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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Practice Theory, Leadership-as-Practice, and Social Action

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## ABSTRACT

Although practice theory has significantly contributed to our understanding of the mechanisms underlying social change, it does not take a position or advocate for particular meso-macro changes, such as responsible management, because it is a theory wedded to ontological understanding. How people choose to 'get along' in life and manage their goods is all part of the practices, which fall under the theorist's microscope. On other hand, the applied field of leadership-as-practice is tied to change as its definitive property; in fact, leadership is defined by turning points occurring in the spaces between people, which, in turn, can lead to changes in the trajectory of the flow of practice. After narrowing the definition of social change in this paper as social action and—institutionally—as responsible management, the paper turns to a comparison between how practice theory contributes to our understanding of the evolution of social action and how leadership-as-practice, relying on the former's erstwhile elucidation, attempts to initiate and facilitate such action. The latter discussion of leadership-as-practice includes an accounting of the impetus for change initiation, its diffusion and prefigured processes, and the post-institutional applications afforded through its link with practice theory. The essay concludes by pointing out the principal contribution of the paper that social change need not rely on exclusive individual direction but on the collective capacity of the agents affiliated with the practice deriving the means to produce more just and sustainable lives.

## 1 | Introduction

In the annals of practice theory, there is ample coverage of cases of agency in which particular social actors influence others within their social spaces to undertake some action preferred by the initial actors. In some instances, this agency can lead to social action, whether as a move to sustainability practices by the organization or as a proactive response to grand challenges affecting the wider society. Nevertheless, practice theory tracts do not tend to *prescribe* such acts of agency. They are content to *explain* them, when they occur, by whom, to what extent, and in what context. So to Schatzki (2019), for example, it is important to recognize how practice sequences composed of chains of human activity combined with processes, structures, and material elements—such as digital tools or the built

environment—all together interact in diverse combinations to recursively affect and be affected by social change. Perhaps this descriptive and analytic tradition has evolved, as in the instance of phenomenology, which preceded it, from a refutation of the view that only human beings can control how the world is configured and rather that it is made sense of by the practices in which they participate (Rouse 1996; Koo 2017; Schatzki 2022). Further, Schatzki (2022) affirms that the processes or 'doings' in life not only incorporate but are also defined by the world through which they proceed. Accordingly, even when it comes to normative aspirations in practice theory, it can be said that whatever is wished to be good is whatever good is determined to be. Ontologies remain the center of practice theory's conceptual architecture; thus, whether referring to 'doings' or 'goods,' they along with material arrangements are constitutive of practices.

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On the other hand, leadership-as-practice (L-A-P), which has sprung from practice theory, is in its construction entirely about the production of change. L-A-P scholars have long defined its definition of leadership itself as occurring when turning points change the spaces between people including their material events, which, in turn, can lead to changes in the trajectory of the flow of practices (Raelin 2016b). In one of the first studies on leadership-as-practice, B. Carroll et al. (2008) asserted that leadership is an emergent experience that unfolds through day-to-day experiences that are embedded within a particular context and that preferably occur through social practices rather than from the competencies exhibited by single individuals. Later in a subsequent study, Crevani (2018) pointed out that change occurs through the ongoing collective process of producing direction that is continuously constructed in real time. Direction is accordingly never fully achieved; rather, it is an organic ‘never-ending story’ of moment-by-moment reconstruction. These cornerstone L-A-P studies situate leadership as divergent from the standard entitative model of leadership, which stipulates that leadership issues from the traits and heroics of individual actors under the long-standing ‘great man’ theory portrayed by Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle. Leadership in this classic view is thought to arise when a presumed ‘leader’ influences and motivates others to contribute toward the success of the group or the organization of which they are members. In contrast to the usage of influence as personal agency, Simpson et al. (2018) have proposed a play on words, suggesting that in the case of leadership-as-practice, the prevailing property would not be singular but rather would be an ‘in-flow-ence,’ signifying a collective galvanizing movement constituted and emergent within the practice.

Leadership in a L-A-P world would thus be associated with social change, which occurs in practice as people engage with and are molded by others, by their surrounding artifacts, and by the context in which they live and work. The changes in practice would not reside outside of leadership but would be very much part of it and would be ascribed normative meaning based on ongoing sociopolitical interactions among the involved people, objects, and systems.

So, where does this leave us when it comes to questions concerning responsible management, which organically address how leadership will confront the fundamental questions of the survival of the species and which require some form of social action leading to social change. Are practice theory and L-A-P on the same page when it comes to the need to question and denaturalize regimes of practice or, in other words, to change them? Is it sufficient to rely on a theory (practice theory in this case), which explains the dynamics in a given practice, which in its own right paves the way for those on the ground to mobilize and attempt to effect change in the very practice? Do we not need an applied theory to follow explanation with a means to confront the everyday practices that perpetuate some of the most serious societal afflictions in the world today, such as inequality, persecution, corruption, discrimination, and the like?

This article is intended to address this seeming discrepancy and current puzzlement between a core field of social inquiry and its applied offspring when it comes to the instigation of social

agency. On one hand, we have a field—practice theory—that sees normative and axiological concerns as tied up with the very practices in which they are embedded. On the other, we have an applied field—leadership-as-practice—that relies on practice theory but then prescribes and attempts to implement changes through explicit social agency. Before delving further into these distinctions between practice theory and L-A-P, let us start by offering a definition of social change for the purposes of this paper.

## 2 | How Shall We Define Social Change?

When we speak about social change, we tend to think about changes in cultural norms and social structures within our institutions and across institutions within a society. Thus, some of these can occur at a microlevel within our immediate context, such as within a current organization, whereas others can range beyond our immediate circumstances and can thus be viewed as proactive responses to grand challenges affecting the wider society. Within the management literature, these grand challenges often focus on responses that are referred to as opportunities but even more, on obligations to engage in ‘responsible management’ or RM (also referred to as responsible leadership; see, e.g., Javed et al. 2024). This latter approach might be referred to as progressive because it often requires a reallocation of sociopolitical power, often involving those who are disenfranchised. We might refer to RM, then, as a form of *social action* occurring within the organization—a subject that we will return to later in this section. Meanwhile, RM has often been defined as constituting three domains of responsible practice, namely ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability (Gherardi and Laasch 2022). Let us look at them in turn.

The study and application of *ethics* is associated with questions of what is morally right/wrong or good/bad and how management can be enjoined to make decisions and take actions that inhere such moral attributes. Often, moral decision making is accompanied by tools, such as ethical codes or moral guidelines, which prescribe model behaviors to accomplish ethical outcomes, although ethics can also be acquired and exercised through contestation over multiple, changing, and even conflicting perspectives and practices within and across the organization (Clegg et al. 2007; Laasch and Conaway 2015; De Bruin 2016).

The *social responsibility* component of RM has consistently addressed the need for corporate managers to take responsibility for the impact of their activities on a wide range of stakeholders as well as to take heed of the sociopolitical and physical environments in which they do business. Among the alternative framings arising from this long-standing approach are the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its subfields of social issues in management, corporate citizenship, and social entrepreneurship (Waddock 2004; Schwartz and Carroll 2008). Among the early advocates of corporate social responsibility, A. B. Carroll (1979) and Wood (1991) called for corporate executives to develop principles and policies to manage the formal processes of response to the social impacts of their company’s conduct and to develop the means to formally assess its social

involvement at individual, organizational, and institutional levels.

The domain of *sustainability* is universally directed toward means to protect our physical environment from irreparable harm that could threaten the survival of future generations, especially of living things. Responsible managers (Kennedy and Bocken 2020) in this context seek to integrate and report on three dimensions of performance—the social, economic, and environmental—to achieve what is often referred to as the triple bottom line or the three p's of people, profit, and planet in which an enterprise would be managed to ensure its financial integrity while improving employees' lives and ensuring the well-being of the planet (Elkington 1998).

Returning to the subset of social change, which I will refer to in this paper as social action for social change, the modus operandi entails people seeking to take action to improve their and others' current living conditions, to organize for the common good of all, and therein achieve social justice (see, e.g., Myers-Lipton 2022). Through responsible management, such outcomes can be sought as including and considering the interests of those historically ignored in strategic decisions, preventing harm to communities from environmental hazards inflicted by corporate waste, or assisting in community organizing to improve the quality of life for area residents.

Although practice theory has amply studied these adverse conditions in society, the change in these conditions is of particular interest to leadership-as-practice because any changes would occur through collective agency as opposed to through hierarchical assignment. In leadership-as-practice annals, leadership is referred to as socially constructed and thus accomplished within the company of others; accordingly, leadership-as-practice is woven into a social process of shared know-how among those engaged in embodied and practical collective accomplishments (Sandberg and Dall'Allba 2009; Svensson and von Knorring 2025). Its sensemaking arises from everyday material-discursive practices rather than from pre-established direction. Thus, L-A-P potentially represents an alternative critical discourse to the mainstream personality approach to leadership, which tends to rely on top managers to set an ethical and responsible direction for the firm. L-A-P in contrast takes advantage of the interconnectedness among people, encouraging the formation of community within which members through social critique may be able to resist inequitable social arrangements. According to Woods (2016) and his commentary on the ethical stance of L-A-P, it must rely on a philosophy of *co-development*, which arises from a tradition that recognizes the innate capacity for ethical agency not based upon a reliance on rules or hierarchy but rather upon active norms such as profound respect for one another and a commitment to one's community.

In this way, L-A-P aligns with a long-standing movement in political theory known as deliberative democracy in which relevant and involved stakeholders become involved in critical decisions within a given community using fair and civil deliberation of the issues at hand (Ercan 2014; Fishkin 2009). This process invites fact-finding and commentary from diverse voices, including

corporate interests, and can at times scale up to inform national and even global policymaking. Thus, as we shall see later in this paper, issues that begin at a local level can expand into a broader analysis of the corporation's connectedness to public discourses that have national and transnational implications across many institutions (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). What make the material-discursive qualities inherent in L-A-P critical to inquiry are the implications for corporate identities when the actions of corporate actors become subject to 'the scrutiny of open public debate, review, and determination' (Fung 2003, 52).

### 3 | Practice Theory's Contributions to Social Action

Turning next to the relationship between practice theory and social action/responsible management, practice theory has made important conceptual contributions to the mapping and explanation of large-scale social phenomena (Schatzki 2016a). In particular, it has helped us understand the agency of collective actors and how they operate to solve social problems. They work together within specific contexts or 'sites' that, accompanied by material arrangements and interconnected practices, shape their 'doings' and 'sayings' (Schatzki 2016b). Practice theory has also contributed to our understanding of nonstrategic social change emanating from contingent processes, such as habitual routines, nondeliberate and dispersed activity, cultural expectations, or technological co-discoveries (e.g., Shove 2003; Warde 2014). In fact, practice theory in some quarters tends to accord more weight to cultural associations, incremental shifts, unintentional coping activity, or networks suddenly mobilized compared to actors' strategic activities (Welch and Yates 2016; MacKay et al. 2021). Thus, social action is not seen as emanating from the one-time actions of single actors but rather from chains of activity—previous, long, complex, and interwoven actions—combined with material events and processes (Everts 2016). Jarzabkowski (2025) offers a further clarification that everyday mundane practices can bring about what she refers to as a 'flow of becoming' that over time can bring about social experiences that can be pro-social or harmful, even extreme. Social action may occur more methodically, however, as practitioners engage the unfolding phenomena—their emergence, their subsistence, their shifts, and their responses—so as to reconfigure them and their flows.

When it comes to large-scale social change, however, practices are ultimately constrained by social institutions that persist across time and by isomorphism that render them subject to conditions of recursiveness, routinization, and inertia (Jarzabkowski 2004). Noted practice theorist Bourdieu (1990) explains these resistant conditions in his reference to the *habitus*—the structuring dispositions that people in society internalize, resulting in a degree of constancy in culture as new information is reviewed based on information already in place. Actors will be influenced not only by their consideration of what is accessible and possible but also by their practical understandings that, in turn, govern subsequent practices (Bourdieu 1990; Kremser and Sydow 2022). Through the *habitus*, consequently, actors will select to engage in responsible practices if such practices are not only consistent with their own cognitive frames and dispositions

but also if they are immanent within the social field (e.g., the organization) in which they are enacted (van Aaken et al. 2013).

Extending the case of the durability of the habitus, Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) argue that change in routines needs to overcome the ‘three pillars’ of practice: the body, the material world, and the social world. The body incorporates the cognitive processes, knowledge, and physical dispositions acquired through social experiences, including, for example, hard-worn judgments often based on biases or unfounded beliefs. The material subsumes technology and infrastructure, which are at times scripted with a set of dispositions that can shape practices or in turn be shaped by practices. So, for example, buildings that are designed for energy efficiency may, in turn, allow residents to set low and comfortable air temperatures that require high energy demand. Lastly, the social world comprises social rules and values that become tacitly accepted and unspoken. Thus, continuing the above example, change in indoor energy consumption may require a public debate regarding what constitutes a comfortable indoor climate.

In sum, practice theory can be just as much about restrictions to change as forces promoting pervasive shifts in trajectories. Thus, if the institutionalized performances of practices are tracked by their reproductiveness, analysts can observe the often subtle shifts in social relations that can lead to potential change and adaptiveness. Thus, the phenomenological understanding of practices can be invaluable in change efforts to help actors identify the constraints against change posed by the dynamics, the material appurtenances, and the distinct contexts of systems of practices. Further, according to strong practice theorists such as Shove (2003, 2010), any focus on social action based on individuals’ attitudes or behaviors would be short-cited especially if it fails to incorporate the cross-purposes among interconnected practices; the durability and malleability of existing practices; and the social and power relations and contingencies of space and time surrounding the persistence of given practices. As an example, Hargreaves (2011) found that a major initiative at a construction company to implement environmentally friendly practices was, in part, thwarted by a facilities’ management team concerned about consequential implications having to do with data protection, hygiene, and fire hazard concerns. At the same time, the experiment in sustainability resulted in greater awareness and personal eco-responsive changes that seemed to have crept into workers’ professional identities.

Another important contribution of practice theory to social action and responsible management has been its characterization of collectives as a social actor, although practice theory cautions that they need to incorporate nonintentional or nonstrategic activity. Admittedly, some collective activity occurs within standard bureaucratic organizations such as when it is subsumed within the locus of the hierarchy, namely as orchestrated by particular managers-in-charge. Otherwise, collectives may organize within subcultures or through noninstitutionalized social movements, which can achieve a collective identity and co-produce a variety of social outcomes. These movements are held together through multiple practices and arrangements that may lead to collective performances through a concentration of

material, spatial, and temporal performances. Some such movements might even be latent, and thus not collectively identified, but like whistle-blowing within companies or like street vending in the public square, they may morph into a sense of collective solidarity through mutual recognition, common opportunities, and common threats (Bayat 2010; Welch and Warde 2015). Public beggars, for example in some circumstances, negotiate orderly spatial rules and codes of conduct and punish violators while uniting in solidarity to protect their habitat (see, e.g., Urbanik et al. 2024).

#### 4 | Leadership-as-Practice and Social Action

Although L-A-P has defined leadership as a moment of change in the flow of practice, it is still early to determine its definitive contribution to social action. However, authors have been outspoken in prodding the conversation away from the single out-in-front actor to collective actions (Willocks and Moralee 2021; Raelin 2023; Gott et al. 2025). Leadership-as-practice has also challenged the idea that agency appears separate from and outside of the social activity itself. Through legitimate social action, involved—often subordinated—social groups develop the capacity and harness the power to resist colonizing discourses (Jimenez-Luque 2021). The power for change emerges not only as a set of dynamic leadership conditions among such actors but also through societal norms, institutions, and via material contributions, such as technology (Steyaert and Hjorth 2006). In addition, as was addressed in an earlier section, democratic experiments in countries worldwide, referred to as direct, or otherwise participative or deliberative, democracy—in which ordinary citizens are assembled to deliberate and decide on critical issues—constitute another domain in which social action is mobilized through collective and embodied practices (Eslen-Ziya and Erhart 2015).

As L-A-P is concerned with practice as the featured unit of analysis, its flat ontology decenters the role of individuals and their dominant discourses as the main source of inspiration, meaning, and action. Rather, any agency on behalf of social action would emanate from practices involving human agents, their accompanying artifacts, and related material entanglements. The human is thus accorded a secondary role to the practice. This flatness takes the pressure off single individuals in authority to overcome organizational ethical lapses by independently leading a charge as a beacon of moral rectitude.

Some studies regarding pro-social work behavior suggest that although workers may initiate, in their case, work unit changes, they often do not act in a vacuum; rather, their proactivity is accomplished interdependently with other colleagues as well as, at times, with management (Bindl and Parker 2010; Thomas et al. 2010). Individuals rely upon their peers to help them develop and legitimate their proposed changes. Furthermore, successful changes connect with material-discursive practices that enable their ultimate disposition; for example, Vough et al. (2017) reported that their researched change-makers made effective use of issues boards, efficacy examples, feedback loops, and the use of recognized and accepted patterns of behavior.

In a similar vein, such fields as discursive analysis and socio-linguistics contend that social action does not arise singly but is carried out by agents who engage in coordinative discourses (Ager 1991; Schmidt, 2011). Nevertheless, observers from these fields are prone to point out that it is not only about who is speaking but also about how they are speaking—that is, how a message is delivered, in what medium, and to whom. Regarding the audience, it is also important to know what they are expecting, to what degree they understand the message, and how they might respond. Most often, the involved agents create a coalition for change working with a range of stakeholders, including the media, advocacy groups, public intellectuals, influencers, and even ordinary people who can provide general support and legitimacy to new initiatives (Zaller 1992; Risse-Kappen 1994).

In the posthumanism of L-A-P, leadership is thus inexorably social, and numerous elements beyond the human—rituals, technologies, bodies, physical arrangements, discourses—mutually constitute and reconstitute to create what Barad (2003) refers to as an ‘intra-action.’ The relation accordingly does not persist between separate entities but transforms into a dynamic process. The various elements constituting the practice interconnect, blurring distinctions between the agent and the collective or between the organization and the environment. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) prefer the word ‘agencement’ over agency to emphasize the processual nature of how agency occurs as the forming of an assemblage and not as a fixed state of things assembled. Gherardi (2016) further explains that the agency in question be considered a collaborative endeavor working through the process of becoming, in which actors see their ongoing activities not as stable events but as unfolding interactive enactments.

Agency can thus reside in the social especially through the reflective process of dialogue (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). But how does any one actor’s concerns for change expand into the social? Raelin (2016a) points out that social action can occur when people begin to talk differently, not only in content but in style. This new talking can bring to light previously unnoticed patterns or new meanings that allow the parties to fashion a scenic sense of their new circumstances (Shotter and Cunliffe 2003). In time, an intersubjectivity is created in which the shared immanent experience between individuals transcends their individual experience. The resulting collaborative agency is not an all-encompassing group agency; rather, intersubjective agency reciprocally constitutes both the individual and the social. In many instances, individuals’ original meaning is incorporated into the emerging meanings of other participants. Through this often unpredictable process, which Billett (2008) refers to as a relational interdependence, one may end up with a dynamically emerging relation leading to a transformed practice.

What other forces initiate the process of agencement such that people see the need to collaborate with one another for change? Espedal and Carlsen (2024) suggest relying on the pragmatism of John Dewey and his view that a process of situated values inquiry begins when there is a troublesome situation, in particular, when there is ‘something lacking or wanting in the existing situation as it stands’ (Dewey 1939, p. 33). Further,

there is often also a state of ‘doubt’ concerning matters that appear persistently unsettled or uncertain. From this state, the group experiencing the doubt engages in a learning process entailing a pattern of reflective inquiry involving repeated cycles of observation, reasoning, ideation, and testing. What is also striking in Dewey’s analysis is his further insight that the inquiry process can become habitual in broadening inquiry into other ethical situations and dilemmas.

Social inquiry, then, can upend habit and yet, somewhat enigmatically, create a new habit. Habit thus has a complementary relationship to agency in the sense that when it fails, there is an opportunity for improvisation to revitalize agency. But how is such improvisation mobilized? Cooren (2020) provides an initial avenue by suggesting that involving other stakeholders in the problem at hand can ‘multiply’ the authors, allowing for the expression of multiple viewpoints addressing the problem in possibly new and creative ways. Carlsen and Kvalnes (2023) refer to this setting as a polyphonic dialogical scene. As involved participants to the practice react, they are also affected by the totality of influences to their interaction from material elements, symbols, related events, rituals, and technologies. Fellow pragmatist to Dewey, Mead (1910), also asserted that human gestures play a significant role as they trigger action sequences in the interactions at hand leading to readjustments in the ongoing practice. Further, Mead’s notion of the ‘Generalized Other’ supplements this reasoning by pointing out that when accepted social meanings attributed to those from prevailing social groups become subject to adjustment, they too are brought into scrutiny through the social inquiry process (Mead 1934).

An example of the significance of material elements, gestures, and more pervasive changes in social meanings and leadership was reported by Carlsen and Kvalnes (2023) in their study of a nursing home under a new administration. Previously, employee conditions deteriorated to such an extent that a quarter of the workforce were on sick leave at any one time. When a new administrative staff took over, one of the first changes was providing a lockable medicine trolley for the nurses, which they desperately needed so as to bring necessary medical supplies to the residents’ rooms. This material contribution was supplemented by the gesture of the new director who was reputed to have negotiated the acquisition of the trolleys as a precondition for her assuming the job. Word spread about the receptive style of the new administration, leading to a shift in employee satisfaction. But the changes did not begin and end within the confines of the nursing home. New service offerings brought residents back into the social life of their communities. Further, through media coverage, new approaches were recommended within the broader geriatric field of how to conduct more benevolent and passionate institutionalized care of the elderly.

*Prefiguration and the diffusion of local agency:* One of the most cited applications of leadership agency and social action/responsible management is that of prefiguration in which leadership occurring at the local level may diffuse to wider contexts resulting in social change. By prefiguration, we refer to the construction of alternative social/political relations to reflect pro-social values within social movement processes (Yates 2015). Although prefiguration may initially occur or even persist as a

struggle taking place in bounded organizational spaces, we tend to think of social action as being manifested in wider socio-spatial formations (Chertkovskaya et al. 2024). Thus, consistent with L-A-P emerging theory, although it is often precipitated through an incremental change through the everyday practices of situated actors, it can also be a ‘transformative force that is distributed across spaces and times’ (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis 2017, 1304). This can occur through what we earlier referred to as the process of agencement in which we may empirically follow how any practice resource—be it an artifact, a rule, a stated cause, a sensibility—becomes attached to another practice and in doing so becomes agential (Gherardi 2016).

The key, then, to transformative social action within leadership-as-practice would be the process of diffusion in which local practices become spatially dispersed into other arenas through such means as demonstrations, alternative media, special events, workshops, and conferences or through more dissenting activities such as boycotts, protests, and occupations. Although diffusion occurs as an assemblage of heterogeneous actors who are often spatially proximate, Chertkovskaya et al. (2024) point out that these assemblages can also form between actors who are more spatially distant and thus organize in other locales. Li (2007) and Anderson et al. (2012) among others also point out that these assemblages are precarious in the sense that there is no guarantee of success, that their cause could be contested and co-opted by those in opposition to their aspirations, and thus that they require dedicated commitment to sustain their stability.

A good example of diffusion of agency was depicted by an investigation by Chertkovskaya et al. (2024) studying the potential of zero waste, especially through local groceries, to decarbonize aspects of the food and the retail system. Those stores committed to zero waste entered the prefigurative space through their expressions of being part of something bigger and through their desire to align their cause with the practices of other spatially distant actors, including activists, environmental groups, and zero-waste suppliers and shoppers. Besides convergent practices, this case also exemplified how artifacts can be used to spread awareness of the values and practices of prefigurative organizations, such as through the use of graphics, posters, and thematic mottos, or as in this case, the refrain of the ‘5R’s’—refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot. At the same time, the case of zero-waste prefiguration is not without its detractors and resisters, such as from larger retailers—some of whom see zero waste as compromising their sales appeal. A response among some willing zero-waste providers has been to entertain a variety of accommodations, such as waste-free aisles/sections or recycling, but only if their core values are sustained.

*Prefiguration as a process:* The prior section depicted prefiguration as an aspiration that can be accomplished through the means of diffusion, but prefiguration also has a second meaning as a process, namely that it relies upon democratic means in which people take part in any decisions that affect the basic conditions within their lives. Thus, it has an implicit meaning of ‘practicing what you preach’ (Wilson 2014). It has thus come to refer to the use of participatory or direct forms of democracy (referred to earlier) and participation rather than representation. Accordingly, leadership for social action comes about

through direct collective involvement as has been characterized in some well-known street movements, such as Occupy, Gilets Jaunes or Yellow Vest protests, or Gezi Park demonstrations.

This process form of prefiguration has its roots in both cultural and political traditions, such as in the Quaker traditions or early labor movements. The Quakers through their consensual non-majoritarian decision making sought to model a cooperative nonhierarchical society that can be prefigured for the present and would be constituted of lived practices (Scheeran 1983). Projects would be organized that paid attention to the political and cultural contexts in which they operate in order to become effective in their implementation. Some observers, such as Attwood-Charles and Babb (2017) and Wilson (2024), further assert that without overcoming the fragmentation of experiments that remain locally rooted and isolated, without confronting institutional inertia, or without recognizing the impossibility of pure horizontality, many prefigurative experiments will be doomed to fail. The challenge, according to Polletta (2002), requires balancing trust with accountability, respect with openness to disagreement, and caring with inclusiveness, along with such practical matters as the extent to which direct access to decisions is required.

As an example, consider how some full participatory movements avoid participant exclusion when they grow to scale, even as it is often not possible for all concerned parties to be present in the same space (Teivainen 2016). For instance, alternatives have been proposed to allow new or different forms of representational politics, even though the latter have often been discouraged. The problem with the representation, according to Adamovsky (2008), is that representatives become ‘special’ separating themselves from the collective. As an alternative, Cohn (2006) suggested employing recallable ‘delegates’, who, acting under mandates from their constituents, can be accordingly recalled if they abrogate their delegatory responsibility. Another option when decisions impact a wider geographic domain is to use electronic voting to assess constituents’ preferences. In some instances, in global politics, there have been calls to form alliances with political parties, with current governments, or with other advocacy groups. Finally, Raelin (2003) has called for prefigurative groups to consider ‘leaderful’ practices in which everyone has the opportunity to assume particular leadership roles, including needed but not necessarily permanent representative roles.

*L-A-P’s practices that release social agency:* Another important application of L-A-P in social agency is the role of dialogue as a special form of social interaction. The prior subsection on prefiguration forespoke of the difficulty of expecting full democratic participation in projects anticipating social action. To initiate a prefigurative process, at the microlevel, leadership activity among humans would most often incorporate a civil dialogical exchange among those committed to the activity. Through the practice of social inquiry, the parties to the exchange, as was suggested earlier, would begin to ‘talk differently’. Using dialogue, the parties seek to coordinate with one another to complete their individual and intersubjective activities. More specifically, the parties in the dialogical exchange display an interest in listening deeply to one another, in reflecting upon perspectives different from their own, and in entertaining the

prospect of being changed by what they learn (Raelin 2012). The discourse is characterized both by nonjudgmental inquiry and by an advocacy that recursively submits to the views of others. Participants learn to see themselves and their views through the eyes of others. Assumptions are collectively shared through a triple-loop learning that challenges not only the facts and the cultural norms within a given work context but also the context itself. The result is most often an ongoing questioning of any defensive routines that might maintain hierarchical hegemony and stifle dissent (Argyris and Schön 1978). The result is thought of as an emancipatory project that militates against any discursive closure that would limit the potential for transformative management practice (Zald 2002; Hotho and Pollard 2007).

There has been a plethora of critiques arguing that any freedom that employees may enjoy spared from managerial control tends to be short-lived. A movement known as the Carnegie School under the tutelage of Simon (1990) and called the principle of ‘bounded rationality’ argued that any rational decision making in organizations is limited by cognitive capacity and that managers and employees resort to subjective interpretations and political actions to determine how to proceed in organizational life. They use narrow personal ideologies to gain competitive advantages; build cultural capital in the form of credentials, status, or refined communication skills; manage their emotions to create informal hierarchies; and even use surveillance and monitoring tools afforded through AI (artificial intelligence) models to snoop on their own teammates (hooks 2003; Brunsson 2007; Diefenbach and Sillince 2011; Aloisi and Gramano 2019; Charles and Schor 2025).

In the section on prefiguration in this paper, there was reference to how social movements can morph across levels, from the individual and the interpersonal to the group, organization, and society, but any such emancipatory projects require

cultures of learning and engagement that preserve such inviolable precepts as autonomy and self-determination along with inclusiveness and collaboration. Raelin (2012) has proposed 11 norms that can guide actors to assess the inclusive quality of their discourse as they seek to deliberate with one another for purposes of mutual exploration, decision making, and shared action. These norms, displayed in Table 1 below, could serve as a guide to fair practices for inclusive engagement in social action.

As another application and under the theme of ‘future-making,’ Thompson and Byrne (2022) advise, when applying dialogical practices to the specific challenge at hand, that practitioners advance material-discursive practices making use, not so much of prior or taught representations but of what might be called a ‘knowing-in-situation.’ These practices work well in attempting to accomplish mutual objectives and may be particularly helpful in initiating and implementing responsible management processes. As an example, consider the following:

1. Formulation—understanding one another as they produce proposals about next steps
  - Examples: rephrasing or expanding upon proposals; questioning presuppositions
2. Affirmation—producing visible symbols to affirm particular proposals
  - Examples: using gestures and tools, editing current work, seeking assistance
3. Organization—combining proposals
  - Examples—using displays, arranging proposals in new order, relocating spatially

**TABLE 1** | Eleven norms for assessing the inclusiveness of a discourse<sup>a</sup>.

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<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does the discourse invite deep listening to one another characterized by an exploration of new ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes?</li> <li>2. Does it provide a safe forum where all helpful voices, even those heretofore unheard, can be solicited, recognized, understood, legitimized, and appreciated as equal?</li> <li>3. Does the discourse incorporate the legitimate and constructive voicing of values and emotions and other forms of expression?</li> <li>4. Does it allow challenge of dominant discourses, such as the interests being served, the authority or expertise relied upon, the source of any knowledge, or the reasons why the work is organized in the way it is?</li> <li>5. Does it warrant that participatory efforts have a real potential to make a difference?</li> <li>6. Is it inclusive of and does it value a diversity of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, rank, and point of view?</li> <li>7. Does it bring together participants from all involved institutions, from government, from the community, and from ordinary walks of life?</li> <li>8. Does the discourse incorporate coverage of social, political, and historical processes that may have naturalized taken-for-granted activities, such as leadership development?</li> <li>9. Is it genuine and not a guise for subjugation, manipulation, or exploitation?</li> <li>10. Does it encourage an examination of whether one’s needs have been freely created and, if not, how to make free choices about meeting them?</li> <li>11. Does it envision the workplace as contested terrain in which oppositional argument or dissent, containing deeply held convictions, can be accommodated?</li> </ol>
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<sup>a</sup>Source: J.A. Raelin (2012). The manager as facilitator of dialogue. *Organization*, 20(6), 818–839.

In sum, social agency requires an inclusive discourse of invitation in which actors engage in vigorous advocacy while not expecting unflinching support of their proposals or particular points of view. The focus is on mutual learning, deep understanding and insight, and collaborative action. It is inclusive such that everyone's point of view is honored; it is open-ended so that participants can avail themselves of discoveries in thought and action as the practice ensues; and it is never assured given the contentiousness of most social practices in the realm of responsible management.

*Change understood through the theory of practice architectures:* From the field of education and educational leadership-as-practice in particular, another approach to social change has arisen known as the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA) (Kemmis et al. 2014). Drawing on the practices of leadership as composed of everyday 'happeningness', it highlights practice architectures, namely the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that underlie practices and that in turn create the enabling or constraining conditions for change to occur. Accordingly, the practice architectures approach seeks to create new arrangements but only after fully understanding the practices already in place. These practices are made up of sayings (the semantic domain), doings (the activities domain), and relating (the social and political domain) and, it is important to note, they 'hang together' to constitute the practice in question (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008). Two critical principles underlie the agency work within the framework, namely any change project cannot be sustainable when changing just one set of practices alone; instead, attention needs to be paid to the full range of practices in a given site; secondly, careful attention has to be paid to the unique conditions and arrangements within the particular site (Wilkinson, 2021; Tindall-Ford et al. 2024).

*Impact on responsible management in particular:* Having considered the practices of social agency, we also need to acknowledge that while L-A-P scholars and practitioners acknowledge the aforementioned prefigurative processes, they also need to examine the particular effects of any practice and whether it has led to an intersubjective co-creation. Indeed, the outcome of any social inquiry can at times be a new or a unique proposal that had never been considered prior to any collaborative engagement. As something new, it may have been or is currently undergoing more scrutiny than those positions and consequences already endorsed by members of the group.

When it comes to contributions and pressures outside the immediate group, the prefigurative activity may be subject to long-standing institutional pressures, especially from power elites who may try to manipulate the discourse and to even upend any commitments to emancipatory practices. This brings to mind the actual capability of social entrepreneurs to resist institutional rules, norms, and power structures that might constrain attempts to produce more equitable arrangements both within the current organization and among various stakeholders including citizens affected by corporate practices (Battilana et al. 2009). In many instances, agentic change may rely upon the ability of the actor to shape the narrative and deploy discursive and symbolic strategies to mobilize support for

change. Included in such strategies would be the need to build supportive coalitions and manage the construction of meaning (Beckert 1999). Accordingly, there is room to maneuver within institutionalized structures because they also provide a platform for transformation, especially when agents develop their capacity to reflect upon and resist taken-for-granted social rules and artifacts (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Garud et al. 2007).

Consistent with L-A-P's approach to leadership as turning points leading to changes in the trajectories within the flow of practice, writers in the field of Communication Constitution of Organization (CCO) have proposed that the means of producing direction in organization is often through what are called *authoritative texts* (Kuhn 2008). These texts can assume agentic roles, such as representing values, framing situations, or specifying roles and most importantly consistent with practice theory, they can be channeled through means other than speech, such as through material objects, tools, and technologies. Further, they can travel through time and space and provide opportunities for further trajectory changes through reflexivity and dialogue (Ricoeur 1981; Leonardi 2013). These alternative approaches point not only to the potential to reproduce or transform institutional structures but also to emphasize that agency is most often a social and intersubjective authorship. Hence, L-A-P, as one of its originators, B. Carroll and et al. (2018), has framed it (noting its preference to focus on authorship rather than on directly overturning the exclusion faced by marginalized groups) 'is equivalent to tiny drops of emancipatory choice and [not an antidote to] the tsunami of domination' (p. 8).

Given the naturally resistant nature of practices to change, the contribution of L-A-P to the transformation of existing practices must remain tentative. Habitual routines characterize the performances of people in everyday life and are even further stabilized as they incorporate other related activities to create what Shove and Walker (2010) refer to as 'complexes of practices.' Baatz (2024) maintains that it is possible, nevertheless, to transform practices through social learning. One way this can be accomplished is through the formation of communities—such as communities of practice (CoPs)—through the negotiation and adoption of meanings that contribute to their identity formation (Didham et al. 2017). Although CoPs need to maintain a certain level of stability, they are very capable of adapting to novel developments by accommodating the values of new members and new situations (Wenger 2010). Another avenue for adopting new practices is through the inclusion of elements already widespread that fit into actors' daily routines and into related interdependent practices (Van Poeck et al. 2016).

The approaches characterized here employing practice theory can generate important applications in the case of responsible management practices, with sustainable consumption behavior as one prominent example. Jabin and Haq (2024) in their review article describe how collective practices and institutional and cultural frameworks, rather than individual choices alone, impact sustainability efforts. In concert with the thesis articulated in the prior paragraph, green initiatives are more likely to be adopted if they can integrate into existing routines and in particular if they take into consideration three critical elements

of practice, earlier referred to as the body, the material, and the social (Shove et al. 2012):

- the competencies and skills (e.g., waste sorting)
- the materials (e.g., recycling bins, public transit)
- the meanings and values (e.g., recycling as a civic duty)

The viewpoints raised so far suggest an expanded role for leadership-as-practice in promoting social action from learning to talk differently, when faced with troublesome situations, to what Kemmis (2025) refers to as ‘coming to practice differently.’ Taking advantage of the collective capabilities within any given entity, collective learning and change can occur not only through the capabilities of the individuals who compose the entity in question but also through the collective capacity of the entity in its own right. Further, the learning in question can be located in everyday life, not just through planned learning events (Lave 2019). Thus, learning is at the heart of socio-material processes that can overcome observed predicaments and correspondingly produce more desirable responsible effects in such areas as community engagement, responsible supply chains, sustainable consumption, environmental impact, social justice, and the like. The resulting new practices are often interdependent and interwoven with other practices in other settings and levels. These connections among practices ‘materialize the social understanding of responsibility’ (Gherardi and Laasch 2022, 276) across time and within a particular place, leading to leadership as a collective and material practice.

It should be noted that in adapting prior norms, rules, and social practices within particular sites, the end results may not be viewed as normatively better by all involved. The social processes are always in contention, but the hope is that the end result will produce more reasonable, just, and sustainable lives. Further, by joining together in community, participants in social critique and practice tend to have a better chance to confront inequitable social conditions than when attempting to intervene on their own to alter extant social arrangements. Working alone, there is always the pressure to conform or to exert caution in our critiques, but together, participants may generate strategies of resistance as a means of collective identity formation and as an expression of human solidarity. Through a critical collective reflection that recognizes the connection between individual problems and the communities in which they are embedded, they may pay heed to the events or circumstances within their surroundings that may construct or reconstruct ongoing leadership.

Responsible outcomes are shaped by sustainable practices characterized by mindfulness and holistic thinking. Participants attentive to the relation between their personal field of view and their institutional surroundings may well develop an ecological understanding to appreciate the value of responsible management. Among the practices they might adopt, they warrant that their involvement with other concerned colleagues has a real potential to make a difference, that any dominant discourse will be challenged, and that they will involve stakeholders from all affected institutions and from diverse backgrounds and points of view.

## 5 | Conclusion

Although practice theory and leadership-as-practice possess a different orientation regarding their applied value, with the former seeking to achieve understanding and the latter change, they are not contradictory when it comes not only to their conceptual architecture but also to their contribution to social action. In the case of practice theory, social change is explained by chains of human activity supplemented by material artifacts and contextual structures taking place within institutional arrangements. The contribution of practice theory can be critical to social agency in providing change agents with an identification of socio-spatial and power dynamics, the material infrastructure, and the contexts applied to the inherent practices under consideration.

Meanwhile, leadership-as-practice adopts the principles of practice theory as it moves into the realm of intentional social agency starting with the contention that agency needs to occur within and not outside the social activity itself. Further, it decenters the role of the individual as the principal source of meaning and action and rather relies on practices characterized by their material-discursive processes. At the heart of these practices when it comes to social change is a social and often emancipatory inquiry that promotes free expression and shared engagement extended as a commitment to the dignity of each involved actor. There are no grand narratives and superimposed truths that govern each activity; rather, the collaborators create an agencement comprising each other’s commitments as shaped by all the interrelated rituals, symbols, technologies, and practices.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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