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**Exploring Material-Discursive Practices:
Comments on Hardy and Thomas' *Discourse in a Material World***

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We welcome the opportunity to engage in a discussion about how organization researchers might take materiality more seriously in their empirical studies. As a topic that has inspired us to revise our modus operandi and achieve fresh insights in our work, we believe that it can offer scholars an innovative approach to studying key research questions in contemporary organizing (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014). Our intent in this commentary is to support the turn to materiality, and contribute to it by considering some differences in our approach from that proposed by Hardy and Thomas (forthcoming), as well as those of other scholars who have been advocating attention to the material in discourse studies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009; Iedema, 2007; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012). We offer these in the spirit of constructive engagement, recognizing that the concepts at stake are necessarily constructs-in-the-making, which for us makes the examination of multiple possibilities all the more generative and valuable.

As interest in materiality progresses, we are witnessing the emergence of an exciting repertoire of approaches. Hardy and Thomas in their article, “Discourse in a Material World,” propose the use of a discursive approach to study materiality, arguing that a deeper examination of the relationship between materiality and discourse can yield valuable insights into the operation of power in organizations (p. 2). We find common ground with Hardy and Thomas in their assertion that discourse studies can address materiality and acknowledge the importance of Foucault’s work in this regard. We particularly connect with what they refer to as a “fundamentally radical approach” that does not assert the primacy of human agency in social life. Re-framing conceptual concerns away from human-centered approaches is a bold move and we recognize that doing so disrupts long-standing assumptions informing many areas of management research (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008).

The ideas that we offer in our discussion are inspired by agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007), which not only theorizes the entanglement of matter and meaning but also assumes a particular position on scholarly practice itself founded on the practice of *diffraction*, one of its underlying concepts. Barad's definition of diffraction as "accounting for how practices matter" (Barad, 2007, p. 88) calls on us to enact research practice differently, drawing our attention to the politics of how we frame, stage, and conduct research. This is consequential because in agential realism, our analyses don't just reflect the world, they are active interventions: the making of difference. This applies to every aspect of academic practice, offering not only a conceptual and methodological apparatus but also an ethic of reading and writing that turns away from "excessive critique" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 91) towards 'respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices, not coarse grained portrayals that make caricatures of another discipline from some position outside it' (Barad, 2007, p. 93). This, of course, holds salience in this paper; rather than setting up unmovable positions or defensive foils, a diffractive methodology encourages us to recognize the insights that are generated through boundary-making practice. Thus even as we participate in a point-counterpoint exchange, our approach is not so much to "counterpoint" as to articulate some critical details emanating from our theoretical standpoint around which we hope to generate further discussion and interest.

In elaborating their theme of "discourse in a material world," Hardy and Thomas (p. 3) draw on Hook (2007) to emphasize the importance of seeing "the discursive effects of the material, and the material effects of the discursive." They illustrate this by examining how discourse interrelates with four different aspects of materiality — bodies, spaces, objects, and practices — and offering some important avenues for further empirical investigation. We

were surprised to see “practices” analyzed as a distinct aspect of materiality alongside bodies, spaces and objects. As we discuss below, our approach treats practices as ontological. As such, bodies, spaces and objects are not separable from or detached from practice. Rather — to paraphrase Taylor (1993) — bodies, spaces, and objects are, at any given time, what practices have made them. In other words, practices are constitutive of the world. This emphasizes some important differences between our approach and those of Hardy and Thomas, which we consider below in terms of the ideas of *materialization* and *performativity*.

Materialization and Performativity

In developing agential realism, Barad (2007) draws on a Foucauldian notion of discourse, but suggests that further attention needs to be given to how meaning and matter are held together. In particular, she maintains that Foucault is “not clear about the material nature of discursive practices” (2007, p. 63), and is thus less able to account for how “discourse is made possible” in practice (2007, p. 148). Her position is that in order to exist, discourse must be *materialized* in some form and in specific times and places.

For Barad, materiality is not a separate or static entity, but dynamically produced-in-practice: “not a thing but a doing” (2007, p. 151). As she explains, “Matter is not immutable or passive. Nor is it a fixed support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse.” Instead, it is a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface that we call “matter.” Thus rather than focusing on the discursive and asking how it exists in, is related to, or shaped by the material world, we center on practices and treat these always and everywhere as *material-discursive*. As Barad argues (2003, p. 822), practices are constituted by both meanings and materialities:

The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulate in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.

The notion of material-discursive emphasizes the entangled inseparability of discourse and materiality. We follow Barad in understanding this *entanglement as ontological*. While Hardy and Thomas observe that discourse and materiality are “inextricably intertwined” (p. 2), they view this *entanglement as empirical*, positioning discourse and materiality as ontologically separable elements, as can be seen through a number of examples. The title “Discourse in a Material World,” for instance, points to a material world within which discourse is located, while the call to study the “intersections of the discursive and the material” (p. 8) suggests these elements are distinct albeit overlapping. Further, Hardy and Thomas argue that “discourse enables us to talk about apparently naturally existing entities by fixing their meaning” (p. 12), and conclude by noting that “discourse brings to materiality — and materiality to discourse — an understanding of the role of power relations in the construction of our realities” (p. 21). We don’t disagree about the importance of meanings and power in enacting reality, but we consider materiality and discourse as constituted through each other. On this view, materiality does not “bring” anything to discourse (or vice versa) because these are ontologically inseparable. As Barad notes “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with one another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (2007, p. ix).

Consequently, an agential realist approach does not make *a priori* distinctions between the discursive and the non-discursive. From this approach, it would not be tenable to put “materiality more firmly under a discursive lens” (Hardy and Thomas, p. 21), because this would require us to identify material “elements” (p. 2), “aspects” (p. 4) or “entities” (p.

21) that exist apart from discourse. Studies inspired by agential realism work from the position that discourse cannot exist without being materialized. That is, discourse lacks an independent, self-contained existence apart from material instantiation in some form. For example, whether spoken speech, written email, official records, or online blog, the discourse does not pre-exist its specific material production as speech, email, record, or blog post in particular times and places.

Rather than positing the material in elements, aspects, or entities, and asking how these influence, mediate, afford, or interact with discourse, the focus is on materializations — how discourse is materially enacted in practice (Introna, 2011). This material-discursive approach thus allows us to ask how specific materializations make a difference in the enactment of reality in practice. As material-discursive practices are constitutive, they configure reality, or put another way, they are *performative*. Performativity focuses attention on the ongoing, dynamic, relational enactment of the world. This is a critically different perspective than the more conventional one of representationalism, which entails identifying *relationships* between distinct entities. As Barad (2003, p. 802) notes:

The move toward performative alternatives to representationalism shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions.

Performativity reframes our understanding of reality as a contingent and practical accomplishment (Law 2004, p. 137). Reality is an ongoing process (Hernes, 2008; Tsoukas and Chia 2002); it is enacted in practice. As Law and Urry (2004, p. 396, emphasis in original) put it “the real is real enough. It is obdurate. It cannot be wished away. But it is also *made*.” While much of the literature on performativity has highlighted the importance of discursive performativity, where utterances or statements create what they purport to describe (Austin, 1962), Barad emphasizes a *material-discursive* performativity. She writes (2003, p. 828):

A crucial part of the performative account that I have proposed is a rethinking of the notions of discursive practices and material phenomena and the relationship between them. On an agential realist account, discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted.

Performativity offers a way of understanding how the world is constantly being made and reconfigured in material-discursive practices. For example, studies in the sociology of finance have highlighted the performativity of financial models that produce the market conditions that they describe (Beunza and Stark 2004; Callon 1998; Callon and Muniesa 2005; MacKenzie 2006; MacKenzie and Millo 2003). In MacKenzie's (2006) study of the Black-Scholes options pricing model, he showed how this financial model first described the world of options pricing and how over time it then produced that world through becoming materially enacted in specific trading skills, computer algorithms, and financial institutions. More recently, Cabantous and Gond (2011) argue that rational decision making in organizations can be understood performatively — as the ongoing activities of decision analysts serve to produce an organizational reality informed by rational choice theory.

Similar performative dynamics are at work in the development of social media websites that collate online user-generated reviews and ratings to produce algorithmically ranked products and services (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014). We have recently undertaken a study of these material enactments in the hospitality industry (Orlikowski and Scott, 2014; Scott and Orlikowski, 2012, 2014), attempting to understand how the material-discursive practices of hotel evaluation are changing as valuations move online, and with what consequential outcomes.

Materialization and Performativity in Hotel Evaluation

In comparing traditional practices of hotel evaluation with those emerging online, a number of significant discursive materializations come to light. Consider the world prior to

online social media websites. In this world, the primary source of guest feedback to hoteliers was face-to-face interactions during a stay or paper-based comment cards completed on departure. This world has been reconfigured with the emergence of social media websites such as TripAdvisor, where feedback is now materialized on an online website and intended to communicate with the public at large (or more precisely, anyone with Internet service). The material-discursive practices producing guest comments on paper cards are significantly different to those producing online hotel evaluations on TripAdvisor. Comparing these not only draws attention to the making of consequential discursive materializations associated with social media, but also helps us to identify critical performative outcomes that in turn inform the research agenda.

Blank guest comment cards are typically found in hotel rooms, offered as a channel for private communication, soliciting direct and confidential feedback from guests about specific aspects of hotel facilities and services. Once regarded as a “best practice” hospitality innovation, they have been adopted sector-wide: hoteliers commonly use them and guests expect to find them. In other words, they are a standard manifestation of normative guest-hotelier relations and as such, regularly included in institutionalized hospitality curricula. Comment cards are typically materialized on paper, laid out over one or two pages with a message from hotel management encouraging guests to provide feedback by rating facilities and services on a scale (from excellent to poor). Written comments can be made in small, fixed-sized text boxes that limit the length and style of remarks. In terms of timing and placing, guest comment cards are an optional part of guest departure and the hotel “check-out” routine. Guests pay their bill and are co-present with hotel staff; it is usually a time of smiles and felicitations in which comment cards are either slid discreetly across the counter at

reception or placed in a box in the lobby. An analysis of guest comment cards suggests that the (arguably captive) staging of this bounded feedback prompts guest responses that more closely resemble signing a visitor's book (e.g., "Just perfect. We will be back again!"), rather than providing a critical evaluation.

Practices vary, but the hoteliers that we interviewed reviewed this guest feedback to flag actionable issues associated with maintenance (e.g. a leaky tap) or service (e.g. tardy room service) and then filed the cards away in a storeroom. Some comment cards promise the guest a follow-up by the manager, and when the guest provides contact information a personal phone call or letter typically ensues if the hotelier regards the issue as worthy of response. In general, guest comment cards are difficult to complete without having being a guest at the hotel, and they are only available to a few hotel staff who read, discuss, and respond to them in private.

In contrast, online hotel evaluations on TripAdvisor materialize public assessments of hotels by guests to the world at large. These social media postings are configured to include both ratings using a few specific (but undefined) criteria, and comments in a relatively unconstrained text area, which facilitates the posting of detailed compositions. The website is multi-media which means that guest photographs can be appended to reviews so as to provide compelling illustrations of the points made. Reviews are typically posted after a stay (e.g., days, weeks or months later) but may also be written during a stay using hotel Wi-Fi in bedrooms or bars. Concerns have been raised about the possibility of fake reviews on social media websites with estimates suggesting that between 10 to 30 percent of online reviews are false. The review platform is designed to allow website contributors varying degrees of pseudonymity and the anonymity of the crowd may elicit bolder comments.

Accountability mechanisms are configured differently online and although there is scope for hotel managers to make brief, public responses to reviews, TripAdvisor relies upon public “course corrections” (travelers countering prior reviews) to “put the record straight.”

Hotel managers check daily or weekly for new TripAdvisor postings about their hotel. As online reviews are intended primarily for other travelers, the feedback hoteliers receive varies. Some comments are direct (pointing out a rude receptionist or praising bar staff), others are indirect (like street noise), or they raise issues that are “unfixable” (location, age of property). Managers integrate this feedback in their ongoing running of the hotel, printing copies of reviews to take to weekly staff meetings, and using them in formal staff appraisals. We found one hotel pinning printed versions of TripAdvisor comments on the employee noticeboard to praise or shame staff members. Hoteliers are often at a loss to know whether and how to effectively reply to public and anonymous feedback. They worry about letting serious complaints or mistaken attributions stand without explanation or correction, but fret over engaging in a conspicuous ‘he said, she said’ debate that could end up undermining their credibility.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the material enactment of guest feedback on comment cards compared to TripAdvisor postings is the relationship that is implied and the degree of transparency afforded to different constituencies. When a guest makes a complaint to the hotelier through the comment card it is reviewed, entered in the hotels’ records, and archived, while remaining private and confined within the boundaries of the business. When a guest makes a complaint on TripAdvisor, it is made visible almost immediately online and remains continually available to the public at large. This shift in material-discursive practices from captive, private comments restricted to hoteliers to online assessments made by anyone and accessible persistently by everyone is deeply consequential.

The different practices producing guest comments and TripAdvisor reviews configure guests and hoteliers differently. Guests who have read TripAdvisor reviews about a hotel prior to staying at it have more detailed knowledge about others' experiences with the hotel. Many feel empowered by this information to request particular rooms or services, and to demand upgrades or discounts on threat of possible negative reviews. Hoteliers in a world of TripAdvisor no longer see a guest walking through the door; they see a potential reviewer. Furthermore, the two different forms of guest feedback have different implications for the running of a hotel and its revenues. Due to the private nature of guest comment cards, this feedback primarily influences the operations of a hotel. In contrast, the very public TripAdvisor postings influence both hotel operations and revenues. While some hotels have seen a dramatic rise in bookings and income from being discovered on TripAdvisor, others have experienced a sharp decline in both bookings and revenues as a result of negative online reviews. As the CEO of TripAdvisor has acknowledged (Livingstone, 2007, p. 371): "Our traffic is so high now that we know, for better or for worse, we have a significant impact on where visitors are choosing to stay. ... When we changed our algorithm, it dropped [the rankings of] some hotels and raised others. Our phones were ringing, because we had had a material effect on their businesses."

Over time, shifts in how guest feedback is materialized in practice — from comment cards to online reviews — are producing different guests, different hoteliers, and different hotels. And these performative changes, in turn, are serving to reconfigure the hospitality industry.

Conclusion

We conclude by joining with Hardy and Thomas in urging management researchers to take materiality seriously in their studies of organizations. Our specific approach to materiality in organizational scholarship orients us around criticality rather than criticism. In

other words, there have been and will no doubt continue to be multiple ways to study materiality in organizations. We do not believe there is a single, best way to do so, and we value the possibilities that can come from multiple approaches. We have thus framed our remarks in the spirit of generative discussion rather than critique, to clarify differences and open us lines of exploration and engagement.

We have pointed to the particular recalibration of practice that our approach entails and how this enables us to call out critical moments of interest. Our approach to the materiality of organizational life both complements and differs from the directions recommended by Hardy and Thomas and other discourse scholars. This is evident in both philosophical and practical ways: we move from holding materiality and discourse as only empirically entwined entities to the ontological entanglement of materiality and discourse. Drawing on Barad's (2007) agential realism, we view materiality as constitutively entangled with discourse in practice, not separate from, prior to, or distinct from discourse and practice. The implication of this for management and organizational research is that instead of framing our studies in terms of interaction — how two separate entities shape each other — we focus on (material) enactment and concern ourselves with detailing how specific materializations of discourse make a difference in practice, and with what performative consequences. As we illustrated, this research apparatus helped us examine shifting discursive materializations of guest feedback over time, and allowed us to understand how the phenomenon of hospitality is being performatively reconfigured by the rise of online social media such as TripAdvisor.

A focus on materialization and performativity is particularly useful given that organizations are increasingly depending on such open-ended phenomena as large-scale data

capture and dynamic algorithmic evaluation of online activity. The rise of algorithmic practices — across multiple sectors such as finance, travel, publishing, etc. — is raising critical questions about intervention, surveillance, accountability, and ethics (Scott and Orlikowski, 2012). We believe studying material-discursive practices can help us address these questions — by examining the specific discursive materializations of algorithms (what algorithms are being manifested, how, in particular times and places?), their performance (what situated outcomes are being produced as a result?), and their performativity (what realities are being enacted in practice over time?). How the different entailments of algorithmic phenomena play out and in what conditions are important empirical and ethical questions with significant salience for our understanding of management.

A focus on materialization and performativity is additionally important because it reminds us that the world is always in the process of becoming; it is enacted in practice. This is an important move that also prompts us to acknowledge and account for how practices matter in our own scholarship. How do the specific discursive materializations of the concepts we use in management research make a difference to what we learn, and with what performative consequences for management? As Law and Urry (2004, p. 396) note, research is an active intervention in the world: “Every time we make reality claims in social science we are helping to make some social reality more or less real.” So we are encouraged by the renewed interest in materiality within organization studies and hope that our discussion along with the others in this point-counterpoint will support and stimulate further explorations. For these discussions are consequential, helping to make some realities more real and others less real.

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