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*A theoretical framework*

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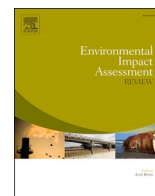
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# Practitioners' pursuit of change: A theoretical framework

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## ABSTRACT

The fact that environmental assessment (EA) practice is executed by multiple practitioners from different stakeholder groups with varying interests means that individually molded ideas of practice are brought into collaborative spaces, where they are negotiated and reworked into an executed practice. This research investigates the practitioner's ability to constitute and change their practice, in terms of how their individual motivations interacting with others' prompts and restricts action. By synthesizing extant theories on decision-making, a new theoretical framework of 'spaces for practice' is proposed, encompassing concepts of motivation, action, discretionary freedom, non-decisions, and rule-following. The framework recognizes practice as consisting of a practitioner's motivation and resulting action, in which constituting a practice is both a matter of restricting potential practice to executed practice, but also using discretion to pursue new opportunities for practice. Besides being a scholarly contribution to theory building within the EA field, the theory is also expected to contribute to understanding how EA practice can develop, supporting the notion that EA is a fluid practice subject to a process of continuous reconfiguration. The theory emphasizes the importance of the practitioner's role, perceiving them as active engineers of the process, rather than as passive participants reacting to a pre-determined practice. The framework provides EA practitioners with a theoretical tool for reflecting upon their own role and better understanding the opportunities they may have for influencing it.

## 1. Introduction

An environmental assessment (EA) practice is a largely responsive process, in which the norms of practice react to the dynamic interests and demands from political and sociological settings. A popularizing conversation within EA is its ability as a process to meet its substantive objectives, namely its position in guiding decision-making and outcomes such that the future development it assesses aligns with the sustainable transition towards which it is oriented (Cashmore et al., 2004; Pope et al., 2013; González Del Campo et al., 2020; Lyhne et al., 2020; Par-tidario, 2020). With approaching deadlines for meeting political goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or nationally defined climate policies, the need and immediacy for reflecting upon EA practice, understanding and further developing its theoretical foundations as well as revisiting practice accordingly becomes progressively apparent. This places emphasis on understanding the relation between actors (i.e., EA practitioners) and the outcomes of their actions to promote decision-making rooted in promoting strong sustainability (Bonnedahl et al.,

2022). Exploring how practitioners react to internal and external pressures that bring their practice into question is a core investigation for this paper.

EA practitioner is here used as an umbrella term for the individuals of various stakeholder groups that play a part in the EA process: consultants (practitioners commissioned to conduct an EA), developers (practitioners commissioning an EA process) and authorities (practitioners conducting an EA or allowing and approving the EA and its corresponding project or plan development). An EA practice consists thereby of the continuous interactions between these stakeholder groups, and how they respond to their own expectations of practice as well as extrinsic ones from other practitioners and legislation. These extrinsic perspectives can stem from other practitioners within other stakeholder groups but can also be from within the same stakeholder group and organization. A consultant is, for instance, confronted with the expectations of a developer, just as the perspectives on what the EA practice entails can differ between two authority members from the same municipality. Perceptions of practice therefore emerge and are

*Abbreviations:* EA, Environmental assessment; EIA, Environmental impact assessment; SEA, Strategic environmental assessment; IA, Impact assessment; SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals.

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shaped by the stakeholder group a participant comes from and those they interact with, but at its core, practice is conducted by the individual, whose own intrinsic ideas are negotiated with others.

If understood in its European legislative regime, EA, both environmental impact assessment (EIA) of projects and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) of plans, policies, and programmes, is guided by EU Directive (2014)/52/EU and EU Directive (2001)/42/EC respectively. EA is a formal procedure for authorities to allow project development, and to grant approval for the development of plans, programmes or policies. Some research focuses on how EA is guided by overlapping and sometimes contradictory objectives (Bäcklund, 2009) and sees the individual practitioner as an agent in facilitating practice, adding subjective values and interpretations to the otherwise objectively recognized formal process (Stoeglehner et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2018). This research addresses the practitioner's role in guiding EA practice, referencing their procedural and substantive influence on EA (Mitchel 1979; Cashmore et al., 2004; Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009; Blicharska et al., 2011).

Simultaneously, a practitioner's ability to change the way they approach the formal, procedural aspects of the EA process is restricted by institutional factors through i.e., legislation, financial resources, political structures, traditional customs, and public opinion (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2001; Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2009; Chanthy and Grünbühel, 2015). While positioned within institutionalized settings, practitioners are bounded by dependencies on other stakeholder groups, such as consultants to commissioning authorities and developers, or developers and authorities to the competencies of the consultants, which may influence the way they decide to act and the decisions that shape the EA being conducted. Morrison-Saunders and Bailey (2009) reference the "us and them" syndrome in which discrepancies in the values, expectations, and motivations between two stakeholder groups can alienate ambitions and create tension in practice. Therefore, a primary assumption throughout this paper is that a practitioner's understanding of their own role in relation to their practice is not only shaped by their own values and the way they relate to their own practice, but to a large degree also by external perspectives, pressures, and expectations.

With this said, there is increased attention to discretion in practice, emphasizing the idea that practitioners have freedom to act and make decisions on their own accord (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). This displaces some emphasis from dependencies on extrinsic sources to intrinsically motivated practice as likewise significant in shaping decisions. Zhang et al. (2018) calls discretion the conscious or subconscious ability for practitioners to influence the outcome of EA processes, suggesting that the internal processes of decision-making are just as significant in determining practice as the external sources, such as other stakeholders or legislative frameworks, that push practice in certain institutionalized directions. To outline the navigation of practice, Kågström and Richardson (2015) have defined a practitioner's 'spaces for action', moving from internally shaped understandings of practice to actions shaped by relevant others, also alluding to the possibilities of changing practice through these spaces.

Adapting practice in support of a sustainable transition requires a deeper theoretical exploration of how practitioners navigate within their practice in the first place. To further solidify an understanding of how they shape the EA process in interpretive contexts, this paper addresses the questions of *i.) how do EA practitioners constitute their practice* and *ii.) what are their opportunities for changing this practice?* It does so through an exploration of a practitioner's 'spaces for practice' and how these spaces interact and influence other practitioner's perceptions of practice and their ability to act upon these perceptions.

Despite the significant number of journals dedicated to research within impact assessment (IA), hereunder EA, the role of theory in IA research remains limited and incoherent (Pope et al., 2013; Kørnøv, 2015). A review from 2015 of the use of theory within IA shows that a significant portion of papers are still unattached from theory and concluded the need for theory development within IA, either through

supplementing or building upon existing theories or proposing entirely new theories (Kørnøv, 2015). To contribute to the otherwise limited supply of theory development within the field of EA, this paper positions itself somewhere between drawing from existing theory to address a practitioner's role in EA and drawing in new elements from the broader field of decision-making.

This paper constructs a new theoretical framework through the conceptualization of existing research and the bridging of theoretical concepts. This is done bearing in mind that the process of theory development implies a simplification of reality, meant to create new, yet generalized understandings, rather than address all details of the explained reality. In this way, theory is never finalized, and some aspects of a theory may be suppressed to allow the emphasis of others more central to the reality being highlighted. The theory development in this paper is centered around creating a theory that compliments and further develops existing theories for a practitioner's role in influencing EA practice, without claiming to capture the full reality.

First, the methodology for theory building is described, as well as the need for new theory within EA research. Secondly, the conceptualization and synthesis of extant theories is presented as are the assumptions drawn therefrom that constitute the foundation from which the new theory is built. Lastly, the new theoretical framework is presented, consisting both of a typology of 'spaces for practice' and the interrelations between these spaces. In this way, it is theoretical grounds rather than the collection of new empirical findings that is in focus.

## 2. Methodology

Theory is understood to describe and explain phenomena, promoting novelty through new insight, but also a sense of continuity by leaning against extant theoretical contributions (Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). Theory building is broadly defined as "... the process or cycle by which such representations are generated, tested, and refined" (Gioia and Pitre, 1990: 587). The need for theory building is triggered through detected discrepancies or anomalies in extant literature or in practice, and often arises from the discontinuities and tensions between the two (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). Thereby, theorizing becomes a process for telling the narrative of an anomaly and providing solutions to or resolving this tension. Shepherd and Suddaby (2017) argue that the need for theorization is motivated by a trigger (i. e., *paradoxes, problematizations, empirical surprises, practice logics*).

At the very root of this paper is the assumption that an awareness and increasing focus on sustainable transition catalyzes an interest in new ways of perceiving EA, and of changing the practice to accommodate for these perceptions. An initial investigation of practice (albeit focused on the integration of SDGs in EA processes) suggested that an increasing interest from practitioners coincides with a dominating uncertainty as to what this entails for their practice and how best to accommodate these new interests. This conflict between the interests and enacted actions of practitioners (a *practice logic* according to Shepherd and Suddaby's (2017) typology of theorization triggers) led to consulting extant theories exploring a practitioner's ability to determine and influence their practice.

Theories concerning practitioner roles as they unfold directly within an EA context were initially consulted (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Kågström, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018). Kågström and Richardson's (2015) conceptual framework was found to argue that implemented practice is a narrowing from potential to actual practice, with an implicit focus on the continuous restriction of action, while Zhang et al. (2018) emphasizes the interpretive and discretionary freedom in practice to open for new opportunities and changes. The two theoretical approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in many ways complement each other's perspectives, but their fundamental focuses introduce a paradox concerning the characteristics of a practice. Theories from broader decision-making processes were thereafter consulted, some elaborating how topics for decision-making are filtered (Lukes, 1974; Christensen and Jensen,

1986), and another describing the way individuals relate to their practice by following rules to fulfill identities (March, 1994). Selecting relevant theories to synthesize used bricolage as a theorizing technique, combining relevant elements "... into fluid knowledge constructs" for "... focusing on combining various elements (e.g., ideas, concepts, experiences) [a researcher has] at hand rather than engaging in endless search for literature or creating a theory from 'scratch'" (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017: 74).

The process for new theoretical development in this research took point of departure in Lynham's (2002) five stages to theory development (*conceptual development, operationalization, application, (dis)confirmation, and continuous refinement and development*), emphasizing the nonlinearity and iterative nature of navigating between them when developing theory. *Conceptual development* entails the initial problem understanding, identification of relevant concepts and the composition of an initial framework connecting these concepts to the phenomenon being addressed. *Operationalization* connects the conceptualization phase to practice for testing in on-the-ground contexts by converting the framework to "... observable, confirmable components/elements..." in the shape of propositions or hypotheses (Lynham, 2002: 232). *(Dis)confirmation* is the evaluation of the propositions/hypotheses in practice to confirm or disconfirm the theoretical framework, while the *application* phase delves even deeper into the practical world to observe the theory in action. Lastly, *ongoing refinement and development* transgresses all theory development phases, and ensures the constant revisiting and revision of the framework in response to new learnings, empirical findings, or conceptual understandings. The stages are not linear, in the sense that theory building can both commence in conceptual levels (*conceptual development* and *operationalization*) or in practical phases (*(dis)confirmation* and *application*) in processes respectively referred to as *deductive theorizing to practice* and *inductive practice to theorizing* (Lynham, 2002). Often, theorizing entails a combination of the two processes, resulting in a theorization process solidified in a continually evolving dialogue between extant theoretical contributions and current practice.

The approach taken in this research concerns itself primarily with the first stage, namely the *conceptual development* of theoretical components, where core concepts are identified. This research also engages in the beginning stages of *operationalization* by generating initial postulations about interrelations between the theoretical components. An overview of the methodological steps is provided in Table 1. The *conceptual development* draws upon i.) existing theories on a practitioner's ability to influence the EA practice they conduct (Stoeglehner et al., 2009; Kørnø et al., 2015; Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Kågström, 2016; Zhang et al., 2018; Lyhne et al., 2021) and ii.) understandings of general decision-making processes (Lukes, 1974; Christensen and Jensen, 1986; March, 1994). The former literature builds the foundational basis for contextualizing the theory in EA, while the latter brings a more nuanced understanding of decision-making from sociological views that I suggest provide new depths to understanding behavior within EA practice. To merge perspectives, both from inside and outside the EA context, the next sections are a theory synthesis used to compare extant theories.

### 3. Conceptualization of extant literature

The purpose of this section is to present and synthesize the extant theories approached in this research by introducing the theories in terms of three fundamental concepts i. potential and actual action and non-decisions, ii. discretionary freedom, and iii. rule following to fulfill identities.

#### 3.1. Potential and actual action and non-decisions

A framework for a practitioner's 'spaces for action', presented by Kågström and Richardson (2015) and later supplemented (in terms of enhancing EA quality) by Kågström (2016), was a starting point for

**Table 1**

The methodological steps pursued in this research and the consulted literature and corresponding findings.

Methodological steps	Consulted literature	Findings
1. Identification of a theoretical trigger.	Gioia and Pitre (1990); Shepherd and Suddaby (2017)	A <i>practice logic</i> trigger: interest from practitioners in changing their practice coincides with uncertainty as to what this entails and how best to accommodate new interests within their practice (a practice logic trigger).
2. Exploration of extant theories on an EA practitioner's role in influencing practice.	Kågström and Richardson (2015); Kågström (2016); Zhang et al. (2018)	A <i>paradox</i> in which one theory argues for practice being shaped by restrictions being placed on how a practitioner can act and the other argues for discretionary freedom increasing a practitioner's opportunities for practice.
3. Exploration of theories for broader decision-making processes.	Lukes (1974); Christensen and Jensen (1986); March (1994)	The uncovering of new depths to understanding decision-making by consulting a context outside of EA, such as non-decisions and logic of appropriateness.
4. Deeper exploration of a discretionary freedom.	Stoeglehner et al. (2009); Lyhne et al. (2021)	A deeper understanding of the interpretive nature of EA practice.
5. Conceptualization of extant theories into new theory development.	Lynham (2002)	A contribution to the <i>conceptual development</i> stage of theory building and merges core concepts from existing theories into a new theory. This includes the development of new models to portray novel ideas.

investigating how a practitioner relates to their practice, which provided a solid foundation for understanding how practitioners navigate from an understanding of practice to an enacted practice. According to Kågström and Richardson (2015), practice is constituted within 'spaces for action'. The first space is a 'potential space for action', determined by an individual's understanding of their relation to their own practice or what they consider *appropriate action*. Appropriate action from 'potential spaces' is composed of internal processes and is then confronted by interactional negotiations of action with other stakeholders in the 'actual space for action'.

The framework suggests how the frames that consultants use to make sense of their practice shapes their understanding of responsibilities in relation to their practice and bias the way they act within the EA process. Kågström and Richardson (2015) and Kågström (2016) suggest that this broad perspective is restricted by firstly self-imposed perceptions of appropriate action and secondly the action that is argued for and brought into interactional confrontations with other stakeholders, restricting what is possible, accepted, and enacted practice. This means that the framework walks one through the process of navigating from potentials in practice to actual practice, where 'potential spaces for action' are pursued through individual perceptions of practice and 'actual spaces for action' are pursued through interactions with others.

Kågström and Richardson (2015), and especially the theoretical supplement (Kågström, 2016), recognize practice as shaped by restrictions continuously presenting themselves as practice is enacted; potential practice is continuously narrowed to an actual practice. The narrowing of practice is described as actions that are not acted upon due to certain restrictions that filter them out. This draws overt parallels to postulations made by Christensen and Jensen (1986) and Lukes (1974)



whose research delineates power dynamics within decision-making. Christensen and Jensen (1986) and Lukes (1974) suggest that different forms of power prevent certain topics (non-decisions) from factoring into decision-making processes as they are filtered out before reaching decision-making arenas. The theorization in this paper builds some of the concepts from Christensen and Jensen (1986) into the concepts presented by Kågström and Richardson's (2015) to strengthen the understanding of filters as restrictions on constituted practice.

### 3.2. Discretionary freedom

While there is emphasis on practice as something that is continuously restricted and controlled, it has also been argued that practitioners can seek new opportunities in their practice, and it is therefore not solely to be defined through its limitations. This argument is particularly salient in Zhang et al. (2018), introducing the discretion that practitioners have in determining and conducting their own practice, in which the subjectivity of EA allows a practitioner to influence and modify their own practice through, for instance, nurturing their autonomy in making decisions. Here, personal judgement and ideology are highly influential. This discretionary freedom allows a practitioner to transgress boundaries and determine how far their practice should go. Should they perform EA merely to satisfy legislation or to self-satisfy their own notion of good or best practice? Zhang et al. (2018) identify an EA practitioner's decision-making process as choices on i.e., determining the scope of relevant impacts, their significance, the executed quality of the EA, in which discretion can be exercised at any point in the process.

Zhang et al. (2018) recognize that decision-making within EA practice consists of formal and informal decision-making processes, which means that elements of EA practice are both subject to impartial procedures (i.e., through legislation) and predisposed to the interpretive values of the practitioner (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018; Lyhne et al., 2021). Thus, an EA process previously believed to be objectively conducted, is now also characterized by subjective social and political contextual factors. Objective processes are intertwined with informal processes, in which subjective interpretations from the individual practitioner fill gaps in practice, where perhaps the objective guidelines are weak or absent (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Decision-making can be conscious or subconscious (Zhang et al., 2018; Lyhne et al., 2021), meaning that institutional structures (Lukes, 1974; Christensen and Jensen, 1986) also set boundaries on a practitioner's understanding of practice.

A practitioner's discretion can be increased through, for instance, a consultant actively fighting for more freedom in their practice, obtaining new technologies to execute tasks and drawing upon experience and expertise (Zhang et al., 2018). But it can also be decreased through strengthened supervision from upper management, detailed regulative frames and a lack of adequate data, resources, or time to complete a task (Zhang et al., 2018). Thus, discretionary freedom refers to a practitioner's ability to exercise subjectivity in decision-making processes given the interpretability of practice, recognizing that both degree of interpretability and the extent of one's ability to act accordingly is situationally dependent. And just as discretion comes in varying degrees, its influence can be positive, neutral, or negative (Kørnøv et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Before Kørnøv et al.'s (2015) exploration of the influence of street-level bureaucracy on the implementation of SEA, discretionary freedom of practitioners was often viewed as a barrier to implementation. The case of a SEA process in Copenhagen demonstrated the advantageous opportunity that discretion can present for practitioners to be innovative, breaking routines of practice and participating in a planning process that fulfills their own ideas of satisfactory practice (Kørnøv et al., 2015).

Stoeglehner et al. (2009) add a dimension to discretion through the concept of 'ownership', arguing that ownership of different aspects of EA is key to its overall democratic and environmental effectiveness. They especially remark the ownership of environmental values and

sustainability objectives as crucial for seeing them fully integrated in EA and corresponding decisions rather than mere rhetoric and they claim values and objectives are applicable through all phases of the planning process (in preparation, exploration, drafting, decision-making and implementation). Moreover, they note the tendency that environmental objectives are seen as a survey for documentation in the EA report and are inherently absent from the negotiation of the planning process. The feeling of ownership of the more subjective aspects of EA practice can fuel a greater individual and collective pursuit of the informal decision-making processes that may diverge from traditional EA and encourage previously unexplored methods of practice.

If contrasting with both Kågström and Richardson's (2015) conceptual framework as well as Lukes' (1974) and Christensen and Jensen's (1986) model for decision-making, Zhang et al.'s (2018) arguments presented here supplement a new approach, namely the focus on the expansion of opportunities within practice rather than the restriction of possibilities. This is not to say that Zhang et al. (2018) do not also recognize that practice can be restricted by decreasing discretion. They merely invite practitioners to alter their practice, which is neither a focus of Kågström and Richardson's (2015), Christensen and Jensen's (1986) nor Lukes' (1974) frameworks. Discretion can both be an individual pursuit and can be a collaborative effort, but even as an individual pursuit, it is highly dependent on the acceptance of others. Regardless, every practitioner can act on their own accord. In this research, I put emphasis on how decisions that are made by the individual are confronted by other relevant practitioners. Although discretionary freedom is also to be exercised in collaborative environments involving multiple stakeholders, I am most interested in discretion as a way to encourage the individual practitioner to challenge norms of practice. Therefore, 'discretion' as used in this paper refers to the action an individual pursues on their own accord, while 'interaction' will refer to collaborative actions, noting that discretion as described by Zhang et al. (2018) is present also in interactions.

### 3.3. Rule following and identities

The last piece of extant literature drawn upon in this paper is March's (1994) idea of rule following that I have determined able to augment Kågström and Richardson's (2015) approach to defining the relation between a potential and an implemented practice. Rule following pertains to how individuals create identities and follow rules to fulfill those identities. It builds on the notion that individuals tend to refer to historical tendencies and external expectations to define their rules, but also change the rules and identities when evoked to do so. This perspective seemed particularly relevant to draw into theory for EA practice, seeing as EA is a practice well solidified in the legislative and historical sense, but can be evoked to change in response to i.e. changing requirements for future development, new practitioner perspectives and new political ambitions and objectives. Responding to a sustainable transition that advocates for altering the way we undertake development could be one example of such a catalyst for change.

March's (1994) 'logic of appropriateness' provides insight into how a practitioner determines appropriate action in their practice. He describes an individual's internal decision-making processes through the 'logic of appropriateness' as a way in which, "... actions are matched to situations by means of rules organized into identities" (March, 1994: 57). This idea of rule following is described as a phenomenon in which a decision-maker asks themselves a series of questions from which they determine the appropriate way to act in a given situation: "What kind of situation is this? What kind of person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this?" (March, 1994: 58). March (1994) views decision-makers as individuals that adopt different roles that define the identities and rules with which the individual coordinates their actions, and in fulfilling identities, "... they follow rules or procedures that they see appropriate to the situation in which they find themselves" (57). In this way, actions are a result of following rules to comply with an

established identity.

According to March (1994), rules that define identities can be both created through "... self-selected roles and rules..." or they can be imposed through "... learned obligations, responsibilities, or commitments to others..." (63). This means that rules followed in conjunction with identities can be either intrinsically or extrinsically sourced, in which rules are, to certain extents, determined by the individual practitioner, but are also defined by the expectations of others and their own definitions of identities and appropriate practice. This means that like Kågström and Richardson (2015), Zhang et al. (2018) and Christensen and Jensen (1986), March (1994) also recognizes that individual decision-making is inexorably dependent on external others.

Because rules and identities are not only self-constructed but are also inevitably reconfigured and determined by the rules and identities imposed by others, rules followed are not necessarily consistent with internalized identities. It is therefore possible for an individual to follow rules that are not in conjunction with an identity. However, March (1994) argues that these identities can be internalized through repeated execution of rules, especially if following these rules proves successful.

If practice is constituted by actions and actions are determined by rule following to fulfill certain identities, how are actions changed to steer practice in new directions? March suggests that rules defining the action carried out by individuals fulfilling certain identities are not statically pre-defined nor necessarily solidified in historical tendencies; "Identities endure, with individuals learning and pursuing the rules of behavior consistent with the roles, but the rules themselves change..." (March, 1994: 77). While identities and rules can in fact reinforce historical rules and tend to do so when not evoked to change, they can also come to anticipate future rules that define an upcoming practice and thereby deviate from past experiences (March, 1994). For an EA practitioner, this may mean bargaining for new procedures, methodologies, or ways of conducting EA practice, as opposed to imitating past practices.

It can thus be proposed that in defining their own identity as an EA practitioner and determining the way to conduct their practice, EA practitioners follow rules that correspond practice with these identities. When they partake the role of an EA practitioner, they comply with the rules that define EA practice, which in formal processes means complying with EA legislations and guidelines, and in informal processes implies an interpretation of practice of what appropriate EA means to them. The rules that individuals follow in particular scenarios are likewise configured by the organizational contexts within which they operate, including also the associated arrangements of organizationally determined rules.

#### 4. Presentation of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework proposed in this paper consists of, firstly, defining this theory's synthesis of core concepts drawn from extant literature, secondly, describing the constituents of 'spaces for practice', thirdly, introducing the typologies of the spaces, and fourthly, postulating the relations between them. The different typologies of practice are presented along with the activities that takes place within each space. The relational pathways between the spaces articulate how the outcomes of the spaces influence each other in addition to the reciprocity of this influence in shaping a practitioner's perception of their own practice.

##### 4.1. Defining the core process: relations between motivation, perceptions of practice and action within decision-making arenas

The roots of theorization in this paper are embedded, broadly speaking, in decision-making processes, but are simultaneously situated within EA, where agents of decision-making are EA practitioners acting out their associated EA practice. Here it may be helpful to converge these two contexts and define core concepts: *EA practice*, *decision-*

*making*, *motivation*, *perceptions*, *actions*, and *non-decisions*.

If viewing EA practice as a process for continually identifying, informing, and making decisions, then it is congruent with the more general process of decision-making referred to in March (1994), Lukes (1974), and Christensen and Jensen (1986). Lukes (1974) and Christensen and Jensen (1986) refer to decisions being made within a decision-making arena. There are multiple decisions that are made throughout the EA process, and thus, there are always multiple decision-making arenas whose resulting decisions and consequences thereof are what constitutes the practice being performed. The decision-making process can take on different forms, characterized for instance by how many decision-makers are involved, whether the decisions are formal, informal, conscious, non-conscious, or whether they are based on facts or values of involved practitioners (Lyhne et al., 2021).

Motivation can be viewed as the initial building block for proceeding decisions. In this research, it defines the reason for pursuing a practice and the conditions of a motivation shape a practitioner's perceptions of practice. I argue that this process of shaping perceptions of practice, commencing with a motivation, takes place within a decision-making arena. March (1994) argues for identities as determining rules, comparable to the notion that motivation and the perceptions of an appropriate practice guides resulting actions (actions being the consequences of rules followed to meet predetermined identities). Thereby, determining executed actions also takes place within a decision-making arena, where perceptions of practice are either enacted or determined impossible. Actions are thereby consequences of the decisions being made, while perceptions of practice are the preceding foundation for the actions pursued, conditioned by the individual's motivation.

This research therefore assumes two different decision-making arenas (of which there can be multiple throughout an EA) as shown in Fig. 1: i. arenas for shaping perceptions of practice and ii. arenas for translating a practitioner's motivation to conduct the practice they find appropriate into action. These arenas are applied to various scenarios for decision-making throughout the process of an EA. Examples of these decision-making scenarios could be those identified by Zhang et al. (2018), namely scoping relevant impacts, determining significance, or identifying when to involve relevant participants in decision-making processes. EA practitioners are the agents shaping perceptions (whether it be their own or others') and performing actions that thereby constitute their practice. March (1994) argues that actions reconfigure identities through experiences gained when executing actions, meaning that the influence between motivation and action is reciprocal.

The typological building blocks of the theory are centered around the concept of 'spaces for practice' consisting both of spaces that define and develop practitioner's perceptions of practice ('spaces for motivation'), and spaces in which concrete actions are determined and exercised ('spaces for action'). In this sense, 'spaces for practice' are distinguished from Kågström and Richardson's (2015) 'spaces for action' by clarifying conceptual nuances between the objective and interpretive perspectives that (de)motivate practice and the explicit actions that are enacted to constitute that practice. This research thereby recognizes that a practice is not solely defined by the executed actions that are consequences of decisions, but that practice is an encompassing *process* also defined by

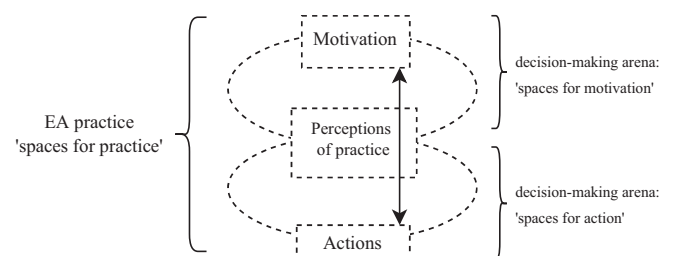


Fig. 1. An overview of the relations between motivation, actions, decision-making and EA practice as well as how these correlate with 'spaces for practice'.

(un)pursued perceptions.

#### 4.2. Expanding and restricting spaces: opportunities and capacities

A performed practice can be considered i. (in)appropriate in terms of rules for fulfilling identities, ii. (im)possible given provided resources, and iii. (non)accepted by relevant others. Borrowing from Kågström and Richardson's (2015) concept of continuously narrowing perceptions and from Christensen and Jensen's (1986) and Lukes' (1974) principles of non-decisions, I argue that perceptions and actions within the decision-making arenas are filtered out by 'capacities'. These 'capacities' determine perceptions or actions to be either inappropriate, impossible or nonaccepted. Yet, this research recognizes that while practice is restricted, new possibilities or perspectives that present themselves to a practitioner can filter in new 'opportunities' for practice. These determine practice that is appropriate, possible, and/or accepted and can range from conservative to radical and innovative changes to practice. This basic framework is illustrated in Fig. 2 and the remainder of this section will explain how this pertains to the different 'spaces for practice'.

##### 4.2.1. Spaces for motivation

The capacities and opportunities in motivation spaces are perceived, in the sense that they are not formed based on experienced practice, but rather, on preconceived notions of what may be (in)appropriate, (im)possible and (non)accepted to execute. Capacities may be a perceived lack of resources for a consultant to perform a specific task, a perceived idea that lacking motivation from other stakeholder groups could hinder practitioner capabilities, or a perception that certain practice is not appropriate for the EA being conducted. On the other hand, opportunities could be newly perceived responsibilities for conducting an EA in a certain but previously unexplored way, or newly perceived ambitions from other stakeholder groups. In this way, the 'space for motivation' shapes the practitioner's perceptions of their identity and thus, how they should and could approach their practice, including initial ideas of the rules that should be pursued; should they comply with a historical practice or is there occasion for pursuing new practice perceived to be more appropriate and at least imaginably possible? It is through the perceived capacities and perceived opportunities that the original motivation is respectively restricted or expanded to create the perceptions of practice. These resulting outcome perceptions then become the point of departure for action spaces.

##### 4.2.2. Spaces for action

Conceptually distinct from motivation spaces, 'spaces for action' operationalize perceptions and create consequences in practice, referred to here as actions. Perceptions of practice shaped in motivation spaces are either pursued or not, depending on how perceptions of appropriate and possible practice hold up when confronted with experienced capacities. The capacities that filter out actions in this space are confronted limitations from experienced practice; what is (im)possible when

bringing perceived practice into action? These capacities could be lacking budget that prohibits the introduction of new methodologies for conducting practice, or an absent interest to pursue new methodologies by other involved stakeholder groups. In addition, new opportunities can be introduced to the space in terms of experiences gained through practice. Perhaps a successful methodology will become the standard practice for a practitioner or a conversation with other practitioners will present new perspectives previously unconceived.

#### 4.3. Identifying typologies of 'spaces for practice': involving multiple stakeholders

Conducting an EA often involves multiple practitioners, and typically, these practitioners also come from varying stakeholder groups. Decision-making arenas could both involve a single practitioner, determining how to go about their own practice, or several stakeholders, in which the interactions between stakeholders would be crucial to shaping the decisions being made therein. Therefore, the theory recognizes that motivation and action spaces can differ depending on the practitioner in question, and that the individual's 'spaces for practice' coincide with other external 'spaces for practice'. The typologies are outlined in Fig. 3.

Motivation for a particular practice can be either intrinsically or extrinsically sourced, meaning that there are 'spaces for motivation' both for the individual practitioner in question (intrinsic motivation) and for the external practitioners (extrinsic motivation). Each have their own reasoning for conducting their practice and develop their own perceptions of (in)appropriate, (im)possible and (non)accepted practice. Preconceived notions of external others' motivation may influence an individual practitioner's own motivation. Thereby, these notions become perceived capacities and/or opportunities in and of themselves.

Likewise, action can be performed by the individual and as a collaboration of multiple practitioners. I therefore distinguish between discretionary and interactional action, in which the former refers to the individual pursuing autonomous discretion and the latter being the interaction between multiple practitioners and the resulting negotiations of practice. It is in the 'discretionary space for action' that a practitioner acts upon their own freedom to subjectivize EA by interpreting certain aspects of their practice. This determines, for instance, what they will bring forward in an interaction with other stakeholders in the 'interactional space for action', or whether they act in accordance with their own perception of appropriate action without approval or consent from others. Each individual practitioner has their own discretionary space, in which actions for pursuing are interpreted.

In 'interactional spaces for action', perceptions of practice and actions (from intrinsic and extrinsic sources) are negotiated to form a practice. The involvement of multiple practitioners in interactional spaces means that practice must be accepted by the involved parties when intrinsic perceptions meet extrinsic perceptions, either reinforcing each other or steering the other in perhaps previously unperceived directions. The rules followed in this space are characterized by both intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions, being a negotiation between the two

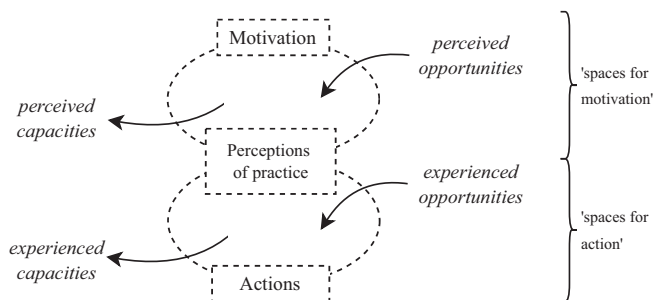


Fig. 2. The impact of capacities and opportunities on restricting and expanding the 'spaces for practice'.

	Spaces for motivation	Spaces for action
Individual practitioner	Intrinsic	Discretionary
Multiple practitioners	Extrinsic	Interactional

Fig. 3. The typologies for 'spaces for practice', consisting of 'intrinsic spaces for motivation', 'extrinsic spaces for motivation', 'discretionary spaces for action' and 'interactional spaces for action'.

motivations. It is also within this space that discrepancies between an individual's identity and the rules that same individual performs can occur if the rules followed align more with extrinsic perceptions than the intrinsically driven ones.

4.4. Postulating interrelations: navigating between 'spaces for practice'

Navigating between the spaces gives a better idea of the conditions of the spaces. A practitioner's navigation between the spaces, and thus, their interaction with other practitioners, is what provides changes to the content of the spaces, by introducing new perspectives and conditions for practice (in terms of perceived/experienced capacities/opportunities. Changes in spaces may occur at any point throughout the EA process, i.e., in the very beginning of the process when constituting initial intrinsic perceptions of practice or later, when being introduced to new perceptions through interactions with other practitioners in interactional spaces. Through the EA process and at every stage, a practitioner may navigate many times between spaces. This section explores postulations concerning the relational pathways between the spaces, indicated as Px in Fig. 4.

*P1: A practitioner's motivation is a prerequisite for discretionary spaces, while action in discretionary spaces give rise to new motivations.*

The actors in an EA practice are multiple, of which there are the intrinsic motivations of the individual practitioner in question (i.e., a consultant) and multiple extrinsic perspectives surrounding this actor (i.e., developers, authorities, consultants). The perceptions of practice from motivation spaces give rise to the actions performed in discretionary spaces. Initial notions of what may be appropriate and possible fuel the individual's discretionary space, in which it is determined what to act upon, and what to bring further into interactional spaces. Action performed by an individual practitioner without consulting other stakeholders is performed in this space. The actions performed in discretionary spaces, and thus, the experiences gained therefrom, can likewise influence a practitioner's motivation.

*P2: A practitioner can bring action from discretionary spaces into interactional spaces and from interactional negotiations into discretionary spaces.*

The action that results from discretionary spaces can be brought into interactional spaces where i.e., new practice is argued for, or methods for conducting the EA is agreed upon. The outcomes of interactional spaces can also reenter discretionary spaces if the negotiations between stakeholders is to be executed by an individual practitioner. For example, a developer and a consultant can agree on the implementation of a new practice, but the methodological development and reporting of these new elements are left up to the consultant. Thus, negotiated action from interactional spaces may require further processing or execution in discretionary spaces. This is also where discrepancies in identity and rules can occur if the negotiated action does not align with the individual practitioner's perceptions of appropriate practice. Negotiations between practitioners result in an external practitioner's perception of practice overpowering an intrinsic perception of practice. A

practitioner's discretionary freedom to act can therefore stem directly from their own perception of appropriate practice but can also be externally motivated and potentially in conflict with their own notions of practice.

*P3: Experienced capacities/opportunities in interactional spaces influence a practitioner's perceptions of practice in motivation spaces.*

Negotiations from interactional spaces can bring experiences that impact the motivations of either internal or external practitioners. Because interactional spaces are where intrinsic and extrinsic motivations meet, they present an opportunity to adopt other perspectives and reconfigure one's own idea of appropriate practice. Motivation of a practitioner influences the action taken in interactional spaces, but through the individual practitioner's discretionary space (pathway P1 and P2).

*P4: Perceived capacities/opportunities of other stakeholders' motivations influence a practitioner's own motivation.*

The two motivation spaces subconsciously influence each other through assumptions of the other's motivation, i.e., intrinsic spaces for motivation are influenced by assumptions of extrinsic motivations. These assumptions are unconfirmed in practice, meaning that they have not yet been acted upon and brought into action spaces. Thus, they have not been exposed to experienced capacities of possible nor accepted practice, and whether the assumptions are true is therefore not verified.

5. Discussion on motivating changes to 'spaces for practice'

I see this theory as meeting a need for mapping EA practice to identify its constituents and understand that all practitioners bring individual perspectives that compliment or conflict other perspectives, resulting in a dynamic process defined by much more than compliance with a legislation. I predict that understanding the capacities and opportunities governing 'spaces for practice', as well as what perceptions and actions are produced in the varying spaces, could give insight into i.e. challenges in translating motivation for more strategic EA to action and help identify what practitioners are key in the facilitation of change.

The theoretical model produced here shows the conceptualization of core concepts of an EA practice and, by doing so, produces a model for expanding the theoretical grounds of EA. Extant theories of EA recognize that EA practice consists of a potential practice that is restricted by capacities to become actual, conducted practice (Kågström and Richardson, 2015; Kågström, 2016), while theories outside of an EA context suggest the narrowing occurs as perspectives and ideas are filtered so that perceptions that are considered in decision-making processes are select (Lukes, 1974; Christensen and Jensen, 1986). Other theories (Stoeglehner et al., 2009; Kørnøv et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018) argue for the increased recognition that practitioners can use discretion to enable new practice, proposing that EA practice is to be understood as an interpretable and value-laden process not only to be defined by limitations and capacities, but also by new opportunities that present themselves. The aim of this theoretical model is therefore two-fold: i. combining the ideas of there being filters to limit practice with the idea that practitioners are likewise individually motivated to pursue new possibilities of practice and ii. demonstrating that these individually constituted 'spaces for practice' are molded, expanded and/or restricted when confronted with the perceptions of other practitioners.

This theory has placed emphasis on distinguishing motivation from action and recognizing that conditions occur during the EA process that can result in the execution of action that does not necessarily align with initial motivations. To this point, significant variance between motivational spaces of practitioners is bound to occur: individual practitioners are pursuing different identities, motivated by different things, and as a result, some are more inclined to pursuing changes to practice than others. Thus, motivational spaces can just as easily be a motivation to

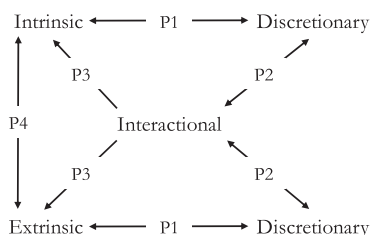


Fig. 4. Relational pathways between the 'spaces for practice'.



prevent change and preserve status quo as it can be a willingness to alter a practice. While the perspectives of one stakeholder group may differ from another, the same stakeholder group or even organization may house vastly varying perceptions, coinciding and conflicting with one another to create dynamic variations of practice.

I find it, therefore, crucial that emphasis on encouraging practitioners to pursue new opportunities is at the core of EA theory, rather than the perspective of capacities as unalterable determinants of practice. It is my intention that generating a dynamic model of practice allows practitioners to recognize that they are change agents of the process, just as much as they are facilitators with occasion to seek and engage in new opportunities.

## 6. Conclusion

This research turns to theories on how decision-makers influence decision-making processes, and in more specific terms, how an EA practitioner constitutes and changes their practice. It does so through ‘spaces for practice’, distinguishing between ‘spaces for motivation’ that determine perceptions of practice and ‘spaces for action’ that determine how these perceptions are concretized in practice. The interrelations between these spaces and how a practitioner navigates from one space to another allows for the reciprocity of perceptions, bearing the potential to change the spaces’ contents and outcomes and thus modify the EA practice being conducted. This theory supplements the current theoretical models of EA practice, such as the ones presented in [Kågström and Richardson \(2015\)](#), [Kågström \(2016\)](#) and [Zhang et al. \(2018\)](#), with the following points of contribution:

- ‘Spaces for practice’ are nuanced to consist of processes that shape a practitioner’s motivation (shaped in ‘spaces for motivation’) and a practitioner’s action (shaped in ‘spaces for action’) throughout the EA process.
- Motivation has an impact on executed action, just as executed action can shape a practitioner’s motivation. Yet, conditions throughout the EA process can cause misalignment between a practitioner’s motivation and their executed action.
- The ‘spaces for practice’ are individually determined but are both intrinsically and extrinsically shaped by the discovery of new capacities and opportunities. These capacities and opportunities can be both perceived and experienced and are uncovered when navigating from one space to another.
- Practice is not solely defined by restrictions. Rather, a practitioner can change traditional EA practice by nurturing new opportunities and pursuing new perceptions of practice.

The theory presented here is the result of a conceptualization of prior theories to merge ideas and develop a new typological approach to understanding EA practice as well as the pathways along which a practitioner navigates and influences their practice. Remaining steps in solidifying this theory could entail an application in on-the-ground EA processes to (dis)confirm and further develop the propositions made. This would also nuance the need for drawing distinctions between an individual’s pursuit of practice and the organizational cultures that set formal procedures for how individuals act. It gives rise to some of the following remaining questions: Are changes to practice more inclined to arise from individual ‘spaces for practice’ or as negotiated between multiple practitioners and stakeholder groups? How do practitioners interact and negotiate to make changes? What perspectives constitute the different ‘spaces for practice’ and are certain capacities and opportunities more prominent than others? How are new opportunities received and what conditions allow them to go from motivation to solidified in practice?

Moreover, this theory is timely in terms of the strengthened discussion on sustainable transition, that has prompted a curiosity in more goal-oriented and strategic EA. Such a shift requires practitioners to

adopt new ways of perceiving and executing their practice, which also implies the embeddedness of institutional and structural landscapes in a practitioner’s decision-making arenas. Institutions and political structures are, in this sense, an internalized part of all ‘spaces for practice’, not as a conscious decision-making strategy, but as an absent or bounded awareness of what practice could and should entail. While still in its early theoretical development phases, I hope this paper is seen as an invitation for practitioners to reflect upon and better understand their role in shaping and guiding practice, especially in the midst of a sustainable transition, recognizing the opportunities and the responsibilities they have in doing so.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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