

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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Manifesto declaration #1: Practice theory needs to tackle power

If practice theory is to go beyond accounting for past changes and contribute to understanding future change and whether it can be shaped for better or worse, and if it is to tackle the uneven and often unjust distributions of goods and bads (including the means for people to perform practices) then it needs to tackle power. Of course there is far from a consensus that practice theory should, or indeed could, aspire to do that sort of thing. But this is declarative manifesto so let us believe that it could and should.

I am phrasing the need to tackle power in practice theory in these problematically normative programmatic terms because if practice theory is only for analysis and re-description of change (and stability) in the social, then it arguably has enough tacit consideration of power already.

How far that is true depends on your definition of power, of course. For the purposes of this manifesto, I take power to have two distinguishable but closely related meanings. First, power is to act and have effect.¹ Second, power is influencing the actions of others. Over the next few pages and manifesto declarations/contentions, I am first going to suggest that, with that first meaning of power, applications of practice theory are replete with understandings of power, even if they are not commonly articulated as such. But then I go on to consider why it is hard for practice theory to take on power as the capacity to influence the actions of others, before thinking about ways in which, through reframing that definition of power in a way consistent with practice theory, practice theory could begin to tackle the sorts of power that can appear to exist distinct from the churn of mundane activity to be bound up with relations and processes that seem structural.

#2: Practice theory already deals with power (as action with effect) (just not very simply or explicitly)

If power can be understood, at the most basic level at least, as acting with effect, then practice theory can be understood as essentially being all about power. First, practice theory is a theory of action. Practices are constituted and reproduced by the flow of human action and in turn they shape that flow. Second, in its repeated application to account for change in the social, practice theory is inevitably tackling processes that are shot through with power – as social change is always a matter of action having effect. Third, and closely associated with the last, in practice theory’s equally compelling accounts of the remarkable stability of the social, it is clear that stability is reproduced

¹ So more or less synonymous with agency, but I think for where this is going it’s useful to understand it as power.

actively, that is, through actions having effect (just mostly that effect being mostly to maintain the status quo).

The difficulty of making power explicit in accounts such as these is that they tend to reveal the power to act as something profoundly distributed. Even if we follow an account of practice which allows for the relational agency even of inert material things (eg Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012) the distribution of the agency does not require that we lose the distinctive capacities of the human subject to do the work of integration of the many elements of practice to effect performance: and it is those capacities that enable the innovations in integration and performance that underlies the changes in practices and so in social order. Nevertheless, accounts of practice are in many ways accounts of the ways in which action is constituted in ways additional to the volition, conscious or otherwise, of individual practitioners. If power is seen as the property of human subjects, then practice theory is substantially a means of accounting for the limits or power, for people to be sovereign over their actions.

#3: Practice theory also speaks to power (as influencing the actions of others)

The same account for the limits of individual sovereignty also play out in relation to the sort of processes which are more commonly associated with power than quotidian actions. This is seen in the compelling and (in these circles at least) well renowned critiques of established modes of governing that seek to do what that second sense of power is all about: influencing the actions of others (eg Shove 2010). Governing tends to influence the actions of others through a limited range of interventions reflecting a model of human action at odds with that upon which practice theory is founded. Practice theory offers an account that illuminates both the passive resistance of practices to governing interventions; and which can enable appreciation of the invariably unpredictable consequences of such interventions.

#4: Practice theory has so far not been used to say a lot about power as influence over the action of others

In criticising particular means of intervention and modes of governing, practice theory is pushed towards dealing with difficult ground. The processes at stake in governing interventions - are difficult to separate from attributes of the social that do not map easily to a horizontal account, such as hierarchy and scale.

In theory, this is not the issue that it might initially appear. From foundational statements of contemporary practice theory, the scale of ambition of its analytical potential is clear: “both social order and individuality ... result from practices” (Schatzki, 1996: 13); practices the very location of the social (Reckwitz 2002). In principle, then, practice theory should be able to account for all realms of the social. Indeed, in more recent articulations of practice theory, its applicability to the situations and institutions typically seen to be the locales of power – including in the more specific sense of the capacity to influence the conduct of others – are conventionally seen to reside, such as the situations and institutions of governing. As Schatzki has it in a forthcoming chapter:

“...all social phenomena – large or small, fleeting or persistent, micro or macro – have the same basic ingredients and constitution.” (Schatzki, forthcoming).

#5: Practice theory is demonstrably applicable to practices governing

The observation that phenomena have the same basic ingredients and constitution, in whatever realm of the social or whatever apparent scale of social phenomena means that the practices of ministerial offices, cabinet rooms and corporate board rooms mostly have the same characteristics as the practices of domestic life or leisure pursuits. They too are comprised of meanings, rules, competences, embodied knowledges, materials, spaces, etc, brought together through largely routinised and mundane patterns of action. The possibilities of empirically exploring practices in such situations through these lenses are increasingly becoming visible, including using practice theory as a means to account for the obduracy of governing practices (eg Berthou, n.d.).

However, stressing the sameness of the practices in these situations, while demonstrably useful for starting to account for the conservatism of institutions, so far fails to account for how power is done in practices. For a critic, practice theory could look to be disabling of critique, practice theorists as apologists for conservatism. This is not a problem within practice theory, which is more or less void of normative content. But could it be that practice theory could account for how it is that practices in some locales have disproportionate capacity for influence over the conduct of others?

#6: Practice theory should address how the conduct of conduct is conducted

Foucault is famously said to have defined government as the conduct of conduct. His work and the ever growing field of studies defined around governmentality have done so much to unpick the means – the techniques and apparatuses – through which conduct is conducted. But how is the conduct of conduct conducted? That is, what is *distinctive* (rather than the same) about the practices of governing, or of corporate influence? Through what practices, with what characteristics, do some individuals, institutions, locales, achieve influence over the performance of other practices (conduct conduct). If we take this agenda seriously, then a couple of the questions we might pursue are:

How is it that some practices accumulate resources from others?

Governing or managing enterprise at scale is only possible through the marshalling, coordination and harnessing of countless other practices, whether providing the financial resources (eg through the multitude of practices that generate and gather taxes or profits), the information (eg through census) or the influence (eg through the armed forces and police). The mundane, habitual practices that comprise the everyday life of the offices of state are the practices which hold together the complexes of practice which gather and accumulate what make governing possible. As such the practices at stake here both enable and enact the uneven landscape of power as influence that characterises centralised states and large corporations.

How is it that some practices orchestrate others over time and space?

More fundamental than the coordination necessary to generate and accumulate resources is the more general influencing of action, that is the purpose of governing. Through what practices, comprised with what elements, do practitioners act in ways that have effect at far remove, potentially in millions of performances of other practices? Embodied action can only be spatially and temporally immediate, the extension and amplification of action can only happen through intermediation. Such intermediation in these processes can rarely if ever accomplished without dependency on other practices as well as technologies, institutions etc It is the ability of some

practices to orchestrate others, only to themselves be orchestrated by others again, that offers the means for accounting for the appearance of hierarchy and scale while retaining a flat ontology.

How do practices and the institutions the comprise reproduce dominant ideologies?

To enable to processes of orchestration described in the last point, the practices of governing are profoundly institutionalised, with buildings, legislations, professional codes and systems of career progression, embedded in and embedding practices. Institutions provide the ordering and stability necessary for the complex orchestration of practice that provides both the means and purpose of governing. Part of that institutionalisation is the alignment and co-dependence of practices within governing. These features, then, might underlie the obduracy of the practices of governing, and the way in which those practices share elements with other practices of governing (through parallel materials, competences and meanings framed within institutions and professions). In understanding power in this way, might practice theory offer insights into the operation and reproduction not only of social phenomena like bureaucracy or managerialism, but also of ideologies like neo-liberalism or the of economic growth being a core social good and proper purpose of government.

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