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The Lens of Practice Theory

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Abstract

In this contribution to the *Theory Corner* of the Columns section, Elizabeth Shove interrogates the pervasive metaphor of the 'practice lens'. Elizabeth takes aim at the seemingly innocuous concepts of 'perspectives', 'lenses', and 'filters' on the grounds that they reproduce a dangerously limited view of the status of theory in social research. The ensuing debate is as important for those who believe that theories selectively reveal aspects of an independent reality as it is for those who claim that theories constitute the very terms of enquiry.

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Whether they are aware of it or not, those who write about a ‘practice lens’ are embroiled in long-standing arguments about the relation between theory and empirical research. Dipping into these debates exposes important points of difference between practice theorists, including those who contribute to this journal. In drawing attention to these divides, my aim is not to stir up trouble for its own sake but to invite further reflection on the diverse projects with which practice theorists are variously engaged.

This is a picture of ‘the lens of practice theory’, made by Sarah Royston, and produced quite some years ago.



Figure 1: ‘The Lens of Practice Theory’ made by Sarah Royston.

This object is meant as a joke, but references to the practice lens, or to the practice perspective, are pervasive, influential, and widely taken for granted. The expression may be in common use, but in my view, the language of the lens is also deeply problematic. It is so on three counts. The first has to do with the suggestion that theories are lens-like in the sense that they can be taken up, or put down, at will. Second, the lens terminology implies that theories allow researchers to see different aspects of ‘reality’. Third, and following from the previous points, this approach supposes that

alternative perspectives can be adopted, substituted, or integrated.

Some of this carries over from the world of optics. Biologists use microscopes to see ‘the same’ thing at different scales, opticians try out different lenses in order to correct problems of astigmatism and focus, and photographers use wide-angle lenses and filters to introduce distortions for artistic effect. In all these examples, lenses bring some things into sharp relief and obscure or disguise others. The metaphorical lenses of social theory are said to be similar in that they reveal some but not other features of society.

In this formulation, the lens model is compatible with the conclusion that many perspectives or disciplinary approaches are better than one. There are problems further down the line – for example, how (i.e. from what position) might theories be reconciled? – but the underlying assumption is that some lenses, or some combinations of them, provide a more detailed or more accurate picture of what is really going on.

I am not about to go into the philosophy of science, but those who write about lenses assume that there is an unmediated realm beyond. This is not the only way of thinking about the status of theory in social research. For example, instead of treating practice theory as an instrument through which objects and processes are glimpsed, an alternative, more powerful proposition is that it constitutes that which is revealed.

In this analysis, theories represent all-encompassing paradigms in which researchers are, or are not, immersed. This does not undermine the value of empirical research – paradigms generate questions that can be addressed and answered – but it reminds practice theorists and others of the necessarily bounded nature of enquiry and the incommensurability of different traditions.

The contrast between these strategies is stark.

Some authors treat practice theory as a lens or set of filters, situated between the observer and the real world. They contend that researchers choose from a range of possible perspectives/lenses, and that practice theories can be grafted onto co-existing approaches, including those that pervade debates in management, education, or sociology.

Meanwhile, others insist that practice theories deal with relations, interactions, and dynamics quite unlike those confronting researchers who subscribe to different traditions and consequently inhabit different worlds. More than that, they argue that since research is always conducted within one paradigm or another, empirical studies cannot be used to evaluate rival theories. The prospect of combining perspectives is also out of the question, as is the lure of interdisciplinary enquiry.

Although still in its infancy, this journal includes contributions that represent both positions: this is to be expected and welcomed, but it should not stifle debate about what theories are and what part they play in the research we do.

I've already hinted at some of the problems associated with the notion of 'the practice lens'. I now make an even stronger case. In my view, this metaphor is positively dangerous in that it bypasses matters of intellectual and personal history, airbrushes out the social foundations of enquiry, and relies on a form of empiricism that is invisibly threaded through swathes of contemporary writing and analysis.

For me, practice theory is no more, and also no less, than a means of configuring and addressing problems that arise from, and that are rooted in, a raft of assumptions

about the social world. In other words, practice theory is not a perspective that can be selected from a toolkit of possible options and applied to empirical material. Nor is it a means of revealing some aspect of reality. Instead, it is something that researchers *do* as a matter of conviction and commitment - it is a way of being and of thinking in and of itself.

This anti-lens thesis goes hand in hand with a more modest account of what can be achieved, and a reluctance to go along with cumulative or additive representations of social research. Judgements about whether one theoretical tradition is somehow better than another are still relevant, but they are contingent and situated, depending on the lives of academic debates and on researchers' careers within and at the margins of different disciplines.

As I said at the outset, this is not a new topic. To give just one example, in a widely cited paper, first published in 1958, Hanson countered the conclusion that interpretations of (the same?) data differ depending on the viewer's perspective (Hanson [1958] 1981). Hanson uses a variety of images and examples to argue that there is no gap between seeing and understanding and that observation is a matter of *conceptual organisation*. It is still plausible to think of theory as an optical device (maybe a lens that actively configures what it shows), but if we go along with Hanson, or with others like him, we cannot also go along with the view that practice theories selectively uncover facets of reality, nor can we conclude that insights from a practice perspective can be added to 'evidence' framed in other terms.

In this opinion piece, I have leant on Hanson's work and revisited it with practice theories in mind. At a minimum, this exercise provides a powerful reminder of the fact that those who adopt a practice theory lens (as defined above) and those who resist such

approaches, tap into fundamentally different epistemologies.

References

Hanson, N. ([1958] 1981) 'Observation as Theory Laden'. In Brown, S., Fauvel, J. and Finnegan, R. (Eds.) *Conceptions of Inquiry*, pp. 222-33. Open University Press.
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