Introduction
The nexus of practice: connections, constellations, practitioners
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Social theorists have addressed the challenges of understanding and explaining social phenomena for the last two hundred years or more. During this time, different schools of thought have flourished and faded, and diverse conceptual schemes and frameworks have evolved. All ideas have histories, and those explored in this book relate to the school of thought that has come to be known as 'practice theory'. Ortner (1984) was one of the first to coin this term. It has since come to denote a body of ideas that, emerging since the 1970s against the background of the philosophical work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, supposes that something called 'practice' is central to social life (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002b).

This is an increasingly influential supposition, shared by people who, despite holding different ideas about society and how it works, uphold the following propositions: that practices consist in organised sets of actions, that practices link to form wider complexes and constellations – a nexus – and that this nexus forms the 'basic domain of study of the social sciences' (Giddens, 1984: 2). This set of ideas links such diverse theorists as Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979) and Lave (Lave and Wenger, 1991) – sometimes referred to as 'first generation' practice theorists – and second-generation proponents such as Schatzki (2002), Gherardi (2006), Reckwitz (2002b) and Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012). It also forms the shared starting point for the contributions to this volume.

Individually, each chapter has something new to say about the nexus of practice and how it can be analysed and understood. Collectively, the contributions develop fresh approaches to important themes such as social change, language, power, people, reflection, large social phenomena and connectivity over time and space, treating these as aspects of or as rooted in the nexus of practice. In taking practice theory forward in these ways, the book counters certain often-heard criticisms. One is that practice theory applies best to small or local phenomena and poorly to larger, more expansive ones. According to this criticism, practice theory is useful for analysing activities like cooking, leisure pursuits or professional practices, but cannot handle 'big' topics including government alliances, international finance systems, religious institutions or power. Another pervasive objection is that practice theory neglects the individual. This criticism holds that practice theory is so fixated on practices and complexes thereof that it ignores the entities or practitioners whose actions compose and perpetuate practices and complexes. While practice theorists have given limited attention to these topics in the past, in this volume both are multiply addressed.

The volume also responds to a particular feature of the history of practice theory to date. In the last two decades, practice theoretical ways of thinking have been taken up in numerous fields including education, geography, history, art, sociology, political science and organisation studies and in the study of varied phenomena, including consumption, learning, teaching, professions, migration, organisations, international relations, sustainability and energy use. This rapid appropriation has not been matched by corresponding refinement in the theoretical ideas that are

used to inform empirical research. This book responds to this situation by developing a richer repertoire of conceptual resources and directions for practice-theoretically inspired research.

Although the book is designed to inform future programmes of empirical enquiry, it is not a methodological handbook: accordingly, relatively little is said about issues of epistemology and methodology. Nor do contributors provide quick and easy recipes for those hoping for definitive instruction on what practice theory is about or how to apply it. Rather, chapters invite readers to venture into uncharted territory where debates have moved beyond familiar tropes such as micro/macro, agency/structure and process/product, and where the challenge is to explain how all social phenomena – including power, institutions, markets, change, organisations, science, religion, etc. – are aspects of, constellations of, or in some way rooted in the nexus of practice.

In exploring the nexus of practice, contributors address a wide range of issues. However, the approaches they take do not represent all possible strategies. 'Practice' is a rich polysemic word that, in addition to denoting organised arrays of action, also highlights the necessary embeddedness of human activity in social and material contexts and the relentlessly unfolding character of action and sequences of performances. Given these different meanings, it is perhaps not surprising that the range of 'practice approaches' has expanded and diversified over the past thirty years (Nicolini, 2012). This wider field encompasses not just the first and second generation practice theories mentioned above, but also so-called 'practice-based studies' that emphasise the concept of situated action (e.g., Gherardi, 2008), MacIntyrian conceptions that attribute internal goods to practices (MacIntyre, 1981), forms of discourse theory that focus on practices (e.g., Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Scollon, 2001) and traditions such as ethnomethodology that underline the processional quality of human social activity. Further afield, but not unrelated, lie endeavours such as social-cultural activity theory, actor-network theory and 'praxis' theory in the neo-Marxist tradition.

Only some versions of social-cultural activity theory, actor-network theory and praxis theory take practices as their central concern and can therefore be considered as 'practice' theories. In addition, important differences and incommensurabilities exist among practice theories (as defined above) and between them and the wider family of practice approaches. The contributors to this volume are not primarily concerned to detail compatibilities, incompatibilities and possible alliances or conflicts among these approaches. Instead, some draw practice theory together with other bodies of thought including theories of power and governmentality, actor-network theory, genetics, post humanist and feminist theory in the course of working through specific questions about the nexus of practice. In taking this approach, various chapters develop and extend practice theoretical concepts alongside and in dialogue with other forms of social theory.

In confronting new and established topics, this book keeps practice theory moving, and with each move, new questions come into view. In this respect, the book is as much an exercise in setting agendas as in filling out or finally resolving well-worn debates. It is also, necessarily, partial: other themes could have been pursued, and those that we do tackle could be developed more comprehensively and in other ways. This volume nonetheless represents a concerted effort to think through the nexus of practice.

Guide for readers

As the book's subtitle suggests, its chapters offer new approaches to describing and analysing *connections* within the nexus of practices, to questioning the dynamics and implications of the complexes and *constellations* that practices form and to understanding the entities – the *practitioners* – that carry on or enact practices. Since individual chapters speak to more than one of these agendas, there is no one way of grouping them and thus no one way of reading the book. We have therefore taken the unusual step of presenting the chapters in alphabetical order, by author's surname. The resulting table of contents is complemented by a chart which identifies themes that each chapter addresses.

Five significant themes are woven through the book, namely: suffusing, threading through, largeness, changing connections and practitioners. These themes did not arise by chance. Some authors, in tackling questions of largeness and in examining the roles of practitioners, respond to the prominent criticisms of practice theory mentioned above. Other authors concentrate on the problem of better understanding how practices hang together. The value of distinguishing between qualitatively different processes of interconnection (such as suffusing and threading through) emerged as the book took shape, as did an interest in characterising the dynamism, not of isolated practices, but of complexes and constellations of them. When read together, the chapters combine to provide new understandings of the nexus of practices and of its connections, constellations and practitioners.

The remainder of this introduction is designed to help readers navigate the collection as a whole. It describes the five cross-cutting themes, explains which chapters engage with each, and briefly comments on what the contributions have to offer.

Suffusing

The term 'suffusing' – which means to spread over or through as with a liquid or gas – suggests that certain phenomena can pervade practices and complexes thereof, providing a kind of atmosphere in which actions are performed and practices carried forward. Suffusing phenomena are often intangible in some sense, even though they are grasped by participants, expressed in doings and sayings and materialised in objects. Examples explored in this book include: affect, general understandings, linguistically articulated meaning and significance and certain forms of sociomateriality. For example, Reckwitz suggests that every social order, as a set of practices, is a specific order of affects. Welch and Warde argue that general understandings pervade practice complexes, developing this idea as an example of how culture can be conceptualised as a phenomenon of practices. Schatzki, who extends practice theoretical concepts to sayings and texts by working off ideas of prominent discourse theorists, discusses how the significance that is articulated in sayings and texts pervades the nexus of practices. And Gherardi draws attention to types of sociomaterial arrangements (e.g., involved in artificial nutrition or in emergency responses) that suffuse practices of ordering. As these chapters show, phenomena that suffuse individual practices and complexes of practice constitute diffuse but pervasive links among them. As well as revealing the subtlety of this particular form of connection, these chapters show

how phenomena that are usually analysed aside from practice (affect, culture, etc.) are formed through multiple associations with multiple practices.

Threading through

The notion of 'threading through' captures the idea that things, for instance, an object or a practice, can move or advance through the nexus of practices, thereby linking the practices through which they pass or to which they are connected. Threading through differs from suffusing because it is characterised by identifiable trajectories and paths, particular links made and unmade and traceable, even concrete movement. By comparison, the presence and dissemination of affect, understanding and meaning is less distinct and more ethereal.

There are many variants of threading through, differing in spatial and temporal extent, the 'thickness' of threads and the density of the woven ties that result. For example, Shove considers things such as energy supplies, components, TVs, and houses as they thread through practices and as their status vis-à-vis different practices switches among the roles of resource, appliance and infrastructure. These threads form ties that span what are usually thought of as different 'scales'. Similarly, Hui writes about how things connect practices and about how different conjunctions represent sources of variation within the nexus of practice. Her method of following the ways in which things such as passports and funeral arrangements are threaded through practices enables consideration of simultaneously dynamic trajectories and interactions of practitioners, materials and social categories. Watson, whose chapter considers how practice theory can accommodate an analysis of power, examines objects that circulate among practice complexes and explains how this circulation affects the 'conduct of conduct' that Foucault called power.

Suffusing and threading through are not mutually exclusive forms. As well as exemplifying processes of suffusion, Schatzki's chapter shows how practice bundles connect through (and are partly composed by) the circulation of sayings and texts. Similarly, Reckwitz writes about how artefacts that circulate among practices can serve as 'affect generators'.

Largeness

In various ways, all sorts of practices connect. The resulting complexes are distributed across the spectrum of small to large, in the sense of spatial(temporal) extension. Whilst many practice theoretical analyses of small-scale or local phenomena exist, comparatively few focus on large social phenomena (for exceptions, see Reckwitz, 2006; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Spee, 2015). This is something of a gap in that laypersons and scholars alike are often interested in large social matters, for example, markets, governments, international coalitions, football leagues and world religions.

Numerous chapters in this volume clear the ground for robust analyses of such phenomena (see also Schatzki, 2016a), examining processes involved in the construction of large phenomena or elements of their composition or workings. Understanding forms of interconnection, such as suffusing or threading through, also helps prepare this ground, but there is more to say about how

large social phenomena form and change. For example, Watson's practice theoretical analysis of how power is exerted by institutions such as governments and corporations focuses on how some practices are capable of orchestrating, disciplining and shaping others. Likewise, in describing series of material relations that add up to more than the sum of the interconnected parts, Shove offers an account of the ongoing making of world trade and global energy demand. Morley similarly deals with material-practice relations, but concentrates on the implications of delegation and automation (for example to automated factories) for the constitution of large arrangements and how these change. Taking a different approach, Schmidt considers the role that reflection plays in the formation and transformation of practice bundles within contemporary football. And Nicolini takes stock of how practice approaches address issues of largeness, laying out options and possibilities for conceptualising this topic.

Changing connections

The chapters in this book repeatedly counter the claim that practice theory promulgates a static view of society. They share the assumption that the nexus of practices is constantly happening and continually changing in small and occasionally larger ways, though it is not, as theories of becoming aver, in constant flux. As several chapters demonstrate, focusing on connections within the nexus of practice has consequences for discussions of change. Two chapters suggest that interconnected systems of practice, as opposed to individual practices, are the locus of change, especially of changes that occur across decades or generations. Blue and Spurling discuss how changes in complexes of practices – in their case, those found in hospitals – are modulated by jurisdictional, temporal and material-spatial dynamics. Morley, meanwhile, considers the growing prevalence of automated machines, arguing that their operation in the absence of human bodies is crucial for understanding how systems of practice develop. These chapters suggest that the trajectories of both individual practices and complexes of them are in part outcomes of how multiple practices interconnect.

Maller's contribution takes a different tack, using epigenetic understandings of the heritability of embodied characteristics to highlight the importance of bodies as media of continuity and change that are connected to multiple practices. The idea that practices are carried across generations by human bodies is intriguing and challenging both for practice theories and for organisations and agencies that seek to direct or shape how practices change. It also raises further questions about the roles of practitioners in theories of practice.

Practitioners

The final crosscutting theme concerns people as participants in practices, a topic about which practice theories have historically said relatively little (but see Dreier, 2008; Alkemeyer, 2013). The book's chapters explore people as entities that become participants and who subsequently perpetuate and transform practices through their actions. Alkemeyer and Buschmann extend practice theoretical approaches to the study of learning, scrutinising the bodily and mental-cum-bodily formation of practitioners through their participation in practices and through the intertwined processes of becoming-a-subject and becoming-subject-to the normative organisations of practices. Reckwitz writes about how individuals' affects and motivations are

tied to the regimes of affect that suffuse practices, while Maller enquires into the possible epigenetic effects of engaging in specific practices. Gherardi likewise considers the shaping of practitioner's bodies, in particular the bodily molding that results from their incorporation into the sociomaterial (à la Barad) regimes of particular practices. Finally, Schmidt's chapter shows that from a practice theory perspective, phenomena traditionally considered to be mental and individualist in character, namely, thinking and reflection, are really features of activity-in-practices, and that it is in this form that they contribute to the transformation of practices over time.

Unfinished business

This book makes important strides towards conceptualising and understanding the nexus of practice, highlighting themes of connection, constellations and practitioners. However, much more work still needs to be done. For example, although the book shows how practice theoretical analyses of large phenomena might proceed, such analyses are not developed in any detail. Similarly, there is clearly more to be said about power, language, learning, practitioners, connectivity and their dynamics. Reading through the chapters, other areas of unfinished business come into view. For example, if practice theories aim to conceptualise and analyse social phenomena in terms of the nexus of practices, what types of social scientific enquiry should be devised, what kinds of knowledge should be produced, and with which tools and methods? We hope this book will inspire researchers to engage with these questions and with others that clearly remain on the practice theory agenda.