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How Practices Become Knowable: Towards a Practice Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This paper asks how practices become knowable in empirical research. Practice theories conceive of social life as organised through nexuses of doings and sayings, but studying those nexuses requires representing them. The resulting tension – how to make practices visible without reducing them to representations – defines the epistemic challenge of practice-based enquiry. Drawing on Dimitri Ginev's hermeneutic theory of social practices, I develop 'practice hermeneutics': an interpretative framework that clarifies how researchers might disclose practices by interpreting their traces. This approach explicates the hermeneutic movement between familiarity and articulation – the circle through which practices become intelligible – and proposes standards of disclosive adequacy for empirical work. By showing how enquiry itself unfolds within the same world of practices it seeks to understand, the paper advances a hermeneutic foundation for practice research and invites further exploration of its methodological implications.

Keywords

epistemology; interpretation; hermeneutics; methodology

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Introduction

Across the human sciences, the 'practice turn' has redefined how social life is understood. It has challenged structuralist and individualist explanations alike, grounding studies in the organised nexus of doings and sayings through which social life takes shape. In doing so, it has mounted a sustained critique of representationalism by arguing that meaning emerges from embodied participation in practices rather than from detached cognitive representation.

This 'turn' has had wide-reaching consequences. What began as a philosophical and social-theoretical shift has become a cross-disciplinary field encompassing sociology, anthropology, education, and organization studies, among others, materialising empirically in domains ranging from consumption (Warde 2005) and sustainability (Shove 2010) to professional learning (Kemmis et al. 2014) and work (Nicolini 2012). Practice-based research now provides a rich vocabulary linking meaning, materiality, and agency across diverse empirical domains. Yet precisely this breadth has rendered the epistemological implications of practice theory increasingly consequential. This is not least because the practice turn has generated a persistent paradox.

Practice theory grounds social explanation in practical activity and situated involvement rather than in representational accounts of social life (Schatzki, 2001), but empirical research requires representing practices in order to study them and therefore risks reverting to representationalism (cf. Bourdieu [1980] 1990). This tension has been a central point of orientation for a great deal of commentary on the question of what kinds of methodologies are implied in researching practices (Jonas et al. 2017; Shove 2017; Spaargaren et al. 2016). The question at the core of such discussion is both simple and fundamental: 'how can practices be investigated empirically without betraying the ontology that defines them?'

This paper develops a response to that question by articulating the hermeneutic conditions under which practices become knowable. It argues that empirical practice research already rests – often tacitly – on a form of 'hermeneutic disclosure' through which researchers interpret traces of practice as expressions of an organised whole. Building on that insight and drawing on hermeneutic practice theory (Ginev 2018), the paper develops the notion of 'practice hermeneutics': an epistemological framework that clarifies how empirical enquiry discloses practices and what interpretative standards render such disclosure credible. The argument speaks to a general problem in practice-based research: the gap between its ontological premises and its methodological operations.

The point of departure for this paper is an interpretative orientation within practice theory that foregrounds practical intelligibility and meaning. In this view, practices are shared contexts of meaning that make social life intelligible, and they can only be disclosed through interpretive engagement rather than direct observation. This orientation is well-suited to describe the hermeneutic dimension of empirical work – the movement between pre-understanding, encounter, and articulation through which practices are disclosed.

The paper advances three contributions. First, it sets out the limits (in general) of studying practices and their organisation empirically and proposes a *seeing/speaking* schema that turns dispersed ontological hints into a general heuristic for engaging with *practice-organisation* as an empirical interest. Second, drawing on the hermeneutic tradition and applying it to empirical practice research, I show why traditional interpretative stances are insufficient for avoiding the objectification of

practice, and instead advance *practice hermeneutics* as an underlying mode of enquiry that allows researchers to treat practices as conditions of intelligibility rather than meaningful action-objects, without reverting to representationalism. Third, it develops *hermeneutic movements* (central ↔ peripheral; singular ↔ plural; then / now / next) as an empirical logic of interpretation for disclosing practices that extends beyond philosophical hermeneutics and establishes the need for new standards of interpretation to assess practice research.

The next section outlines the motivation and problem that underpins this paper.

The Problem of Accessing Practices Empirically

As stated above, the tension between the ontologies of practice and the representational means of empirical enquiry is a concern for scholars who seek to research practice. This tension is in no small part produced by the very definitions of practices that motivate practice research. For instance, the pre-reflective dimensions of practice, such as practical understanding, are not well suited to being directly described with representational approaches. Complicating things further, ontological accounts such as Schatzki (2019, 61) state that "… the organizational structure of a practice is not localized in the way action performances are." The elements that compose a practice – its practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structures, and general understandings (Schatzki, 1996; 2002) – extend across performances but are never contained within any single one. The organisation of practice, therefore, cannot be directly observed – if they can be observed at all in the case of practical understanding. Plausibly, the organisation of practice can only be inferred or interpreted from partial manifestations. This makes the empirical study of practices possible only as a process of interpretative reconstruction. The issue is therefore not whether practices can be studied empirically but how such study is possible and what form of interpretative work it presupposes.

The underlying tension is arguably one which cannot be fully resolved. Shove (2017) has argued that trying to make a direct link between practice ontologies and a set of methodologies or methods is a mistaken approach, effectively ruling out the existence of specifically curated practice theory methodologies. Others have instead advocated that practice research ought to be fundamentally a methodological project (Nicolini 2017), a *modus operandi* that specifies a distinct kind of sociology oriented to the performative constitution of the social (Schmidt, 2017). This style of thought has inspired the very idea that methodology is a form of practical engagement, i.e. as methodology-in/as-practice, rather than a set of rules to follow (Hui 2023). Others still have advocated that practice theory can mobilise methodological principles from other theoretical traditions (Schäfer 2017).

To what extent any specific methodology can do practice ontologies justice when envisioning practice research in these varied terms is not necessarily a matter that can be effectively solved. Indeed, as noted elsewhere, practice scholars have often selectively appropriated ontological concepts and separated theoretical development from empirical research (Gherardi 2015; Nicolini 2012, 180). Doing so might well be justified from a pragmatic approach to research that does not allow itself to be burdened by ontological discussions, instead advocating for eclectic research programs (Nicolini 2009) without reflecting on the compatibility of their ontological assumptions (cf. Schatzki 2002, 190–203).

The absence of an explicit epistemological framework has not stopped the success, or bandwagon (Corradi et al. 2010), of practice research from flourishing. Indeed, it is well plausible that commitment to a distinct *modus operandi* oriented towards practices in empirical work suffices to effectively ground practice research. The concern of this paper is not that research necessarily fails to take the ontological commitments of practice theory seriously, but rather that there is reason to attend to the interpretative conditions and interpretative work that make the empirical disclosure of practices possible. As Dimitri Ginev (2018) notes, simply attending to practices risks an approach that procedurally constructs practices as objectified entities rather than recognising them as nexuses of intelligibility.

This paper builds on Ginev's call to approach the tension between ontology and empirical work as one that requires a clarification of the interpretative processes that make disclosure possible. It develops what I call 'practice hermeneutics' – a general interpretative orientation that precedes discussions of method and, at a more fundamental level, is required to disclose practices. This orientation is not separate from, but complementary to, existing discussions on how practice research is possible (cf. Hui 2023; Nicolini 2017; Schmidt 2017; Shove 2017).

To situate this argument across studies of practice, it is necessary to acknowledge that practice theory itself is ontologically plural; a plurality that contributes to the unsettled question of how ontology relates to research. While the present discussion proceeds from an interpretative orientation, not all practice theories share this emphasis. Recent realist, posthumanist (e.g. Gherardi 2016, 2025; Mol 2002) strands extend practice thinking by foregrounding how ontology is materially and relationally enacted in practice. In these accounts, practices are not approached primarily through hermeneutic disclosure but are understood as being enacted through heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human actors. Accordingly, empirical research is often understood as participating in ontological enactment rather than being oriented toward the disclosure of an already meaningful world.

Rather than focusing on enactment-oriented approaches, the present paper addresses a different epistemic orientation that underlies a substantial share of practice research, even when it is not made explicit. Many studies implicitly rely on a Heideggerian understanding of facticity (*faktizität*) – the condition of being already involved in a world of meanings and possibilities, already entangled in practices that render the world intelligible (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 82). Heidegger's notion of facticity points to existence as always situated and already at work in a meaningful world rather than standing before a set of independent facts. As Ginev (2018, 69) emphasises, this also applies to empirical enquiry: research does not enact reality *ex nihilo* but discloses reality from within such situated involvement. From this perspective, understanding is grounded in the 'factical' involvement through which both researchers and actors find practices intelligible. It is this disclosive condition of empirical research that the notion of practice hermeneutics seeks to clarify. The following section develops this argument by revisiting the theoretical foundations of practice-organisation, and subsequently elaborates on how disclosure is made possible.

Defining Practice-Organisation

Following the preceding discussion on empirical access, it becomes necessary to clarify what practices are and how they are constituted. This will provide the conceptual ground for understanding how practices can be disclosed empirically without abandoning the ontological premises of practice theorising.

Practice theory proceeds from the premise that practices are the primary phenomena of social life. They are the sites where the social happens (Schatzki 2002), the background of mutual intelligibility, and the condition that makes acting and knowing possible. To speak of 'practice-organisation' is to address the internal ordering through which practices hold together and become intelligible.

The general framework adopted here follows the 'family resemblance' of contemporary practice theory, drawing on Schatzki's ontology of organised doings and sayings (1996, 2002) and informed by the syntheses of Reckwitz (2002) and Shove et al. (2012). Across their differences, these accounts share an interest in how social order arises through recurrent, competent activity and in how intelligibility is sustained through embodied and materially mediated participation. Practices, in this view, are nexuses of doings and sayings organised through interdependent elements – including but not limited to understandings, competencies, meanings, materials, emotions, and teleological structures – that render conduct recognisable as belonging to 'what one does' in a given domain.

The relational ordering of these elements constitutes the organisation of a practice, which each practice theory defines in a partly overlapping but distinct manner. Across these theories, practices and their organisations, are never reducible to individual performances or to explicit norms; they unfold as patterned configurations through which meaning, normativity, and purposiveness are reproduced across time, across settings, and among participants. Material arrangements – bodies, artefacts, infrastructures – anchor and sustain this organisation by providing enabling environments for doings and sayings. Throughout this paper, I will presuppose that material arrangements – bodies, artefacts, and so forth – are constitutively implicated in how practices become intelligible and are enacted.[2]

For the purposes of this paper, I work with Schatzki's conception, taken from across several of his works (1996; 2002; 2010b) of four interdependent aspects of organisation: 1) practical understanding, 2) explicit rules, 3) general understandings, and 4) teleo-affective structure. I do this because, in my view, this is the most ontologically elaborated framework in which each element expresses a sufficiently distinct facet of how practices are made intelligible and sustained. Practical understanding refers to the embodied know-how through which participants competently engage in and recognise a practice. Explicit rules denote the formulations that codify what one ought or ought not to do. General understandings infuse practices with shared meaning and provide a background of significance that extends across situations. Teleo-affective structures denote the projects and underlying affect that render participation in practice worthwhile. Together, these elements compose the intelligible organisation of doing and saying that sustains social life.

Seeing/Speaking about Practices

In this section, I address the epistemological and methodological implications of theorising practice-organisation. While Schatzki's conception identifies the above elements of practice-organisation, it does not spell out how empirical enquiry might disclose them. Hence, the epistemic problem is left under-specified, leaving open how, in the course of empirical analysis, practices and their organisation can be treated without reducing them to objectified actions, properties, or variables. Instead, I treat these elements as a distinct empirical target to elaborate this epistemic problem. Accordingly, the section provides a discussion of what each element is and what is involved in

[2] For a discussion of this idea see, for example, Schatzki 2002; 2010a.

disclosing it. To do so, I describe the distinctive challenge of engaging with practice-organisation as a dynamic between 'seeing practices' and 'speaking about practices' – two modes that all practice research necessarily implicates. This distinction resembles Gherardi's (2006, p. xiv) methodological suggestion to approach practices as sets of seeing, doing, and saying. While Gherardi advances this as a way of reorienting empirical analysis towards practice, my use of seeing and speaking is narrower and epistemic in intent, serving as a heuristic for analysing how practices become empirically knowable within a hermeneutic framework.

I use 'seeing' to name situated, embodied familiarity with doings, bodies, artefacts, and moods, while 'speaking' names the disciplined articulation that composes those sightings into a disclosed whole. The point is not observational versus textual methods, but the interpretive relay between lived familiarity and analytic articulation. The distinction between seeing/speaking also expresses the central non-representational concern of practice philosophy: that practices never fully reveal themselves and that representation is always partial. This tension compels scholars to examine "… the practices through which we attempt to represent practices…" (Nicolini and Monteiro 2016, 6) and to consider whether what they see genuinely discloses what practices 'are about' – namely, which aspects of practices are made salient or obscured through representational practices, and with what consequences for what becomes visible or invisible.

In what follows, this distinction frames the discussion of each element of practice-organisation. Both seeing and speaking are necessarily limited endeavours: we, as practice theory-inspired researchers, only ever see traces of practices, and our speaking can offer nothing more than partial articulations of what those traces disclose. To be clear, to 'see' a practice is never to observe disembodied activity. What becomes visible are bodies in movement, gestures, postures, the use of artefacts, and the moods that pervade such engagements. Material arrangements prefigure the performances of practices in a broad sense (Schatzki 2002, 46-47, 210-212) and are thus also present in disclosure. Speaking about practices entails translating embodied and material impressions into verbal representations.

1. Practical Understanding

Practical understanding – alternatively described as embodied know-how or competence – is foundational in practice theory (Bourdieu [1972] 1977; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996). Following Heidegger ([1927] 1962), our primary mode of access to the world is involved and pre-reflective rather than contemplative: things show up in use, as part of activity, not as objects first inspected then applied (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 98). Schatzki (1996) has elaborated on this notion, suggesting that know-how underwrites the intelligibility of social action. Schatzki (2002, 77) specifies this as three conjoined abilities: knowing how to do a practice, how to identify it, and how to respond appropriately within it.

Seeing. Practical understanding is non-propositional (Bourdieu [1980] 1990, 103; Schatzki 1996, 92). It is to see bodies in motion, tools being used effectively, and spaces being navigated. Practical understanding can only be observed in its manifestations: skilled performances, fluent adjustments, and – importantly – breakdowns and disruptions that reveal background expectations (Heidegger [1927] 1962; Garfinkel 1967). Familiarity matters: greater participation affords finer discrimination of competence (cf. Lave and Wenger 1991), but even for insiders, what is seen are traces of practical understanding, not practical understanding itself.

Speaking. Due to its non-propositional form, speaking about practical understanding can only ever be partial and indirect – characterisations of adequacy, skilfulness, innovation, or misfit. Such accounts register the demands of competent participation without converting competence into rules or representations (Schatzki 1996, 129); they amount to illustrations of ways of practising rather than representations of practical understanding itself.

2. Explicit Rules

Rules have a pivotal role in practice theories, in no small part due to the influence of late Wittgenstein (see [1953] 1958; 1969). However, it is important to distinguish between tacit and explicit rules. Giddens' (1979, 65; 1984, 23) mention of rules implied tacit ones in contrast to explicit ones (cf. Schatzki 1996; Turner 2001). Defining rules as tacit further implies that they constitute a form of practical understanding that underlies practitioners' ability to undertake action. Explicit rules do not have this purpose in contemporary practice theory but rather denote explicit normativity expressed through formulations, instructions, and precepts that guide doing and may result in sanctions if not heeded.

Seeing. Explicit rules surface in instruction – for instance, how is a tool used correctly? – and in sanction. They are not safely 'read off' from regularities (Wittgenstein, 1958, 26, 38). What matters empirically are the formulations that participants themselves treat as binding for this practice – as shown in training, corrections, manuals, through digital interfaces, code-of-conduct talk, and so forth.

Speaking. One speaks of rules by tracking their situated articulation: how they are cited, enforced, relaxed, or renegotiated over time. Two cautions follow. First, practices are rarely as neatly codified as games; explicit rule-talk may not map onto actual practice (Orr 1996). Second, rules are dynamic; researchers should expect revision and local drift rather than a stable canon of rules (cf. Gherardi 2019, 115).

3. General Understandings

By general understandings, I mean the background ideas and meanings that suffuse bodily doings and sayings and tint these in certain meanings (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2002; Shove et al. 2012). They are distinct from know-how: they shade practices without being identical to the skills that enact them.

Seeing. General understandings can be treated discursively but become visible when issues are articulated, justified, or contested – in disputes, or ordinary discourse that names what the practice 'is about' (Schatzki 2002, 243; Welch and Warde 2016). General understandings are articulated when and where people express their convictions of how the world ought to be arranged and so forth. Because general understandings often span multiple practices (Hui et al. 2016, 4), disclosure is occasioned and selective: we see what a situation calls forth, not the total background at once.

Speaking. One speaks of general understandings by connecting 'seen' articulations to what is at stake in the focal practice (Rouse 2007). However, given what has been observed, accounts of general understanding are inherently limited to what surfaced in those 'seen' moments.

4. Teleo-affective Structure

Teleo-affective structure refers to the interrelation between the teleological organisation of participation – the for-the-sake-of – which renders action worthwhile (Heidegger [1927] 1962; Dreyfus, 1991), and the affective attunement or mood (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 172) makes particular ends desirable, appropriate, or urgent. While Reckwitz (2017, 119) notes that affects are states of arousal, pleasure, or displeasure directed towards a person, object, or idea, these are not inner states but modes of attunement that orient how participation in practice becomes meaningful.

Seeing. Pursued ends manifest through projects saturated with affect – enthusiasm, anxiety, pride, boredom. Such affect is discernible in accounts of mastering a machine or perfecting a craft – in statements that denote some emotional weight to participants in a practice. Actors are often capable of accounting for their activities and their ends (Schatzki 1996 49, 152), although they may lack thematic awareness until circumstances prompt articulation (Schatzki 2002, 81). Researchers should not 'read off' outcomes as evidence of ends, since ends pursued need not be ends achieved (Dreyfus 1991, 91; Schatzki 2010b, 172). Although some theorists define affect as beyond language and cognition (Massumi, 1995), affect is always part of practice. For that reason, affect is also not a propositional term.

Speaking. While accounts of pursued ends can be elicited and analysed from participants' descriptions, affect is a more difficult aspect to uncover in explaining why actors participate in practices. Speaking cannot represent affect.

The Limits of Seeing and Speaking about Practices

When it comes to seeing and speaking, there are limits for the study of practice and practice-organisation. As Bourdieu ([1980] 1990) argued, therefore, a form of scepticism concerning the researcher's ability to grasp practices-in-themselves is warranted. Across the elements of practice-organisation described, seeing yields episodic, situated traces of practices and speaking can only produce partial articulations of what those traces disclose. Practical understanding resists propositional capture; explicit rules drift and are invoked situationally; general understandings hang across multiple practices; teleo-affective structures are within nested projects that need not be achieved, or fully accounted for, while affect is only partially articulable (if at all). The limits of seeing and speaking about practices also remind us that disclosure is corporeal and affective: both embodied understanding and the body's ease or discomfort resist full articulation yet inform the intelligibility of practices.

How then should practice theory-inspired researchers proceed? The limits of seeing and speaking about practices do not foreclose inquiry; they define the conditions under which practice can become knowable. Understanding those conditions motivates the next step and contribution of the paper: to develop an explicitly hermeneutic account of how familiarity and articulation belong to one movement of understanding, and how standards of disclosive adequacy can be specified for research.

Practice Hermeneutics

The account above foregrounds the central difficulty of grasping the constitution of practice. Worse yet, it does so by emphasising practices as things-in-themselves, one element at a time. How, then, do we move from traces and partial articulations in research, and from the temptation to objectify practices? Rather than turn to questions of method selection (ethnography vs. interview vs. survey), or finding appropriate data analysis schemes, I want to make a more fundamental point – that practice enquiry is hermeneutic rather than merely methodological. The very possibility of seeing traces, and of speaking about them intelligibly, depends on acknowledging this.

An interpretative stance is insufficient to make this point. Interpretivism, in its classical Weberian form, treats meaning as mental content to be reconstructed, whereas hermeneutics regards meaning as ontological disclosure – a way in which the world shows itself. It is not enough to suggest that practices and their constitution ought to be treated as sensitising rather than definitive concepts (cf. Blumer 1954). Nor is it enough to reintroduce individualist or representational modes of interpretation. The concern here is not simply to 'read off' meanings from social life as meaningful actions or symbols but to understand how practices are disclosed as intelligible within everyday participation (Ginev, 2018). Procedures aimed at propositional capture – or that ignore the practical relations of phenomena – such as coding acts or categorising statements as discrete variables – inevitably miss the point.

Hermeneutic thought, by contrast, begins from the premise that understanding is a mode of being, not a stock of mental representations or techniques of data interpretation. As Heidegger ([1927] 1962) argued, people are always already involved in a world that shows up in a particular way through practices; practices form the background of intelligibility against which anything, including practices, can appear. More recently, Schmidt (2017) argued that the empirical accessibility of practices presupposes this shared background of public familiarity. In his work, Ginev (2018) embeds this background within his practice ontology: intelligibility arises from the interrelated organisation of practices that compose a 'cultural life-form', a horizon of interrelated practices that renders the world intelligible. Every act of understanding – including empirical enquiry – occurs within this historically sedimented nexus in which we are embedded. This background is not simply a hidden schema waiting to be unearthed by external researchers, but an ongoing practical interdependence. 'Understanding', therefore, is intra-practical: it unfolds through the relations in and among practices that constitute a world of significance.

Hence, researchers can never approach a practice from a position of neutrality. Their enquiries are themselves moments within the same world of practices that render understanding possible. This point marks the break from proceduralist understandings of methodology. Enquiry does not stand outside its object but belongs to the same field of intelligibility it seeks to grasp. A crucial premise of practice hermeneutics is that understanding practices is possible only because we already inhabit the same world of practices that makes them intelligible. Even from non-participatory positions, social life remains comprehensible precisely through this shared involvement. We are always already entangled in the horizons of meaning that make practices recognisable, and even those we have never performed are, to some extent, familiar: we grasp what they imply and how they matter (cf. Wittgenstein [1953] 1958, 92).

Practice hermeneutics does not engage merely with 'webs of belief', discursive elements, or sayings alone, but with doings, the material/affective, and their interrelations, through which participation discloses material organisation and its significance. This view is not meant to constitute a complete

hermeneutic system but rather an orientation that draws upon established hermeneutic thought while remaining responsive to the ontological concerns of practice theory.

While contemporary practice scholars have raised the issue of how the study of practice is a form of epistemological practice (Gherardi 2019; Hui 2023), the hermeneutical point I want to make is more fundamental. Understanding is an event within the same 'life-form' that it seeks to articulate, an unfolding movement between horizons of familiarity and foreignness that steadily transform (Gadamer 1989) – an interpretative process internal to the world of practice rather than a methodological stance imposed upon it. As a consequence, empirical practice research already operates within a hermeneutic field, where understanding arises through participation in interrelated practices. In this sense, practice hermeneutics offers a general orientation that clarifies the epistemic situation in which practice scholars find themselves whenever they try to grasp what practices are.

The tension between ontology and disclosure is that, for practice scholars the 'facticity' of practice risks becoming, as Ginev puts it, objectively constructed factuality: a result that fundamentally reduces practices due to the inability to account for them as they are. The limits of seeing and speaking constitute a fundamental challenge that some scholars recognise as necessitating a departure from strict practice ontology, instead requiring an engaging in eclectic research programmes (e.g. Nicolini 2009). It could, however, also be why a practice theory methodology cannot exist in the sense that other theory-method packages do (Shove 2017).

Accordingly, practice hermeneutics emphasises two consequences for empirical work. First, a practice cannot be a self-contained unit separate from us as researchers; it is a node within the wider nexus which we are part of. Second, proximity, procedural rigour, or methodological refinement – whether through data accumulation or sophisticated analysis schemes – do not themselves guarantee understanding. Hermeneutic enquiry emphasises the circular movement between familiarity and articulation – the dynamic through which understanding deepens – rather than assuming that more data or cleaner coding will suffice.

Whereas Ginev embeds intelligibility within a cultural life-form, he does not specify how empirical work should engage the constitutive elements of practices. The account developed here extends his framework by naming practice-organisation as an explicit empirical object of disclosure and by formulating hermeneutic movements and the seeing/speaking schema as practical heuristics for assembling traces into a disclosed whole. The following sections set out these extensions.

Hermeneutic Movements in Practice Enquiry

Since understanding a practice is, at the same time, understanding its organisation, practice hermeneutics must engage with 'what one does', believes, and pursues within practices. The focus is not on individuals as isolated bearers of meaning, but on how their actions participate in and disclose a shared order of intelligibility. By 'one', I refer to the general, normativised sense of what a practice 'is about'. The hermeneutical character of this enquiry lies precisely in this: as an interpreter encounters different traces of a practice, these traces are related and composed into a whole to grasp what 'one does' in that context. Understanding thus proceeds through a recursive movement in which traces of practice are gathered into an intelligible whole that is itself revised in light of new encounters.

This movement is circular, yet not in a methodological or formal sense. The hermeneutic circle marks the dynamic of understanding itself: every trace encountered – whether a statement of a rule, an instance of skill, or an account of an end pursued – is already disclosed through a preliminary sense of the whole, and that provisional whole is reconfigured as the traces are reinterpreted. What is disclosed is never a representation of practice but a sense of its organised coherence within a shared world.

Two questions help to explain this movement. First, how do the various traces of a given element – for instance, the manifestations of rules that matter in practice – hang together to form an intelligible impression of that element? Second, how do the traces of one element inform the grasp of a practice as a whole, understood as the configuration of its organising elements? When I attempt, for example, to discern which rules are most characteristic of a practice, I relate each instance to the overall understanding of that practice. When I relate those rules to other elements such as beliefs or ends, my understanding of the whole practice shifts again. The circular character of interpretation is thus cumulative: each return to the parts refines the whole, and each new whole recasts the meaning of its parts.

This process is iterative and unfolds across levels of analysis. Interpretation moves not only between the particular and the whole but also between the local practice and the broader network of practices that render it intelligible. While earlier discussion distinguished elements for analytical clarity, in lived practice, these overlap. A rule may persist because it resonates with certain beliefs; adherence to it may presuppose a particular practical understanding; ends and beliefs may be interwoven in the same constellation of meaning, and all of this happens within a wider nexus.

Engaging from a pre-understanding of a roughly defined whole, we come to see traces in relation to this whole in an interpretative process that deepens and revises our understanding. This hermeneutic movement does not stop at what can be seen or said but reaches into the tacit conditions of intelligibility. Unlike classical hermeneutics, in which the text provides the model of interpretation, practice hermeneutics must also contend with the non-discursive and the embodied. We move between the sayable and the unsayable, between manifestations that can be expressed and those that must remain shown in action. The circle thus binds together doing and saying within the same interpretative movement, no matter if there are discrepancies between seeing and speaking about practices. Indeed, even the tacit comes to matter, as partial articulations thereof – however limited – come to enrich our understanding.

The following three movements are my proposal for practice hermeneutics: they are not steps but repeatable orientations that guide how traces might be composed into an intelligible whole. Each represents a possible trajectory within the hermeneutic process through which an understanding of practices is deepened.

1. Between the Central and the Peripheral

A first move concerns the relation between the general and the particular. Interpretation often begins by seeking what a practice is most commonly about under the conditions observed – the beliefs, rules, or ends that recur and seem most characteristic. This orientation reflects the tendency to privilege what appears central and to treat deviations as secondary. Yet such a move already involves interpretation. What appears general or important is never self-evident but arises from the

interpreter's pre-understanding of what the practice is supposed to be about. Furthermore, what is most visible may not be what matters most. The tacit, taken-for-granted elements of practice often escape explicit attention precisely because they are constitutive of the background of intelligibility. Conversely, a researcher might attend to the periphery or to moments of innovation to understand the implicit normativity that defines the practice. In both cases, the interpretative movement lies in relating what appears explicit to what remains implicit, thereby revising one's sense of what the practice as a whole entails.

2. Between the Singular and the Plural

A second move concerns the relation between the singular and the plural. While it is heuristically convenient to speak of a practice, no practice unfolds in isolation. Practices coexist in complexes, nexuses, or textures (Schatzki 2002; Shove et al. 2012). Understanding, therefore, unfolds within the interrelatedness that Ginev (2018, 7, 22) calls the hermeneutic field – the cultural life-form in which meaning is sustained. When we witness a scene of action, we seldom encounter a single practice in isolation but a tangle of overlapping doings and sayings belonging to several distinct yet interdependent practices. Interpretation thus involves moving between these entanglements, tracing how the meaning of one practice depends on, and illuminates, others. Each practice becomes intelligible only within the web of relations that sustains it; to examine a practice in isolation risks mistaking local coherence for the wider field of intelligibility. The singular is disclosed through the plural, and the plural gains meaning through each of its parts.

3. Between the Now, the Then, and the Next

A third move engages with temporality. Practices are not static phenomena but unfold historically. What is encountered 'there and then' is a manifestation shaped by previous configurations of the same or related practices. Understanding thus involves relating the present to its past – the now to the then. Gadamer (1989) reminds us that interpretation always draws on tradition, and the same applies to the study of practices: intelligibility depends on recognising how inherited meanings continue to orient current activity. To disclose a practice hermeneutically is therefore also to disclose its temporality – how it has changed, what persists, and what possibilities for transformation are emerging. In this way, interpretation does not simply reconstruct what a practice is but reveals what it has been and might become.

Taken together, these moves illustrate that practice hermeneutics unfold along multiple dimensions: from the central to the peripheral, from the singular to the plural, and from the present to the historical and the future. Each move reinforces the other. The circle of understanding expands not by accumulation of data but through deeper articulation of the background from which practices derive their sense.

Standards of Disclosive Adequacy

As noted earlier, debates about methodology in practice research have not settled how empirical work might correspond to practice ontologies. The notion of 'disclosive adequacy' proposed here addresses this difficulty by shifting attention from procedural compliance to the quality of interpretative disclosure. From the standpoint of practice hermeneutics, interpretation does not aim at factual or reductive truth but at intelligibility. A convincing account renders practices more comprehensible

within the world we already inhabit. What matters, then, is not adherence to formal method but the degree to which enquiry illuminates the structures of intelligibility through which practices make sense. To assess such illumination, several complementary questions can guide evaluation. They do not prescribe a method but indicate the dimensions along which adequacy can be judged:

Coverage of manifestations and tacit aspects – How fully does an account engage both what can be observed or reported and the background understandings, moods, and material involvements that remain implicit? That is, how can its partial articulations better our understanding of what is manifested?

Interpretative recursivity – How well does the analysis show both the interrelations among the organising elements of practice and the recursive interpretive movement through which those relations become intelligible?

Contextual configuration and adjacent practices – How well is the focal practice situated within neighbouring or intersecting configurations, revealing how local intelligibility depends on a nexus of practices?

Temporality (then / now / next) – Does the account disclose how present enactments are shaped by inherited meanings and anticipate future possibilities?

Reflexive positioning – How explicitly does the interpreter acknowledge their own familiarity, and affective involvement – the standpoint from which disclosure occurs?

Taken together, these dimensions outline what depth of disclosure entails. A hermeneutic account achieves adequacy when it brings such relations, movements, and positionalities to light – when it allows readers to inhabit, not merely observe, the world of practice that it renders intelligible. In this sense, a text that discloses practice can evoke in the reader the familiarity that participation affords, much as discussions in affect theory remind us that affect cannot be represented but can be felt and instilled through expression (Massumi, 2002). For the reader of practice research, the account itself becomes part of their own ongoing interpretation of practices.

Re-Orienting Evaluation

These standards stand in contrast to conventional expectations of methodological rigour. Familiar appeals to frameworks that promise procedural transparency – such as thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), the 'Gioia' method (Gioia et al. 2013), or early grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) – often misconstrue interpretation as pattern recognition or coding. Used unreflexively, such procedures construct what Ginev (2018, 70) calls 'factuality': a methodological projection of reality as stabilised data points, transforming disclosure into representation. Similar tendencies appear in neighbouring fields. Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984), despite their sophistication, may confine attention to the micro-order at the expense of the wider background of intelligibility (Ginev 2018, 80). The most extreme proceduralism is found in computational text analysis, where meaning is reconstructed as statistical association (DiMaggio et al. 2013), converting intelligibility into correlation. These examples illustrate the difference between methodological 'sophistication' and what I describe as hermeneutic standards.

The point is not to reject the kind of methodological techniques described on principle but to evaluate their use based on their capacity for disclosive adequacy: by their ability to render the interplay of the sayable and the unsayable, the explicit and the tacit, the embodied and the material. This shift in evaluative vocabulary – from validity, reliability, and replication to familiarity and depth of disclosure – frees practice research from the expectation to conform to generic qualitative criteria. A strong hermeneutic account enables readers to recognise practices as meaningful in new ways and to see how practical understanding, rules, general understandings, and teleo-affective orientations hold together within a shared world. Facts about practices are not excluded, but they serve as complements to disclosure rather than its measure; once familiarity and depth are achieved, further factual detail only enriches the picture. Coding procedures, likewise, may complement analysis when disclosure provides the interpretative ground.

From this position, the various methodological proposals in practice research can be seen as contextual articulations of a more fundamental hermeneutic movement. To treat methodology as practice, to deny the existence of a fixed method, or to borrow principles from other traditions are all, in different ways, enactments of the same disclosive logic that practice hermeneutics makes explicit. Rather than competing alternatives, these orientations presuppose the hermeneutic condition of enquiry that renders practices intelligible in the first place.

Conclusion

This paper began with a simple but enduring question: how can practices be empirically investigated without betraying the ontology that defines them? I have argued that this question cannot be answered through methodological refinement alone but requires an epistemological reorientation. Practice research, when understood in its own ontological terms, already rests on a form of hermeneutic disclosure through which practices are made intelligible. The notion of practice hermeneutics developed here begins to articulate this condition of enquiry.

Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, I have proposed that empirical investigation is not a process of representing practices from without but of disclosing them from within a world of interrelated practices that renders both research and its object intelligible. Heidegger's account of factical involvement grounds this orientation in our already-practical being-in-the-world, highlighting understanding as a movement between familiarity and estrangement, part and whole. Ginev's hermeneutic theory of social practices provides the conceptual bridge between these philosophical insights and the concerns of practice enquiry. Building on this lineage, I have argued that empirical practice research is best seen as a hermeneutic process that occurs within, rather than outside, this hermeneutic field, explicitly oriented towards the disclosure of practices and their organisation.

From this standpoint, the task of research is not to accumulate data or codify procedures but to disclose the conditions that make practices intelligible. What counts as a strong interpretation is not accuracy in a representational sense but disclosive adequacy – the degree to which an account allows readers to recognise and understand practice-organisation in new ways. Practice hermeneutics thus redefines the epistemic criteria of practice research: from procedural rigour to depth of familiarity. In this sense, practice hermeneutics offers not a method but a way of understanding what it means to study practices as phenomena of meaning – a form of enquiry that is itself embodied and materially situated, continuous with the very nexus of practices it seeks to disclose.

In doing so, this paper has proposed three interrelated dimensions of practice hermeneutics: the *seeing/speaking* schema to address the empirical limits of representing non-localised elements, the *hermeneutic movements* that operationalise the interpretive circle across empirical contexts, and the *standards of disclosive adequacy* that reorient evaluation from procedure to disclosure. Together, these moves specify how hermeneutic understanding can be practised, not merely invoked, in empirical research. They invite scholars to treat interpretation itself as participation in the nexus of practices we study – where bodies, artefacts, moods, and meanings interrelate – and where the work of enquiry becomes a continuation of the intelligibility it seeks to disclose.

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