An Interview with Wanda Orlikowski: Careers and Ideas in Practice

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Abstract

Starting from an early interest in Information Systems research and digital technology, Wanda Orlikowski came across social science by accident. From that moment on, she has sought to change the ways in which work, technology, and organizing are thought about, especially in the field of management studies. Her research focuses on the dynamic interplay between technology and organizations, and on how organizing structures, cultural norms, communication patterns, and work practices are reconfigured over time. Her notable contribution lies in applying Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to analyze the adoption and utilization of technologies within organizational settings. In this interview, she takes us through the stages of these metamorphoses and describes her approach, from questioning structures and their effects to detailed ethnographic studies of technologies in action.

Keywords

organizing; sociomateriality; structure; technology; work

Introduction

As part of the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on the theme 'Past, Present, Future', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three influential figures whose work has significantly shaped the development of practice theory. These conversations focus on pivotal moments and turning points in the interviewees' careers, and the evolution of the ideas they have championed. Together, these interviews form the 'Past' section of this issue and present some insight into how theories of practice have emerged within, and responded to, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational contexts.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

Wanda Orlikowski is the *Alfred P. Sloan Professor of Information Technology and Organization Studies* at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Her research examines technologies in the workplace, with a particular focus on how digital reconfigurations generate significant shifts in organizing, coordination, and accountability. She is currently exploring sociomaterial practices in digital work. Wanda Orlikowski has published widely in journals such as the *ACM Transactions on Information Systems, Administrative Science Quarterly, Information Systems Research, Organization Science, MIS Quarterly*, and the journals of the Academy of Management.

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Wanda Orlikowski about her work with practice theories and some of the ideas she has developed bringing together issues of work, organization, technology, and practice.

Manuel Baeriswyl: To begin we'd like to invite you to describe where and when you first came across practice theory. And what attracted you to it? In your 2011 article 'Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory' with Martha Feldman (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011) you say that a focus on practice, and on Giddens and structuration theory fitted better with the experience of IT development and programming, and that other ideas about technology, and innovation were framed a bit differently at the time. So maybe tell us more about this aspect?

Wanda Orlikowski: I did my undergraduate and master's degrees in South Africa, where I grew up, studying computer systems and not at all engaged in sociology or social theory. So, I worked with computer systems, particularly database systems, designing and building them for various projects. I then moved to the States to do my PhD, and at first, I thought I would continue that technical focus in my doctoral studies at NYU, working on database theory. But fortunately, we were required to take at least one course outside of the department, and for various reasons I ended up taking a course in sociology. I often describe doing that course as a conversion experience, because it was very eye opening for me, introducing me to a different way of understanding the world. And as a result of that experience, I switched my focus and began to take more sociology courses. And that's when I encountered social theory, and in particular, Giddens and structuration theory, which spoke very deeply to me.

Perhaps it was growing up in South Africa during the Apartheid years, and experiencing the imposition of a structure that really only existed because everybody enacted it every day. There was a way in which it wasn't real, but it was made real through practice. I didn't have the language then to describe that lived experience, but structuration theory gave me a vocabulary and a way to interrogate those structures and come to understand how that system could persist in the way it had for so long.

So, structuration theory resonated for me. And then when doing my doctoral dissertation studying technology in the workplace, I was surprised to see how much of the organizational literature was taking a deterministic view of technology and its influence on organizations.

That didn't connect with my prior experiences as a systems designer and programmer, and it certainly didn't connect with my view, now informed by structuration theory, of how the social world works. So, I tried to do something different by offering a structurational take on technology in organizations. Even though Giddens does not explicitly focus on technology, I tried to articulate some initial ideas on how that might work, which I subsequently revised. But that's how I came to practice theory, first through Giddens and structuration theory, and then deepened later through my empirical studies and the influence of other practice theorists.

Elizabeth Shove: So, were you thinking about it as practice theory, then?

Wanda Orlikowski: Not explicitly. I was thinking about structuration theory, and certainly practices are core, but I was focused on telling a structuring story, on how structures are produced and reproduced over time. This was in the late eighties. And trying to make sense of structuration theory offered me a way of understanding practices on the ground and linking them to the constitution of structures, including particularly technology structures.

Elizabeth Shove: You've mentioned Giddens as a turning point, and as a significant influence, but you also write quite a lot about Latour. Now, those two don't necessarily go together very often or at least not for many people. Were you deliberately making those connections?

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes. In trying to offer an organizational understanding of technology by drawing on structuration theory, I turned to STS scholarship which was very helpful here. Authors such as McKenzie and Wajcman, Woolgar, Latour, Pinch, and Bijker, and the social construction of technology were all very influential (see Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987).

Elizabeth Shove: There weren't that many other people in organization studies dipping their toes into that kind of writing at that time, so did it feel like you were on your own?

Wanda Orlikowski: It did feel somewhat that way, particularly working in a management school in the States in the nineties. But I found it useful, and I was hoping it would be useful for others as well.

Elizabeth Shove: It looks like it has been!

One of the papers that I really like is when you write about scaffolding (Orlikowski 2006), partly because it crosses between Giddens and Latour, but also because it goes beyond a simple actor network theory take on materiality. You embed technologies in organizations and in infrastructures or wider systems, and you don't simply focus on one technology at a time. For me, you were being quite ambitious, putting together a lot of different narratives in quite a seamless way, and making them palatable for an organization studies' readership. But what happened to the idea of scaffolding? Where did it go?

Wanda Orlikowski: This was around the time where I had become more focused specifically on practice theory.

The Practice Turn book (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny 2001) had come out, and Schatzki's book on *The Site of the Social* (2002) and also Pickering's *The Mangle of Practice* (1995). So, I was reading a lot more about practice theory, but I was still not convinced by the treatment of materiality. The scaffolding paper was an invited piece where I was experimenting with some ideas. And around that time, I encountered Karen Barad's work (see 2007), Lucy Suchman's *Human-Machine Reconfigurations* (2007), and Annemarie Mol's work on the body multiple (2002). And I found those ideas very generative, moving me away from the notion of humans and materiality as interacting but separate, and towards treating them as inseparable and enacted in ongoing practices.

Manuel Baeriswyl: So next, we were wondering about the fact that your papers often start with practice theory and then move on to a specific issue, for example, Lotus Notes (Orlikowski 1993), or hotels and Tripadvisor (Orlikowski and Scott 2014), or communication in organizations. Over the years, the realms of the digital and of work have changed a lot, so how has that fed back into practice theory?

For example, you recently engaged in issues of scale in your 2021 article with Michael Barrett (University of Cambridge) (Barrett and Orlikowski 2021), and also about the current/contemporary ubiquity of the digital.

Wanda Orlikowski: The way I would put it is that I start with phenomena in the world. The theory is an onto-epistemology, so that's always there. But I am interested in empirical phenomena, specifically in technological phenomena and how they are shaping our worlds. And trying to understand how technologies are manifesting in practice in organizations led to empirical studies of different kinds of technologies in different settings. For example, with the work on Lotus Notes (1993), I tried to study across multiple settings to see if there were thematic ideas and theoretical framings that would travel, that would help make sense of commonalities and differences in technologies-in-practice.

And as the digital has become ubiquitous in everyday life, it is also increasingly distributed and removed from the realm of the observable. I think this creates challenges for practice scholars attempting to interrogate practices that are so deeply entangled with algorithms, data, and platforms that are operating unknown and unseen behind our backs.

The interest in digital work has now led to research that I've been doing with my collaborator Susan Scott (Imperial College) where we examine a phenomenon we refer to as the 'digital undertow' (Orlikowski and Scott 2023). This is an attempt to come to grips with novel materializations manifesting as corollary effects of digitalization that we find are indirectly displacing institutional apparatuses in practice.

Elizabeth Shove: Can I just interrupt you? It's not my turn, but I'm taking it anyway.

I'm interested in how this has flipped back into practice theory. You're talking about the methodological challenges of following the dynamics of something that you can't see or touch, as you say, the digital world has changed massively in the time that you've been looking at it, so has the world of work. So, if you flip the problem around and say, "what does that mean for theories of practice?" some of this must go beyond Latour and Giddens, so what specific challenges do these trends present for social theories of practice. Are there theoretical problems that you didn't expect?

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes. Sometime in the early-2000s, I was engaged in a couple of empirical studies trying to understand virtual worlds, and doing so with my toolkit of structuration theory, practice theory, scaffolding, and other ideas. But it was not working.

It seemed that empirically the digital phenomena had shifted in ways that overflowed the possibilities of my theoretical toolkit to understand. So, I looked for new tools. And that's when I found the work of Lucy Suchman, Annemarie Mol, and Karen Barad to usefully connect with both the phenomena I was trying to explain, and with a practice ontology.

But the challenges for practice theory of how to study distributed and unobservable digital phenomena will continue as we try and understand AI and machine learning and large language models.

Coming back to Manuel's question, the piece I wrote with Michael Barrett on scale was really motivated because we kept hearing over and over again "well, you practice scholars can't really speak to scale". So, it was our attempt to say "hang on"...

Elizabeth Shove: "Of course we can!"

Wanda Orlikowski: "How else do you think the social world manifests?" We tried to argue for understanding large-scale systems in terms of what's happening on the ground and how larger configurations are enacted as a result of ongoing collective practices.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Before we move on, have we missed any other important influences?

Wanda Orlikowski: As noted, an important theoretical influence has been Karen Barad's work on agential realism. And drawing on that to try and understand empirically the phenomenon of the digital undertow that Susan Scott and I are finding to be related to institutional displacement.

Manuel Baeriswyl: I think we can move on to specific texts. So, the first one we were interested in was your 1996 paper 'Improvising Organizational Transformation Over Time: A Situated Change Perspective' (Orlikowski 1996). In this paper, the key idea is that change is both situated and ongoing. You work with the metaphor of theoretical improvisation and the notion of metamorphosis, so how did you go about making your case in this article? And why were you talking about change at that moment?

Wanda Orlikowski: It was shaped by the phenomenon I was researching. I had previously done a study of the implementation of Lotus Notes in a large consulting firm where little had changed despite broad visions for the technology. The IT department had deployed thousands of copies of Lotus Notes, but it hadn't been taken up by the consultants and wasn't used much. When I studied the Zeta Corporation and their customer support department, I found interesting differences, where the staff were actively trying to change how they worked by taking up Lotus Notes.

As a structurational scholar at that time (this was the mid-nineties), I was interested in understanding how those technological changes manifested in everyday practice. I studied this process at Zeta over two years, and what I observed were ongoing, incremental shifts, subtle shifts in how people worked, and in the structures that were being enacted. And that's what I tried to articulate with the notion of metamorphosis.

I'm an Escher fan and had had a print of his Metamorphosis II up on my wall at some point.[1] It had always struck me as a very interesting depiction of subtle but powerful shifts that at every moment seem slight, but that, over time become quite consequential. So, I used that as a visual metaphor to describe changes in the everyday practices of the workers at Zeta.

That's why I wrote about situated and ongoing change, because that's what I had observed. I was also trying to argue for the value of attending to gradual incremental changes because the dominant views of change in organizational theory at the time were technological determinism, punctuated equilibrium, or planned change. And none of those could explain what I was seeing.

Manuel Baeriswyl: And so, we're wondering, because of the way you describe it in your 2011 paper 'Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory' (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011), that as practice theory started at the background and came more to the foreground of your research, and probably interests, if that was your own sort of practice turn around these times as well?

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[1] M. C. Escher is a Dutch artist who created Metamorphosis II. The art piece depicts an abstract patterned image undergoing several metamorphoses into different patterns of shapes and colors.

Wanda Orlikowski: After I finished the Zeta study, I contrasted my findings with those of the consulting organization that had introduced the same technology with very little change on the ground. And that became my 2000 paper 'Using Technology and Constituting Structures: A Practice Lens for Studying Technology in Organizations' (Orlikowski 2000). I was still using structuration theory but looking for ways to think differently about technology structures.

I think the piece that was most influential to me at that time was Jean Lave's *Cognition in Practice* (1988). It powerfully articulated that important move of taking seriously the "*in practice*"! And then I read more, for example, Edwin Hutchins and others who have done interesting work on distributed cognition (see Hutchins 1995). So, yes, perhaps that 2000 paper was my practice turn, as I was trying to work out what it might mean to think about technology structures as more thoroughly "in practice".

Elizabeth Shove: This is just what we were hoping for in that you are describing how your academic life is woven into a history of ideas. Your position in a management school and in organization studies is also relevant when you talk about the role of empirical research, but to go back to the 2000 article, lots of people have read it, so do you have a sense of what they're getting from it, and of what your contribution has been?

Wanda Orlikowski: There have been others who have taken these ideas and moved them forward, and I hope what they're taking from it is a way of thinking about technology in use as something that is enacted in practice and varies across settings.

Elizabeth Shove: There's definitely a split between the language of users and uses of technology on the one hand, and a version of practice theory that wouldn't separate the user and the technology. You are not exactly having your cake and eating it, but in that 2000 paper some of your sentences point in different directions. So, was that part of working out where you stood, or were you appealing to the user camp? What were you doing with that hybrid language?

Wanda Orlikowski: I think the whole notion of user and use is a perennial problem in my field.

Elizabeth Shove: Yes.

Wanda Orlikowski: It is the language that has been in place from the early information system studies, probably back in the sixties, as a shorthand for what humans do with technology. And there is a discomfort in using that language. But I believe the challenge remains. I'm still struggling to know exactly...

Elizabeth Shove: You mean what kind of language are you supposed to use? If you can't use 'users'...

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes!

Elizabeth Shove: I think you are right, it's an ongoing issue. I mean, even now you're writing about 'users' and so are other people. In that sense practice theory hasn't had a turn. It hasn't done away with that vocabulary, yet the language of scripting does seem to have taken hold.

Wanda Orlikowski: In that 2000 paper, I did make a specific move away from inscribed and appropriated structures to emergent and enacted structures. And that came directly from Jean Lave's work on cognition in practice and led to the work on knowing in practice (Orlikowski 2002).

Elizabeth Shove: Yeah.

Wanda Orlikowski: I think people's lived experience is often one of being a "user" and of being subject to whatever the digital platforms and algorithms are doing. I think it is a challenge in organization studies that we don't have effective language to articulate this experience of entanglement and performativity.

Elizabeth Shove: The practice of practice theory! Now we've got a few questions looking across your career and thinking about what have turned out to be the main themes. You said technology at work, and how to account for materiality.

Manuel Baeriswyl: On the first point, it is clear that your work is empirically driven, and that your main concern is not the practice ontology, but how to inform further empirical cases.

Wanda Orlikowski: Situated within a school of management, in an organization studies and information technologies group, my work is shaped in part by those kinds of phenomena. The practice ontology is crucial. It is the way I understand the world and how I understand digital phenomena. Empirically, I am interested in studying what's happening in the world of organizations. And to be able to inform students about how to think about these new digital phenomena, and to give them some ways of engaging with these phenomena that may be helpful.

Elizabeth Shove: Okay. To press on, you've written a lot about organizations, technologies and practices, so what kind of itches do you have, and what would you like to be better understood, or better studied?

Wanda Orlikowski: Well, there is some frustration with the sorts of analyses that continue to treat digital technologies as fixed entities that we interact with. And I don't know how we make sense of the worlds we live in today if we take that view.

I think what is important is developing a more subtle set of tools to understand the dynamic, mutable, inscrutable phenomena that we are all entangled with.

Elizabeth Shove: But it's funny, isn't it, that there is also an outpouring of work on so called strategy as practice, entrepreneurship as practice. You just need to stick "as practice" on anything.

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes.

Elizabeth Shove: So. what's going on there?

Wanda Orlikowski: Well on the one hand, I think it is really encouraging that people are taking practice seriously. For scholars in strategy and entrepreneurship to recognize the importance of attending to what people do every day is, I think, really welcome and generative. You mentioned the piece I wrote with Martha Feldman in 2011, and the distinctions we make among practice as philosophy, theory, and empirics. Those distinctions were based on a chapter I had done for the Handbook on strategy as practice (Orlikowski 2010).

While welcoming the attention to strategy and practice, I felt people were muddying the waters a bit, for example, describing their studies of practitioners at work as practice theory, but theorizing their findings in different ways. I wanted to articulate some possibilities for different ways of doing strategy as practice in relation to philosophical and theoretical practice commitments.

Elizabeth Shove: One last question, do you think there's a place for this new journal? I mean, we're going to do it anyway, but it's such an interdisciplinary field.

What do you think about it?

Wanda Orlikowski: I think it is important. I think it will be really helpful to see the extent of the wider practice community, and the interdisciplinary influences, and the different questions that people are asking with the same commitment to practice. I think that it could be very generative.

Elizabeth Shove: Well, that's good to hear. It's great to have you as part of the adventure!

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