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The Subjects of Practices: An Invited Response to the Question: 'What is the Significance of the Human Being in Practice Theories?'

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Abstract

This paper considers the significance of people within practice theory, arguing that they do not merely participate in practices as unspecified individuals but assume specific subject forms through which they develop a practice-related subjectivity. In contrast to both the Cartesian notion of an autonomous subject and its dissolution in holistic accounts of practice, the article proposes a relational understanding of subjectivity as a constitutively conditioned capacity to act. Drawing on Bourdieu, Giddens, Schatzki, Leont'ev, and the concept of subjectivation, it shows how subjects and practices co-constitute one another as transformative processes. Practices are not only structured patterns of action but, following Leont'ev, motivated and meaningful activities oriented toward an 'objectivity' ('gegenständlichkeit') in the world. They thus include the embodied, reflexive capacities of participants. Material artefacts and infrastructures are seen as enabling or constraining such agency. The article illustrates this dynamic through the historical emergence of the 'Fosbury Flop' in high jumping, showing how innovation arises from socio-material constellations rather than autonomous creativity. People appear as active, reflective moments within practice, whose constitutively conditioned subjectivity enables critique, transformation, and the creation of something new.

Keywords

co-constitution of practices and subjects; objectivity ('gegenständlichkeit') of practice; subjectivation; transformation

Introduction

In this article, I unfold the assumption that people do not simply participate in practices as unspecified human beings, but that they take on certain forms in practices, which I refer to as subject forms. The argument is that within and across these forms, they develop a subjectivity that not only allows them to engage and participate in practices, but also to respond reflexively towards their demands. In order to understand the significance of this initial assumption in the field of practice theories, it is necessary to first delineate the basic outlines of this field.

The field of practice theories resembles a family (cf. Schatzki 2016, 29). Their members are similar in that they do not explain social phenomena through the autonomous actions of individuals or by simply following predetermined structures. Instead, they are interested in how social orders are created, maintained, and transformed in collective social practice. In doing so, they make it clear that people do not act alone - other living beings, environmental conditions, objects, tools, technologies and symbols also play a constitutive role.

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However, in our view (e.g. Alkemeyer et al. 2016), the claim of practice theory to formulate a sociology of practice beyond action theory (individualism) and structuralism (holism) has so far only been partially realised. In our opinion, the practice-theoretical debate continues to operate within the framework of the well-known alternative of whether social practice constitutes its actors or whether it is based on the activities of predetermined individualities.

Accordingly, the practice-theoretical universe of discourse can be sorted according to whether praxeological observation focuses primarily on the actions performed by actors or on the forms of practice and routines that determine these actions.

Against this background, this article aims to outline a conception of subjectivity within the praxeological paradigm that neither aligns with the "Cartesian figure of an autonomous, self-transparent subject…" (Alkemeyer et al. 2015, 12) nor reduces subjectivity to being primarily formed in practices (Reckwitz 2006). In the practice-theoretical universe of discourse, subjectivity and all the attributes traditionally associated with this term - intellectual perspectives, reflection, the potential for self-determination, and critique - are provocative words, as they seem to mark the return of the sovereign, self-conscious subject of the idealist tradition. However, rather than eliminating these terms entirely from theory and thereby losing touch with the problem complexes they articulate, my aim is to show ways in which they can be incorporated into the subject-critical perspective of contemporary practice theories.

To this end, I proceed as follows: In the first step, I critically examine prominent approaches to a contemporary sociology of practices that tend to dissolve subjectivity in practices (1). Against this background, I turn to various practice-theoretical approaches spanning the holistic and individualistic ends of the field to consider how each might contribute to a conception of subjective agency that is constitutively shaped by the materiality of practices (2). This critical review deals with the practice-theoretical 'master theories' of Bourdieu and Giddens (2.1); Schatzki's conception of the relationship between practices and people (2.2); the activity theory of the cultural-historical school in its formulation by Leont'ev (2.3), and the concept of subjectivation and self-formation in practices (2.4) developed in Oldenburg research contexts, among others, which is supplemented here by considerations regarding the role of things in the formation of subjective agency (2.5). The role that this subjectivity plays in the emergence of new practices will then be outlined (3). A brief summary concludes the article.

1. Questions to the Contemporary Sociology of Practices

At present, the pendulum of the practice-theoretical discussion seems to be swinging towards a holistic view of individual actions and the subjectivity of actors. This is exemplified by a sociology of *practices* (instead of *praxis*), which considers practices, rather than individuals and their actions, as the primary units of sociological analysis. This theory understands practices as recurring patterns of activities that are primarily stabilised by unwritten rules of behaviour, implicit knowledge (routines), and material arrangements (Schatzki 2002; Reckwitz 2003; Schmidt 2012). Strong formulations of this sociology identify these patterns as units that 'recruit' things and people as their carriers and structure individual action, thinking and feeling (Shove et al. 2012; Shove and Pantzar 2016). Inspired by post-structuralism, some family members also examine this process as a process of *subjectivation* (e.g. Reckwitz 2006). It positions individuals in a discursively and materially pre-stabilised order in such a way that they become this order's *subjects* in the sense of *accomplices* who actively support the order because they owe their recognition as capable and accountable subjects to their 'submission' to this order. In this view, the order does not assert itself against the individual, but through the individual.[1]

A sociology of *practices* thus emphasises the unity and continuity of the historically changeable forms that social *practice* acquires (Giddens 1979, 216), and highlights the fitting of things, people, and activities into these forms. The current boom in this approach can be explained above all in terms of theoretical history and politics: it is an expression of a critique of the image of the modern, sovereign subject of action that has been articulated for decades. This image not only dominates *the folk theories* of everyday life but is also reflected in the ontological and methodological individualism of sociological theories of action. In that "theorists of practice deny that they are individualists" (Schatzki 2017, 26) and that they describe society

[1] Subjectivation theory approaches mediate the opposing meanings of the word 'subject' as 'the subject' on the one hand and an individual, that is subjected to external circumstances, on the other hand. Taken together, the subject in this view refers to an individual who willingly submits to a given order.

not from the perspective of individuals but on the basis of practices, they explicitly enact an 'epistemological break' (Bourdieu et al. 1991) with this image. *Terminologically*, this break manifests itself, among other things, in describing individuals not as actors but as 'participants' (Hirschauer 2004) - a term that explicitly avoids the action-theoretical focus on individual intentionality and casts participation not as proactive action but as passive involvement. *Methodologically*, it is realised in an overview perspective on practice, whose benefits consist in being able to identify recurring patterns of action and socio-material constellations made up of people and things across situations. However, this benefit comes at a price. This is because it obscures the fact that people also have something substantial to contribute to the course and quality of a practice, that they engage in a practice with more or less commitment and motivation, and that they have to make all kinds of efforts to set a practice in motion, keep it running, cope with unforeseen events, or assert their own interests. This also applies to the view of the individual as 'the unique crossing point' (Reckwitz 2002, 256; cited from Warde 2017, 94) of "a plurality of practices…" (Warde 2017, 95) that they are the carriers of. This view is also limited insofar as it accounts for the individuality of performing a practice merely as the outcome of a 'personal trajectory within practices' (Warde 2017, 96), which can only be discerned from a bird's-eye perspective. However, the meaning of a practice for an agent, the specificity, intensity, and degree of personal engagement cannot be understood from this perspective.[2] "Theories of practice…", Schatzki (2017, 26) summarises accordingly, "… have said much about practices […] but relatively little about people".

This imbalance can only be remedied if the sociological observer leaves his or her vantage point and enters the 'melee' of practice – as proposed at the other, more individualistic pole of the practice-theoretical discourse universe, for example by ethnomethodology or studies of work, in order to understand how people produce local realities through their everyday interactions and to become aware with all senses of the demands, expectations, problems, and possibilities to which they are exposed in the process.[3] Only an immersive - participatory or 'enactive' (Wacquant 2015) - ethnography reveals that practices are often experienced by participants as conflictual, contradictory, and confusing, and that they challenge each participant in distinctive ways. From this approach, practices come into view as a dynamic structure of conflicting perspectives that does not teleologically amount to success or the reproduction of the existing circumstances. However, from an internal perspective, the trans-situational patterns that structure situated action fade in exactly the opposite direction to the external view.

2. The People in Central Approaches of Practice Theory

The following chapter focuses on the conception (of actions) of people in a total of five approaches to practice theory that I consider central to this question. I deal with the similarities and differences in the 'master theories' of Bourdieu and Giddens in the first section.

2.1 The Structures and Actions of the Actors in the 'Master Theories' of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens

The current sociology of practices tends to fall back on structuralist thinking by conceptualising practices as regular occurrences that recruit and shape their participants and produce them as 'their' subjects. Its secret structuralism is countered by individualistic tendencies, particularly in phenomenologically inspired versions of practice theory. Pierre Bourdieu's and Anthony Giddens' social theories, which have been influential in recent practice sociology, have already claimed to eliminate the one-sidedness of both the structuralist (holistic) and the subjectivist (individualist) paradigms in a new, third paradigm. *Bourdieu* describes social practice as a social *game* characterised by interests and strategies, in which structures, processes, and game activities constitutively determine each other, and methodologically postulates a constant change between bird's-eye and frog's-eye perspectives in order to make the co-constitution of structures, actions and actors observable (Bourdieu [1989] 1993, 42-3). However, Bourdieu's macro-sociological focus on the reproduction of social

[2] At least Alan Warde shows a stronger interest in individual action than many other practice theorists. Similar to Bourdieu, he explains individual action as the encounter of individually incorporated dispositions with contextual conditions that trigger these dispositions because they are recognised as situational demands. Warde also points out that individuals acquire a repertoire of different techniques through learning, which enable them to perform a practice in alternative ways. Like Bourdieu, however, Warde also attributes greater significance to the 'automatic', routine dimensions of individual action in practice than to mind, consciousness, and reflection (see also below, section 2.1).

[3] For the following attempt at classification, see in particular the excellent dissertation by Matthias Michaeler (2025).

inequality ultimately leads to a certain one-sidedness. In contrast to his Algerian studies (Bourdieu 2013), which are primarily dedicated to the discrepancy between social reality and habitus, his sociology of 'modern' French society (Bourdieu [1979] 1984) draws a detailed picture of a largely harmonious interaction between habitus and field, i.e. between incorporated and objectified social structure, in which both sides primarily stabilise each other.

In contrast, Anthony *Giddens*' structuration theory (1979, 1984) paints a more open picture of the interrelationship between structure and action. Even the term 'structuration', which gives his theory its name, explicitly identifies structures as regularities that only take shape in social practice. Accordingly, in his theory, people appear less as *agents*[4] of the social structures they incorporate than as *actors* who also reflexively control their actions and consciously influence the conditions under which they act.

Both approaches thus share the ambition of thinking about structure and action non-dualistically but differ in their emphasis, either on social reproduction or on reflexivity. Bourdieu's praxeology focuses on the routines and everyday mechanisms that reproduce social order. Giddens' structuration theory, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the actors' "capacity for reflective monitoring of performance..." (Warde 2017, 140) and their capability to consciously observe, interpret, and direct their actions. Thus, while Bourdieu stresses the constitutive conditioning of action by the structural 'logic' of practice, Giddens treats people rather as the actual source of practice.

2.2 'Practices and People' by Theodore Schatzki

In order to overcome the one-sidedness of previous approaches, i.e. to treat neither the practices nor the people as principles that ground the practice, Schatzki (2017) has recently presented a conceptualisation of the relationship between 'practices and people' that emphasises the 'equifundamentality' of both sides: "no people, no practices; but, equally, no practices, no people..." (Schatzki 2017, 28). According to this, practices and people are distinct but equally important "organizing principles" (2017) of practice: practices structure action, and people shape the concrete course of practice. Schatzki thus ascribes to them an *agency of* their own that shapes or changes the practice, instead of reducing them to mere distillations, condensations, carriers, or recruits "from practices" (28).

This approach points in the direction that I also have in mind. In my view, however, the concepts of 'equifundamentality' and 'mutual dependence' need to be clarified in more detail. In my understanding, Schatzki treats both sides - practices and people - as entities that already exist independently of each other before they come together and then influence each other when they meet: on the one hand, there is a "plenum of practices" (Schatzki 2017, 26), and on the other hand, there are people who bring their individual properties – experiences, knowledge, skills, feelings, motives, etc. – into the practice. This conceptualisation is catchy, but it avoids two problems. Firstly, it bypasses the 'objective' and 'subjective' conditions under which *practices* and *people* come together in the first place. And secondly, it neglects how the individual properties of people are formed into a *specific agency* under the respective conditions of a practice, thereby giving the practice they perform a specific form, i.e., how both sides constitute each other as concrete realities in practice.

Bourdieu addresses the first point with his question of the fit between field-specific requirements and habitus-shaped dispositions: Which subjectively incorporated dispositions resonate with which objectively materialised (field) conditions? The second point aims at the question of how the incorporated dispositions in a practice are organised in such a way that they become an inner moment of the practice itself. Answering this question is a prerequisite for perceiving practices and people as mutually constitutive rather than as pre-practically, presupposed realities. This would also have categorical consequences. Practices would then not only be structured connections of activities (doings) but would also include the embodied *agency* of their practitioners. These in turn would no longer appear unspecifically as people, but as concrete *subjects of action* whose dispositions take on a form characteristic of the respective practice.[5]

[4] In the sense of persons who only fulfil certain functions.

[5] This question also addresses Alan Warde's (2017) understanding of the relationship between practices and their agents. Although Warde emphasises the significance that individuals - understood with Reckwitz as 'unique crossing points of practices' - have for the concrete formation of a practice due to their particular commitment to it, his conception of the relationship between practices and their agents remains one-sided: "Activity generates wants, rather than vice versa..." (Warde 2017, 137). As we will see in the next section, Leont'ev - following Marx - understands the relationship between activities and wants to be mutually constitutive: activities create wants, which create new activities, and so on.

An example from sport may illustrate this. The practice of goalkeeping requires a handball goalkeeper to focus the physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities acquired through socialisation, practice, and training on the goal - Schatzki (2002) refers to this as a 'teleoaffective structure' - of blocking an oncoming ball. An organism that is not tuned accordingly would instinctively avoid the ball instead of reflexively throwing itself towards it. Conversely, the actions resulting from this orientation contribute to the concrete embodiment of the teleoaffective structure of the practice. Practice and actor mutually in-form[6] each other over the course of time, and the actor, thus brought into form, is an integral moment of the practice without, however, dissolving into it.

2.3 The Intertwining of Objectivity ("Gegenständlichkeit") and Subjectivity in The Theory Of Activity[7] ("Tätigkeitstheorie")

It is the theory of culturally and historically mediated activity that pays particular attention to this idea.[8] One of its central features is that the materiality of the social world is not regarded as a limit to the 'Willkür-Freiheit' (arbitrary freedom) (Schürmann 2022) of an autonomously conceived subject, but rather as the *objectivity* ('Gegenständlichkeit') of an action.[9] "Analogous to phenomenological 'intentionality' (Schürmann 2022, 77), this objectivity orients individual doings and constitutes them as *meaningful* action by determining whether X (e.g. running after someone) or Y (e.g. running a race) is done. It is therefore nothing physical, but "the determinacy of action..." (Schürmann 2022, 77), its "actual motive..." (Leont'ev [1975] 1978, 95, cited in Schürmann 2022, 77).[10] This logic of determinacy differs diametrically from the action-theoretical logic of intentionality. While action theories recognise "only two explanatory instances..." - the intention to act and the material circumstances that enable or restrict action (Schürmann 2014, 218) - activity theory understands the material conditions as the "determinations of the intention itself..." (Schürmann 2014, 218; see also Schürmann 2022, 72). Accordingly, they motivate and orient the motor, perceptual, and cognitive activities of the actors, which thus take the form of a 'Mit-Wissen' (co-knowledge) (Leont'ev [1975] 1978, cited in Michaeler 2025, 207) bound by the activity.[11] With this insight into the objectivity of activities, activity theory also overcomes the distinction still invoked in practice theories between the normality of routines on the one hand and conscious reflection on one's own actions in cases where the routine does not work on the other. In terms of activity theory, these are modalities of action that are inextricably interwoven in their common orientation towards the object of an activity and that constantly merge into one another. That is, for activity theory, the hour of conscious (metapragmatic) reflection does not only strike when routines are irritated.[12] Rather, consciousness is continuously involved in action - not, however, as in Giddens, for example, as a personal consciousness, but as a consciousness *bound by* the objectivity of the activity (Michaeler 2025, 139).

This does not, however, mean that participants' actions are always unanimous. This is because the subject matter in question generally has a different meaning for them.[13] It is the common point of reference for different or differently interested perspectives and, as such, enables "cooperation without consensus..." (Star and Griesemer [1989] 2017, cited in Retterath 2024, 350), in which the differences remain silent or are actively de-thematised.[14] However, these can break out at any time during the activity and lead to conflicts that must then be dealt with by the participants.

[6] As Kalthoff (2008, 10) explains in reference to Heidegger, in-forming means as much as instructing and shaping. A reciprocal in-formation means that no side remains as it was.

[7] Activity theory distinguishes between three levels of practice: 1. *Activity* is the overarching unit of human practice. It is determined by a supra-individual motive (e.g. vocational training). 2. *Actions* are part of an activity. They are directed toward a specific end ("What do I want to achieve?"). 3. *Operations* are the concrete ways in which an action is performed. This three-way division is strictly analytical. In reality, the levels often merge. For example, when an action becomes habitual, it turns into an operation: shifting gears when learning to drive is initially a conscious action, and later it becomes an automated operation.

[8] Nicolini (2012) is one of the exceptions.

[9] In activity theory, 'objectivity' does not mean that an action is directed at or influenced by an object. Rather, human activity is always objective for Leont'ev insofar as it is directed at something in the world that lies outside the subject and is transformed by the activity.

[10] Activity and practice are therefore different perspectives of the same process: *activity* marks "the object or the determinacy of a personal action...", practice marks "the object or the determinacy of the same personal action in the perspective of what one typically does, i.e. oriented by a basic idea, formulated in *social meanings*..." (Schürmann 2022, 81) and not *in a personal sense*. *Actions* are related to this personal sense, which in turn require certain *operations* in order to take place. The level of organisation of a personal action depends on the context. For example, throwing a handball in a competition can be an operation, but when practising, it becomes an activity. For more details on the distinctions between objective meaning, personal meaning, activities, actions, and operations, see Schürmann 2022.

[11] Bühler ([1989] 1999) calls this knowledge 'empractic'.

[12] As, for example, Bourdieu sees it, with the consequence of reproducing the dualism of body and mind in contradiction to his own intention.

[13] While meaning marks the "supra-individual aggregate state of the object of action...", sense, on the other hand, denotes "the individual aggregate state of the object of action..." (Schürmann 2024, p. 78).

[14] Star and Griesemer ([1989] 2017) refer to such objects as 'boundary objects'.

In terms of activity theory, people are therefore neither mere executors of practices nor autonomous subjects, but agents whose power and freedom are bound by the objectivity of the activity. They have to commit to the activity, and they themselves transform it while structuring and restructuring it through their actions - a dialectical 'inter-formation' of activity, action, agency, and actors. This also means that neither practices nor their actors are static entities. Rather, they form and transform each other in a contingent, ongoing process. Thus, they are not only co-present, but processually entangled – they exist in a mode of becoming, with the constitutive possibility of becoming something else. "The internal (subject)..." writes Leont'ev ([1975] 1978, 111), "acts through the external and this in itself changes him." And further:

> "This position has a completely real sense. After all, the subject of life initially appears only as possessing, to use Engels' expression, 'an independent power of reaction'. Yet this power can act only through the 'external', i.e., through 'its transition from the potential to the actual', in which it becomes concrete, develops, and enriches itself. In this sense, the changes brought about by the subject's power of reaction are always 'a transformation also of its carrier, the subject himself'. (Leont'ev ([1975] 1978, 111)

Leont'ev's subject is therefore a subject that transforms itself by (trans-)forming the world. Precisely as such a formed and continuously transforming, fluid subject, it refracts the "external influences" (111) to which it is subject.[15]

2.4 Subjectivation Through, In and Between Practices

In our Oldenburg research contexts, we have conceptualised the formation of a materially conditioned agency in the sense above as *subjectivation* (e.g. Alkemeyer et al. 2013; Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2016). The concept comprises four interlinked dimensions:

1. The formation of specific dispositions;
2. The adaptation to social norms and values;
3. The acquisition of the power to react reflexively towards the conditions to which one owes recognition as an accountable subject of action;
4. The historicity and changeability of the form of a subjectivity characterised by intentionality, accountability, and autonomy.

With this understanding of subjectivation, subjects of action are not only, as in most power-critical adaptations of poststructuralist thought, "collections of subject positions, [as] crossing points of discourses (or of practices), or [as] nodes in relations..." (Schatzki 2017, 41), but rather co-players who can make the social and material conditions of their "ability to play along..." (Brümmer 2015) the object of reflection, critique, and transformation. As such, they escape the contradiction between heteronomy and autonomy. According to Marx they:

> *"make their own history, but not just as they please. They do not choose the circumstances for themselves, but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past."* (Marx [1852] 1943, 23)

In social practice, they (subjects of action) appropriate the existing circumstances and make them part of themselves. Bourdieu refers to the incorporated circumstances as habitus. However, in order to focus more clearly than Bourdieu on the practice-and situation-relatedness of the making of history and self, we explicitly understand habitus not as a compact and

[15] Within the current discussion of practice theory, Leont'ev's conception of activity seems to converge most strongly with Joseph Rouse's (2007) thinking on practice. Rouse also does not view practices as being governed by rules or regularities, but rather as a process that arises from the mutual relationship between single performances. Similar to Leont'ev's activity, a practice in Rouse's view is characterised by the fact that these performances are not mere reactions, but are oriented toward something- a topic, a question, a problem whose answer is not yet certain, i.e., something "what is at issue and at stake..." (Rouse 2007, 5) - in Leont'ev's words, to an objectivity. Actors are embedded in this process and, as such, are involved in its further development and direction, although, in my view, to a lesser extent than in Leont'ev's theory. However, Rouse reflects more strongly than Leont'ev on the temporality and thus contingency of practice - performances respond to earlier ones and are directed toward future performances with an open outcome - as well as on their implicit normativity, which unfolds over time. Practices are "constituted by the mutual accountability of their performances..." (1). This means that every performance is subject to an evaluation of whether it is "correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like..." (3) in relation to the practice performed. Against this background, synthesising Leont'ev's activity theory with Rouse's practice theory would be a worthwhile endeavour that could likely lead to a deeper understanding of the temporal co-constitution of subjectivity and practices.

fixed entity, but rather as a collection of heterogeneous (mental, perceptual, cognitive, affective, motor, etc.) embodied dispositions that are selectively activated and formed depending on the object of an activity.

In one activity, *these* dispositions take the centre stage, while in another, *those* dispositions take on a form determined by the respective activity; meanwhile, other dispositions remain in the background.

However, dispositions can emerge surprisingly from the background at any time – triggered by a gesture, an object, a constellation of people and things, an atmosphere. A drastic case would be the situational invocation of a racial trauma through the verbal or gestural expression of another person; in less drastic cases, memories of private matters, for example, intervene irritatingly in the performance of a public or professional activity. However, such an 'appearance' of inappropriate dispositions does not necessarily have to manifest itself as insecurity, but can also have a positive outcome – for example, if one is suddenly enabled to do something (a movement, a figure of speech, an idea, etc.) in the collectivity of a practice that one has never been able to do before.

In all these cases, the subject of action is surprised by itself and realises that there is something in it that is beyond its control – a kind of individual 'character' (Koßler 2015) that is formed in the trajectory of its life.[16] Such a character is not the mere sum of the dispositions that an individual 'accumulates' over the course of their life as a subject of action in various practices, but rather a supersummative form of a new quality. This character ensures that a subject of action does not completely dissolve into the practice it is currently performing. Rather, it enables the subject to retain a relative autonomy in relation to that practice. Seen in this way, 'character' refers to the trans-situational imprint of a 'subject' that is not identical with what I have previously referred to as a 'subject of action'. This character is not formed in individual practices but emerges across the heterogeneous practices of different social fields and forms of life (Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2017b). Its emergence thus has a historical index insofar as it is subject to the conditions of a 'modern' society that is differentiated into relatively autonomous fields. The conditions of this society confront the subjects of action with the need to assert themselves as a person in different contexts (Renn 2016, 189) and to independently bridge the ruptures that this society establishes in their habitus (Krais 1993, 220).

2.5 Enabling and Disabling – The Role of Things

As part of their criticism of the mentalism of competing approaches, practice theories emphasise the involvement of things and material infrastructures in practices. From this perspective, things are also involved in the constitution of subjective agency. In the current practice-theoretical discussion, they are mainly discussed as offers that guarantee or at least suggest a certain use - like railings on which action can be based (e.g. Hirschauer 2016, 52; Schmidt and Volbers 2011). Sometimes this supporting function is also attributed to symbolic infrastructures such as language, discourses (Hirschauer 2016) or websites (Retterath 2024, 89). By taking into consideration the materiality of practices, practice theories overlap with approaches of the so-called New Materialism according to Latour (e.g. [1999] 2004) or Barad (2007) as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS).

From a praxeological perspective, however, the new materialisms raise a problem when they understand processes of meaning as a separate (non-material?) dimension of the social, which only materialises in its interconnection with material entities or physical arrangements (cf. Schürmann 2021, pp. 49).[17] In contrast, practice theories are cultural sociologies (Reckwitz 2003) in the sense that they understand practices *eo ipso* as particular, i.e., "this-and-not-that…" (Schürmann 2021, p. 50) kind of performances of action. Otherwise, they would not be practices, but mere behaviour. Most practice theories take this into account in the wake of Wittgenstein. However, activity theory further clarifies this insight into the meaningfulness of practices by linking meaning to the objectivity of an activity, i.e., by seeing the activity as driven by a motive and the actions performed within the framework of the activity as determined by a (perspective-bound) sense. Activity theory can thus make it particularly clear why individuals are motivated to actively engage in an activity as its subjects.

[16] With the concept of 'character', Koßler emphasises that people do not merely merge into abstract (functional) subject positions or play roles as *personae* when engaging in practices but also lend a special imprint to a practice due to the distinctiveness of their personal features, as formed in their life experience.

[17] Although Shove et al. (2012) understand practices as meaningful processes, this view is also echoed in their terminological differentiation between materialities, meanings, and competencies, as well as in their endeavour to study the transformation of practices as reconfigurations of these three dimensions.

Other terms used in the practice-theoretical discourse universe to designate the things at play, such as '*usage suggestion[s]*' (Hirschauer 2016, 52), 'object meaning' (Holzkamp 1976, 25) or - originating from the psychology of perception – 'affordance' (Gibson [1979] 2014), imply that things have a meaning for the subjects of action. However, they do not acquire this meaning on their own, but only in the relationship structure of the practice in which they participate. For example, a hurdle has a different meaning for a hurdler in a competition than it does in practice and training – in the first case, crossing the hurdle is a subordinate operation to the goal or motive of the activity, in the second case it is the object of the activity itself (see footnote 6) -, a biomechanic observes the movements of the body in his research practices from a different perspective than a sociologist using an ethnographic approach, practitioners elicit different uses from urban furniture when skateboarding than when shopping, or the computer takes on a different meaning when gaming than when writing an academic article. What all these examples have in common is that the things and the subjects of action must (a) be connectable and disposed to each other and (b) be adjusted to each other through the teleoaffective structure of the practice so that a relationship appropriate to the practice can be established between them. In the reflexive reference to the framework of meaning of the practice (hurdling, research, etc.), both sides then in-form each other. The action lends the thing a meaning typical of the practice and the thing, which in practice reveals itself to the subject of action as precisely *this* object, conversely models the action.[18]

The establishment of a practical relationship between people and things is, therefore, presuppositional; it is based on learning processes. Leont'ev ([1959] 1981, 298) describes the coming together of people and things using the example of learning to use a spoon. Due to its material properties, a spoon is better suited to eating soup than a fork or a knife. Nevertheless, the learning child initially encounters it as a stubborn object. It is only through repeated practice that the spoon and the child come together. The child's motor, perceptual, and cognitive dispositions adapt to the material properties of the spoon, and the child develops the object meaning of the spoon through the practice of handling it and gradually integrates it into its sense of self; for the child, the spoon changes from an 'available' object into an 'accessible' thing to handle (Heidegger [1927] 2010). This process is normatively regulated – on the one hand by the conventions of (soup) eating already materialised in the object, and on the other hand by the supportive and corrective, physical and verbal interventions of caregivers. For the child, it means acquiring competence that increases their independence. The child acquires an ability to act that is conditioned in material, symbolic, and normative ways and that not only gradually allows them to eat soup in a socially recognised way, but also to imprint their own character on the practice of eating soup or even to consciously violate the etiquette.

However, things never completely lose their availability; instead, they can reassert themselves at any time as a source of disturbance. Furthermore, materialities not only participate in practices as functional instruments, but can also appear as media for thinking, designing and imagining. Malafouris (2014) has found a beautiful formulation for this: 'creative thinging'. In practical interaction, the subject of action experiences and explores the material properties and the potential for (re) design that an object has for them. In this process, projects of what could be done with or from them can emerge[19] - an *imaginary* dimension of practice that goes beyond the tried and tested, the known and familiar, which remains underexposed in a sociology of practices that is primarily interested in the stabilising function of things.

We propose (Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2017a) the concept of mutual *enablement* for the co-constitution of things to be dealt with and the subjects of action. Due to its threefold meaning of 'enabling', 'being enabled', and 'being able', it denotes the simultaneity of heteronomy and autonomy and directs attention to how people and things bring each other into play as subjects of action and things to be dealt with – or not, if there is a lack of connectivity for each other. A thing might elude accessibility for certain people because of its design, its technology or its handling; pupils might find no access to the arrangements of school lessons because the habitus of the social middle classes, which is unfamiliar to them, materialises in them, etc.

[18] This article does not take into account a further dimension of the social that also has an in-formative effect on practice, namely the dimension of 'general understandings' (Schatzki 2002) or 'social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004) that transcends practices, fields, and life forms.

[19] Unlike a predetermined plan, a design only emerges under the actual conditions of practice and must be continuously modified in action (cf. Castoriadis 2005, 77).

These are examples of how certain objective circumstances remain inaccessible to the subjectively embodied dispositions and thus to the practical knowledge of certain people (groups) and can prevent them from elaborating into a recognisable competence.[20] Persons affected are then prevented from appearing as competent subjects of action - they are disabled.

From this perspective, it seems to me to be necessary from a *practice-sociological* perspective to question technological change – such as current processes of digitalisation – not only in terms of the extent to which they bring about a transformation of already established practices – of consuming, collaborating, training, etc. (see Schatzki 2025; Brümmer 2019) – but also in terms of which social groups they tend to decouple and thus disable. This would be a question for a separate article.

3. The Emergence of the New in Socio-Material-Imaginary Constellations

A sociology of practices focuses primarily on the stabilisation and success of practice in the interplay of people and things. Insofar as it thematises change, it sees it primarily as a consequence of deviations that arise by themselves in repetitions (e.g. Schäfer 2013) or reconstellations in the interplay of materiality, competence, and meaning (Shove et al. 2012; Schatzki 2019). In their consistent anti-subjectivism, however, they also portray processes of change as predetermined, thereby diminishing the role of human capacity for conception. With the concept of enablement, however, this capacity can also be understood in a non-subjectivist way – namely as an event that results from the contingent encounter of people and things. It is then attributed not to an *unconditional* subjectivity, but to a subjectivity that is constitutively conditioned by circumstances.

A prominent example from sport is the 'invention' of the Fosbury flop in high jump, attributed in the narratives of sports history to the US athlete Dick Fosbury. Fosbury first achieved international success with this jumping technique at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. Its characteristics are a fast arched run-up, a torso rotation during the last steps, and crossing the high jump bar backwards. This technique revolutionised high jumping within a very short time because it led to an explosive increase in performance and was easier to learn than the straddle technique practised up to that point. Fosbury jumped a height of 2.24 meters in Mexico at a height of 1.93 meters. The Cuban Javier Sotomayor jumped 2.45 meters 25 years later, surpassing that height by a whole 52 centimetres - his world record is still valid today.

The condition for the appearance of the Fosbury flop was a historically contingent interplay of infrastructural, biographical, social, and cultural factors: 1. *Infrastructurally*, it presupposed the possibility of landing backwards in the form of voluminous foam safety mats, which were adopted from pole vault. 2. *Biographically*, Fosbury's individual *trajectory*[21] played a decisive role: up to the age of 21, Fosbury was only a moderately successful high jumper *and* student of practical physics. As a high jumper, he was unable to exceed the modest jumping height of 1.60 meters using the straddle technique and occupied a marginal position in the field of high jumping, characterised by failure. We know from Bourdieu that marginal positions often favour an unconventional, experimental attitude.[22] In his experimentation, Fosbury brought his knowledge of physics (knowing that), which he had acquired as a physicist, into play alongside the knowledge he had acquired as a high jumper (knowing how): "He realised that his technique only exposed his body over the bar at hip width and no longer from head to toe in the horizontal as in the straddle..." (Hartmann 2020). And – another biographical contingency – he came across one of the few coaches who believed in the new technique long before Fosbury's international breakthrough and worked with him to develop it further. 3) *Socially*, the code of outbidding (higher-faster-further) prevailing in the social field of competitive sport structured and motivated the efforts of the athlete and his coach. In terms of practice theory, this code can be understood as the manifestation of a field-specific imaginary or general understanding that informs all competitive sports practices. 4 Finally, *culturally*, Fosbury was surfing on a zeitgeist of departure at the end of the 1960s. His jumping style was considered dynamic, young, and revolutionary, and the public celebrated the athlete as a "youthful trailblazer in […] encrusted structures..." (Hartmann 2020).

[20] Such processes are a central theme of *Disability Studies*. They also show that, as a rule, it is not the circumstances that are disqualified or criticised in public, but that the persons become conspicuous as 'disruptive variables', e.g. because they delay routine processes (see Schillmeier 2007). In this sense, they experience a practical injustice.

[21] Bourdieu uses this term to mark the fact that the social conditions in which people grow up open up certain 'trajectories' in social space and close others. In a sense, they pave the way for a person's career (see Staab and Vogel 2014).

[22] Bourdieu (1996) demonstrates this favouring of an experimental attitude by assuming a marginal position in the literary field.

The contingent interplay of these heterogeneous factors opened up a 'situational potential' (Jullien [1997] 2004) for Fosbury, which he used to develop his new technique. On the one hand, this technique was anchored in traditional techniques (Swidler 2001) and was thus recognisable as a variant of high jumping. On the other hand, it marked a significant innovation in the field of high jumping, as it was immediately adopted by other high jumpers. After Fosbury's breakthrough, almost no high jumper used the old technique.

Conclusion

The aim of the present contribution was to explore theories and concepts with which people can be viewed neither as autonomous subjects nor as agents of practices, but as subjects of action whose intentions, motives, power to act, and freedom are constitutively conditioned by the socio-material circumstances in which they are active. From this perspective, their activities (*doings*) and dispositions in practice take on an intelligible, recognisable form that is reflexively related to the framework of meaning of the practice in which they are currently involved. In this sense, they become a competent participant, in the moment of the practice, without, however, being absorbed into it. Acting, as imposed on individuals by the differentiated structures of modern society within heterogeneous social fields and their practices, requires them to assert themselves as persons in the space between these practices and to develop a 'character' in this in-between. This character is a trans-situational subjectivity that grants them relative autonomy within each practice. On the one hand, individual moments of this 'character' can interfere with the subjects of action in the execution of a practice as an irritation and, for example, lead to a stagnation, failure, demolition or exit. On the other hand, however, the 'character' also opens up the deliberative potential for them to distance themselves from the current practice, to relate (critically) to it and thus to themselves and to develop alternative perspectives. Empirically, the social-theoretical question of the fate of this deliberative potential of a constitutively determined subjectivity under the conditions of current social and technological transformation must remain open.

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