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Practice theory as a package of theory, method and vocabulary: Affordances and limitations

Davide Nicolini

Abstract In this article, I argue that practice theory should be mainly conceived as a theoretical orientation towards the study of the social where the methodological element remains central. Practice theory, therefore, should be conceived as the pragmatic effort to re-specify the study and re-presentation of social phenomena in terms of networks, assemblages and textures of mediated practices. In arguing for the value of practice theory as an inseparable package of theory, method and vocabulary, I articulate four strategies that can be used to conduct practice-based studies. These are the analysis of the concerted accomplishment of orderly scenes of action; the examination of how scenes of action have been historical constituted; the study of the development and disappearance of individual practices; and the inquiry into the co-evolution, conflict and interference of two or more practices. I argue that these strategies, which build on the different traditions, which fall under the umbrella term of practice-based approaches, provide different affordances and allow practice theory to present a view of the social that is richer, thicker and more convincing than that of competing paradigms. I conclude by noting that several open issues still stand in the way of the development of practice theory as a package of theory, method and vocabulary. These should constitute the tropic of future research and debate.

What is practice theory?

Practice theory, practice idiom, praxeology, practice lens and practice-based studies are some of the different labels used to refer to the increasingly influential orientation in the human and social sciences, which since the 1970s[1] have been applied to the analysis of phenomena as varied as science, policy making, language, culture, sustainability, consumption, technological change and learning. This orientation and interest stem from the convergence of several distinct scholarly traditions which generally share a number of common assumptions. These include the following ideas:

- The fundamental features of human life such as sociality and 'knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions and

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[1] As early as 1984, Sherry Ortner wrote about the 'growing interest' for the concept of practice and suggested that this interest had been ongoing for 'several years' (Ortner 1984, p. 144).

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human transformation' must be understood as rooted in and transpiring through practices and their connections (Schatzki 2001, p. 2).

- Practices are organised constellations of material activities performed by multiple people (Schatzki 2012, p. 14).
- Practice rests on something that cannot be reduced to words. This non-propositional approach foregrounds the role of the body and artefacts in all human affairs; it also posits that intelligibility (how we make sense of things) and practical knowledge (the learned capacity to go on with things without thinking first) rather than rules and decisions organise human activity and inter-activity.
- Underlying all the apparently durable features of our world—from queues to formal organisations— there is some type of productive and reproductive work. The focus, however, is not on the work of individuals but on practices. Practices rather than individuals are the point of departure for the investigation and the 'unit of analysis'. Individuals do not disappear but are mainly considered carriers of practice (Nicolini 2012).
- Human activity is fundamentally an open event (see Schatzki 2011). At the point of action, although agents find themselves in a world that is already made intelligible for them, conduct is never fully determined and therefore, is impossible to predict. Every present is potentially the site of something new (ibid.).

In sum, the appeal of the practice-based approach lies in its capacity to describe important features of the world we inhabit as something that is routinely made and re-made in practice, using tools, discourse and our bodies. From this perspective, the social world appears as a vast array or assemblage of performances made durable by being inscribed in skilled human bodies and minds, objects and texts and knotted together in such a way that the results of one performance become the resource for another. Practice-based approaches offer a new vista on all things social by foregrounding work, materiality, process and knowledgeability. It promises a new way to navigate the choppy waters between the Schylla of methodological individualism, an orientation that is becoming increasingly popular as a result of the increasing hegemony of the neo-liberalist discourse, and the *Charybdis* of old structuralist notions such as those of system, structure, class and institutional logics, which in spite of all criticisms, continue to provide refuge and a safe haven for social scientists from different disciplines. The broad appeal of this thoroughly processual, material, constructive, bottom-up post-humanist approach is indicated by the dramatic growth in analyses utilising terms such as practice, praxis, interaction, activity, performativity and performance.

What are practices?

The central concept in practice theory is that of practices. Several versions of this concept exist. A popular view of practice is that put forward by Schatzki (2002). The author views practices as open and spatially, temporally dispersed sets of doings and sayings organised by common understandings, teleology (ends and tasks) and rules. Practices are inevitably entangled with the material arrangements that they contribute to create, in which they are carried out and through which they transpire. Examples of material arrangements are artefacts, linked people, organisms and elements of nature. The basic unit of analysis of all things human are thus bundles of practices and material arrangements. While Schatzki's definition, like that offered by other authors such as Reckwitz (2002), captures several key elements of the practice-based approach, it also tends to foreground the content of practice at the expense of its inherently performative nature. In other words, while the intent is unmistakably anti-foundationalist, the formulation exposes itself to reification—that is, turning practice into 'some-thing', with all the negative consequences that this implies. To preserve the inherent processual nature of the practice approach, I prefer to conceive practices as regimes of a mediated object-oriented performance of organised set of sayings and doings. We call these performances 'practices' when they have a history, social constituency and hence, a perceivable normative dimension. In my quasi definition, historically situated performance and the resources that go into producing and accounting for them is the basic building block of a practice-based approach. Examples of practices would include teaching a class, cooking a meal, telesales, telemedicine, investigating accidents, trading online and driving.

By stating practices are first and foremost performances, I emphasise that practices only exist to the extent that they are reproduced. Thus, my interest is in performances connected in space and time, not mysterious entities called practices. My practice approach is processual through and through. The word 'mediated' in the definition means that all practices are carried out through and are made possible by material or discursive resources we bring from somewhere else. Mediational means including both material tools and discursive resources (what we say, how we say it, and when we say it). I call practices 'a set of organised sayings and doings' to emphasise that different sets of sayings and doings and different ways of assembling them is what makes practices different. To say that saying and doing must have a history to become a practice means that practices have inherently a *duree*, that is, they last in time by virtue of being re-performed. Put differently, practices are durable regimes of performance; hence, the use of the term in the opening definition, intending the idea of regime both in its mechanical and political sense. Saying that practices have a social constituency means that

practices are always such for a social group that legitimates them and performs them on a regular basis so that practice is kept in existence. The corollary of this is that when a practice is not performed and the people who used to perform it have all gone, the practice disappears and only traces survive. When a set of object-oriented doings and sayings have a history and a constituency, then they also acquire some normativity—a sense emerges and is sustained there is a right and wrong way of doing things. This becomes the actual 'boundary' of the practice, a place that is always contestable and contested and where very often new practices emerge. Finally, practices are always oriented and organised around a telic dimension. As Bourdieu observed (1990), all practices have a sense, an object towards which they are orientated. Such an object exists only as a floating signifier (Laclau 1996) that emerges at the intersection of the several elements of the practice. As such, it is partly given and partly emergent, continuously changing, and always subject to negotiation and contestation (which makes it impossible to fully articulate in language). The key point here is that from a practice-based perspective such an object and telos are carried by the practice, not by individuals. Individuals may have their personal motives but once they join a practice they also tune into the object, telos and sense that is associated with the practice. Social practices thus populate our world with sense and meaning so that a practice unfolds on a moment-by-moment basis around something we care about and which interests us.

From local practices to the world

The attraction of the idea of practice is that it does more than offer a remedy for a number of problems left unsolved by other traditions, especially the tendency of describing the world in terms of irreducible dualisms between actor/system, social/material, body/mind and theory/action. Practice theory also allows us to 're-assemble the social' (Latour 2005) in terms of socio-material activities and use this basic building block to understand large and complex phenomena including concern organisations, institutions and society.[2] It does so without recurring to post hoc rationalisations and the use of *deux-ex-machina* types of explanatory devices such as identity, culture, forces of capital and other hidden forces. The idea of practice avoids this slay of hands by reverting to the principle that the world is nothing but a vast, complex constellation(s) of practices. In Schatzki's words, 'Bundles of practices and arrangements provide the material out of which social phenomena, large and small, consist' (Schatzki 2011, p. 6. see also Giddens 1984). Different versions that exist by a widely shared view are that practices are

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[2] The expression 'deux-ex-machina' describes the theatrical trick introduced in Greek times, whereby an actor dressed as a god was lowered onto the stage so that it could solve complicated plots that the author could not bring to a satisfactory resolution.

kept together by different forms of association or the sharing of common components and elements. For example, practices can become associated since one practice uses the outcome of another as a resource because they (1) depend on the same material arrangement (e.g. space), (2) are oriented towards the same end or object, (3) keep together different interests or (4) have been intentionality orchestrated. By positing that the world in all its complexity results from the association of practices, this approach joins forces with other relational sociologies and flat ontologies such as ANT Latour (2005) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), suggesting the need to eradicate from sociological conversation the idea that the world is or can be sliced into levels. Accordingly, we need to amend the statement used above; in fact, meaning, intelligibility, knowing, science power, language, social institutions and human transformation are rooted in and transpire through networks, assemblage, nexuses and textures of mediated practices.

The idea that practice theory is first an orientation towards understanding and explaining the social in terms of socio-material practices and their association helps distinguish a weak and strong programme in the wider 'practice turn'. The weak programme stems from a valid, but often vague, perception that much is to be gained if we bring work and activity back into social descriptions. The risk with this approach is that it results in a naïve quasi-praxeology, which reduces practice theory to the mere reporting of 'what people do'. This often produces studies that limit themselves to naming, describing and listing practices. The results are shallow descriptions that mainly bear witness to the scarce familiarity of the researcher with the new research setting, while leaving readers (and practitioners) with a puzzling 'so what?' sense, which consequently risks extending the idea of practice studies itself. The strong programme differs from the weak one in that it goes much further. While the two share an interest for the mundane and often unsung details of organisational life, the strong programme strives to *explain* social matters, their emergence, change, disappearance and effects in terms of practices instead of simply registering what practices are performed.

The focus on how practices create the social world (or the world as the site of the social) also distinguishes this approach from what I call 'localism'. Localism is detectable in the propensity of scholars, for example, certain members of the ethnomethodology community, to produce studies that fall within what Levinson (2005) calls 'interactional reductionism'—the tendency of reducing all social phenomena to self-organising local interactions. The focus is, thus, on the scene of actions and the localised accomplishment of practices, with authors making no effort to explore the relationships that link such accomplishments to other practices in space and time. The end result is studies that betray the relational nature of practice and ignore its situated and 'sited' nature—which implies that practices only acquire meaning when understood in 'context' (Schatzki 2002) and history (Holland and Lave 2009).

What kind of theory 'practice theory' is (or should be)?

From the above discussion, it should be clear that calling the broad orientation I refer to as 'practice theory' is in a way, a misnomer. Not only, as many others have noted (see, e.g. Schatzki 2001), there is no such a thing as a unified theory or practice: practice theory is also a particular type of theory. The word practice is, in fact, the signpost for a loosely defined re-constructive social ontology, what Schatzki (2009) calls a 'humanistic type of social theory'. The aim of this type of theory is not to provide general laws or explain casual or associative relationships between constructs; rather, it aims to provide a set of discursive resources to produce accounts, overviews and analyses of social affairs that enrich our understanding of them: a social ontology. Put differently, practice theory provides a set of concepts (a theoretical vocabulary) and a conceptual grammar (how to link these concepts in a meaningful way) that allow us to generate descriptions and 'bring worlds into being' in the texts we compose[3]. For this reason, the ultimate test for practice theory is neither its coherence nor elegance but its capacity to create enlightening texts. As Latour puts it, for social scientists, the text is the '… equivalent of a laboratory. It is a place for trials, experiments and simulations. Depending on what happens in it, there is or there is not a [network[4]]' (Latour 2005, p. 159). Like in the old pragmatists' tradition, the value of ideas and concepts can only be assessed in terms of practical consequences and differences they may make in our lives through the new understanding they provide (James 1907). Ontology is good or useful if it makes us see more things than we did before—it predisposes us as being affected by new differences.

Several authors have made the case for the advantage of a practice theory against other rival ontologies (Schatzki 2002, 2005; Reckwitz 2002; Nicolini 2012). Rarely, however, they have paused to examine three issues that have a direct bearing on our work as empirical scholars. First, does ontology need to be written to produce effects? Second, how complete should practice vocabulary and grammar be? Are we better served by a full vocabulary of what Latour calls an 'infra language'? (Latour 2005, p. 30) Third, is ontology a way of seeing or a way of doing?

- The first question is relevant to a notable tendency in contemporary social science that far more people discuss, debate and agonise over new theoretical vocabularies than putting them to use; for example, critical realism. However, actor-network theory (ANT) also suffered from the same fate in many areas of human and social science. There are dozens of books and hundreds of articles on critical realism and ANT, but only a handful of empirical studies. Nevertheless, to the extent that ontology is a form of understanding, it cannot

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[3] Texts can take different forms, of which writing is only one.

[4] You can substitute the term in the square brackets with any object in social and human analysis; for example, practice, mind or culture.

be made completely explicit. While all encounters with an element presuppose an understanding of it, this understanding can remain un-articulated. A social ontology is learned and developed as social scientists engage with phenomena and try to translate them in the text. Put differently, practice theory cannot be written first and operationalised later; it can only emerge through engagement with the phenomenon. In theory, practice theory exists. In practice, however, it does not (Latour 1988, p. 178). Ontology is always more than what is written in the paradigmatic texts of a discipline or what is discursively articulated in the meta-debates that accompany its deployment. From this follows that agonising about 'what is a practice?' and discussing 'what are the boundaries of a practice?', and other similar academic activities is useful only to a certain extent, after which it becomes counterproductive. While debating what practice is can be a useful exercise to refine our vocabulary and sharpen our analytical categories, this is only a mean to an end. At some point, one has to engage with practice itself and allow the phenomenon to bite back. Beyond this point, the ontological project becomes counterproductive as it stifles the engagement. Practice theory does not mean to theorise an ideal type of practice and then test its distance in the real world. This would, in fact, reinstate the very primacy of propositional knowledge that practice theory wishes to contest. Rather practice theory is an accumulation of choices and differences that makes a difference in both conducting empirical research and writing the results in a text.

- A second question follows from the first one. According to the argument above, a good ontology has to remain open. It must provide elements and rules to combine them without attempting to exhaust all the combinatorial possibilities. Put more clearly, ontology is powerful not when it provides an imaginary self-contained world, but when it allows the world to speak through it. A good social ontology provides the social equivalent of the table of elements so that the researcher can synthesise the world in their text, rather than trying to describe the shape of everything. A good example is the polar difference between functionalism à la Parsons and ethnomethodology—two approaches that, according to Garfinkel, stem from the same concern for social order (see Garfinkel 2002 for a discussion). While the first aims at producing an all-encompassing architecture, the second only provides vocabulary or grammar that generates infinite empirical research questions. There is, thus, merit in not turning the search for practice theory into a giant 'Glass Bead Game'[5] and operating with ontology in the making. The progress of practice theory is better served by refinement through empirical trials of strengths rather than elaboration and definition.

- From points one and two, one can derive the idea that practice theory is not a theoretical project (in the traditional sense), but a methodological orientation

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[5] Reference is made to Hermann Hesse's famous novel, *Das Glasperlenspiel* (Hesse 1943).

supported by a new vocabulary. Elsewhere (Nicolini 2012, Chap. 8), I have described this circumstance by suggesting that practice theory is inherently a package of theory, method and literary genre. Practice theory, as I understand it, is a family of ways of understanding the social that gives handles to empirical researchers. Practice theory should, therefore, be mainly conceived as a theoretical orientation towards the study of the social, where the methodological element remains central. As an effort to re-specify the study of the social in terms of networks, assemblage, nexuses and textures of mediated practices the approach should be considered and approached as a machinery to ask questions in the right way rather than a collection of answers. The object of practice theory research is thus not practice but organisation, teaching, cooking, gender relations and power—that is, the phenomena that are re-specified by the ontology. If practice theory only discusses practice, it misses the point. Put differently, this is to surmise that practice theory (similar to other cognate approaches) constitutes a new and still tentative form of empirical philosophy. Rather than a theory, practice is a mode of theorising that opens specific spaces of intelligibility: a theorising practice in its own right.

Four ways to use the practice theory–method package (and the risks they pose)

The idea that practice theory is fundamentally a methodology–vocabulary orientation (a package of theory and methods) emphasises that, to study practices, one needs to employ an internally coherent approach, where ontological assumptions (the basic assumption about how the world is) and methodological choices (how to study things so that a particular ontology materialises) work together. A pertinent question that follows from this is what strategy and design can be used to bring the project of re-specifying social phenomena in terms of practice and their associations. In a previous work, I suggested that one way to achieve this is to reiterate three basic movements: zooming in on the accomplishments of practice, zooming out to discern their relationships in space and time and using the above devices to produce diffracting machinations that enrich our understanding through thick textual renditions of mundane practices (Nicolini 2009, 2012). I believe that this fundamental rhizomatic approach holds true as it responds to the inherent trans-situated nature of practices (by my definition above, practices manifest in more than one place and more than one time). In this section, however, I extend the discussion on how conducting practice-based studies and examining four strategies may contribute in different ways to the effort of re-specifying social phenomena in terms of associations between practices in time and space (see also Nicolini, 2016). These strategies are (i) the analysis of the concerted accomplishment of orderly scenes of action (ii)

the study of how individual practices emerge and disappear (iii) the examination of how concerted accomplishments hang together to form constellations and what consequences descend from this and (iv) the inquiry into the co-evolution, conflict and interference of two or more practices. I call these situational, genealogic, configurational and conflict-sensitive orientations towards studying practices. I will argue that these strategies, which build on the different traditions that go under the umbrella term of practice based, provide different affordances and allow practice theory to present a view of the social that is richer, thicker and more convincing than that offered by competing paradigms.

Situational orientation

The first step to analysing the social from a practice perspective is to focus on the concerted accomplishment of orderly scenes of action. In line with my thinking, I still see this approach as both logically and methodologically predominant. It is logically predominant because, as I suggested above, practices are mainly sequences of indeterminate events organised and prefigured in various ways but never determined by them. The idea is that the past and future co-exist in the present until a deed takes place. The deed itself selects its past (by creating a sequence it establishes what is 'determined') and indicates what of the possible future oriented the action. Organisation studies have been familiarised with this idea by Karl Weick (1979) and his famous sentence 'how do I know what I think until I see what I say' (borrowed from E.M. Forster). If while walking in the corridor I meet someone with whom I had an argument with and I am greeted by this person, I can either respond or not. Whether I am still 'mad' with this person is not decided until the scene unfolds. Because each turn of a sequence is open to the future, its accomplishment changes or more precisely, selects the past. By the same token, what counts as a resource or a mediated tool follows the same fate. A resource does not exist in and for itself, and you can only ask *when* something becomes a resource. The need to attend to the accomplishment and production of the social ('being in the corridor') is made more urgent by the fact that familiarity makes the aspects of practices invisible to the practitioners and the realisation that work becomes invisible with distance (Suchman 1995). Witnessing the scenes of action is thus in many ways, a necessary passage for any study of practice and the study of practice is from the perspective 'naturalistic inquiry' writ large. Studies of practice that do not transit through the site where the practice is produced are contradictory and likely to build on our own familiarity with the practice itself. We can dispense with observing how people shower (vs. take bath) because we are competent in this practice. But studying a new or unfamiliar practice without familiarising ourselves with it would be logically impossible.

There is, however, a second and there exist more methodological reasons for why scenes of actions are so important. While for analytical purposes, practices

can by conceived and examined individually, empirically we always encounter multiplicities or arrays of practices. Both of us (and practitioners) have developed various ways to create discursive landscapes where some practices—what Shove et al. (2012) call complexes—are fore-grounded and others are left in the background. When people talk about 'snowboarding', they usually ignore the practices of driving, playing, eating, drinking and photography (and consuming substances) that are part and parcel of 'spending a day on a half-pipe'. While all these practices can and have been studied in their own right, we have become skilled at distinguishing the tree from the forest. By focusing on one particular 'filament' in the rope or bundle, we can thus go about studying snowboarding as an object of episteme. By the same token, we have also become skilled (through the vocabulary mentioned above) at describing how different complexes are linked to constitute large arrangements (teaching or trading on the market or living a laboratory life). My observation, however, is that empirically, we often find ourselves in a different situation. We almost ubiquitously experience practices from within a particular scene of action, where several practices intersect and are knotted together—what Scollon and Scollon (2004) call 'nexuses'. Think of a train station or a hospital emergency room. We know that these spaces are dispositifs that connect practices together. But for the researcher, the question is which practices am I observing? What should I observe? What are the practices that are circulating in and through this scene of action? Which are relevant? The problem for the empirical researcher is thus different (and possibly opposite) from that of a theoretician. She needs to find out relevant practices before we can study them. Also, remember that 'practice' is a second-order abstraction both for us and practitioners (practitioners ordinarily talk about their own practices).

Genealogic orientation

While studying practice through scenes of action remains central, several scholars within the practice movement have embraced a different strategy. Rather than reverse-engineering (or de-constructing) scenes of actions as suggested above, their strategy has been to focus on the development and disappearance of individual practices, their interest being how concerted accomplishments become a regime, how it is perpetuated, how it changes and why it disappears. Shove et al. (2012), for example, have conducted numerous studies on the dynamic of social practice. To do so, they have developed a version of practice theory on the basis of Reckwitz (2002), which assumes that practice emerges from or is constituted by the association of meaning, skills and tools. Thus, the study of practices become the empirical study of how these elements are associated, by whom and under what conditions they become a practice. This combinatory approach allows us to study practice variation which can stem from both elaboration of the elements and the substitution of one of them (as in the emergence of the snowboarding practice)

or both. The approach also gives an edge when trying to explain how practice travels in space and time as it provides clear objects to follow.

Focusing on the social dynamics of a specific practice has obvious benefits for the researcher. It is one thing to study 'domestic life' and another to focus on the practice of dish washing and cleaning. Of course, as we have seen before, empirically, we encounter domestic life first and need to construct our object of study on the basis of our own experiences and what the practitioners distinguish for their own practical purposes. Approaching practice from this end, however, exposes us to risks. First, this approach requires us to relax, at least to some extent, the normative implications of the above idea that practice theory is naturalistic research writ large. This is facilitated by the fact that practitioners usually have and use quite precise words to describe the details of practices (what they do and say) as the language in practice is how novices are socialised and the practice is elaborated in the first place. Most practitioners can thus tell their version of 'what the story is here'. However, talking to practitioners remains second best and studying practice through accounts is undesirable. Whenever possible, we should position ourselves in the midst of the scene of action. This gives us the chance to offer our account, which may be radically different from those produced by the actors, and appreciate aspects that actors cannot. In addition, I believe studying practices through interviews is second best, which is, of course, better than nothing. Interviews or focus groups are themselves practices (Silverman 2013). By interviewing someone about their practice, you learn a lot about interviewing, their relationship and (usually very little) the actual practice under investigation. By the same token, while historical analysis is sometimes necessary for the lack of alternatives, it is always second best to longitudinal studies. History in the making is not easy to do and is impractical but is preferred.

Studying the dynamic of social practice exposes us to a second risk. As Shove et al (2012) clarify, to do so one has to first construct practices as an epistemic object (something that practitioners also do when they elaborate). Unfortunately, the step from this to reifying practices and making a practice a 'thing with boundaries' is short. Questions such as 'what is practice?' and 'what are the boundaries of a practice?' soon emerge—mostly because we are inept in dealing with fluid entities. Studying the dynamic of individual social practices thus requires to keep hold on the awareness that (a) we are studying the re-production of performances, not the construction of things (asking what is the boundary of a performance does not make sense) and (b) what is the boundary of a practice; when a practice becomes something else is an empirical not a theoretical questions. When a democratic vote ceases to be democratic, when teaching is not teaching but imparting a curriculum are things that people fight for in the street (or moan about in their offices) and is not something for academics to decide.

Configurational orientation

Studying how concerted accomplishments and performances hang together to form constellations or larger assemblages is the third way to respond to the general question 'how do social phenomena transpire amid and through constellations, bundles and regions of practice?'. In a previous work, I described this as a zooming out movement and suggested that it requires to adhere to ANT's methodological prescription to follow the intermediaries (e.g. actors, artefacts and texts: see Nicolini 2009). A critical insight here is that to understand how practices form constellations and broader configurations, we should not look for abstract processes but for other material practices and localised performances. We must remember that social scientists are not the only people interested in creating panoramic views of society. Several actors pursue the same 'by scaling, spacing, and contextualising each other through the transportation in some specific vehicles of some specific traces' (Latour 2005, p. 184). How they do it is a key empirical question. In this sense, asking the question rather than approaching the issue with prefigured answer is paramount. For example, Schatzki (2012) suggests that practice form configurations when they share the same element, they are mutually dependent, the ends or goal people purse are common or orchestrated, they form chains of action or they are intentionally and programmatically joined. These, however, are general answers to the question, 'how are practices associated?' They are useful and clever answers. However, the risk is that researchers go out in the wild looking for them and report back whether they were there, a move that contradicts the idea that good science should be articulative. To see how this works, one has only to take notice of the endless formulaic application of Callon's problematisation-interessement-enrollment-mobilisation sequence (Callon 1986). This notion, which was originally put forward to shed light on how associations are formed, ended up hampering rather than fostering the abductive movement by offering an easy way out to (lazy) scholars in search of a quick publication.

Put differently, studying how practices are connected to form bundles and constellations again requires us to hold firm the principle that practice theory is a package of theory and methods geared towards generating questions, not providing answers. There is a real risk, in fact, that the idea of 'practice as entity' (a useful tool in the hands of cautious, processually oriented scholars) becomes quickly reified and researchers start to empirically search for complex architectures of practices that they then need to put in motion—with the potential consequence being that the distinction between a structure and process that we were trying to throw out of the door re-enters through the window.

Conflict- sensitive orientation

A final, and somewhat less frequently used, strategy to conduct practice-based studies is to inquire into the co-evolution, conflict and interference of two or more practices. A reason why this strategy is still less used is that it largely depends on the three abovementioned strategies. Yet paradoxically, this particular way to look at practices is also where some of the most valuable rewards may come from. This is visible in the cultural historical activity tradition (Engeström, Miettinen and Punamäki 1999) which focuses on the study of contradictions and how they are solved given that this is one of the places where the interests of the practitioners and those of academics coincide. Cultural historical activity is, in fact, predicated on studying and analysing practices, surfacing tensions and contradictions and offering their findings to the practitioners themselves—on the basis of the assumption that when it comes to practices (e.g. performance surfacing interferences), problems and contradictions often trigger generative and expansive processes. Interesting work in this area has also been conducted in relation to the sociology of consumption (Warde 2005; Shove et al. 2012) and in the area of sustainability (Shove and Spurling 2013), where scholars have managed to generate surprising and authentically novel questions using the simplified model, such as 'how does a practice gains superiority over a competing one by enrolling practitioners and associating with meaning?' rather than the other way around.

Focusing on conflict and interference is important because it constitutes one of the ways to interrogate practices and their associations in terms of the effects that they produce, thus addressing the issue of power that is otherwise notably missing from the discussion. For example, we know well that empowerment, scope for agency and voice are effects of practice and how they are associated. Beyond the question of how practices hang together lies the issue of what effects this hanging together have on those who dwell within the nexuses and assemblages composed. In a recent study, for example, I investigated with a co-researcher a particular bundle of (communication) practices and then began asking questions such as are these practice aligned among them? Are they good at the purpose they were set up to serve? What type of practical 'identity' of those involve do they prefigure? Is this practical identity (what the people involve do) aligned with their desired identity (what they think they should do)? Some of the most promising ways for practice theory is to investigate the contrast between the emergent and intended object of a practice, play with different time horizons to generate different understandings and explain change as the result of contradictions between the elements of practice and their accumulation.

Summary and concluding remarks

In this contribution, I proposed that while practice theory holds big promises for the future, it requires that we hold firm to some principles so that practice theory or the practice-based approach does not become something else and the practice turn becomes indeed a practice 'U-turn' (Sormani et al. 2011).

In particular, I claimed the following:

- The practice-based approach is better served by the thoroughly processual understanding of practice that prevents its reification. I suggest that holding on to the idea as practices as regimes of performances is one way forward.
- The real value of practice theory stems from overcoming the idea that 'practice theory is just chronicling what people do' and 'only what is in sight counts'. The practice orientation is a sociological project that promises to offer a better understanding of social phenomena by re-specifying in terms of practices and their associations.
- Practice theory is more than a simple sensitising tool. Practice theory governs methodological choices and orients towards specific forms of inquiry—the aim being to populate the world with practices and not something else (e.g. individuals, networks and systems) However, to do conduct practice, theory must be constituted as a weak and modest ontology. Practice-based approaches need theory but should remain fundamentally a methodological project.
- The project of practice theory is fundamentally cumulative in nature. Just as different intellectual traditions allow us to interrogate practices in different ways (see Nicolini 2012, Chap.1 for a discussion), we need to employ different strategies to study practice. To cover the plenum of practices in any of the regions of human co-existence, we need to deploy as many as possible of the four strategies: analyse the concerted accomplishment of orderly scenes of action; study the historical dynamics of individual practices; examine how concerted accomplishments hang together to form constellations; investigate the co-evolution, conflict and interference of two or more practices; and ask what are the different effects generated by different assemblages of practices.

Each of these strategies comes with risks attached. Interrogating scenes of action is a critical step that should be part of any study of practice—probably the first step of the inquiry. However, focusing on scenes of actions exposes us to the risk of localism; it also provides a partial explanation for what is going on. While studying a scene of action is critical, especially for those who study organisation in the making (organising processes), scenes of action constitute the departure points and the (ideal) end point of a study. Studying individual practices is a valid alternative strategy which, however, also comes with its own risks. One of the major potential downfalls in this case is the temptation to reify the object of study, forget that practice as an epistemic object is a second-order concept and focus on refining such epistemic object rather than using it to investigate society or

organisation. In other words, there is a subtle distinction between refining the vocabulary of practice so that it serves better empirical research and turning this refinement into a self-referential exercise that remains confined within the walls of the ivory tower. A similar risk applies to the complex issue of how to investigate the relationships and association between practices. Here again, holding on to a methodological understanding of practice theory is paramount so that we do not end up either with a tautological view of practice (i.e. a view where theories simply make you see their own reflection in the so called 'phenomena') or a form of practice architecturism where the goal is to create artificial models of reality rather than understanding how practitioners do it for real.

From this discussion, it emerges that several open issues still stand in the way of the development of practice theory as a package of theory, method and vocabulary:

- What is the practical relationship between the study of situated studies of scene of action (what I called nexuses of practices) and the study of individual practices? Is there a difference between studying practices and practice-based studies of social phenomena? What is this difference? Or is this simply an effect of the interest and object of study of different community of practitioners (organisational scholars are more interested in the local scenes of actions, while sociologist of education focus on teaching)
- Are proximal approaches (i.e. approaches where the researcher is 'the' or one of the main instruments of inquiry) a necessary aspect of practice theory as empirical research? Can we study practice without starting from the middle of action (and returning constantly to it)? Is practice simply ethnography writ large? Are practice theories simply an infra language to fulfil the graphos part of ethnography?
- Is practice theory necessarily historical? What do we gain or lose if we ignore short and long sequences of production and reproduction? What are the implications of changing our temporal scale for the understanding of practice? How long is 'long enough' in space and time?
- Is practice theory comparative or should we at least strive to make practice theorising comparative? What are we set out to win or lose?
These topics should constitute the objects of future research and debate.

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