

Please Note: The following working paper was presented at the workshop “Demanding ideas: where theories of practice might go next” held 18-20 June 2014 in Windermere, UK. The purpose of the event was to identify issues and topics that constitute ‘unfinished business’ for people interested in social theories of practice and in the relevance of such ideas for the DEMAND Research Centre. This working paper should not be quoted without first asking the author’s permission.

DemANdING ideas

Working Paper 14: Frank Trentmann, *Commentary on DEMANdING ideas* (f.trentmann@bbk.ac.uk)
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Note: Frank was invited to comment on the mini-manifestos produced by Allison Hui, Mikko Jalas, Hilmar Schaefer, Ted Schatzki and Matt Watson.

The five memos by Allison, Mikko, Hilmar, Ted and Matt give us plenty to talk about. For me, there are three kinds of issues that especially call for discussion: Theoretical boundaries; the relational side of practices; and scale.

Theoretical boundaries and content

We have radical and conservative theorists in this group. For the former the main goal is to stretch theories of practice and expand the map of the subject. For the latter, the goal is more moderate, and to gain clarity about the limits of its theoretical application. The first group consequently seeks to expand the realm of practices – e.g., to the practices of politics. The second, by contrast, sees additional dimensions as relatively autonomous, and as such something that need to be added to practice accounts to give these greater explanatory power – e.g. institutions, architecture, infrastructures.

To talk about the future shape of practice theory it might be a good first step to identify more precisely where the boundaries currently are – and what all the particular case studies add up to. While there is some shared language cropping up in these memos (recruitment, performance, procedures), this is not yet enough to tell me exactly what sort of properties currently are a shared part of a “theory” of practice. A related point concerns the properties assigned to practices themselves. I asked myself how one might find a typology that would allow one to see the shared or different properties of practices as such. Allison refers to the ‘inequality’ of practices – asymmetry or variety might be better. What kind of criteria or metrics might enable one to draw a map of practices, and what might be useful axes? The rate of repetition, frequency, rhythm, synchronic degree, points of dependence or contact with other practices, longevity, degrees of collective action, and so forth would have to be all compared. To follow these across time adds enormous complications, since we do not have historical registers of practices. (Since I am not sure what Ted means by “event cum action series”, I leave it for him to speculate how one might represent event and action series.) I am reminded of the initial diagrams by Bourdieu in *Distinction* and the extended and more nuanced and multi-dimension versions generated by the cultural consumption group around Mike Savage and Alan Warde for their more recent book. What might be ways of organising and displaying practices to clarify and illustrate the nature of practices and thus specify the boundaries of practice theory?

Allison, tellingly, ends her comments by noting how currently ‘theories of practice are often difficult to digest ... and not always easy to translate into methodological and empirical terms’. This is rather interesting, since, after all, the theory is meant to be about very ordinary aspects of everyday life:

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what people are doing. Why should this be? I am not sure it is the subject matter – Norbert Elias, cultural historians, microstoria etc. are if anything renowned for their stylistic power and clarity of presentation. I think it has to do with what remains a certain tension or gap between a theoretical reach that tries to create unity or comparability among ways of doing and what are ultimately more or less different forms of action. Hence, the verbs are troubling in the current theoretical vocabulary. Does sewing “enrol” understandings and aims (p. 11) ? Is knitting a “performance”? Does skateboarding “recruit”? Few people would say: “I was recruited by cooking” or “Skiing has recruited me: I love it.” Armies recruit – and this is a different process from cooking, skiing etc.; of course, we could try and describe and analyse the way the Swiss state recruits all male adults into their army as a “practice” but it is a fundamentally different series of actions from cooking, Nordic walking etc. My point here is not simply a stylistic one but to suggest that the ambivalence or distortion inherent in some of the current terms of art reflect a deeper unclarity about the components of practices that refuse to be captured in a single shared verb.

Relations

The tension between theoretical moderation and imperialism is replicated in the treatment of institutions, spaces and politics. For Allison, “procedures or methods for bringing elements together exist within a practice”. For Matt, power consists of practices. By contrast, for Mikko, practices happen within spaces of action that have their origins outside the practices themselves: the practice of walking does not build a city, but the city creates a space for walking/commuting etc. For Ted, similarly, there is a big world outside practices that includes institutions and much else. Presumably, the same holds for Hilmar: to study the transfer of practices we need some agency or institution that enable them to move from one place to another (such as transnational social reform movements, architecture schools, ideas etc). Of course, we could object with Lefebvre that it is the doing that creates the space – but this still leaves us with the problem of how infrastructures, grids, transport networks come into place and why some societies favoured apartment-blocks and central heating while others went for individual houses. Again, this is in my view not a question that can be settled abstractly: some practices may possess resources that enable the integration of other practices – but other practices may need resources that lie outside the practice itself: e.g. cooking needs fuel, but the practice of cooking does not decide whether the fuel used is wood, gas or electric.

For DEMAND the last point is particularly important, because a practice is only partly responsible for the energy that is ultimately consumed. Here, Mikko’s concern about how to allocate energy between buildings and practices is important (though I am not sure that “eating” is an “infrastructure” p 15.) – and deserves to be extended further. Yes, all practices are energy-hungry but how much energy precisely is consumed requires locating the practice along a much longer chain of energy use, production and transmission. The same practice of cooking (same length, same dishes, same location) could have hugely different consequences for actual energy use, depending on how and where the energy is generated, what fuel is used and much else. It might be useful to consider and chart the changing energy intensity of a practice – although I am sure this will not be easy. Mikko’s attention to “stocks” in addition to flows is also important – in addition to stocks of wood or oil in the tank, the “stock” might be expanded to the in-built energy in houses, buildings, roads and infrastructures more generally. That is a stock that is passed on and that favours certain practices over others.

The relational nature of practices is important because it is one reason why the empirical study of practices is so difficult, or, more precisely, why it is so difficult to reach a generalisable picture of

various practices. Most practices have outside as well as inside relations – and these outsides pull research away from the practices themselves. I noted in several papers emphasis on the resilience of practices. Practices are stubborn, have a life of their own, never are exactly the same, but repeat themselves. All of this is true, and yet this emphasis on their routine replication also tends towards an exaggerated view of the inner self-conserving power of practices at the expense of the power of external forces of change. Surely a European or Japanese person born in 1800 would be stunned to see how hugely different practices and everyday life more generally is in 2000. Sleeping, working, eating, moving about and, above all, daily habits of hygiene have vastly changed. This is not a process generated by the practices themselves. It often involved the imposition, marketing and socialisation of new practices – often having to overcome considerable resistance. I am not sure what Hilmar had in mind when he referred to “education”, but loosely understood, there is a huge amount of it in the modern period. The millions of Chinese who have moved from country to city in the last decade or so have not just recycled all their practices. There is more than repetition, and to think about change requires us to do more than just look at the dynamics of practices themselves.

Matt is right to emphasize power. But I think there is so much more power that students of practices should concern themselves with first before trying to analyse the practices of power more specifically. Of course, we do not want to return to a simple institutional understanding of the monopoly of force. Equally, governmentality has diffused power so much, that everything and nothing is and has power. It is useful to retain a distinction between the Maxim Gun and a red postal letter box. Nor am I sure that the practices of power are so distinct in and of themselves. For example, Patrick Joyce has studied the civil service file and filing as a technique of power in the governmental fashion. Does this advance our understanding of power or the practice of filing for that matter? I am not sure. NGOs use files, including those resisting authority. I have filing cabinets, although I am far from being a “competent” “practioner” and show (“perform”) the limits of “liberal” governmental discipline in shocking ways. Yes, states acquire power with the help of certain practices (such as collecting taxes, counting them, asking citizens to file tax reports, etc.). But what would such practices reveal about power? Very little – power depends on how much a state taxes, who is taxed, for what purposes and on whose command. Similar matters apply to the unequal distribution of resources, knowledge, land, capital etc. Interests and Ideas matter. And it is these that leave their mark on practices (more than the other way around), in part by shaping the unequal distribution of stocks, infrastructures and resources which enable and constrain people’s lives.

Scale

The theoretical ambition and promise of practice theory is inevitable tied to its relative ability to move between scales. My first observations on the difficulty of capturing a variety of practices with singular analytical verbs might be read as a sign of scepticism. However, my second point about the relational life of practices might also hold out some potential for scaling up research. I do not think the issue is whether empirical research is naturally limited to a practice within set local configurations. All empirical research is so by its very nature. Microstoria and earlier studies of everyday life sometimes argue that the macro is contained in the micro; I am not so sure about that. Rather my point is that the simple fact that a number of practices are not limited to unique local spaces but can be observed in a number of places suggests that practices themselves move up and down scales. This has to do with their transfer, which in turn has to do with the (uneven) global spread of certain ideals of the good life, and their adoption and diffusion by authorities, experts and also social movements. That this is not a simple top-down process, does not mean we should just look at one scale only.