

The Travels and Adoptions of Practice Theories

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Abstract

Although the practice-theoretical approach originated primarily as a theoretical endeavour and framework for empirical sociological research, it has also long sought to inform, inspire, and guide practical policies, strategies, and interventions. This article outlines future research directions aimed at exploring the travels and adoptions of practice theories across various fields of use.

Keywords

applied sociology; knowledge adoption; knowledge transfer; policymaking; social impact of science

Introduction

The ambition to encourage ideas, strategies, decisions, and interventions leading to socially desirable goals has been a recurring theme in the practice-theoretical scholarship.¹ In this paper, I propose that the travels, adoptions, and uses of practice theories across various areas outside of academia have not yet been sufficiently explored and that gaining a better understanding of these processes would be valuable.

Importantly, this piece does not emphasise the conceptual merits of practice theories that make them suitable for inspiring strategies and policies. Nor do I intend to suggest any systematic evaluation, such as to what extent the practice-theoretical perspective has succeeded in its interventionist efforts. I only attempt to encourage a closer exploration of what happens when practice theories leave their social scientific origins and move elsewhere, become adopted, and are put to use.

In what follows, I will first discuss several fields of potential usage of practice theories in policy making. Then, I outline a practice-theoretical framework for exploring such adoptions, and finally, I propose a set of questions that could inspire future studies in this area.

Adopting Practice Theories

While this article cannot provide a detailed overview of all the efforts of practice theories to inspire policies, strategies, and interventions, the ambition to influence climate change policies, reducing carbon emission and enhancing sustainability should probably be highlighted here as the most important one. It is visible across a range of practice-theoretical inquiries into such phenomena as transport, eating, shopping, dwelling, laundering, showering, heating, and tourism (e.g. Hand et al. 2005; Watson 2012; Cass, Faulconbridge 2016; Godin et al. 2020; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; Watson and Shove 2023). Another area which practice theories have tried to influence is policies and interventions regarding health and well-being. It is visible widely in investigations on physical activity, exercise, smoking, alcohol and drug consumption, obesity and weight management, and various non-communicable diseases (Maller 2015; Blue et al. 2016; Jauho et al. 2016; Blue et al. 2021).

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¹ In this paper, I will use the terms 'practice theories', 'practice-oriented studies', 'practice-theoretical approach', and 'practice-theoretical perspective' interchangeably. The use of plural forms highlights that 'there is no such thing as a unified practice theory' (Nicolini 2012: 8), while the singular terms emphasise the commonalities among them.

It is also important to note that practice-theoretical studies in the fields of care (Carlsson et al. 2022), education (Zeivots et al. 2024) and inclusion (Janssens, Steyaert 2020), among many others (Strengers, Maller 2015), also have potential for practical application.

Across these explorations, practice-oriented studies have largely opposed individualist theories and behavioural approaches that populate current policy-making (Shove 2010; Spaargaren 2011; Spurling et al. 2013; Keller et al. 2016). From the practice-theoretical perspective, phenomena such as resource use or health problems should be understood as outcomes of the dynamic organisation of specific practices rather than the effects of individual choices and behaviours. This shift calls for a fundamental re-framing of policies from “How do we change individuals’ behaviours to be more sustainable?” to “How do we shift everyday practices to be more sustainable?” (Spurling et al. 2013, 4). This conceptual reorientation necessitates changes in intervention methods. Instead of emphasising the role of communication, information, persuasion and incentivisation, the practice-theoretical approach advises targeting practices as socially embedded underpinnings of health conditions and resource use. Accordingly, the general practice-based directions for intervention were suggested: re-crafting practices, substituting practices, and changing how practices interlock (Spurling et al. 2013). It has also been recommended that interventions should target meanings, provide relevant materials, tools and infrastructure, and assist or prevent the development and diffusion of specific competencies and skills. Acknowledging the complex and dynamic character of practices and relations between them, it has also been advised that the cross-cutting impact of such interventions on a range of practices should be carefully monitored. Moving further from inspiring to guiding action, specific approaches such as Change Points (Watson et al. 2020), initiatives like living labs (Sahakian et al. 2021), sustainable design projects (Kuijjer, Jong 2012) and direct enquiries related to specific policies² have been pursued to translate practice-theoretical insights into the world of policy-making effectively.

However, while practice theories have long aimed to inspire, inform, and even guide various kinds of policies and interventions, much less is known about whether such uptake has taken place, and, if so, how it occurred. Since practice theories have already gained a strong foothold in scholarly discussions across various policy-related fields, it makes sense to investigate how this perspective has been actually appropriated, adopted, and applied by policymakers, experts, stakeholders, and other practitioners. It is also worthwhile to examine what this means for practice theories and the practice of making them.

Framing the application of practice theories, I propose that the travels and adoptions of practice theories can be conceptualised as processes of the circulation of knowledge between practices in which it originates and practices in which it becomes appropriated and utilised. From this perspective, practice theories could themselves be viewed as outcomes of organised and socially regulated practices, namely doing academic sociological research. The ‘receiving’ practices could, in turn, vary widely, including different kinds of advisory, analysis, negotiating, lobbying, activism, and decision-making. Taken together, these knowledge-adopting practices may be understood as constituting what, in a meso-level conceptualisation, would be broadly put under the umbrella term of ‘policymaking’.

Crucially, in the proposed conceptualisation, the circulation of practice theories is conceived not as a simple transfer or acquisition but as an ongoing process of adoption through which knowledge becomes recontextualised, rearranged, and integrated into new contexts, taking root among the meanings, materials, and competencies constituting the receiving practice (Shove et al. 2012). Following this intuition means that instead of analysing the intellectual history of practice theories, presenting their analytical advantages or responding to criticism, the analysis of their adoption would rather focus on how these theories are received, appropriated, and incorporated within the specific adopting practices.

² <https://www.demand.ac.uk/publications>

Bringing Adoption into Question: Several Lines of Enquiry

The framing of the circulation and application of practice theories from a practice-theoretical perspective creates opportunities for interesting research questions that have yet to be explored. Below, I outline and categorise some of them.

Have Practice Theories Travelled and Become Utilised?

It seems natural to begin by establishing whether practice theories have actually travelled and become adopted, and - if so - where they have travelled (i.e. to what practices) and how this has occurred. What were the receiving practices? How have practice theories circulated (embedded in articles and reports, policy papers, frameworks, or other forms of epistemic outputs? Were they disseminated through academics and experts, by means of education and training)? Were there specific projects, exchanges in 'trading zones', or picking up from some kinds of knowledge reservoirs involved?³ It is also interesting to see what kind of use has been made of practice theories. It has long been argued that practice theories have the potential to challenge established views and paradigms of policy making, which suggests some kind of cognitive breakthrough expected to happen as a result of their adoption. However, it is possible that the actual use of practice theories has been more varied and complex, and potentially also rather mundane, bounded within the socio-material arrangements of everyday activities in offices and boardrooms. It might have entailed - as it often happens with scientific knowledge and expertise - a plethora of extra-epistemic effects, such as negotiating roles, mobilising various actors, getting involved in power struggles, and inducing institutional changes. Recognising these effects could be helpful for a fuller understanding of the practical role of practice theories.

How Have Practice Theories Been Recontextualised and Integrated within the Receiving Contexts?

It has long been argued that practice theories lie outside the dominant discourses and traditions of economics and psychology, thus requiring their users to make a certain kind of "conceptual leap" (Shove 2014, 417). Hence, it seems worthwhile to see what happens to practice theories in the course of their adoption. It may involve asking how practice theories are assessed in relation to the currently dominating individualistic paradigm (be it classical behavioural theory or the more recent nudging approach) that is incompatible with the practice-theoretical view. It is also interesting to learn about the kinds of friction and resistance that practice theories encounter, not only on the conscious and cognitive level, but also on the institutional level, given that individualism is often deeply embedded in the evaluation schemes and required forms of evidence for policy effectiveness. It is also possible that practice theories become translated in various ways - perhaps modified, simplified, merged, or negotiated - along the ways of their travel and adoption. Critically assessing these processes may include examining how practice theories could have been misread or compromised, potentially losing some of their theoretical distinctness, given the argument that "moulding practice theory into some policy-amenable form, is to miss the point, and to misunderstand what makes practice theories distinctive" (Shove 2014, 43). It is, however, also possible to treat such translations as ways in which practice theories acquire new interpretations and make unexpected connections, which - leaving for a moment the conceptual integrity aside - may constitute an inevitable part of the process of their travel.

³ A conversation between Stanley Blue, Elizabeth Shove, and Mike Kelly on promoting a practice-oriented public policy provides an illustrative story of such travel - 'A Public Policy and Practice Theory - A Conversation with Mike Kelly', <https://soundcloud.com/practice-theory-podcast/final-day-5-chat-with-mike>.

What Are the Effects of the Uptake of the Practice-Theoretical Approach within the Adopting Practices?

According to the practice-theoretical understanding, incorporating new elements into an existing practice may lead to its reconfiguration. If established policy approaches predominantly frame human action as a matter of individual choices, then adopting the practice-theoretical approach could lead to profound transformations in policy-making-related practices. As Shove (2010, 1283) predicted, "... move beyond the ABC would have to go hand in hand with the emergence of new genres and styles of policy which were... more modest than at present, harbouring no illusions of manageability". This suggests significant transformations in the meanings, concepts, and understandings that organise various practices of policy making and the relationships between them. If "... the connections between so-called policy levers and outcomes are never straightforward..." (Rinkinen et al. 2021, 69), intervening is likely to be piecemeal and collaborative, and "... efforts to modify relations between practices may have effect in unanticipated ways, and over the longer as well as the short term..." (Blue et al. 2021, 1062), there is the question of what kind of mix of policy instruments can be proposed and pursued in line with the practice-theoretical thinking. Finally, there are always ethical questions. While the practice-theoretical perspective may be viewed as empowering and acknowledging the "... potential agency of people, objects and social contexts..." (Sahakian 2014, 31), it should be noted that any policy goal, with no exception for sustainable transformation, may be questioned or opposed by some actors. Recognising the intended and unintended consequences should thus not be excluded from the explorations of the adoption processes.

How May the Adoptions of Practice Theories Be Assisted and Enhanced?

In contrast to the previous questions, which were framed as research questions, this line of enquiry is more action-oriented. Assuming that adopting the practice-theoretical approach is a desirable aim, one may consider how to facilitate this process and enhance the practical relevance of practice theories. In line with the practice-theoretical perspective, it may be hypothesised that the relevance of any type of knowledge is a relational phenomenon, depending partly on this knowledge and how it is articulated, and partly on the organisation of specific practices to which it travels. Thus, it seems worthwhile to enquire how practice theories can be made more relatable and actionable for the receiving practices. For example, if the core elements of the decision makers' toolbox are legal regulations, fiscal instruments, and public investments and planning, it could be an interesting exercise to try to either translate the language of practice theories into these kind of measures without losing the specificity of the practice-theoretical approach, or to propose different ones, for example by working ex-post on specific interventions. Enhancing the relevance of practice theories may also mean aligning them with the routine, everyday, and mundane aspects of the receiving practices, including their temporalities, tools, and other socio-material practicalities. It may turn out, for example, that the adoption of a specific approach depends on how it aligns with existing timeframes for legislation, government silos, and reporting standards. Taking this into account would require having a close understanding of the adopting practices, which may also reveal potentially unexpected opportunities for increasing relevance or identify some extra-epistemic sources of friction.

How Could the Practical Engagements Contribute to the Practice-Theoretical Approach?

The final proposed topic of interest changes the perspective to how practice theories could be affected by their adoption in areas outside academia. Hypothetically, flows of inspiration between practice and academia may occur in both directions, and it is possible that practical interests could stimulate novel developments in practice theories. Simply identifying new areas of the practice-theoretical reflection emerging in response to changes in fields of application could be valuable. There is also a potential to observe how practice theories evolve, perhaps becoming conceptually more interested in dynamics of practices or social inequalities, and how the very practice of practice-theory-making changes, potentially to include more translatory and advisory activities.

Conclusion

This necessarily short essay was an attempt to outline new lines of enquiry focused on the travels and adoptions of practice theories in areas outside academia, particularly in policymaking, which practice theories have long sought to influence. Instead of suggesting an evaluative assessment or reconstructing the intellectual impact of practice theories, this research agenda invites exploration into the 'social life' of these theories, examining how they have travelled and been appropriated, and the consequences of such practical engagements.

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