

My Journey within Practice-Based Approaches Bandwagon

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Abstract

In this comment to the Symposium on the *Contamination of Practices*, the author reflects on the birth of practice theory, as emerged from the work done with his colleague Elizabeth Shove. In doing so, the comment outlines that the interest to develop this approach especially emerged from the author’s frustration with the perspective to consumption common in economics. Starting from this subjective view, the article takes into consideration the contribution from the papers included in the symposium, highlighting that their variety reveals the flexibility and usefulness of the practice approach.

Keywords: theory of practice; structuration theory; practice turn; consumer economics.

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During the last few decades a real “bandwagon” of practice-based studies has emerged. Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni (2010) have studied in detail different versions of this movement. They suggest with good reasons that the bandwagon has spread through pluralism of conceptual labels and ideas. Different disciplines have their own versions, eg. “Strategy as practice” or “Marketing as practice.” What follows is a somewhat personal, surely biased, account of my personal “practice approach trajectory” ca. 2003–2014. Reading excellent papers of this volume inspired me to return back in time when my interest arose.

In the next few pages I will try to catch what puzzled and what excited me when starting my work on practice turn. The first step was already decades ago, when I enthusiastically — as a doctoral student — read *The Constitution of Society*:

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The core subject of the social sciences is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2).

The articles in this Symposium make me think how differently practice theories are approached today compared to the situation when my interest first arose while reading Giddens (1984) and, more than a decade later, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). Compared to my early, somewhat uneducated theoretical optimism, the authors here (e.g. Volonté, Tosoni and Magaudda & Piccioni) seem to share a much clearer and less confused view of what practice theory is good for, and how it could be used. Is this a proof of normalization of the practice approach or alternatively a proof of forgetting complicated philosophical questions behind practice theories? I am not sure.

As a doctoral student of economics, my earliest interest in practice approaches stemmed from my frustration of seeing the “economic man” purely from an individualistic point of view. Methodological individualism of mainstream economics manifested an under-socialized version of human behavior. At the same time, the picture of human behavior in mainstream sociology was over-socialized (Granovetter, 1985). In my early academic career, my response to this dichotomy was to work with terms such as “choreography of everyday life” or “domestication of technology.” Since then some of these concepts have become quite widely used and normalized when emphasizing agency-structure interdependencies. Also, my dissertation, titled *A Replicative Approach to Evolutionary Dynamics* (1991), was much stimulated by Anthony Giddens’s arguments for the recursive nature of human behavior and in specific structuration theory overcoming the duality of structure and agency. Therefore, it is no big surprise that listening to Alan Warde’s presentation in the spring of 2003 about potentiality of practice theories in consumer research fascinated me a lot. It is possibly through everyday life repetitions and ordinary routines that changing consumption patterns could be approached.

According to Warde, theories of practice justify the rejection of analyses based on models of either *homo economicus* or *homo sociologicus*. At that time I asked Warde whether any ready-made text existed and he sent me a draft of his 2003 CRICT Discussion paper. Picture 1 reveals my reactions and excitement: the paper is full of underlining, exclamation and question marks. It was through this paper that I learned of both Schatzki and Reckwitz, both of whom became in many ways corner-stones in my forthcoming joint work with Elizabeth Shove.

I remember that some parts of Warde’s text were quite complicated to understand, such as the difference between “practice as an entity” and “practice as a performance.” Warde’s paper was published in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* in a purified (to me, less interesting) format (Warde, 2005). It became one of the most cited articles of the journal.

I appreciated Warde’s use of rich theoretical sources and, in specific, a plea for multiple methods: from the practice point of view, most forms of data collection are suitable (This fitted well to Giddens’s appreciation of multiple disciplines, say geography or history, in social scientific account). I felt that there was a major difference compared to standard consumer economics, which simply dealt with exogenously given preferences, changing incomes and prices. Importantly, practice-based theories could add competencies and various feedback mechanisms (e.g. endogenous preferences and technology) to the vocabulary of consumer research.

Later, the emphasis of multiple methods and theories took place concretely later on in many articles written by me together with Elizabeth Shove. When studying, for instance, digital photography or floorball trajectories (Shove & Pantzar, 2007), we used many “social learning methods,” such as participatory observation or autoethnography, in addition to interviews. As Stefano Crabu (2019) in this volume emphasizes, social learning is an essential part of practice-based theories. In many ways, my trajectory from being an economist to becoming a practitioner of practice theory reminds to what Crabu tells about social learning in precision medicine:

Learning is not a neutral process but it takes place in biographical and historical landscapes that co-define peculiar forms and possibilities of participation and learning trajectories (Crabu, 2019).

Indeed, cooperation with Elizabeth Shove (a sociologist and an economist) implied a lot of time-consuming negotiation of interpretations of our different epistemic positions. For instance, we discussed a lot whether we should characterize our framework as a “model” (as economists do), an “approach” or a “theory,” or how to make sense of the mechanisms by which individual acts and practice complexes — relate to each other. When we operationalized our thoughts, we developed a kind of “precision choreography of everyday life.” “Picturing practices” was one of the ways through which we attempted to reach shared understandings. Many topics, such as the diffusion of digital photographing and floorball (Shove & Pantzar, 2007) or nordic walking (Pantzar & Shove, 2010a), temporal patterns of everyday life (Pantzar & Shove, 2010b) or fossilized practices (Shove & Pantzar, 2005) started from simple curiosity or occasionally even from jokes. For me, as a consumer researcher, just the idea of increasingly moving the focus from sayings (or artefacts) to doings and processes was definitely an essential step.

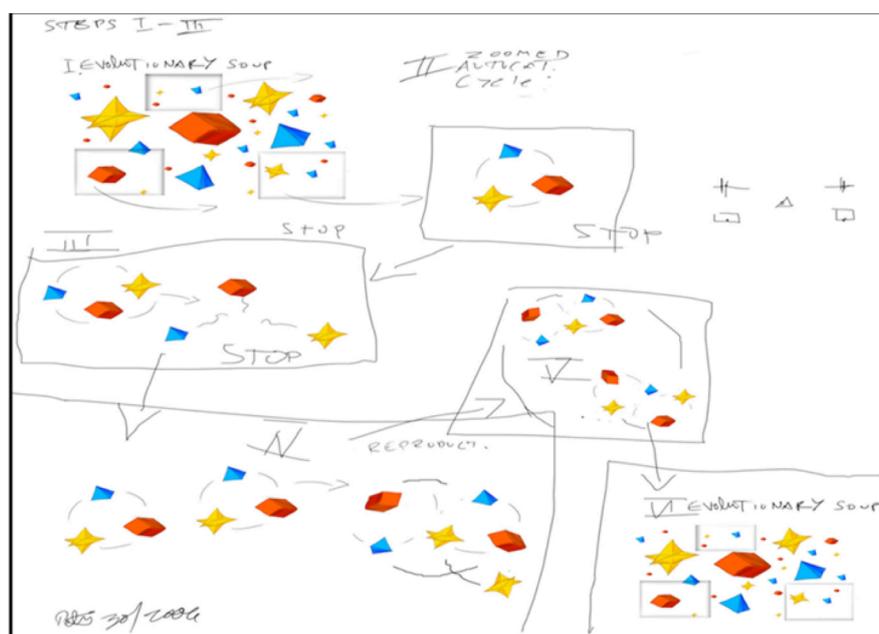
I must admit that articulating various aspects of skills and competencies in daily practices was one of the most demanding tasks for me, because standard economics totally lacks discussions of differently distributed and changing consumption skills. For an economist, motivational forces, material artefacts or ideas (beliefs, values etc.) were much easier to grasp and theorize. My background in evolutionary economics made historical trajectories or recursive nature of practices quite an obvious focus. In my earlier work on — say — domestication of technology, I had emphasized that practitioners change within social and material structures and they also affect changes in these structures. With practice theory, I had to recognize that there is no definite end-point in domesticating technology.

It was 2003–2004 when serious work together with Elizabeth Shove started, as she visited me for a few months at the National Consumer Research Centre. During the following ten years, our joint interest led to several presentations, articles and one book focusing on practice theory. Both of us had been interested in socio-material arrangements in our earlier careers and we also shared the appreciation for Giddens’s work. Reckwitz and, more specifically, Schatzki provided useful theoretical tools to us.

At the very beginning we developed our argument by drawing simplified graphs and figures about practice dynamics (e.g. picture 2). Working by and with drawings might be related to the fact that we both have architects as parents. Because of coming from different epistemic cultures, picturing concepts of practice was a method to negotiate and share understandings about the essence of our practice approach. We also created some joint conventions. For instance, we fixed that different colors referred to different classes of elements. Translating these thoughts into PowerPoint presentations was quite easy. Path towards ready-made articles and a book was much more demanding. Fortunately, at that time I had a five-year grant from the Finnish Academy and many ideas that we had developed together as drawings then were articulated as joint written texts.

We developed a specific and quite simple model, which (Picture 2) we called *integrative model of practice*, suggesting that practice is a process of integration resulting in a structured arrangement. In brief, to persist and survive, practices have to attract and activate practitioners and other constituent elements (material, image and skill). Practices and practice complexes are formed through multiple circuits of reproduction. Very importantly, to close the loop, elements of practices are generated, renewed and reproduced through practice arrangements.

We characterized cumulative forms of integration with terms like “normalization, routinization, habit-formation, practice formation.” Practice innovations (and practices) proceed through various integrations. In this way, practitioners are innovators. Practices figure as something that actual and potential practitioners can participate in or withdraw from. At the same time, practices are constituted through performance. On one side of the coin, practitioners are “captured” by practices that make demands of those who do them. On the other side of the coin, practices are constituted through participation and defined by the activities of those who “do” them. This reminds of general evolutionary dynamics suggesting that systems participate in the building of their own environments. It was especially important to me, as an economist, that practice theory is opposed to any theory arguing for givens such as exogenous preferences or technology (in mainstream economics). Schatzki’s (as well as our) version of practice theory recognized the importance of both performativity and networks. It was also important that practice theory opposes dualistic thinking, which manifests in such dualisms as mind-body, action-structure and human-nonhuman. Contrary to Schatzki, in the spirit of ANT, we suggested that also



Picture 2: Evolution of practice complexes (from M. Pantzar's and E. Shove's Drawing book, 2005)

material artefacts are elements of practices.

We share with Nicolini's (2012) practice approach an invitation to reiterate between two basic movements: on the one hand, to zoom in on the accomplishments of practice; on the other hand, to zoom out of their relationships in space and time. In addition to the notion of zooming in and out, in our book we purposefully stressed zooming back and forth, thereby pondering empirical access not only to spatial but also to temporal dimensions of practice.

Our colleague Inge Ropke from Denmark once expressed her hope that we could make a book providing a theoretically simple toolbox for anybody interested in using practice theory in empirical settings. Indeed, our book (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012) provided a kind of simple skeleton model of practice. Hopefully, it has also generated interesting ideas and conjectures. However, now it feels a bit that our simplified model has also led to oversimplified versions of practice approaches. Maybe one, including me, should go now back to early texts by Schatzki, Reckwitz and Warde to revitalize and reorient the view of practice dynamics.

In retrospect, I can say that in the early excitement I had quite a naïve belief that practice theory combining thinking and doing into a single framework could help me getting totally rid of both cognitive rational models (typical to economics) or purely cultural explanation, e.g. social construction of technology. Later on, I have recognized that at least for the purposes of operationalizing some aspects of practice theory, it is useful to focus only on, say, intrinsic or extrinsic rewards, or infrastructures (as Warde already anticipated in 2003). To some extent, I feel sorry that today most empirical studies in the field of practice are purely based on interviews, whereas not so many are based on other forms of observing and gathering data.

Many thoughts (and thanks) came into my mind when I read the papers of this volume. For me one strength of practice approaches is their capacity to integrate various theoretical streams (here eg. ANT or enactment theories) and very different topics. Indeed, flexibility and usefulness of the practice approach is evident. It does not matter whether one is interested in body ideals (Volonté, 2019), reverse vending machines (Giardullo, 2019), electric infrastructures (Magaudda & Piccioni, 2019), dark culture (Tosoni, 2019), precision medicine (Crabu, 2019) or cooking (Domaneschi, 2019). At least, this variety of texts proves that practice theory as a method sensitizes and structures thinking about various dynamic processes inherent in everyday life. Possibly it also sets traditional theories of consumption, technology and innovation in a more general framework. In a Weberian sense, concepts serve to assist research rather

than capture reality accurately:

Rather than being endowed with the capability to “replicate” the external world or define any particular phenomenon, ideal types are constructed “utopias” that alone aim to facilitate empirical reality (Kalberg, 1994, p. 85).

Seen this way,

each model is designed to engage, even constraint comparative historical researchers in a perpetual back and forth movement between the empirical case, relationship, or development under investigation and a conceptual framework (Kalberg, 1994, p. 12).

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