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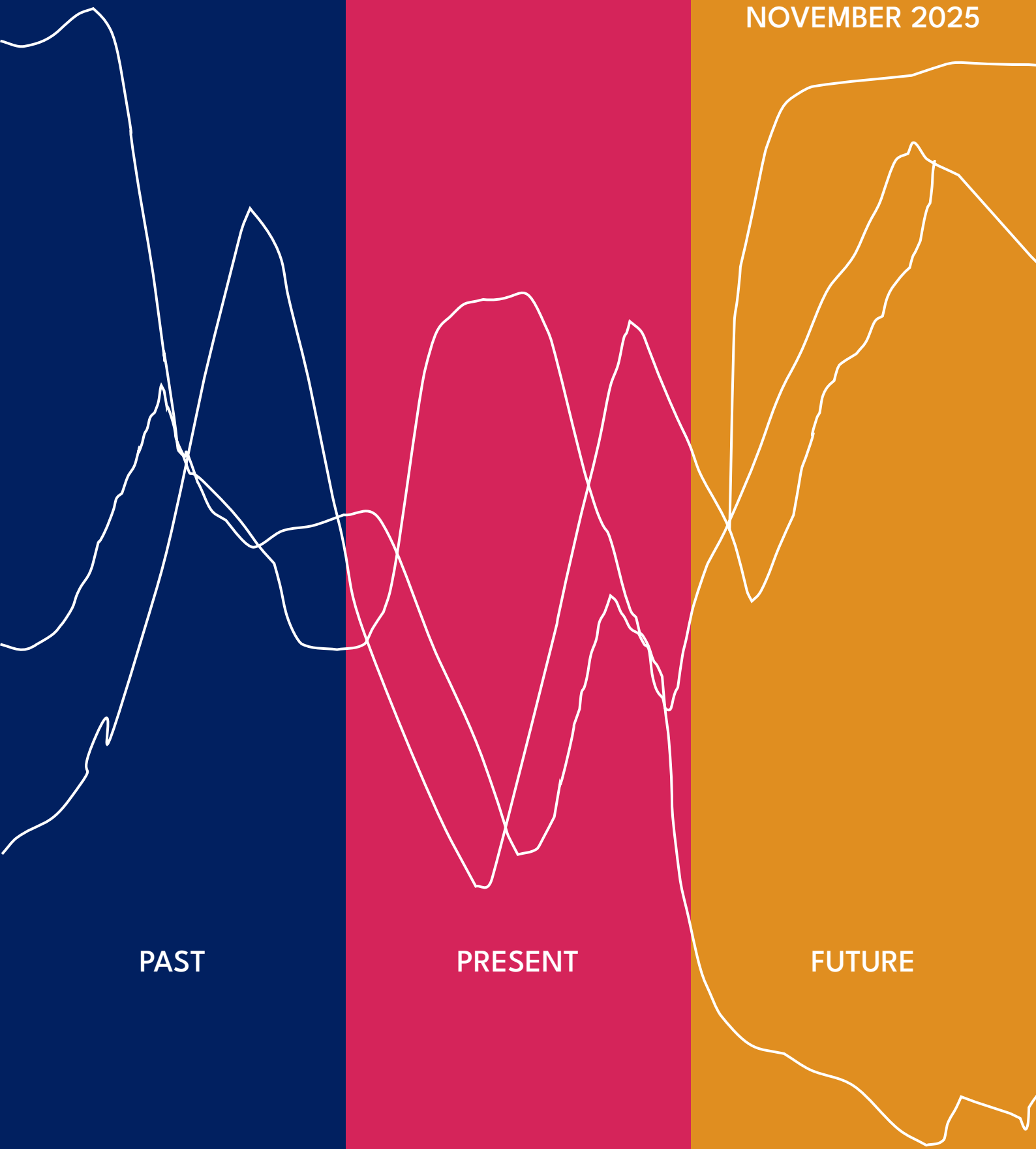

PAST

PRESENT

FUTURE

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THE JOURNAL OF PRACTICE THEORY

Volume 1: Practice Theory: Past, Present, Future

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THE JOURNAL OF PRACTICE THEORY

The Journal of Practice Theory is a peer-reviewed and interdisciplinary academic journal dedicated to advancing the field of practice theory. Its aim is to explore, develop, and disseminate cutting-edge research on social practices and their significance in contemporary society.

Although there is no single theory of practice, practice theories imagine and analyse social life and social phenomena as constituted by practices that are connected and extended across time and space. The idea of taking practices as a central unit of social analysis and conceptualisation sets this tradition apart, on the one hand from systems theories and structural accounts and on the other, from those who focus on some version of individualism. *The Journal of Practice Theory* is a place for practice theorists working with a wide range of interpretations of practice, in all kinds of disciplines, to advance concepts, understandings, and debates about the practical nature of social life.

The reason for starting *The Journal of Practice Theory* is to provide the multi-disciplinary practice theory community with a common and dedicated platform for the exploration, exchange, and dissemination of research that advances the field whether by way of theoretical and conceptual development; philosophical integration; disciplinary connection, or empirical insight.

The journal is open access, autonomous, and depends on the contributions of the practice theory community (authors, editors, and reviewers). This setup affords us the opportunity to publish articles that harness insights from multiple disciplines to develop the field of practice theoretical work. It also enables us to cultivate the free spread of ideas and knowledge and contribute to an emerging transformation in scholarship and research.

The Journal of Practice Theory is organised into the following sections with the following types of contributions:

Research Articles
Full-length research articles that are either based on empirical research or that are conceptual in nature (8,000 – 10,000 words);

Essays
Shorter pieces that pursue a distinct argument (3,000 – 6,000 words);

Alternative and Innovative Forms
The journal aims to be adventurous in form. Because of that we are open to proposals for innovative formats. Please propose a form that suits your content and we will consider whether the journal can accommodate it (open format).

Columns
Columns (1,500 – 2,000 words) are short opinion pieces, whose arguments - if they make any - are not required to systematically marshal evidence or to provide considerations against contending positions. The column is a space where an author can succinctly lay out a particular point of view, issue a reminder, call attention to something, making a connection, or advance a particular theme.

Re-views
The *Re-views* section revisits key texts in practice theory. Unlike conventional book reviews, re-views bring together a set of short reflective essays (around 800 words each) written by scholars from different fields and backgrounds.

For more information, see:
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Editorial
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Editor's Introduction to Volume 1: Practice Theory: Past, Present, Future

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Abstract

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

Keywords

practice theory; past; present; future

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introducing the First Issue

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

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

Past

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

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

Present

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

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

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

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

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

Future

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An Invitation

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

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

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

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The Journal of Practice Theory, Vol. 1
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Interview
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An Interview with Stephen Turner: Careers and Ideas in Practice

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Abstract

Over the course of his long career, Stephen Turner has challenged a host of established positions in social theory. In this interview we discuss some of these interventions, starting with his critique of concepts that purport to explain social life but that are detached from it. Instead of treating practices as reified entities that 'exist' and about which we can have a theory, Stephen works from the ground up, asking about the place of habit and tacit knowledge and their significance for how practices are shared. In discussing Stephen's approach, and how it relates to – and departs from - the work of Thomas Kuhn, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Antony Giddens, and Bruno Latour, we range across topics to do with constructivism, realism, and materiality. We look back at the reception of his landmark book, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), and we look forwards: thinking about where his ideas are leading now.

Keywords

habit; explanation; tacit knowledge; technology; skill

Introduction

As part of the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on the theme 'Past, Present, Future', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three influential figures whose work has significantly shaped the development of practice theory. These conversations focus on pivotal moments and turning points in the interviewees' careers, and the evolution of the ideas they have championed. Together, these interviews form the 'Past' section of this issue and present some insight into how theories of practice have emerged within, and responded to, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational contexts.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

Stephen Turner is Distinguished University Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the University of South Florida. He is the author of a number of books in the history and philosophy of social science and statistics. He has also written extensively in science studies, especially on patronage and the politics and economics of science, and on the concept of practices, including three books, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), *Brains/Practices/Relativism* (2002), and a collection of essays, *Understanding the Tacit* (2014).

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Stephen Turner about his take on practices and practice theory and some of the ideas set out in his book, *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994).

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Elizabeth Shove: Let's start at the deep end. Your critique of widely shared views of the social and the place of practice is striking and original and you've been making this argument for a very long time. So, I'm wondering, did you have, I don't mean an enemy, that's putting it too strongly, but was there an orthodox position that you thought needed to be addressed, tackled, or taken apart?

Stephen Turner: In the sixties the dominant positivist understanding of things was fraying both in philosophy and sociology. Then things like ethnomethodology came along in sociology, and they were very exciting novelties, but initially very poorly understood: was ethnomethodology a methodological critique, a form of social psychology, or a full-scale alternative to behavioural science as it then existed? In philosophy, there was a parallel and equally confused revolution associated with Wittgenstein and Quine - all of which had elements that go into the notion of practices. As a student you try to make sense of all this, you realise that it is not just Parsons and positivism, there's Durkheim, there's Spencer, there's Comte, Sumner and so on. Almost everyone has something relevant but different to say about the topic, but everyone is working with concepts like *Weltanschauung*[1] from different traditions whose relations are unclear. And you need to figure out a way to fit all that together, and not really negl ect any of it either.

There was also, for me, an existential element: a matter of starting out with a general social exposure to different cultures and ethnicities from childhood that sensitised me to differences. Then, as an undergraduate, I took a course on African political development that really opened those things up in a radical way. There were places where culture, practices, family connections, beliefs and so on were important to understand but were also radically different, yet not anthropological curiosities either. And so, then the problem became: "how do you think about these differences?". The alternatives that were around were things like functionalism and that didn't do you much good. They were reductive and crude. So you needed something better.

So that's the way I was motivated. I used those starting points to talk critically about organizational sociology, which happened to be important to the setting that I was in while in graduate school. And then that turned very quickly into the fad of studying organizational culture, which is actually a great topic, but not very happily developed. These were practical motivators. But my nagging question was still just "how do you think about those things?". And "what concepts are going to get you some traction?".

Elizabeth Shove: So, there you were, thinking about these things and actually getting some traction. In your writing you talk quite a lot about solving problems. Looking back, do you think you did solve some of those conceptual problems?

Stephen Turner: The thing that I eventually landed on, probably in the late seventies and early eighties, was tradition. I was preparing grant proposals on two concepts of tradition - rejected, by the way. But I got very interested in political traditions, which are one of these ineffable things. And I was getting some good first-person commentary on that from people who could say interesting things about it. It became obvious to me that there was a kind of more or less Durkheimian way of thinking about these things, which I later came to understand as neo-Kantian. And there was an embodied (which nobody said then), practice-oriented way of thinking about them. So, thinking about those things and what they required, what they assumed, and what they also assumed illegitimately, was one of my concerns. If you turn explanatory concepts into objects and then start ascribing a teleology to them, which is what Bourdieu did, that is ideologically very clever, but not necessarily accurate.

Elizabeth Shove: You put it very modestly, but you're actually having a go at the very foundations of a lot of social theory.

Stephen Turner: Absolutely. That was the target all along. And that's why I spent so much time doing straight historical stuff, mostly on explanation. My approach was always about explanation rather than ontology.

Elizabeth Shove: Yes, that's a big difference. In some ways you're quite against the concept of practice but in other ways it's completely compatible. I mean, it depends on how you interpret practice and whether you view that as an explanation or whether you see it in some other kind of way. So that's definitely interesting.

Stephen Turner: Exactly. So, for me ontologizing, both for practices and collective intentionality, is a premature stopping point that avoids the explanatory issues.

Elizabeth Shove: On a different track, I was curious to read about the influence of Kuhn: could you say a bit more about that?

[1] The world view of an individual or group.

Stephen Turner: The whole of the sixties in the philosophy of science was consumed by the revolution against logical positivism, and Kuhn was a big revolutionary.[2] But Kuhn's work contained a lot of problematic elements, such as the famous 21 definitions of paradigm (Masterman 1970). Larry Nichols and I have a new paper in *Critical Inquiry* (2024) on L. J. Henderson, who was sort of the godfather of Conant, who was the godfather of Kuhn, who actually talks about practice as a fundamental problematic, as the basis of conceptual schemes but also interacting with conceptual schemes in a way that binds them to practical activities. These things were all implicit but in a confused way in Kuhn, and partly lost. And the paradigm concept obscured all of this. Incommensurability and Feyerabend and the whole rebellion against positivism, which by that time was badly wounded and bleeding, took precedence. But it turned the discourse away from practice and towards concepts, and eventually semantics.

But Kuhnianism at the time was nevertheless part of one's education and part of the way in which almost everything was framed. He was a celebrity and paradigm talk was part of the culture. So, you had to address it. Practice is a good way of thinking about the unstated, the tacit stuff, that differentiates one intellectual context from another. But practices weren't something that you could pick out, like a paradigm understood just as a conceptual scheme. It was more. To study practices, you needed to treat them as a natural object. Likewise, you had to figure out what the paradigm included and what made it a paradigm. And you had to compare it to something as a natural object. So, I think Kuhn's work just raises all the big questions without answering them.

Elizabeth Shove: OK, but your take on practices has some resonance with some strands of science and also some really big points of difference and departure. For example, on social constructivism, you're quite critical about the logic of that.

Stephen Turner: I'm probably not all that different from David Bloor[3] in some ways. My criticisms involved the short cuts that they took in explanation. But the topics are the same: even Harry Collins is interested in tacit knowledge and so forth. For me, those people were very positive in the sense that they legitimated this stuff as the big deal area of study. And one of their mantras was, well, "we want to attack the hard problems". I think one of the problems with the Chicago school[4] was that they sort of ran away from the hard problems.

Elizabeth Shove: From the big problems?

Stephen Turner: Yeah, they sort of said, "Oh, you guys can take care of all the important stuff, like class and power, while we're going to talk about this really cute stuff that people do." And that conceded the big things - and not only politics. And the science studies people didn't do that. They said, "we're going to talk about hardball physics, and we're going to talk about it in these terms".

Elizabeth Shove: I'm going to go over to Manuel in a minute, but you know, you also refer to Bourdieu, not very favorably, really. (*Laughs*) So I'm puzzled now: we've got Kuhn, we've got Bloor, we've got science studies, and then Bourdieu. So, how in your head, do you frame that?

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*). I've been thinking about this. And what I think is really going on is that there are people like Reckwitz and Bourdieu, and in philosophy Rouse, but also the people in management studies, who have an idea of what a practice is. And usually, it's this sort of kind of thing that has a goal, explicitly or not explicitly. So, it's an identifiable unitary thing that they can have a theory about.

That's not the way I think about it.

I think about practice in terms of the way I started my dissertation those many years ago, in terms of the occasion for explaining something. You discover, to your surprise, that something's a practice, and not natural. I think, for me, that's the big distinction. But you get there through empirical experience with these distinctions. You don't realise that you're dealing with somebody that's operating with a different practice until something goes wrong, and/or, somebody explains to you why it's going wrong.

I can give you this example that sticks with me. I had a Chinese department chair, and we would have conversations, and he would go silent. And I would think, well, I haven't explained myself clearly enough. Let me put it more forcefully and more clearly. And he would get even more silent. And then it was explained to me in some travel guide that no, that's the Chinese reaction when they don't like what you're saying (*Laughs*).

[2] Kuhn's 1962 book, the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, drew attention to the social organization and history of knowledge.

[3] Here Stephen refers to the 'strong' programme in science studies, and the idea that all forms of scientific knowledge are shaped by dominant paradigms. Key authors include David Bloor at Edinburgh and Harry Collins, at the University of Bath.

[4] Those associated with the Chicago school, for example, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, also dealt with social organisation, but with a focus on everyday life.

But how do you discover that? And how do you theorise that? Well, I think that a practice in this sense is a comparison-based object, a discoverable that depends on your starting point, rather than a kind of thing out there that you can grab.

Elizabeth Shove: We could go on for a good while on this and on whether you aren't overdoing it a bit in terms of the stiffness of practice theory, but it's Manuel's turn now.

Manuel Baeriswyl: We wanted to talk about the specific texts we picked to read in preparation for talking with you. The first is *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions* (1994). You said that most readers ignore the last chapter of a book (*Laughs*). So perhaps you could say more about what you had in mind in the last chapter specifically?

Stephen Turner: What is buried in the last chapter (really the last couple of chapters) is actually very similar to what I wrote more recently, on habits (2020a, 330-335), and it's been a continuing concern of mine: what is it that sustains practices, and how do people acquire them if they are not shared through some kind of magical mental transmission? What happens?

The examples I was thinking of in those last chapters, performances such as playing baseball that form habits, were about transmission, but there was nothing magical about the process. There are also the rituals that people perform together, and their objects. That's what I've been emphasizing more recently. There are actual objects in the world that people orient themselves to, and that makes things hang together in a way that doesn't require a kind of common mental state.

Demystification was the goal. So, the last chapters were really an attempt to just hint at what was an alternative explanation of what's a genuine phenomenon.

Elizabeth Shove: There's something intriguing about this reference to a genuine phenomenon. I need to think about this a bit more, but it sounds as if you go along with the view that there is a world out there that simply needs understanding?

Stephen Turner: Yeah, absolutely.

Elizabeth Shove: And that's where you begin?

Stephen Turner: Yes - you start where you are, with your own tacit expectations and feelings. And with things like alien political traditions, it becomes obvious that you have stumbled onto a way of doing things that is very long term, very deeply rooted, and very difficult to describe. But it's definitely there.

Elizabeth Shove: Yes, yes. But the thereness of the 'it' is interesting. And it brings us back to how you think about practices. You say practices are "defined as those non-linguistic conditions for an activity that are learned" (Turner 2001, 129), which is fine as far as it goes. But it was something like 25 years ago that you wrote that. The first question is: are you sticking to that now, 25 years on?

Stephen Turner: Yeah, but now I think I would emphasise more of the sort of dialectic between the public and the private, or purely tacit parts. But also, the public objects themselves that we do share.

Elizabeth Shove: That's fine, but what brings change about then, Stephen?

Stephen Turner: This is less of a problem if you don't have a unitary theory of a practice as a kind of object or as a set of presuppositions. If you are looking at how ideological change occurs, and how ideas get turned into practices and become tacit, you have a different focus: ongoing and individual experience which varies.

One of the things that Foucault did was to trace back, through his genealogies, somebody explicitly saying what everybody now assumes. There has got to be a way of talking about the "assuming" part as a kind of causal story and also retain the individuality of people's experience of those things: discipline, for example. It's not like people have cookie cutter brains that have downloaded the same programme: they're interacting with something that is public, that enables them to communicate and produces a kind of conformity, but nevertheless, is distinctly theirs and personal. The trick is to problematise those processes and not assume how it happens.

Elizabeth Shove: We'll come back to the material world and the role of things a bit later. But first, another person who's writing a lot at the time (the mid-1980s) is Giddens. *The Constitution of Society* (1984) was a bit of a landmark for some people. And Giddens has no qualms at all about constructing an edifice around the concept of practices and society.

Stephen Turner: And the structure of the whole thing of a society.

Elizabeth Shove: Absolutely. So, there you were in America. In your autobiography (2022a), Giddens is quite a hero, but he's saying completely different things, compared to the sorts of positions that you're taking.

Stephen Turner: Yeah.

Elizabeth Shove: I mean, you probably never argued this through with Giddens, but if Giddens was here…

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*)

Elizabeth Shove: What would you have to say to him?

Stephen Turner: I think that was a boat that I got off in a paper called *Social Theory Without Wholes* (1984). After a summer seminar with Richard Rorty[5], I really rethought the question of whether it even made interesting sense to talk about there being a correct social theory or a true social theory. And that shows up in the practices book as well. So, I took a much more almost pragmatic or utilitarian view of social theories. They are images that help you around a little bit. But then there are lots of these images, and there's nothing absolute about any of them. But that also pushes you to the question of, okay, well, what is absolute?

I thought, there are many flowers growing out in this garden of social theory. But what's the source, what's the ground? And that question pushed me more in the direction of cognitive science: in a way, I was already there.

Elizabeth Shove: So, you never did have an argument with Giddens then?

Stephen Turner: No, no. And actually, he was puzzled, and others were also puzzled by that book [*The Social Theory of Practices, Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions* (1994)]. It made no sense to them at all.

Elizabeth Shove: Okay, so we've got some questions about the reception of that book. I'm not saying it sunk without trace, because the traces are all around us in a way, but from your point of view, what happened?

Stephen Turner: It gets ritually cited by people who only read the title (*Laughs*). I think that's the fate of a lot of books. One of the reasons for writing it was to reach a more sociological audience, but it actually got a philosophical audience. And it made clear to me that this was really a philosophical argument about a sociological topic. Since people didn't have commitments in both fields it was hard for them to make sense of it. But then it did pick up with people who were really engaged with it, like Joe Rouse, for example, or Jim Bohman who did a nice review of it in *History and Theory* (1997) which was even translated into French. So, it had definitely had an impact on that bunch of people. But outside of that, I think what was in demand, especially in American sociology, and what Bourdieu supplied, was a kind of orthodox vocabulary that you could use to describe things. For people who were looking for that, this book wasn't the news that they wanted to hear.

Elizabeth Shove: We've read some of the reviews of that book and we'd like to go back over what some people said then.

Manuel Baeriswyl: First, a review from Michael Hård (1996) in which he quotes you saying that "we cannot do anything to get behind the notion of practice, either in a causal or justificatory way, because practices are not objects, but are rather explanatory constructions that solve specific problems of comparison and unmet expectations" (Hård 1996, 123). So, the question would be, what do you make of that now?

Stephen Turner: One of the key texts for me was Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (1969). And that's very much the spirit of that text. In fact, the original title of the practice book was *The Opacity of Practice*.

Elizabeth Shove: (*Laughs*)

Stephen Turner: That ended up as the title of the last chapter, I think. But that was the idea that you can't get behind practices, you can't turn them into something else, and you can't reduce them to a functional instrument and so on and so forth.

Elizabeth Shove: That's great. I never knew that. I've always found the title really puzzling, because it's absolutely the reverse of what the book is about.

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*) That's what the editor said: "You don't mean "*the*"… you're saying you have *the* social theory of practices?" I said, no, no, that wasn't what it was about.

Elizabeth Shove: It stuck anyway.

Stephen Turner: Well, I think, actually, it turned out to be a good title, because it was the kind of thing that if somebody

[5] Richard Rorty was an American Philosopher known for his work on representation and language.

needed a citation on practices and didn't want to read the book, then you just could cite it.

Elizabeth Shove: That's a bit annoying as well.

Stephen Turner: Well, you take what you can get.

Elizabeth Shove: Manuel, we're going back to Trevor Pinch's review, is that right?

Manuel Baeriswyl: Yes. Trevor Pinch writes in his review (1997) that one problem with your work is that you focus on very broad practices. But what if we take other well-known examples of empirical research using practice theory, such as Lave's (1991) work, on situated practices and on learning midwifery. What do you make of this?

Stephen Turner: Yeah, well, I think the interesting thing about her work is that it's almost a paradigm case of the stuff I was criticising (*Laughs*). It's not so much the narrowness of the practice that you're looking at it's the conceptualisation of the practice. And I think it goes back to this idea of what a practice is, and then how you're going to have a theory about it. So, you know, Pinch thinks "this is a practice. So, this is the way we need to think about practices." I'm completely on the other side. I'm saying, "oh, we never know what's a practice or not in advance."

Elizabeth Shove: But the idea of practices is a useful device for academics and for non-academics as well. It's real in its effects, even if it's not, as it were, *real* real. For example, you don't have to buy the whole architecture of structure and agency and all the rest of it to go along with Giddens' claim that practices are shared across space and time. I'm not trying to change your mind, but it is intriguing, given how much there is written about practices, strategy as practice, entrepreneurship as practice, everything is "a practice" and there you are in Florida in a hurricane still saying completely the opposite!

Stephen Turner: I was at a management meeting some years ago in the UK and they were using this very kind of practical notion of practices that made perfect sense in the context of conflicting organizational cultures or of questions about why some company works well and not another, which definitely wasn't the way I was thinking of practices.

But nevertheless, when you start looking at even those problems you get entangled in the question of OK, really, what does that practice consist of? It's going to consist of these things that you have to discover and dig out. You can't say in advance what the content of that is. You see some general picture, but the details you don't really know. And you can certainly be surprised.

I think interpersonal practices of deference and so on, for example, are really deeply rooted and interesting. I have a Chinese colleague who's a liberal and he was talking about why it's so difficult to have liberal democracy in China. It's the Confucian tradition. It's not that people are consciously Confucians, but that there's a whole style of human interaction that doesn't fit very well with the sort of the autonomous individual necessary for a certain kind of practice of liberal democracy. But this is another case where you've got many different traditions that practice it in different ways. And that's fascinating to me. That to me is what the problem is.

Elizabeth Shove: OK, to move on. You write about tacit and explicit knowledge, common experiences, sharing between people, collective intelligibility, and so on. And this is where we come to the material world. As you know, there's a whole field of science studies and Actor-Network Theory and so on, and Latour saying 'Where Are the Missing Masses?' (1992) in social theory, but you don't pay much attention, in fact, probably no attention to the material world. You also say some quite interesting things about Latour. And, I agree, he was a fantastic magician.

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*)

Elizabeth Shove: But where do you stand now?

Stephen Turner: Originally, when I worked on rituals, obviously this included ritual objects and their powers. These were pretty material, but it wasn't a material sort of determination. I certainly was aware of that kind of argument. And more recently I looked at digitalisation in the same way, and about what do we mean by familiarity, given the objects that we have around us, and so forth (2022b).

But I also think that the changes in the physical world from, say, 1920 to 1999, or something like that, weren't all that great. True, television substituted for radio. But now we've got some much more pervasive kinds of changes where everybody has to have a phone to go to the grocery store. That strikes me as really interesting. And also, AI externalises a lot of what were previously matters of tacit knowledge.

Today, if you want to fix a car or something like that, or if you've got a plumbing problem, you go on YouTube, and you can see, OK, this is how it's done. You don't have to know anything special, but you do have to know some things. It seems like the world of skills gets invaded and tacit knowledge, skills, and practices get replaced. But on the other hand, a lot of it has to do with standardised objects. There's a lot to be thought about.

Elizabeth Shove: Absolutely. Screw, and fittings, and all the rest. But I'm wondering, where does that fit in? If we have a **Stephen Turner** view of practices, where does the standard screw thread fit in the sharing process?

Stephen Turner: This is an interesting historical problem - British screws weren't standard at first, but American ones were. Standardisation creates new relations. It makes sharing less directly interpersonal. Think about Polanyi (1964) talking about discovery: he's talking about science as an apostolic succession, where you learn to think and to do stuff in the lab, and where your mental patterns match up to somebody else's patterns, but not perfectly. And that's how progress comes about. That's very different from, you know, getting it off YouTube. But science is now becoming less personal (Turner 2020b).

Elizabeth Shove: Okay, but it's also different from the lesson, if that's the word, that's inscribed in a screw thread, that it will only fit a certain kind of plumbing. And you can't get away from that. I mean, that's what Latour was on about with the notion of scripting as well.

Stephen Turner: Yeah, so I did have a paper that actually talks about this, the way in which knowledge is built into objects. And so, a lot of knowledge that our ancestors had, we don't have, because it's built into the objects that we use routinely (Turner 2007: 45). So, when you talk about consensus, or what sharing is and so forth, a lot of it's going to be through those objects. But the objects are themselves outcomes of past practices with histories and genealogies of practices. You don't encounter the makers or anything like that: just the objects.

Elizabeth Shove: OK so that's where your take on practice comes closer and closer to the idea of common experience, common encounters, which some people then call practices – and treat them in a different way – that is as explanations. For example, Reckwitz talks about people as the carriers of practices, but objects have this role as well, just like the screw threads we've talked about. So, do you think it's just a matter of faith, at least on Reckwitz's part, and on my part as well, that we just believe that practices are carried in this way?

Stephen Turner: I think this is really an empirical question. But it's also, I think of it more as a cognitive sciencey question. All these notions like extended mind, appeal to me a lot. Because now that I'm old, I have to write everything down to remember it. So, it's very present to me that the material world is part of the mind.

Elizabeth Shove: It is part of you.

Stephen Turner: Yeah. And it's also, in a way, a sharable part of the mind. I just did a paper on Karl Popper (2024), which shows how his World 3[6] is really a version of the older idea of the objective mind. The interesting thing about it is that objective minds are common things, too, they're object-like things in the world. That's what makes it "objective." And so, minds in this sense can be articulated and used as common points of reference, just like a tool can be.

Elizabeth Shove: OK, we're on to another theme now. When I was reading some of your books and papers, I was wondering about whether your work would have happened in a European environment. That's not really a question, because you live in America, you are an American, but it goes back to the question about who you're having a debate with, and about the movement of ideas between America and other parts of the world. Everybody is part of a tradition but how have the debates around you shaped who you are, and the flow of your ideas.

Stephen Turner: Well, my friends think of me as a European intellectual, and not as an American.

Elizabeth Shove: That is interesting!

Stephen Turner: This is an old American problem. There was a historic tension produced by disciplinarisation. If you're not someone who goes after particular journals or who lives and dies by them, you are an outsider. And disciplinarisation was the fate of American academia. William James wrote a famous paper on the PhD octopus (1903), and then, 25 years later, the president of Harvard, Lowell, along with Henderson, Whitehead, and Curtis wrote this incredible screed against specialisation, and about how the PhD system ruins people's minds. And that became the basis for the creation of the Harvard Society of Fellows (Homans and

[6] In Popper's 'three-worlds', world three consists of 'cultural' objects of thought that interact with a mental world two and a material world one.

Bailey 1948). Their model was Trinity College at Cambridge. I was always pretty interdisciplinary. But it was sheer luck that I was allowed to be. If I had been in a conventional philosophy or sociology department it wouldn't have happened.

Elizabeth Shove: So, we have a couple of questions about your career as a whole, which is quite broad, to put it mildly. We asked about what you would pick out, and in the notes that you sent us, you mentioned the problem of relativism. We have to remember that somebody might read this, so could you explain a bit more what you meant?

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*). The argument, found in people like Gananath Obeyesekere[7] is that there are some things that really aren't relativistic, that what people do in their practical life and so forth, is pragmatic. It's governed by their relation to the world, but it's not a theoretical alternative. So, on the one hand, you have this incredible diversity of ideas, practices, ontologies, morals, and so forth. On the other hand, you have this stuff that is not really all that diverse, and that everybody has to do. That is a common bond. Figuring out what is the common stuff of humanity and what is not - I think that's an empirical question.

Elizabeth Shove: OK.

Stephen Turner: Can you have a practice that actually is radically different from what everybody has ever done historically? I think those are the big existential questions.

There's a lot of sort of relativism denial, and I want to avoid that, but also avoid the kind of absolutist relativism that denies change. If you insist that cultures determine everything, that we are all cultural dopes, in Garfinkel's terms, and you're also saying: "no, cultures can't change, they can't improve even on their own terms." I think those are real problems that we have to navigate.

Elizabeth Shove: The other thing you mentioned, and which we've already touched on is a resistance to the reification of concepts and general explanations. And that's where I think you *are* an American.

Stephen Turner: (*Laughs*)

Elizabeth Shove: I mean, never mind what your friends might say, but if you were to look for strong traditions of reification, you'd look to American Sociology. I don't see quite the same in other areas of social theory. So, what are the big theories that are still out there, Stephen?

Stephen Turner: Well, I think cultural sociology would be one example.

Elizabeth Shove: OK.

Stephen Turner: It's one of those areas where people are indoctrinated into a whole way of thinking - it's a paradigm. And then the question is, can you get outside of that and criticise it? But I think for a lot of those people, that's not important. They're trying to describe something, and they're looking around for tools that they can use, that also they can communicate with other people on. So, they latch onto these vocabularies.

Elizabeth Shove: And that's the way those concepts acquire a life of their own.

Stephen Turner: Exactly right.

Elizabeth Shove: Manuel, sorry, I've been hogging the agenda, but the practice turn is the next topic.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Yeah. To go on to another theme, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny 2001) was published in 2001, and you and others have written a lot since then. Looking back, do you think there really was a practice turn at that time?

Stephen Turner: Yeah, I think so. I think it shows when you look at what happened beforehand, with systems theory and functionalism and, as you know, Giddens, various forms of Marxism, and all these other big scale ideas. People have used the notion of practice to go beyond that and to undermine that whole style. The same kind of turn happened earlier, oddly enough, with rational choice theory. And the two are sort of sides of the same coin: practice theory provides the non-rational parameters within which rational choice accounts make sense. But they were both substitutes for this older structural functionalist tradition, which was entombed in the book called *Approach to the Study of Social Structure* (1975) that was edited by Peter Blau. And that was that generation's last word. (*Laughs*)

And I think the timing was important, too, because the late eighties was a time in which American sociology went

[7] Gananath Obeyesekere is Emeritus professor of Anthropology, Princeton University.

through a complete, fairly radical disintegration and then reconstruction. So, practice ideas were there to be used. And Bourdieu was waiting in the wings. Bourdieu had actually a pretty interesting relationship with Merton that shows up in his letters. Some people, like Jon Elster[8], just view Bourdieu as another functionalist. So, there's a hidden continuity there: the notion of practice rode in on the horse that Bourdieu was riding.

Elizabeth Shove: But I mean, not only Bourdieu, and also what's happened to practice theories since then. We're heading towards the end, but some of our questions are about what's happened to those agendas since.

Where are the horses riding now?

Stephen Turner: Well, I think your point about how practice theories show up in so many different areas is the important one, because there really are different conceptions of practice in these different places. There are some common threads, but there's not a unified practice theory. But I think actually the challenge of making sense of it in different contexts is pretty important because that diversity illuminates what you're saying, or what's wrong with what you're saying in a particular setting.

I credit Sherry Ortner with a lot of this, because I think before that essay (1984), people really didn't think of practice theory as a thing of its own, even if we used the term "practices", as I did. That essay pulled it all together. All of these concepts were floating around out there and Ortner said "okay, this is a topic, and these are the different views that relate to it." And to me, at least, that was a revelation.

Elizabeth Shove: But what now? Have you got any thoughts on the direction these debates are going in, and how they relate to different traditions in philosophy and sociology?

Stephen Turner: One of my concerns all along has been the relationship between social science descriptions and explanations and more fundamental neuroscience kinds of things. I think that's always got to be in the back of your mind - what is the cash value of the notions that you're theorising about?

But I think that goes both ways. If you get a really good description of something like practice, that's something that cognitive scientists have to take into account and say, "okay, well, how do we understand that in our terms?". And there has to be that kind of dialogue. I've been more and more focused on how do you take some social theoretical notion, like "recognition" and translate it into cognitive science terms (2022d). Those are the kinds of questions that are really difficult but really interesting.

Elizabeth Shove: Thanks Stephen, we've packed a lot into a short interview and there is much to think about.

[8] Jon Elster is a philosopher and political theorist, Emeritus professor at Columbia University.

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An Interview with Joseph Rouse: Careers and Ideas in Practice

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Abstract

In mapping out some of the key features of his interpretation of practice theory, Joseph Rouse begins by talking about the influence of science studies, and about the social organization of scientific practice. In all of this, Kuhn is an important figure, as are controversies about the socially constructed nature of knowledge. For Joe, practice theory provides a distinctive take on these debates and on the place of language, materiality, normativity, and power. All these issues prove to be important for big questions about the natural and the social world and for Joe's conclusion that practices underpin the basic structure of human biological environments.

Keywords

language; nature; normativity; power; science

Introduction

As part of the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on the theme 'Past, Present, Future', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three influential figures whose work has significantly shaped the development of practice theory. These conversations focus on pivotal moments and turning points in the interviewees' careers, and the evolution of the ideas they have championed. Together, these interviews form the 'Past' section of this issue and present some insight into how theories of practice have emerged within, and responded to, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational contexts.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

Joseph Rouse is Professor of Philosophy, Science and Technology Studies, Environmental Studies, and Hedding Professor of Moral Science at Wesleyan University. Professor Rouse's research interests are in the philosophy of science, the history of 20th Century philosophy, and interdisciplinary science studies. His published books include: *Knowledge and Power: Towards a Political Philosophy of Science* (1987), *Engaging Science: How to Understand its Practices Philosophically* (1996), *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (2002), and *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* (2023).

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Joseph Rouse about practice theory and what it brings to big questions about the natural and the social world.

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Manuel Baeriswyl: In describing those who have influenced your work on practice theory, you mention Bourdieu and Giddens as classic sources; Wittgenstein and Heidegger in the background, but also figures like Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hubert Dreyfus, Thomas Kuhn, and Bob Brandom. These are very diverse sources of inspiration, so for you, what holds the field of practice theory together?

Joseph Rouse: Well, of course I came into this from a very specific direction. I was trained as a philosopher of science, with a background as much in continental philosophy, phenomenology - Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault - as in the Anglo-American tradition. And I got started on this by reading Tom Kuhn's (1970) work in relation to that tradition. He provided not so much a different conception of scientific knowledge, but a conception of scientific understanding as embedded in scientific practice.

That was really where I was starting, and of course, part of the difficulty in the philosophical context was that there was no vocabulary readily available for talking about social practices. And so, I was looking for people who were giving me resources to do this. And there, Charles Taylor and Dreyfus were initially very helpful, and then Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion about practices came out in the late seventies and early eighties (e.g. 1981). So, this was very, very useful for me. And part of what was going on was that most of these folks (except MacIntyre) were adamantly seeing practice-based approaches as a way of differentiating a social world from the natural sciences and a natural world.

And what I was struck by was how much their work helped us understand sciences and scientific understanding. So, I was both enormously influenced by their accounts of practices and also critical of uses they wanted to make of this to sharply distinguish between the social and the natural.

And the two things that were very important to me were emphasising the material component of practices - and of course, this was coming out of philosophy of science and thinking about experimental systems and theoretical models and so forth – and thinking about language as a social practice. And that's where Brandom became especially helpful, because he was developing the most articulated account of language as a social practice. And so that was the set of resources that initially I found helpful.

At the same time, I had, much earlier than most philosophers of science, close connections to the emerging tradition of social constructivism. Both the British folks, at Bath and Edinburgh[1], but especially Karin Knorr-Cetina and Bruno Latour and so forth. And also the emerging feminist science studies. So those people, Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, were very, very important in helping me think about scientific practice and in seeing scientific practice not as something isolated and special and separate, but as an integral part of the social world.

Elizabeth Shove: So, can I interrupt there? Kuhn is really interesting as a starting point. As far as I know, Kuhn doesn't talk about practices. Implicitly he does, as the basis of shared understandings, but definitely not about materiality. So I'm curious, who else was putting these pieces together?

Joseph Rouse: Kuhn was definitely shifting the philosophical focus from scientific knowledge to the practice of scientific research - "normal science" is a kind of practice. He also was much more interested in practices, instruments, and the material basis of research than has been widely recognized. I have written about these aspects of Kuhn. But there wasn't really anyone else putting all those together. You know, I was also steeped in the classical tradition in philosophy of science and at that point, what was interesting to me was that I was seeing pieces coming from different places that were very helpful. For example, Dreyfus put me on to Pierre Bourdieu. And so, for me, reading Bourdieu and Giddens on the one hand, was very reassuring to see that people working in the social sciences were working on these themes. At the same time, I wasn't finding much new in their work, and so up through the nineties I was mostly talking about practices in relation to Taylor, MacIntyre, Dreyfus, Brandom, and so forth.

Elizabeth Shove: Back tracking a bit, the authors that you mentioned are working with different ideas, so it's a bit hard to say where you first met practice theory. You've told us a little bit about your own background, but there are many, many topics that you could have followed. So why this route?

[1] Here Joe refers to the 'strong' programme in science studies, and the idea that all forms of scientific knowledge are shaped by dominant paradigms. This is associated with authors such as Harry Collins, at the University of Bath, and David Bloor and Barry Barnes at Edinburgh University.

Joseph Rouse: Well, it seemed to me that for thinking about the sciences and scientific understanding, looking at practices as temporally extended, and looking at practices as always looking ahead, as building on a path of past performances, but taking them in new directions, that seemed to be what was being left out.

And so, the other part here is that I was very much steeped in Heidegger and Wittgenstein. You know, Wittgenstein on rule following and norms as embedded in practice rather than as specified, and Heidegger on intersubjectivity and the anonymous [meaning collective or shared] character of social practice. From my point of view, practice theory really goes back to Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

Elizabeth Shove: But as you mentioned, there is also the parallel track of social constructivism and science studies, and the Edinburgh School,[2] and so on. What were you bringing to that debate?

Joseph Rouse: That's where it makes a difference that my first encounter with that tradition was with people like Latour and Knorr-Cetina, because they very much were doing ethnographic studies of everyday practice and research orientation in the sciences. You know, Karin was my colleague for a year, at Wesleyan, so I got to know her very well and Bruno [Latour] gave the paper, 'Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise the World' (1983) at Wesleyan before it was published. So that was much more indicative of science studies to me than the folks in Bath or Edinburgh, although they were also interesting and important, especially in looking at experimentation. I was also reading the anthropologists and the feminist theorists who were taking this in some different directions. So, you know, reading Haraway in the early eighties even before *Primate Visions* (1989) came out.

Elizabeth Shove: Okay, but what was happening to 'practice theory' in the early 1980s? What were the main issues amongst the people you met and who were influential?

Joseph Rouse: Right. Well, I mean there, there were two, no, three things that seemed to me, really central. One was the question of whether practices were a locus of commonality, shared norms, and common performance, or whether they involved contestation and difference all the way down. That was where I was finding the anthropologists very helpful, you know, Sherry Ortner's (1984) paper on theory in the sixties came out about that time and that helped me a great deal. Especially in thinking about practices as ways in which people depended on what other people do, even if they didn't have the same concerns, the same needs, or the same backgrounds. And so that was one issue.

A second, of course, was the nature-culture divide or the social-natural divide.

And of course, part of why I was interested in this was because I saw that as a false division.

The third issue was the importance of language and the ways that practices involve contestation over meaning. There was a line in Charles Taylor that was very influential for me early on which basically said that you could only engage in a certain set of practices if you also had the relevant kind of vocabulary to talk about what you were doing. And you could only make sense of that vocabulary if you were engaging in those practices. And so, seeing language and practice as both closely integrated, and indeed, I mean language as itself a practice and as integral to social practices was very, very central to my thinking about that. That would be the third thing.

Elizabeth Shove: This is an odd combination, isn't it? I mean, we've got Latour, who doesn't really bother with these issues of language and practice, we've got the materiality that you're bringing in, following Latour, but that's not centrally part of debates about scientific knowledge and social constructivism. I mean, you're either a real magpie here, which is possible, or there's something that holds this package together for you, or both.

Joseph Rouse: Latour was much more interested in language and practice than you suggest. Look at the emphasis on inscriptions and writing in *Laboratory Life* (1987), and in *Science in Action* (1988) or the *Pasteur* work (1993) as concerning practices. But what holds it together is the sense that our, you know, our lives together, the things we do, the ways we make sense of ourselves, are focused on these different kinds of practices and the ways we make sense of them. So that the notion of meaning and the ways in which each meaning is not something in the head, but out in the world, in our engagements with one another, that's where it lies.

[2] For example, the work of David Bloor and Barry Barnes and their arguments about the social organisation of even 'hard' science.

Elizabeth Shove: OK, so the next bit of discussion is about landmark contributions, your own, but others as well. We've read an article by you from 1993, What are Cultural Studies of Scientific Knowledge? (Rouse 1993). In that article you are distinguishing between the cultural production of knowledge and the social organization of science, versus social constructivism as a position, and as a stance on the status of knowledge. In a sense, you are bringing your philosophical tradition to what was then quite a live debate in science studies. So, what difference did that paper make? People carried on talking about social constructivism, despite you, Joe, despite your intervention (*laughter*).

Joseph Rouse: Well, part of the point of that article was to explain that there is an alternative tradition emerging in how to think about scientific practice and scientific understanding in practice, that was different from mainstream social constructivism. Different from the Bath School, the Edinburgh School, and so forth. The exemplars were people like Donna Haraway, Sharon Traweek, a lot of feminist work, and anthropological studies.

And what struck me at the time was two things. One was that there was a lot of this work being done that was really fascinating, but it didn't have the kind of programmatic articulation that, let's say, David Bloor had given for the strong programme, that the Edinburgh folks had done, or that Harry Collins had been doing. And so, this paper was an attempt to say that there is something important going on in science studies that shares themes and concerns with classical social constructivism. This is about treating scientific knowledge as a social and cultural phenomenon and scientific understanding as practice.

And the point was that the Edinburgh and Bath folks were head on in argument with a lot of the philosophers. And part of my point was that they were meeting one another head on because of how many assumptions they shared. Their debate was really about rationality or irrationality, internal and external factors, and what was striking was that this other work [Joe's own approach, and feminist work] didn't accept those assumptions. So, this was coming out just at the same time as the Pickering volume *Science as Practice and Culture* (1992), which was also doing some of the same things, and which saw Latour and Woolgar and others moving in the sort of direction that my 1993 paper was taking.

Elizabeth Shove: OK.

Joseph Rouse: But that paper (1993) was probably the most widely cited paper I've ever written. Partly because it spoke to this emerging group that didn't have a programmatic articulation of their position, that was important, and the fact that it was the first paper in the first issue of a new journal in the field.

So that was it, it provided a moment of crystallisation of some new directions in science studies. Not that I was initiating these, but this was what I was seeing other people do, and I helped to formulate it as "this is what we're up to and this matters." And it was very much a practice-oriented conception, but one which saw practices as contested, power laden, and differentiated.

Manuel Baeriswyl: We'd also like to talk about your chapter in The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory. 'Two Concepts of Practices' (Rouse 2001) contributes to a discussion about how practices are shared and is a response to some of Stephen Turner's work. We can go into more detail about this text, but we're interested in learning about the history of this chapter and why you wrote on the topic that you did. You focus on the extent to which participants are normatively accountable to each other, so why was normativity an issue worth writing about at that time?

Joseph Rouse: Well, normativity has always been as far as I'm concerned, the central issue in practice theory. That is, how is it that people engage in performances that are open to assessment as appropriate or inappropriate, or in all the other terms that are used - good or bad, just or unjust. And of course, that was part of what was going on in Heidegger and Wittgenstein: seeing norms not as explicit rules, but as embedded in how people's performances responded to one another.

And so, that issue was central. Now, what prompted it? *Engaging Science* (1996), my second book, had just been published and I had a full-blown account there of what I take practices to be, and then I read Turner's book *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), and my response was double edged. I thought, you know, Turner was attacking two different conceptions of practices.

Practices as regularities - people who do the same things and thereby build a tradition together on the one hand, or practices as performances - governed by norms or shared presuppositions on the other. You know, he had

two different lines of argument there. And on the one hand I thought he was spot on in his criticisms of both these conceptions, but he took those to be exhaustive. And, you know, the kind of work I'd been doing had been giving a very different account.

So, the point of my chapter was to, on the one hand, say that Turner's doing something really significant here that challenges a lot of the familiar ways of talking about practices. But there is an important absence, and that was also a way of saying what's going on in the account of practices that I had been developing. Part of what I argued was that you could even discern this third alternative between the lines of Turner's criticisms of the other two, even though he did not recognise its possibility.

Elizabeth Shove: Can I follow up on that? For you, the normativity and to some extent a language as well situates people as the kind of central point, but there are other versions of practice theory. Andreas Reckwitz, for example, writes about people as the carriers of practice, arguing that practices exist beyond people. Sometimes it seems as if that is what you are saying, but you often go back to an idea about the centrality of relations between people. What do you think about the suggestion that people are 'merely' the carriers of practices?

Joseph Rouse: I mean carriers isn't the word I would use, but I think the point you're making is right. That is that practices are not just about relations among people, it's the settings, and patterns of action in which people participate, that enable them to act meaningfully, understand themselves, and so forth.

Elizabeth Shove: So, what word would you use if you don't use "carriers"? What word would you use?

Joseph Rouse: Maybe the "site" (*laughter*), right? That is, humans' ways of life go beyond just what people do, but they're focused around us. I mean, you know, in my recent book, I take practices to be this basic structure of human biological environments.

Elizabeth Shove: I was wondering whether there has been a shift in your own thinking on that or whether you've held to the same view of practices from the 90s onwards?

Joseph Rouse: There were common streams of concern all the way through. But, as I read more work and brought in more elements, the view gets developed and expanded. Robert Brandom's work on languages as practices and the reinterpretation of Donald Davidson's work on language as a practice theory enabled me to say much more, but it didn't change my view in the sense of making me reject things I used to say.

And likewise discovering Niche construction theory,[3] I'd already been involved in the philosophy of biology and in looking at the criticisms of genocentric accounts of molecular biology and the modern evolutionary synthesis, but niche construction theory fitted beautifully into what I was already doing and enabled me to do a lot more with it. So, it's about discovering new resources that help articulate and develop my account.

Manuel Baeriswyl: So maybe on that note, do you think the practice turn happened or not?

Joseph Rouse: Oh yes, absolutely. Well, here's the thing. It happened, and in some areas, there were also turns away from it. In philosophy, and social philosophy, there was a turn away from practice theory, right? A huge area in philosophy, social ontology, starts from presumptions that just leave out the possibilities of practice theory. And practice theory is now coming back into that field as people realise what has been left out. So there has been both a development of practice theory in various disciplines and, you know, a number of my papers start by talking about how the notion of practice has been so influential across a wide range of disciplines, but it's also been contested within those disciplines, right?

Practice theory is not the dominant approach anywhere, I think, but it's a prominent approach almost everywhere (*laughter*) in thinking about human life. And of course, I think that it's on the right track. Now, you mentioned Reckwitz. I think that after the turn of the millennium, practice theory in the social sciences has developed in ways that are quite consistent with the conceptions that I've been developing. I mean, there are points I would disagree with Reckwitz about, but that's an approach that's very sympathetic to mine.

Manuel Baeriswyl: To go back to another big issue, you say that you are interested in overcoming any conceptual or practical divide between social world and the scientific intelligibility of nature. You mentioned this earlier, but it is also important in your most recent book, so maybe you could elaborate on this.

[3] Niche construction theory is a form of evolutionary biology that takes account of the fact that organisms modify their environments and the selection pressures that follow.

Joseph Rouse: That has been a theme of my work going back to my first book, *Knowledge and Power* (1987). Of course, the original idea was that a great deal of practice theory initially developed as an account of what makes the human social world different from the natural world and the social sciences different from the natural sciences. I was greatly influenced by that account of practices while criticising the claim that it differentiated a social world from nature.

And so, I had already been arguing that this was a false distinction from one side.

That is, scientific practice is very much a practice in this way, and that how we understand and deal with the natural world is part of a single set of engagements in the world. Then of course, on the other side, I discovered that [some forms of] biology gave us a very rich resource for understanding human embodiment, human engagement with the world, and with one another in practices that didn't separate embodied skills from discursive articulation.

A large part of that was providing the resources for making that connection, because that was always a divide between bodily skill and language, right? You see it even in Bourdieu between habitus as a kind of bodily phenomenon and then rules and norms. And part of what my work was doing was arguing that those are false distinctions, that language and conceptual articulation and explicit rules were embedded in embodied practice and engagement with the world.

And so, avoiding those two kinds of separation between tacit embodied skill and explicit articulated knowledge, and between culture and nature seemed to me a really important thing. And I think it is one that more recent work in practice theory has become more sympathetic to. Both because of very good recognition of the material dimension of practices, which is of course the world, the natural world. And partly because social scientists are no longer committed to the project of distinguishing the social and the natural, partly because of the influence of science studies, which overall has been very constructive, and I think it has also moved in the direction that I'm suggesting.

This includes the ways in which social studies of science have moved beyond debates about constructivism and knowledge, and incorporated anthropological, feminist, and other perspectives.

Elizabeth Shove: A second big theme you mentioned was relations amongst practices and between them, and questions of power. So again, the science studies angle is interesting in terms of power. Why did you pick that as a second theme you'd like to talk about?

Joseph Rouse: Well, because that has been there all along. As I noted, I began with a book about how scientific knowledge and power were integrally connected. The question of whether practices are the locus of a community, of shared presuppositions, of common ways of doing things, or whether power, contestation and difference run all the way down has been a theme and an issue throughout. And of course, another figure who we haven't mentioned here, but who is I think very important in this context is Foucault. He was enormously influential on my work as well, so seeing practices not as defined by shared things - norms, performances, presuppositions, whatever - but instead as ways in which people both depend on one another and on the settings in which they engage with one another, and at the same time have different goals, interests, needs, and so forth. I think here, Ortner's (1984) early paper was actually very, very good on, on bringing that vision out.

And so, for me, power has always been at the centre of practices. Not as something that people possess, but as - again, this is a broadly Foucauldian idea - as something that runs through interactions among people in everything being… and power is, in Foucault's terms, capillary, it's in the ways in which small actions shape the field of possible actions.

Elizabeth Shove: Is there anything extra to say about power and materiality and practice, when you put those three concepts together?

Joseph Rouse: Well, of course. History is absolutely central. I mean that was part of the point of seeing the material setting of practice and the reconstruction of those settings. So, you know, this brings in all sorts of other things that are not explicitly part of a practice theoretical tradition, but which I see as consistent with it. For example, my friend Quill Kukla's (2021) lovely book, *City Living*, is about the ways in which interactions among urban dwellers shape the making of city life and the divisions in the territories and patterns of practice. This seems to be a lovely contribution to social practice theory, but it's very much about the interactions of people with spaces, buildings, equipment and so forth.

Manuel Baeriswyl: To finish, we'd like to know what you think about how practice theories are developing today.

Joseph Rouse: Well, I mean, first of all, I basically agree with your point that practice theory nowadays is rightly concerned with change, materiality, with the ways in which practices in different scales affect one another, transform one another, that this is about the dynamics of practices to steal the title from a book, right? (*laughter*)

But it seems to me that language is at the heart of that. That is, the ways in which languages themselves are practices that are changed and contested. Another book that is not coming from the practice theory tradition at all but draws on it and makes a lovely and important contribution to it, is David Beaver and Jason Stanley's (2023) new book on *The Politics of Language*. They start from things like slurs and other non-assertive uses of language, but they're emphasising the ways in which language shapes the ways we interact and the terms in which we do so, and that it often guides fragmentation and contestation over various practices and various issues. And similarly, normativity. Now one of the big issues of course is that broadly speaking, and there are lots of exceptions, social theorists and philosophers tend to think about normativity differently. I think in social theory it's about the imposition of norms, right? And you know, it's describing norms as something that governs or either are accepted or are imposed.

Whereas in the most interesting philosophical uses, it's about how we hold one another open to assessment, and how the norms according to which that assessment takes place are not already settled but are at issue. And so again that shows how normativity, the very terms in which we assess and make sense of one another, is part of that discussion about change, materiality, the interconnections among practices, scale and power, right? This is about the ways in which changes in language enable some things to be said more clearly and to close off others.

There's always been a tradition in sociology of thinking about conversation as itself a social practice. And there is some very good work done along those lines, but it's certainly the case that thinking about language as a practice has been much more on the side of philosophy. And part of the difficulty, of course, is that that literature engages a whole set of themes that go beyond the traditional concerns of the social sciences. Another part of the problem is that there are different traditions for thinking about language. One of the things that has been central to my work all along is discovering that there are these things going on in different places [disciplines] which have important things to say to one another.

And so, one of the points here is that there is important translational work to be done to be able to say how work being done on language here is actually very helpful to the kinds of things you're doing over here in practice theory. Or, in my case, thinking about human bodies biologically as organisms in an environment can actually be very helpful for thinking about everyday social practices.

One of the things I hope that your journal will do is to provide these kinds of translational opportunities to see how people from different disciplines are working on similar themes and providing resources that one another can use without having to say, "oh you have to be trained in eight different disciplines to do that."

Elizabeth Shove: One last question about practice theory and everyday life. Has this tradition made any difference to your own daily life, and if so, how?

Joseph Rouse: Absolutely yes. I'll start with a very simple way. Manuel and I were talking earlier about my nearly lifelong involvement in competitive sports. Understanding volleyball and fencing as practices and embodied skills, and how they change the way you understand things and see things, that's been an important back and forth between philosophy and everyday life. But there is a bigger context, right? You know, I grew up in the American South when it was still legally segregated, and amidst the civil rights development. I became an adult in the middle of second wave feminism. I became a science studies scholar in the 80s in the middle of the AIDS epidemic. Thinking about race, gender, and sexuality as embedded in practices, and the way which everyday practices can be both oppressive or liberating, and thinking about my own activities and ways of life in those terms, has been enormously influential in my day to day life.

And I think part of taking a normative concern seriously is recognising when the expression of it, and the concern, are at odds. That means thinking about the times when you have to violate the rule or the norm in order to live up to why it matters. And thinking about norms in that way,

as something that always outruns our efforts to express them and formulate it, important as that is, has been an important guide in everything I do. So, I was delighted when you asked, you know, when I saw that question because in fact thinking about practices and the ways in which I think about practices has been informed by central issues in my life and has informed them.

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An Interview with Wanda Orlikowski: Careers and Ideas in Practice

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Abstract

Starting from an early interest in Information Systems research and digital technology, Wanda Orlikowski came across social science by accident. From that moment on, she has sought to change the ways in which work, technology, and organizing are thought about, especially in the field of management studies. Her research focuses on the dynamic interplay between technology and organizations, and on how organizing structures, cultural norms, communication patterns, and work practices are reconfigured over time. Her notable contribution lies in applying Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to analyze the adoption and utilization of technologies within organizational settings. In this interview, she takes us through the stages of these metamorphoses and describes her approach, from questioning structures and their effects to detailed ethnographic studies of technologies in action.

Keywords

organizing; sociomateriality; structure; technology; work

Introduction

As part of the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on the theme 'Past, Present, Future', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three influential figures whose work has significantly shaped the development of practice theory. These conversations focus on pivotal moments and turning points in the interviewees' careers, and the evolution of the ideas they have championed. Together, these interviews form the 'Past' section of this issue and present some insight into how theories of practice have emerged within, and responded to, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and generational contexts.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

Wanda Orlikowski is the *Alfred P. Sloan Professor of Information Technology and Organization Studies* at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Her research examines technologies in the workplace, with a particular focus on how digital reconfigurations generate significant shifts in organizing, coordination, and accountability. She is currently exploring sociomaterial practices in digital work. Wanda Orlikowski has published widely in journals such as the *ACM Transactions on Information Systems, Administrative Science Quarterly, Information Systems Research, Organization Science, MIS Quarterly*, and the journals of the Academy of Management.

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In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Wanda Orlikowski about her work with practice theories and some of the ideas she has developed bringing together issues of work, organization, technology, and practice.

Manuel Baeriswyl: To begin we'd like to invite you to describe where and when you first came across practice theory. And what attracted you to it? In your 2011 article 'Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory' with Martha Feldman (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011) you say that a focus on practice, and on Giddens and structuration theory fitted better with the experience of IT development and programming, and that other ideas about technology, and innovation were framed a bit differently at the time. So maybe tell us more about this aspect?

Wanda Orlikowski: I did my undergraduate and master's degrees in South Africa, where I grew up, studying computer systems and not at all engaged in sociology or social theory. So, I worked with computer systems, particularly database systems, designing and building them for various projects. I then moved to the States to do my PhD, and at first, I thought I would continue that technical focus in my doctoral studies at NYU, working on database theory. But fortunately, we were required to take at least one course outside of the department, and for various reasons I ended up taking a course in sociology. I often describe doing that course as a conversion experience, because it was very eye opening for me, introducing me to a different way of understanding the world. And as a result of that experience, I switched my focus and began to take more sociology courses. And that's when I encountered social theory, and in particular, Giddens and structuration theory, which spoke very deeply to me.

Perhaps it was growing up in South Africa during the Apartheid years, and experiencing the imposition of a structure that really only existed because everybody enacted it every day. There was a way in which it wasn't real, but it was made real through practice. I didn't have the language then to describe that lived experience, but structuration theory gave me a vocabulary and a way to interrogate those structures and come to understand how that system could persist in the way it had for so long.

So, structuration theory resonated for me. And then when doing my doctoral dissertation studying technology in the workplace, I was surprised to see how much of the organizational literature was taking a deterministic view of technology and its influence on organizations. That didn't connect with my prior experiences as a systems designer and programmer, and it certainly didn't connect with my view, now informed by structuration theory, of how the social world works. So, I tried to do something different by offering a structurational take on technology in organizations. Even though Giddens does not explicitly focus on technology, I tried to articulate some initial ideas on how that might work, which I subsequently revised. But that's how I came to practice theory, first through Giddens and structuration theory, and then deepened later through my empirical studies and the influence of other practice theorists.

Elizabeth Shove: So, were you thinking about it as practice theory, then?

Wanda Orlikowski: Not explicitly. I was thinking about structuration theory, and certainly practices are core, but I was focused on telling a structuring story, on how structures are produced and reproduced over time. This was in the late eighties. And trying to make sense of structuration theory offered me a way of understanding practices on the ground and linking them to the constitution of structures, including particularly technology structures.

Elizabeth Shove: You've mentioned Giddens as a turning point, and as a significant influence, but you also write quite a lot about Latour. Now, those two don't necessarily go together very often or at least not for many people. Were you deliberately making those connections?

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes. In trying to offer an organizational understanding of technology by drawing on structuration theory, I turned to STS scholarship which was very helpful here. Authors such as McKenzie and Wajcman, Woolgar, Latour, Pinch, and Bijker, and the social construction of technology were all very influential (see Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987).

Elizabeth Shove: There weren't that many other people in organization studies dipping their toes into that kind of writing at that time, so did it feel like you were on your own?

Wanda Orlikowski: It did feel somewhat that way, particularly working in a management school in the States in the nineties. But I found it useful, and I was hoping it would be useful for others as well.

Elizabeth Shove: It looks like it has been!

One of the papers that I really like is when you write about scaffolding (Orlikowski 2006), partly because it crosses between Giddens and Latour, but also because it goes beyond a simple actor network theory take on materiality. You embed technologies in organizations and in infrastructures or wider systems, and you don't simply focus on one technology at a time. For me, you were being quite ambitious, putting together a lot of different narratives in quite a seamless way, and making them palatable for an organization studies' readership. But what happened to the idea of scaffolding? Where did it go?

Wanda Orlikowski: This was around the time where I had become more focused specifically on practice theory.

The Practice Turn book (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny 2001) had come out, and Schatzki's book on *The Site of the Social* (2002) and also Pickering's *The Mangle of Practice* (1995). So, I was reading a lot more about practice theory, but I was still not convinced by the treatment of materiality. The scaffolding paper was an invited piece where I was experimenting with some ideas. And around that time, I encountered Karen Barad's work (see 2007), Lucy Suchman's *Human-Machine Reconfigurations* (2007), and Annemarie Mol's work on the body multiple (2002). And I found those ideas very generative, moving me away from the notion of humans and materiality as interacting but separate, and towards treating them as inseparable and enacted in ongoing practices.

Manuel Baeriswyl: So next, we were wondering about the fact that your papers often start with practice theory and then move on to a specific issue, for example, Lotus Notes (Orlikowski 1993), or hotels and Tripadvisor (Orlikowski and Scott 2014), or communication in organizations. Over the years, the realms of the digital and of work have changed a lot, so how has that fed back into practice theory?

For example, you recently engaged in issues of scale in your 2021 article with Michael Barrett (University of Cambridge) (Barrett and Orlikowski 2021), and also about the current/contemporary ubiquity of the digital.

Wanda Orlikowski: The way I would put it is that I start with phenomena in the world. The theory is an onto-epistemology, so that's always there. But I am interested in empirical phenomena, specifically in technological phenomena and how they are shaping our worlds. And trying to understand how technologies are manifesting in practice in organizations led to empirical studies of different kinds of technologies in different settings. For example, with the work on Lotus Notes (1993), I tried to study across multiple settings to see if there were thematic ideas and theoretical framings that would travel, that would help make sense of commonalities and differences in technologies-in-practice.

And as the digital has become ubiquitous in everyday life, it is also increasingly distributed and removed from the realm of the observable. I think this creates challenges for practice scholars attempting to interrogate practices that are so deeply entangled with algorithms, data, and platforms that are operating unknown and unseen behind our backs.

The interest in digital work has now led to research that I've been doing with my collaborator Susan Scott (Imperial College) where we examine a phenomenon we refer to as the 'digital undertow' (Orlikowski and Scott 2023). This is an attempt to come to grips with novel materializations manifesting as corollary effects of digitalization that we find are indirectly displacing institutional apparatuses in practice.

Elizabeth Shove: Can I just interrupt you? It's not my turn, but I'm taking it anyway.

I'm interested in how this has flipped back into practice theory. You're talking about the methodological challenges of following the dynamics of something that you can't see or touch, as you say, the digital world has changed massively in the time that you've been looking at it, so has the world of work. So, if you flip the problem around and say, "what does that mean for theories of practice?" some of this must go beyond Latour and Giddens, so what specific challenges do these trends present for social theories of practice. Are there theoretical problems that you didn't expect?

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes. Sometime in the early-2000s, I was engaged in a couple of empirical studies trying to understand virtual worlds, and doing so with my toolkit of structuration theory, practice theory, scaffolding, and other ideas. But it was not working.

It seemed that empirically the digital phenomena had shifted in ways that overflowed the possibilities of my theoretical toolkit to understand. So, I looked for new tools. And that's when I found the work of Lucy Suchman, Annemarie Mol, and Karen Barad to usefully connect with both the phenomena I was trying to explain, and with a practice ontology.

But the challenges for practice theory of how to study distributed and unobservable digital phenomena will continue as we try and understand AI and machine learning and large language models.

Coming back to Manuel's question, the piece I wrote with Michael Barrett on scale was really motivated because we kept hearing over and over again "well, you practice scholars can't really speak to scale". So, it was our attempt to say "hang on"...

Elizabeth Shove: "Of course we can!"

Wanda Orlikowski: "How else do you think the social world manifests?" We tried to argue for understanding large-scale systems in terms of what's happening on the ground and how larger configurations are enacted as a result of ongoing collective practices.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Before we move on, have we missed any other important influences?

Wanda Orlikowski: As noted, an important theoretical influence has been Karen Barad's work on agential realism. And drawing on that to try and understand empirically the phenomenon of the digital undertow that Susan Scott and I are finding to be related to institutional displacement.

Manuel Baeriswyl: I think we can move on to specific texts. So, the first one we were interested in was your 1996 paper 'Improvising Organizational Transformation Over Time: A Situated Change Perspective' (Orlikowski 1996). In this paper, the key idea is that change is both situated and ongoing. You work with the metaphor of theoretical improvisation and the notion of metamorphosis, so how did you go about making your case in this article? And why were you talking about change at that moment?

Wanda Orlikowski: It was shaped by the phenomenon I was researching. I had previously done a study of the implementation of Lotus Notes in a large consulting firm where little had changed despite broad visions for the technology. The IT department had deployed thousands of copies of Lotus Notes, but it hadn't been taken up by the consultants and wasn't used much. When I studied the Zeta Corporation and their customer support department, I found interesting differences, where the staff were actively trying to change how they worked by taking up Lotus Notes.

As a structurational scholar at that time (this was the mid-nineties), I was interested in understanding how those technological changes manifested in everyday practice. I studied this process at Zeta over two years, and what I observed were ongoing, incremental shifts, subtle shifts in how people worked, and in the structures that were being enacted. And that's what I tried to articulate with the notion of metamorphosis.

I'm an Escher fan and had had a print of his Metamorphosis II up on my wall at some point.[1] It had always struck me as a very interesting depiction of subtle but powerful shifts that at every moment seem slight, but that, over time become quite consequential. So, I used that as a visual metaphor to describe changes in the everyday practices of the workers at Zeta.

That's why I wrote about situated and ongoing change, because that's what I had observed. I was also trying to argue for the value of attending to gradual incremental changes because the dominant views of change in organizational theory at the time were technological determinism, punctuated equilibrium, or planned change. And none of those could explain what I was seeing.

Manuel Baeriswyl: And so, we're wondering, because of the way you describe it in your 2011 paper 'Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory' (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011), that as practice theory started at the background and came more to the foreground of your research, and probably interests, if that was your own sort of practice turn around these times as well?

[1] M. C. Escher is a Dutch artist who created Metamorphosis II. The art piece depicts an abstract patterned image undergoing several metamorphoses into different patterns of shapes and colors.

Wanda Orlikowski: After I finished the Zeta study, I contrasted my findings with those of the consulting organization that had introduced the same technology with very little change on the ground. And that became my 2000 paper 'Using Technology and Constituting Structures: A Practice Lens for Studying Technology in Organizations' (Orlikowski 2000). I was still using structuration theory but looking for ways to think differently about technology structures.

I think the piece that was most influential to me at that time was Jean Lave's *Cognition in Practice* (1988). It powerfully articulated that important move of taking seriously the "*in practice*"! And then I read more, for example, Edwin Hutchins and others who have done interesting work on distributed cognition (see Hutchins 1995). So, yes, perhaps that 2000 paper was my practice turn, as I was trying to work out what it might mean to think about technology structures as more thoroughly "in practice".

Elizabeth Shove: This is just what we were hoping for in that you are describing how your academic life is woven into a history of ideas. Your position in a management school and in organization studies is also relevant when you talk about the role of empirical research, but to go back to the 2000 article, lots of people have read it, so do you have a sense of what they're getting from it, and of what your contribution has been?

Wanda Orlikowski: There have been others who have taken these ideas and moved them forward, and I hope what they're taking from it is a way of thinking about technology in use as something that is enacted in practice and varies across settings.

Elizabeth Shove: There's definitely a split between the language of users and uses of technology on the one hand, and a version of practice theory that wouldn't separate the user and the technology. You are not exactly having your cake and eating it, but in that 2000 paper some of your sentences point in different directions. So, was that part of working out where you stood, or were you appealing to the user camp? What were you doing with that hybrid language?

Wanda Orlikowski: I think the whole notion of user and use is a perennial problem in my field.

Elizabeth Shove: Yes.

Wanda Orlikowski: It is the language that has been in place from the early information system studies, probably back in the sixties, as a shorthand for what humans do with technology. And there is a discomfort in using that language. But I believe the challenge remains. I'm still struggling to know exactly...

Elizabeth Shove: You mean what kind of language are you supposed to use? If you can't use 'users'...

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes!

Elizabeth Shove: I think you are right, it's an ongoing issue. I mean, even now you're writing about 'users' and so are other people. In that sense practice theory hasn't had a turn. It hasn't done away with that vocabulary, yet the language of scripting does seem to have taken hold.

Wanda Orlikowski: In that 2000 paper, I did make a specific move away from inscribed and appropriated structures to emergent and enacted structures. And that came directly from Jean Lave's work on cognition in practice and led to the work on knowing in practice (Orlikowski 2002).

Elizabeth Shove: Yeah.

Wanda Orlikowski: I think people's lived experience is often one of being a "user" and of being subject to whatever the digital platforms and algorithms are doing. I think it is a challenge in organization studies that we don't have effective language to articulate this experience of entanglement and performativity.

Elizabeth Shove: The practice of practice theory! Now we've got a few questions looking across your career and thinking about what have turned out to be the main themes. You said technology at work, and how to account for materiality.

Manuel Baeriswyl: On the first point, it is clear that your work is empirically driven, and that your main concern is not the practice ontology, but how to inform further empirical cases.

Wanda Orlikowski: Situated within a school of management, in an organization studies and information technologies group, my work is shaped in part by those kinds of phenomena. The practice ontology is crucial. It is the way I understand the world and how I understand digital phenomena. Empirically, I am interested in studying what's happening in the world of organizations. And to be able to inform students about how to think about these new digital phenomena, and to give them some ways of engaging with these phenomena that may be helpful.

Elizabeth Shove: Okay. To press on, you've written a lot about organizations, technologies and practices, so what kind of itches do you have, and what would you like to be better understood, or better studied?

Wanda Orlikowski: Well, there is some frustration with the sorts of analyses that continue to treat digital technologies as fixed entities that we interact with. And I don't know how we make sense of the worlds we live in today if we take that view.

I think what is important is developing a more subtle set of tools to understand the dynamic, mutable, inscrutable phenomena that we are all entangled with.

Elizabeth Shove: But it's funny, isn't it, that there is also an outpouring of work on so called strategy as practice, entrepreneurship as practice. You just need to stick "as practice" on anything.

Wanda Orlikowski: Yes.

Elizabeth Shove: So. what's going on there?

Wanda Orlikowski: Well on the one hand, I think it is really encouraging that people are taking practice seriously. For scholars in strategy and entrepreneurship to recognize the importance of attending to what people do every day is, I think, really welcome and generative. You mentioned the piece I wrote with Martha Feldman in 2011, and the distinctions we make among practice as philosophy, theory, and empirics. Those distinctions were based on a chapter I had done for the Handbook on strategy as practice (Orlikowski 2010).

While welcoming the attention to strategy and practice, I felt people were muddying the waters a bit, for example, describing their studies of practitioners at work as practice theory, but theorizing their findings in different ways. I wanted to articulate some possibilities for different ways of doing strategy as practice in relation to philosophical and theoretical practice commitments.

Elizabeth Shove: One last question, do you think there's a place for this new journal? I mean, we're going to do it anyway, but it's such an interdisciplinary field.

What do you think about it?

Wanda Orlikowski: I think it is important. I think it will be really helpful to see the extent of the wider practice community, and the interdisciplinary influences, and the different questions that people are asking with the same commitment to practice. I think that it could be very generative.

Elizabeth Shove: Well, that's good to hear. It's great to have you as part of the adventure!

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The Subjects of Practices: An Invited Response to the Question: 'What is the Significance of the Human Being in Practice Theories?'

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Abstract

This paper considers the significance of people within practice theory, arguing that they do not merely participate in practices as unspecified individuals but assume specific subject forms through which they develop a practice-related subjectivity. In contrast to both the Cartesian notion of an autonomous subject and its dissolution in holistic accounts of practice, the article proposes a relational understanding of subjectivity as a constitutively conditioned capacity to act. Drawing on Bourdieu, Giddens, Schatzki, Leont'ev, and the concept of subjectivation, it shows how subjects and practices co-constitute one another as transformative processes. Practices are not only structured patterns of action but, following Leont'ev, motivated and meaningful activities oriented toward an 'objectivity' ('gegenständlichkeit') in the world. They thus include the embodied, reflexive capacities of participants. Material artefacts and infrastructures are seen as enabling or constraining such agency. The article illustrates this dynamic through the historical emergence of the 'Fosbury Flop' in high jumping, showing how innovation arises from socio-material constellations rather than autonomous creativity. People appear as active, reflective moments within practice, whose constitutively conditioned subjectivity enables critique, transformation, and the creation of something new.

Keywords

co-constitution of practices and subjects; objectivity ('gegenständlichkeit') of practice; subjectivation; transformation

Introduction

In this article, I unfold the assumption that people do not simply participate in practices as unspecified human beings, but that they take on certain forms in practices, which I refer to as subject forms. The argument is that within and across these forms, they develop a subjectivity that not only allows them to engage and participate in practices, but also to respond reflexively towards their demands. In order to understand the significance of this initial assumption in the field of practice theories, it is necessary to first delineate the basic outlines of this field.

The field of practice theories resembles a family (cf. Schatzki 2016, 29). Their members are similar in that they do not explain social phenomena through the autonomous actions of individuals or by simply following predetermined structures. Instead, they are interested in how social orders are created, maintained, and transformed in collective social practice. In doing so, they make it clear that people do not act alone - other living beings, environmental conditions, objects, tools, technologies and symbols also play a constitutive role.

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However, in our view (e.g. Alkemeyer et al. 2016), the claim of practice theory to formulate a sociology of practice beyond action theory (individualism) and structuralism (holism) has so far only been partially realised. In our opinion, the practice-theoretical debate continues to operate within the framework of the well-known alternative of whether social practice constitutes its actors or whether it is based on the activities of predetermined individualities.

Accordingly, the practice-theoretical universe of discourse can be sorted according to whether praxeological observation focuses primarily on the actions performed by actors or on the forms of practice and routines that determine these actions.

Against this background, this article aims to outline a conception of subjectivity within the praxeological paradigm that neither aligns with the "Cartesian figure of an autonomous, self-transparent subject…" (Alkemeyer et al. 2015, 12) nor reduces subjectivity to being primarily formed in practices (Reckwitz 2006). In the practice-theoretical universe of discourse, subjectivity and all the attributes traditionally associated with this term - intellectual perspectives, reflection, the potential for self-determination, and critique - are provocative words, as they seem to mark the return of the sovereign, self-conscious subject of the idealist tradition. However, rather than eliminating these terms entirely from theory and thereby losing touch with the problem complexes they articulate, my aim is to show ways in which they can be incorporated into the subject-critical perspective of contemporary practice theories.

To this end, I proceed as follows: In the first step, I critically examine prominent approaches to a contemporary sociology of practices that tend to dissolve subjectivity in practices (1). Against this background, I turn to various practice-theoretical approaches spanning the holistic and individualistic ends of the field to consider how each might contribute to a conception of subjective agency that is constitutively shaped by the materiality of practices (2). This critical review deals with the practice-theoretical 'master theories' of Bourdieu and Giddens (2.1); Schatzki's conception of the relationship between practices and people (2.2); the activity theory of the cultural-historical school in its formulation by Leont'ev (2.3), and the concept of subjectivation and self-formation in practices (2.4) developed in Oldenburg research contexts, among others, which is supplemented here by considerations regarding the role of things in the formation of subjective agency (2.5). The role that this subjectivity plays in the emergence of new practices will then be outlined (3). A brief summary concludes the article.

1. Questions to the Contemporary Sociology of Practices

At present, the pendulum of the practice-theoretical discussion seems to be swinging towards a holistic view of individual actions and the subjectivity of actors. This is exemplified by a sociology of *practices* (instead of *praxis*), which considers practices, rather than individuals and their actions, as the primary units of sociological analysis. This theory understands practices as recurring patterns of activities that are primarily stabilised by unwritten rules of behaviour, implicit knowledge (routines), and material arrangements (Schatzki 2002; Reckwitz 2003; Schmidt 2012). Strong formulations of this sociology identify these patterns as units that 'recruit' things and people as their carriers and structure individual action, thinking and feeling (Shove et al. 2012; Shove and Pantzar 2016). Inspired by post-structuralism, some family members also examine this process as a process of *subjectivation* (e.g. Reckwitz 2006). It positions individuals in a discursively and materially pre-stabilised order in such a way that they become this order's *subjects* in the sense of *accomplices* who actively support the order because they owe their recognition as capable and accountable subjects to their 'submission' to this order. In this view, the order does not assert itself against the individual, but through the individual.[1]

A sociology of *practices* thus emphasises the unity and continuity of the historically changeable forms that social *practice* acquires (Giddens 1979, 216), and highlights the fitting of things, people, and activities into these forms. The current boom in this approach can be explained above all in terms of theoretical history and politics: it is an expression of a critique of the image of the modern, sovereign subject of action that has been articulated for decades. This image not only dominates *the folk theories* of everyday life but is also reflected in the ontological and methodological individualism of sociological theories of action. In that "theorists of practice deny that they are individualists" (Schatzki 2017, 26) and that they describe society

[1] Subjectivation theory approaches mediate the opposing meanings of the word 'subject' as 'the subject' on the one hand and an individual, that is subjected to external circumstances, on the other hand. Taken together, the subject in this view refers to an individual who willingly submits to a given order.

not from the perspective of individuals but on the basis of practices, they explicitly enact an 'epistemological break' (Bourdieu et al. 1991) with this image. *Terminologically*, this break manifests itself, among other things, in describing individuals not as actors but as 'participants' (Hirschauer 2004) - a term that explicitly avoids the action-theoretical focus on individual intentionality and casts participation not as proactive action but as passive involvement. *Methodologically*, it is realised in an overview perspective on practice, whose benefits consist in being able to identify recurring patterns of action and socio-material constellations made up of people and things across situations. However, this benefit comes at a price. This is because it obscures the fact that people also have something substantial to contribute to the course and quality of a practice, that they engage in a practice with more or less commitment and motivation, and that they have to make all kinds of efforts to set a practice in motion, keep it running, cope with unforeseen events, or assert their own interests. This also applies to the view of the individual as 'the unique crossing point' (Reckwitz 2002, 256; cited from Warde 2017, 94) of "a plurality of practices…" (Warde 2017, 95) that they are the carriers of. This view is also limited insofar as it accounts for the individuality of performing a practice merely as the outcome of a 'personal trajectory within practices' (Warde 2017, 96), which can only be discerned from a bird's-eye perspective. However, the meaning of a practice for an agent, the specificity, intensity, and degree of personal engagement cannot be understood from this perspective.[2] "Theories of practice…", Schatzki (2017, 26) summarises accordingly, "… have said much about practices […] but relatively little about people".

This imbalance can only be remedied if the sociological observer leaves his or her vantage point and enters the 'melee' of practice – as proposed at the other, more individualistic pole of the practice-theoretical discourse universe, for example by ethnomethodology or studies of work, in order to understand how people produce local realities through their everyday interactions and to become aware with all senses of the demands, expectations, problems, and possibilities to which they are exposed in the process.[3] Only an immersive - participatory or 'enactive' (Wacquant 2015) - ethnography reveals that practices are often experienced by participants as conflictual, contradictory, and confusing, and that they challenge each participant in distinctive ways. From this approach, practices come into view as a dynamic structure of conflicting perspectives that does not teleologically amount to success or the reproduction of the existing circumstances. However, from an internal perspective, the trans-situational patterns that structure situated action fade in exactly the opposite direction to the external view.

2. The People in Central Approaches of Practice Theory

The following chapter focuses on the conception (of actions) of people in a total of five approaches to practice theory that I consider central to this question. I deal with the similarities and differences in the 'master theories' of Bourdieu and Giddens in the first section.

2.1 The Structures and Actions of the Actors in the 'Master Theories' of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens

The current sociology of practices tends to fall back on structuralist thinking by conceptualising practices as regular occurrences that recruit and shape their participants and produce them as 'their' subjects. Its secret structuralism is countered by individualistic tendencies, particularly in phenomenologically inspired versions of practice theory. Pierre Bourdieu's and Anthony Giddens' social theories, which have been influential in recent practice sociology, have already claimed to eliminate the one-sidedness of both the structuralist (holistic) and the subjectivist (individualist) paradigms in a new, third paradigm. *Bourdieu* describes social practice as a social *game* characterised by interests and strategies, in which structures, processes, and game activities constitutively determine each other, and methodologically postulates a constant change between bird's-eye and frog's-eye perspectives in order to make the co-constitution of structures, actions and actors observable (Bourdieu [1989] 1993, 42-3). However, Bourdieu's macro-sociological focus on the reproduction of social

[2] At least Alan Warde shows a stronger interest in individual action than many other practice theorists. Similar to Bourdieu, he explains individual action as the encounter of individually incorporated dispositions with contextual conditions that trigger these dispositions because they are recognised as situational demands. Warde also points out that individuals acquire a repertoire of different techniques through learning, which enable them to perform a practice in alternative ways. Like Bourdieu, however, Warde also attributes greater significance to the 'automatic', routine dimensions of individual action in practice than to mind, consciousness, and reflection (see also below, section 2.1).

[3] For the following attempt at classification, see in particular the excellent dissertation by Matthias Michaeler (2025).

inequality ultimately leads to a certain one-sidedness. In contrast to his Algerian studies (Bourdieu 2013), which are primarily dedicated to the discrepancy between social reality and habitus, his sociology of 'modern' French society (Bourdieu [1979] 1984) draws a detailed picture of a largely harmonious interaction between habitus and field, i.e. between incorporated and objectified social structure, in which both sides primarily stabilise each other.

In contrast, Anthony *Giddens*' structuration theory (1979, 1984) paints a more open picture of the interrelationship between structure and action. Even the term 'structuration', which gives his theory its name, explicitly identifies structures as regularities that only take shape in social practice. Accordingly, in his theory, people appear less as *agents*[4] of the social structures they incorporate than as *actors* who also reflexively control their actions and consciously influence the conditions under which they act.

Both approaches thus share the ambition of thinking about structure and action non-dualistically but differ in their emphasis, either on social reproduction or on reflexivity. Bourdieu's praxeology focuses on the routines and everyday mechanisms that reproduce social order. Giddens' structuration theory, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the actors' "capacity for reflective monitoring of performance..." (Warde 2017, 140) and their capability to consciously observe, interpret, and direct their actions. Thus, while Bourdieu stresses the constitutive conditioning of action by the structural 'logic' of practice, Giddens treats people rather as the actual source of practice.

2.2 'Practices and People' by Theodore Schatzki

In order to overcome the one-sidedness of previous approaches, i.e. to treat neither the practices nor the people as principles that ground the practice, Schatzki (2017) has recently presented a conceptualisation of the relationship between 'practices and people' that emphasises the 'equifundamentality' of both sides: "no people, no practices; but, equally, no practices, no people..." (Schatzki 2017, 28). According to this, practices and people are distinct but equally important "organizing principles" (2017) of practice: practices structure action, and people shape the concrete course of practice. Schatzki thus ascribes to them an *agency of* their own that shapes or changes the practice, instead of reducing them to mere distillations, condensations, carriers, or recruits "from practices" (28).

This approach points in the direction that I also have in mind. In my view, however, the concepts of 'equifundamentality' and 'mutual dependence' need to be clarified in more detail. In my understanding, Schatzki treats both sides - practices and people - as entities that already exist independently of each other before they come together and then influence each other when they meet: on the one hand, there is a "plenum of practices" (Schatzki 2017, 26), and on the other hand, there are people who bring their individual properties – experiences, knowledge, skills, feelings, motives, etc. – into the practice. This conceptualisation is catchy, but it avoids two problems. Firstly, it bypasses the 'objective' and 'subjective' conditions under which *practices* and *people* come together in the first place. And secondly, it neglects how the individual properties of people are formed into a *specific agency* under the respective conditions of a practice, thereby giving the practice they perform a specific form, i.e., how both sides constitute each other as concrete realities in practice.

Bourdieu addresses the first point with his question of the fit between field-specific requirements and habitus-shaped dispositions: Which subjectively incorporated dispositions resonate with which objectively materialised (field) conditions? The second point aims at the question of how the incorporated dispositions in a practice are organised in such a way that they become an inner moment of the practice itself. Answering this question is a prerequisite for perceiving practices and people as mutually constitutive rather than as pre-practically, presupposed realities. This would also have categorical consequences. Practices would then not only be structured connections of activities (doings) but would also include the embodied *agency* of their practitioners. These in turn would no longer appear unspecifically as people, but as concrete *subjects of action* whose dispositions take on a form characteristic of the respective practice.[5]

[4] In the sense of persons who only fulfil certain functions.

[5] This question also addresses Alan Warde's (2017) understanding of the relationship between practices and their agents. Although Warde emphasises the significance that individuals - understood with Reckwitz as 'unique crossing points of practices' - have for the concrete formation of a practice due to their particular commitment to it, his conception of the relationship between practices and their agents remains one-sided: "Activity generates wants, rather than vice versa..." (Warde 2017, 137). As we will see in the next section, Leont'ev - following Marx - understands the relationship between activities and wants to be mutually constitutive: activities create wants, which create new activities, and so on.

An example from sport may illustrate this. The practice of goalkeeping requires a handball goalkeeper to focus the physical, emotional, and cognitive abilities acquired through socialisation, practice, and training on the goal - Schatzki (2002) refers to this as a 'teleoaffective structure' - of blocking an oncoming ball. An organism that is not tuned accordingly would instinctively avoid the ball instead of reflexively throwing itself towards it. Conversely, the actions resulting from this orientation contribute to the concrete embodiment of the teleoaffective structure of the practice. Practice and actor mutually in-form[6] each other over the course of time, and the actor, thus brought into form, is an integral moment of the practice without, however, dissolving into it.

2.3 The Intertwining of Objectivity ("Gegenständlichkeit") and Subjectivity in The Theory Of Activity[7] ("Tätigkeitstheorie")

It is the theory of culturally and historically mediated activity that pays particular attention to this idea.[8] One of its central features is that the materiality of the social world is not regarded as a limit to the 'Willkür-Freiheit' (arbitrary freedom) (Schürmann 2022) of an autonomously conceived subject, but rather as the *objectivity* ('Gegenständlichkeit') of an action.[9] "Analogous to phenomenological 'intentionality' (Schürmann 2022, 77), this objectivity orients individual doings and constitutes them as *meaningful* action by determining whether X (e.g. running after someone) or Y (e.g. running a race) is done. It is therefore nothing physical, but "the determinacy of action..." (Schürmann 2022, 77), its "actual motive..." (Leont'ev [1975] 1978, 95, cited in Schürmann 2022, 77).[10] This logic of determinacy differs diametrically from the action-theoretical logic of intentionality. While action theories recognise "only two explanatory instances..." - the intention to act and the material circumstances that enable or restrict action (Schürmann 2014, 218) - activity theory understands the material conditions as the "determinations of the intention itself..." (Schürmann 2014, 218; see also Schürmann 2022, 72). Accordingly, they motivate and orient the motor, perceptual, and cognitive activities of the actors, which thus take the form of a 'Mit-Wissen' (co-knowledge) (Leont'ev [1975] 1978, cited in Michaeler 2025, 207) bound by the activity.[11] With this insight into the objectivity of activities, activity theory also overcomes the distinction still invoked in practice theories between the normality of routines on the one hand and conscious reflection on one's own actions in cases where the routine does not work on the other. In terms of activity theory, these are modalities of action that are inextricably interwoven in their common orientation towards the object of an activity and that constantly merge into one another. That is, for activity theory, the hour of conscious (metapragmatic) reflection does not only strike when routines are irritated.[12] Rather, consciousness is continuously involved in action - not, however, as in Giddens, for example, as a personal consciousness, but as a consciousness *bound by* the objectivity of the activity (Michaeler 2025, 139).

This does not, however, mean that participants' actions are always unanimous. This is because the subject matter in question generally has a different meaning for them.[13] It is the common point of reference for different or differently interested perspectives and, as such, enables "cooperation without consensus..." (Star and Griesemer [1989] 2017, cited in Retterath 2024, 350), in which the differences remain silent or are actively de-thematised.[14] However, these can break out at any time during the activity and lead to conflicts that must then be dealt with by the participants.

[6] As Kalthoff (2008, 10) explains in reference to Heidegger, in-forming means as much as instructing and shaping. A reciprocal in-formation means that no side remains as it was.

[7] Activity theory distinguishes between three levels of practice: 1. *Activity* is the overarching unit of human practice. It is determined by a supra-individual motive (e.g. vocational training). 2. *Actions* are part of an activity. They are directed toward a specific end ("What do I want to achieve?"). 3. *Operations* are the concrete ways in which an action is performed. This three-way division is strictly analytical. In reality, the levels often merge. For example, when an action becomes habitual, it turns into an operation: shifting gears when learning to drive is initially a conscious action, and later it becomes an automated operation.

[8] Nicolini (2012) is one of the exceptions.

[9] In activity theory, 'objectivity' does not mean that an action is directed at or influenced by an object. Rather, human activity is always objective for Leont'ev insofar as it is directed at something in the world that lies outside the subject and is transformed by the activity.

[10] Activity and practice are therefore different perspectives of the same process: *activity* marks "the object or the determinacy of a personal action...", practice marks "the object or the determinacy of the same personal action in the perspective of what one typically does, i.e. oriented by a basic idea, formulated in *social meanings*..." (Schürmann 2022, 81) and not *in a personal sense*. *Actions* are related to this personal sense, which in turn require certain *operations* in order to take place. The level of organisation of a personal action depends on the context. For example, throwing a handball in a competition can be an operation, but when practising, it becomes an activity. For more details on the distinctions between objective meaning, personal meaning, activities, actions, and operations, see Schürmann 2022.

[11] Bühler ([1989] 1999) calls this knowledge 'empractic'.

[12] As, for example, Bourdieu sees it, with the consequence of reproducing the dualism of body and mind in contradiction to his own intention.

[13] While meaning marks the "supra-individual aggregate state of the object of action...", sense, on the other hand, denotes "the individual aggregate state of the object of action..." (Schürmann 2024, p. 78).

[14] Star and Griesemer ([1989] 2017) refer to such objects as 'boundary objects'.

In terms of activity theory, people are therefore neither mere executors of practices nor autonomous subjects, but agents whose power and freedom are bound by the objectivity of the activity. They have to commit to the activity, and they themselves transform it while structuring and restructuring it through their actions - a dialectical 'inter-formation' of activity, action, agency, and actors. This also means that neither practices nor their actors are static entities. Rather, they form and transform each other in a contingent, ongoing process. Thus, they are not only co-present, but processually entangled – they exist in a mode of becoming, with the constitutive possibility of becoming something else. "The internal (subject)..." writes Leont'ev ([1975] 1978, 111), "acts through the external and this in itself changes him." And further:

> "This position has a completely real sense. After all, the subject of life initially appears only as possessing, to use Engels' expression, 'an independent power of reaction'. Yet this power can act only through the 'external', i.e., through 'its transition from the potential to the actual', in which it becomes concrete, develops, and enriches itself. In this sense, the changes brought about by the subject's power of reaction are always 'a transformation also of its carrier, the subject himself'. (Leont'ev ([1975] 1978, 111)

Leont'ev's subject is therefore a subject that transforms itself by (trans-)forming the world. Precisely as such a formed and continuously transforming, fluid subject, it refracts the "external influences" (111) to which it is subject.[15]

2.4 Subjectivation Through, In and Between Practices

In our Oldenburg research contexts, we have conceptualised the formation of a materially conditioned agency in the sense above as *subjectivation* (e.g. Alkemeyer et al. 2013; Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2016). The concept comprises four interlinked dimensions:

1. The formation of specific dispositions;
2. The adaptation to social norms and values;
3. The acquisition of the power to react reflexively towards the conditions to which one owes recognition as an accountable subject of action;
4. The historicity and changeability of the form of a subjectivity characterised by intentionality, accountability, and autonomy.

With this understanding of subjectivation, subjects of action are not only, as in most power-critical adaptations of poststructuralist thought, "collections of subject positions, [as] crossing points of discourses (or of practices), or [as] nodes in relations..." (Schatzki 2017, 41), but rather co-players who can make the social and material conditions of their "ability to play along..." (Brümmer 2015) the object of reflection, critique, and transformation. As such, they escape the contradiction between heteronomy and autonomy. According to Marx they:

> *"make their own history, but not just as they please. They do not choose the circumstances for themselves, but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past."* (Marx [1852] 1943, 23)

In social practice, they (subjects of action) appropriate the existing circumstances and make them part of themselves. Bourdieu refers to the incorporated circumstances as habitus. However, in order to focus more clearly than Bourdieu on the practice-and situation-relatedness of the making of history and self, we explicitly understand habitus not as a compact and

[15] Within the current discussion of practice theory, Leont'ev's conception of activity seems to converge most strongly with Joseph Rouse's (2007) thinking on practice. Rouse also does not view practices as being governed by rules or regularities, but rather as a process that arises from the mutual relationship between single performances. Similar to Leont'ev's activity, a practice in Rouse's view is characterised by the fact that these performances are not mere reactions, but are oriented toward something- a topic, a question, a problem whose answer is not yet certain, i.e., something "what is at issue and at stake..." (Rouse 2007, 5) - in Leont'ev's words, to an objectivity. Actors are embedded in this process and, as such, are involved in its further development and direction, although, in my view, to a lesser extent than in Leont'ev's theory. However, Rouse reflects more strongly than Leont'ev on the temporality and thus contingency of practice - performances respond to earlier ones and are directed toward future performances with an open outcome - as well as on their implicit normativity, which unfolds over time. Practices are "constituted by the mutual accountability of their performances..." (1). This means that every performance is subject to an evaluation of whether it is "correct or incorrect, just or unjust, appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong, and the like..." (3) in relation to the practice performed. Against this background, synthesising Leont'ev's activity theory with Rouse's practice theory would be a worthwhile endeavour that could likely lead to a deeper understanding of the temporal co-constitution of subjectivity and practices.

fixed entity, but rather as a collection of heterogeneous (mental, perceptual, cognitive, affective, motor, etc.) embodied dispositions that are selectively activated and formed depending on the object of an activity.

In one activity, *these* dispositions take the centre stage, while in another, *those* dispositions take on a form determined by the respective activity; meanwhile, other dispositions remain in the background.

However, dispositions can emerge surprisingly from the background at any time – triggered by a gesture, an object, a constellation of people and things, an atmosphere. A drastic case would be the situational invocation of a racial trauma through the verbal or gestural expression of another person; in less drastic cases, memories of private matters, for example, intervene irritatingly in the performance of a public or professional activity. However, such an 'appearance' of inappropriate dispositions does not necessarily have to manifest itself as insecurity, but can also have a positive outcome – for example, if one is suddenly enabled to do something (a movement, a figure of speech, an idea, etc.) in the collectivity of a practice that one has never been able to do before.

In all these cases, the subject of action is surprised by itself and realises that there is something in it that is beyond its control – a kind of individual 'character' (Koßler 2015) that is formed in the trajectory of its life.[16] Such a character is not the mere sum of the dispositions that an individual 'accumulates' over the course of their life as a subject of action in various practices, but rather a supersummative form of a new quality. This character ensures that a subject of action does not completely dissolve into the practice it is currently performing. Rather, it enables the subject to retain a relative autonomy in relation to that practice. Seen in this way, 'character' refers to the trans-situational imprint of a 'subject' that is not identical with what I have previously referred to as a 'subject of action'. This character is not formed in individual practices but emerges across the heterogeneous practices of different social fields and forms of life (Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2017b). Its emergence thus has a historical index insofar as it is subject to the conditions of a 'modern' society that is differentiated into relatively autonomous fields. The conditions of this society confront the subjects of action with the need to assert themselves as a person in different contexts (Renn 2016, 189) and to independently bridge the ruptures that this society establishes in their habitus (Krais 1993, 220).

2.5 Enabling and Disabling – The Role of Things

As part of their criticism of the mentalism of competing approaches, practice theories emphasise the involvement of things and material infrastructures in practices. From this perspective, things are also involved in the constitution of subjective agency. In the current practice-theoretical discussion, they are mainly discussed as offers that guarantee or at least suggest a certain use - like railings on which action can be based (e.g. Hirschauer 2016, 52; Schmidt and Volbers 2011). Sometimes this supporting function is also attributed to symbolic infrastructures such as language, discourses (Hirschauer 2016) or websites (Retterath 2024, 89). By taking into consideration the materiality of practices, practice theories overlap with approaches of the so-called New Materialism according to Latour (e.g. [1999] 2004) or Barad (2007) as well as Science and Technology Studies (STS).

From a praxeological perspective, however, the new materialisms raise a problem when they understand processes of meaning as a separate (non-material?) dimension of the social, which only materialises in its interconnection with material entities or physical arrangements (cf. Schürmann 2021, pp. 49).[17] In contrast, practice theories are cultural sociologies (Reckwitz 2003) in the sense that they understand practices *eo ipso* as particular, i.e., "this-and-not-that…" (Schürmann 2021, p. 50) kind of performances of action. Otherwise, they would not be practices, but mere behaviour. Most practice theories take this into account in the wake of Wittgenstein. However, activity theory further clarifies this insight into the meaningfulness of practices by linking meaning to the objectivity of an activity, i.e., by seeing the activity as driven by a motive and the actions performed within the framework of the activity as determined by a (perspective-bound) sense. Activity theory can thus make it particularly clear why individuals are motivated to actively engage in an activity as its subjects.

[16] With the concept of 'character', Koßler emphasises that people do not merely merge into abstract (functional) subject positions or play roles as *personae* when engaging in practices but also lend a special imprint to a practice due to the distinctiveness of their personal features, as formed in their life experience.

[17] Although Shove et al. (2012) understand practices as meaningful processes, this view is also echoed in their terminological differentiation between materialities, meanings, and competencies, as well as in their endeavour to study the transformation of practices as reconfigurations of these three dimensions.

Other terms used in the practice-theoretical discourse universe to designate the things at play, such as '*usage suggestion[s]*' (Hirschauer 2016, 52), 'object meaning' (Holzkamp 1976, 25) or - originating from the psychology of perception – 'affordance' (Gibson [1979] 2014), imply that things have a meaning for the subjects of action. However, they do not acquire this meaning on their own, but only in the relationship structure of the practice in which they participate. For example, a hurdle has a different meaning for a hurdler in a competition than it does in practice and training – in the first case, crossing the hurdle is a subordinate operation to the goal or motive of the activity, in the second case it is the object of the activity itself (see footnote 6) -, a biomechanic observes the movements of the body in his research practices from a different perspective than a sociologist using an ethnographic approach, practitioners elicit different uses from urban furniture when skateboarding than when shopping, or the computer takes on a different meaning when gaming than when writing an academic article. What all these examples have in common is that the things and the subjects of action must (a) be connectable and disposed to each other and (b) be adjusted to each other through the teleoaffective structure of the practice so that a relationship appropriate to the practice can be established between them. In the reflexive reference to the framework of meaning of the practice (hurdling, research, etc.), both sides then in-form each other. The action lends the thing a meaning typical of the practice and the thing, which in practice reveals itself to the subject of action as precisely *this* object, conversely models the action.[18]

The establishment of a practical relationship between people and things is, therefore, presuppositional; it is based on learning processes. Leont'ev ([1959] 1981, 298) describes the coming together of people and things using the example of learning to use a spoon. Due to its material properties, a spoon is better suited to eating soup than a fork or a knife. Nevertheless, the learning child initially encounters it as a stubborn object. It is only through repeated practice that the spoon and the child come together. The child's motor, perceptual, and cognitive dispositions adapt to the material properties of the spoon, and the child develops the object meaning of the spoon through the practice of handling it and gradually integrates it into its sense of self; for the child, the spoon changes from an 'available' object into an 'accessible' thing to handle (Heidegger [1927] 2010). This process is normatively regulated – on the one hand by the conventions of (soup) eating already materialised in the object, and on the other hand by the supportive and corrective, physical and verbal interventions of caregivers. For the child, it means acquiring competence that increases their independence. The child acquires an ability to act that is conditioned in material, symbolic, and normative ways and that not only gradually allows them to eat soup in a socially recognised way, but also to imprint their own character on the practice of eating soup or even to consciously violate the etiquette.

However, things never completely lose their availability; instead, they can reassert themselves at any time as a source of disturbance. Furthermore, materialities not only participate in practices as functional instruments, but can also appear as media for thinking, designing and imagining. Malafouris (2014) has found a beautiful formulation for this: 'creative thinging'. In practical interaction, the subject of action experiences and explores the material properties and the potential for (re) design that an object has for them. In this process, projects of what could be done with or from them can emerge[19] - an *imaginary* dimension of practice that goes beyond the tried and tested, the known and familiar, which remains underexposed in a sociology of practices that is primarily interested in the stabilising function of things.

We propose (Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2017a) the concept of mutual *enablement* for the co-constitution of things to be dealt with and the subjects of action. Due to its threefold meaning of 'enabling', 'being enabled', and 'being able', it denotes the simultaneity of heteronomy and autonomy and directs attention to how people and things bring each other into play as subjects of action and things to be dealt with – or not, if there is a lack of connectivity for each other. A thing might elude accessibility for certain people because of its design, its technology or its handling; pupils might find no access to the arrangements of school lessons because the habitus of the social middle classes, which is unfamiliar to them, materialises in them, etc.

[18] This article does not take into account a further dimension of the social that also has an in-formative effect on practice, namely the dimension of 'general understandings' (Schatzki 2002) or 'social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004) that transcends practices, fields, and life forms.

[19] Unlike a predetermined plan, a design only emerges under the actual conditions of practice and must be continuously modified in action (cf. Castoriadis 2005, 77).

These are examples of how certain objective circumstances remain inaccessible to the subjectively embodied dispositions and thus to the practical knowledge of certain people (groups) and can prevent them from elaborating into a recognisable competence.[20] Persons affected are then prevented from appearing as competent subjects of action - they are disabled.

From this perspective, it seems to me to be necessary from a *practice-sociological* perspective to question technological change – such as current processes of digitalisation – not only in terms of the extent to which they bring about a transformation of already established practices – of consuming, collaborating, training, etc. (see Schatzki 2025; Brümmer 2019) – but also in terms of which social groups they tend to decouple and thus disable. This would be a question for a separate article.

3. The Emergence of the New in Socio-Material-Imaginary Constellations

A sociology of practices focuses primarily on the stabilisation and success of practice in the interplay of people and things. Insofar as it thematises change, it sees it primarily as a consequence of deviations that arise by themselves in repetitions (e.g. Schäfer 2013) or reconstellations in the interplay of materiality, competence, and meaning (Shove et al. 2012; Schatzki 2019). In their consistent anti-subjectivism, however, they also portray processes of change as predetermined, thereby diminishing the role of human capacity for conception. With the concept of enablement, however, this capacity can also be understood in a non-subjectivist way – namely as an event that results from the contingent encounter of people and things. It is then attributed not to an *unconditional* subjectivity, but to a subjectivity that is constitutively conditioned by circumstances.

A prominent example from sport is the 'invention' of the Fosbury flop in high jump, attributed in the narratives of sports history to the US athlete Dick Fosbury. Fosbury first achieved international success with this jumping technique at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. Its characteristics are a fast arched run-up, a torso rotation during the last steps, and crossing the high jump bar backwards. This technique revolutionised high jumping within a very short time because it led to an explosive increase in performance and was easier to learn than the straddle technique practised up to that point. Fosbury jumped a height of 2.24 meters in Mexico at a height of 1.93 meters. The Cuban Javier Sotomayor jumped 2.45 meters 25 years later, surpassing that height by a whole 52 centimetres - his world record is still valid today.

The condition for the appearance of the Fosbury flop was a historically contingent interplay of infrastructural, biographical, social, and cultural factors: 1. *Infrastructurally*, it presupposed the possibility of landing backwards in the form of voluminous foam safety mats, which were adopted from pole vault. 2. *Biographically*, Fosbury's individual *trajectory*[21] played a decisive role: up to the age of 21, Fosbury was only a moderately successful high jumper *and* student of practical physics. As a high jumper, he was unable to exceed the modest jumping height of 1.60 meters using the straddle technique and occupied a marginal position in the field of high jumping, characterised by failure. We know from Bourdieu that marginal positions often favour an unconventional, experimental attitude.[22] In his experimentation, Fosbury brought his knowledge of physics (knowing that), which he had acquired as a physicist, into play alongside the knowledge he had acquired as a high jumper (knowing how): "He realised that his technique only exposed his body over the bar at hip width and no longer from head to toe in the horizontal as in the straddle..." (Hartmann 2020). And – another biographical contingency – he came across one of the few coaches who believed in the new technique long before Fosbury's international breakthrough and worked with him to develop it further. 3) *Socially*, the code of outbidding (higher-faster-further) prevailing in the social field of competitive sport structured and motivated the efforts of the athlete and his coach. In terms of practice theory, this code can be understood as the manifestation of a field-specific imaginary or general understanding that informs all competitive sports practices. 4 Finally, *culturally*, Fosbury was surfing on a zeitgeist of departure at the end of the 1960s. His jumping style was considered dynamic, young, and revolutionary, and the public celebrated the athlete as a "youthful trailblazer in […] encrusted structures..." (Hartmann 2020).

[20] Such processes are a central theme of *Disability Studies*. They also show that, as a rule, it is not the circumstances that are disqualified or criticised in public, but that the persons become conspicuous as 'disruptive variables', e.g. because they delay routine processes (see Schillmeier 2007). In this sense, they experience a practical injustice.

[21] Bourdieu uses this term to mark the fact that the social conditions in which people grow up open up certain 'trajectories' in social space and close others. In a sense, they pave the way for a person's career (see Staab and Vogel 2014).

[22] Bourdieu (1996) demonstrates this favouring of an experimental attitude by assuming a marginal position in the literary field.

The contingent interplay of these heterogeneous factors opened up a 'situational potential' (Jullien [1997] 2004) for Fosbury, which he used to develop his new technique. On the one hand, this technique was anchored in traditional techniques (Swidler 2001) and was thus recognisable as a variant of high jumping. On the other hand, it marked a significant innovation in the field of high jumping, as it was immediately adopted by other high jumpers. After Fosbury's breakthrough, almost no high jumper used the old technique.

Conclusion

The aim of the present contribution was to explore theories and concepts with which people can be viewed neither as autonomous subjects nor as agents of practices, but as subjects of action whose intentions, motives, power to act, and freedom are constitutively conditioned by the socio-material circumstances in which they are active. From this perspective, their activities (*doings*) and dispositions in practice take on an intelligible, recognisable form that is reflexively related to the framework of meaning of the practice in which they are currently involved. In this sense, they become a competent participant, in the moment of the practice, without, however, being absorbed into it. Acting, as imposed on individuals by the differentiated structures of modern society within heterogeneous social fields and their practices, requires them to assert themselves as persons in the space between these practices and to develop a 'character' in this in-between. This character is a trans-situational subjectivity that grants them relative autonomy within each practice. On the one hand, individual moments of this 'character' can interfere with the subjects of action in the execution of a practice as an irritation and, for example, lead to a stagnation, failure, demolition or exit. On the other hand, however, the 'character' also opens up the deliberative potential for them to distance themselves from the current practice, to relate (critically) to it and thus to themselves and to develop alternative perspectives. Empirically, the social-theoretical question of the fate of this deliberative potential of a constitutively determined subjectivity under the conditions of current social and technological transformation must remain open.

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What is the Place of the Human Being in Practice Theories?

An Answer from a Posthumanist Position

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Abstract

This paper sets out a response to the journal's question - what is the place of the human being in practice theories? - from a posthumanist position. The article is positioned within the so-called re-turn to practice theories after the 2000s, inside work and organization studies. It explores the conception of 'the human being' once practice is assumed as the unit of analysis. The discussion is organised around three arguments. The first focuses on the decentring of the human subject, no longer universal, pre-given and the only seat of agency. The second articulates a processual vision of the human as becoming-with nonhuman, more-than-human, and earth. The third proposes a conception of the human multiple, emerging from ethic-onto-epistemic practices of knowledge production grounded in the concepts of sociomateriality and naturecultural. In conclusion, the article argues that the decentralisation of the human subject in posthumanist theories of practice opens up methodological possibilities that do not depend ontologically, epistemologically, or ethically on the figure of the human subject.

Keywords

agencement; becoming-with; nonhuman-human relations; natureculture; sociomateriality

Introduction

What is the place of the human being in practice theories? It is not easy to give an answer to the tricky question that was asked to me by the editorial board of the journal for its inaugural issue focused on the present, past, and future of practice theories. I will seek to tackle it without claiming to have a final word nor to explore and reconcile a plurality of concordant and discordant voices. Thus, I will begin by positioning my answer (and myself) in saying that just as it is impossible to speak of a singular theory of practice, it is equally impossible to consider the sheer variety of theorisations that have emerged around the concept of practice itself. Therefore, it is necessary to establish some fixed points from which this question can be addressed. One fixed point concerns the historicisation of the conversation around the concept of practice starting from the re-turn of this concept circa the 2000s (Miettinen et al., 2009) and its break with previous classical theories of practice (à la Bourdieu or Giddens) focusing on the tension between structure and agency. A second fixed point concerns the disciplinary context in which the concept of practice was taken up again, in which I was formed, and to which I contributed. Therefore, I will not consider classical theories and will make explicit my positioning within the sociology of work and organisation and my place in these studies as a feminist scholar (white, Western, and cis-gender).

The delimitation of a disciplinary field of study means that the interests of researchers' knowledge are formed on the basis of research questions that presuppose an expertise formed within a specific literature and which are addressed to a community of similar scholars while not excluding the aspiration to produce interdisciplinary knowledge. Whilst being wary of a reductive picture, I would say that theories of practice within organisational studies answer broad questions such as: what do people do when they work and when they organise their own and others' work?

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How do they know what they know and what is appropriate to what they do? How do they work with artefacts, technologies and the increasing digitalisation of their work? How do they use language to talk to each other and to coordinate their work? How do they preserve and transmit a common know-how? How do they question the effects that work and organisational practices have on nature and society? How do they develop a shared and/or contested morality?

Moreover, in making my positioning as a feminist scholar explicit, I declare my interest in the production of knowledge that is emancipatory and concerned with social justice in nature. Consequently, in my use of the term 'the human being', one can read both a note of irony for its supposed universality and an implicit affirmation that the human being is to be understood as racialised, Westernised, gendered and inscribed in a system of ongoing differentiation. Feminist philosophies contribute to the conceptualisation of practice in the reflections of feminist new materialism, feminist post-humanism and corporeal ethics. These philosophical positions allow me to consider the subject of knowledge as 'situated' (Haraway, 1988), materiality as vital and agentic (Bennett, 2010), and the production of knowledge as an ethical-onto-epistemological process, which emphasises that the human being is "becoming with the world" and that "the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter" (Barad 2007, 185). In theoretical terms, the previous assumptions continue the path of those practice approaches that distance themselves both from subjectivist and objectivist explanations of the social in an effort to locate a third road, less travelled, between methodological holism and methodological individualism (Alkermeyer and Buschmann, 2017).

My answer to the question 'What is the place of the human being in practice theories?' will be articulated in three steps that illustrate what theories of practice 'do' when assigning a place to the human being and what methodological implications for empirical research on practices follow from this. The first step develops the idea that in theories of practice, 'the human being' is decentralised and, therefore, is not pre-given, nor is it the central seat of agency. The second step continues the previous one by arguing that 'the human being' does not precede the practices in which s/he is involved, but arises in relation to them, always and already in a process of becoming-with other humans and more-than-humans. The third step deepens the idea of 'the human being' as a subject multiple, beyond the divide between sociality and materiality and beyond the divide between nature and culture. In this third step, the concept of sociomateriality will be discussed in the context of practices of digitalisation of work and the concept of naturecultural in relation to sustainability practices.

My personal motivation for answering the above question stems from the belief that the potential of practice theories is not fully grasped when the empirical research design proposes a human-centred methodology that privileges the intentionality of human actors from which meaningful action emanates.

The 'Human Being' is Not Pre-Given and is Not the Central Seat of Agency

The question about the place of the human in practice theories should consider the historicisation of what is considered as being human and one which should take into account the increasingly widespread reflection on the crisis of the subject of Western thought, historically defined as the bearer of rationality, free will, and universal moral values. We inherited from Enlightenment thinking an ideal of the rational, universal human being built upon the premise of a singular, coherent subject, often coded as white, male, heterosexual, and Western. Such a narrative has rendered other human beings invisible, peripheral, and less-human. Feminist philosophies undermine this vision of human exceptionalism and control over other species and work towards the elaboration of a nonanthropocentric, relational ontology. Thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti (2019) call for a posthumanist ethics that disrupts the notion of a fixed human centre and instead recognises our intrinsic entanglement with the nonhuman, the cyborgian, the ecological, the biological. The ideal of 'the human being' as the measure of all things and, represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, is "the emblem of Humanism as a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive, and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress." (Braidotti, 2013,13)

This humanistic universalism has undergone numerous cultural elaborations that lead to speaking of humanism in the plural (Schatzki, 2002) and which I recall in this context only in relation to the conception of the human being as the central seat

of agency and knowledge because it is useful for contextualising how the conception of the human subject constitutes an important line of demarcation (Schatzki, 2025) between humanist theories of practice (human activity and human life) and posthumanist ones.

The decentralisation of the human subject, in posthumanist theories of practice, calls for a critique of agency as an exclusively human capacity, together with a critique of human superiority and exceptionality (anthropocentrism and speciesism). The debate on critical post-humanism (Braidotti, 2013) and post-epistemologies that began in the seventies, with radical thinkers of the post-1968 generation, conflates post-humanism ("post" to the humanist universalism of "Man") and post-anthropocentrism ("post" to the exceptionalism of the human species). Once the centrality of anthropos is replaced by a relational self—which includes all other nonhuman beings and objects—numerous boundaries separating 'Man' from other nonhuman animals, plants, and earthly elements fall down. A cascade effect opens up unexpected perspectives with methodological implications on the conception of practice and for how to conduct the empirical study of practices.

A methodological focus on practice as a unit of analysis, rather than substances, structures, or individuals, from which meaningful action derives, has been translated in organization studies in the slogan 'focus on practices rather than on practitioners' (Nicolini, 2012). In other words, the human being (the practitioner) is not pre-given or pre-existing with respect to the practice in which s/he is engaged. With practice as the unit of analysis, the human subject is no longer the only and central seat of agency, the one in control of the world, the one from whom intentional actions emanate. Agency is no longer a human prerogative when theories of practice assume an ecological model in which agency is emergent, fragmented, and distributed between humans and nonhumans and in which the relationality between the social world and materiality is subjected to inquiry. Whilst theories of action start from individuals and their intentionality in pursuing courses of action (Cohen, 1996), theories of practice view actions as 'taking place' or 'happening', as being performed through a network of connections-in-action, as life-world and dwelling (as the phenomenological legacy calls them; see Chia and Holt, 2006; Sandberg and Dall'Alba, 2009; Holt and Sandberg, 2011). In other words, practices are not just activities but also the configuration of the world in which such activities are significant.

In posthumanist practice theories, humanism has become humbled. In fact, decentring the human subject does not mean removing it, but it means placing subjects, objects, technologies, discourses and instruments in an agential and material-discursive environment. To use Law's (1994, 24) expression, relational materialism is a process of "ordering [that] has to do both with humans and nonhumans". It provides the basis on which to construe agency as emerging from the interconnections between humans, nonhumans, discourses, and sociomaterial relations that affect and are affected by each other.

A shift from entities that have agency to relations that perform entities is at the core of the principle of relational thinking (Østerlund and Carlile 2005, p. 92) that "is neither a theory nor a method in itself, but rather, a loosely structured framework or scaffold around which various practice theories and methods are being developed". Within a relational epistemology, practice represents a mode of ordering the social in which doing and knowing are not separated, and the knowing subject and the known object emerge in ongoing intra-actions (Barad, 2007) rather than interactions.

The 'Human Being' is Always and Already in a Process of Becoming-With Other Nonhumans and More-Than-Humans

In the previous section, I argued that the posthumanist epistemology of practice is a project that reconfigures the concept of agency. This implies a flat ontology that does not privilege one form of agency over others. It is often associated with Latour's (2005) thinking on Actor-Network Theory, and it is also assumed within 'site ontology' (Schatzki, 2005) and broadly shared by feminist new materialisms and critical post-humanism. A flat ontology assumes that the world is not made up of the workings of structures at macro and micro levels of analysis; instead, entities only exist in relations. The real is done, not discovered (Kuhn, Ashcraft and Cooren, 2017), and thus, society is reframed as a flattened and fluid assortment of interconnected practices. Flat and fluid are the adjectives associated with a process approach that privileges becoming rather than being. However, being and becoming are not a binary pair; both are processual. Deleuze and Guattari's ([1980] 1987) conceptualisation of becoming specifies that there is nothing other than the flow of becoming and that all 'beings' are just relatively stable moments in a flow of becoming-life. Following the same line of thought Donna Haraway (2008) writes that becoming is always becoming *with*, and this becoming-with aligns with Barad's (2007) agential realist ontology, where the world is not composed of discrete 'things', but phemomena-in-their-becoming. Not only are practices fluid but also (decentred) human beings are always imbued with and immersed in relational intricacies with other humans, nonhumans (artefacts, tools, technologies) and more-than-humans (nonhuman animals, plants, inorganic matter, the earth).[1] This focus on becoming thus conceives of organisations – and organisational practices as well – "not as an ontological stable object, but rather something that exists only in its duration." (Clegg et al., 2005, 159)

Human agency is reconstituted in dynamic intra-actions (not interactions), which repositions the relationality between bodies, things, objects, space, and time in order to develop a different perspective of practice as assembled relations of power. Whereas a humanist, phenomenological perspective of practice (e.g. Simonsen 2012) would ask how human bodily doings and sayings constitute meanings, identities, and social orders, a posthumanist perspective of practice would ask how the social is composed by the intra-actions of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human entities. Thus, we can inquire into how a working practice assembles and how it could be assembled differently. Moreover, we may ask what is the place of the researcher in studying a practice? Are researchers (also human, gendered, racialised, often Western, and white) external to the practice they observe? Do their epistemic practices not influence the object of knowledge? In discussing the place that humans as practitioners have in theories of practice, we should also contextually discuss the place that humans as researchers assume and the conception of how they think about knowledgeable doings.

In defining a practice as an *agencement*[2] of relations between elements (human and more-than-human) that do not pre-exist their being in relation, we consider that the activity of producing knowledge and the subjects who are engaged in this activity are also part of the same *agencement*. The term research *agencement* (Cozza and Gherardi, 2023) was introduced to express the idea that the ethic-onto-epistemologic practices of those who study and theorise practices are inseparable from the practices that are studied.

The roots of this non-positivist conception of knowledge can be traced back to laboratory studies (Latour, 1987; Knorr Cetina, 1981) of the 1980s in which the practices of scientific knowledge production were seen as situated working practices. In fact, defining work practices as 'situated' has a broader meaning than simply conceiving practice in time and place, that is, in situ. The concept of situated knowledge, which has been theorised in feminist studies starting from Haraway (1988), intends to be a critique of the 'God Trick' model of seeing everything from nowhere, which, from above and outside the object of study, produces a knowledge that claims to be objective, universal, and disembodied. Situated knowledge is not merely about having a perspective in contrast to the 'God Trick' (a position of masculine privilege and omniscient knowing), which sustains scientific normativity, objectivity, and the rhetoric of writing practices that effaces their author. Rather, it is about

[1] The term more-than-human (in some cases also other-than-human) may be used to include both the technological, the animal, plants, organics, inorganics and earth. I prefer to keep both the expression nonhuman and more-than-human because a wide debate has discussed the relation human/nonhuman, especially in organisation studies, following Actor Network Theory. In this debate the nonhuman is mainly referred to as artefacts, tools and technologies, while organic life (animals, plants, virus) and earthbound others entered the debate a second time mainly through the term more-than-human.

[2] The process of *agencement* illustrates how the elements within a practice or the practices within a texture of practice connect and acquire agency through their connectedness. Hence, a practice is not viewed as a unit circumscribed by given boundaries and constituted by defined elements but rather as a connection-in-action: that is, as an *agencement* (Gherardi, 2016) of elements that achieve agency by being interconnected.

a methodological principle for accounting for how the specific visualising apparatus matters to practices of knowing (Barad, 2007). Thus, considering the place of the researchers as inside the same research *agencement* of entangled elements implies a focus on knowledge as activity and reflects the specific historical moment, cultural context, and the networks within which it is made. Methodologically, this focus offers contemporary practice theories a critical tool for recognising the 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings of the researchers themselves. This positioning of the researchers inside the research *agencement* becomes an ethical request "to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway, 1988, 583) and also for being accountable for what and how we write 'scientific' texts. It becomes an engagement with an ethic-onto-epistemology that does not separate the material from the social, nature from culture, knowing from being, but one which focuses on differences that matter and differing as the process of producing differences that matter. At the same time, contemporary practice theories are left with the empirical problem of how to account for the human when it is not stable, is processually embodied, never the same, and co-evolving with nonlinear causalities. How can one move from continuous becoming to being? Although being is temporarily 'stabilised' for the time necessary to become object and/or subject, through which epistemic practices is this done?

A Subject Multiple, Beyond the Divide between the Material and the Social, and Nature and Culture

When a posthumanist epistemology of practice informs our research (Gherardi, 2022), we find ourselves searching both for a way out of humanism and for a way through it to reimagine it as a practice of interconnection, an ethics of shared vulnerability, a humane becoming-with the world.

A possibility is to think of the 'human being' as an object multiple (in the sense of Annemarie Mol, 2002), emergent in and through relations that are heterogeneously material and semiotic, since it is only through research practices that "ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices" (Mol, 2002, p. 6). Thus, there are many ways of practising the human that are brought into being through researchers' epistemic practices. I propose to explore what the place of the human is when the divide between the social and the material is blurred (with the concept of sociomateriality) and when the divide between nature and culture is blurred (with the concept of naturecultural).

Sociomateriality

The issue is not whether or not materiality matters within practice theories. Rather, it is whether materiality merely mediates human activities – as in human-centred theories – or is constitutive of practice, as in posthuman practice theories. The term 'sociomateriality' enters this debate without resolving the tension between a substantialist ontology that assumes that the social and the material, human beings and things, exist as separate entities that interact and impact on each other and a relational ontology that assumes the constitutive entanglement of the social and the material.

The term 'sociomateriality', without a hyphen and in reference to the feminist onto-epistemology of Barad (2003), was introduced into practice theories by Wanda Orlikoswski (2007) together with Marta Feldman (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). The term 'constitutive entanglement' is present in their work, grounded in a relational ontology, and it refers to the fact that within a practice meaning and matter, the social and the technological, nature and culture are inseparable and they do not have inherently determinate boundaries and properties; rather, they are constituted as relational effects performed in a texture[3] of situated practices. In other words, who/what is a practitioner (or a technology), which one is its place in practicing, will emerge from a configuration of elements within a practice assuming a form, while different practices perform multiple beings (and multiple technologies).

The use of the concept of sociomateriality has implications for the empirical study of situated practices and, to give an example, I suggest considering the texture of practices put in motion by the intra-action of *algorithmic technologies* and

[3] The term 'texture of practices' (Gherardi, 2016) denotes the interdependencies (material and semiotic) of practices. This term brings out the definitive feature of texture, its endless series of relationships which continually move into each other. Texture is a strongly evocative concept which recalls the intricacies of networking but at the same time allows for an analytical, qualitative framework (Strati, 2000).

algorithmic management, starting from the consideration of how generative artificial intelligence (AI) is driving a socio-economic transformation based on new practices in which human–AI intra-actions shape the interdependencies among managers, employees, and platform workers. Contemporary algorithms embedded in computers, digital platforms, mobile apps, and wearable devices rely on different infrastructures for data collection and offer outputs through the elaboration of several screens and devices. These techno-logical components of daily life constitute the algorithmic technologies, which are "able to render decisions without human intervention and/or structure the possible field of action by harnessing specific data" (Issar and Aneesh, 2022). Leaving aside technological determinism in favour of an approach to technology as social practice (Suchman et al., 1999), I favour the study of situated practices (the *agencement*) in which algorithms relate and order a multitude of entangled elements such as different types of data, materials, methods, times, places, and social relations. Algorithms are constitutively entangled with different normativities, and these normativities come to shape our world (Lee and Björklund Larsen, 2019). Algorithmic technologies, humans, and discourses constantly change their configuration as humans move through their everyday worlds and experience the material, discursive, and symbolic affordances of digital data use (Lupton and Watson, 2020). I follow those practice scholars who are interested in showing how algorithmic technologies are programmed to reshape the daily lives of their users and, in turn, how users are involved in appropriation processes, transforming algorithms into terrains for participation, resistance and conflict (Miele and Giardullo, 2024). In an AI-driven scenario, the opacity of algorithms and of machine learning in the design of algorithmic management systems leads to a double transformative process since both workers and management take part in changing working practices, and both are disappearing under the smokescreen of algorithmic technologies. Workers are becoming less visible as many of their tasks are automated and directed by algorithms. At the same time, bosses are perceived as more distant but still effective in their algorithmic management practices (Arcidiacono and Sartori, 2024).

Digital labour platforms are just one of the most studied areas of algorithmic management practices through which planning, staffing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling workers are performed via databases or digital devices that elaborate on data from and to the workers of digital platforms (Burrell and Fourcade, 2021). Platforms like Uber, UberEat, Lyft, or Foodora represent examples of the infrastructuring of practices that direct, evaluate, and discipline workers, users and managers at the same time. They are built on algorithms that automatically allocate tasks via digital devices. Through algorithmic management practices, companies manage workers as invisible bosses, directing activities, sending notifications, monitoring and collecting data. The evaluation of workers follows a customer-generated reputational system, and customers' ratings are aggregated to score, prioritise, and recommend workers for the next task. Platform reputation systems produce a loss of meaning and control in the worker experience (Arcidiacono and Sartori, 2024), especially when the assignment of tasks to workers is automated and is also based on customers' ratings. These ratings have an impact on the visibility of workers and are folded into a disciplining practice through a structure of punishments and rewards meant to guarantee collaboration and compliance with the company's terms of service.

Workers' resistance to material and discursive algorithmic management practices exploits 'fissures' in algorithmic power (Ferrari and Graham, 2021), moments in which algorithms do not govern as intended. These moments show that algorithmic power is inherently partial and is emerging from the configuration of past practices that play into the present, affecting the present practices that do not hold together and the obduracy of those that stay in place despite it all. This is just an example of the pervasiveness and the non-directionality of the power to connect. It illustrates how resistance is not only a human affair but also an effect of the dynamic entanglement of humans, technologies, and other vital materialities. It differs from assuming a central focus on humans and their agency but also from enlarging the attribution of agency to other separated entities that later interact with each other.

Going back to the sociomateriality of algorithm multiple, we have to consider that there is not just one Uber algorithm that manages all drivers in the exact same way. On the contrary, workers are being governed by, and interact with, different permutations of code that are "only knowable in their becoming as opposed to their being" (Bucher 2018, 49). The point is that there are multiple realities of how workers feel, act, imagine, and know in their becoming-with algorithms in situated practices. The algorithm multiple and the human multiple transcend the boundaries between local and global practices.

We can notice it in relation to how machine learning intra-acts with the knowledgeable collective doing of humans and nonhumans. The language of learning and knowing has often been reserved for human only capacity. However, situating those activities in working practices makes visible how power relations are embedded in configurations where the abstract human being is racialised, gendered, and colonised in different ways within different practices. If we take, for example, the case of ChatGPT, we may consider how machine learning requires pre-training and training phases that need to be supported by large masses of data. These pre-training practices have fully been outsourced to the Philippines, Türkiye, India, South Africa, and Kenya, giving rise to a new 'data colonialism' that takes place in sociomaterial practices of domination across those who are fully human and the less human being.

The sociomaterial conception of algorithmic technologies makes visible the texture of practices in which society, technology, tools, and discourses are differently configured through the intra-actions among humans, nonhumans and more-than-humans. In a similar way, the next paragraph illustrates how the concept of naturecultural illuminates the texture of sustainability practices.

Naturecultural

The binary pair nature-culture has been a pillar of Western thought, but the collapse of the hyphen between the two terms has acquired a new meaning within the conversation about the Anthropocene (Latour, 2017), in which the idea of nature as an 'environment' external to the human being and relatively separate from society is no longer sustainable since it hides the humans' role in perpetuating ecological catastrophes. The view that humans are ontologically separate and superior to nature (human exceptionalism) is discursively challenged by concepts such as natureculture but also materialsemiotic (both attributed to Haraway, 1988) and biosocial (Ingold, 1998). They have become marks of a specific understanding of the human being's place in the world and in relation to nature not opposed to human. Their adoption has methodological consequences. For example, the concept of biosocial becoming (Shove, Blue and Kelly, 2024) has been employed for describing in a single frame, the dissolution of the divide between the biological and the social world and the dynamics of the biological and material processes of the living world. For simplicity, I will assume such a complex debate under the label 'becoming earth' meaning that what is included in the more-than-human is not only the animal but also other living and not living beings.

In referring to the study of practices of sustainability, it has been stressed how this literature seldom questions explicitly the premises of human superiority over nature nor inquires sufficiently about power within human–Earth relations (Ergene and Calas, 2023). The material-discursive tangle of anthropocentrism and economic capitalism creates the illusion that socioecological crises can be addressed by market stakeholder capitalism and green technology (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2011). An imaginary based on the separation of the human from nature and a conception of producing knowledge on the world by standing outside of it grounds the discourse of sustainability in an imagination in which it is in 'our' (human) capacity to save or to ruin the world.

To reproduce human-centered (and technology-centered) practices of sustainability is not going to change human–Earth power relations. Rather a project for going beyond the nature/culture divide and for conceiving the human in posthumanist practice theories as earthbound human beings is described by the term '*becoming naturecultural*' (Ergene and Calas, 2023, 1962): "a material-discursive assembling process of more-than-human and more-than-capitalist entanglements." In methodological terms, it means tracing the webs of relations that lead to the materialisation of power asymmetries and observing more-than-human and more-than-capitalist practices on the ground.

An example of the complexities and the methodological challenges of conducting an empirical study of human–Earth power relations in everyday organisational practices is offered by Ergene and Calas (2023), who conducted fieldwork at an organic cotton t-shirt supply chain in Türkiye, following the movement of cotton seeds from the farms until the becoming of a 'sustainable t-shirt'. They entered this supply chain's industrial practices by conducting an affective ethnography (Gherardi, 2019). The case study illustrates the ongoing assembling process of cotton plants, workers, managers, textile materials and machines, photographs, and various discourses of sustainability, as well as the researchers' embodied knowing and becoming-with-data. The story is not one of a privileged human gaze nor of an anthropomorphised nature, but rather of humans entering a research field and becoming inscribed in it as the story unfolds. Here, the assemblage *becoming naturecultural* materialises, and the sedimented, uneven human–Earth power relations become visible as they maintain some configuration of interests over marginalised others.

The main contribution of the empirical approach—*becoming naturecultural*—is to imagine different research practices for the Anthropocene that acknowledge their political and ethical commitment to a liveable world for all. Moreover, a relational view of agency in which a primary ontological status for agency is not limited to humans can effectively contribute to sustainable practices since, on the one hand, it enables non-anthropocentrism and, on the other hand, admits that practices bind potential outcomes (Heikkurinen et al. 2021). We have to consider that sustainability practices are pervasive; they are developed and diffused in programs for total quality environmental management, life-cycle analysis, product stewardship, ecoefficiency, pollution prevention and waste-management strategy, environmental risk and liability management, and environmental banking and investment.

A growing number of scholars are aware of the need for responsible managing practices that cannot be institutionalised and socially sustained by abstract ethical principles or codes of conduct but by the capacity to see the more-than-human sphere in ethical terms (Gherardi and Laasch, 2022), as situated ethics-in-practice.

Sustainability practices cannot be identified tout cout with 'grand challenges'; however, they may be considered as part of the same debate about "matters of concern that entail complexity, evoke uncertainty, and provoke evaluativity" (Gehman, 2022, p. 260). Practice theories participate in this debate through a specific contribution on how past and present practices contribute to the development and persistence of grand challenges (Danner-Schöder et al, 2025).

A Concluding Reflection

Decentring the human being in practice theories is the starting point for elaborating a knowledge production practice that criticises the place of the human as the sole possessor of agency, its exceptionalism as individual, and its supremacy over other species. The fiction of the universality of a 'human being' cancels the fact that who is conceived as the 'human being' is man, male, Western, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied, and thus it supports an epistemic practice grounded in a tangle of ethics/power/politics. The epistemic practice that positions the 'human being' as universal and the measure of all things is a fantasy (or a nightmare) that conceals its historical construction inherent in Enlightenment and Eurocentrism. This subject is said to produce knowledge standing outside of the world and mastering nature and all the other-than-human elements, deeming them to be passive and controllable.

An epistemic practice that assumes the human being as part of the world and as a product of situated knowledge practices blurs the boundaries between ethics, ontology, and epistemology. It reframes agency as flow and gives to the subject a relational positioning as emergent from the intra-action of humans with materiality, discursivity, and nature. The human being emerges from an unfolding of becomings-with others (human and more-than-human) and is only temporarily stabilised by the knowledge production practices that draw boundaries around and inside entangled elements (what Barad names agential cuts). The social is also emergent and entangled with all materialities (corporeal, biological, technological, and discursive) and expressed as sociomaterial. Furthermore, the social is also generatively entangled with nature and this concept is expressed as becoming naturecultural.

The above assumptions pose a methodological question: How to do empirical research on situated practices when what counts as an element in a flow of becomings is an onto-epistemological move that 'freezes' an element within an *agencement* long enough to observe it? I cannot enter in this discussion here, rather, I limit myself to the simple observation that researchers are inside the practice they study with their ethic-onto-epistemologic practices and are responsible for the effects of their knowledge production practices. Moreover, I pose another question: Are researchers the only 'human being' in my story? Algorithms carry an inscription of epistemic practices that generate machine learning in collaboration with human and generative AI participants in the social construction of categories from which humans and organisations make sense of the world. The borders between humans and nonhumans are porous. Rather than a category of distinction, they signal the inseparability and co-dependence of humans and materiality (technology and artefacts), humans and earthly-bound beings. The same consideration about porosity can be affirmed in relation to other categories that operate a dichotomous separation between humans and what counts as human, animal, plant, organic, and inorganic, and their earthly relations. For contemporary practice theories, it is crucial to reflect on the construction of the above categories, their methodological implications in research design, and the theoretical conversations to which practice theory aims to contribute.

This article has worked for positioning the human being while breaking the boundaries (and working in the interstices) between the following categories: the individual/practice unit of analysis; being/becoming; socio/material; nature/culture. Most importantly, it has given to the researchers (and their epistemic practices) a place within the practice they study, breaking the boundaries between an external/internal positional divide.

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Proposing a Gradient of Humanism/Non-Humanism and Understanding the Contributions of Body-Minds to Social Practices

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Abstract

The world is constantly changing, as are the social practices that comprise it. In view of the growing numbers and types of dynamic non-humans recruited into social practices, and what the significance of humans might be in this crowd, this article presents three interrelated lines of thinking in two main sections. The first section discusses whether there are any potential differences between humanist and post-humanist varieties of social practice theories, and instead of favouring one or the other, advocates for some middle ground by proposing a gradient of humanism. The second section explores how human body-minds (bodies) can be conceptualised more distinctively in theories of social practice, and in doing so, invokes the persistent question of whether distinctions between humans and non-humans in social practices can be usefully made and, if so, what roles they might play. The conclusion reflects on the previous discussion and revisits the recursive relationship between practices and bodies, highlighting important nuances and complexities while advocating for an expanded conceptualisation of bodies as more than simple carriers of practices and moving beyond dichotomies of humanist/post-humanist accounts of practice.

Keywords

bodies; dynamism; materiality; more-than-human; non-human; performance

Introduction

In discussing theories of social practice, it is worth briefly contemplating the obvious point that practices are by their very nature, social. 'Social' by definition is relational; meaning that every part and every member of a society or social world is in relation to all other parts and all other members in varying degrees of proximity over space and time. However, as definitions of what and who constitutes the social have been expanded to include materials and resources, other species, technologies and artefacts, accompanied by the generation of hybrid neologisms such as biosocial (Ingold and Palsson 2013; Meloni et al. 2016), nature-culture, (Braidotti 2018; Franklin 2006) and sociomaterial (Gherardi 2017), who and what counts as a part of social practices has been increasingly the subject of discussion (Maller & Strengers 2019; Reckwitz 2002a; Shove et al. 2024). While up to the early to mid-2000s practice theories tended to imply that only (but not solely) humans perform practices, positions on this topic have diversified as scholars have come to further contemplate the agencies, capacities and materialities of non-humans within practices (e.g., Rinkinen et al. 2019; Shove 2017; Shove & Trentmann 2019) in part drawing on cognate relational theories such as actor-network theory (e.g., Latour 1992), social studies of science (STS) (e.g., Mol 2008), and post-humanism (Braidotti 2006; Castree & Nash 2006). Closer examination of notions of performance, agency and materiality in theories of practice are further tested by recent discoveries into animal sociality, intelligence and language (Pepperberg 2013; Taylor 2024), the roles of microbes and genes in bodily processes and development (Meloni et al. 2022), and the growing capabilities and functionality of new technologies, including software (Morley 2019) and generative AI (Custers and Fosch-Villaronga 2022). At the present moment it is possible to argue that there is a greater magnitude of 'dynamic' non-humans than ever before, even compared to just a few years ago (e.g., Maller & Strengers

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2019). These developments have potentially opened a 'Pandora's box' (Stengers 2010), or several, as these 'new' actors and capabilities give rise to questions about what roles non-humans can, should, or do play in social practices and the making of social worlds, how they can be understood, and the extent to which it matters. As Reckwitz wrote with prescience in 2002: "in … modern times [we] are witnessing an unprecedented expansion of hybrids, 'quasi-objects' (Serres), non-human creatures that are neither pure nature nor cultural projections, but indispensable (by now, innumerable) components of social 'networks' or 'practices'." (Reckwitz 2002a, p. 207) Fresh interest in the relative humanism/posthumanism of practices and practice theories has also been stimulated by scholarship in new materialism (e.g., Coole 2013), more-than-human thinking (e.g., Maller 2018), and post-colonialism (e.g., Gherardi 2024; Maller 2018). To oversimplify, but nonetheless comment, on what these literatures have in common, they are essentially concerned with decentering white, westernised ontologies and experiences and elevating the multiple, dynamic, ongoing relations between humans, animals, materials, artefacts and other non-humans, guided by responsibilities of care and ethics, and informed by narratives of antiracism and feminism (e.g., Braidotti 2018; Coole & Frost 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa 2012; Todd 2016; Tynan 2021). This interest is accompanied by broadening recognition of and a desire to challenge, the anthropo- and Western- centrism pertaining to many past and present theoretical resources for explaining social life.

Put together, these developments signal the timeliness of engaging in further conversations about the role or significance of humans in practices amongst other potential 'players' vying for attention and highlighting possible tensions between humanism and post-humanism. Before going further, some positioning. I come to address the question posed for this article having thought with theories of practice for over 15 years in the disciplines of geography, sociology, and public health, and in the context of research concerned with sustainability, resource consumption, and health in the daily routines of households. Therefore, the material I draw on is largely associated with these disciplines, forming a subset of the available literature on theories of social practice. I also have a persistent interest in moments of practice performance, in what is happening in the act of doing or becoming, who and what is involved and how this momentum propels practices along trajectories through space and time (Maller 2017; Maller 2019; Maller & Strengers 2015). This focus colours the way I have approached this article. The first section begins by discussing whether a distinction between humanist and post-humanist accounts can be maintained. In the second section, I revisit how I have conceptualised human beings, or their body-minds, in social practice theories in a series of works from the last decade or so. In the conclusion, I distil the main points from these two sections and briefly reflect on some further topics for discussion.

'Humanist' and 'Post-Humanist' Social Practice Theories

When addressing the significance of human beings in practice theories, a question that springs to mind is whether there is any value in discussing potential differences between 'humanist' and 'post-humanist' accounts. As has been observed many times, there are several waves or generations of practice theorists across disciplines, meaning there is no single agreed-upon version of the theory (Gherardi 2024; Schatzki 2001; Shove et al. 2012). Rather, there is reference to a family of theories that share certain ontological and epistemological characteristics; namely, that practices are enduring entities involving things and their use, practical know-how, and shared meanings reproduced through ongoing enactments (Reckwitz 2002b; Schatzki 2001; 2010; Shove et al. 2012). Social practices offer a recursive way of understanding activity and its effects that avoids favouring either structure or agency. A scan of more recent literature on theories of social practice indicates there are varying positions on how humans are conceptualised in practices (e.g., see Brümmer et al. 2017; Cozza and Gherardi 2024; Gherardi 2025; Maller 2019; Schatzki 2001). In so-called 'humanist' practice theories, practices are about what humans do, conceptualised as practices which are carried out in conjunction with non-humans and various forms of materiality (Gherardi 2025). Although they account for non-human agencies within practices, a human or multiple humans are usually centred (Cozza & Gherardi 2024), noting that agency is a quality of, inherent to, or produced by practices rather than being attributed to individuals or objects (Shove et al. 2012). In 'post-humanist' accounts of social practices, a broader remit appears that is overtly not only concerned with what humans do but also with other beings and non-human agents and their roles in practices. These varieties can be summarised as including, but not limited to humans, and are not only concerned

with human activity, but are concerned with activity more generally in processes of becoming that humans may be central or peripheral to (Cozza & Gherardi 2024). Gherardi writes: "the human being' does not precede the practices in which s/he is involved, but arises in relation to them, always and already in a process of becoming-with other humans and more-than-humans." (2025, p. 3)

That within the same family of theories there appear to be differences in the humanist or post-humanist position of the authors is not necessarily problematic. However they are defined or however they position humans, theories of social practice move beyond purely human, rationalist understandings of agency, doing and becoming (Shove et al. 2024). In my view social practice theories are therefore by default always post-human[1] (Schatzki 2001), and by definition are inherently more-than-human (Maller 2018) because practices always involve more than just human activity and materiality, and in fact wouldn't be performed without various things, artefacts, technologies, material elements and, as is increasingly recognised, other species (e.g., Shove et al. 2024). Rather than a binary between humanist and post-humanist accounts, if such distinctions are to be made, I suggest a gradient or sliding scale of humanism may be more useful. Positions along the scale would vary according to the questions being addressed, the practices of interest, or possibly with the variety of practice theory in operation. A gradient would resolve tensions, avoid the potential development of opposing camps and encourage further in-depth discussion about when categories and boundaries matter in understanding the world through social practices. Regardless of their degree of humanism, a pertinent ontological question concerns the relative value of humans and non-humans in social practices: are there distinct differences or are they all equal players? An early provocation in this regard can be traced back to the work of Latour. As Reckwitz (2002a, p. 208) explains, according to Latour (1993): "nonhuman 'actants', things ... are necessary and are so-to-speak 'equal' components of a social practice." However, Reckwitz goes on to argue that:

> "When artefacts can only be effective within practices insofar as they are 'handled' by human agents and when they are sites of 'materialized understanding', then their status obviously cannot be completely 'equal' with that of human agents and their embodied understanding. The distinction between such a position and Latour's pleading for a 'symmetric anthropology' should not be blurred; rather, the debate whether within social practices there is or is not any substantial difference between human agents and non-human 'actants' must continue." (Reckwitz 2002a, p. 214)

For Reckwitz at this time, the answer remained elusive. In the couple of decades since this publication, I ask has any further clarity been achieved in understanding the potential differences between human and non-human actants in practices? And if so, what does this mean for the significance of humans, and the perceived distinctions between humanist and post-humanist accounts of social practices? As a partial response to this question, it is worth examining what humans contribute to social practices on a pragmatic, material, or tangible level. Compared to STS where the dynamism and materiality of bodies is more often brought to the fore (e.g. Coole 2005; Meloni et al. 2022; Mol 2002; 2013), I have previously suggested that body-minds have traditionally had an 'absence-presence' in theories of social practice (Maller 2017). The next section reviews this claim and discusses whether differences in human bodies (capacities, biophysical materialities, and mutabilities) matter from a social practice starting point.

Conceptualising Human Beings (Body-Minds) in Social Practice Theories

It is not possible to discuss the role or significance of human beings in theories of social practice without discussing body-minds or, more simply, bodies (Gherardi 2017; Maller 2017; Nicolini 2012). In previous writing, I have approached the question of how to represent human bodies in theories of practice in several ways, which I discuss together here for the first time. These ideas and their progression are presented in the following four subsections.

[1] Depending on the definition of post-humanism employed. In this essay, I follow Schatzki (2001) where he highlights two possible post-humanist dimensions of social practice theory. The first is that practices involve non-human entities that also contribute to sociality and that practices are therefore not solely performed by humans, and the second is that it is practices, not humans or individual subjects, that are generative of social life and are the central phenomenon of study in practice-based approaches.

Practice Memory

I developed the concept of 'practice memory' to better understand the mobility of practices around the world and over time through the bodies of carriers or performers (Maller & Strengers 2013; 2015). Practice memory was used to explain how practices were carried through migration from one place to Australia (often from 10s of 1000s of kilometres away) and how practices from different times and places could be 'resurrected' in response to new local environmental and cultural conditions, in this case in the context of scarcity. When water restrictions were in place during the Millennium drought (early 2000s), practices carried by migrants from destinations without running water or with past water scarcity were quickly resurrected and enacted in these new geographies experiencing drought (Maller & Strengers, 2013). In some cases, practices brought from other places never stopped being performed (e.g., collecting rainwater in large bins and using buckets in showers to collect 'grey' water for the garden).

Practice memory borrows from 'muscle memory', a concept which explains how the fibres of muscles retain memories from previous activity (Bruusgaard et al. 2010). Practice memories are inscribed on the human bodies that carry and perform them (Maller & Strengers 2013). They are embrained and embodied (Braidotti 2018), primarily represented in physical and mental know-how and meanings, lying dormant and awaiting the right environmental conditions until they are needed (Maller and Strengers 2013). Reckwitz's (2002b) definition of social practices as primarily routinised bodily activities, movements of the body, and the regular, skill performance of (human) bodies underlies this conceptualisation. Human bodies are repositories of past practices, leading to the proposition that to be resurrected and performed again, practices must somehow leave their mark. Through repeated performances of, and familiaristation with, the evolving iterations of a practice entity, humans can carry both past and present practices and their comprising elements (Maller & Strengers 2015). In other words, practice memories can be said to capture embodied performative histories of practices (Maller & Strengers 2013; Shove et al. 2012). Practice memory proposes that the link between past and present practices is codified in the physical and mental structures of human body-minds across 'communities of practice' (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014), or in other words, the people who have performed a particular practice or set of practices in the past. Human bodies are therefore key to the 'survival' and possible revival of past practices, as well as the continuation of current practices along particular trajectories. Although not explored in the original writing on this topic, it is also probable that practice memories or their fragments are also inscribed in other non-human forms of storage. For example, know-how, meanings and materialities of past practices are found in written and visual artefacts such as recipe books and photographs, in past technologies and artefacts displayed in museums, and in disused but still present infrastructures. Depending on the practices, there are likely to often be multiple forms of storage and memory, with storage in bodies likely to always be only part of the picture. Considering that bodies age and degrade over time, multiple forms of 'remembering' gain further significance.

Understanding The Effects of Practices on Bodies

In a subsequent article, I considered more deeply how practices can be ingrained in bodies via epigenetics (Maller 2017). Epigenetics is concerned with cellular and molecular changes to bodies based on interactions between genes and environments, including how some genes or their expression can be switched on or off in certain environmental conditions (Meloni 2014; Milagro et al. 2013). This piece explored how the embodiment of practices changed the biophysical and genetic composition of bodies using the example of obesity, and how these effects accumulate and are carried not only across geographies but in ways that also matter for the bodies of future generations (Maller 2017). As Handel and Ramagopalan explain, humans are "acquiring changes to our epigenome all the time" (2010, p. 2), which, from a social practice ontology, arises from the ongoing performance of practices.

In this article, I wrote that in the moment of performing a practice, bodies interact materially with the world in complex ways and experience certain material conditions, receiving a range of environmental exposures that could trigger epigenetic changes (Maller 2017). I would now express this as bodies always are in constant material interaction with the world, but the moment of practice performance (and its repetition) is where genes, bodies and material environments interact in

specific combinations. This interaction represents an opportunity to understand how practices not only shape the physical appearance of bodies but also their biophysical and genetic processes. Some of these changes may be temporary and of little consequence, while others have more serious implications for health and well-being, longevity, and the health of future generations of people as their impacts accumulate over time (e.g., drug use, poor nutrition). On the flip side, performances can involve or require minute variations that add up over time, after all, practices are often considered to be in a constant state of flux (Shove et al. 2012). Some of these variations will be due to differences and changes in individual practitioners' bodies or communities of practice, while others will not be. The achievement of skilful performances of practices (Nicolini 2012; Reckwitz 2002b) relies on bodies being continually shaped by and 'improved' through practice, drawing attention back to the effects of practices on mental patterns, muscular and metabolic changes, and the development of know-how. The development of skill is another way bodies are essential for practices.

How Bodies are Represented in Theories of Practice

It was in 2017 that I proposed that bodies have a 'present-absent' status in theories of social practice. They are clearly 'present' in that practices are embodied and carried by bodies, but they are 'absent' because differences in the physical and affective capabilities of bodies have been largely unrecognised or dematerialised (Gherardi 2017; Maller 2017). By this, I meant that the materiality, physicality, and health status or capacities of bodies and communities of practitioners are rarely foregrounded in early work drawing on theories of practice, unintentionally giving rise to rather homogenised or opaque representations. The significance of bodily differences for practices is assumed or taken for granted without ever much being the subject of detailed discussion (Gherardi 2017). At the time, I offered two ways bodies could be further developed in theories of social practice, depending on the context. The first idea discussed the material contributions bodies make to practices, including energy, metabolic, genetic and sensory capacities, and as repositories of performance, as already discussed above (Maller 2017) and as suggested in a broad sense by Reckwitz (2002a) and Schatzki (2010). I also touched on movement and skill (which are generally acknowledged in practice theory literature) as well as aesthetics.

The second way I proposed bodies could be conceptualised in a more detailed way was as human-non-human assemblages, comprised of biophysical, affective, and mental capacities, as well as the various microbiomes of the skin, gut, and other orifices. Drawing on assemblage theory (Greenhough 2011; Marcus & Saka 2006; Wallenborn 2013), this contribution aimed to make evident the fact that human bodies are never a single body, that component material parts can sometimes offer essential material contributions as well as interact with each other, and to illustrate the porousness and impermeability of perceived boundaries of bodies as a counter to individualisation. These ideas were exploratory rather than definitive and share much in common with post-human and STS literatures, including the work of Ingold (Ingold and Kurttila 2000; Ingold and Palsson 2013) and Braidotti (2006; 2018), and more recently in the social practice literature, Shove et al (2024).

Accounting for the Dynamism of Different Bodies

In a later piece of writing (Maller 2019), I picked up these suggestions again to take a more detailed look at the materialities and capacities of human bodies that make them dynamic. Dynamism and change in theories of social practice is attributed to practices - or practice bundles, complexes or nexuses - rather than materials or bodies (Shove et al. 2012). However, I argued that alongside this, considering bodies as changing over time encourages reflection on the capacities of different bodies, how bodies are made different through practices, and how bodies might also change practices (potentially in more socially or environmentally just directions). I posited that bodies at various life stages and differently abled, gendered, classed or racialised bodies, may not only perform practices differently, but are also likely to perform different sets of practices due to opportunity (or lack of it) and the structuring of effects of practice bundles and complexes (Shove et al. 2012). I suggested two further advances in the way that bodies could be conceptualised in theories of social practice, turning to a broader set of more-than-human thinking, including new materialisms (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Pickering 1993), assemblage theories (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; Wallenborn 2013) and STS (Mol 2002). The first was to consider

bodies as vibrant and dynamic materials, more than what could be said is part of the background hum of simply being alive. Schatzki (2010, p. 137) had previously proposed that "the materiality and composition of human bodies and of [other living and non-living] entities" are preconfigurations of practices. To illustrate bodily vibrancy and dynamism in more detail, I focused on two essential practices that involve temporally dependent, rhythmic biological processes: sleeping and eating. These two practices are examples of activities essential for keeping bodies alive, and each involves specific metabolic and biochemical functions and systems. Considering that there are fewer such internal processes involved in practices such as laundering, the non-essential nature of practices classified as hobbies, and the physically demanding requirements of practices such as cycling, it could be said that, depending on what parts of bodies are involved, they may be more engaged, vital and dynamic in some practices than others. I summed this up by saying that "just as bodies are made by practices, so are practices made by bodies." (Maller 2019, p. 91)

At the time, I explained that in differentiating between different bodies, materialities, vitalities and capacities, theories of practice could better address complex questions of health inequality and related social issues. But reconsidering this line of argument now, what would considering different bodies and their capacities contribute to theorising social practices that might be distinct? Although there may be value in addressing this question, it ultimately may not matter much for theories of practice. Bodies, as part of practices and practices as entities, change over time in a constantly recursive, co-constituting manner, which vary from place to place and community to community. Further there are always different practice variations in circulation at any given time and place (Shove et al. 2012). This leads me to now conclude that rather than seeking to differentiate practices by differences in the bodies of performers, it is more consistent with the theories to examine practices, complexes and bundles (Shove et al. 2012) or practice material arrangement nexuses (Schatzki 2002) in their geographic and temporal contexts, which would - and should - reflect these variations. This method would be a more consistent way of understanding the creation of difference using social practice theories than coming from a starting point of seeking to differentiate between the bodies of individuals.

The second suggestion was that theories of practice remain overly focused on human bodies rather than acknowledging bodies of other kinds and their roles in practices. This positioning connects with logics in post-human practice theorisation and extends the point made in 2017 about practices being comprised of human-non-human assemblages. In 2019, I argued that in acknowledging non-human bodies, practices could be thought of more overtly as more-than-human assemblages. The idea behind this suggestion was to better represent the multiple dynamic bodies present in some practice performances and entities. Reflecting on other types of bodies that might be enrolled, I focused on plants and animals in gardening and dog-walking practices. My point here was that gardening and dog-walking directly involve the bodies of non-human species (including plants and dogs, as well as soil microorganisms and other species present in gardens and parks), without whom such practices could not be performed in the same way. These ideas built on other work with co-authors in 2016 (Strengers et al. 2016). In considering non-human animals who are implicated in practices that consume energy, such as heating and others that take place in homes with pets, we discussed how animals are recruited into practices through accepting or refusing food, standing near heaters, making sounds, or simply occupying interior settings (Strengers et al. 2016). We argued that in these instances agency is distributed (Bennett 2005) within practices, in addition to the agency of practices themselves, spread between human and animal 'consumers' in different bodily and material assemblages. Taking this a step further, we also suggested that as well as people, animals could also be considered performers of practices, rather than simply material elements as the alternative classification.

Following Bennett (2005) and Latour (1993; 2005) in this paper we proposed that animals (human and non-human) as performers of practices "have equal ability to exert agentic capacities (even though these are likely to be unequally distributed within an assemblage...)." (Strengers et al. 2016, p. 765 emphasis added) This focus on the relative potential capacities of humans and non-humans allowed for changes in the internal dynamics of agency within practice performance to occur over time, and from moment to moment. This stance reflected the ongoing dynamism inherent in practices where the agencies of any bodies (human or non-human) within practices "[emerge] in relation to other actants and their interactions within an assemblage." (Strengers et al. 2016, p. 765) The reasoning here responds to Reckwitz's (2002a)

plea for the debate to continue about whether there are any differences between human agents and non-human actants in practices. However, Reckwitz was referring only to artefacts, not to other living beings or non-human species.

Reflecting on these arguments now, as already suggested in the first section of this present article, I return to the idea of a gradient of 'humanness' or 'non-humanness' and suggest that the status of humans and non-human animals in practices would depend not only on the sets of practices of interest but who is involved. As I stated in 2019, there are many other (animal) bodies that can be recruited to, implicated in, or are otherwise indispensable to practices: "different bodies do, and are made by, different practices; this applies not just to human bodies but also to non-human ones." (Maller 2019, p. 93) A final comment on the dynamism and vibrancy of bodies as more-than-human assemblages is that human bodies (and those of other animals) are always made of multiple others; they host and are made by vast numbers of microorganisms that perform a variety of fundamental processes, with only a small percentage causing disease (Maller 2023). How and whether these organisms are counted as part of social practices is directly discussed by Shove et al. (2024, pp. 159-160), who argue that "social practices engender and are outcomes of multiple habitats and microbiomes, the dynamics of which constitute processes on which forms of biosocial becoming depend". As they explain, the processes and interactions of non-humans have been recognised as part of the dynamics of social practice in the literature; however, their significance has not attracted much attention until more recently. Clearly, there is more to discuss and debate on this topic, beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion

The discussion above has summoned multiple juicy dimensions of the theorisation of practices, including materiality, embodiment, performance, agency and humanism. Although these topics have been touched on briefly, the intent of this article has been to consider the significance of human beings in social practice theories. I have approached the topic through a discussion on whether there is value in distinguishing between humanist and post-humanist varieties of the theories, with the idea that this might reveal different forms of significance or help determine a definitive response. Instead, I proposed that there is not a clear distinction to be made and that a gradient of humanism is more useful as well as less divisive. Underlying this rationale is my stance that social practice theories are inherently more-than-human, meaning that humans and non-humans will have more or less significance depending on the practices, bundles, complexes, or material arrangements under investigation, and in their geographic and temporal contexts. Ultimately, there is no straightforward answer to the question of who and what count as part of social practices; it will always depend on the particulars of a given context.

To address the related question as to whether there are any fundamental differences between human and non-human actants in practices, I explored what human bodies materially contribute to social practices, drawing on my earlier work. Most obviously, and as has been written about in the practice theory literature already, bodies are the key vehicles or carriers of practice and are necessary for every practice performance. Beyond carriage, the development of the skills necessary to successfully perform practices is one key contribution bodies make. In embodying mental and practical know-how, bodies are shaped by, and shape, practices over time in an ongoing recursive manner. Embodiment is more than 'skin deep' however; performing practices involves interactions between things, bodily capacities, genetic makeup, other non-human actants, and environmental conditions that can produce biophysical and epigenetic effects that transcend generations, impacting performers and practices of the future. Bodies also transform matter through the act of being alive, and the vibrancy and dynamism that that entails (Bennett 2010), creating energy and the vitality needed for practices. When practices are not performed regularly, they are stored as practice memories until such time as they are needed. In this way, bodies hold the key to the revival and survival of past practices, resurrecting them under the right conditions.

There is an unavoidable recursivity between practices and bodies. Bodies are activated and made by practices, as practices are by bodies. As has been written about previously, bodies are commonly thought of as sites where multiple practices intersect (Coole 2005; Gherardi 2017; Mol 2002). This line of thinking challenges the idea that one stepping off point for

understanding difference and inequality is to acknowledge that different bodies have different capacities and opportunities. Taking practices as the unit of enquiry rather than bodies means knowing that difference arises from the structuring effects of practices which vary from place to place, over time, and from community to community. Another way to understand bodily differences is that depending on what parts of bodies are required, they may need to be more engaged, vital, and dynamic in some practices compared to others, with varying outcomes. Structured by practices, different bodies have different capacities, and different practices require varying bodily involvement and demands of bodies. Difference matters because it leads to innovation in the evolution of practices, which can alter their course.

Although I have expressed some ambivalence on humanism-vs-post-humanism in theories of practice by cultivating the idea of a gradient, I stand by an expanded conceptualisation of bodies (human and non-human) that acknowledges their dynamic, vibrant nature and their existence as more-than-human assemblages, rather than seeing bodies as only human and as simple carriers or performers of practices. As introduced above and explained elsewhere, human bodies are never singular, and in some circumstances the bodies of non-human animals are clearly performers of practices, or at the very least they share skills and meanings in distributed models (as can objects, artefacts, and technologies). It is clear by now that new knowledge about the emergent and changing nature of social worlds is only going to further challenge ideas of who and what can perform practices. The question as to whether there can ever be social practices without humans, I leave for future debates.

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Sociodigital Practices: Mobilising and Challenging Social Practice Theory

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Abstract

In this article, we ask what the emergence of digital technologies means for social practices. We argue that digital forms (devices, data, infrastructures, platforms, etc.) and (many) social practices are entangled such that they should be conceptualised as sociodigital practices. Conceptualised as such, key analytical questions are: How are sociodigital practices configured and reconfigured? And how and what kinds of connections form between sociodigital practices? We demonstrate how five concepts from Social Practice Theory (SPT) – infusing, circulating, merging and emerging, cross-referencing, and interweaving – are instructive for addressing these questions. Four challenges to SPT (and practice theories more broadly) are identified. (1) Analysis needs to extend beyond the everyday to include professional practices and sites of practice performance. (2) Technical expertise and interdisciplinary collaboration are essential to fully grasp the material threads that weave through sociodigital practices. (3) Specific concepts (infusing, cross-referencing, and interweaving) represent important analytical starting points for explaining the extensiveness and density of sociodigital practices. (4) Attention to futures claims as empirical objects of enquiry is necessary to engage with sociodigital future-making practices.

Keywords

circulating; cross-referencing; emerging; infusing; interweaving; merging; sociodigital

Introduction

Digital technologies are everywhere. The mobile web and the platforms it supports are carried in the pockets of over 4.6bn people worldwide (GSMA 2024) and embedded in diverse social practices from booking a restaurant to completing a bank transaction, learning to cook or watching television. The extensive reach of digital devices across everyday life is alluded to in phrases such as 'ubiquitous media (Featherstone 2009) and described in terms of "digital devicification … the situation where more and more forms of action are digitally mediated by devices" (Cochoy et al. 2020, 2). This emphasis on devices positions' the technical' as substantially distinct from social practice; as a tool that mediates action rather than a form of action itself.

Our use of the term sociodigital practices (Halford and Southerton, 2024) moves beyond the observation that social practices are increasingly integrated with digital devices (see, for example, the use of the term sociodigital in relation to educational practices in Korhonen, et al. 2024). Informed by Science and Technology Studies' (STS) use of 'sociotechnical', our conceptualisation extends beyond its insistence that the technical and social are co-constituted in two ways. First, and in keeping with Actor Network Theory (ANT), is to consider what is generally described as the social and the digital to be part of the same thing: practices or more specifically, sociodigital practices. Taking this position refutes an ontological boundary between digital technologies and social practices and, following Barad's (2003) concept of intra-action, focuses analytical attention on 'entangled agencies' (in distinction from inter-action, where discrete entities come into contact to create

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something new). Thus, the primary epistemological unit is not independent entities with inherent boundaries and properties but sociodigital practices composed of intra-acting 'components'. Second, and as a consequence, analytical attention turns to the processes through which sociodigital practices gather, accumulate, fragment, and reconfigure and to the connections between them.

This framing shifts attention from how devices mediate social practices to the accomplishment of sociodigital practices. Most obviously, it draws attention to sociodigital practices in familiar domains of everyday life – consuming, learning, organising, caring, moving, and so on – and the heterogenous elements (understandings, materialities, skills, etc.) involved in accomplishing these.[1] This framing also positions heterogeneous elements as entangled with, rather than conditioning of, sociodigital practices as entities and performances (see Hanchard 2024). For example, with reference to materiality, this means arrangements of devices, infrastructures, data, platforms and so on are understood as constituted through diverse practices. We also consider sociodigital practices to include technical research, design, operations, and governance that take place in particular sites, including laboratories, government agencies, base stations, and standards bodies. These, too, are constituted through understandings, materialities, and skills that are performed in the everyday life of specialist communities of practice. In short, digital technologies cannot be treated as distinct – or analysed in separation from – social practices. This takes us beyond devices to ask what sociodigital practices are being configured and reconfigured, how, where and when? What connections and forms of connectivity exist between sociodigital practices? And, what stays the same and what changes as sociodigital practices emerge, connect and evolve?

In what follows, we reflect on what Hanchard (2024) describes as the second wave of practice theories, specifically Social Practice Theory (SPT), and what it offers for describing and explaining sociodigital practices. Our approach is particularly informed by the work of Reckwitz, Schatzki and Shove, amongst others. We do not aim to draw out the synergies and tensions across different approaches to SPT (see Warde 2016) but note key debates and theoretical alliances to include with approaches such as ANT. In doing so, it becomes clear that attention to sociodigital practices also poses some challenges to SPT. We see this as an opportunity to open up new questions rather than a critique per se.

What Does Social Practice Theory Have to Offer?

SPT insists that social practices are the principal unit of social scientific enquiry. Schatzki (1996, 89) defines a social practice as a "temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings", which Reckwitz (2002: 249) describes as "a routinized type of behaviour consisting of heterogenous and interconnected elements, including: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge." Heterogenous elements combine in ways that render practice as entities recognisable, intelligible, and describable. Practices are also reproduced, adjusted and modified through their performance. The dynamics of social practices are found in the relationships between practices as entities and as performances (Shove et al. 2012).

This is a helpful starting point for conceptualising sociodigital practices. It moves away from dominant explanations (in engineering and orthodox economics, for example), which position digital technologies as acting on social practices (Halford and Southerton, 2024). Instead, analytical attention is focused on the diverse, indeterminate, and relational processes through which practices form, replicate, and change; how new practices emerge, how old practices linger; and how multiple practices hold together (Shove 2023). Practices are always a "part of a nexus of connections" with other practices (Nicolini, 2012, 229), and this enables SPT to overcome troublesome questions of scale, such as popular characterisations of macro, meso, and micro that present small phenomena as nested within larger phenomena (Schatzki 2019; Shove 2023). Such characterisations tend towards debates about whether the larger phenomena shape the smaller and how smaller phenomena challenge (deliberately or not) the orthodoxy of the larger. In distinction, SPT holds that the processes which give rise to arrangements of practices can be applied to all sizes and shapes. Notions of large and small are replaced with, borrowing from Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005, see also Schatzki 2019), concepts of more and less extensive forms of connection between practices (Shove 2023).

[1] See ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures: https://www.bristol.ac.uk/research/centres/sociodigital-futures

Framed this way, attention turns to how sociodigital "practices connect and different kinds of connectivity evolve" (Shove 2023, 3). For example, how the design of streaming services connects with television watching practices or how edtech industry practices connect with learning practices in the classroom. Both cases connect with multiple other everyday practices, such as parenting practices, and professional practices to include the ways in which corporate strategy practices drive engagement with standard setting for network connectivity, internet interoperability or privacy legislation, and engineering and design practices with technical cross-overs between streaming and Edtech platforms.

From this perspective, two key questions arise about sociodigital practices. First, where and how are sociodigital practices emerging, and in what ways do they relate to established (i.e. pre- or non-sociodigital) practices? At the core of this question is what new sociodigital practices or practice combinations are emerging, how and in what ways (might) they spread (across time and space), and which current practices may recede or disappear. This points to a second question about how emergent sociodigital practices can be conceptualised in relation to ideas about futures. Addressing this question, we contend, means more than extrapolating trajectories from past and present sociodigital practice relations to identify directions of travel. Instead, it means paying attention to how futures are claimed and acted on in the ongoing nexus of sociodigital practices.

Shove's (2023) account of SPT and extensive phenomena sets out a helpful framework for addressing our first question. Five of Shove's concepts are especially relevant for our purposes: infusing; circulating; merging and emerging; cross-referencing; and interweaving.

1. 'Infusing' considers how general understandings circulate across and between practices and may work towards "epistemic convergence" (Shove 2023, 14). Shove uses germ theory to show how "beliefs, values, general understandings and commitments" (14) infuse across practices. This concept is helpful in analysing, for example, how understandings of 'Artificial Intelligence' (AI) have come to infuse everyday life today. AI has a history of diverse meanings and practices, worked through science fiction, engineering labs, and popular culture. Interest and iterations of AI have waxed and waned historically, with layers of understandings and meanings patchily enacted in different sites of practice performance and at different times. Since the late 2000s – following the emergence of huge volumes of digital data, rapid increases in processing speed and cheap data storage – epistemic convergence has, arguably, formed around machine learning and generative AI. This is underpinned by powerful claims about its necessity (for national competitiveness, etc) and 'inevitability'. An identifiable epistemic community (of government, industry, engineering research, standards, infrastructure bodies, and management consultancies) is forming and shared understandings about the properties and capabilities of AI is gaining coherence.
2. 'Circulating' considers how materials and artefacts acquire meaning and value as they circulate through and across practices in space and time. In this process, the meanings and values of materials are continuously made and re-made through practices and practice connections. The mobile phone is a good example. Once a substitute for wired telephone conversations (Agar 2013), it now circulates through and across an array of everyday and professional practices, connecting with a suite of other artefacts from digital devices (e.g. Tablets, Computers) to data and digital services, which bring together materials as diverse as the food ordered from an online App to the underwater cables and satellites that transfer data across the globe (Starosielski, 2015). As materials and artefacts (such as the mobile phone) circulate through and across sociodigital practices, their meanings and values are continuously being made and re-made (but not determined).

3. 'Merging and emerging' refers to how a practice colonises and absorbs another practice or where two or more practices converge such that they can be described as hybrids. As Shove argues, "processes of multiple, multi-sited merger [may] result in hybrid practices that are reproduced in many places at once" (Shove 2023, 7). Working this concept through the examples of email and online shopping (sociodigital practices), Shove demonstrates that email is not simply a substitute for postal services but a hybridisation of multiple related, and once distinct, practices including filing, data storage, writing, communicating, archiving, and printing. Each have their own histories, associated devices and infrastructures, and competencies and skills. Similarly, the scaffolding of online shopping was already in place through the logistic systems, store layouts, barcodes, marketing, and electronic transactions that pre-dated it. It is notable that in recent years, the term 'hybrid' has become widely used to describe exactly this merging and emerging across diverse practices from work to education, social gatherings and political organization. This could be seen in purely technocratic terms as the adoption of digital technologies to replicate non-digital social practices. What is really involved in any of these hybrid practices comprises changes to both the entities involved and the ongoing performance of what are emergent sociodigital practices.
4. 'Cross-referencing' refers to how practices influence each other through mutual adaptation and calibration. Shove demonstrates how cross-referencing of systems, codes, standards, conventions, and regulations bleed across disparate practices. This concept raises some critical considerations for analysing sociodigital practice connections. In the telecoms sector standard setting appears (on the surface) as an ongoing technical activity. Specialist communities come together, such as W3C (web standards e.g. for HTML) or GSMA (5G/6G), to define standards and respond to ongoing technical (or regulatory) innovations. Like any infrastructural work, this involves controversies over how things should be done, vested interests in one solution over another, and has implications for the professional practices of those charged with maintaining and delivering infrastructures – as illustrated by the recent controversy over Huawei's involvement in 5G standard setting (Plantin, 2021). In mobilising claims about technical standards other 'social practice' standards are cross-referenced (about the demand for connectivity, low latency and increased data use). Such claims are premised on the needs, demands and expectations of (past-present-future) everyday (sociodigital) practices. In this example, cross-referencing is in motion across professional and everyday sociodigital practices and enacted (or arranged) through performances of multiple (connected) practices across diverse sites.
5. 'Interweaving' refers to how material threads (devices, resources and infrastructures) thread through practices. Shove offers the example of the Internet of Things that weaves together 'digital-electronic systems' across everyday practices from home lighting and food provisioning to car driving and traffic management. Material threads of connectivity – high-performance networks, internet, mobile phones, data centres, and so on – link together practices that are, by definition, increasingly sociodigital. They make sociodigital practices possible and facilitate forms of merging and emerging to include colonisation of previously non-sociodigital practices (e.g. writing). In this process of interweaving, interdependencies between material threads and sociodigital practices are being created and reproduced. As material forms such as network base stations, robots or immersive headsets become increasingly interwoven with algorithms, data, and generative AI, questions emerge about the resources these assemblages consume and the affordances that emerge through their interweaving in sociodigital practices.

These five concepts represent a set of SPT concepts to examine the connections between sociodigital practices. Our examples illustrate how each concept interprets sociodigital practices. This would represent a rich empirical research agenda but delivering it does pose some challenges.

Challenging SPT?

Exploring sociodigital practices poses four challenges for SPT research. The first considers what 'objects' of enquiry should analytical attention focus upon. The 'doings' and 'sayings' of practices as entities and performances remain the principal unit of analysis but attention needs to look beyond everyday practices. Researching an everyday practice, say eating, and considering the ways in which digital devices, data, and services relate to its performance is useful, but will provide only a partial analysis principally focused on processes of merging and emerging. Alternatively, we could consider the various sites in which multiple sociodigital practices related to eating are performed and examine the connections between them. Above, we have highlighted sites related to professional sociodigital practices, including engineering labs and sites of policy-making and business strategy. This makes it possible to explore each of Shove's concepts, to include the sociodigital practices that are performed in those sites and how elements of everyday sociodigital practices are mobilised within professional practices. A third option is to pay attention to the interweaving of material threads, the hardware and software (data flows, algorithms, AI models, platform services, etc.) that connect sociodigital sites and practices. We suggest that all three objects of enquiry are necessary to analyse sociodigital practice relations.

Second, what can SPT'ists 'know' about digital materialities, and how? Technical operations are often obscure to the social scientist. Yet, knowledge of what digital forms are, do, can or might do, is essential for analysing sociodigital practices. This is especially the case when holding to the position that digital devices, data, and services are material elements constituted through practices, entangled with other heterogenous elements and are not only material arrangements that configure practices. As such, understanding what we describe above as digital forms demands collaboration across SPT and technical expertise, not just because it is necessary to understand the technicalities of digital forms but because those forms are constituted through sociodigital practices. Such collaborations also offer methodological opportunities for SPT to work with new sources of data and methods. Certainly, these data and methods, carry concerns about their constitution and interpretation (see Halford et al., 2013; 2017). Nevertheless, a commitment to utilising and understanding the technicalities of digital forms is necessary for robust analysis of sociodigital practices (Halford and Southerton, 2024).

The third challenge is, given the extensiveness of sociodigital practice connections, with which concepts should we start? Are some concepts more fundamental or of pressing need to investigate than others? The concept of merging and emerging would appear an obvious starting point since it would focus attention on how sociodigital practices colonise, absorb and converge (or diverge) with other practices. It would not, however, help explain the density (i.e. the intensity of elements upon which concentrations of sociodigital practices co-depend) of those relations. Here, the concepts of interweaving, cross-referencing, and infusing are key points of departure. Each emphasises how understandings, standards, and material threads coalesce, offering a basis for examining both the extensiveness and density of sociodigital practice connections. Interweaving draws attention to the digital forms upon which multiple sociodigital practices co-depend and often do so synchronously (at the same times) and sequentially (in a particular order). Cross-referencing has implications for what and how sociodigital practices merge and emerge. Infusing matters because it offers scope to explore the emergent 'patchworks' of ways of describing, classifying, and prescribing forms of sociodigital practice. Importantly, while concepts such as cross-referencing and interweaving identify how multiple elements interact, both demonstrate that any analytical distinction between what could be described as social practice and digital forms collapses.

We end with a final challenge: in what ways can SPT engage with sociodigital futures? As argued elsewhere (Adam and Groves 2007; Urry 2016; Halford and Southerton, 2023), sociological theories largely look backwards to identify processes of change that might (or will) continue (unless something different happens in the present). This critique applies to first-wave practice theories (e.g. Bourdieu). SPT employs concepts such as prefiguration (Schatzki 2011) and trajectory (Shove 2023) to explain how existing practice relations, which have emerged from the layering of past practice relations, render some future arrangements more or less likely. This is certainly the case. However, this reduces futures to projections' out of' past and present practice arrangements. Futures matter beyond the identification of trajectories (Halford and Southerton, 2023). As STS demonstrate, while the future is unknowable, claims (imaginations, expectations, anticipations) about possible

futures have a performative effect on the present (see, Van Lente 2012; Jasanoff 2015; Halford and Southerton, 2024). Futures claims open-up and close-down possible futures (Stirling 2008). This means that claims about future sociodigital practices can, and should, represent empirical objects of enquiry alongside the more familiar analysis of past and present configurations of practices. Doing so offers a basis for considering sociodigital practice 'futures-in-the-making' (Adam and Groves 2007). A wealth of methodologies is available for this task (see Poli, 2018 for an overview, and Strengers at al. 2019 for an example).

Returning to our opening sentence, digital technologies are everywhere, as are claims that the future will be digitally mediated. These claims have a performative effect in the present. We have argued that these are observations of sociodigital practices and that SPT offers a rich conceptual repertoire for explaining sociodigital phenomena. Attention, however, needs to extend beyond everyday practices (into professional practices and sites), with interdisciplinary insights necessary to explain 'material threads', and concepts of infusing, cross-referencing, and interweaving, offering critical starting points for analysing the extensiveness and density of sociodigital practice relations. Attention to futures claims as empirical objects of enquiry, alongside analysis of present and past practice relations, is needed to critically engage with sociodigital future-making practices (Halford and Southerton, 2023).

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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 agentivity 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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What's 'Natural' About Disasters? Practice Theory as an Emancipatory Lens for Reconceptualising the Social Construction of Disasters

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Abstract

Practice theory constitutes an emancipatory lens for reconceptualising the social construction of disaster. Framing extreme weather disasters, such as floods, fires and tropical storms as natural, places them beyond human action. By contrast, a practice lens places their consequences firmly within the realm of human action. Drawing on practice theory, we explain why framing disasters as natural exacerbates their prevalence. We note that the practices of everyday life and striving to resume those practices after disaster often take precedence over alleviating the sources of disaster. Furthermore, these practices are distributed across time and space in patterns of social order that perpetuate the tendency for disaster to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. We conclude by issuing a call to arms to embrace the emancipatory potential of practice scholarship by exposing the disastrous consequences of mundane practice, critiquing the dominant ways of knowing that contribute to existing constructions of disaster and using social science to advocate for fundamental change.

Keywords

equity; natural disaster; social construction; vulnerability

Introduction

This essay proposes a practice theoretical lens for examining the phenomena of so-called 'natural' disasters on communities, meaning those that are framed as natural because they are caused by extreme weather or seismological events. A practice lens allows scholars to move beyond considering these disasters as exceptional natural events that cannot be controlled to considering how framing them as natural contributes to the increasing prevalence of disaster in everyday life. By reconceptualising the social construction of disaster through a practice lens, scholars can expose, analyse, and reconfigure the nexus of practices within which disasters are enacted to potentially decrease their incidence and devastating effects.

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Disasters arising from earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts, floods, and wildfires are often referred to as 'natural' to distinguish them from those arising from human error, such as explosions, oil spills, and health crises. When disasters are conceptualised as exceptional natural events, they are considered to exist outside human action (Revet 2020). Yet disaster is certainly not exceptional. Over the last 50 years, a disaster related to climate, weather, or water hazards has occurred every day, resulting in an average of 115 deaths and US$202 million in losses daily (World Meteorological Organization 2023). Disasters might thus be understood as frequent, normal, and a devastating part of many people's everyday lives, particularly for those in the Global South (Reice 2001).

In response, a more critical approach has arisen, emphasising that disasters are not inevitable and that they disproportionately effect the most vulnerable (Kelman 2020). For example, some 91% of the deaths in the above WMO figures occurred in developing economies, and even in advanced economies, devastation from extreme weather is exacerbated for minorities and the poor. The disastrous consequences of 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were compounded for those vulnerable due to poor-quality housing in the path of the hurricane and with fewer economic resources to avoid the consequences (Congressional Research Service 2005). Increasingly, therefore, there are calls to focus on the moral (Steinberg 2006) implications of conceptualising disasters as natural. Such concepts have economic and political expediency (Blaikie et al. 2014) that legitimise the failure to act on preventing the occurrence of disasters (Clarke and Dercon 2016). In this paper, we argue that practice theory can elicit a more critical understanding of disasters that can be emancipatory, including in altering our scholarly practice.

Practice Theory Premises

Our practice perspective is grounded in three key premises. First, practice occurs within in-the-moment sites of doing and sayings that are purposive but largely mundane, enacting aspects of everyday life such as commuting, working, family life, and socialising in ways that are not necessarily purposeful (Blue and Shove 2016; Chia and Holt 2006). Such moments are multiple and intersecting (Schatzki 2002). Practice is a complex nexus of moments that intersect and sustain people's everyday ability to act in their many social arenas (Giddens 1984). While it may sometimes involve purposeful, conscious and reflexive choices, it is mostly about the practical consciousness of enacting everyday life (Bruder 2025).

Second, this nexus of moments constitutes a flow of becoming (Shove et al. 2012; Tsoukas and Chia 2002) in which habitual yet dynamic patterns of commuting, working, and socialising are continuously being constructed. Each moment, while mundane, is also highly consequential in constructing the taken-for-granted patterning of social order (Giddens 1984). These moments are distributed across people and over time, cumulatively weaving the social fabric of communities and societies (Shove et al. 2012). This interplay between the in-the-moment and the flow of becoming over time makes practice theory 'scalable' from everyday practices by individuals, to the patterns of societal order that are always becoming within those practices (Jarzabkowski et al. 2015).

Third, these broader patterns of social order, constructed across time and space, are imbued with power and agency. The nexus of practices that enable social coordination also produces patterns of privilege and power (Bourdieu 1992; Foucault 1980; Giddens 1984). In particular, the practices through which power circulates within society produce patterns that accord some actors rights that are not accessible to all (Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016). Patterns of social order are thus patterns of power and privilege that also perpetuate patterns of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Practice Theory in Reconceptualising the Social Construction of Disaster

These three key premises of practice theorising – that practice inheres in the moment; that multiple moments across time and space are consequential in constituting unfolding patterns of social order; and that these patterns reproduce power and privilege – help to reconceptualise disaster as enacted within mundane human action, rather than as an exceptional 'act of nature'.

A Vignette of Reproducing Disaster in Everyday Practice

On a research field trip, we were looking at places where homes had been purchased and demolished after a catastrophic flood. The programme was voluntary, offered to those who wanted to move away from the disaster zone. Their homes were then fully demolished and rezoned as either parkland or environmental land. The birdlife was abundant, and we all remarked on the beauty of these reclaimed sites in this largely lower socioeconomic area. Some, backing onto streams and forested areas, had been planted to blend in with the forest, creating pockets of wildlife habitat. Others were small parks dotted among the suburban landscape.

The sense of peace was at total odds with the raging torrent that had ripped through this area only three years ago, devastating homes and livelihoods. And had also ripped through the neighbourhood 11 years before that. It seemed impossible that this serene working-class neighbourhood could have been the scene of such devastation.

We were surprised to see many houses adjacent to or in the middle of a strip of reclaimed land. These houses, mostly of a relatively cheap building type to provide affordable housing for population growth, were also flooded in the recent event and had no apparent advantages over the houses that had been demolished. Why hadn't their owners moved? The project manager explained that many people found moving stressful and beyond their capabilities to find somewhere new and affordable to live. All around us, people were going about their everyday lives, with little evidence of the trauma that had been visited on this neighbourhood twice in the past 20 years. It seemed a normal, pleasant place to live.

Our first premise, that mundane action is purposive in enacting immediate moments of getting things done rather than changing how and why those things are done (Bruder 2025; Chia and Holt 2006; Shove et al. 2012), helps explain how disaster is conceptualised as outside everyday experience (Revet 2020). While disaster is part of an increasing number of people's everyday experience, a flood or hurricane does not happen to those people every day. Most people's activities are, therefore, directed at enacting everyday life, rather than averting disaster.

Living in disaster-prone contexts is rarely a matter of conscious choice (Kelman 2020; Reice 2001). Rather, as shown in our vignette, people find themselves in contexts like floodplains through other aspects of everyday life, such as access to jobs, personal finances, affordable housing, and places to raise children in compatible communities; contexts not perceived as 'disaster-prone'. Hence, when disaster happens, it appears random and exceptional (Blaikie et al. 2014). After the disaster, the focus is, understandably, on securing homes and resuming everyday life as quickly as possible. The magnitude of enacting everyday life after a disaster, often in temporary or sub-standard accommodation, takes precedence over how to change that everyday life, such as moving away from a disaster zone. While some people move, the many who remain underscore the stabilising effects of the moment-by-moment activities within which people construct everyday life (Bruder 2025; Rouse 2007; Shove et al. 2012) even within the disruption generated by disaster. Practice theory thus helps explain why enacting 'normal' everyday living takes precedence over enacting living without disaster. Everyday practice has a profound stabilising effect in reconstructing patterns of social order that tend to embed the experience of disaster as outside human action.

In our second premise, communities come about, and societal orders are constructed within many entangled moments (Nicolini 2013; Schatzki 2002). For example, the housing development in our vignette came about within government and industry activities that generate jobs, affordable housing, and educational facilities that attract and retain communities. Where and how people live is a nexus of multiple entwined practices where many purposive but also mundane activities, distributed over time and space (Blue and Shove 2016; Rouse 2007), come together to construct the dense legacy of communities as places to live, even so that they are in the path of, and exacerbate the likelihood of, disaster. In their everyday practices, people, businesses, and governments have constructed the disaster as an exceptional event, rather than one to which their practices have contributed.

This nexus of distributed practices within which social order is constructed is also key to reconceptualizing disaster. These communities and their propensity to disaster have been enacted over many decades of mundane action (Giddens 1984; Rouse 2007) that reinforce the building, rebuilding, and growth of such communities, even where that exacerbates the likelihood of disaster (Davis [1998] 2022). While an individual can make choices to move, the disasters that are enacted are not solely the consequence of that individual's actions. Rather, they are the outcomes of a nexus of mundane actions by many people, organisations, and governments over time. Hence, instead of wondering why people in our field study did not move, we might rather query 'why – through what nexus of practices – has that housing been built there?' The prevailing patterns of social order through which people live in the path of disaster have been enacted within mundane and distributed actions across society over time. Rather than existing outside human action, the disaster that eventuates from any such pattern is a consequence of distributed human action.

In our third premise, distributed human action incorporates power and privilege in constructing disaster in ways that exacerbate its consequences. Patterns of social ordering have long entrenched inequity in living conditions (Elliott 2021). Conceptualising disasters as exceptions of nature is one means of perpetuating this inequity (Kelman, 2020). If a disaster is natural, action by those with greater access to power could not have prevented this "Act of God" (Steinberg, 2006). Similarly, if a disaster is exceptional, it does not warrant changes that might be costly, uncomfortable, and disrupt existing social order (Feldman and Pentland, 2022; Rouse, 2007). Hence, houses continue to be built in places and with materials that exacerbate the incidence of disaster and sold through the mortgage, and real estate institutions that we have constructed.

Often, lower socioeconomic areas are associated with cheaper forms of 'affordable' housing and less resilient building materials, thereby embedding inequitable consequences when disaster strikes. However, the pervasiveness of constructing disasters as outside human action is not solely driven by inequity. As demonstrated by repeated wildfires in California—of which the 2025 fires in LA were merely the latest at the time of writing—many different societal institutions are deeply entangled in perpetuating living in the path of disasters (Davis [1998] 2022). The practices of municipalities, state and federal governments, private and public insurance, taxation, wealth creation, construction codes, urban planning, and legislation all conspire to support the reestablishment of such communities. When these communities are displaced by disaster, other institutions for disaster relief and humanitarian aid are enacted to get them back on their feet (Clarke and Dercon 2016). Often in precisely the same places where they have already been knocked down (Elliott 2021). But the fundamental questions of whether people should live in such places and how practice can be reconstructed to move communities out of harm's way—in effect preventing disaster—are lost in the reproduction of existing patterns of socioeconomic order.

Conceptualising disasters as exceptional and natural thus perpetuates the circuits of power in which they happen (Foucault 1980; Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016). As long as the disastrous consequences of prevailing social patterns are largely contained to those with the least access to power and privilege, and those consequences are seen as exceptional, they can persist. If disaster is an exceptional act of nature, there is no need for those with greater access to the means of change to painstakingly rebuild a society in which such disasters are less likely. By contrast, practice theory helps to firmly ground disaster in human action.

A Call to Arms: Practice Theory as an Emancipatory Lens on Disaster

From a practice perspective, the disastrous effects of extreme weather are enacted within mundane human actions. Focusing on mundane actions is emancipatory because such actions are in continuous flux, always constituting the potential for change despite their profound stability (Bruder 2025; Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Schatzki 2019; Shove et al. 2012; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). However, a critical and reflexive approach is needed to support changes in social order (Danner-Schröder et al. 2025; Feldman and Pentland 2022; Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016; Gherardi 2009). We call for practice scholars to engage in studies that emancipate society from existing patterns and reflexively reconstruct them to alleviate the consequences of disaster, based on three key points.

Point 1

Practice researchers could find new and more accessible formats for exposing the disastrous consequences of mundane practices. Practice scholars typically use immersive methods to understand their participants' lived experiences, endeavouring to render those experiences 'real' in their writing. We urge practice scholars to go beyond writing for their disciplinary communities to making their participants' lived experiences of disaster available to wider audiences. These methods might include visual essays, documentaries, and alternative media.

In one salient example, Sou and Douglas (2019) use a cartoon format to display everyday recovery from Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, where post-disaster deaths escalated to over 3,000 due to power outages. The accessible cartoon format evocatively captures the lived experiences of families; graphically exposing the fragility of taken-for-granted practices for the supply of power, water, food, shelter, and medical care in the face of a disaster, the effort of restoring household practices in these conditions, and how recovery varies according to gender, ethnicity and class. The cartoon communicates the researcher's deep knowledge about how disaster is framed, who is disproportionately affected, the arduous work of recovery, and how disastrous effects might be alleviated (Sou et al. 2021). Despite making no reference to theories, the format is theoretically informed, displaying the complex relationality of practices (Bruder 2025; Jarzabkowski et al. 2015) associated with experiencing and recovering from disaster.

Our first key point, therefore, is for practice researchers to find new and more accessible formats for representing the entanglement of practices within which disasters are socially constructed, exacerbated, and potentially alleviated. These formats could both enable participants to reflect on their experiences and communicate them evocatively to audiences that are not part of the researcher's cognate community, provoking awareness, understanding, and the potential for change.

Point 2

Practice scholars could critically interrogate the interdisciplinary ways of knowing through which disaster is constructed. The complex practices entangled in the social construction of disasters demand interdisciplinary collaboration. While interdisciplinarity is proposed as a means of reorientation to complex problems (Anderson 2013; Ergene et al. 2021), our point goes beyond gaining a more comprehensive understanding of complex problems. Of course, that is important to our agenda. For example, engineers and architects are knowledgeable about the built environment, meteorologists have extreme-weather expertise, and political scientists, economists, and sociologists can explain relationships between housing, labour, and economic productivity. The tools, data, and ways of knowing from these and other disciplines are important for understanding the nexus of practices within which situations, such as the 2025 LA wildfires, become disasters. Beyond this, however, different disciplines construct and embed taken-for-granted practices about what is 'known' and how (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Hence, these entangled yet often siloed disciplinary ways of knowing embed and normalise the very practices that place people and properties in contexts that exacerbate disaster risk.

Our second key point, therefore, is for practice scholars to zoom in on interdisciplinary ways of knowing (Nicolini, 2009), tracing how they inform economic, housing, planning, and development practices that maintain and exacerbate the incidence of disaster. They might then incorporate other disciplines to generate new ways of knowing and acting (Blue and Shove 2016; Danner-Schröder et al. 2025). In doing so, practice scholars will have to go beyond the canonical ways of knowing and representing knowledge in their own disciplines. Stepping outside our disciplinary comfort zones will be challenging, but also emancipatory, in supporting a more critical practice agenda for studying disaster.

Point 3

Practice scholars could use their science to advocate for fundamental change in the practices that exacerbate disaster. Building on the above points, we urge practice scholars to embrace the responsibility of science to society (Hilgartner et al. 2015) by using their research for advocacy (Williams et al. 2025). Science informs and can even be co-opted into constructing societal patterns that preserve existing patterns of socio-economic power and privilege that perpetuate disaster. However, science is not neutral and can also contribute to the redistribution of power and wealth, as well as new ways of living (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Hilgartner et al. 2015). As society faces ever-greater challenges from climate change, inequality, poverty, and injustice, practice scholars could be more than scientific bystanders to disaster, actively advocating for change (Williams et al. 2025).

Our practice theory call to arms, therefore, is to reconceptualise disaster as social, not natural phenomena; develop societal forms of knowing how to act differently; and actively advocate for fundamental changes in everyday practice. Doing so will require courage, persistence, and humility (Jarzabkowski et al. 2025) and may not garner the multiple publications and rapid career progression that are the typical rewards of academia (Williams et al. 2025). Yet, practice scholars are well placed to take up this emancipatory work of engaging science to reconceptualise the societal approach to disaster.

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Practice Theory Perspectives on Learning and Social Change

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Abstract

This essay briefly outlines an individualist, cognitive, epistemic view of learning and supplements it with a sociomaterial, ontological view of learning as coming to practice differently. It draws on anthropological views of learning in communities of practice to outline a sociomaterial view of learning distributed among participants in social ensembles in which different participants come to practice differently from one another. It argues that learning is an ontological transformation, not only of learners, but also of the worlds they inhabit – in particular, practices, sites and arrangements, histories, and lives. Understanding learning as transforming learners' worlds locates learning in processes of social change, allowing researchers to show how distributed learning in social ensembles contributes to social movements for cultural, economic, ecological, social, and political transformation.

Keywords

communities of practice; education; ensembles; learning; sociomateriality

Introduction

This essay sketches some of the ways practice theory contributes to understanding the process of learning by reaching beyond the limiting horizons of an individualist view and complementing it with a view of learning as socially and materially constituted in changes in practices - coming to practice differently (Kemmis 2021). The practice perspective provides theoretical resources that connect studies of learning to studies of social change - and vice versa - and offer the prospect of more comprehensive accounts of transformations that integrate knowledge about changes in individuals with knowledge about changes in the worlds they inhabit. Knowledge about how the individual, social, and material faces of learning are interrelated can help harness individual, social, and political action to address many contemporary global problems and issues (e.g., climate change, loss of biodiversity).

At the risk of oversimplification, a practice theory view of learning recognises not only:

1. learning as a cognitive phenomenon and an epistemological achievement befalling individual learners, evident in learners' acquisition of knowledge or behaviours, but also
2. learning as socially and materially constituted in changes in practices, and evident in ontological transformations in the distributed practising of participants in social ensembles and in the worlds they inhabit.

The essay begins by outlining the individualist, epistemic view of learning adopted by most psychological theories of learning, sometimes supplemented by notions of 'learning organisations' in organisational psychology. Some anthropologists have offered an alternative perspective on learning, for example, in the notion of 'situated learning' in 'communities of practice'. Site-ontological and sociomaterial theories see learning as realised in practices, and as apparent in ontological transformations not just in learners but also in the worlds they inhabit. On this view, learning can be understood as 'coming to practise differently'. A practice theory perspective on learning helps to fill out theories of social change by providing

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accounts of how individual learners come to practise differently in relation to the others with whom they participate in social ensembles. In distributed learning, different participants in ensembles come to practise differently in different ways, transforming the overall capacities of the ensemble. A practice perspective thus offers resources for understanding the role of processes of learning in processes of social change.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to comment on the use of the concepts of 'change', 'transformation', and 'difference' in the essay. 'Change' is used here as a more open and general term covering multiple kinds of change. 'Transformation' is narrower: it refers to change in a formative process, that is, a process that forms things. A practice is such a process; practices are sociomaterial events (learned, situated, embodied human social action in history) that dialectically form both the person who practises and things in the world. They are also themselves routinely varied in response to changes in the world. When such variations are secured as enduring potentialities of a practice (e.g., remembered; or routinised in rules or procedures), it is reasonable to say that the practice has been transformed, and its transformation is evident in how the practice is practised 'differently'. In the discourse of the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014), this means that the practice is composed of sayings, doings, and relatings that differ in some way from those that previously composed the practice, and that they 'bundle' (Schatzki 2012) differently with arrangements (or with different arrangements) present in a site. A change, transformation, or difference in a practice - and learning as 'coming to practise differently' - may or may not bring about normatively 'better' states of affairs. For example, many changes in the conduct and consequences of human social practices since the Industrial Revolution have brought the world to a climate emergency, while many changes in practising today aim to ameliorate or reverse the harms done by humans to the communities of life and geophysical systems of the planet. People may come to practise differently in practices that are new for them, but they do so by adapting prior practices (Vygotsky 1978).

It is beyond the reach of this essay to provide a comprehensive review of different theories of learning. Illeris (2018) outlines many contemporary theories. The sketch of different theoretical perspectives offered below introduces some individualist, epistemological views of learning, then shows some of the ways in which other theorists of learning have sought to escape the limitations of individualist perspectives.

Individualist, Largely Epistemological Views of Learning: Learning as a Cognitive Phenomenon

Psychological research on learning has a long history. Since Ivan Pavlov's experiments on classical conditioning first published in 1897, there have been many schools of psychological research on learning including, in the early 20th century, for example, John Watson on stimulus-response relationships in behaviourism; in the mid-20th century, Burrhus Frederic Skinner on operant conditioning; Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers on learning in humanistic psychology; Jerome Bruner's cognitivist view; and Albert Bandura's social learning theory.

Alongside these in the early 20th century, theorist of human development Jean Piaget explored learning through an equilibration theory, tracing the development of cognitive schemata.

Since the mid-20th century, the now-burgeoning field of neuroscience also began to emerge (e.g. Berntson & Cacioppo 2009), addressing the changes learning brings about in learners' neural pathways, processes, and activity.

Most of the theorists mentioned here have focused on learning as a cognitive phenomenon located in individual learners - a process of the acquisition of behaviours or the acquisition of knowledge (e.g. propositional knowledge, skills, attitudes).

Since the 1970s, these perspectives have been complemented by developments in organisational psychology, some fuelled by an interest in 'learning organisations' (e.g. research by James March, Johan Olsen, Chris Argyris, and Donald Schön from the 1970s and Peter Senge in the 2000s). This stream of research shifted the study of learning into the social setting of the organisation. Generally, organisational theorists do not posit organisations as entities which are themselves capable

of learning; rather, they posit what might reasonably be called 'organised learning by individuals in organisations'. These developments located individuals in social groups, but did not escape individualism.

Schatzki (2003 2005), by contrast, suggested that a practice perspective could reveal 'organisations as they happen'. Other theorists in organisational studies also viewed organisations as composed of practices, not just of persons (e.g. Gherardi 2006; Gherardi and Strati 2012). These perspectives break free of the constraints of individualism.

Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

Anthropologist Jean Lave and colleagues (Lave 2019; Lave and Packer 2008; Lave & McDermott 2002) have been especially critical of individualist perspectives on learning and the focus of much psychological research on learning in schools and other educational institutions. Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991) studied learning as a social, material, and historical phenomenon to reveal 'situated learning' in 'communities of practice'. Lave and Packer (2008, p.44) described learning as a process of 'ontological transformation'. Later, revising her earlier views of communities of practice, Lave (2019) explored situated learning in everyday life settings, including in workplaces and in apprenticeship, illuminating how learning is always situated in settings which shape learners and learning, and also shape how learning changes other things in those settings.

Lave steps beyond the individualist view by locating learning in everyday life, as an indelibly historical, material, and social process. For example, following a review of various ethnographies of apprenticeship, she concluded:

> "[H]istorical processes of political-economic transformation, production processes, and family relations are intimately bound up in everyday relations of learning and vice versa." (Lave 2019, 55)
>
> "The complex practices described in these ethnographies belie characterisations of apprenticeship as simple mechanical reproduction of craft production processes. They raise questions about the social constitution of persons and practices in historical and political-economic terms, for which social practice theory offers analytic resources." (Lave 2019, 61).

On this view, learning is an intrinsic part of everyday life as it happens in all kinds of settings; it is certainly not limited to educational institutions (which frequently alienate learners and learning processes, see Lave and McDermott, 2002).

Site-Ontological and Sociomaterial Theories of Learning as Realised in Practices

From the 1920s, Soviet psychologists sought approaches to studying learning that would escape the confines of individualism and arrive at theoretical approaches compatible with communitarian Marxist-Leninist theory and practice. Thus, from the 1920s, Vygotsky (1978), with associates like Aleksei Leontyev and Alexander Luria in the Moscow Institute of Psychology, developed sociomaterial approaches to development and learning. These laid the foundations for activity theory, which has continued to evolve into the twenty-first century (e.g. Billett 2020) and thrives in various forms of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (e.g. Engeström 2015; Stetsenko 2017).

Schatzki (e.g. 1996; 2002; 2010) developed a compelling site-ontological perspective on practices as entangled with arrangements present in the sites where they happen, in what he calls (Schatzki 2012, 16) 'practice arrangement bundles'. He regards these bundles as the basic unit of social analysis. Kemmis et al. (2014) elaborated a version of the site-ontological approach in the theory of practice architectures, which sees the sayings, doings, and relatings that compose practices as being enabled and constrained by (respectively) the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements present in sites.

Kemmis et al. (2017) argued that learning is an initiation into practices, 'being stirred in' to practices or, following Wittgenstein ([1953] 1958), 'coming to know how to go on in practices'. Schatzki (2017) was hesitant to accept that view, arguing that practice theory could accept the 'standard' definition of learning as the acquisition of knowledge, in the three senses of know-how, knowing that, and familiarity.

In response to Schatzki, Kemmis (2021) argued that a practice theory view of learning should not be confined by that 'standard' definition, arguing that practice theory could take a more forthrightly ontological view of learning in which learning is understood as 'coming to practice differently'.

An attraction of viewing learning as both an epistemological achievement of individuals and an ontological accomplishment of social ensembles is that it reframes the problem of the learning organisation: an organisation's learning is evident in changes in its distributed practising - that is, when different actors in the ensemble come to practise differently in different ways in relation to one another, potentially enhancing the collective capacities of the ensemble as well as the individual capabilities of the individuals that compose it (Kemmis et al. 2025). This development is an instantiation of what Schatzki (2003) called a 'societist' social ontology.

In recent years, various practice theorists have focused more closely on learning and development from a sociomaterial perspective, including theorists of professional learning like Hager (2012), Hager, Lee & Reich (2012), Hager & Johnsson (2012), Fenwick & Nerland (2014), Hopwood (2016), and Price and Lizier (2024).

Hopwood (2016), for example, grounds his account of professional learning in an extended ethnography of professional practice in a residential unit providing support for parents of newborns and toddlers experiencing difficulties with feeding and settling to sleep. He presents a view of professional practice and learning seen in four dimensions (2016, 8):

1. *times*, which he sees as multiple, enacted, and emergent phenomena, evident in activity time, rhythms, and routines;
2. *bodies*, which are involved in individual and collective attuning and noticing (sounds, visions, multisensory actions), interacting with clients (attending to face, voice, posture, and movement), and the fuzzy edges of the body in professional practices;
3. *spaces*, including physical spaces as well as public and secret spaces; and
4. *things*, including material spaces (e.g., corridors, client suites, playroom), organising work (e.g., whiteboard, communication book, clients in residence sheets, signatures), and stabilising functions (e.g., objects around the nurse's station, pens; rhythms of clipcharts).

In a similar way, Kemmis et al. (2025) have drawn on both the theory of practice architectures and Lave's (2019) revised theory of situated learning to focus on learning in social settings where people participate in distributed (i.e., multi-

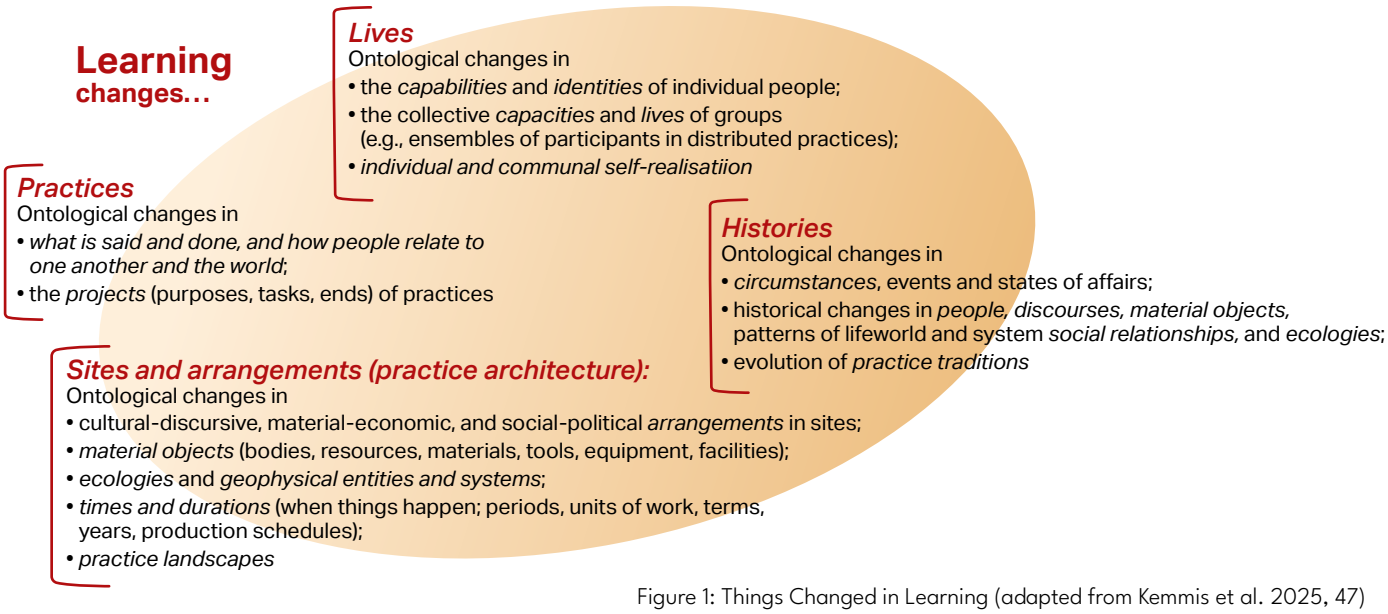

Figure 1: Things Changed in Learning (adapted from Kemmis et al. 2025, 47)

party) practices like a medical consultation or a football game. In light of critiques of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of 'communities of practice' (e.g. Duguid 2008; Lave 2019), Kemmis et al. instead speak of social ensembles of participants in distributed practices. Thomas (2009, 275) describes a person as 'the ensemble of social relations'; Kemmis et al. (2025, 47) flip that relationship to define an ensemble as a relationship of associated persons - that is, as persons associated by jointly participating in distributed practices. This yields a sociomaterial view of learning which Kemmis et al. see as shaped by, and shaping *practices*, *sites*, *histories*, and *lives* - as depicted in Figure 1:

Paths Ahead: Social Change

Practice theories offer rich resources for exploring distributed practices as matrices within which human sociality and coexistence unfold (see, e.g., Hui, Schatzki and Shove 2016). They also offer rich resources for studying learning, both by individuals and by ensembles.

Social theory since Marx (e.g. the *Theses on Feuerbach*, [1845] 1969) has been concerned with the nature and dynamics of social change, which Schatzki (2019) explores from a practice theory perspective. Conceptualising learning as 'coming to practise differently' puts the study of learning at the heart of studies of social change - both the learning of individuals and the distributed learning of ensembles evident in local and wider historical changes in cultures and discourses, materialities, and social formations. There is a need for further studies of how learning shapes, and is shaped by, social change; practice-theoretical perspectives can help to meet this need.

In the face of current global challenges - not limited to the climate crisis, wars, inequities, injustice, and political polarisation - human beings need to learn, that is, to come to practise differently, if we are to live different lives. Learning has been part of human adaptation to changing conditions throughout history, from the neolithic to neoliberalism. It remains central to the continuing evolution of humans and of the community of life on Earth.

Seen from the perspective of these crises, the relentless individualism of much conventional psychological research on learning seems not so much a theoretical or methodological limitation as an occlusion of the coexistence of human beings and the coexistence of humans with Earth's community of life. Humans need to find new and better practices by which to live with one another and the world - something for which practice theory has provided new and exciting resources (e.g. Shove & Spurling, 2013). We also need further insights into how to transform our existing practices to arrive at the new and different practices by which we may live more reasonably, sustainably, and justly. Studies of learning as a sociomaterial process can show how we come to practise differently.

The theory of practice architectures (e.g. Kemmis et al. 2014; Kemmis 2022) makes the case that changing our existing practices requires changing the practice architectures (arrangements) that sustain practices - that is, the conditions of possibility that secure practices. Many but not all of those practice architectures are produced by human beings, and can be changed by them, so we also have to learn how to become better at changing practice architectures - many of which (e.g. organisations, institutions) are the enduring products of sometimes long-past practices. Indeed, changing the practice architectures that shape practices is the goal of much social reform and the effect of much social change.

The immense, urgent task of transformation still looms over the planet, and increasingly polarised polities in many parts of the globe forcefully and sometimes violently contest paths to possible futures, only some of which will prove sustainable. People must also, therefore, learn how to make change towards more sustainable cultures, economies, ecologies, and societies in the face of contestation, opposition, and resistance - not merely as individual action, nor even just as social action, but also, inevitably, as political action. Practice theory perspectives on learning can provide resources for this task. Using these resources, practice researchers can show how individuals' learning is entangled in dialectical relations of mutual constitution with the learning and practising of others, and with changes that learning brings about in practices, sites, histories, and lives. Practice theory can thus throw light on how distributed learning in social ensembles contributes to social movements for cultural, economic, ecological, social, and political transformation.

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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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Received: 23/01/25. Accepted: 07/07/25. Published: 09/07/25. Peer Review: This contribution received one independent peer review that was double anonymised and one internal review in which authors' and editor's identities were visible.
[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 (Kuijer, Jong 2012) and direct enquiries related to specific policies[2] 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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Bordering and Insurgency: Towards a Decolonial Practice-Based Approach

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Abstract

This essay advances a decolonial agenda for practice-based research through the concepts of bordering and insurgency, introduced as generative tools for rethinking how practices are theorised and studied. While practice theories have contributed significantly to overcoming dualisms and foregrounding relationality, many empirical applications continue to overlook colonial histories, power asymmetries, and intersectional dynamics that shape social practices. Drawing on decolonial ideas, I propose an affirmative orientation that expands the analytical and ethical scope of practice theories. Bordering invites attention to the epistemic boundaries that legitimise certain practices while marginalising others, while insurgency foregrounds the knowledges and actions that emerge from sites of resistance. Together, these concepts support a more plural, situated, and reflexive engagement with practice - one that is attuned to historical legacies, ongoing exclusions, and the political stakes of knowing and doing. The essay concludes by encouraging future research that embraces epistemic diversity and cultivates methodologies capable of engaging with contested and emergent forms of practice.

Keywords

colonisation; decolonisation; intersectionality; social theory

Introduction

The turn to practice (see Schatzki et al. 2001) in the social sciences has contributed significantly to rethinking agency, materiality, and knowing. However, despite the epistemological and methodological richness that practice-based approaches have enabled, many empirical studies - particularly in management and organization studies - continue to overlook questions of difference, historical situatedness, and the unequal distribution of power across contexts. As Quijano (2000) and Ballestrin (2013) argue, modern social science is entangled with coloniality, not merely as a historical residue but as an ongoing set of interwoven practices that shape knowledge production, circulation, and validation.

In this essay, I propose a decolonial reorientation of practice-based research that foregrounds two interrelated concepts: *bordering* and *insurgency*. These concepts invite a shift from viewing practices as coherent and stable configurations toward understanding them as situated, contested, and marked by histories of struggle and exclusion. Rather than offering a general critique of practice theories or their ontological assumptions, the essay outlines a forward-looking research agenda that articulates how decolonial commitments can broaden and deepen practice-based enquiry.

While recent efforts have begun to address power and politics in practice theories (e.g., Watson 2017; Jonas and Littig 2017; Koddenbrock 2017), this essay adopts a different entry point. Rather than focusing on institutional configurations, rule negotiations, or the reconstruction of broader orders from within observed practices, it proposes a decolonial lens that foregrounds the geopolitics of epistemic legitimacy. Power, in this framing, is not simply an effect of relational positioning or normative disruption but is enacted through ongoing social practices that define which ways of knowing, doing, and being are rendered possible, peripheral, or unintelligible. This focus sets the stage for the concepts of bordering and insurgency.

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By *bordering*, I refer to the ways in which boundaries are continuously drawn and negotiated between epistemic traditions, geographic spaces, and social identities. This notion echoes the argument advanced by Scobie, Lee, and Smyth (2021), who suggest that the decolonial struggle is also a negotiation between aspirations and institutional constraints. Bordering is not only a condition of exclusion; it is also a space of encounter, translation, and friction. It challenges us to ask which practices are legitimised, whose knowings are foregrounded, and which forms of life are rendered peripheral or unintelligible.

Insurgency, in turn, refers to a mode of epistemic resistance that affirms subaltern forms of knowing and being. It resonates with Lugones' (2014) notion of decolonial feminism, where the task is not only to critique dominant narratives but to create spaces for enacting and embodying other ways of knowing. Insurgent practices reclaim silenced histories, inhabit alternative temporalities, and affirm ontological multiplicity. They are not merely oppositional but generative, cultivating openings for new theoretical and political possibilities.

Together, bordering and insurgency offer conceptual tools to imagine a decolonial practice theory - one that does not merely transpose existing frameworks onto new contexts, but reconfigures the epistemological foundations from which practices are defined and studied. This essay sketches such an agenda, drawing on decolonial scholars who foreground the need for critical reflexivity (Bonatti & Battestin 2023), situated engagement (Girei 2017), and collective re-existence (Lugones 2014). In doing so, I invite researchers to engage with the implications of their own positionalities and to consider how their work might contribute to more plural, grounded, and just forms of practice-based research.

Critique of Empirical Practice-Theoretical Research

Despite the conceptual openness of practice theories, many empirical studies - particularly those conducted within dominant institutional and epistemic centres[1] - tend to reproduce analytical closures that obscure key dimensions of power, history, and difference. While foundational practice theorists such as Bourdieu, Giddens, or Schatzki offer resources to explore contestation and hierarchy, applied research often privileges stability, routine, and normativity over disruption, struggle, and transformation.

One frequent limitation lies in the assumption of homogeneity across practices, contexts, and actors. Practices are often treated as internally consistent units of analysis, without sufficient attention to how they are shaped by race, gender, caste, class, and other intersecting markers (see Collins 2019; Akotirene 2023). As Liu (2022) shows, even seemingly inclusive knowledge regimes can operate through racialised assumptions and affective disciplining, reinforcing whiteness as the normative horizon of behaviour and professional recognition. Similarly, Dixit (2023) demonstrates how caste privilege continues to shape epistemic legitimacy in academic fields, even when such hierarchies remain unacknowledged in empirical descriptions of practice.

A second issue concerns the abstraction of practices from their sociohistorical conditions. In many empirical studies (e.g, Bjerregaard and Klitmøller 2016; Lüthy 2024), practices are examined in the present tense, as if they emerge spontaneously from local configurations of activity and materiality. This temporal flattening occludes the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal legacies that continue to structure which practices are possible, desirable, or intelligible in a given field. As Bonatti and Battestin (2023) argue, these silences are not accidental but part of a broader epistemic regime that marginalises knowledges rooted in embodied experience, affective memory, and collective resistance.

Moreover, practice-based research often reflects what Sliwa et al. (2025) describe as 'ontological arrogance' - a tendency to universalise theoretical assumptions developed in the Global North, while neglecting alternative modes of knowing and organising. Girei (2017), for instance, offers a reflexive account of her positionality as a researcher and practitioner working in post-conflict Uganda. Her efforts to promote participatory development through civil society engagement were repeatedly challenged by donor-driven practices that imposed technical and managerial logics. Through this experience, Girei came to recognise the coloniality embedded in institutional routines and the need to ground research in relational, situated, and politically aware ways of knowing.

[1] By dominant institutional and epistemic centres, I refer to universities, journals, languages, and research traditions located mainly in the Global North that set the standards of legitimate knowledge, often marginalising other socio-historical contexts and epistemologies (see Liu 2022; Girei 2017; Dixit 2023).

Taken together, these issues are not symptomatic of a failure of practice theories themselves, but rather of a selective engagement of ideas in empirical application. What is often missing is a deliberate attentiveness to power, history, and positionality - not as external conditions, but as constitutive of what practices are, how they are reproduced, and how they might be transformed. A decolonial agenda thus invites researchers to expand the analytical scope of practice-based research beyond technical competence or localised activity, toward a more situated, critical, and ethically attuned engagement to 'the political[2]' within practices.

Some scholars have sought to reintroduce power and politics into practice theories through complementary strategies to the one that I propose. Watson (2017), for example, maps how power circulates across constellations of interrelated practices, producing differentiated capacities for action and recognition. Jonas and Littig (2017) advance a praxeological political analysis that attends to how practices participate in norm-setting and public contestation. Koddenbrock (2017), in turn, warns against the fragmentation of social analysis into disconnected practices and advocates for a 'logic of reconstruction' that links local practices to 'broader' political-economic formations. While these approaches expand the analytical range of practice theories, they operate (to varying degrees) with the same epistemic grammar - privileging internal dynamics or analytical reconstructions rooted in Western critical traditions. In contrast, the perspective developed here begins from the colonial difference. It frames colonisation not as a historical backdrop, but as an ongoing social practice that shapes which practices are legitimised, whose knowledge is made credible, and whose lived realities remain invisible. This shift opens a different horizon for engaging with issues of power and politics in practice theories - one that is not merely additive or corrective but grounded in the epistemic and ontological reconfigurations demanded by decolonial arguments.

Decolonial Arguments for Practice-Based Research

Decolonial arguments offer vital resources for reimagining how we study and theorise practices. Rather than treating knowledge as abstract, disembodied, or universal, decolonial approaches foreground the entanglements of epistemology with colonial histories, geopolitical hierarchies, and material asymmetries. As Quijano (2000) reminds us, coloniality persists as a network of power-laden practices that organises not only labour and bodies, but also subjectivities and systems of knowledge. This means that the ways in which practices are defined, valorised, or dismissed are usually implicated in broader struggles over meaning, memory, and legitimacy.

Within this context, the notion of bordering emerges as a key analytical tool. Bordering refers to the discursive, institutional, and material processes through which boundaries are drawn between what counts as legitimate knowledge and what is rendered peripheral, residual, or invisible. These borders are not static lines; they are produced and contested through everyday practices of categorisation, translation, inclusion, and exclusion. As Ballestrin (2013) suggests, the 'colonial difference' continues to structure the global division of epistemic labour, often demarcating the Global South as a site of empirical illustration rather than of theoretical innovation.

The conceptual roots of *bordering* in a decolonial register draw heavily from *border thinking* or *border gnosis*, as articulated by Mignolo (2009), who describes it as a mode of knowing from the underside of the colonial perspective of modernity. It builds on Anzaldúa's ([1987]1999) work on *borderlands*, where ontological multiplicity is not merely tolerated but inhabited as a generative space. In this framing, *border ontology* does not seek to overcome or erase borders, but to dwell in their tensions, reclaiming them as epistemic and political resources. As such, bordering becomes both a condition of exclusion and a space of encounter, translation, and friction. It challenges us to ask which practices are legitimised, whose knowings are foregrounded, and which forms of life are rendered unintelligible.

The concept of *insurgency* complements this view by naming the active contestation of dominant knowledge regimes. Insurgency refers to epistemic and ontological practices that interrupt, subvert, or exceed the norms of what is thinkable or speakable within hegemonic frameworks. Lugones (2014) describes these as acts of *resistant existence* - practices that emerge from the cracks of the colonial/modern 'system' and affirm other ways of being, relating, and knowing. In the field of

[2] Here, 'the political' refers not to institutional politics or policy-making, but to the ever-present dimension of antagonism, contestation, and power relations that shape social practices (see Mouffe, 2005).

political epistemology, Escobar (2018) conceptualises *insurgent knowledges* as grounded, embodied, and collective processes that challenge abstract, universalising epistemologies from the standpoint of the oppressed and dispossessed. These are not merely oppositional acts; they are constructive, crafting worlds in which plural ontologies can coexist without being absorbed or erased by dominant paradigms.

Insurgency also resonates with what Mignolo (2009) calls *epistemic disobedience* - a deliberate refusal to obey the rules of colonial reason and a commitment to enact other logics, other memories, and other futures. Rather than asking to be included in dominant forms of order and knowing, insurgent knowers seek to displace taken-for-granted terms and recompose the ground from which theory and practice emerge. Girei's (2017) account exemplifies this point. Her attempt to work collaboratively with Ugandan civil society organisations was met with donor-driven expectations of technical neutrality and depoliticised practice. Instead of conforming to these demands, she reframed her research as a relational and political engagement, rooted in the lived realities of those marginalised by institutional power. Her praxis was insurgent not only in its content but in its refusal to separate knowledge from positionality, ethics, and struggle.

These concepts do not stand apart from existing practice theory approaches; instead, they provide an opportunity to revisit and expand them. For instance, Schatzki (2002; 2012) defines practices as organised nexuses of doings and sayings, governed by teleoaffective structures (the ends and emotions that make actions meaningful), rules, and shared understandings. He argues that what makes sense to do in a given situation - *practical intelligibility* - is embedded in and shaped by these social arrangements. A decolonial approach invites us to ask: whose ends are included in a given teleoaffective structure? Whose intelligibility is taken for granted? And how are such orientations historically conditioned by coloniality, epistemic domination, or resistance?

A similar move is possible when engaging with posthumanist approaches to practice. Gherardi (2022) defines practices as sociomaterial configurations where knowing is enacted relationally through entanglements of human and more-than-human elements. Her notion of *knowing-in-practice* challenges the Cartesian division between subject and object and invites us to trace how knowledge is embodied, situated, and co-constituted with artefacts, spaces, discourses, and affect. From a decolonial standpoint, this opens a path to recognise how non-Western cosmologies, spiritual materialities, and ancestral presences can also participate in the constitution of practices, even though such knowledges are often excluded from what is deemed intelligible or relevant in empirical research. In this sense, bordering and insurgency allow us to expand the reach of sociomaterial thinking not only to include nonhuman agency, but to render visible epistemologies that do not separate knowing from land, ritual, silence, or community.

From this angle, *bordering* and *insurgency* do not reject practice theories; they radicalise its potential. They are concepts with which once can reorient epistemic commitments and foreground plural genealogies of knowing and doing. They call for practice theories capable of working across borders, listening across differences, and engaging with the insurgent possibilities that emerge from the periphery.

While posthumanist and practice-based epistemologies already challenge the Cartesian separation between subject and object, they do not always and necessarily attend to the geopolitical and historical conditions that shape which knowledges are seen, heard, or rendered credible. As Ibarra-Colado (2006) argues, knowledge production - even when conceived as situated and embodied - remains shaped by power relations that determine whose knowings are legitimised and whose are marginalised. Gherardi's (2022) notion of knowing-in-practice foregrounds knowledge as performative and relational, co-constituted through sociomaterial entanglements. Ibarra-Colado's critique develops this position by highlighting how such entanglements are also conditioned by epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial histories and institutional arrangements. Together, these insights support an approach that attends to politics within a practice: one that understands knowing as always situated, but also contested, regulated, and bordered by broader struggles over recognition and legitimacy.

Towards Bordering and Insurgent Practices

What would it mean to take bordering and insurgency seriously in practice-based research? This question points toward a future agenda in which practice theories do not merely describe what is, but help to imagine what could be. It invites researchers to attend more carefully to how practices are made visible, who is authorised to participate in them, and what forms of life are silently excluded from accounts of action, meaning, and competence.

To begin with, a bordering-sensitive approach calls for heightened reflexivity regarding research positionality and the epistemic boundaries that shape inquiry. Rather than assuming that practices are stable, self-evident phenomena, researchers are challenged to ask how categories such as 'organising', 'learning', or 'managing' are historically and culturally constructed, and whose practices remain unnamed or unintelligible within dominant frames. This requires attention not only to what is said and done, but also to what is silenced, erased, or misrecognised. As Bonatti and Battestin (2023) remind us, knowledge is often shaped through denial- an active process of forgetting the colonial conditions that underpin modern institutions and their practices.

The idea of *insurgency* reorients research towards marginal and emergent practices that defy codification. It foregrounds modes of knowing that may not fit neatly into analytic categories, but which hold political and ontological weight. This includes spiritual, affective, collective, and territorial forms of knowledge that are often dismissed as anecdotal, informal, or pre-theoretical. Empirical engagement with such practices requires methodological openness: dialogical designs, narrative and performative methods, and participatory approaches that decentre the researcher as the exclusive knower. It also calls for humility - a willingness to unlearn inherited epistemic habits and to let research be disrupted by those whose worlds do not conform to dominant expectations. As Hui (2023) argues, decolonial strategies in research should not be imposed normatively from above but emerge through methodological reflexivity and attentiveness to how enquiry itself unfolds as situated practice.

From a conceptual standpoint, this agenda invites a rethinking of key notions in practice theories. For instance, what counts as *practical intelligibility* may vary radically across ontological horizons; what 'makes sense' to do cannot be assumed as a shared rationality but must be interpreted through historical, situated, and contested grounds. Similarly, *competence* is not a neutral category - it is often racialised, gendered, and classed, shaped by unequal access to recognition. A decolonial approach urges researchers to critically interrogate how such hierarchies are reproduced or resisted within practices, and what forms of learning or participation are rendered possible or impossible.

This reframing also opens a critical dialogue with posthumanist theories of practice. While Gherardi (2022), conceptualises knowing as a relational, sociomaterial process performed through entanglements of humans and nonhumans, her *knowing-in-practice* decouples knowledge from the isolated, intentional subject and emphasises emergent agency across heterogeneous networks. However, this kind of approach has the potential to bracket social markers of difference such as race, gender, class, and colonial history. A decolonial orientation complements this by emphasising those dimensions as part of the relational and sociomaterial web, showing how power circulates not only through human–nonhuman relations, but also through embodied inequalities, symbolic violence, and historical exclusions. In this way, bordering and insurgency extend posthumanist sensibilities, making them more attuned to difference, conflict, and resistance within practice.

Finally, a decolonial approach to practice theories may also contribute to deepening our understanding of large-scale, complex, global issues – sometimes framed as *grand challenges* (Jamali et al. 2021). While much existing literature addresses such challenges through institutional strategies and global frameworks, a decolonial approach invites us to examine how such crises are lived, contested, and transformed through situated, everyday practices. As Danner-Schröder et al. (2025) argue, practice theories offer valuable tools to explore the dynamic, relational, and processual nature of how organisations engage with complex societal issues. Building on this, a decolonial position foregrounds how such engagements are also shaped by historical inequalities, epistemic exclusions, and colonial legacies that are often rendered invisible in mainstream responses to climate change, global health crises, or systemic racism.

A decolonial approach to practice-based research would illuminate the frictions, resistances, and insurgent strategies that emerge from the margins, not as peripheral exceptions, but as central to understanding how change becomes possible. By tracing the interplay of power, memory, and knowledge in the enactment of practice, a decolonial approach reveals how seemingly universal responses are always situated, contested, and selective. In this way, bordering and insurgent practices offer a grounded, plural, and relational way of engaging with grand challenges - not from above, but from within the tensions and possibilities of lived experience.

Final Thoughts

This essay has proposed a decolonial reorientation of practice theories grounded in the concepts of *bordering and insurgency*. It has sought to open a space for dialogue, inviting researchers to engage more deeply with the political, historical, and epistemic dimensions of practices. By foregrounding the ongoing effects of coloniality, the argument is that practice-based research must go beyond descriptions of situated activity to confront the conditions under which activity becomes visible, legitimate, or intelligible.

Bordering and *insurgency* offer conceptual ideas through which to recognise the asymmetries that shape both everyday practices and research practices. They ask us to remain attentive to how epistemic boundaries are drawn, differences erased or domesticated, and how resistance and creativity emerge from the margins. Crucially, these concepts do not stand in opposition to established practice theories and related ideas. Instead, they invite us to consider not only *what* is practiced, but who *practices*, *where*, *how*, and *against what conditions*.

A decolonial approach to practice theories offers valuable contributions for understanding both ordinary and large-scale phenomena, from routine forms of exclusion to the lived realities of grand challenges. It does so not by proposing a new method or paradigm, but by cultivating a sensibility - one that embraces epistemic humility, listens across difference, and holds space for plural ways of knowing and acting.

In this spirit, the future of practice theories may lie not in their consolidation but in their fragmentation: in allowing them to be unsettled, translated, and remade from diverse geopolitical and epistemic locations. Engaging with bordering and insurgency is not only an analytical gesture; it is a political and ethical commitment to make room for other worlds within the study of practices. It is, above all, an invitation to unlearn, to re-exist, and to practice otherwise.

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On War and Practice Theory: Difficulties, Dangers, and Unease

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Abstract

In this short piece for the Columns section of the journal, Torik Holmes considers war as under-explored terrain and asks what the potential might be for a practice theoretical analysis of armed conflict. In doing so, he discusses how a conceptual focus on practices rather than individuals unsettles conventional narratives of blame and responsibility and raises difficult ethical questions about the uses and consequences of social theories.

Author Biography

Torik Holmes is Hallsworth Research Fellow at the Sustainable Consumption Institute and Sociology Department at the University of Manchester. His research focuses on sustainable transitions. He is currently examining the manifold concerns and challenges wrapped up with plastics recycling. Torik has written about practices in relation to plastics recycling, energy demand and infrastructure, the sociology of markets, and the unsustainable consequences of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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One hundred and fourteen – that's the estimated number of wars, or armed conflicts, unfolding across the world at present, according to the Geneva Academy website. This number goes up and down and has likely never, nor never will, hit zero. Like death and taxes, war is a perennial feature of social life. Despite this, practice theory has remained relatively absent from the theorisation and related analysis of war. Where has practice theory been? Typically elsewhere – visiting and reshaping arguments over environmental sustainability, education, entrepreneurship, management, innovation, design, and health.

Should practice theory be more involved in the analysis of war? Undoubtedly, it would contribute a new approach, as it has on other subjects, challenging conventional wisdom and fundamentally reframing debates. War is not, however, a pleasant subject. It is unsettling and rouses thought on both the difficulties and dangers, with ontological and ethical roots, that practice theory would face if it turned to war.

While these difficulties and dangers are not unique to the analysis of war, they appear more acute when war and all that can come with it - pillage, plunder, displacement, murder, genocide, rape, physical and psychological scaring, biodiversity loss, the list goes on - are in the crosshairs of theorisation and analysis. The overarching sense that arises from contemplating war as a topic of study is one of ethical unease. This unease, in turn, provokes a more encompassing reflection on the functions and duties of social theory and whether it is the role and responsibility of practice theory to condone and condemn and not simply to provide understanding and explanation. Practice theory has tended to be more comfortable with explaining, focusing on how matters come to be than identifying what or who is to blame. War and the difficulties and dangers that come with studying it, together with the overarching shadow of ethical unease provoked by the subject as a potential focus of practice-oriented theoretical enquiry, call this tendency into question by spotlighting tensions between ontological commitments and ethical quandaries.

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These tensions are a useful reminder that ontologies cannot escape ethical questions, judgements, and resultant feelings of uncertainty, which provoke critical reflection.

The difficulties practice theory faces in getting more involved in the analysis of war arise from the strength of grip individualism holds on such analyses and the related and very understandable ethical impulses to attribute blame and responsibility, which strengthen this hold. The force of this grip is evident in the long-held, prevailing fascination with who is at war. While the discussion of armies and troops features, it is the individual heads of state and organised groups that tend to come into focus most sharply when war is the subject of analysis.

Mentioning Hector, Paris, and Helen brings the Trojan War of Greek history to mind. Mention of the Napoleonic wars brings their namesake into view. Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy - the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia. As I am writing, I am hearing talk over the radio of Mahmoud Abbas lamenting Donald Trump for suggesting the United States will take over Gaza following the destructive invasion undertaken by Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel that resulted in an estimated 64,260 deaths, according to a 2025 paper in *The Lancet*, between October 2023 and June 2024.

This figurehead framing makes perfect sense for those who consider the world to be comprised of individuals, be these people, groups or states, and construe war as armed conflict between them and their competing interests. This makes no sense from a practice theory perspective. It's antithetical to the shared bedrock of practice theory, which is to take practices, not individuals, as the basic units of social life. Based on this, the who of war is decentred according to practice theory by questions concerning how conflicts materialise. The different ontological starting points assumed by those in the individualist and practice theory camps also mean that shared questions concerning what war involves and how wars unfold will be explained in divergent terms.

This division is not unique to the analysis of war. Practice theory is regularly at task with individualism. Compared to more popular areas of study, the difference in the present case lies in the heightened ethical dilemmas provoked by war, thanks to the dire consequences of armed conflict. These dilemmas promise to stress test practice theory's commitment to challenge individualistic accounts of cause and effect – and the attribution of roles and responsibilities that come with them.

Maintaining the position that practices are the bedrock of social life instead of individual people, who practice theorists frequently characterise as 'rule followers', 'carriers', and 'crossing points', is arguably hard to maintain in the face of the monstrosities of war, which push for the identification of individual monsters who can be put to trial and held to account for their actions. This is troubling for those practice theories that see actions as belonging more to practices than —if at all— to the individual people who carry on practices. By extension, individual people are not to blame for war and what tends to come with it, for example, murder, interrogation and incarceration – instead, practices must be assumed to be largely at fault. The challenging implications of this view of action and responsibility become even clearer when threaded through the issue of rule-breaking.

War demands an explanation of rule-breaking as much as of rule-following, which practice theory tends to be more closely associated with. This is because war commonly involves the breakdown of international conventions of diplomacy and peace. An important issue is where this breakdown comes from. Conventionally, it is seen as the outcome of faltering relationships between figureheads of state and disagreements over land, resources, money, and expected behaviour. For many practice theorists, rule-breaking needs to be approached as an outcome of the details and dynamics of practice.

One way to view rule-breaking is as a consequence of certain practices winning out over others, with the ardent following of certain rules leading to the breaking of others. For example, pursuing the practical ends of statecraft and maintaining political power may involve breaking rules and related practices of international diplomacy, as in the case of the Iraq War, which saw United Nations Security Council resolutions transgressed. The suggestion here is that war results from practices breaking the rules of other practices. This signals a strong stance on the omnipotence of practice over individuals and also brings into question whether practices have a will of their own and the extent to which they can and should be treated as wilful transgressors.

Critics will argue that maintaining such a strong stance on practices indicates an abdication of responsibility, leaving it difficult to hold anyone to account for war and what results from it. This criticism is hard to face. Practices cannot stand trial without people in the dock. A lingering issue here is whether people are responsible for the practices they enact and the related breaking of rules. In the face of war, and

particularly in reply to questions concerning what's to be done in response to its ills, it's hard not to lay culpability in the hands of individual practitioners. This will no doubt leave many practice theorists with an uneasy feeling for which a remedy isn't immediately clear, other than avoiding the gritty details of responsibility and retribution that war provokes.

To turn to the dangers - there is a danger that the involvement of practice theory in the analysis of war could lead to its powerful schemas being taken up and mobilised as part of the enactment of armed conflict. The quandary here concerns the extent to which practice theory could end up being put to destructive ends, functioning as a means of fine-tuning machines of war. There is certainly a danger that practices of war could be sharpened if there was even greater sensitivity to the important roles that technologies, resources, meanings, messages, and skills play in the carrying out of armed conflict. This sharpening could disturb and disable the capabilities of practices carried out by adversaries, as well as upscaling and improving those of allies. Crucially, because practices travel and are taken to have lives of their own, honing sensitivities to the conduct of war would circulate and could contribute to the overall potency of destructive action irrespective of debates over right or wrong.

There's also a danger, again ethical, that the decentring of individuals that comes with much practice theory could feed dehumanising approaches to conflict based on people being reduced to carriers, crossing points, materials and resources, which are there to be managed, manipulated and expunged as appropriate to the ends pursued. History has revealed the stark consequences of such ontological reductions and the relegation of humans to ways of being conventionally considered further down the pecking order of worth. The nagging ethical concern here is the extent to which the ontological equivalence and symmetry between humans and non-humans that practice theory sometimes calls for could be perversely used to justify dangerous and damaging treatments of human life.

Accordingly, the idea of practice theory getting more involved in the theorisation and analysis of war provokes difficulties, dangers, and an overarching sense of ethical unease. The latter is rooted in tensions between the ontological commitments of practice theory and ethical quandaries that the subject of war sharply spotlights.

As indicated, thanks to what it involves and brings to mind, war inevitably provokes thought on rights and wrongs, victims and perpetrators, injustice and justice. These thoughts signal ethical judgements regarding which practice theory has typically practised and encouraged agnosticism. A way to view this agnosticism is as an outcome of practice theory's analytical commitment to practices as the basic unit of social life, enquiry, and explanation. In its most potent form, this commitment sees all social matters, including those to do with ethics, as residing within and relative to practices. Just as practices are taken to change over time and to differ from one practice to the next, so too can the ethics that reside within them.

This understanding and the ontological and analytical commitment to practice it echoes calls the universal validity of any particular ethics into question. It also, relatedly, counsels the analyst to hold off from making judgments premised on the ethical considerations that they, as analysts, carry with them as carriers of particular practices.

The ethical unease provoked by the subject of war thus needs to be approached and analysed as a product of the practices that elicit that unease, including those of doing practice theory. In this regard, war provides a potent reminder that there are ethical consequences to ontologies and associated views on the constitution of social life and that it is not always easy for analysts to suspend judgments premised on the ethics of practice they bring with them.

These implications linger however hard practice theories and practice theorists try to remain agnostic toward ethics. This is partly because social theorists and the social theories they help develop can be judged according to these theories' implications for ethics, whether such judgment is wanted or not. It is also because, relatedly, while social theories and the theorists that put them to work may seek to remain quiet on making ethical judgments, the silence proves deafening as trying to maintain the quiet can itself carry ethical implications. For example, that silence is an unethical act. It is thus arguably best to squarely face the difficulties, dangers, and connected, overarching feelings of unease that a subject such as war provokes about possible practice theoretical analysis and to reflect on the origins of these and what they suggest about the predilections and potentials – good and bad - of social theories.

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