

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

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It is sometimes said that practice theory applies best—or only—to local social phenomena. “Local social phenomena” here denotes those social phenomena that characterize or are constituted by small nexuses of action, coordinated activity, and face-to-face interaction in contiguous settings. These phenomena are roughly coextensive with those directly investigated through ethnographic methods. In this vein, studies exist of washing practices, Nordic walking practices, office practices, driving practices, nursing practices, energy consumption practices, ambulance attendance practices, boxing practices, practices of the self, practices of communication, day trading practices, and so on. Such practices are displayed in immediate settings and can be accessed through experience and observation (however these are understood). The spate of such studies helps fuel the above claim about the successes-limits of practice theory.

Of course, practices of the sorts just mentioned are not exhausted by particular episodes in particular settings, but instead extend beyond particular episodes and settings in both space and time. Giddens highlighted this fact in using his conception of practices to theorize social systems. Giddens’ account of systems, however, is thin compared to his account of practices. This sort of fact gives credence to the claim that practice theory applies to the “local” or “micro” but neglects or cannot deal with the large or “macro.”

It is clear that, whilst practice theories have informed a myriad of fine studies of particular practices or small practice complexes, they have not produced many analyses of larger-scale phenomena. Bourdieu’s structure-practice analyses of fields and of the educational, art, scientific, and economic fields in particular constitute the one solid “practice theoretical” paradigm for analyzing large-scale phenomena. Giddens’ brief analyses of social systems and space-time distantiation and Shove et al.’s concepts of complexes, circulation, and circuits are suggestive but underdeveloped starts. Hence, one key challenge for practice theory is whether it can develop conceptual schemes adequate to mapping and explaining large social phenomena.

Two clusters of issues arise once this challenge is accepted. The first embraces general ontological issues, perhaps the most central of which is analyzing the general relationship between, on the one hand, all those practices that propagate through and extend beyond particular settings of action in space and time and, on the other, the sorts of large entities analyzed and investigated in social research: institutions, organizations, networks, and systems, as well as markets, economies, governments, religions etc. This issue has been highlighted under such labels as the “micro-macro relationship” and “individualism versus holism.” In contemporary practice theory, the concept of practices takes the place of those of the individual and micro in formulations of the issue.

The second cluster of issues concerns explanation. Practice theory holds that social life is made up of, or takes place in or as part of, a plenum, or more neutrally, a big bunch of practices. The most

general explanatory issue is accounting for changes in practices and complexes thereof. There are many possible approaches to this issue. One possible general sort of approach is to apply single explanatory schemes or mechanisms to practices and practice complexes. A prominent example of such a scheme or mechanism is the evolutionary team of variation-selection-retention. Applying this scheme to the plenum of practices would imply explaining changes in practices and complexes thereof through combinations of these three processes. Another possible sort of single scheme approach is that found in the family of systems theories. Here the idea would be that practices forms systems and that changes in practices and complexes thereof are tied to systemic processes and subject to systems theoretical considerations. A third approach would highlight the notion of a field: embedding practices in wider fields, it would argue that competition, power dynamics, and the pursuit of meaning in those fields determine how practices change. Of these three approaches, only the third comes close to having active advocates (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). It is easy, however, to imagine applying any of the three to social life understood as a big bunch of practices.

I believe that none of these approaches is adequate. Anyone who has read the works of Michel Foucault, Gabriel Tarde, or Bruno Latour, let alone those of most historians, knows that social life is simply too intricate and contingent for any such scheme to cover either the phenomena it claims to cover or very many phenomena at all. Contingency and detail are simply too decisive in the advance of social affairs. The detailed descriptions provided by the practice-based analyses of social phenomena mentioned in the opening paragraph reinforce this general claim by showing that social affairs unfold in a myriad of ways. As an alternative to advocating a particular scheme as the explanatory key to social change, the work of the aforementioned thinkers points toward the idea that explanations of social phenomena are historical in character: that is, that explanation is a matter of describing, or following out, what specifically led to the phenomenon to be explained, that is, the series of events that brought it about (on this, see also W.H. Walsh). This idea applies to small and large, and to micro and macro, alike. Both a counterpunch and a revolution are in principle explained by tracing the series of events that led to them. Of course, when the phenomenon to be explained is larger than a small network of actions or interactions, a multitude of event chains lies behind it. As a result, explaining it requires fashioning an overview of this multitude. In all cases, however, giving explanations requires delving into the details of social life.

The idea that explanation is historical also raises questions about what explanatory work is left for theory. My view is that theory primarily develops concepts that can inform empirical research, description, and explanation. It does this by developing technical accounts of the subject matter of interest. *Vis-à-vis* explanation, theory can also develop accounts of the event series that lie behind social phenomena. A rather opposed position sometimes found among professional historians is that technical accounts are not needed to understand these series—ordinary concepts suffice—and that technical accounts are of scant intellectual interest anyway.

Practice scholars are more friendly to theory than historians are. Moreover, they embed event series in the plenum of practices. This means that a general understanding of the nature, trajectories, and effects of these series requires grasping (1) the relations of event series to practices, including the bearing of practices on them and their bearing on practices, and (2) how practices compose social phenomena. Discharging the first task requires developing an account of the dynamics of practices, their formation, perpetuation, and dissolution, where “dissolution” includes destruction, disappearance, hybridization, and bifurcation. Central to this account will be the role that event cum action series play in these processes. As discussed, discharging the second

task requires addressing questions about the relationship between practices and social entities of types such as organizations, institutions, power, interactions, and field as well as between practices and large phenomena of types such as governments, financial systems, and international telecommunication networks. Analyses that address both areas of investigation yield broad accounts of the connection between chains of events and the coming about of social phenomena of all scales, from those such as face-to-face interactions that are often confined to particular settings to those such as energy provision networks that are often global in reach. Again, explanations of particular phenomena always refer, ultimately, to particular event series. As a result, the provision of explanations is empirical and requires methodic investigation or social experience. Whilst explanation is empirical, practice theory (1) offers accounts of event series and the practice stage on which they propagate, thereby (2) provides technical concepts with which researchers can provide overviews of event series, analyze explanans and explanandum, and thus be oriented in their empirical investigation, and (3) informs the self-understanding of researchers.

Part of the work of theory in this context is devising technical concepts that name features of or forms of change in the dynamical plenum of practices or the social phenomena that thereby arise, change, and disappear. This includes features and patterns in the myriads of event series that give rise to social affairs. An example of technical concepts that describe patterns in event series is Tarde's (e.g., 1969) triad of imitation, invention, and opposition, which characterize both the events that make up series as well as the series themselves. Another example is William Ogden's (1964) concepts of invention, accumulation, diffusion, and adjustment, each of which names a type of event or event series nexus; the latter sort of concept also applies to the social phenomena resulting from such nexuses. (Social phenomena are a type of pattern.) A recent example of such a typology is Georgina Born's (2008) circulation, contagion, differentiation, resistance, imitation, association, aggregation, sedimentation, and differential curves of change, which like Ogden's concepts name types of event or pattern-result.

Sorting out the roles that humans, nonhumans, and inanimate entities play in event and action series is an issue that has received considerable attention since the mid-1980s. Whether in the belief that these roles can be understood through the notion of action or in the belief that human actions are crucial to most of the event series that bear on social affairs, a practice account of event series propagating through the plenum of practices should work with the notion of series of actions. Different accounts exist of action series, most of which have no direct connection to practice theory. Examples include Tarde's notion of imitations rays and Latour's notion of mediator chains. These conceptions series construe action chains as central to the dynamism of social life. Practice theory adds to these approaches the idea that action chains are inherently embedded in bundles and constellations of practices.

The challenge that large phenomena pose to practice theory is thus one of devising ontological analyses that theorize the relationship between the plenum of practices and social phenomena. To the extent that a practice theory takes on the notion of action-event series, it is incumbent on that theory to analyze the relationship among action series, practices, and large phenomena. An alternative is to defend general explanatory schemes or mechanisms that apply to practices and practice complexes widely. In all instances, practice theories must develop concepts useful to empirical researchers for conceptualizing, describing, and explaining their subject matters and for capturing the dynamic processes pertaining to them.

References

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