Practice Reloaded: A Statement, an Acknowledgment and a Comment

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Abstract

This article is a comment to the Symposium on the *Contamination of Practices*. It starts by presenting a concise picture of the adoption of the idea of practice in Science & Technology Studies and Organization Studies and then it offers some remarks on several of the articles included in the Symposium.

Keywords: practice theory; science and technology studies; organization studies; power.

Being a sociologist moving between the fields of organization studies (OS) and science and technology studies (STS), I would like to start my comment with a statement, which is at the same time an acknowledgment.

Among the various debates which have been influenced by the debate around practices, and which have consistently contributed to it, OS and STS are particularly relevant.

In fact, it could be said that already before the publication of the seminal book by Schatzky, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny (2001), the "practice turn" invested the field of OS thanks to the work of scholars interested in studying learning and knowledge from a situated perspective. It was 1991 when Lave and Wenger developed the concept of "community of practice" to refer to a "set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (1991, p. 98). In that same year, Brown and Duguid sketched a "practice-based standpoint" (1991, p. 41) and, some years later, Cook and Brown defined practice as "the coordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their 'real work' as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context" (1999, p. 390). Gherardi referred to practice as "the figure of discourse that allows the processes of knowing at work and in organizing to be articulated as historical processes, material and indeterminate" (2000, pp. 220–221), while Whittington, discussing the study of strategy in OS, wrote that "the practice perspective is concerned with managerial activity, how managers 'do strategy'" (1996, p. 732).

The idea that practice refers to what people concretely do when accomplishing an activity can be traced back to STS and ethnomethodological studies of science. Laboratory studies (Latour & Woolgar,

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1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Lynch et al., 1983), in particular, focused on "what scientists do" and the "ordinary practical reasoning" they rely on during their everyday work. The advent of actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Law, 1987) made things even messier, adding non-humans to the possible participants of a practice. Building on these premises and on the work conducted at the Xerox Park in the 1990s, Suchman and colleagues (1999) were able to define technologies as "social practice," showing how technology may acquire different meanings and uses in relation to the local circumstances and the practices in which it is embedded and to which it is connected.

This quick, partial and unexhaustive statement and acknowledgment of some of the early contributions on practice in the field of OS and STS was necessary to make clear that, as Barbara Czarniawska (2015, p. 105) does, one could provocatively question what this "practice turn" is all about.

At a general level, I agree with Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) that the main features of "the family of practice theories" (Reckwitz, 2016) regard the consequentiality of situated actions in the production of social life, the rejection of dualisms, and the relationality of mutual constitution. At the same time, as noted by Gherardi (2016, p. 682): "most practice theories agree on the ingredients of a practice — actions, individuals, contexts, artifacts, rules, symbols, texts, discourses, and embeddedness — but they disagree on the salient feature of each of them."

Personally speaking, I take this disagreement as an advantage, in that it permits a continuous debate among scholars and the constant development of the field of practices. Also, the papers that compose this Symposium, in fact, do not exactly agree about the salient features of practices. In the paper by Paolo Magaudda and Tiziana Piccioni (2019), for example, emphasis is on the relationship between technologies, action and infrastructures. In particular, the authors focus on the "infrastructural disclosures" that occur when common actions related to smartphones (like messaging or searching the web) are disrupted by a disalignment between smartphones and their infrastructure (made up of electricity, radio signal, data, operative systems and platforms). In their analysis, Magaudda and Piccioni privilege the sociomaterial dimension of practices and the relevance of the connections intercurrent not only between humans and technologies, but also between different kinds of technologies. As famously stated by Star (1999), what for some people and in regard to some actions represents an infrastructure (as for electricity when we switch on the light), for some others (such as the engineers who have to build the entire electric network) constitute a technology to be fulfilled in itself. In this respect, it is worth noticing how practice theory allows for taking into account the never-ending chain of heterogeneous connections which turn stabilized actions and artefacts of a situated context into the problem at stake of another situated context.

Also the paper by Lorenzo Domaneschi (2019) takes sociomateriality as a key characteristic of practices through which investigating professional cooking. The paper shows how the attuning between the embodied skills of the chef and the affordances carried by ingredients allows the work to be performed correctly, especially in situations where the ability to improvise plays an important role. The analysis reminded me of the paper by Jack Whalen and colleagues (2002) about "improvisational choreography" in the work of a call centre. As for teleservice workers, who act on the basis of a routinized practice which, by the way, may require from time-to-time a different "choreography" (meaning, arrangement) of the elements involved in performing a competent telephone call, professional cookers have to find ways of arranging differently elements that are supposed to be always the same, although they may vary in taste, consistency, colour, and so on. In this way, not the body or the food, but the ordering of relationships between the subject and the object, becomes the unit of analysis.

Different from Magaudda and Piccioni, Domaneschi concentrates on the role of the body, its senses, and its techniques. As for many other activities where the body is at the frontline (Wacquant, 2004), it is the body that becomes the infrastructure of practice. This infrastructuring role of the body becomes even more evident in the study by Paolo Volonté (2019) on fashion modelling. The author nicely shows how the body of female models (with its embodied skills and ideal "sizes") is not the result of the pressure and the power exerted by stylists or managers of the modelling industry. On the contrary, it is part of a practice shared among all the actors of the fashion industry (stylists, managers, photographers, fashion advisors, tailors and models themselves). Detaching the body from individuals and attaching it to practice is the analytical move which permits Volonté to show the inertia of fashion practices and, most importantly, how such inertia is not perceived by actors as a constraint, given that the aim of actors is

precisely to host, interpret, and carry on that particular practice.

Here we witness the power of practice, states the author, and, I would add, the way power is understood in practice theories. Traditional sociological approaches frame power as "an object, generally as a capacity of a person, institution or other social actor" (Watson, 2016, p. 170). In practice theories, on the contrary, power is always relational so that it needs to be performed and enacted: power only has reality so far as it is manifested in moments of human action and doing (*Ibidem*, p. 171). From this point of view, one could argue that practice theories are all about power (*Ibidem*), in that power is seen as a property of social relations. Not surprisingly, the intellectual heritage of practice theories is grounded in the work of authors who have always dedicated explicit attention to power relations (such as Marx, Foucault or Bourdieu).

At the same time, practice theories have often been criticized for dissolving power into micro relations and interactions. This seems to me the old remark that mainstream sociological approaches have typically addressed to phenomenological and interactionist perspectives and, later on, to postmodernism. It would be out of place to engage in such a debate for this short essay, but I would like to simply state that from my understanding of practice theories, power is a practice in itself. Not only that, it could be argued that "power" (like "gender" or "capitalism") is one of the very basic practices through which our society is produced and reproduced (or "structured" in more traditional terms). We learn power as an intrinsic dimension of the social world. As such, we also learn how to perform power in every domain and space of social life: at home, at school, at work, in the street, at the restaurant, and so on. Performing power, we become practitioners of it, and the more we practice it, the more we become expert in mastering the process, as for every practice. But practices can be performed differently, and this is where our responsibility as active subjects lies.

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