

Gendering Practices: Feminist Perspectives Transforming Practice Theory

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Abstract

In this essay I intend to explore the intertwining of feminist and gender perspectives and practice theory, highlighting their mutual contributions and potential synergies. On the one hand, a practice-based approach offers a relevant framework for studying gender, shifting the focus of analysis to actual activities, situated actions, and material arrangements. On the other, feminist research, which has long proposed a conceptualisation of gender as social practice, can enrich the debate on practices, bringing to light the ways in which power and inequality are woven into the fabric of practices. Finally, I will attempt to outline some directions for future research that bridge practice theory and feminist research, foregrounding embodiment and the intertwining of power and materiality.

Keywords

feminism; gender; power; transformation

Introduction

The study of practices has become a cornerstone of contemporary social theory and research, offering a powerful lens to understand how social and organisational life is enacted through embodied, material, and situated actions. Yet, despite its focus on the dynamics and processes of everyday life, practice theory has paid limited attention to power dimensions and to gender issues in particular. Feminist scholarship, with its longstanding attention to how gender operates as both a structure and a practice, provides valuable tools to address this gap. By framing gender as a social practice, feminist studies not only align with core tenets of practice theory but also challenge its inattention to the dimensions of gender and power, bringing to light the ways in which power and inequality are woven into the fabric of practices. This contribution intends to explore this productive intersection, illustrating how feminist perspectives and gender studies can expand the analytical potential of practices theory while also deepening our understanding of the gendered dimensions of social life.

Feminist Approaches and Practice Theories: A Fruitful Dialogue

Since its early developments, practice theory has highlighted the role of materiality and the body in the reproduction of social structures. By focusing on everyday practice – repetitive and embodied actions that individuals engage in – it offers a way to understand the role of practices as mediators between individual agency and social structure, showing that social and organisational realities are continuously constructed through practices, while also being shaped by them. Practice theory has brought significant insights into the ways social life is enacted through embodied and material activities. However, while it has been invaluable in shifting the focus from individual agency to the collective and habitual dimensions of social action, it has often overlooked the power relations that shape, and are shaped by, social practices (Watson 2017).

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A particularly important prompt in this direction, whose relevance, however, has not always been recognised within the debate, comes from the feminist perspective and from gender studies, especially regarding the role of power relations. They have made it possible to overcome the traditional essentialist view of male and female as ascriptive and static individual traits, progressively shifting the focus to gender as process and iterative practice, constructed through everyday practices and embedded in the social texture (Poggio 2006). In this perspective, social practices - whether related to work, organizations, family, sexuality, care or other domains - are never neutral; rather, they are structured by power relations that reproduce and enforce gender hierarchies. Analysing such practices through a gender perspective allows us to uncover how they maintain women's unequal social, economic, and political positions, often rendering women's labour invisible or undervalued.

Feminist theories, with their long-standing commitment to interrogating power, offer a critical lens that complements and expands practice theories. By framing gender not as a static category but as a dynamic, performative, and material practice (Butler 1990; Scott 1986), feminist scholarship invites a deeper examination of how power operates within and through everyday practices. This perspective aligns with practice theories that focus on the embodied and material dimensions of action, while also foregrounding the ways in which power and inequality are reproduced in seemingly mundane activities.

Moreover, feminist contributions are characterised by a deep critique of neutrality: they emphasise that no practice is neutral, but all practices are embedded in contexts of privilege and oppression (Connell, 1987). For example, practices related to domestic labour, childcare, or workplace behaviour are deeply gendered, reflecting and reinforcing broader societal norms and power dynamics.

Again, feminist approaches underscore the materiality of practices in new and profound ways. Scholars like Haraway (1988) have emphasised the embodied and material dimensions of gender, showing how bodies are disciplined, shaped, and enacted through social practices. This resonates with practice theories that emphasise the interplay between the material and the social but pushes it further to consider how materiality is also a site of power and struggle.

This dialogue between feminist and practice-based approaches lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive and critical analysis of social life, one that places gender, power, and materiality at the centre of the study of practices.

A Practice-Based Approach to Gender

The construct of 'doing gender', developed by West and Zimmerman (1987), laid the foundations for a practice-based approach to gender. It frames gender not as fixed attribute, but as something accomplished through situated and culturally embedded practices. The notion of doing gender offered a critical framework for understanding how gender is enacted through social interactions. Doing gender refers to the idea that gender is not something an individual has but something that is accomplished in interaction with others. In this view, gender is not a static attribute but an ongoing, socially constructed performance that is reproduced and negotiated through daily practices. Every social interaction becomes an opportunity to do gender, to enact gendered behaviours and identities in ways that either affirm or challenge gender norms. Gender is, therefore, reproduced through the practices and actions of individuals in society, a social process rather than an individual trait.

The doing gender perspective highlights the relational nature of gender: gendered identities are negotiated in the interaction between individuals and their social context. By framing gender as a social accomplishment, this approach helps explain how gender roles are maintained and challenged in everyday life. It also highlights the socially negotiated and contextualised nature of gendering and gendered practices and their embeddedness in social structures and interactions that continually reproduce or transform gender norms. But, while 'doing gender' positions gender construction mainly in interactions, a practice approach to gender goes a step further. It conceives gender as co-produced and performed through ongoing, relational processes embedded within a broader texture of social practices (Gherardi and Poggio 2018, 274).

The development of a vision of gender as social practice owes much to the work of Raewyn Connell (1995). Connell argues that gender relations, particularly masculine and feminine identities, are historically and socially structured through various gendered practices. These practices are not simply reflective of individual traits but actively construct and reinforce gender hierarchies. Masculinity and femininity are represented not as essential dimensions but by means of “processes of configuring practice through time, which transform their starting points in gender structures.” (Connell 1995, 72) Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how practices related to dominant masculinities are embedded in social norms, such as physical strength, emotional restraint, and dominance in both public and private spheres. These norms are performed and reinforced through practices in everyday life, such as how women and men interact in the workplace, in family life, or in social contexts. Practices associated with hegemonic masculinity are not static but are constantly negotiated, enforced, and challenged through social interaction.

Around the same time, anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1996) also emphasised the importance of bringing feminism and practice theories into dialogue. Her work laid the groundwork for understanding how gender is culturally constructed through symbolic, ritual, and social practices that reproduce inequalities and are embedded in everyday interactions, continually negotiated between actors and structures. This reading reinforces a vision of gender not as a rigid and unchanging system but one that is constantly reproduced and transformed, with spaces of agency and resistance.

Another relevant contribution to the debate on gender as a practice comes from Patricia Yancey Martin (2006), who identifies a two-sided dynamic - gendering practices and the practicing of gender - to analyse the dialectic between emerging and institutional dimensions of gender. In Martin’s view, these practices are central to the construction of gender identities, as they are sites of negotiation and transformation of social expectations. These gendered practices do not simply reflect hegemonic masculinity or traditional femininity but are active sites where new forms of gender can be produced and performed.

In this brief and necessarily incomplete review of authors who have contributed to the development of theoretical reflection on gender as practice, one misses the pivotal work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), with its emphasis on the embodiment of gendered power relations and the performative nature of gender. In Butler’s work, performing is seen as a doing that constitutes a being, an activity that creates what it describes, and gender as an ongoing performance that is repeated in everyday actions and thus gives the illusion of a coherent and stable identity. At the heart of Butler’s analysis is the problematisation of ‘doing’ itself: the conditions that make it possible and the effects it produces. This perspective opens up space for transformation, as the performative view of gender reveals how repetition can be disrupted, making room for the subversion of dominant gender norms.

The contributions and authors referred to herein allow us to see how gendered practices are more than habitual routines: they also involve active negotiations that reproduce or challenge dominant gender norms, carrying transformative potential and creating spaces for resistance and social change. Moreover, from a practice-based perspective, gender is performed in, by, and through those relations and is mobilised and situationally enacted (Bruni and Gherardi 2001) within a texture of social practices (Mathieu 2009).

Further, feminist contributions emerging in recent years (such as new materialism, feminist posthumanism, and corporeal ethics) have played an important role in defining and developing the concept of practice along different trajectories. These approaches offer new ways of thinking about practices as complex interactions involving bodies, materials, and relations between human and nonhuman beings. Such understandings move beyond the sphere of the individual subject, emphasising the material, natural, and ethical entanglements in which practices are embedded. They underscore that practices are not merely human-centered performances but relational entanglements of bodies, materialities, and ethical concerns. By moving beyond the limits of individual agency, these approaches open new avenues for exploring how gendered practices emerge, stabilize, and transform within broader socio-material assemblages.

Gendering Practices: Feminist Perspectives Transforming Practice Theories

Feminist perspectives have already begun to reshape practice theories in significant ways. Developments such as feminist new materialism, posthumanist approaches, and the emphasis on embodiment, affect, and relationality have challenged core assumptions of traditional practice theories - particularly its anthropocentric focus and relative neglect of power. These contributions shift the understanding of practices beyond purely social or discursive phenomena toward complex configurations involving bodies, emotions, materialities, and nonhuman forces.

Building on these trajectories, this section explores how feminist-informed perspectives can contribute to rethinking practice theories by foregrounding the entangled nature of gendered practices and their transformative potential. In particular, a stronger analytical focus is proposed on how materiality—such as technological objects, spatial arrangements, and the body—participates in gendering processes; on how affect shapes the reproduction or disruption of gender norms; and on how everyday practices, especially when collective and embodied, can become sites of resistance and social reconfiguration.

Expanding Practice Theories Through Feminist New Materialism

Drawing from Feminist New Materialism, emerging feminist theorists argue that practices are more than social or linguistic phenomena: they are entangled with material conditions and nonhuman forces (Coleman 2018). In this perspective, objects, bodies, and spaces actively participate in the reproduction and transformation of social norms, including those related to gender. Feminist posthumanism challenges a human-centered perspective, introducing the idea that gender is not exclusively performed by human bodies but is also shaped by interactions with nonhuman actors, such as technologies, animals, and environmental factors. In this context, practices are collective and relational, expanding beyond the individual to include a network of material and non-human entities that influence gendered experiences and power relations. Relatedly, the construct of intra-action proposed by Karen Barad's (2007) overcomes the dichotomy between human and material actors: practices, in this view, are not simply activated by interacting actors, but emerge from dynamic relationships between humans, objects and discourses. A feminist rethinking of practice theories from this perspective emphasises how materiality - technological objects, spaces, and the physical body - is essential to understanding how gendered power is embodied, enacted, and transformed in everyday practices.

Affect and Embodiment in Gendered Practices

Another relevant intersection between feminist studies and theories of practice can be realised around the constructs of embodiment, bodily ethics, and affect. Feminist scholars have long emphasised the embodied nature of gender (Butler 1990; Grosz 1994) and how gendered practices are deeply connected to emotions, feelings, and physicality. By exploring how gendered power is embodied in everyday practices, a feminist practice theory highlights the importance of affective experiences in shaping how gender norms are not only reproduced but also contested.

Corporeal ethics invite a focus on the ethical dimensions of embodiment, where practices are seen as expressions of moral and ethical stances. The affective dimension of practices also sheds light on how emotions, such as anger, joy, or solidarity, shape the political and ethical potential of practices in ways that go beyond cognitive or linguistic expression (Ahmed 2004).

Practices of care, emotional labour, and affective labour are considered as embodied and collective practices, showing how emotions are central to the reproduction and contestation of gendered norms (Gherardi and Rodeschini 2015). Attention is thus brought to how gendered practices are not just shaped by social structures but are also felt and experienced through the body. In this way, the corporeal is seen as central to understanding how practices are sites of resistance, agency, and social change.

Gender and Power in Practice: Resistance and Transformation

Finally, a crucial contribution that feminist approaches have already and could much more decisively make to practice theories is the emphasis on transformation. Here, the concept of social change becomes central to understanding how gendered power relations are continuously negotiated through practices. Feminist theorists highlight how gendered practices, particularly those that are often seen as mundane or private (e.g., caregiving, domestic labour), can also be sites of resistance and social change (Tronto 1993). For example, Davina Cooper (2014) explores practices as spaces of possibility for creating new social configurations. Practices are conceptualised as material and symbolic processes that construct “everyday utopias”, offering an interesting perspective on the transformative potential of social practices.

Power not only exists in the structure of society but is actively reproduced, contested, and transformed in social interactions. A feminist practice theory explores how practices, especially those considered mundane or trivial, can be sites of resistance that challenge hegemonic gendered norms.

Feminist approaches emphasise the transformative potential of practices. By focusing on the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of practices, they reveal how practices are active sites of gender construction and, particularly when they become collective and political, they can actively challenge and transform dominant gender norms, creating new possibilities for social transformation.

In bringing these strands together, I hope to have shown how feminist theories not only intersect with but can actively reshape the analytical scope of practice theories. While the connections with materiality, affect, and transformation are increasingly present in current scholarship, I suggest that a more systematic engagement with these dimensions is needed to fully capture the gendered nature of practices. This perspective reorients practice theories toward questions of power, embodiment, and political possibility, foregrounding everyday practices not only as sites of reproduction but also as arenas of resistance and reconfiguration. In this sense, a feminist-informed practice theory offers a generative framework for understanding - and potentially transforming - the gendered dynamics of social life.

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