Considering the Material-discursive Practice: Enacting the Unspoken Goal

Jonna Silfversparre
University of Skövde
Jonna.silfversparre@his.se

Abstract

Goals are commonly recognized through their materialization in explicit statements. By applying a sociomaterial lens to the practice of goal formation, the scope of the analysis is widened beyond pre-defined social and material actors. Hence, considering also the mundane, presumed and overlooked spatial and material dimensions. Through observations of workshops in a home care service quality development initiative in a local Swedish government, it is shown how goals are in becoming and performatively configured given conditioned possibilities of material-discursive arrangements. This study contributes to IS research by demonstrating the applicability of a sociomaterial lens in understanding social phenomena. This is done by showing how goals are formed not only by what actors say and do, but also where, when, how and with what they do it. Through downplaying language and increasing tentativeness toward significant material dimensions, this study shows how goals can be perceived when not necessarily spoken or conscious.

Keywords: Material-discursive practice, subject positioning, agential cut, goal formation

1. Introduction

Despite acknowledging that every organizational practice is always bound up with materiality (Orlikowski, 2007), scholars rarely consider the material dimension of sociality (Cooren, 2018; Hultin & Introna, 2019), which is, among other things, what a sociomaterial approach invites us to do. This study approaches the practice of goal formation which has so far been perceived in research as exclusively social (e.g., Bryson et al., 2024). Goal formation includes both the stated and deliberately set goals and the emergent and actually pursued goals, seeing the formation of goals as a dynamic and complex process (Bryson et al., 2024).

The concept of goal formation assumes goals to take their form not merely through explicit statements, but be enacted in the interactions, discussions, negotiations and compromises performed by the actors involved (Bryson et al., 2024). In this vein, studying goal formation has implied a focus on the social practice, centering human language as the analytical focus and thereby leaving materials passive. Previous literature has acknowledged the sociomaterial dimension of decision-making (e.g., Turner et a., 2022) and strategy formation (Balogun et al., 2014). Hence, how sociomateriality is incorporated in organizational practices for *achieving* the goals of organizational actors. Here, the analytical focus is on how a sociomaterial perspective can support our understanding of what the goal of decisions and strategies *is*. The application of a sociomaterial perspective on goal formation means to refrain from perceiving the topic of study as consisting of pre-defined actors within a narrowed scope of taken-for-granted boundaries. Instead, it implies an expansion of the circles we draw around the set of relations we assume are incorporated in the phenomenon under study (Bailey et al., 2022). As argued by Hultin (2019, p.99); "*by beginning the inquiry with these pre-defined human actors, there is a risk of losing sight of the specific ways in which these actors are already performatively configured to think and act in certain ways*". At the same time, scholars often narrow their focus on only one type of materiality (Putnam, 2015). In this way disregarding how "*sociomateriality promotes a sensitivity towards all things human and nonhuman being equally valuable and inextricably intertwined in the enactment of situated practice*" (Schultze et al., 2020, p.826).

In sociomaterial analysis, the analytical focus is on the entanglement of sociomaterial agencies in material-discursive practices. This enables a stronger elaboration of how language is entangled with tools, locations and spatial arrangements. Considering organizational practices as consisting of various material-discursive arrangements enable an understanding of how they work to produce the conditions of possibility for the enactment of particular subject positions (Hultin & Introna, 2019). This study approaches goal formation as a material-discursive practice, considering neither just pre-defined human actors, nor a pre-defined form of materiality, but the sociomaterial dimension of goal formation where the actors (social or material) perceived as meaningful to this enactment are not defined a priori. The aim of the study

URI: https://hdl.handle.net/10125/112166
978-0-9981331-9-5

is to develop understanding of how moving the analytical focus from the social practice to the material-discursive practice may generate new insights on seemingly social phenomena, here exemplified by studying goal formation. The research question addressed is therefore; *how do material-discursive arrangements work to produce the conditions of possibility for the formation of particular goals?* By reaching beyond the over-dependence of the intentional human (Hultin & Introna, 2019), this study challenges the prevailing assumption of goals being restricted to a conscious human sphere. Hence, it resonates with Orlikowski's (2007, p.1437) well-cited claim that "*there is no social that is not also material and no material that is not also social*". Without pre-defining a form of materiality, this approach contributes to a scholarly aim of acknowledging the material dimension of sociality (Cooren, 2018; Hultin & Introna, 2019). This is done by analyzing how material-discursive practices work to produce the conditions for behaviors and prioritizations that are already interpreted as appropriate and legitimate. Thus, responding to a growing need for better understanding of materiality's constitutive role in organizational practices (Leonardi, 2023; Schultze et al., 2020).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The material dimension of sociality

Sociomateriality was presented to the IS field as a way of theorizing the pervasiveness of materiality in organizing practices and to account for organizing as increasingly dynamic, multi-faceted and entangled (Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). Prior literature was criticized for leaning towards either a material-centric or a human-centered approach, failing to engage with materiality as integral to organizing without privileging agencies as either social or material (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

The sociomaterial perspective applied draws on Barad's (2003; 2007) post-humanist view, where sociomaterial agencies are perceived as inseparable, and continuously and performatively enacted and re-enacted in practice. This sociomaterial perspective implies a relational understanding of agency, where the social and the material are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement and recognizable only in momentary stabilizations for specific purposes, called agential cuts (Barad, 2007). This implies a rejection of entities having pre-given, inherently determinate boundaries and properties. Instead, when an agential cut is performed, it determines what relations are included in the definition of a phenomenon and what are left out for it to become meaningful (Barad, 2007). The act of *performing an agential cut is illustratively explained by Kautz and Jensen (2013, p.25) as "emphasizing and magnifying details through a lens and exploring and analyzing what is rendered visible in an intra-action through a magnifying glass."*

Sociomateriality is repeatedly subject to criticism due to indigestible language use (e.g., Kautz and Jensen, 2013). In order to avoid falling into a jargon monoxide trap, I will in the further try to explain in my own words what it actually means to perform an agential cut.

One of the fundamental notions of sociomateriality drawing on Barad (2007), assumes that it is irrelevant to impose agential properties on neither social nor material actors before one can determine the relations between and around them as they are enacted in practice. Depending on how the practice positions the human (subject), there are different relations stabilizing the boundaries around her as a researcher, a playmate, an earthquake survivor or a pyromaniac. At the same time, different relations stabilize a table as a workplace, a cubbyhole, a shelter, or a piece of fire fuel. By perceiving the human and table in relation to the particular situations, they both get positioned radically different. It is in this enactment that the cut can be performed, and it is the cut that makes it possible to analyze the agencies that make this enactment possible. Hence, the cut makes boundaries visible and provides them with actual meaning.

Note that even though these examples refer to the conscious and intentional actions of humans, the table could act as shelter for an earthquake even if the human under it was asleep. Moreover, there is always the risk of the painful experience of a table leg being unintentionally placed on a toe. Further, the conditions of possibility position humans to unreflectively consider certain thoughts and actions as feasible and meaningful. This is convincingly illustrated by Hultin and Introna (2019) in how case officers and asylum seekers unintentionally conducted themselves very differently in three different reception areas, despite essentially performing the same practice. Due to the different material-discursive sites, the asylum seekers were positioned as either criminals, customers or unique individuals.

A sociomaterial analysis then, illustrates how all that is non-human is not merely "standing reserve" as things that are for the purpose of the intentions of humans (Introna, 2013). Rather, humans and things are what they are because of their mutual entanglement, and they can be differently positioned depending on the material-discursive arrangement (Hultin & Introna, 2019). What is included or excluded as meaningful to this positioning is determined through the boundaries drawn by the agential cut (Barad, 2007).

2.2. Goal formation

Goals are generally perceived as foundational in the organizational context (e.g., Linder & Foss, 2018). Yet, scholars have acknowledged goals as not necessarily stated, conscious or even real (Bryson et al., 2024; Gross, 1969; Vangen & Huxham, 2012). For example, as potentially existing only in operations but not in a strategic sense (Perrow, 1961, p.855), or the contrary; as explicitly stated but not reflected in organizational behavior (Georgiou, 1973), as disguised cover stories (Vangen & Huxham, 2012), or as being directed to something desirably avoided rather than something one wants to achieve (Bryson et al., 2016). These examples paint a fuzzy picture of what the defining characteristics of a goal may be. If goals can be unconscious, then conceptualizations of goals as a set of constraints that an action must satisfy (Simon, 1964), or a view that goals *"exist in someone's mind" (*Gross 1969, p. 279), do not suffice. What may come closest to a sociomaterial understanding is Eden and Ackerman's (2013, p.12) observation of "*the beliefs and aspirations that surface as managers act, either directly or indirectly, are the basis for understanding the real – emergent – goals*". This is due to how it captures how goal formation is not merely preceding action, it is simultaneously enacted in the behaviors that are performatively configured to seem appropriate and legitimate.

Hence, goals take their form not merely through explicit statements but lay hidden within the practice where they "*can emerge in practice to frame, refine, or reframe what is already happening in an organization*" (Bryson et al., 2024, p.544). Previous research has offered some insights on the complexities of goals as emergent, ambiguous, dynamic and hierarchical. However, previous research tells us less about how we are to understand goals that are unexpressed or even beyond the consciousness of the actor involved. This provides the basis for why the concept of goal formation holds favorable conditions for illustrating the usefulness of applying a sociomaterial lens. When the analytical focus is widened beyond the discursive practices of interacting actors, it could enable more illuminating answers to questions like the ones stated above. Hence, this study increases the sets of relations assumed to be incorporated in the phenomenon of goal formation, by embracing it as a material-discursive practice.

3. Methodological approach

3.1. Empirical context

The research setting of this study has been a quality development initiative to improve home care service quality by a local Swedish government department of health and welfare. The project was initiated as a part of the response to a political objective of the department reaching and maintaining being ranked in the top 25% of a national quality index. Improving the care recipients' experience of quality in terms of trust and attitude in their relation with home care service providers was identified as critical for reaching this aim. At the time, care giving was perceived to be greatly diversified with major differences in level of engagement among members of the care giving staff. A project group was appointed and the group members were to use their mobile phones to record interviews with care recipients. The interviews encompassed how care recipients experienced value in how they were treated by the care givers. These authentic stories were then to be used in larger workshops with the home care service subgroups to influence the care giving and the overall attitude towards care recipients.

The project group consisted of the Head of Unit for the local government department of health and welfare and one individual each from all of the six geographically divided home care service subgroups. The home care service group representatives were appointed by their respective managers on two premises; 1) They needed to be individuals that would enjoy working with quality development and find it interesting, and 2) they were informal leaders, having the ability to convey the message and carry the quality work in their respective groups. In the initiating stage of the project, the workshops were led by an organizational consultant.

3.2. Data generation

Data was generated through observations of workshops performed by the project group during a period of one year. The project is ongoing, and at this point six meetings have been conducted resulting in 12 hours of observations. In connection to the workshops, the researcher has continuously had discussions with the consultant and the Head of Unit, following up on reflections from the workshops and asking follow-up questions. These sessions have at times been conducted as semi-structured interviews which have been recorded and transcribed. At other times interviews have been conducted in a more ad-hoc manner, where the researcher and the respondent(s) have jointly reflected on their shared experiences from the workshops (Andersson, 2022).

The workshops occurred in a conference room at the office for the department for health and welfare. The researcher has acted as a workshop participant, taking part in the activities and at times in the discussions, however rather contributing with reflections when asked than providing suggestions or actively trying to form the discussion. Hence, the observation method is participatory as the researcher has been observing in a naturalistic setting and taking part in activities of the practice under study (Musante & DeWalt, 2010, p.2).

All of the workshops were recorded and transcribed and the researcher has continuously taken notes during the workshops and from the discussions with the consultant and the Head of Unit.

Generating data through observations includes the benefit of enabling the researcher to experience a practice as it unfolds (Andersson, 2022). Hence, the researcher can document and grasp the context in which the practice occurs, and more vague expressions and behaviors that participants may be unaware of or are unwilling to share in an interview or a survey (Clark et al., 2009). These benefits were found to be critical for understanding how materiality is entangled with the discursive practices of the quality development work, at times in a taken for granted or elusive manner. This way of studying goal formation, as observations occurring during an extended period of time resonates with Bryson et al. (2024) and Linder and Foss (2018) recommending goal formation to be studied as an extended longitudinal process. Similarly, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. (2014, p.819) urge researchers to conduct extended longitudinal studies "*in order to better articulate how sociomaterial relations dynamically emerge through time and space*".

3.3. Data analysis

In Barad's (2007) vocabulary, the primary unit of analysis is a phenomenon that comes to appear through an agential cut. Here, the phenomenon is conceptualized as the formation of a goal, as 1) through both explicit goal formulation and how the goal is subsequently enacted, or 2) merely through enactment.

The findings are thematized in terms of which goals the sociomaterial analysis has made distinguishable. In sociomaterial analysis, categorization and coding should not be reduced to the words in an interview transcript. Instead, it should incorporate a sensitivity to how the researcher is affected and how the words are enacted (Hultin, 2019). The analysis of the data generated has embraced spoken words, emotional responses, one handedly- or co-written texts, the physical location of the workshops, the atmosphere of the workshops, the operational context of the home care service work, and various material artefacts. In accordance with previous sociomaterial research, an analytical distinction is allowed between the social and the material enabling specificity about the dimensions incorporated within the practice and that were a "*productive part of the phenomena*" (Hultin & Mähring, 2014, p.139).

The presented list of goals is not to be understood as exhaustive, nor as a claim of true and accurate reflection. Instead, these are the goals as the researcher experienced them as she was part of the research context. As the researcher increasingly started to familiarize herself with the empirical context, "*small but consequential*" (Hultin, 2019, p.100) aspects that form entangled patterns were noted as they started to emerge. These were used to form categories incorporating the dimensions that were perceived as productive or consequential for the formation of a particular goal. Hence, the entangled patterns are used to describe what is included, and thereby indirectly what is left out, in every agential cut materializing a goal.

These descriptions are not intended to be perceived as representational accounts, as this is not the aim of a sociomaterial analysis. Instead, sociomaterial research grounded in a becoming ontology fundamentally assumes the researcher to be accountable for the enactments of the phenomena in which she both studies and plays a role (Schultze et al., 2020). This accountability makes the researcher responsible for the inclusions and exclusions of the cuts she performs. As such, the researcher is herself entangled with the phenomenon of study and in her choice of methods. With the cuts she performs, the researcher enacts what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Hence, the researcher is herself an agent and thus constitutive of the phenomenon of study at the same time as the material-discursive practice is both constraining and enabling how the cuts can be enacted (Barad, 2007). This urges the researcher to make explicit the reasoning behind why she chose the inclusions she did. Hence, as the goals are presented, the aim is to transparently account for how they were experienced as being formed.

4. Formed goals

4.1. Top 25% ranking

The relations stabilized in the agential cut that are included in the first goal are the *criteria for measuring performance* and *politically imposed requirements*, which leads to the initiation of the quality development project and subsequently to additional goals materializing. This is a clearly formulated goal that is most related to the conventional understanding of what a goal is in the organizational context. It emerges as a consequence of the performativity of criteria for measuring performance (Linder & Foss, 2018). Being a political objective, it is imposed on the organization in a top-down manner and it is concrete and measurable. It is simultaneously the least visible goal in the workshop context. It is rarely mentioned, never visualized, and the activities and priorities emerging during the workshops are never explicitly related to how they support the actual ranking. Yet, when asked about the goal of the service quality development initiative, this is the goal repeatedly accentuated by the Head of Unit as *"the reason we are here"*. The Head of Unit described how this goal was *"broken down into categories of direction"* leading to the

Table 1. Formed goals

Formed goal	Included in agential cut	Goal is enacted through
Top 25% ranking	• Criteria for measuring performance. • Politically imposed requirement	Materializing other goals. Positions the participants as engaged in service quality development.
Uphold operational efficiency	• Operational reality • Informal leader role • See-through wall • Swarming and contact-seeking colleagues	Material-discursive arrangement enacts feeling of rush and perception of accessibility. Positions the participants to enact their role as informal leaders.
Establish ownership	• Managerially imposed requirement • Informal leader role • Collaborative writing technology	Positions the participants as co-producers and owners of the material developed during the workshops.
Give voice to care recipients	• Interview method • Empowered care recipients • Imperativeness to ensure conditions	Positions care recipients to become subjects that matter.

identification of hospitality and quality being the aspects prioritized. This led to the decision of a quality development group consisting of members from each of the home care service subgroups being an appropriate work method for goal attainment. If conforming to a conventional understanding of goals, one could argue that this specific, attainable and measurable ranking goal would suffice and that the activities performed preferably could be guided by more visible lower-level subgoals in a goal hierarchy (March & Simon, 1958). However, as will be illustrated further, not all goals formed respond to this overarching goal, and they would not conform themselves into a hierarchy of subgoals leading neatly to the attainment of the goal of being ranked in the top 25%. Admittedly, however, it is an important goal since it is the reason for the initiation of the project. Hence, it forms the substance from which relations starts to emerge that materialize other goals (Cooren, 2020), and it positions the participants as engaged in service quality development.

4.2. Uphold operational efficiency

The relations stabilized in the agential cut that are included in the second goal include the *operational reality*, *informal leader role*, *see-through wall* and *swarming and contact-seeking colleagues*. The operational activities of the home care service work teams were characterized by resource scarcity and time constraints. The workshop participants' work reality of rushing stood in sharp contrast to the workshop setup of meeting once every other month for a two-hour reflective discussion.

The stress imposed on the workshop participants was evident in interactions both before, after, and during workshops. When greeting fellow colleagues upon arrival it was commonly occurring to immediately inform each other on the current personal work situation. As an example, you would exchange information about the length or occurrence of your work shifts in connection to or during the day of the workshop;

"*It is barely possible to breathe between visits. That is how it is. For example, I continue to work after our meeting here at four. I actually finish at four*" (Project group member).

This contributed to a workshop atmosphere influenced by a sensation of squeezing the workshop in on an already busy work situation and being in a constant rush to continue along with you workday.

The goal of upholding operational efficiency in itself is hardly surprising in regard to the wider operations within the department. It is never explicitly formulated as a goal, yet indirectly present 'between the lines' in the social interaction. However, the workshop participants are explicitly encouraged to leave operational responsibilities outside of the workshop sessions. They have allocated time to attend the workshops, and they have no formal authority in their respective service teams that they would need to attend to during the sessions. Hence, this is not a goal relevant to and thus unintentional within this particular practice. As will be illustrated, it is nonetheless an evident goal when considering the practice as material-discursive.

Even though the urgency to uphold operational needs can be perceived in part solely based on the social exchange between the workshop participants, the following analysis will show how this goal is intensified when incorporating the physical place of the workshop into the analysis. The workshops occurred in a glass-walled conference room at the office for department for health and welfare. The workshop participants could see the constant activity occurring outside of the room, with permanent and temporal colleagues arriving and leaving, preparing for or finishing shifts,

both directly and indirectly calling for the participants' attention. Hence, the feeling of stress and rush was hardly mitigated upon the start of the workshop, but constantly enacted before the participants' eyes through the glass walls.

Workshop participation was often interrupted by work cellphones ringing, urging participants to excuse themselves from the meeting to handle something related to their home care service group. At times to return to the workshop, at other times to leave altogether. As this caused frequent disturbance to the first workshops, the Head of Unit decided the phones were to be left outside of the conference room. However, the glass walls did not just enable the participants to see the operational reality being enacted outside of the conference room, they were simultaneously visible to their colleagues, making them constantly accessible. Consequently, the workshops were still interrupted by colleagues knocking to consult with participants during workshops, as they were easily reached for all present at the office.

The participants appeared to willingly invite interferences, for example by excusing themselves to answer their ringing phones instead of neglecting the call, or by seeking and maintaining eye contact with people on the other side of the glass wall and exchanging subtle gestures that formed 'semi-invitations' for the interfering colleague to approach the conference room entrance. In sum, the glass walls simultaneously enacted the feeling of rush with the participants, and the perception of accessibility with their colleagues.

The workshop participants could have neglected the calls or closed the blinds, but instead they enacted a somewhat voluntary accessibility in how they accepted and at times even invited interferences. This limited their capability to be completely here and now in discussions and reflective exercises. As such, as informal leaders in an intense work environment, the workshop participants enacted their perceived responsibilities to uphold operational efficiency even when they were assigned other work tasks. After all, their perceived leadership tendencies were a major reason for them being appointed to the quality improvement project in the first place. However, without the possibility provided by the material-discursive arrangement incorporating ringing cell-phones and a see-through wall, the goal of upholding operational efficiency could have had less influence over the workshop participation. By engaging with materiality in the analysis, the spatial dimension of the material-discursive practice enacts the actors into being (Gherardi, 2023), as rushed and needed. Actors conform to ways of speaking and doing as appropriate and legitimate, and ultimately taken for granted. Hence, when the material-discursive arrangement enacts their responsibilities as informal leaders in the ongoing operations of their respective teams, this is the role they perform by prioritizing operational efficiency over active workshop participation.

4.3. Establish ownership

The relations stabilized in the agential cut that are included in the third goal are *managerially imposed requirements*, *informal leader role* and *collaborative writing technology*. One aspect perceived as critical for the quality improvements success was to anchor the purpose with the participants. Hence, it was important to enable them to be involved and agentic in developing the project design. The participants were encouraged to constantly reflect on issues and contribute with experiences and thoughts as different aspects of the project was developed and refined. For this purpose, participants were continuously engaged in discussions to bring forth activities, prioritizations, purposes and directions. During the initial workshops, this was performed through materialization of ideas and thoughts in texts written single-handedly, in pairs or jointly in the group, in notebooks, on large paper sheets on the walls around the conference room and on PowerPoint slides.

The reasoning behind this way of conducting workshops as inherently participative was to engage and empower the workshop participants as co-producers in the quality improvement project, and to anchor the purpose of the project with them as it would eventually involve their respective teams. Hence, establishing ownership is a conscious and intentional aim imposed in a top-down manner. By taking careful consideration to how this goal is performed through the use of PowerPoint, a sociomaterial analysis enables an elaboration on how it is enacted in practice.

The use of PowerPoint was characterized by how empty or roughly filled out slides served as spaces were actors jointly formulated main points from their discussions, as such answering or clarifying questions or areas that needed to be addressed in the workshop discussions. At some points, the consultant was producing the text based on explicit formulations stated by the group, or formulated as summations of the group discussions. At these times, the text as it was produced in real time was visualized for all participants on a large conference screen. When visualization artifacts are entangled in organizational practices, they contribute to shape individuals focus of attention (Hultin & Mähring, 2014). In this way, all participants were enabled to actively take part in adjusting, reformulating or elaborating on the text produced in the slides.

At other times, the consultant requested other participants to produce the text by simply pushing the laptop that was screen sharing onto the conference screen towards another workshop participant and causally ask them to do the writing. A sequence where a sentence was perpetuated as text could be initiated by a project group member interrupting someone speaking by saying

"*What you said there… That good wording. Let's start there. Could you write that down?*", followed by a discussion on what was actually said and how to formulate the text being produced in the PowerPoint slide. As the workshop participants were actively engaged and exposed to the text produced in the PowerPoint slides, they were enabled to involve themselves in adjustments and redefinitions. This is different from general text production, as writers generally cannot see the receiver and gain insight into how the text is received in real time, thereby being deprived of the possibility to discuss formulations and notice non-verbal signals like mimes and gestures that may deliver clues on how the message is being interpreted (Van Woerkum, 2007). Additionally, it forms a sharp contrast to when one participant takes meeting notes in a traditional sense, as notes are produced based on the interpretations of the note taker and readers are less likely to initiate fine-grained adjustments when presented to the material retrospectively in contrast to when they are engaged in the live production.

As such, the text produced in the slides was co-produced in the sense that multiple actors conducted the actual writing, and, perhaps more importantly, all participants were enabled to influence the definitive formulations written as they were produced visually in real time for all to engage with. In this manner, the workshop participants are positioned as subjects through these mundane situated practices of involvement (Hultin & Introna, 2019), in using PowerPoint as an interactive space (see Kaplan, 2011). The material-discursive practice positioned them in obvious and appropriate ways of acting - as co-producers and thereby also co-owners of the material. When considering the contrast to if a note taker had been summating the discussion from her own interpretations, or if PowerPoint had been used, as conventionally, as a software supporting the presentation of a finished material, two aspects are illuminated. First, the co-production is supported by the visualized text production as it becomes not the writing of an individual but of a collective. Second, the practice determines how this specific use of PowerPoint positions the actors as active co-producers rather than passive information recipients.

4.4 Give voice to care recipient

The relations stabilized in the agential cut that are included in the fourth goal are the *interview method*, *empowered care recipients* and the feeling of *imperativeness to ensure conditions*. The goals discussed hitherto have been deliberate, even though the analysis has showed how the goals have appeared through their enactment in practice. In the following, the case is made for a goal that is unconscious and thus unexpressed explicitly, yet perceivable through the priorities and behaviors of the workshop participants in relation to how they approach their interviews with care recipients. To grasp this goal, it needs to be understood in relation to how the workshop participants perceive the outcome of the quality development work would affect service quality levels.

What to do with the material (i.e., the recordings of interviews) was an often-occurring topic of discussion. The plan that subsequently emerges was to use the recorded material in workshop sessions with the project group members' respective teams in an effort to enable an emotional response with the staff, as they could hear the actual voices of the care recipients describe what treatment made them feel safe, taken care of and seen as human beings. The act of playing sequences of interviews with care recipients was meant to enable an embodied listening, where care givers could be emotionally affected (Chadwick, 2021). Moreover, the use of various voices was meant to illustrate that there is no universal service quality technique or a checklist applicable to and valued equally by all, but that there were individual humans with various preferences and preconditions who could only be treated with responsiveness towards their individual needs. Consequently, the main focus was on how the material outcome of the interviews (i.e., voice recordings) are to be used to change the care givers' attitude towards the care recipients. However, if positioning the analytic view through the material-discursive lens, another goal emerges. Namely the implications of the interview itself.

In the workshops preceding the interviews, respondents are primarily talked about in relation to selection criteria. In the workshops succeeding interviews being conducted, other insights regarding the respondents emerge; the care givers have reflected on the importance of the interviews to the respondents. Subsequently, in requesting participation and planning the interviews, the respondents experience of being interviewed have started to become a prioritization. As the working situation is strained, the care givers have become worried about scheduling interviews and then having to cancel them, due to having to take on work

shifts. To some of the care givers this concern becomes justified as the situation subsequently occurs.

Workshop participant 1: "*I baked cardamom cake last Sunday that I was going to take with me to break the pattern.*"
Workshop participant 2: "*But it did not turn out as you had in mind.*"
Workshop participant 1: "*I saw it in her. It goes so wrong. Even if she was like it does not matter. No, **I** think it does.*"

What seem to be acknowledged from these ways of behaving and resonating is acknowledgement of being invited to be a respondent in the interviews matter to the very subjects whose perception of service quality levels one wants to affect. In the very act of positioning care recipients as people whose experience of service quality matters, care recipients are positioned as subjects with voice. Consider this in contrast to care recipients who are passively receiving care with a service quality level that is defined and chosen by the care giver's level of skill and commitment. The care recipients are repositioned as subjects from passive care receivers, exposed to the conceptualization of the individual care givers of what home care service provision is and should be, to an empowered subject who can take active part in producing the service quality as it is defined by her. The act of requesting an interview, scheduling a time outside of regular care giving hours, actually showing up in this time, and even the small gesture of bringing a cake to the interview in an effort to express gratitude for the care recipient's participation, were all details that were perceived by the workshop participants as important to the care recipients. As argued by Hultin et al. (2022), the mundane details are important for the enactment of a subject that matters. When the workshop participants look back upon their conducted interviews, they share anecdotes of being met by enthusiastic, well-prepared, and a bit nervous respondents who have taken their upcoming interview participation very seriously.

So, why is this a goal if the care givers were not aware of it, never expressed it and did not discuss it prior conducting the interviews? Because when reaching beyond explicit formulations and rationalizations, this is a goal that was enacted by the care givers in their behaviors and through their prioritizations. The workshop participant did not need to talk about what it meant for the care recipients to be given a voice, they ensured "*the necessary conditions for such a voice to become possible through the material-discursive organizing practices*" (Hultin et al., 2022, p.692).

5. Discussion

This study builds on research that illustrates how a sociomaterial perspective can favor knowledge on seemingly social phenomena (e.g., Cooren, 2018; Hultin & Introna, 2019). By applying a sociomaterial lens to a practice that at first glance may be perceived as predominantly social, one can learn new insights of what understandings a sociomaterial perspective enables. Moreover, by refraining from narrowing the analysis to only one type of materiality (Putnam, 2015), we can focus on the mundane, presumed and overlooked material dimensions and see how they too matter in how practices are enacted. After all, what sociomaterial theorizing fundamentally boils down to, is agency. Or more specifically; how agency materializes through relations occurring in practices, and that should according to Leonardi (2023) be the core focus of IS research.

By incorporating spatial and material dimensions in the analysis, the study shows how goals are formed when they are analyzed as enacted trough the conditions of possibility provided in material-discursive practices. The analysis has made certain agential cuts in the effort to define the purposes underlying the way practices unfold and have referred to these as formed goals, incorporating both explicit formulations and more subtle enactments. Included in each cut are both human and non-human actors whose significance has not been determined a priori. In this way, the analysis complies to the sociomaterial notion of considering all things human and nonhuman as equally valuable and inextricably intertwined (Schultze et al., 2020). The analysis illustrates how a widened scope beyond an approach centered on either pre-defined social actors or a pre-defined type of materiality can provide explanations for why actors prioritize as they do. This approach has the potential to illuminate aspects that are presumed or unconscious, downplaying the role of language in perceiving them.

A concluding insight from Putnam's (2015) review is the need for scholars to focus on multiple types of materiality. As argued by Hultin and Mähring (2014), individual focus of attention is shaped not only by top–down influences but also by bottom–up environmental stimuli. Hence, the consideration of material and spatial dimensions within a social practice may provide information of which actions and behaviors that are considered appropriate or even taken for granted. The goal of upholding operational efficiency exemplified with the glass wall illustrates how organizational practices not just occur *in* space, but that space actively takes part in producing the material-discursive practice (Gherardi, 2023), rather than acting as a container with static boundaries where practices occur (Putnam, 2015). The goal of establishing ownership exemplified with the use of PowerPoint as an interactive space illustrates how material objects are entangled in a practice and take part in how actors are positioned as subjects to act in a

certain way rather than another (Hultin & Introna, 2019). The goal of positioning care recipients as subjects with voice emerges through how the workshop participants ensure the conditions for the care recipients to become subjects that matter. The goal is enacted without any prior discussions taking place, just because it performatively configures the workshop participants to prioritize in ways that seem obvious to them. It emerges and makes itself appear without being fully conscious and comprehended. Subsequently, a post-humanist lens enables us to look beyond the spoken and conscious to generate an understanding of why social actors act as they do through noticing mundane details (like the baking of a cardamom cake) (Hultin et al., 2022). Hence, illustrating the usefulness of a sociomaterial analysis of practices lacking a pre-defined material component, i.e., a specified technology.

This study presents a number of limitations. Like other sociomaterial research, it struggles to neither loose itself in jargon without being restricted by discursive conventions (Hultin, 2019). Further research could explore how the sociomaterial vocabulary could be made more accessible and thereby more useful. Second, despite aiming to move beyond discursive conventions and pre-defined actors, the study struggles to capture the data that 'goes beyond' in a clear manner. It seems to be difficult to account for the more-than-discursive in a discursive format. Space limitations allow little for incorporation of images, notes or detailed narrations. A third limitation is the lack of attention to temporality. Further research could incorporate the temporal dimension in the sociomaterial analysis and show how goals materialize more or less over time as they emerge and fade in a temporal manner. This is due to how time, just like space, lacks static boundaries and plays an important role in shaping phenomena materializing through material-discursive practices (Putnam, 2015).

5.1 Practical implications

Sociomaterial theorizing has been argued to have "*very little to offer the practitioner*" (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014, p.826), despite its focus on the everyday lived experience. Hence, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014, p.826 advocate scholars "*spending more time and energy on identifying the practical implications associated with understanding the co-constitution of the social and the material…*", and Putnamn (2015) notes how exploring the relationship between discourse and materiality has important implications for management. This study shows that it is also important to understand that organizational practices like goal formation are not solely enacted through social interaction. Rather, it is through a material-discursive practice where goals are in becoming, and performatively configured not only by what actors say and do, but also where, when, how and with what they do it, inviting the material dimension of sociality to the surface. Hence, the practice enacts goals that are already legitimate and taken-for-granted and that will take part, at best in favorable, but nevertheless also in counteracting or, by all means, indifferent ways. This implication urges practitioners to take into consideration the implications that may at first glance be perceived of as mere surroundings, insignificant details, passive tools, or structural constraints. Being attentive to and taking into account how these implications are embodied in the situated practice enables the possibility to influence how actors are positioned as subjects.

6. Conclusion

By approaching the practice of goal formation, this study illustrates how a sociomaterial analysis can develop our understanding of seemingly social phenomena. References to goals normally relate to verbal or written statements. Undeniably, speaking or writing about something is a non-negligible way of materializing it (Cooren, 2020). However, a sociomaterial analysis shows that the formation of goals is performatively configured by the conditions of possibility provided by the material-discursive practice as they influence how goals are enacted. It illustrates how there is not merely an interaction between a (pre-defined) material artefact and an intentional human. Rather, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between the social and the material generating emerging sociomaterial agencies that influence how goals are enacted in how subjects are positioned through organizational practices. In this manner, language is downplayed and the tentativeness toward significant material dimensions is open-ended, which could enable goals to be perceived regardless of being spoken or conscious.

The treatment of organizational practices as consisting of pre-defined actors risks to cloud our vision towards aspects that significantly impacts the ways in how social actors behave since it cannot be entirely illuminated when just perceiving practices as discursive or the material dimension as pre-given. At least if we want to understand the under-rationalized, subconscious or unreflected aspects that continuously affects how organizational practices unfold.

References

Andersson, T. (2022). Intentionality and agency in values work research. In *Researching values: methodological approaches for understanding values work in*

organisations and leadership (pp. 57-74). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Bailey, D. E., Faraj, S., Hinds, P. J., Leonardi, P. M., & von Krogh, G. (2022). We are all theorists of technology now: A relational perspective on emerging technology and organizing. *Organization Science*, *33*(1), 1-18.

Balogun, J., Jacobs, C., Jarzabkowski, P., Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2014). Placing strategy discourse in context: Sociomateriality, sensemaking, and power. *Journal of management studies*, *51*(2), 175-201.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, *28*(3), 801-831.

Bryson, J. M., George, B., & Seo, D. (2024). Understanding goal formation in strategic public management: a proposed theoretical framework. *Public Management Review*, *26*(2), 539-564.

Bryson, J. M., Ackermann, F., & Eden, C. (2016). Discovering collaborative advantage: The contributions of goal categories and visual strategy mapping. *Public Administration Review*, *76*(6), 912-925.

Cecez-Kecmanovic, D., Galliers, R. D., Henfridsson, O., Newell, S., & Vidgen, R. (2014). The sociomateriality of information systems. *MIS quarterly*, *38*(3), 809-830.

Chadwick, R. (2021). Theorizing voice: Toward working otherwise with voices. *Qualitative research*, *21*(1), 76-101.

Clark, A., Holland, C., Katz, J., & Peace, S. (2009). Learning to see: lessons from a participatory observation research project in public spaces. *International journal of social research methodology*, *12*(4), 345-360.

Cooren, F. (2020). Beyond entanglement:(Socio-) materiality and organization studies. *Organization theory*, *1*(3), 2631787720954444.

Cooren, F. (2018). Materializing communication: Making the case for a relational ontology. *Journal of Communication*, *68*(2), 278-288.

Eden, C., & Ackermann, F. (2013). Problem structuring: on the nature of, and reaching agreement about, goals. *EURO Journal on Decision Processes*, *1*(1-2), 7-28.

Georgiou, P. (1973). The goal paradigm and notes towards a counter paradigm. *Administrative science quarterly*, 291-310.

Gherardi, S. (2023). The fluid affective space of organizational practices. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, *18*(5), 1-19.

Gross, E. (1969). The definition of organizational goals. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *20*(3), 277-294.

Hultin, L. (2019). On becoming a sociomaterial researcher: Exploring epistemological practices grounded in a relational, performative ontology. *Information and Organization*, *29*(2), 91-104.

Hultin, L., Introna, L. D., Göransson, M. B., & Mähring, M. (2022). Precarity, hospitality, and the becoming of a subject that matters: A study of Syrian refugees in Lebanese tented settlements. *Organization Studies*, *43*(5), 669-697.

Hultin, L., & Introna, L. (2019). On receiving asylum seekers: Identity working as a process of material-discursive interpellation. *Organization studies*, *40*(9), 1361-1386.

Hultin, L., & Mähring, M. (2014). Visualizing institutional logics in sociomaterial practices. *Information and Organization*, *24*(3), 129-155.

Introna, L. D. (2013). *Otherness and the letting-be of becoming: Or, ethics beyond bifurcation* (pp. 260-287). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kaplan, S. (2011). Strategy and PowerPoint: An inquiry into the epistemic culture and machinery of strategy making. *Organization Science*, *22*(2), 320-346.

Kautz, K., & Jensen, T. B. (2013). Sociomateriality at the royal court of IS: A jester's monologue. *Information and Organization*, *23*(1), 15-27.

Leonardi, P. (2023). Affordances and Agency: Toward the Clarification and Integration of Fractured Concepts. *MIS quarterly*, *47*(4).

Linder, S., & Foss, N. J. (2018). Microfoundations of organizational goals: A review and new directions for future research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *20*, S39-S62.

March, J. G. and Simon, H. (1958). Organizations. New York: Wiley.

Musante, K., & DeWalt, B. R. (2010). *Participant observation: A guide for fieldworkers*. Rowman Altamira.

Orlikowski, W. J. (2007). Sociomaterial practices: Exploring technology at work. *Organization studies*, *28*(9), 1435-1448.

Orlikowski, W. J., & Scott, S. V. (2008). 10 sociomateriality: challenging the separation of technology, work and organization. *Academy of Management annals*, *2*(1), 433-474.

Perrow, C. (1961). The analysis of goals in complex organizations. In *American Sociological Review*, 26(6), 854-866.

Putnam, L. L. (2015). Unpacking the dialectic: Alternative views on the discourse–materiality relationship. *Journal of management studies*, *52*(5), 706-716.

Schultze, U., van den Heuvel, G., & Niemimaa, M. (2020). Enacting accountability in IS research after the sociomaterial turn (ing). *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *21*(4), 10.

Scott, S. V., & Orlikowski, W. J. (2014). Entanglements in practice. *MIS quarterly*, *38*(3), 873-894.

Simon, H. A. (1964). On the concept of organizational goal. *Administrative science quarterly*, 1-22.

Turner, S., D´ lima, D., Sheringham, J., Swart, N., Hudson, E., Morris, S., & Fulop, N. J. (2022). Evidence use as sociomaterial practice? A qualitative study of decision-making on introducing service innovations in health care. *Public Management Review*, *24*(7), 1075-1099.

Van Woerkum, C. M. J. (2007). Orality and the process of writing. *Journal of technical writing and communication*, *37*(2), 183-201.

Vangen, S., & Huxham, C. (2012). The tangled web: Unraveling the principle of common goals in collaborations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *22*(4), 731-760.