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Practice theory: a new approach for archival and recordkeeping research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce a qualitative research approach based on current developments in the field of practice theory. The novelty of this approach is that it positions organizational practices as a central unit of analysis of archival and recordkeeping work. The goal of the paper is to highlight the continuity between practice theory and archival and recordkeeping scholarship and to then propose how practice theory could be used in archival and recordkeeping research.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper traces the continuity between practice theory and two influential bodies of literature in archival and recordkeeping scholarship developed in the last two decades. It then outlines a practice theory research agenda for archival and recordkeeping research by drawing on the disciplines of cultural sociology, science and technology studies, ethnomethodology and organizational studies. The potential research application of practice theory is illustrated with examples from an on-going doctoral project on appraisal and preservation practices in a digital broadcasting archive.

Findings – The analysis of current literature shows an agreement that archival and recordkeeping practices exhibit a complexity that makes them important foci for further research. By placing these insights into contact with practice theory, the paper champions a new research agenda for archival and recordkeeping research.

Originality/value – The paper positions and outlines the tenets of practice theory, making them methodologically available to archival and recordkeeping scholars and practitioners. It also indicates how practice theory offers a new perspective for conceptualizing the causal effects of organizational culture on organizational practices.

Keywords Methodology, Qualitative methods, Practice theory, Preservation, Multimedia, Archiving, Appraisal

Paper type Conceptual paper

Title: Practice theory: A new approach for archival and recordkeeping research

Keywords: practice theory, qualitative methods, methodology, appraisal, preservation, multimedia

Purpose (mandatory)

The paper introduces a qualitative research approach based on current developments in the field of practice theory. The novelty of this approach is that it positions organizational practices as a central unit of analysis of archival and recordkeeping work. The goal of the paper is to highlight the continuity between practice theory and archival and recordkeeping scholarship and to then propose how practice theory could be used in archival and recordkeeping research.

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The analysis of current literature shows an agreement that archival and recordkeeping practices exhibit a complexity that makes them important foci for further research. By placing these insights into contact with practice theory, the paper champions a new research agenda for archival and recordkeeping research.

Originality/value (mandatory)

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Introduction

This paper introduces a largely unexplored approach in archival and recordkeeping research based on the theoretical and methodological premises of the field of practice theory.ⁱ Despite what the name suggests, practice theory is not a unified theoretical framework.ⁱⁱ Rather practice theory is an interdisciplinary research approach based on a set of ontological and epistemological arguments about the nature of social reality. The defining feature of this approach is that it positions social and organizational practices as its central unit of theoretical and empirical analysis.

Practice theory sets out a new agenda for sociological inquiry in archival and recordkeeping research informed by ideas developed in the disciplines of cultural sociology, science and technology studies, ethnomethodology, and organizational studies. It does so by placing an emphasis on the fact that archival and recordkeeping work is fundamentally constituted by situated (i.e., context-specific) social and organizational practices, and therefore, could be productively studied on these terms. Practice theory contributes to prior philosophical and sociological studies of archival and recordkeeping practices by offering a new perspective for describing and analyzing the social, cultural, and technological dimensions of practice, and by offering a new theoretical conceptualization of the causal effects of organizational culture on organizational practices. Adopting practice theory in archival and recordkeeping research responds to recent calls for *softer* research approaches that can account for “the actual practices of making and keeping digital objects, implicitly relying on capable and knowledgeable mediators [i.e., archivist, records managers, or digital curators]” (Foscarini, 2010, p. 390). It also provides a suitable research framework for advancing the *pragmatic theorization* of emerging practices of managing information and records in digital environments (Dallas, 2016).

To introduce the practice-theory research agenda outlined above, this paper first situates practice theory in the context of what it calls the interpretive paradigm in archival and recordkeeping research. It then discusses the theoretical foundations of practice theory. Lastly, it demonstrates its methodological application by using examples from an on-going doctoral project on the appraisal and preservation practices at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).

Situating practice theory in archival and recordkeeping research

Practice has always been a central concept in archival and recordkeeping research. It is generally accepted that the focus of archival and recordkeeping research is to “build theories and models that provide frameworks for practice, as well as explain and describe the contexts within which practice operates” (Gilliland and McKemmish, 2006, p.149). To be sure, there is an extensive theoretical and methodological literature, how-to manuals, and hundreds of standards to guide and support the work of archivists and records managers. But interpretive research on archival and recordkeeping practice has emerged only recently. A characteristic feature of this research is that it typically begins by closely examining the phenomena under investigation without committing to *a priori* explanations. Rather theories and concepts serve as sensitizing frames to guide a flexible and adaptable inquiry, or in some cases are not used at all.ⁱⁱⁱ The goal of research is to describe and analyze the phenomena under investigation, primarily through qualitative methods (e.g., participant observation, in-depth interviews), and to then refine old, or advance new, theoretical explanations. As a result, interpretive research is typically focused on small empirical sites of observation (case studies) and does not provide the form and volume of data necessary for a statistical generalization. What makes it particularly valuable across the social

sciences, however, is the ability to examine the sociocultural and symbolic dimension of social phenomenon, reveal the meanings social actors attach to their actions and environments, and uncover concealed regularities, causal processes, and mechanisms (cf. Denzin, 1970; Guba, 1990; Reed, 2011; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). The emergence of an interpretive research paradigm is among the most influential developments in archival and recordkeeping scholarship in the last two decades. This development provides both philosophical and sociological perspectives on the role of archival and recordkeeping practices to which practice theory can contribute.^{iv}

The interpretive paradigm in archival and recordkeeping research

During the 1980s, the changes of administrative and juridical structures and the proliferation of electronic records across all branches of social institutions brought an increased attention to the porous lines dividing archival and records management practices, questioning the validity of such distinction (Ham, 1981; Atherton, 1985).^v This gave rise to a new conceptualization of the scope and goals of these practices, one advocating for the proactive management of organizational records prior to their inclusion in archives and founded on a pluralistic understanding of the shifting meaning and value of records as evidence of organizational activities and sources of collective memory across space and time (Upward, 1996 & 1997; McKemmish, 2001; See also, Tough, 2004). Parallel to that, the growing prominence of digital information technologies necessitated the repositioning of archival and recordkeeping practices in the context of the evolving digital information domain (Gilliland, 2000; Duranti, 2001; Cunningham, 2007; Yakel, 2007; Lee and Tibbo, 2011). In this intellectual environment, archival and recordkeeping research saw the emergence of two bodies of literature that provide original perspectives for

critique and analysis of archival and recordkeeping practices. For the sake of clarity, in the subsequent sections these two bodies of literature are divided and analyzed separately, but they developed largely in dialogue over the last two decades, and collectively contribute to what we can call the interpretive paradigm in archival and recordkeeping research.

The postmodern line of critique of practice

During the 1990s several prominent archival and recordkeeping authors engaged with postmodern theory. Postmodern theory influenced the intellectual development of the field in many ways. One of these ways was to propose that archival and recordkeeping practices are complicit in creating the evidential and memory value of records and archives. Brothman (1991) is among the first authors to support this view by arguing that because archival practices such as appraisal and classification are social rather than natural phenomena, they are inevitably subjected to political and ideological influences (pp. 81-84). Thus, he advocated for the need of “critical cultural self-analysis” of archival theory and practice in order to facilitate the closer alignment between the two (Brothman, 1991, p. 91). Ketelaar (2001) similarly argued that not only practices of appraising, classifying and organizing, but every subsequent use by a creator, archivist, or user adds to the meaning and value of records—enriching, what he calls, the records’ “semantic genealogy” (pp. 137-139). In doing so, Ketelaar (2001) introduced the concepts of use and users into the debate, and similarly to Brothman concluded that studying “the social, cultural, political, and religious contexts of record creation, maintenance, and use” must occupy a central role in archival and recordkeeping research (p. 141). Duff and Harris (2002) further expand this line of inquiry by refocusing the discussion from the general level of appraising, organizing, classifying, and using records to the more granular level of applied

archival and recordkeeping practices such as archival description. They argue that the subjective biases and value judgments of archivists and records managers unavoidably taint the objective goals of archival description. As a remedial measure, they suggested that practitioners develop a capacity for critical self-reflection that will enable them to recognize the subjectivity of their practices, identify their biases, and disclose these as a part of the archival description (Duff and Harris, 2002, p.278).

Similar emphasis on the constructivist role of archival and recordkeeping practices flourishes also in the works of Schwartz (1995; 2000), Nesmith (2002; 2005), Harris (1996; 1997), MacNeil (2001) and Cook (2001a; 2001b) among others. But it comes most sharply into focus in Cook and Schwartz's (2002, p. 173) conceptualization of the relationship between archival theory and practice that states:

[T]he practice of archives is the ritualized implementation of theory, the acting out of the script that archivists have set for themselves. Yet the script acted out daily by 'line' archivists is rarely derived from a detailed understanding of archival theory, let alone abstract philosophizing, for it is strongly suspected that a few practising archivists read such work. Rather, it is a script formed by the "social magic" of now-unquestioned, "naturalized" norms. These norms are themselves generalized from past performances (practices) that archivists have collectively anticipated, over generations, would confer on them appropriate legitimacy, authority, and approval.

The influence of these ideas on archival and recordkeeping research are far reaching. But that is not because they have replaced the theoretical foundations of the field. Postmodern authors have not sought to invalidate principles and concepts such as provenance, original order, evidence, reliability, and authenticity, but rather to problematize their understanding and consequently their use in both research and practice. It is more accurate to then say that postmodern archival and recordkeeping literature has widened the purview of the field by introducing—as Nesmith (2005) has argued—"new contextualities" that expand the boundaries of what counts as a valid form of research and practice.

Yet, in equal measure, this scholarship has been met with skepticism for being based on a relativist conception of reality and being too philosophically abstract to provide an explanation of the dynamics of the day-to-day archival and recordkeeping work. An important early counterpoint is offered by Eastwood (1993). Since then similar views have been infrequently articulated in the literature, except from a recent critique of Derrida's reception and interpretation in the field (Matthews, 2016). In the context of this paper, however, a criticism of postmodern thought is warranted because postmodern archival and recordkeeping authors often sought to correct what they identified as the deficiencies of archival and recordkeeping theory by introducing equally abstract and somewhat distanced theoretical ideas. But more importantly, their writing exhibits a general tendency to portray archivists and records managers as actors duped by external sociocultural forces (e.g., ideology, discourse) that cloud their capacity for self-reflection while covertly dictating the terms of their practice. As a result, the role of actors' rationality in the context of practices is either too narrowly construed, too vaguely analyzed, or altogether absent from the analyses of postmodern archival scholars. It is important to note that archival and recordkeeping scholars have turned their attention to this blind spot by problematizing the concept of agency. For instance, the information-seeking practices of archives' users and the ways in which they attribute meanings to records have been extensively studied (Duff and Johnson, 2002; Duff, Craig, and Cherry, 2004; Duff, Monks-Leeson, and Galey, 2012). Other work in this direction includes Craig's (2004) analysis of the boundaries between appraisal theory and appraisal practice (pp. 81-110), and more recently Rolan's (2016) participatory recordkeeping model that offers a typology of the continually evolving agency of various actors involved in the creation, management, and preservation of records.

Practice theory further contributes to this line of analysis of actors' agency. This is an important contribution because irrespective of the blind spot of postmodern thought identified above, the analytical significance of what Cook and Schwartz (2002) call the "social magic" and "naturalized norms" of archival and recordkeeping practices has been conceptualized further in another body of scholarship that has explored the sociocultural dimension of archival and recordkeeping work through the lens of social theory. This body of scholarship is most characteristic for its avowed goal to examine "archival processes and practices *in situ* – within communities of practice – rather than as idealized conceptions of archival theory" (Gracy 2004, p. 336).

The sociological line of critique of practice

This second body of scholarship comprises ethnographic and historical studies on a variety of record creation and recordkeeping practices in contexts as diverse as radiology, zoology, and neuroscience (Yakel, 2001; Shankar, 2004 & 2007; Ilerbaig, 2010); law enforcement (Trace 2001) and banking (Lemieux, 2001; Foscarini, 2012a); digital archives (Zhang, 2012); media fields such as film preservation (Gracy, 2007), as well as, historical studies of the socially-constructed nature of archival and recordkeeping practices and of the tools supporting them (Craig, 2002; Yakel, 2003; MacNeil 2005; 2011; 2012). Due to the diverse empirical cases these studies have examined, and the varying theoretical approaches they have championed, it is difficult to systematically build arguments based on their findings. However, one common theme clearly emerges. Unanimously, these studies demonstrate that archival and recordkeeping work is constituted by a set of "uncodified practices and tacit knowledge in communities of practice" (Yakel 2001, p. 233). These findings collectively lend credence to the argument that "archival

environment[s] [do] in fact encompass a cultural dimension” and that this dimension has marked implications for the nature of archival and recordkeeping work (Gracy, 2004, p. 337).

Jointly, both the postmodern and sociological literature discussed above demonstrate that practices are an important empirical unit of analysis in archival and recordkeeping research. But by doing so, this literature also raises two important questions. Namely, what factors inform practices in situated organizational contexts? And how should we study them? Confronted with these questions, archival and recordkeeping scholars have advanced several theoretical explanations by drawing on ideas that lie beyond the established body of archival and recordkeeping knowledge. Yakel (2001) and Trace (2001) have drawn on the field of ethnomethodology to propose that practices stabilize in a workplace context because of the interactional dynamics among members of a workplace community. Shankar (2004) has proposed the concept of “information infrastructure” to argue that as practices develop over time they “become transparently embedded into other organizational structures” (p. 386). Gracy (2007) has drawn on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of field and habitus to account for the institutional stratification between commercial and nonprofit practices within a single field (film archiving) and the diverse conceptions of worth and value within this field. Gilliland (2014a; 2015) has examined ethnographically the relationship between affect and agency in archival work in post-conflict zones. MacNeil (2012) and Foscarini (2012a) have used the concept of *genre* developed in the field of rhetorical genre studies to examine the extent to which textual artifacts and rhetorical conventions regulate the continuity of social actions within a given field or an organization. And most recently, Oliver and Foscarini (2015) have proposed several modes for analysis of “information culture.” As it will be discussed in the remainder of this paper,

practice theory adds a new theoretical and methodological perspective to this growing body of scholarship.

The tenets of the practice theory approach

As noted in the introduction, practice theory is an interdisciplinary approach for the study of social and organizational phenomenon. The approach combines insights from sociology (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984, pp. 297-304); ethnomethodological studies of work (Suchman, 2007; Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010; Tolmie and Rouncefield, 2012); and science and technology studies (Latour, 1987; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). While practice theory has had an impact on several fields in the social science, its influence has been prominent in the field of organizational studies (Gherardi, 2009; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011), where in recent years the approach has matured into a distinctive methodology for the analysis of technologically-mediated workplace practices (Nicolini, 2013).

What unifies practice theory's research agenda then is not a single disciplinary field but a set of ontological and epistemological arguments that place social and organizational practices as a central unit of analysis of social phenomena. The roots of these arguments are traceable across the diverse literatures listed above. However, they are most acutely articulated in the development of anthropological and sociological scholarship that has increasingly gained prominence since the 1980s. This scholarship has revised the conceptualization of culture from that of *culture* as a general "system of symbols of meaning" that provides a set of values to guide and regulate the conduct of social actions (the canonical understanding of culture in the sociology of Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons); to *culture* as a system of *cultural practices*, which social actors use to effectively participate in the social world around

them (Sewell, 1999, pp. 46-52). This conceptualization of *culture-as-practice* has three important implications for research: (1) it offers a view of culture as a “*tool kit* of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which, people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems”; (2) it thus suggests that in order to understand “culture's causal effects” an analytical focus should be placed on the “*strategies of action*, persistent ways of ordering action through time,” (3) and by doing so it locates “culture's causal significance not in defining ends of action [i.e., providing the values to which action is oriented], but in providing the cultural components that are used to construct *strategies of action*” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273 [emphasis in the original]). The conceptual shift here is subtle but significant. What culture offers to social actors, it is argued, is not a system of values that guide the conduct of social action, but rather a system of social mechanisms that actors deploy as means of conducting social action. To understand the causal effects of culture, therefore it is suggested, one needs to study social practices—i.e., the mechanisms of social action.

As noted earlier, these ideas can be observed in both Bourdieu and Giddens’ grand sociological theories that account for the agency of macro-sociological structures and micro-sociological practices within a unified framework. They have influenced the development of cultural sociology, and play a central role in the research agenda of science and technology studies.^{vi} Lastly, they are strongly connected to the discipline of ethnomethodology, which developed independently a different set of arguments, but in response to the same stimuli—in particular in response to the sociology of Talcott Parsons (Heritage, 1984, pp. 7-36).

Ethnomethodology is a sociological approach that emphasizes the significance of “the local, moment-by-moment determination of meaning in social contexts” (Heritage, 1984, p. 2).

Predicated on this view, the goal of ethnomethodological research is to examine the mundane

details of daily interactions by focusing on individual practices as a central unit of analysis (Bergmann, 2004, p. 77). When translated to the context of studying organizational behavior, this suggests that the “methods essential to work (and organization) will be found in details of attention and mutually oriented methods of work, and ordered properties of mutual action, rather than abstract formulations” (Rawls, 2008, p. 702).^{vii} Practice theory extends the ethnomethodological approach mainly by seeking to account for situated individual actions while also maintaining a broader view of the role of collective context, thus “retaining some basic premises of both individual and collective theories” (Rawls, 2008, p. 704).

A practice theory methodology: The *theory-method package*

The specific practice theory approach discussed next draws methodological insight predominantly from organizational studies literature. By being a more recent development in practice theory, organizational studies literature provides focused synthesis of the key theoretical insights of the field and applies them to organizational studies topics. This latter aspect makes it particularly relevant to archival and recordkeeping research because at their most rudimentary level archival and recordkeeping practices are essentially an organizational phenomenon.

However, in line with other qualitative research approaches, the limitations of practice theory are that by necessity research findings must be derived from observations of local, situated contexts (case studies). Therefore, practice theory cannot be operationalized in large-scale quantitative studies. As Yin (2009) explains case study research findings are “generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 15). The instrumental research purpose of a case study, then, is that it can “provide an insight into an issue or redraw a generalization. . .,”

which in turn can “. . . lead to a better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2005, pp. 445-446).

The methodological application of practice theory in organizational studies underlines the importance of examining both the individual and collective nature of situated practices, as well as the importance of examining the agency of not only human but also discursive, material and, technological—i.e., nonhuman—artifacts (e.g., objects, documents, spaces, technologies) (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Nicolini, 2013, pp. 1-14). To this end, Nicolini (2013) recommends developing a research design that draws on multiple theoretical perspectives to establish a set of “sensitizing concepts” to guide an empirical and analytical inquiry (pp. 213-240). This research design—which Nicolini (2013) calls a *theory-method package*—must accomplish two primary functions. On the one hand, it must examine the “accomplishments of a practice” at an individual level by showing their *internal mechanisms* (e.g., workplace routines and personal understanding of the goals and value of one’s work); and parallel to that, it must examine the *external relationships* “in space and time” that establish the continuity of practices within a wider collective context (e.g., social interactions and communally shared understanding of the organizational goals and objectives) (p. 219). Similarly, Gherardi (2009) explains that examining practice “from outside” focuses on “the pattern which organizes activities, and on the more or less shared understanding that allows their repetition [within the workplace];” conversely, examining practice “from within” focuses on “the activity that is being performed, with its temporality and processuality, as well as the emergent and negotiated order of the action being done . . .” (p. 177).

A practice theory case study: background and context

The ideas above provide the basic methodological structure of a doctoral project on the appraisal and preservation practices at the digital archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). A central objective of the project is to document and analyze the organizational practices at the CBC at an individual, group, and institutional level by using ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interview methods. Beyond this, drawing on the project's data, it is examined what the analysis of appraisal and preservation practices at the CBC tells us about the concepts of authenticity and value of digital archives. This question is justifiable because as the *culture-as-practice* perspective postulates, the symbols of a culture are analytically accessible through the analysis of its practices. The theoretical argument thus is that analyzing appraisal and preservation practices at the CBC provides a privileged view into how the concepts of authenticity and value are understood, interpreted, and legitimized in the day-to-day context of digital archival work.

The CBC is Canada's federal public radio and television broadcaster. The digital archives of the CBC (officially known as the Libraries + Archives department) are nested in a complex digital media management infrastructure that supports the television production needs of the organization. Libraries + Archives manage a vast amount of moving image materials on daily basis. The management of this material takes place on a complex system of production servers and through a slew of databases and media management tools. The majority of moving image materials that pass through the departmental servers are deleted on weekly basis in the so-called weekly *purge cycles*. Technically, only a portion of the materials that enter Libraries + Archives are acquired for long-term preservation, yet this includes all culturally significant material broadcasted by the corporation. Materials acquired for long-term preservation are catalogued and

then transferred to a LTO data tape storage known internally as the *deep archive*, which holds over 500,000 hours of moving image content dating back to the 1950s. The amount of data managed by Libraries + Archives is large. The deep archive alone is close to 7 Petabytes in capacity.

What makes Libraries + Archives an interesting case study, however, is not only the large amount of data managed on daily basis. The intellectual content of moving image materials processed and archived is highly aesthetically, semantically, and symbolically rich. These materials do not fit in any traditional conception of archival records, and are also voluminous in the sense that moving image clips as short as one minute in duration are regularly acquired, catalogued, and archived. Another reason Libraries + Archives is an interesting case study is the high level of reuse of archival materials within the organization, which predates the use of digital technologies and has been a standard practice since the archive's inception in the 1950s, but has become more prominent since the 1980s when material was increasingly migrated from film to videotape and subsequently from one generation of videotape to another up to present day digital storage technologies. It is thus reasonable to suggest that the archival and record keeping community can learn a great deal from the organizational practices of moving image archives such as Libraries + Archives, because moving image archives have dealt with reuse of archival materials and have "faced rapid cycles of format obsolescence that have required significant devotion to refreshing, migration, and emulation" long before these practices became defining concerns of the archival and recordkeeping community in the digital domain (Besser, 2014, p. 31).

The doctoral project discussed below investigated the organizational practices at the central branch of Libraries + Archives in Toronto. The project is currently in the data analysis

and writing stage and all findings remain tentative. The project's conceptual framework and research design are presented here as means of illustrating one possible way of applying practice theory in archival and recordkeeping research.

Assembling a *theory-method package*

The doctoral project briefly contextualized above is motivated by the observation that appraisal and preservation practice of moving image archives take on a new set of complexities and challenges in the digital domain. This view is supported by the literature on the topic (e.g., Connors, 2000; Besser, 2001; Rubin, 2009; Wright, 2011). After identifying appraisal and preservation practices as the focus of the project, the practice theory literature provided a new perspective for conceptualizing them. Central to this undertaking is Camic, Gross, and Lamont's (2011) conceptualization of *social knowledge making practices* that broadly designates the practices through which scholars in the humanities and social sciences, as well as knowledge workers outside of academia (e.g., policy advisors, financial analysts, pundits, jurists, etc.), produce "descriptive information and analytical statements" about the social world (pp. 3-4). In line with this concept, we can think of archival and recordkeeping practices as a subtype of *social knowledge making practices*. This idea is perhaps most firmly supported by Blouin and Rosenberg's (2011) observation that:

far from being a site of passive curation, archives seen from the inside out are places of constant decision making, where archivists themselves, like historians and others scholars, are constantly involved in processes that shape the *stuff* from which history is made (p. 142 [emphasis in the original])

Conceptualizing archival and recordkeeping practices as *social knowledge making practices* opens them to an investigation in relation to the broader literatures on knowledge-making practices in the social sciences, presenting multiple comparative angles for analysis. The

subsequent question of interest thus became not *if* archival and recordkeeping practices produce knowledge but *how*. To address this, it is necessary to begin assembling sensitizing concepts within a *theory-method package*.

The concept of *epistemic culture* is useful for describing the situated context of knowledge making practices. Knorr-Cetina (1999) defines it as “those sets of practices, arrangements, and mechanisms bound together by necessity, affinity, and historical coincidence that, in a given area of professional expertise, make up *how we know what we know*” (p. 1 [emphasis in the original]). The concept is useful because it makes the notion of culture available for description and analysis. For the applied goals of the project, *epistemic culture* focused the data collection and analysis on the relationship between the (1) social and organizational structures, (2) individual routines, (3) the material and technological tools, (4) patterns of “symbolic classification” (e.g., as manifested in decision-making); (5) while also accounting for the role of “objects of knowledge” (e.g., records and archives). An important aspect is that not only the presence of these elements needs to be described but also the articulations between them, since these articulations are a key factor that differentiates one *epistemic culture* from another. And because these articulations are historically- and context-specific, “their symmetry and conception cannot be decided theoretically by the analyst prior to fieldwork, but must be traced in the field” (Knorr-Cetina, 2005, p. 69).

In the context of the ideas of Camic, Gross, and Lamont (2011) and Knorr-Cetina (1999) two commonalities of appraisal and preservation practices at the digital archives at the CBC were identified and conceptualized. Put in simple terms, appraisal practices are a main determinant of what ultimately is—or is not—acquired and preserved by archives. Preservation practices, on the other hand, ensure that materials deemed valuable for posterity will remain accessible in their

authentic form. It was thus conceptualized that appraisal and preservation are *anchoring practices* that “structure larger systems of discourse and practice” within an organization (Swidler, 2001, p. 99). These systems of discourse and practice in the context of the project being the extended life of archival materials within archives, their future potential for broadcast reuse, and their future potential as sources of cultural memory.

Alongside that, it was also observed that in the digital environment appraisal and preservation practices have begun exhibiting another important common characteristic. Namely, they both appear to be what we can think of as *evaluative practices*—practices implicated in determining the value of social and cultural objects (Lamont, 2012, pp. 211-214). This undoubtedly is the case with appraisal, which as a practice has historically grappled with the twin questions “what is meant by value” and “where value resides” (Trace, 2010, p. 56).^{viii} Interestingly, however, digital preservation also seems to be an evaluative practice, at least theoretically. This is because digital preservation practices pose major challenges to traditional notions of the authenticity of archives as digital materials are continually at risk of being corrupted while being accessed, exchanged between users and systems, or transferred to new media to avoid hardware and software obsolescence. A crucial aspect of digital preservation practices thus consists of identifying the technical, intellectual, and contextual characteristics of digital materials and documenting them as metadata evidence of authenticity (Rothenberg, 2000; Lynch, 2000; Heslop, Davis, Wilson 2002; Harvey, 2012, pp. 75-98). Despite the emergence of standards and tools for generating preservation metadata (e.g., OAIS information model, PREMIS, METS), the question what constitutes a reliable metadata, or more broadly “what evidence must be collected, from whom, and how are we going to be sure the evidence itself is true” (Giaretta, 2011, p. 207), are difficult to generalize particularly when dealing with culturally

significant and technologically complex digital materials. Therefore, alongside appraisal, digital preservation is also concerned with evaluating the significant properties of digital objects and then documenting these properties at the appropriate level of descriptive, administrative, rights, and technical metadata. This shared evaluative character of appraisal and preservation practices in digital environments has been identified previously by Yeo (2010) who argues that “[n]otions of *significance* in digital preservation, and in media conversion, transcription and editing, are no less problematical than the long-running debates about notions of *value* in appraisal theory” (p. 100 [emphasis in the original]). For data collection and analysis, examining appraisal and preservation as *evaluative practices* requires attention on “the constraints put on evaluation” by an “epistemic culture,” which could include “methods of comparison, criteria, conventions (or customary rules), self-concepts, and other types of nonhuman supports” (Lamont, 2012, p. 211). In context of the CBC case study, these could include specific methods for comparison of versions of television content, the institutionally sanctioned selection rules for acquisition and preservation, the individual interpretation and application of these rules, and the range of technologies used in appraisal and preservation practices.

Subsequently, two more concepts were added to the *theory-method package*. The first is the concept of *porousness*. The tendency of knowledge-making practices to be subjected to diverse external influences is discussed by Camic, Gross, and Lamont (2011, p. 27) and further builds on the concepts of “disembedding and reembedding” of practices developed in Takhteyev’s (2012) ethnographic study examining the transfer of software practices between North and South American contexts. The concept of *porousness* refines the focus of data collection and analysis by placing attention on the potential external influences on practices. These influences can be manifested at an organizational level (e.g., the CBC’s digital archives

are influenced by the practices of news broadcast production) or at the level of individual routines (e.g., archivists routinely drawing on external aesthetic and historical frames of reference to determine the significance and value of archival materials).^{ix}

The final concept in the *theory-method package* is *socio-material genre*. The concept of *genre* was originally developed in the field of rhetorical genre studies and states that *genre* is a form of “social action” (Miller, 1984). Miller (1984) argues that because of their recurrent use within distinctive types of social situations, discursive artifacts (what she calls *genres* [e.g., tax bills, business reports, memos, cover letters, greeting cards, or love letters etc.]) acquire a degree of social agency. In this way, *genres* become a part of a “common stock” of “rhetorical forms” belonging to a social group, and retroactively their use becomes associated with “a set of particular social patterns and expectations” (p. 158). The goal of tracing and analyzing *genres*, Miller (1984) explains, is “in effect, ethnomethodological: it seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” (p. 155). Based on Miller’s foundational insight, the concept of *socio-material genre* was developed further following the work of Spinuzzi (2003), Foscarini (2012b; 2014); MacNeil (2012), and Feinberg (2015) to identify a broad range of socio-material artifacts—finding aids, workflows, training manuals, taxonomies, metadata schemes, schedules, calendars, and software interfaces and software tools—and to provide a framework for analyzing their agency in practice by tracing the social expectations, meanings, and frames of reference associated with their use.

Thus, in sum, following Nicolini’s (2013) call for building a context-sensitive *theory method-package*, the above discussed conceptual framework posits that appraisal and preservation at the CBC practices are:

- ***Product of an epistemic culture***—this concept sensitizes us to the articulation between social and organizational structures, individual routines, the material and

technological tools, patterns of “symbolic classification” (e.g., as manifested in decision-making), while also accounting for the role of “objects of knowledge” in the practice (e.g., records and archives).

- ***Anchoring***—this concept sensitizes us to the way in which organizational practices structure the extended life of archival materials, for example, determining their future potential for reuse, and their future potential as sources of cultural memory.
- ***Evaluative***—this concept sensitizes us to how organizational practices are implicated in determining the value of archival materials, focusing analytical attention on the methods for comparison of versions of digital archival materials, the institutionally sanctioned rules, the individual interpretation and application of these rules, and the range of technologies used in practices.
- ***Porous***—this concept sensitizes us to the potential external or internal influences on practices within the organization.
- ***Socio-material genres***—this concept sensitizes us to the way in which socio-material artifacts—finding aids, workflows, training manuals, taxonomies, metadata schemes, schedules, calendars, and software interfaces and software tools—are a part of the “common stock” of “rhetorical forms” used in organizational practices.

It is important to note, that the conceptual framework above is only one elaboration of a *theory-method package*. The framework can be narrowed down or expanded to address the case-specific demands of different practice theory case studies. Having either complex or simple a conceptual framework, however, is an important prerequisite for a practice theory study. This makes the approach markedly different from other interpretive approaches such as grounded theory and some forms of inductive ethnography. The approach thus could be categorized as a form of “abductive analysis” that unfolds as a “puzzling-out process [in which] the researcher tacks continually, constantly, back and forth in an iterative-recursive fashion between what is puzzling and possible explanations for it, whether in other field situations (e.g., other observations, other documents and visual representations, other participations, other interviews) or in research relevant literature” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p. 27).

Operationalizing the theory-method package: Data collection and analysis methods

Following the development of a conceptual framework, two research questions were formulated to scope and guide the inquiry:

- (1) How do digital moving image archivists establish criteria to assess the value and ensure the authentic preservation of archival moving images?
- (2) What articulations of social interactions, evaluative decision-making processes, and sociotechnical systems assist them in these tasks?

The research questions were purposefully kept broad and descriptive with the idea that answering these *how* and *what* questions would provide rich understanding of appraisal and preservation practices at the CBC and could lead to developing inferential—*why*—questions.

Consequently, three methods were used for data collection: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of organizational documents and information artifacts. Data collection was focused exclusively on documenting the tools, interactions, dynamics, and patterns of symbolic classification at the research site. Economic, racial, and demographic variables were deemed analytical insignificant because the data collection was focused on obtaining information from the research participants as means of learning about the practice in which they engage daily, rather than as means of evaluating their performance at work (in the context of which such variables may have had an analytical significance). Lastly, it was determined that presenting a complete picture of appraisal and preservation requires examining the practices of the entire organizational lifecycle at the CBC including the (1) acquisition, (2) cataloguing, (3) visual resources (access and reuse), (4) media management, and (5) preservation departments.

The data collection began with six bi-weekly site visits at each of the five departments, for the total duration of six months. A total of six research participants in key managerial roles at each of the five departments enrolled in the study. During the site visits, the participants were

observed engaging in daily workplace routines and solving common daily problems. Their reflections on their practice were solicited and documented, and they were frequently asked clarifying questions inviting them to disclose the rationale behind their specific actions or statements.^x Practical guidance for conducting a participant observation was informed primarily by Button and Sharrock's (2009) approach to fieldwork in technology-mediated workplace environments, which fitted well the context of the research site. This first cycle of data collection was followed by a preliminary data analysis, which offered an opportunity to refine the scope of the in-depth interviews that followed next (See, Fig. 1).

The interviews were conducted with each participant individually, lasting roughly two hours at a sitting. All key research participants were interviewed at least twice. Additional participants were enrolled at the interview stage. The interviews sought to facilitate an extensive dialogue with each participant. The conceptual framework provided the basic structure of the interview process, but each interview was to an extent unique because it was based around questions relevant to the participant's specific expertise and the goals and practices at their department. As an addition to the participant observation, the interviews sought to reveal the specific frames of reference and meanings the participants bring to their work. The interview method used is described as a "discursive-dialogic" method geared toward developing a deep, extensive discussions with participants that have expert knowledge on the topic under investigation (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

The third stage of data collection consists primarily of the collection, organization, and analysis of various policy documents, training manuals, administrative forms, and organizational records used at the CBC, as well as the analysis of taxonomies, databases, and media management software tools. This stage of data collection depended on input from both the

participant observation and interview data collection, as participants were both observed and asked how and why they use specific technologies and artifacts. The data analysis process—currently in progress—is divided in two stages: preliminary and final. At both stages data is coded using “elemental coding” techniques providing “basic but focused filters for reviewing the [data] corpus and for building foundations for future coding cycles” (Saldaña, 2013 pp. 83-96). Thus, a second coding cycle will be introduced to refine the analysis later in the project (Saldaña, 2013 pp. 207-245) (See, Fig. 2). All data is analyzed with the goal of answering the project’s research questions. Keen attention is paid to unanticipated emerging themes and to what appraisal and preservation practices at the CBC can tell us about the theorization of the concepts of authenticity and value.

Preliminary findings

As noted, all project findings are tentative. However, the preliminary data analysis suggests that the practices at the digital archives at the CBC align with the parameters of the project’s conceptual framework. For example, when the archiving and reuse of moving images began at the CBC in the 1950s there was hardly any academic or professional expertise on the topic. Consequently, much of the organizational practices were developed organically. Later, generations of practitioners came and further improved on what was already present, and in the process continually adapted organizational practices to meet the demands of emerging technologies. Over the years, specific practices and processes formed into established organizational workflows, yet most of these remain specific to the department. This is supported by numerous references in the data that indicate that the practices at the Toronto branch (which was the site of the investigation) are different from these of other branches across the country. As

such, the data shows that the articulation between social and organizational structures, individual routines, and material and technological tools are constitutive of what we can call an *epistemic culture*.

Furthermore, there is an awareness by all research practitioners that the way they do things does not adhere to clearly identifiable global standards, but rather to internal, local conventions and routines. These conventions and routines are supported by departmental policies, but more importantly, they are internalized through the use of organizational *genres* (including database structures, cataloguing templates, and the folder structure of the media management system), which contribute to a shared understanding about the flow and goals of practices. At the same time, it would be incorrect to state that the practices are completely insulated from external influences. Every time the research participants were asked if their work is guided by specific standards, they said that it is not. No of them, for example, pointed to established standard or a reference models such as the DCC curation lifecycle model or OAIS. However, they all acknowledged the influence of established best practices in their respective areas of expertise (acquisition, cataloguing, visual resources, media management, and preservation) and more importantly to a strong influence by the norms and conventions of broadcasting and journalism. At the same time, however, canonical archival principles such as original order and provenance also influence the organizational practices at the CBC archive. This suggests that the practices are *porous*—that is to say, they are selectively open to different influences coming from within and outside of the organization.

Lastly, the data suggests that aside from appraisal and preservation, virtually every practice at the CBC archives— acquisition, cataloguing, visual resources, media management, and preservation—has an evaluative dimension. Although it is early to conclusively confirm, this

suggest that digital curation of television archives is a complex site of *evaluative practices*, occurring at each stage of the curation lifecycle. It is thus tempting to propose that *evaluative practices* may be a symmetrical (or perhaps a prerequisite) element to practices of adding value to data, which is one of the key objectives of digital curation (Higgins, 2011). This warrants further analysis of the project's data in relation to the emerging literature on evaluation and valuation (Lamont, 2012; Beljean, Chong, and Lamont, 2016).

Collectively, the preliminary data analysis indicates structural similarities between digital archival and recordkeeping practices at the CBC and the literature on knowledge-making practices in the natural and social sciences upon which the conceptual framework of the project is based. This reinforces the argument that archival and recordkeeping practices are a subtype of knowledge making practices and demonstrates that practice theory is a productive approach to study them.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a practice theory research agenda for archival and recordkeeping research. One of the central goals was to indicate how practice theory aligns with current literature in the field. Furthermore, the paper presented the tenets of practice theory and showed how they provide unique perspective for studying practices and a new way of explaining the causal effects of organizational culture on organizational practices. The final section of the paper offered conceptual and methodological suggestions on how to develop a practice theory study in digital archival and recordkeeping environments.

The implications of the practice theory research agenda presented here are arguably twofold: (1) practice theory can be used as an approach for tracing and analyzing organizational

practices to inform the development of more reliable and efficient records management practices, or (2) it can be used as an approach to studying archival and recordkeeping work. In this paper, only the latter application of practice theory is presented and discussed. Future research, however, can explore the extent to which practice theory insights can be synthesized to become a part of the arsenal of conceptual methods and tools supporting records management and digital curation work. This will require intellectual commitment beyond the scope of this paper, but it could prove useful to the profession. While practice theory is a highly complex sociological approach, we should not forget that it was the sociology of Anthony Giddens that inspired the records continuum model, whose influence on contemporary archival and recordkeeping practices is arguably beyond dispute.

As an approach to studying archival and recordkeeping work, as argued above, practice theory advances the prior interpretive sociological research in the field. Consequently, practice theory could be applied to the study of other topics such as description, classification, and decision-making about access to sensitive records. The strength of the approach ultimately is that contrary to an anti-intellectual turn toward empiricism, practice theory can provide a window to analyzing how archival concepts and principles (e.g. value, authenticity, provenance, original order, evidence) are understood in, and made applicable to, the daily context of practice. While archival and recordkeeping practices exist in many organizational contexts and as such are undoubtedly historical and context-specific, this paper proposes that they may exhibit common underlying features, whose systematic and comparative analysis will enrich our understanding of archival and recordkeeping work.

Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

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Notes

ⁱ I take the term “archival and recordkeeping” from McKemmish (2001, p. 337); however, I use it with a broader meaning to refer to archivists and records managers who routinely engage in information organization practices such as appraisal, classification, description, preservation, and deaccessioning of current or historical records in corporate, public, or academic settings.

ⁱⁱ In social research, theoretical frameworks are models for thinking and mapping social relationships, processes, and mechanisms. A key aspect of a theoretical framework is to simplify the complexity of social reality, making data collection and analysis systematic and reliable. A formal definition is provided by Anfara and Mertz (2006) as “any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (e.g., grand, mid-range, and explanatory), that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena” (p. xxvii).

ⁱⁱⁱ Some interpretive approaches, notably grounded theory, suggest that a study begins with limited to no prior knowledge of the literature on the topic.

^{iv} Practice theory has also been recently introduced in information science as a distinct approach that can explain the accumulation and exchange of tacit knowledge in organizational settings and the process-oriented nature of information practices in everyday life (Huizing and Cavanagh, 2011; Cox, 2012).

^v The questioning of the porous lines between archival and records management practices have existed in many contexts prior to the 1980s. Particularly notable is the Australian archival and recordkeeping scholarship, which contributed largely to the shaping of these debates in academic literature. The reference to the 1980s as a starting point of these developments is used loosely to designate the decade in which these ideas came to wider attention in archival and recordkeeping debates internationally.

^{vi} For an overview see, Schatzki (2001).

^{vii} The ethnomethodological approach has been extensively introduced to the field by Ciaran B. Trace (2002; 2016).

^{viii} For an overview See Kula (2002, pp. 23-53); Craig (2004, pp. 59-81); Gilliland (2014b).

^{ix} Analyzing what I call *frames of significance and value* is a major emerging theme in the data analysis.

^x These were general questions such as, e.g., Why did you do that? What happens if you do this? Can you tell me why do you think that this is important...? Etc.