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How social practices generate, carry and require knowledge and know-how

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This short comment has two starting points. One is an agreement that it is possible to focus on social practices as ‘the basic domain of study of the social sciences’ (Giddens 1984) and the ‘site of the social’ (Schatzki 2002). The second is an acknowledgement that social practices entail and are constituted through the active integration of a range of elements, among them embodied skills and competence (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012), and ‘background knowledge in the form of understanding and know-how... and motivational knowledge’ (Reckwitz 2002, 249). If we take social practice as our starting point, then we need an account of knowledge and know-how that is rooted in practice.

There is already a body of useful and relevant work in something like this tradition. For example, Lave and Wenger’s analysis of Situated Learning (1991) explores the circulation of knowledge from old hands to newcomers through the process of doing. Instead of seeing knowledge as something that exists outside practice, and that has to be acquired in advance, Lave and Wenger argue that legitimate peripheral participation in the activities of a community of practice is what enables newcomers to become old hands. They write: ‘... engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for the effectiveness of learning’. (93)

Others examine the routes through which embodied experiences and forms of knowing-through-doing are ‘abstracted’ from situations of practice, and how they are codified, packaged, stored and prepared for wider circulation. Recipe books, instruction manuals and sketch plans are outcomes of such abstraction. If it is to be of value, knowledge, captured in these forms has to find its way back into practices enacted by other people and at other places and times: as Disco and van der Meulen explain, it has to be decoded, interpreted and re-enacted - in their words it has to be ‘reversed’ (Disco and van der Meulen 1998).

Methodologically, both these accounts take ‘knowledge’ as their central theme, asking questions about how it is shared and how it is de- and re-contextualised. Similarly, questions about the transferability of research ‘findings’ (see Chapter 10 on health) are at heart questions about knowledge treated as an object that can ‘circulate’, or ‘be transferred’ between people. While Lave and Wenger and Disco and van der Meulen are interested in practice: in processes of learning and becoming, and in modes of circulation from one moment of performance to another – practices themselves are not the central topic of their analysis.

If we take practice theories seriously, a more consistent strategy would be to stick fast to the methodological suggestion that practices, as such, constitute the core objects of social enquiry. From this point of view, questions about knowledge and know-how would not be framed in terms of how practitioners learn, nor would they focus on how knowledge travels. Instead, the challenge would be to understand how practices constitute the knowledge bases on which their own

continued existence depends. This question is key for getting at how practices change or extend through recruiting and losing practitioners (Shove and Pantzar 2007).

One obvious problem is that a new practice cannot take hold unless it is able to 'capture' recruits and carriers already capable of enacting and reproducing it. Practices can only come into being through enactment by skilled practitioners. Hence the question how do practices 'make' the skills / knowledge they need? (Disco and van der Meulen 1998) There is unlikely to be any one answer. Different practices will have different strategies for establishing the knowledge bases they need. Potential techniques include the following:

- Predation: practices might leech off, or in some circumstances, completely hijack practical knowledge developed by another practice;
- Encroachment: a milder form of predation in which practices make use of proximal, 'boundary' overlapping practice knowledge;
- Appropriation: practices might build on sunk-knowledge embedded in material (inscription, infrastructure), or institutional (rules, traditions of thought, paradigms) forms which makes some courses of action easier to follow than others;
- Cultivation: practices might develop internal ladders or 'levels' of expertise; there might be steps or stages of progression enabling novices to become expert within a practice; further such internal variants of a practice might be of a form that enables teaching / curricula to be built around them.
- Simplification and open access: practices might simplify themselves, become open access, or reduce the need for specialised know-how in order to increase the pool of potential recruits.

The suggestion that practices survive and thrive through producing and re-producing the appropriately skilled activity of practitioners (which constitutes the practice) is convincing and plausible. By contrast, the related suggestion that practices have knowledge-management strategies of their own would strike many as odd: perhaps pushing the agency of practice a step too far. On the other hand, this approach provides a fresh way of thinking about the relation between knowledge and people as the carriers of practices and as the crossing points for multiple practices (Reckwitz 2002, 250).

As we know, doing develops skills in cohorts of carriers, providing them with new knowledges and capacities and as a result enabling them to be recruited and trained in other practices. In so far as knowing is part of doing, and in so far as the lives and careers of (people) are shaped by the practices they carry, practitioners – those who do - are indeed both the containers and the conduits of quite specific bodies of know-how, the aggregate characteristics of which define the potential for leeching, hijacking or being encroached upon by other established or emerging practices.

It follows that knowledges, being part of practices, are never fixed but always in processes of development and decay spurting forwards in moments of exponential growth, falling into decline, being resurrected from near oblivion, or hybridised in new combinations. It also follows that,

developments in knowledge, and knowledge-related processes of apprenticeship, or of abstraction and reversal, have no independent existence: rather, they are part of the ongoing establishment and decline of practices never in isolation but always in relation to each other, and always 'carried' by us their variously knowing hosts.

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