstantial when it comes to understanding what is really occurring in projects (see Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006). At the same time, there are numerous different schools of thought or perspectives of project management. Anbari (1985) suggested five, Söderlund (2002) suggested seven, and Bredillet (2007) (together with Anbari and Turner) suggested nine. Then again, the number of schools of thought is less important than the notion that project management today still has a predominantly rational focus. Söderlund (2004) pointed out that process and real-time case studies and project organization issues are of particular interest. If these issues are to be considered, we need to go beyond project management models, A Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide), project plans, work-breakdown structure (WBS), program evaluation and review technique (PERT), and Gantt schedules (cf. Maylor, 2001) when trying to understand projects. Going deeper with analytical and mostly rational theoretical models of project management will only provide more make-believe statements on project management issues. Even though the critique of project management models is diverse and may lead to different conclusions, it seems to be widely agreed upon that there is no such thing as one unified theory on projects (Sauer & Reich, 2007; Smyth & Morris, 2007; Turner, 2006). However, as history of general management informs us (cf. Cyert & March [1963], a theory of the firm that never became the theory), there never will be one theory because projects are at the most basic level an open-system organization with many contextual dependencies, as well as individual variation (see also Engwall, 2003; Turner & Keegan, 1999).

Consequently, we need to first look at what people do within the context of projects before we can start our quest to understand projects themselves (cf. Geertz, 1973). This is still research about projects. But this is research on what people do in projects (practice) rather than on the confirmation of best practice models for project management. Whereas traditional project research starts with overall models and concepts from which action is derived, we argue for a practice perspective (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001) that begins with individual actions and asks what overall models and concepts result from those actions.

Our aim in this article is to outline elements for project-as-practice research and to discuss major issues that need to be addressed within this approach. It bears pointing out that we are not discounting the present knowledge about projects. Rather, we are suggesting a complementary approach. The article has a multifold contribution. We add to the growing understanding of projects by identifying challenges and patterns that need to be considered by academia. Moreover, we outline a practice perspective for temporary organizations, which have features different from permanent organizations (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). In the following, temporary organizations are primarily referred to as projects.

The Practice Turn in Project Management

Traditionally, a major divider exists between engineering-focused traditional system-based research on the one hand (hard systems theory, optimization theory) and the social science–based, process-oriented tradition of research of project management on the other hand (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998; Engwall, 2003; Söderlund, 2002). The divider is one example of the “battle” between espoused theories (“what should be done”) and theories in use (“what is actually done”) (cf. Argyris, 1976) or between “being” and “becoming” (see discussion in Winter et al., 2006). By traditional project management we refer to structured, mechanistic, top-down, system-model-based approaches to project management that rely on systems design, tools, methods, and procedures. Traditional system research thus strives for best practice, guidelines, and forecasting of relevant behavior for practitioners. Some of its results are transferred into textbooks, guidelines, formalized norms, and expectations, such as the various bodies of knowledge currently on the market (see also Smyth & Morris, 2007). See also Turner and Keegan (2000) for an elaborate discussion on the mechanistic system approach.

The process-oriented approach (cf. Söderlund, 2004) highlights “theories in use.” It focuses primarily on the relationship between past, present, and future when analyzing a project’s processes. Projects within this tradition are seen as a social and organized setting on which numerous conceptual organizational theories and organizational behavior frameworks can be applied and developed. Over time, the process perspective has also come to include processes connecting projects to a wider context, thus emphasizing project contingencies and contextual dependencies (Engwall, 2003).

As the tension between the mechanistic structural top-down and the “past-present-future” perspectives has been quite thoroughly investigated (e.g., Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998; Bresnen et al., 2005; Engwall, 2003; Lindkvist, Söderlund, & Tell, 1998; Morris & Jamieson, 2005; see also the special issue of International Journal of Project Management, 2006, Vol. 24, Issue 8, on rethinking project management), we will not delve into this any further.
Process studies are mostly concerned go far enough in at least two ways: the point of view, process studies do not method that identified some lessons to Blackwell (2006) study of a case study Sutterfield, Friday-Stroud, and Shivers- and actions. Another example is the Lundin and Söderholm (1995), who example of a project process study is life (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006, p. 10). An projects as social processes, which take into account the complexities of human processes are built is sacrificed. As a consequence, a more fine-grained analysis of the microactivities upon which the processes are built is sacrificed. 2. Following the first point, process studies focus on people in charge, thus sacrificing a bottom-up analysis of what individual actors actually do when they work on projects.

The tendency to generalize, which is inherent in the general version of the process perspective, has consequences on which mechanisms are found and how well grounded and relevant an analysis is. This approach to process studies runs the risk of being caught up in the trap it typically criticizes—namely, to provide general best practice models (see also Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006).

The critical perspective questions common project knowledge and explores more details of human behavior and patterns of behavior (Cicmil, 2006; Hodgson, 2004). The perspective thus comes close to what we claim is significant for the practice approach. The practice approach, however, differs in that the approach is not necessarily critical in the same sense. We observe a development toward studies of projects where both process and traditional hard systems approaches are under scrutiny. One way of doing this, from a critical standpoint, is to explore the microactivities, the real “action” within projects. Following the words of Geertz (1973, p. 6), transferred to our area of research, it is necessary to first look into what project managers do before we can understand what project management is. Geertz’s advice can also be read the other way around: theories built without drawing upon the foundation of actual work of project managers may be irrelevant or, in the worst case, erroneous. Thus, in order to build an understanding that is more strongly underpinned, research has recently taken a more practice-oriented turn where the focus is on the actors and their activities rather than on models and their application. This is not to say that the effort so far is not important. The traditional approach has contributed to the development tools, methods, and generalizations used by practitioners in different industries all over the world. The process-oriented approach has, on the other hand, contributed to a more human element on projects. We therefore modestly claim that the everyday actions of the practitioners make a more significant contribution to the understanding of projects.

The turn toward practice has been observed in various fields of research (see Schatzki et al., 2001, for a comprehensive review on the practice approach in social science) and it has had a great impact on the innovative research in the area of strategy and, more specifically, on the development of strategizing as a core concept for studies on strategic processes (Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2004, 2005; Whittington, 1996, 2002a). A focus on practice is indeed, as Bourdieu (1990) argued “to take seriously the work and the talk of the practitioners themselves.”

Practice-oriented research has its roots in the much broader field of sociology and social sciences, with one notable contribution coming from Bourdieu and his concepts of “habitus” and “social praxeology.” Bourdieu argued that practice generated by habitus follows a “practical logic,” contrasting it to the Levi-Straussian model of “logical logic,” which “reduces action directly to structure” (Lau, 2004, p. 378). Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s (1984) development of habitus, encompassing an individual’s social context, education, experiences, and history, is subject to a double reading. The first reading relates to “the distribution of materials, resources, determinant relations, and the species of capital in a field” (Everett, 2002, p. 70). This first reading says little about agency, which makes the second reading necessary. The second reading tries to come to terms with more tacit properties of human actions—that is, practical activities, mundane knowledge, subjective meaning, and practical competency (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 7–9). According to Everett (2002, p. 70), the two readings are what is referred to as Bourdieu’s “social praxeology.” It is suggested that habitus can be investigated by its structural components—for example, by examining the use of language, which has become quite popular in critical studies of organizing (e.g., Hodgson, 2004).

In regard to projects, Bredillet (2004) expressed his concern when he argued that the praxeology (the study of human action) of projects has been forgotten. Even though some time has passed since the practice research of organizing was introduced as a comprehensive approach, only recently has the discussion been utilized for project management research. An important plea for research to focus on the actuality of projects was published in 2006 (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson, 2006) where theoretical and methodological considerations for a research agenda with an emphasis on the actualities of projects were outlined. In the context of this article, research on actualities and practice share many of the same basic assumptions, arguments, and concerns. We thus build our thoughts on the following in both the
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practice turn in social science and management research, as well as in the recent “rethinking project management” discussions referred to earlier.

Only recently have studies that take a practice perspective at the outset appeared in the field of project management. Examples include the management of deviations in an engineering project (Hällgren & Maaninen-Olsson, 2005; Hällgren & Wilson, 2007); the day-to-day work of a project manager in a software development project (Nilsson, 2008; Nilsson & Söderholm, 2005); the use of tools in project management (Besner & Hobbs, 2006); the roles in temporary organizations (Bechky, 2006); the work of project managers and how they talk and understand what they do (Blackburn, 2002); projects as a tool for rebureaucratization (Hodgson, 2004); and Simon (2006), who studied the “actual work” of the project managers for creative projects.

We have so far distinguished between three main approaches: traditional system, process, and practice (although we recognize that, depending how one counts, there are more approaches to project management [Anbari, 1985; Bredillet, 2007; Söderlund, 2002]). A fourth perspective, the critical approach, has been briefly referred to. However, it operates primarily parallel to the others and is applicable as a critical assessment of research and practice in general, as well as a perspective that guides the way research questions are formulated and researched within process- or practice-oriented research approaches.

Each one of the three approaches—traditional system, process, and practice—has its own prerequisites and theoretical and empirical focus. Our discussion on different approaches is summarized in Table 1.

Having acknowledged the differences of the three perspectives and their relative position, we will continue discussing the practice perspective for project research.

**Project-as-Practice: Praxis, Practitioner, and Practices**

There are three concepts that the approach in practice, as it is known, builds upon. They are:

1. **Praxis**—the situated actions taken;
2. **Practitioner**—the men and women conducting the praxis; and
3. **Practices**—the norms, routines, traditions, and rules guiding the behavior of the practitioner (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Whittington, 2002a).

The *praxis* in our case refers to the actions of a project manager or project worker—what he or she does in a given situation. The praxis of a project manager includes more than just the classic tasks of a project such as budgeting, scheduling, and control. It also includes

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<td>Above all quantitative methods, to enable Erklaren [explaining]</td>
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<td>Andersen (2006); Dvir and Lechler (2004); Pinto and Slevin (1989)</td>
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<td>Intersubjective</td>
<td>Objectivist/subjectivist</td>
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<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td>Fociuses on describing the process and how the process relates to the structure</td>
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<td>Intersubjectively situated</td>
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<td><strong>Practice</strong></td>
<td>Focuses on describing the process through the identification of local situated actions</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>Intersubjectively situated</td>
<td>Subjectivist</td>
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Table 1: Three approaches to project management research.
all the actions of a project manager in relation to the different tasks in the project. The project manager’s actions, or praxis, are believed to depend not only on the situation or context (what Schatzki, 2005, called the Sit) but also on the project manager’s “habitus,” i.e., his or her history, previous experience, education, and even the present and previous family situation (Bourdieu, 1984). Studies of praxis therefore include both what is done by the project manager and how that praxis influences and is influenced by what happens around the practitioner.

The practitioner refers to the person who does the actions (e.g., the project manager). Studies of the practitioners often start with the question of who the project managers are in order to understand why or how they act the way they do (Whittington, 2002b). Not only are the project managers’ actions believed to rely on the habitus of the practitioner, but they also depend on the practices of the organization or industry.

Practices, which are common in all organizations or industries, are the various traditions, norms, and rules or bodies of knowledge that state, explicitly or implicitly, how the practitioner should act in a certain situation. These practices can be written in documents stating best or preferred practice in the company or told in stories exemplifying “how we do things” at the company. Those practices are the rules of action that are largely taken for granted (Jarzabkowski, 2003). Departing from these rules can sometimes be very difficult, as the traditions are often firmly entrenched within an organization. Practitioners’ praxis builds not only on the practices but also on the habitus and information from the specific situation and context that might demand actions other than what is “normal.” There could be different reasons for departing from accepted or traditional practice. In project management, the main goal is to take the project from point (or stage) A to point B, and in order to do so, it is important to follow the project plan. Nevertheless, when the reality does not conform to the plan, it is up to the project manager to improvise (Leybourne, 2006) using his or her habitus—which includes skills, experiences, and education—to make decisions that allow the project to move toward point B. Because every project is unique, the decisions might not be the ones traditionally taken, but they may nevertheless be beneficial for the project. Such nontraditional decisions often evolve into best practice, or “how we do things,” in the long run as the merits of these decisions are recognized and embraced. For example, when word spreads through an organization how a project manager solved a particularly difficult case, the practitioner’s practice might eventually become part of accepted practices.

The concepts praxis, practitioner, and practices are not independent but rather entangled, as they co-evolve in what Hendry and Seidl (2003) called episodes. Episodes are limited events occurring in the organization at any given point in time (i.e., meetings, planning sessions, or deviation management). While practices represent the present thinking and interpretation in a given situation, they are then converted into praxis by practitioners through repeated episodes. Praxis therefore builds on the practitioner’s earlier experience and on other contextual or situation-specific information as well as on the practices used in the company. As long as the situation remains the same, practices and praxis can be expected to continue more or less unchanged. The practitioner might, however, reinterpret appropriate praxis and choose another path to presumed goal fulfillment if externally influenced. If the practitioner or other practitioners then repeat the new praxis, the practices can be considered changed. Hence, when a practitioner departs from standard practices, new experiences contribute to change as they add to previous experiences and create new traditions, which in turn become accepted practices.
the institutional level. Nevertheless, when doing this, the research should focus on the individuals’ actions in context in order to manage, in our case, the project and also build a temporal and spatial site where the organization can be analyzed (Gherardi, 2006).

When doing practice research, there are two challenges that need to be dealt with. The first is the relevance challenge—doing practice research in a context relevant for society, for the practitioners studied, and for the understanding of projects. The focus of the research should be to present it so that it not only helps academics understand project management, but that the research also adds to the practitioners’ understanding of their jobs and of the conditions under which they spend most of their time at work. The second challenge is to avoid an approach that only produces trivial and random observations, lacking insights, coherence, and implications. Thus, even though a practice perspective indicates our interest in microprocesses, the micro level on its own is an insufficient level of interest from an analytical viewpoint. It might not be the most interesting one either. Whittington (2004) heightened the trap of focusing too narrowly on microprocesses. We label this the pattern challenge, which is concerned with lifting the analysis of the praxis to a higher level so that not only the individual actions are analyzed but also that the pattern resulting from the various actions can be analyzed. Smyth and Morris (2007) discussed the tension between general observations, which may marginalize the particular, and observations of the particular, which may oversee the general pattern. Addressing the relevance and pattern challenges is thus one way to avoid being trapped in either one of the end points reviewed by Smyth and Morris.

The sections that follow will further develop the understanding of those two challenges.

The Relevance Challenge
The first challenge has to do with what the observations are about. Schatzki (2005) described “the sites of organizations” and he argues that praxis occurs in a setting, or “the site,” thereby placing praxis in a broader context. His claim is that the actions of one person also make up the context of another person’s actions or of the physical and social context where the actions are taking place. Consequently, practice is a part of a greater social interplay where one person’s praxis can be understood only in relation to the social and physical context where it was carried out. Now, for project management research, the challenge is to define and describe relevant contexts for practice-based studies; to define where to go for observations and how far to go once within the context. This is the relevance challenge. Fundamentally, what we are saying is that not all observations are equally relevant for the understanding of projects.

In failing to meet the relevance challenge, we will end up doing “relevance lost” research that Johnson and Kaplan (1987) claimed occurred within management accounting. Here, for project-as-practice, there is a need to search for those sites where relevant things are happening. And this is where we need to make informed decisions in order to conduct research relevant for project management and not on “coffee table discussions” per se. Coffee table discussions may be of interest if they contribute to our understanding within a wider project context, but certainly not as an end in itself.

There are two different angles to the relevance challenge: (1) in terms of implications on choice of empirical setting and (2) in terms of questions to address. Relevance, however, cannot be based on what has been done in traditional model-based project management research only, since the limited understanding provided through such models is the starting point for the turn to practice in the first place. Thus, we need to look elsewhere for advice. Wenger (1998) discussed communities of practice, also building on the practice turn argument, and how localized communities are to be understood. A (relevant) community of practice is formed around three different concepts: First, there is a need for mutual engagement of participants. This means that individuals are engaged and know that they are part of a mutual undertaking. Second, there is a joint enterprise, in which specific content is negotiated and where there are accountability norms in place. And, finally, Wenger discussed a shared repertoire of concepts, models, roles, and rules used to perform specific activities. It is important to note that all three of these components include negotiation and may be characterized by conflict, diversity, and heterogeneity. It is, in other words, not necessarily a search for harmony that underlies the forming of a community of practice.

For a practice-based research endeavor, it is necessary to address the community-building issue, parallel to other more precise research issues. A project team may form a community of practice, in the terms put forward by Wenger (1998), or, depending on the situation, they may not. One question of relevance is to what extent are communities of practice formed in alignment with project definitions or to what extent are communities formed based on principles other than those of the project, as, for example, suggested by Lindkvist (2005) for groups not as tightly and continuously interacting as suggested by Wenger.

A single action or task has no meaning without the social context in which it is enacted. Instead, communities are the first layer of embeddedness—that is, the lowest level of context in which practice is situated. Beyond the community, other layers may be found, such as historical, social, cultural, and institutional layers (Schatzki, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Brown and Duguid (1991) even suggested that organizations may be viewed as
“communities of communities.” Schatzki (2005) talked about organizations as bundles of practices and material arrangements, arriving at a similar conclusion. From a project point of view, this has to do with the need for contextualization of projects (Winter et al., 2006) and the broadening of our understanding of project scope (Atkinson, Crawford, & Ward, 2006).

Our point is that a practice perspective calls for a different approach, and a different definition, of relevant sites for inquiry. Even though questions addressed may be typical project issues such as planning, execution, termination, knowledge transfer, contracting, or procurement, it is necessary to start the inquiry without assuming that organizational units, narrowly defined project organizations, or other “top-down” definitions of the relevant organization are good entry points into the empirical context. It is a plea to make a critical assessment of the research site and to clearly assert that projects, project management, and project organizations are not “found” but “invented” (Smyth & Morris, 2007, p. 426).

The second issue—which questions to address—is a bit tricky. At first, it may seem that a practice approach is only suitable for some specified sets of research questions—focusing on “practice issues” (whatever they may be). However, this is not necessarily the case. It is correct that a practice approach requires the research design to allow for data collection on everyday activities, within the frame of a community of communities, to look for how meaning is created and how the interaction between practices (models and other “shared repertoires”) and action are carried out (see Schatzki, 2005, for a discussion on a social ontology for studying organizations from a practice perspective). It is not correct, however, that only certain and limited sets of questions can be phrased accordingly.

Let us take an example to clarify this point by referring to a classic quote by former U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower: “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” Plans are a cornerstone of any project; consequently, planning is a dominant activity within a project context. Applying project-as-practice would mean that plans and planning are researched through questions like (for example) how the content of the plans is used as a basis for everyday action, how the procedure for changes in the plans is actually carried out, or how planning procedures are really done and how deviations from plans are responded to (for the last example, see Höllgren & Maaninen-Ölsson, 2005, 2009). These are just examples. All of these questions would be answered in terms of how a shared repertoire is applied, what learning and power mechanisms are at hand, and how the interaction is organized and coordinated across organizational units.

In the same way, any traditional project management topic can be made suitable for a project-as-practice research approach. The main thing to keep in mind is to retain the focus on how things are being worked out in real life, how actions are designed, performed, and related to other actions, communities, institutions, and the like. This may call for a renewed definition of the empirical object of study—for example, by more clearly investigating sequences of related activities in which people are engaged rather than defining organizational entities to research (see discussion in Bengtsson, Möllern, Söderholm, & Wåhlin, 2007). Cicmil et al. (2006) provided an excellent discussion on the need for studies on project management actualities that supports the argument made here.

Unwittingly, Simon (2006) provided an example of the importance of setting and how the first angle of the relevance challenge can be achieved. Simon studied the actions of a project manager in a creative industry—the computer game industry. He found that the project manager had four roles: sense-maker, web-weaver, game-master, and flow-balancer. Although it was still tentative, Simon provided an example of how the empirical setting shapes the actions of the practitioner—the project manager.

Another example of the impact on the choice of setting is provided by Pitsis, Clegg, Maroszezky, and Rura-Polley (2003), who studied project management meetings during the Sydney 2000 Olympic infrastructure project. Among other insights, the researchers found that various tactics were used to achieve the “future perfect,” including “strange conversations,” “playing end games,” “workshopping,” and “projecting feelings, concerns and issues.” Pitsis et al. provided an example of how the notion of “future perfect” is transformed from vision to action and finally to implementation. In the meetings, the tactics previously mentioned developed and ended up challenging the common assumptions and behavior in the construction industry.

Like the first goal, the second goal of the relevance challenge is not always an easy task to achieve, as is evidenced by the contemporary development of project management. The issue of which questions to address with what methods is closed because it all begins with the actions of the practitioner. Blomquist and Müller (2006) provided an example of how quantitative research methods are not only applied to a project-as-practice approach but also achieve a practice-inspired analysis. They studied the roles and responsibilities of program and portfolio managers. Through the use of a few interviews and an extensive survey, they found that the responsibilities of the program manager were planning, keeping track of time and budget, managing stakeholder relations, and being responsible for the end result. The portfolio manager in turn was responsible for various kinds of reports as well as the profit and loss of the portfolio. The roles of the managers were determined to be those of integrator, coordinator, escalation point,
and consultant. Noticeably lacking, however, is how the program managers act in their roles.

Another example of which question to address and how is the study by Raz, Shenhar, and Dvir (2002) on the use of risk management practice. Once again, the main research method used was a survey among more than 100 projects in various industries. The study found that the proposed methods were used in only a fraction of the projects and that the application of risk management procedures (actions) was more likely in high-risk projects. On the other hand, the study did not show how the tools were actually used in a specific situation.

**The Pattern Challenge**

The second challenge of a practice approach is to link data of everyday actions to integrated and synthesized observations that carry value beyond independent observations of micro-processes. In other words, it is necessary to see the patterns resulting from everyday actions and activities, and to be able to move from the particular to the general (Smyth & Morris, 2007). Thus, we would like to label this the *pattern challenge*. Explicitly, observations need to contribute to a greater meaning than the single observation on its own. Project activities have to be placed into context in order to enable conclusions on a more aggregate level (Bengtsson et al., 2007; Engwall, 2003).

The first part of the challenge is that practice is situated in a rich cultural and social context (Schatzki, 2005). This means that actions are influenced and colored by the culture and the social expectations in projects or the organization as a whole. Also, the actions themselves will most probably influence the context too. "Situatedness" internalizes behaviors of persons in their situation and affects the behaviors in and around the project. For example, in project meetings, people normally know from the way they interpret the situation or from their expectations what is the appropriate and acceptable way of acting. To study the patterns, it is consequently important to do so in the context of how actions are situated.

The second part of the challenge is one of commonality, implying that patterns are discovered while acting that will construct and mediate the meaning of the episode (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Whittington, 2006). This means that individuals in a meeting try to understand what it is all about and therefore they act before, during, and after the meeting in ways that allow them to figure out what is going on. For example, they might be found in the corridor discussing some of the pending issues in the forthcoming meeting or asking questions for clarification during the meeting to make sure of the agenda. In this way, all of those involved in the meeting share and create a common understanding of the situation. In all cases, commonalities develop for those involved and working practices spread around the organization. It may not be enough to create a solid community of practice in terms of Wenger (1998) but it may be a way to create a common base for action (Lindkvist, 2005).

The third part of the challenge is for patterns to be identified in the interdependencies between actions of people (cf. Hendry & Seidl, 2003). Their engagement in action creates other project meetings via a series of phone calls, e-mails, and other coordinating activities. Interests, skills, and knowledge from single participants are not enough to resolve issues in the project. But by calling for and utilizing other sources, the community can respond and solve problems far more complex than possible on an individual level. By participating in these situations, individuals learn both by their own actions and by witnessing others acting. Both actions strengthen the community. This is, again, not immediately obvious when only investigating micro-processes, but becomes clear as part of the search for patterns.

The last pattern challenge is that actions are driven by mechanisms and that accountability is built into the way projects are organized (Whittington, 2006). By investigating projects in action, the structure of a project will be expressed in the mechanisms of management tools, techniques, and procedures, but also in outputs of accountability for the persons involved. For example, the incentive structures in place or the career options opening up for participants may be elements of the infrastructure that have a major impact on the practice.

The point we would like to make is that relevant research is achieved when these pattern challenges are met in the research agenda. Nevertheless, patterns also include a critical element of some significance. Hodgson (2004) studied how project management as a method was sold within an organization with discursive tactics as a “de-bureaucratization” rather than the “re-bureaucratization” initiative it was, and how the employees responded to that. Hodgson's article carries the notion of "situatedness." Situatedness assumes that patterns of action are internalized among the practitioners as they feel that their behavior is accepted in the group to which they belong. The findings from Hodgson's study show the employees responding with, for example, barbed humor and occasionally openly resisting the initiative. The search for patterns can thus include critically examining issues that are behind the official interaction or unfolding hidden agendas (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006).

Framing actions on an individual level rather than an institutional or project level, Nilsson (2005) studied a project manager in the software business. He found that the job of project managers, who are forced to spend a lot of their time in meetings with people from various levels of the organization, is highly fragmented. This fragmentation is an example of “interdependencies”; that is, the actions are dependent on the practitioner, another person, and/or their environment.
Although Hodgson (2004) and Nilsson (2005) do not explicitly state that they have a “project-as-practice” approach, the common denominator is that they focus upon actions and how these actions on the microlevel influence conditions in and around the project. Furthermore, the previously mentioned articles demonstrate the need for aligning the actions with relevant findings and explanations at other levels in order to create substance and derive meaning from the findings.

**Toward a Project-as-Practice Approach**

We started this article arguing that there is a need for practice-based research on project management and have discussed some basic challenges that have to be met in doing so. A practice approach requires research to look more closely on what is actually being done as people do project management—rather than focusing on models and implementation from a top-down perspective only. A practice approach will add to our knowledge of projects by delving into practice, and it will expand our area of attention as we do so. Chia and Holt (2006, p. 250) stated that “...much of what takes place within an organization or between organizations [...] is [...] consequently ignored because it does not occupy any observational space in the researcher’s world view.”

Following their line of argument, practice-based research will open up new areas for observation. Praxis is what practitioners do, but it is also the tools they use, their interaction and intentions, and their joint episodes of activities. Taken together, a dynamic setting for action is created on the local arena where knowledge and action come together in practice. The main underlying notions guiding research into these dynamics, also to some extent discussed earlier, are the following:

1. Research is organized bottom-up, rather than top-down (Chia & Holt, 2006; Whittington, 2006). This means that we look primarily at what is done and build the understanding of larger contexts (and communities) based on these observations. The interplay between practitioners, the episodes they create, and the tools they use are the basic building blocks that need to be understood and explained. Broader explanations must be based only on such observations. We need to be able to understand and conceptually explain how work is organized, how tools are used, and how results are achieved (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2001). The project-as-practice approach acknowledges this by focusing on praxis, practices, and practitioners and the episodes where they meet. Following this approach is different from the use of a specific data-collection method, such as observations or interviews. Practice research does not presuppose a specific method (although ethnography tends to be popular); meanwhile, it is an epistemology and an ontology of how projects function and are viewed.

2. Research is based on practice, rather than on (organizing or management) principles (Czarniawska, 1993). Praxis, as often described, is what people do. We seek their reasons for doing what they do, instead of seeing how well they perform according to corporate or model-based principles for action (Cicmil et al., 2006). Being able to understand how real people solve real problems is, consequently, of paramount interest, whereas to evaluate or research how well project plans are implemented is of less significance.

3. Research will look for communities, rather than organizational units, and look for what underlying processes or areas of commitment that support communities. Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are shared among a number of people and are based on a simultaneous application of action and knowledge for a specific area of practice. Even if a group lacks the continuous interaction pattern and common history defined by the communities of practice concept, it can still build common understanding and an action-oriented community (Bengtsson et al., 2007; Lindkvist, 2005). Understanding the creation and upholding of communities will, eventually, also guide us to a better understanding of how projects (as organizationally defined units) overlap or diverge from communities (as defined by action and knowledge) in a particular organization.

4. Research will account for interorganizational and extraorganizational issues in terms of how people make such issues present in their praxis and how they translate them into practice, rather than looking at the diffusion or implementation of tools (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). A practice perspective will thus combine the “local” with the “global,” not as a hierarchical relation where the global, or extraorganizational, level impacts the praxis level, but as an integrated interplay between tools in fashion and the translation of such tools into practice (Gherardi, 2006, pp. 230–232).

5. Research will build an understanding of the management problem-based organization seen as a bundle of communities and intertwined practice, rather than as organizational units, levels, and layers (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Schatzki, 2005). This follows, to some extent, from the first and third issues brought up in this section, the “bottom-up” perspective and the focus on communities.

Finally, one may ask what the management applications are. Practice-based research, as with traditional research on project management principles, cannot solve all problems that a project manager or a general manager may have. Nevertheless, it will add considerably to understanding the profound project management challenges in contemporary organizations. A deeper and insightful understanding of how people actually use their tools, how they
react and respond to various changes in circumstances, and how they jointly create a mutual or divergent understanding of the task at hand will be valuable knowledge for every manager. Project managers we praise as being the heroes of projects are often those who master the various and seemingly unrelated bits and pieces of project life, those who can manage the unforeseen, those who can apply principles and tools creatively, and those who are around to promote and offer support when needed. In short, the art and skills of project management is illustrated through a practice approach that captures, conceptualizes, and highlights issues for further discussion and reflection, thereby once again making project research matter.

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Project-as-Practice


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