From a phenomenological perspective, organizations and their management can be interpreted as specific life-worlds. These worlds of life serve as a starting point and focus for any phenomenological inquiry into organizing and managing (Sandberg and Dall’Alba, 2009). The life-world is the living world of materialities, realities and experiences in which concrete beings in organizations are situated in time and located in place as part of everyday phenomena. As a daily milieu, ‘members’ of organizations dwell on and as ‘bodies’ operate in this world in an unwitting state of mundane engagement that mediates the pursuit of their activities and enables them to perform their tasks. While their respective existences and practices take place and are paced through contextuo-temporal realities and experiential living processes, life-worldly spheres provide the source and media for given, collective meanings and created sense-making (Küpers, 2013b). It is this ‘seamless’ stream of embodied living and its meaning as organizing to which the phenomenological approach returns in order to move forwards in understanding its phenomenality. With its emphasis on the lived experience of inhabiting bodies and their connectedness to habitualized embodiment, Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology offers a resource for readdressing organization studies and especially its practice as an embodied one.

The return to practice is a continually re-emerging topic in the social sciences in general (e.g. Turner, 1994; Schatzki et al., 2001) and in organization and management studies in particular (e.g. Miettinen et al. 2009; Nicolini, 2012).

Following preceding practical turns, the recent return towards practice is marked by a search for and research on the development of more adequate approaches, vocabularies and interpretations that allow transcending divisions between entities and levels and more suitable understandings.

According to Nicolini (2012: 2), the attraction of using a practice idiom or lens ‘stems in particular from its capacity to resonate with the contemporary experience that our world is increasingly in flux and interconnected,
a world where social entities appear as the result of ongoing work and complex machinations, and in which boundaries around social entities are increasingly difficult to draw.’ He suggests that we ‘think of the fluid scene that unfolds in front of us in terms of multiple practices carried out at the same time’ (Nicolini: 2012: 2). Such a shift of understanding also helps to critically process and tentatively dissolve, rather than entirely resolve, enduring dualisms such as those between social/material, body/mind and theory/action (Nicolini: 2012: 3), while contributing to overcoming reified objectivist approaches. Reified conceptualizations have seen organizations as immutable ‘objects’ or ‘objective realities’ that somehow remain disembodied or even independent of bodies, unconscious motives, intentions, responses and intersubjective agencies or communities. In contrast, understood as incarnated life-worlds, organizations create, sustain, communicate and transform multidimensional phenomenal practices and their relations and events (White, 1990: 82). Nevertheless, a phenomenological approach recognizes that this embodied ‘life-world’ and its practices are always more complex than anything that can be said about them. Even more so as they are bodily lived and thus remain different and greater than the known.3

Because practices are multi-fold and complex, they refer to a broad range of phenomena, cultural dimensions, actions, different orientations and methodologies. As a result, there are various conceptual, theoretical and empirical ways for thematizing and investigating them. Practice seems to be an umbrella term, or facilitating boundary-concept, that is open enough for multidimensional analysis, creative exploration and dialogue across disciplinary borders, as it allows for different traditions and approaches, with their distinct perspectives, to contribute and join a discussion for a more comprehensive understanding.

As ‘practice-oriented approaches’ take various perspectives and focuses, there exist many distinct understandings of and approaches towards practice as they have been inspired and guided by different philosophical theories and meta-theoretical orientations. These include, among many others, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (e.g. Schatzki, 1996; Shotter, 2005) and philosophical pragmatism in general (Küpers, 2011b; Schatzki, 2006; Simpson, 2009; Wicks and Freeman, 1998) or Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Everett, 2002; Gomez, 2010; Splitter and Seidl, 2011). Moreover, the notion of practice is used in different ways within the social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001). Although there is not, and probably cannot be, a ‘unified’ practice approach (Schatzki, 2001), and practices are intrinsically interlaced with other social practice (Schatzki, 2005: 473), for many organizational researchers, practices constitute both the starting point, processing reality or media, and the end, serving investigations and allowing theoretical and practical understandings of organizing and organizations.