REFLECTING ON USE OF PRACTICE THEORIES TO UNDERSTAND 'PRACTICES': A BOUNDARY PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE ON WORK OF BUSINESS ANALYSTS

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Abstract

In recent years, Practice Theory has been used as a theoretical lens to examine a number of phenomena in organisation and management studies. In this arena, Practice Theory has been used to increase our understanding of strategy formulation, the effective use of information technology in organisations, boundary spanning, innovation, learning and knowledge, governance and other topics. Given this it is arguably time to reflect on the efficacy of Practice Theory as a lens in organisation and management studies. In a contribution toward this need, this paper seeks to explore both the benefits and difficulties of using Practice Theory as a lens in the Information Systems field. The efficacy of the Practice Theory lens will be examined through the experience of the authors undertaking research that was focussed on the role of business analysts and the nature of their work practices in organisations. Specifically, the study explores the idea of business analysts' work as a boundary spanning practice, spanning the boundaries of the information technology and business communities in an organisation. In this paper, the authors will reflect on their motivation for using Practice Theory, and the actual benefits and difficulties of the lens.

Keywords: Boundary practice, practice theory, practice research, practice-based studies

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1 Introduction

Practice theory has been applied to understanding strategising (e.g., Chia and Mackay 2007), the use of information technology (IT) (e.g., Orlikowski 2000), boundary spanning (Levina and Vaast 2005 ; Lindgren et al. 2008), innovation (e.g., Swan et al. 2007), learning and knowledge (e.g., Gherardi and Nicolini 2000; Orlikowski 2002), theorising (e.g., Zundel and Kokkalis 2010), nursing (e.g., Reed 2006), governance (e.g., Smallman 2007), project management leadership (Bjorkeng et al. 2009),and decision making (e.g., Cabantous et al. 2010). It has also been used to understand consumer culture (e.g., Warde 2005) and virtual communities (e.g., Akoumianakis and Alexandraki 2010).

This broad interest in practice theories to study diverse phenomena is not without its challenges. Practice theories do not represent a unified conceptualization (Schatzki 2001, Osterlund and Carlile 2005). The term 'practices' introduces a semantic plurality (Gherardi 2009a; Simpson 2009) that makes practice concept difficult to define. There is little analytical focus on (a) the distinct social ontology that is implied by practice theories (Goldkuhl 2006) and (b) practice as an epistemology (Gherardi 2009a). There is need for more reflection on appropriateness of research methods and research designs that are used in practice based studies (Johannisson 2011). The claim that practice theory has an unstable identity (Reckwitz 2002) is arguably rooted in such concerns. Despite the discussion on concerns surrounding practice theories, there is very little discussion on how work practice studies that adopt a practice perspective deal with such issues. This denies adopters of practice theories much needed insights and discourages adoption of practice theories in scholarship of work practices.

Realising the importance of reflecting on these concerns, in this paper we aim to highlight the issues faced in adopting a practice perspective for studying the work practice of business analysts. More specifically, we wish to discuss our experience in dealing with questions like (a) why might adopting a practice perspective be appropriate for studying work practice of business analysts? What constitutes a practice perspective? (b) how do we deal with the 'polysemy' of the term 'practice' in the research? (c) what paradigmatic assumptions are implied in adopting a practice perspective? what does viewing practices from 'inside' and 'outside' mean? (d) how do we use a specific practice theory to inform work practice research? (e) how do we resolve research method and research design issues and (f) how do we present results and make a contribution to knowledge? Some of the findings from our research on work practices of business analysts have been reported elsewhere (See Vashist et al. 2010, 2011) and in this entry, rather than focusing on the empirical findings, we wish to discuss our experience of adopting a practice perspective. By this we hope to contribute to the discussion on practice of practice-based approach for studying work practices.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section we outline our motivation for studying the work practice of business analysts and adopting a practice perspective to inform this research. In the section that follows we discuss the boundary practice perspective (Wenger 1998) on the practice of business analysts and the resulting research questions. In the third section we outline our research process into a work practice research framework and reflect on issues faced in our research at the different stages of this framework. Last section discusses implications of using a practice perspective in work practice research.

2 Motivations

2.1 Studying the work of business analysts

IS failure rates continue to be a cause for pessimism (Goldfinch 2007) and a problem for IS researchers and practitioners (Sauer and Davis 2010). While there is an expectation and a perception that business analysts act as a bridge between users and IT staff (Evans 2004) to overcome the gap between the user requirements and the designed solution (Heeks 2006), the suggestion that failure to identify 'real business requirements' is a major factor leading to IS project difficulty (Goldsmith 2004,

p. xvii) raises the question as to whether business analysts are able to bridge the requirements-design gap effectively.

Perhaps there is a more fundamental concern: Are there limitations in the dominant view of requirements analysis? Over the years IS researchers have raised concerns that the dominant view of requirements analysis is largely rationalistic leading to inadequate view of organisation (Boland 1979). Boland argued that such a perspective (a) lacks reflection on *act* of system analysis and design (b) ignores social processes that are to benefit from information systems and calls for investigating systems analysts' orientation towards users and methods that they use for analysis. Research on use of methods in IS development reveals that reality of practice is far removed from the rationalist notion that practice is merely about using methods that are based on scientific, rational knowledge (Mathiassen and Purao 2002). Empirical research suggests that human behaviour is frequently at odds with rational assumptions (Avgerou and McGrath 2007). Methods and tools seek a particular kind of transformation based on a particular worldview (Checkland and Scholes 1990) and the rationalist worldview, through the use of rational methods and tools, is inevitably imposed on stakeholders, resulting in an arguably limited approach to analysis. Scholars have called for rejecting positivist concepts of requirements (Oats and Fitzgerald 2007) and for inclusion of social, cultural, and political context into understanding information systems (Avgerou 2001). A way forward is to investigate what is involved in understanding user requirements and bridging the requirements-design gap by understanding the work of business analysts and what it means to them (Brown and Duguid 2000).

We were also conscious of the much discussed issue of practical relevance of academic research (see Benbasat and Zmud 1999; Davenport and Markus 1999; Klein and Rowe 2008; Lippert and Anandrajan 2004; Van De Ven 2007). To make research outcomes more relevant to practitioners, IS research needs to overcome the limited understanding of context, problems, and opportunities that concern practitioners (Benbasat and Zmud 1997). To make research outcomes more useful for students we need to improve our understanding of practice and integrate that understanding into pedagogy (Mathiassen and Purao 2002). Research suggests that the published research of IS academics and the published writing and research of IS practitioners in the field of systems analysis focus on quite different areas and this inhibits the training and education of systems analysts (Lippert and Anandrajan 2004). An investigation into the roles and practices of business analysts would help address concerns that the systems analysis and design curriculum needs to be more effective for meeting the challenges faced by practitioners.

2.2 Adopting a practice perspective in studying work practice of business analysts

While the socio-technical nature of information systems has been widely discussed, little consideration has been given to the suggestion that not only are the requirements rooted in social context of the users but the process of requirements analysis is itself social (Goguen 1993). A perspective that views requirements coming from the social system rather than from the minds of the users is required (Goguen, Cited in Ramos and Berry 2005) to acknowledge the socio-technical nature of information systems. The sociology of the workplace, therefore, becomes important in understanding requirements analysis (Nuseibeh and Easterbrook 2000; Yue et al. 2011). Given that viewing an organisation as a unified whole could be problematic (Goguen 1994, Orr 2006) in concealing the many social configurations that flourish in an organisation, requirements analysis needs to consider the various social configurations that interact during requirements analysis (Goguen and Linde 1993). Research efforts have focused on users and have largely ignored the social issues that relate to the other participant groups. For example, IS research is still heavily invested in understanding user involvement and user-centeredness in IS development (e.g., Iivari et al. 2010) and very little is known about the nature of involvement of other social configurations.

Research into role of requirements analysis participants emphasises either the user-business analyst dimension or the user-IT developer dimension and ignores the analyst-IT developer dimension. Recent research suggests that IT developers' direct access to users is rare (Ramesh et al. 2010) and, therefore, business analyst-developer interaction is critical in developers' understanding of user requirements. Little research on business analyst-developer interaction implies that this interaction is either, surprisingly, ignored, or considered unproblematic. For example, studies that discuss the difficulties of requirements analysis (e.g., Davis 1982; Brown and Ramesh 2002) focus entirely on the user-analyst dimension. Assertions have been made about the user-analyst link being the weakest link (Joshi 1992) but there is little empirical work that has actually examined the analyst-IT link (Vashist et al. 2010). There is very little research that investigates the tri-partite arrangement amongst the users, technical developers, and business analysts and looks at the roles and practices of business analysts as boundary spanners involved in interacting with both users and IT staff and negotiating issues and differences between them.

A useful research perspective on the practices of business analysts, therefore, would be one that (a) models requirements analysis as a social process and (b) adopts a tri-partite perspective in requirements analysis research. This led us to adopt a practice perspective that is informed by Wenger's (1998) communities-of-practice (CoP) and boundary practice concepts. The adopted perspective is appropriate for several reasons. First, being a practice lens, it has the conceptual apparatus to foreground 'practices' of business analysts. Second, it allows us to consider the 'social' in understanding the 'practices' of business analysts and views organisations as a *constellation* of interacting practices. Third, the boundary practice perspective allows us to adopt a tripartite view on requirements analysis, in which business analysts connect the users and the developers.

3 Theoretical Perspective and Research Questions

3.1 Theoretical perspective- business analysts as a boundary practice

The Community of Practice (CoP) perspective (Wenger 1998) provides us a way to inform our empirical work on understanding the practices of business analysts. Wenger's understanding of practices is very inclusive and classifies practices as Explicit and Implicit (See Table1).

Practices	**Examples**
Explicit	Language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specified criteria, codified procedures, regulations, and contracts that various practices make explicit
Implicit	Implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognisable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared worldviews

Table 1: Meaning of Practices (Wenger 1998, p. 47)

These practices are related to community by three dimensions - mutual engagement (ME), joint enterprise (JE), and shared repertoire (SR). The first dimension -mutual engagement– explains that actions of individual become meaningful as a result of engagement among individuals in a social configuration. The second dimension-joint enterprise– explains that as a result of mutual engagement, the members of a social configuration arrive at a shared purpose or joint enterprise. This purpose need not be stated explicitly and results in "*relations of mutual accountability*" (p. 78). The third dimension -shared repertoire– includes tool, methods, and activities that are shared by the members of the community.

Wenger argues that any organisation, independent of its size, is discontinuous and, rather than viewing it as a single CoP, it needs to be seen as a *constellation of practices*, a *community-of-communities* (Brown and Duguid 1991). Viewing an organisation as a unified whole is problematic in requirements analysis (Goguen 1994) and in the study of work practices (Orr 2006). Adopting this constelllation perspective allows us to view organisations as consisting of multiple practices. While the focus was on understanding the practice of business analysts, an attempt at understanding their practice would be incomplete without the perspective of users and IT staff that the business analysts interact with. In this research, therefore, we also considered (a) the practice of users of information systems and (b) the practice of IT staff for their participation in the work of business analysts. We view business analysts as a boundary practice (Wenger 1998) - a practice that provides a connection between the users and the IT staff (See Figure1). This perspective allows us to investigate the tri-partite arrangement amongst the users, technical developers, and business analysts.

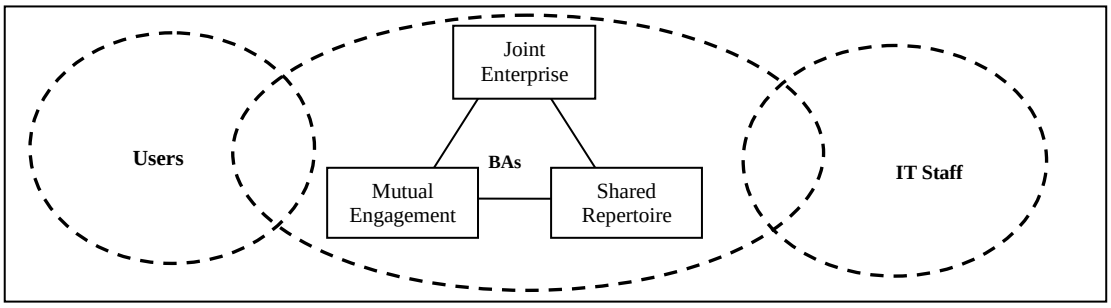

Figure 1: Business analysis as a boundary practice

3.2 Research questions

Considering the theoretical perspetive, the objective of the research was to use the communities-of-practice and the boundary practice perspective to gain insights into and understanding of the roles and practices of business analysts. This translated into research questions that are discussed next.

Research Question 1: What insights into the roles and practices of business analysts emerge by using a CoP theoretical lens?

This question is concerned with understanding the practices of business analysts that contribute towards formation of a CoP. Our research investigations focused on understanding the nature of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire in a practice of business analysts. Wenger (1998) suggests that instead of asking whether a configuration fits the concept of CoP, the CoP concepts framework should be used *to articulate to what degree, in which ways, and to what purpose it is (or is not) useful to view a social configuration as a CoP* (p .122). For a practice of business analysts, such a view will help examine the nature of boundaries, if any, that develop between them and users and IT staff.

Research Question 2: What constitutes boundary practice work in the practice of business analysts?

While the first research question was concerned with mutual engagement within a practice of business analysts, the second question is concerned with understanding the roles and practices of business analysts as a boundary practice, as they engage outwards with users and IT staff. Investigation of business analysts' boundary practice focused on the following:

Understanding the boundaries involved in the work of business analysts: Following suggestions that (a) Understanding boundary spanning needs to be preceded by understanding the boundaries that are involved (Oliver and Montgomery 2005) (b) it is only in a specific empirical context that one can define and locate boundaries (Aldrich and Herker 1977) and (c) characteristics of boundaries come to

the foreground only in the experience of people at boundaries (Diamond et al. 2004), we attempt to understand the boundaries that business analysts span in interacting users and IT staff. Scholarship in boundary practice that examines boundaries has the potential to provide insights into problems like the failure to identify "real business requirements" (Goldsmith 2004, p xvii) and the inability to satisfactorily bridge the gap between the requirement and design (Heeks 2006) by requirements analysts.

Understanding business analysts' dealings with users and IT staff: Communicating across practice boundaries not only requires business analysts to be aware of differences between users and IT staff but requires them to engage in *perspective taking* communication (Boland and Tenkasi 1995) with users and IT staff. The boundary practice work is investigated to understand how business analysts interact and negotiate boundaries with both users and IT staff.

4 Reflections on Adopting a Practice Perspective

The research process that we followed can be outlined into the research framework shown in figure 2. In this section we discuss the issues that arose in our research at different stages of this framework. As suggested earlier, we discuss our experience in dealing with questions like (a) why might adopting a practice perspective be appropriate for studying work practice of business analysts? What constitutes a practice perspective? (b) how do we deal with the 'polysemy' of the term 'practice' in the research? (c) what paradigmatic assumptions are implied in adopting a practice perspective? what does viewing practices from 'inside' and 'outside' mean? (d) how did we use a specific practice theory to inform work practice research? (e) how do we resolve research method and research design issues and (f) how do we present results and make a contribution to knowledge?

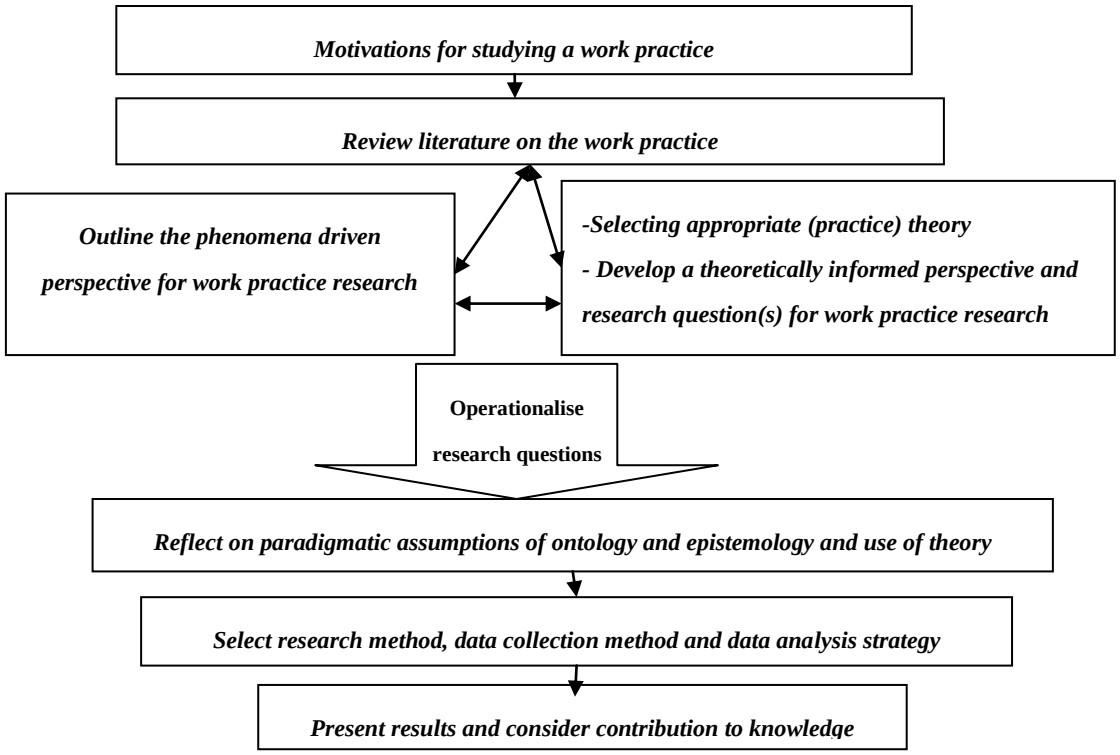

Figure 2. A work practice research framework

The first issue that we needed to consider was *why might adopting a practice perspective be appropriate for studying work practice?* Our experience suggests that, while the motivations for studying a work practice may be rooted in the problem domain, the rationale for adopting a practice perspective for examining the work practice may only emerge later. This is likely to emerge from

understanding two mutually informing issues (a) what is a useful way of 'looking' at the work practice and (b) what theoretical lens would inform and shape this perspective. For example, review of literature on requirements analysis suggested that a useful way of 'looking' would be the one that takes a pluralist view of organisation, models the requirements analysis process as a social process, and adopts a tri-partite perspective on requirements analysis. These considerations directed us to towards a practice perspective, more specifically towards Wenger's (1998) CoP and boundary practice concepts, that helped us frame our research questions for examining the work practice of business analysts.

A related question is *what constitutes a practice* perspective? Although there is no standard or canonical practice theory, the understanding of what constitutes a practice perspective in practice research is fundamental to progressing research towards a theoretical perspective, research objective and research questions. In adopting a practice perspective, we follow Reckwitz (2002) and make two analytic distinctions. The first distinction involves moving away from purpose-oriented and norm-oriented explanations of human action and social order towards an understanding based on shared knowledge that enables and constrain understanding and actions. For Reckwitz, theories highlighting shared knowledge are cultural theories and practice theory is one type of cultural theory. The next distinction, based on the location of shared knowledge, differentiates practice theories from other cultural theories:

> *Practice theory does not place the social in mental qualities, or in discourse, or in interaction…it places the social in 'practices' and that it treats practices as the 'smallest unit' of social analysis*(Reckwitz 2002, p. 249).

The practice perspective, as explained by Reckwitz, decentres *mind, text, and conversation* and foregrounds 'practices'.

But what do we mean by the term 'practices' in practice research? *How do we deal with the polysemy of the term* '*practices'* ? Given that scholars acknowledge the polysemy of the term (e.g. Gherardi 2009; Simpson 2009), practice-based studies need to acknowledge its various meanings and make explicit how these meaning shape their study of work practices (see Table 2).

Meanings of Practice	**References**
Practice is considered as being complex, unpredictable and collective, and referred to a specific social system	Schulz 2005
Practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.	Schatzki 2001
Practice as the conduct of transactional life, which involves the temporally-unfolding, symbolically-mediated interweaving of experience and action	Simpson 2009
'Practices' will refer to shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things', this last in the broadest sense	Whittington 2006
Practice as temporarily unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings	Schatzki1996
Practice is action informed by meaning drawn from a particular group context	Cook and Brown 1999
Practice as a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action	Wenger 1998
Practice is routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.	Reckwitz 2002
Practices are discernible patterns of actions arising from habituated tendencies and internalized dispositions rather than from deliberate, purposeful goal-setting initiatives	Chia and MacKay 2007
Practices provide the behavioural, cognitive, procedural, discursive and physical resources through which multiple actors are able to interact in order to socially accomplish collective activity	Jarzabkowski et al. 2007

Table 2 Meanings of practice

The humanist and post-humanist theorists have a different focus when viewing 'practices' (Schatzki 2001). The humanists focus on 'practices' as an array of human activities (what people do). Equating 'what people do' with practices, however, leads to some fundamental difficulties. It makes it difficult to de-centre individuals and focus on the social nature of 'practices' (Chia and MacKay 2007) and it fails to understand practice as an epistemology -'a generative source of knowledge' (Gherardi 2009a). Scholars who argue against using activities and 'practices' inter-changeably, view 'practices' as including tacit knowledge, skills and pre-suppositions (Chia and MacKay 2007) that are embedded in institutional and organisational context (Swan et al. 2007) and include a shared logic for making judgements in matters of ethics and aesthetics (Gherardi 2009b). They argue that it is from these 'practices' that activities are seen to emerge. The post-humanists include material objects in their discussion of practices (e.g., Jonsson et al. 2009; Orlikowski 2006) and emphasise the need to examine the relationality between social world and materiality and how humans and artefacts align (Gherardi 2009a). The expertise of the practitioners is seen to be depending upon the relationship between practitioner and non-human objects (Cetina 2007). In our research, as discussed earlier, we followed Wenger's (1998) notion of 'practices' (See Table 1). It includes both, 'what people do' and shared logic for 'what people do'. Our experience agrees with suggestions that activities, shared logic of practice, and practitioners are interconnected and would appear so in an empirical investigation (Jarzabowski et al. 2007).

We needed to reflect on *what paradigmatic assumptions are implied in our research while adopting a practice perspective? What does viewing practices from 'inside' and 'outside' mean?* While our ontological and epistemological assumptions are implied in our view of the problem domain and the application of the theory to generate research questions, an explicit reflection of these philosophical notions became important for making decisions about operationalising the research questions. The turn taken by practice theorists presents a distinct social ontology (Goldkuhl 2006) that, as discussed earlier, decenters mind, text, and conversation and foregrounds 'practices'. There are, however, different epistemological positions that practice theorist take. Practices can be viewed from two perspectives: from *outside* and from *inside* (Gheradi 2009a). Viewing practices from outside implies a focus on patterns and regularities but viewing them from inside involves understanding practices from the practitioners' point of view. We were interested in *going inside* and followed an interpretive research paradigm. Our ontological position is relativism and we believe that "*what is said to be 'the way things are' is the sense we make of them"* (Crotty 1998, p. 64). In our research, we agree with the distinct social ontology of practice theories (Goldkuhl 2006) that foregrounds 'practices'. Constructionism explains our epistemological orientation and enshrines a belief that we do not discover meaning but rather construct meaning in our engagement with the world (Crotty 1998, p. 64).

The next issue was *how do we use a specific practice theory to inform work practice research?* Our paradigmatic assumptions guided us on this issue as they influenced (a) our views on what constitutes theory (b) use of theory (Charmaz 2006; Walsham 1995) and (c) choice of methods of enquiry (Gherardi 2009). We adopted Walsham's (1995) suggestion regarding how interpretive studies can use theoretical concepts without being constrained by them for a number of reasons:

> *To create an initial theoretical framework which takes account of previous knowledge, and which creates a sensible theoretical basis to inform the topics and approach of the early empirical work…* [but also] *preserve a considerable degree of openness to the field data, and a willingness to modify initial assumptions and theories* [resulting in] *initial theories being expanded, revised, or abandoned altogether* (p. 76).

The concepts of CoP, boundary practice, and boundaries were used to frame our research perspective and inform our empirical work. In analysing data we remained open to field data and were not constrained by the theoretical concepts. We revisited these concepts, where required, in discussing our findings to account for any theoretical grounding (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2003), or lack of it, that seemed apparent from our empirical findings.

The next issue was to consider how an *interpretive research paradigm informed selection of research methods and research design* (See Figure 3). An interpretive case study method was adopted to understand the practice of BAs. It is an appropriate method to understand practitioners' issues (Benbasat et. al 1987), to capture the reality of practice in considerable detail (Galliers 1991), and for areas where theory and understanding have not been well developed (Darke et al. 1998).

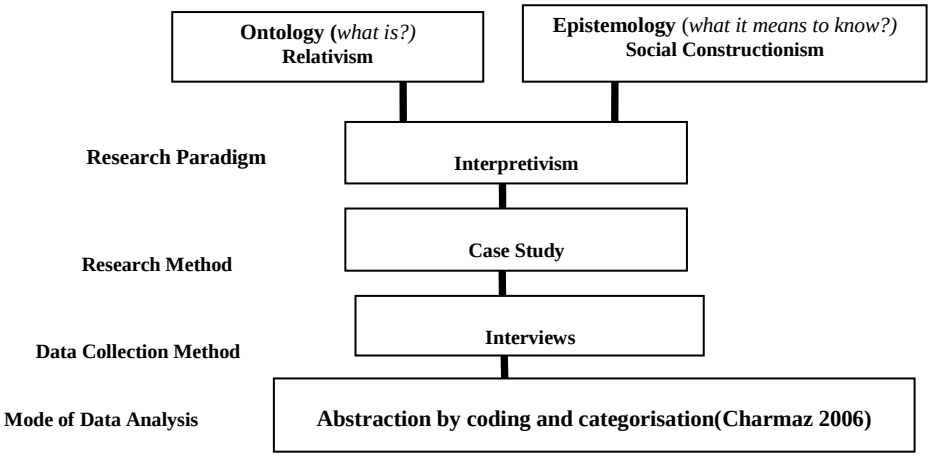

Figure 3. Research paradigm, research method, data collection and analysis methods (Developed from Crotty (1998) and Myers (1997))

Recognising the situated nature of practices, a multiple case design was adopted to investigate practices in multiples organisations. Being interested in an interpretive understanding of practices, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. While the focus was on understanding the practice of BAs, an attempt at understanding a boundary practice would be incomplete without the perspective of other participants in the practice. Thus, we interviewed not only the BAs but also the users and IT staff that interact with the BAs. We interviewed 19 BAs, 10 users, and 10 IT staff across four organisations. Semi-structured interviews of 30-60 minute duration were conducted between October 2009 and January 2011 and audio recordings were transcribed. The interview guide was informed by the theoretical concepts discussed earlier but we remained open to other questions that became relevant to the research objective and emerging analysis.

Since our interest in the cases was to present an account of practices of business analysts, we followed Stake's (1995) suggestion that the data analysis approach should focus on abstraction by coding and categorisation and thus followed data analysis techniques from Charmaz (2006). The coding followed a two step process: Initial coding and focused coding. Initial coding had a focus on interpreting participants' meanings and actions (Charmaz 2006, p. 49) and involved, as far as possible, line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts. Focused coding required that we used the most significant initial codes to label larger amounts of data (Charmaz 2006, p. 57-58). Focussed codes and associated data segments were compared with each other to raise the analysis to a higher level of abstraction and to form categories. These categories were then used to discuss the practices of business analysts and for any theoretical grounding that seemed apparent.

The next issue to consider was *how do we present results and make a contribution to knowledge?* Although we found it easier to report specific empirical findings from cases, the bigger challenge in answering the research questions was to discuss all finding from a single case. The strategy we followed was to aggregate categories into groups so that findings can be organised to answer the research questions. An example of this approach can be seen in Figure 4 where empirical categories are aggregated under 3 themes to answer the research question: what constitutes boundary practice work in the practice of business analysts? Since the categories were available across the cases, they serve as a means for cross-case comaprison.

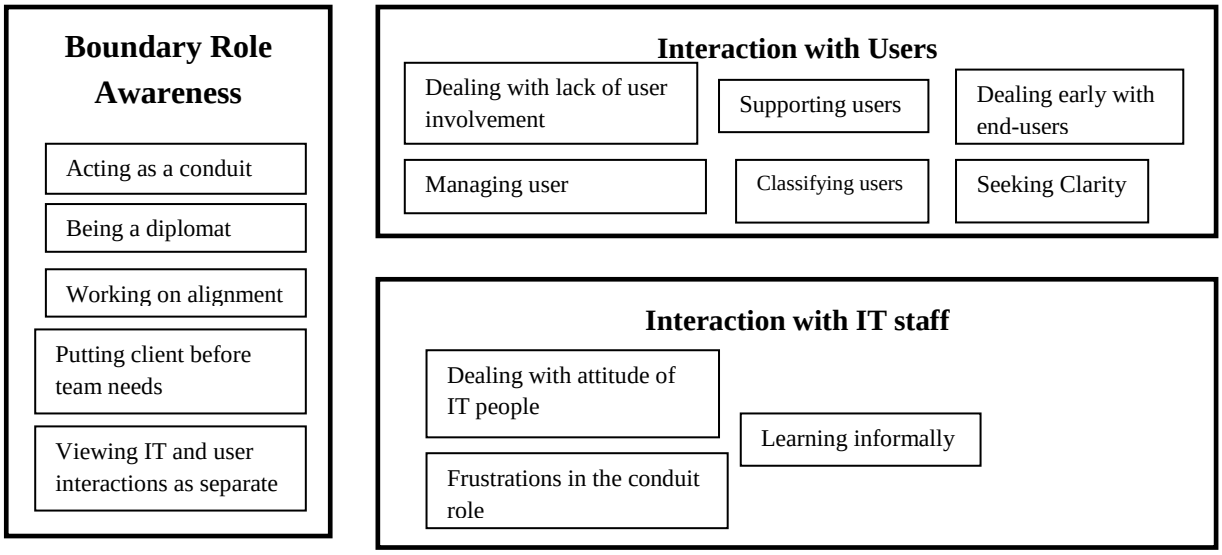

Figure 4. Aggregating categories to present results

Practice based studies need to consider how their knowledge contributions have a utility for practice and academic research (Corley and Gioia 2011). For improving practical utilty, we follow Jarzabkowski et al.'s(2007) suggestion that, usefulness of descriptive, theoretical accounts of practices and the ability to address the "so what?" question can be improved by extrapolating findings to potential implications for practice. Achieving utility for academic research is more challenging as practice theorists are generally wary of attributing explanatory power to theories(Schatzki 2001). Therefore, while the descriptive accounts of practices may not be able to compete with the generalisation of grand theories, they should rely on their usefulness as a 'heuristic device' (Reckwitz 2002). We also intend to consider Walsham's(1995) suggestion that four types of generalisations can be drawn from interpretive case studies: *the development of concepts, the generation of theory, the drawing of specific implications, and the contribution of rich insight*(p.79). Table 3 gives examples of nature of practical and research implications that can be drawn from results.

Implications for practice	**Implications for research**
- BAs closeness or distance from either IT staff or users is likely to influence (a) focus of their work (b) users' and IT staffs' perceived closeness and trust (c) legitimacy in spanning boundaries. - BAs are not expected to be experts in business and technical domain. They are likely to better meet the role expectations if they focus more on (a) their analytical ability, and (b) ability to ask the right questions and enable the users to better understand their requirements	- For boundary practices, negotiating with practices across boundaries seems more important than negotiating within their own practice. -further research is needed to identify boundaries that that are introduced by a boundary practice and understand their possible consequences - future research needs to investigate how the documentation, tools, and processes used by business analysts become a source of boundaries for a boundary practice

Table 3. Examples of extrapolating and generalising from findings to serve practical and research utility (Vashist et al. 2010, 2011)

5 Implications of Using Practice Perspective in Work Practice Research

Studies adopting a practice perspective in examining work practices could address issues related to the practical relevance of research. There is one view that suggests that legitimacy of research rests on practical relevance (Klein and Rowe 2008). Another view suggests that research outcomes should

have an academic focus to develop students into reflective practitioners (Davenport and Markus 1999). More recently, scholars have argued that it is problematic to assume that academic knowledge can be transferred to practitioners (Beech et al. 2010; Knights and Scarbrough 2010; Zundel and Kokkalis 2010). In this view, relevance is seen as temporary and ever changing (Wieringa and Heerkens 2006) and academics are expected to focus on new insights rather than address immediate practical problems (Zundel and Kokkalis 2010). We are of the view that practice based studies of work practices are uniquely positioned to serve both the practitioner and research communities. They have the potential to expose rigor-relevance divide as artificial (Gulati 2007) or unnecessary. For practitioners, they can not only extrapolate findings relevant to practice, but provide a platform for *engaged scholarship* (Van De Ven 2007). For example, the practice research framework discussed earlier could be adapted for a practice-research engagement that results in 'practical theories' (Goldkuhl 2006) that meet the demands of both academic and practitioner audiences (Scheneberger et al. 2009; Taylor et al. 2010).

The practice perspective in work practice studies has the potential to bring inter-disciplinary insights into organisation research. For example, IS researchers have used practice theories in understanding organisational competence in boundary spanning (Levina and Vaast 2005) and use of IT (Orlikowski 2000). We find it difficult to agree with suggestions that organisational researchers need to use "indigenous" theories instead of importing theories from disciplines like sociology and psychology that may create blind spots (Suddaby et. al. 2011). While we acknowledge the dangers of being partially 'blinded' by use of a theoretical lens, we do not agree that closing disciplinary boundaries to extant, relevant knowledge will improve practical relevance. The appropriateness of a theory for work practice research, in our view, needs to be judged by its ability to (a) provide insights into the phenomena of interest and allow researchers to question assumptions embedded in extant literature (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011) and (b) capture the logic of practice through emphasising practical rationality (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). For example, boundary practice perspective allowed us to (a) investigate the tri-partite arrangement amongst the users, IT staff, and business analysts and (b) view requirements analysis as a social process and provide outcomes that are relevant to practice and research.

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