

# Editor's Introduction to Volume 1: Practice Theory: Past, Present, Future

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## Abstract

On behalf of the Editorial Team, I would like to welcome readers to the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory*. This introduction explains the rationale and promise of establishing this new journal and outlines its aims and scope. It also introduces the first issue, Vol. 1: Practice Theory: Past, Present, Future, providing an overview and commentary on each of the three sections and on what they reveal about the current state and potential of practice-theoretical research. The editorial concludes with an invitation to contribute to future issues of the journal and to submit articles that connect, extend, and expand the field of practice theory across disciplines and topics.

## Keywords

*practice theory; past; present; future*

## Introduction

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory*. This new publication marks an important moment for a diverse and growing international community of scholars working with theories of practice across the social sciences and beyond. Before outlining the theme, structure, and contributions of this first issue, I want to explain the reasons and objectives for launching a journal dedicated to practice theory.

What unites practice theories and practice-theory inspired research is a shared commitment to understanding social life as constituted by practices: organised, shared, embodied, and materially mediated doings and sayings that extend across time and space. By taking practices as the fundamental unit of social analysis and conceptualisation, practice-theoretical research distinguishes itself from both systemic or structural accounts and from individualist enquiries into social life. Over the past two decades, this orientation has gained a distinct and privileged position in many fields of applied research, including in: consumption, design, education, energy, health, management, media studies, mobility, sustainability, and technology, where it has been used to reframe questions of social order, change, and everyday life.

At the same time, theories of practice have been debated and developed within and across multiple disciplines, including: anthropology, education, geography, organisation studies, philosophy, science and technology studies, and sociology. While practice theory and research have flourished, practice-theoretical work has remained dispersed, often anchored in distinct disciplinary contexts, conceptual traditions, and empirical problem areas. Despite growing networks and interdisciplinary exchanges, there has been no dedicated venue to bring these conversations together in written form. The founding editorial team believes the time is right to establish a platform that fosters dialogue across traditions, connects substantive insights from diverse fields, and strengthens both the power and visibility of practice-theoretical research. *The Journal of Practice Theory* has been created as a shared space for the development and discussion of practice theories and for exploring their contributions to understanding contemporary social life. The journal is guided by three core aims.

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The first aim is to publish high-quality theoretical and empirical research that speaks across disciplinary boundaries. We want the journal to become the go-to venue for advancing and debating practice theory.

The second aim is to seek to strengthen and expand the global network of practice theory scholars, including early-career researchers. The journal is designed to contribute to and facilitate a thriving practice theory community connected not by shared discipline or topic, but by shared conceptual and methodological concerns.

Finally, the journal is committed to operating as an open-access and autonomous publication. This structure reflects a third and broader ambition: to contribute to a transformation in how scholarly knowledge is produced and shared. The journal therefore depends on the collective efforts of contributing authors, reviewers, and editors who share a commitment to developing practice theory as a living, evolving field. We hope that this journal will become a lasting resource and meeting place for the ideas, people, and networks that continue to shape practice theory.

## Introducing the First Issue

There are two main reasons for launching *The Journal of Practice Theory* with its first issue, 'Past, Present, Future'. The first is that Past, Present, Future provides a narrative device through which to take stock of where practice theories stand today, the ideas and careers that have shaped their development, and the trajectories that lie ahead. In taking this approach, we recognise that practice theories are multiple, divergent, and overlapping and that they have distinct and sometimes intersecting histories. Variants of practice theory shape careers, networks, and collaborations and are themselves shaped by the empirical insights they help to generate. With this view of how ideas, careers, and fields emerge, the narrative structure of Past, Present, Future signals the ethos of the journal and how we intend to operate - as a medium through which practice theories can continue to hybridise, accumulate, and develop.

The second reason is historical. It has been twenty-five years since Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Eike von Savigny published *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (2000). While that volume did not mark the beginning of practice theory, it stands as a significant milestone, one that helped to consolidate and name a growing body of work concerned with the role of practices in the constitution of social life. This inaugural issue brings together interviews and invited essays that illustrate how practice theory has developed across multiple fronts, what tensions and debates cut across, organise, and animate it today, and how it might continue to move on. The contributions we have included celebrate the diversity and energy of the field.

## Past

The first section, Past, features interviews with three scholars whose work has profoundly shaped the development of practice theory: Stephen Turner, Joseph Rouse, and Wanda Orlikowski. Conducted by Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove, these interviews do not represent everything that has happened in this emerging and changing field. Instead, the views and experiences of these three scholars help to illuminate a set of formative moments, shared influences, and divergent trajectories, as well as a selection of common starting points, that have contributed to the emergence of practice-theoretical research over several decades. The interviews show how each scholar encountered and contributed to practice theories in different ways and at different times through their writings, collaborations, and engagements with adjacent intellectual movements.

It is notable, though coincidental, that all three interviewees are based in the United States. This is relevant because all three have negotiated careers within institutional settings marked by distinct institutional, disciplinary, and hierarchical contexts - contexts that differ from those shaping the lives of academics in other parts of the world. Such conditions form part of the intellectual histories that these interviews reveal. Preoccupations and arguments travel unevenly: concepts gain and lose attention; debates mix, diverge, or fail to connect across disciplines and geographies. The interviews offer insights into how practice theories have evolved and been remade by these disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational dynamics. The launch of *The Journal of Practice Theory* continues these many trajectories.

## Present

The Present section focuses on a contemporary cross-cutting debate within practice theory, inviting contributors to respond to the question: “What is the significance of the human being in practice theories?” Similar to representing the past through a selection of interviews, in doing so, the section on the present does not attempt to describe the full diversity of current positions - an impossible task in one section of a single issue - but instead uses this question as an organising device to mark a particular set of differences and overlaps of contemporary concern.

The status of the human being remains one of the field’s central axes of differentiation. How ‘the human being’ is conceptualised - as actor, assemblage, body, body–mind, carrier, participant, practitioner, or subject of action - has implications for understanding agency, materiality, learning, power, and social change, among other issues. It also shapes how practice theories connect with broader intellectual movements and disciplinary concerns, from phenomenology and pragmatism to posthumanism and affect theory. By focusing on this question, the section provides a snapshot of distinct yet interconnected positions that characterise the current landscape of practice theory.

To open the section, Thomas Alkemeyer writes about ‘The Subjects of Practices’, examining the dynamic interplay between subjects and practices. His essay argues, with the notion of subjectivity, that subjects and practices co-constitute one another as transformative processes.

Silvia Gherardi instead eschews the representational emphasis implied in the journal’s question and reformulates it from a posthumanist position, asking: “What is the place of the human being in practice theories?” Gherardi’s contribution develops a posthuman, relational, and processual understanding of the human as becoming-with the nonhuman, the more-than-human, and the earthly - an approach that decentres the human subject without denying its situated and ethical significance.

Finally, Cecily Maller advances an alternative response by proposing the idea of a gradient between more humanist and posthumanist positions. Conceptualising the human being as more-than-human ‘body–minds’, Maller proposes that it is possible, and necessary, to move across different conceptual positions depending on the focus and purpose of analysis. In doing so, Maller offers a generative way of thinking that recognises the multiplicity of practice theoretical approaches and their potential for dialogue rather than division.

## Future

Finally, the Future section brings together a set of short, forward-looking essays that identify emerging challenges, unexplored terrains, and possible developments for practice theory. These contributions open conversations about where the field might go next and how practice theories can continue to evolve in response to changing worlds, shifting social formations, and new empirical and conceptual demands. Collectively, they point to a dynamic field that is simultaneously deepening its analytical reach while widening its ethical, political, and methodological horizons.

Dale Southerton and Susan Halford open the section with ‘Sociodigital Practices: Mobilising and Challenging Social Practice Theory’, arguing that many contemporary practices are now best understood as sociodigital - entangled with devices, platforms, data, and infrastructures. Their essay shows how digital transformations create opportunities for practice theory while also requiring new conceptual tools, particularly around expertise, technical systems, and the future-making capacities of digital infrastructures.

In ‘Gendering Practices: Feminist Perspectives Transforming Practice Theory’, Barbara Poggio explores the mutual relevance and influence of feminist and practice-theoretical approaches. Poggio describes how feminist research enriches practice theory’s treatment of materiality, embodiment, and power, while practice theory provides tools for understanding gender as a process woven into everyday activity. Poggio’s argument for closer dialogue between these approaches foregrounds the transformative potential of feminist insights for future practice research.

In 'What's 'Natural' About Disasters? Practice Theory as an Emancipatory Lens for Reconceptualising the Social Construction of Disasters', Paula Jarzabkowski, Katie Meissner, Tyler Riordan, and Rosie Gallagher demonstrate the ability of a practice theoretical perspective to reframe pressing global issues. They argue that so-called 'natural' disasters are deeply social in origin, shaped through the mundane reproduction of everyday practices.

Stephen Kemmis's 'Practice Theory Perspectives on Learning and Social Change' explores the relationship between learning, practice, and social change. Extending practice theory into the domain of education and social movements, Kemmis conceptualises learning as an ontological process through which people and their worlds are transformed together. In doing so, he bridges individual, collective, and societal scales of change and shows how processes of distributed learning contribute to wider processes of social transformation.

Seweryn Rudnicki's 'The Travels and Adoptions of Practice Theories' turns attention to the ways practice theories move, mutate, and are adopted across the contexts of their use. Rather than treating practice theory as a stable body of thought, Rudnicki invites future research to follow its translations across disciplines, sectors, and sites of application, exploring how practice-theoretical ideas are and might be adapted and reassembled in different intellectual and practical environments.

Finally, Marcelo de Souza Bispo's 'Bordering and Insurgency: Towards a Decolonial Practice-Based Approach' advances an agenda for rethinking the ethical and political scope of practice theory. Through the concepts of bordering and insurgency, Bispo indicates how practice-theoretically inspired research might be attuned to historical legacies, ongoing exclusions, and the political stakes of knowing and doing. Bispo calls for a plural, situated, and reflexive practice theory that will further attend to epistemic diversity and the politics of knowledge.

## An Invitation

Taken together, the contributions in this inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* remind us that the field remains dynamic, contested, and full of possibilities. The interviews and essays collected here do not work with or add up to a single definition of what practice theory is or should be today. Instead, they reveal a plurality of approaches, orientations, and problem spaces. This diversity is one of practice theory's greatest strengths. Over the last few decades, the field has expanded to include engagements with posthumanism, materiality, temporality, affect, power, and more. It has also travelled across disciplines, taking shape within sociology, geography, anthropology, organisation studies, education, international relations, design, and beyond.

In keeping with this dynamic process, *The Journal of Practice Theory* invites scholars, from all disciplinary and geographical backgrounds, and at all career stages, to submit contributions - articles, short essays, opinion pieces (columns), or other innovative forms - and to propose topics and special issues for guest editing, that take practice theories and practice-theory inspired research into new arenas, that develop new conceptual arguments, offer empirical insights grounded in practice-theoretical analysis, or reflect on methodological and philosophical questions about what it means to study practices.

*The Journal of Practice Theory* is not only a publication; it is an evolving collective endeavour - a space to think, argue, experiment, and imagine together. We warmly invite you to join that process: to contribute your research, your questions, and your ideas to the ongoing development of practice theories and practice-theoretical enquiry.

## References

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