

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 7: Hilmar Schäfer, *Current issues in practice theory* (hschaefer@europa-uni.de)

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In order to generate ideas for future developments in practice theory, I would like to start by identifying some of its strengths and weaknesses at the outset. Practice theory's most important value lies in the decentring of common sociological approaches towards the social. It is concerned with overcoming traditional dichotomies like the separation between society and the individual, culture and the material or thinking and acting. In line with that, it rejects essentialist beliefs and instead advocates a view according to which contextual relations determine identity. By focusing on practices instead of individuals or structure, practice theory offers a relational perspective on the social which parts with monocausal explanations of action. Similar to interpretive approaches, practice theory emphasizes the local production of the social, but it asserts that no situation can exist for itself and that the analysis thus cannot be centred around situational interaction alone. In this regard, it distinguishes itself from the interactionist stance. Rather, the identity of practices, subjects or material things is determined in contexts, which transcend any given situation and which constitute identity in relation to other occurring practices, in relation to the past as well as to different sites. This perspective, which underlines the relationality of the social, offers an alternative to other approaches in social theory and has already produced a lot of valuable research.

However, there have been and still are a couple of crucial weaknesses. According to practice theory, a lot of human action can be understood as non-reflective repetition guided and upheld by the stability of bodily acquired dispositions, which are formed in the course of socialization. In this perspective, the general attitude towards situations is characterized by familiarity and the social appears as self-evident. This is the reason why many authors from Anthony Giddens (1984: 19ff., 50, 60ff.) to Andreas Reckwitz (2002: 255) have centred their conception of practice around the notion of routine. This focus on routine and stability has been criticized (Bongaerts 2007).

Only recently there has been thorough reflection on the crucial issue of the relation between stability and dynamics in practice theory (Shove/Pantzar/Watson 2012). This approach proposes to understand practices as performances and entities at the same time. Focussing on practices as entities, following practices around the realm of the social, so to speak, this perspective emphasizes the movement of practices in time and space and offers a valuable shift of sociological theory, which is aided by the usage of a very compelling rhetoric with vocabulary like "careers of practices", "trajectories", "rhythm of daily life" or "patterns of practices".

Parallel to the publication by Shove, Pantzar and Watson, I have worked on the same issue in my Ph.D. thesis *The Instability of Practice*, in which I compare and assess the approaches of Bourdieu, Foucault, Butler and Latour and propose to focus practice theory on the notion of repetition instead of routine (Schäfer 2013). Here, repetition is understood in a poststructural sense, inspired by Derrida's reflections on "iterability": A repetition is that which is linked by its reappearance, but which can never be exactly the same. This simple yet consequential insight is true for every kind of

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social practice. If we conceive of the social as repetitions in time and space, we are also reminded that at the heart of every repetition of a practice there is difference, because every repetition occurs under already altered circumstances. In an anti-essentialist approach, this means that any contextual difference also has an impact on the identity of a practice thus stressing the dynamics of repetition and the possibility of change.

It is from this position and based on these reflections, that I can identify trajectories of further developments in the field of practice theory and empirical research. By thinking of practices in terms of repetitions which link different sites and instances, practice theory is able to follow the fragile relations which make up the stability of the social, enabling it to grasp the specific contributions of bodies and material artefacts in the process its stabilization. This is a prerequisite for a methodology which opens up sociological theory for analyses into the relationality and heterogeneity of the social.

In terms of **methodology**, the theoretical perspective requires the analysis to move in time and space, following the links which exist between the heterogeneous elements involved in a network and trying to connect the dots, so to speak. Practically, this means the combination of different research methods and the necessity to visit different locations as Latour (2005) proposes in his methodological call to localize the global, to redistribute the local and to connect sites.¹ I find a lot of stimulating methodological proposals in the concepts, research designs and actual studies of **actor-network-theory** (ANT). Practice theory and ANT both share a theoretical decentring of the subject and its intentions as well as a corresponding inclination not to reify structures. Neither subjectivity nor social structure should form the basis of explanation but rather the processes in which these are made and constantly need to be maintained. This analytical perspective does not locate subjectivity and agency at a single spot. Instead, it situates them in a distributed network of practices and materialities, taking artefacts as well as the human body into account. It also considers the fundamentally temporal and spatial dimension of the social. In contrast to ANT, the strength of practice theory lies in its consideration of embodied dispositions and its focus on the processes in which tacit knowledge is formed and transmitted. In turn, ANT can help practice theory to understand practices as elements in a relational network of heterogeneous entities and can sensitize praxeological analyses for gradual differences. Thus, a dialogue between practice theory and ANT might prove fruitful for future developments.

A general field for new directions of research would be to look into the mechanisms how practices travel in *time*, *space* and across *social fields* and to find methods for mapping trajectories of practices. First, how do practices **move in space**? Which prerequisites – material, bodily, immaterial – does the translocal, the global travel of practices entail? What kind of support structures and media does it involve? How can we follow practices across the realm of the social? Do we need to stay with the subjects as “carriers” of practices or are there other relationships to be explored? Here, one option in order to grasp the movement of practices in space could be to cooperate with research groups on translocal projects, each pursuing practices locally and contributing to an overall research topic.

Second, how do practices **move in time**? A key entity is the human body. We need to look closer into practices of education which are directed towards the bodily stabilization of practices. Books, manuals, and material infrastructures are also “anchors” for practices in the course of time. In terms

¹ Cf. already Marcus’s (1995) proposal for a multi-sited-ethnography.

of material infrastructures, the idea of “layering” proposed in the invitation and integrated in the DEMAND programme seems very compelling. How can we include a perspective on the **built environment** into our research? Architecture is a crucial entity and force which stabilizes practices in terms of spatial structures and atmospheres. This is a direction of research I would like to pursue in the future. In my own work, based in cultural sociology and currently centring on cultural heritage and the specialized and vernacular practices it is embedded in, I will think about the relationship between architecture and practice. In terms of cultural heritage, architecture and restoration, the notion of “layers” might prove fruitful and could also provide a link to the work on energy use as pursued in the DEMAND programme. In the field of cultural heritage, the notion of authenticity is also crucial – the idea of a distinguished state of being which has to be preserved “as is” and which is yet carefully constructed at the same time with an array of heterogeneous social practices (labelling, research, restoration). This research in the field of cultural sociology could connect with some questions DEMAND might be asking about what is regarded as a “carbon-neutral” or “sustainable” kind of energy usage.

Of course, movements of practices in time and space are closely linked. For both aspects, a perspective on **institutions and organizations** seems crucial. Although some work in the field of organization theory and practice theory already exists, this topic certainly needs more reflection.

Third, we can ask what happens if practices move between social fields? If we follow Bourdieu that social fields like economics, science or art are characterized by relative autonomy, there are always specialized practices unique to each field, but there are also practices which exist in more than one specialized field and which might have different, specific qualities in each of these fields. This is especially true for “dispersed” (Schatzki 1996) practices like arguing, valuing, proving etc. If practices are shared between fields, but are used and perceived differently by the participants of these fields, this might entail a) tensions or conflict or it might b) open up a space of reflection for participants, because they might be able to distance themselves from entrenched routines by comparing different forms of practices, which might help them to assess and review practices. It might be a fruitful research perspective to follow practices as they move and are shared between social fields.

For all these new directions of research, it would be interesting as well as challenging to find appropriate **new methods of social research**. How much help are the common qualitative methods of interviews and participant observation? What are their limits? Can we find other ways to follow practices, record their movements and present our data in scientific papers? We can think about using all kinds of visualization like photographs, mind maps, cognitive maps, videos, video stills etc. in order to follow and compare practices.

Finally, the question of the stabilization and destabilization of practices in time and space also entails a reflection on their **emotional aspect**. This might help us to explain the persistence as well as the change of practices better. But how can we grasp the affective dimension of practices theoretically? And how can this dimension be integrated in a practice perspective? Although there are certainly differences in the affective quality of practices, I don’t think this justifies speaking of “affective practices” as a special kind of human activity. Rather, I think the task for an integration of the emotional dimension in practice theory has to be to reflect on the affectivity of all kinds of social practices, even those normally not considered to be emotional at all, e.g. all those kinds of practices generally thought of as “rational” like economic exchange or scientific research.

I am hoping to gain insights into these and other interesting topics in the course of our workshop and I am looking forward to an engaging exchange.

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