



# The Practice Approach: For a Praxeology of Organisational and Management Studies

Davide Nicolini and Pedro Monteiro

Practice theory, practice-based studies, practice approach, or practice lens denote a family of orientations that take orderly materially mediated doing and sayings ('practices') and their aggregations as central for the understanding of organisational and social phenomena. Authors who embrace this orientation suggest that matters such as social order, knowledge, institutions, identity, power, inequalities, or change result from and transpire through practices and their aggregations. Examples of social practices include driving, taking pictures, cooking, consuming, teaching a class, online trading, strategising in corporate meetings, and performing heart surgery. Practice approaches are a primary way to study organisation processually. This is because all coherent practice approaches subscribe to the view that social and organisational life stem from and transpire through the real-time accomplishments of ordinary activities.

The practice approach is rooted in a number of traditions including Marxism, the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the North

American pragmatist tradition, which put concrete human activity – with blood, sweat, tears and all – at the centre of the study of the production, reproduction, and change of social phenomena. In a famous example, Pierre Bourdieu, used to note that to understand crucial aspects of French society we need look into ordinary settings such as kitchens and dining rooms rather than high places or abstract spheres populated with structures, functions, and the like (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The texture of French society is in fact reproduced daily through ordinary activities and conversations such as "Have you been respectful to your teachers?" and "This is not the proper way to sit at the table: sit up straight!" Similarly, one of the greatest recent social changes in North American history was triggered in the back of an old bus by a small number of courageous women and men who refused to leave their seats and in so doing interrupted the reproduction of segregation – in practice (Parks & Reed, 2000). Thus, coherent practice

approaches posit that phenomena of various complexities are not made of transcendental elements such as forces, logics, or mental models. When it comes to the social world, it is practising all the way down<sup>1</sup>.

In this chapter, we present the main tenets of the practice approach. In the first section, we explain the central elements that characterise practices and address the main misunderstandings usually associated with the approach in the following one. In the third part, we showcase four research strategies to carry out practice-based studies, and in the epilogue we briefly discuss our position on theorising through a practice lens.

## 1. WHAT ARE PRACTICES?

One of the challenges of discussing the practice approach is its lack of epistemological unity. Practice theories constitute, in fact, a fairly broad family connected by a web of historical and conceptual similarities. Each has its own definition of practice and therefore praxeologise their object of inquiry in different ways (see Table 7.1 for a collection of definitions of social practice). There are however numerous family resemblances that allow us to speak of a practice approach. Among others, scholars agree that:

- 1 Practices are molar phenomena that hold a number of sub-components – usually smaller units of activity. For example, the academic practice of publishing is made of, gives sense to, and organises (in the sense of establishing sequences and relations between) a number of other activities that may not count as practices. Different authors give these smaller units various names. From the smaller to the bigger, Schatzki name them “doings and sayings” (e.g., pressing keys on a keyboard), “tasks” (e.g., searching for a quotation on the Internet), and “projects” (e.g., writing an article). Cultural historical activity theory scholars distinguish between “operations, action and activity” (Kuutti, 1996). More recently, González, Nardi, & Mark (2009) introduced the further level of “ensembles”, defined as sets of actions thematically connected, oriented towards a particular purpose, and framed within a particular object-related activity.
- 2 Practices and their sub-elements only acquire sense when organised around an end or object. Jumping on a table is an activity that does not make sense as part of the practice of ‘attending a class’ although is perfectly sensible as part of the practice of ‘singing Austrian folk dances’ (where singers jump on tables and perform their piece keeping the tempo by shaking whips!). By the same token, even ‘individual’ activities like brushing our teeth in the morning already makes sense because the practice itself carries (and is organised around) an implicit end. In a sense, most of the time practices flow towards their end and we follow practices, as we participate in them, blindly. This does not mean that we act as automatons, turning off our brains. Rather, it means we carry out our lives in ways different from what is usually imagined by functionalists – who posit that people ‘deliberate internally’ before they act. Practice scholars captured this dimension in specific ways. Schatzki suggests that all practices are guided by a teleo-affective dimension (Schatzki, 2002). Cultural historical activity theory scholars talk about the object of a practice, suggesting however that such object is partly given, partly negotiated with others, and partly beyond our control – especially when the practice involves a transformation, as most work activities do (Engeström, 1987). Practices are inherently associated with a performative understanding of reality (Latour, 2005). Although we might speak of practices as discrete, substantial entities (turning them into discursive ‘objects’), in the end we are still talking about activities, not things. For example, while practices can be identified and named (practitioners do this all the time, and talk about ‘teaching a class’ but of ‘giving a speech’). Asking where the bounds teaching lie is like asking what the boundary of a language or any dynamic phenomena is. There are no clearly defined bounds because the answers are necessarily open-ended. Hence, questioning, “When does teaching end?” or “When is teaching no longer teaching?” is an empirical question, not one that can be answered using a list of attributes (more on this on Section 3.2).
- 3 Practices exist in configurations, which authors refer to as knots, networks, nexuses, assemblages,

**Table 7.1 Definitions of Practice**

<i>Author</i>	<i>Definition of Practice</i>
Catherine Bell	"I will use the term to highlight four features of human activity. Practice is (1) situational; (2) strategic; (3) embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world, or what I will call 'redemptive hegemony'" (Bell, 1992, p. 81)
Pierre Bourdieu	"Practice = (Habitux X Capital) + Field" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101)
Michel de Certeau	"The microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structure and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of 'tactics' articulated in the details of everyday life" (De Certeau, 1998, p. xi)
Harold Garfinkel	"Contingent ongoing accomplishments" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 11)
Anthony Giddens	"Regularized types of acts" (Giddens, 1984, p. 75) "The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality but social practices ordered across space and time" (p. 1989)
Aleksei Leont'ev	"Activity is the non-additive, molar unit for the material, corporeal subject. In a narrower sense (i.e., on the psychological level) is the unit of life that is mediated by mental reflection. The real function of this unit is to orient the subject in the world of objects. In other words, activity is not a reaction or aggregate of reactions, but a system with its own structure, its own internal transformations, and its own development" (Leontjev, 1981, p. 46)
Alasdair MacIntyre	"Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill but the game of football is, and so is chess" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175)
Sherry Ortner	"Modern practice theory seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call 'the system,' on the other. Questions concerning these relationships may go in either direction – the impact of the system on practice, and the impact of practice on the system. (Ortner, 1984, p. 148) ... routines and scenarios are predicated upon, and embody within themselves, the fundamental notions of temporal, spatial, and social ordering that underlie and organise the system as a whole. In enacting these routines, actors not only continue to be shaped by the underlying organizational principles involved but continually re-endorse those principles in the world of public observation and discourse" (Ortner, 1984, p. 154)
Andreas Reckwitz	"A routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice ... forms so to speak a 'block' whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements" (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 49-50)
Theodore Schatzki	"A practice is a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structures, and general understandings (...) the organization of a practice describes the practice's frontiers: A doing or saying belongs to a given practice if it expresses components of that practice's organization" (Schatzki, 2002, p. 87)
Charles Taylor	"The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, mutual actions" (Taylor, 1971, p. 27)
Lev Vygotsky	"Artifact-mediated and object-oriented action" (Vygotsky, 1980, p. 40)

and textures (Czarniawska, 2007; Gherardi, 2006; Latour, 2005; Nicolini, 2009a; 2012). They are joined by happening in the same time and place or by being bound together in harmonious or conflicting relationships. For example, teaching depends on the alignment of other practices

that in effect are not directly part of it – such as enrolling students, opening the school, and keeping it clean, all practices in their own right. In this sense, we never encounter practices in isolation, and to think of a specific practice we must foreground it by bracketing its relationships.

This ramified 'hinterland' becomes particularly visible where there is a breakdown or where situations change. If electricity production practices are interrupted, the effects ripple through the connections, affecting the practice of teaching a class by making the room dark and the slide projector unusable.

- 4 Practices have a collective and normative nature. Besides spanning connections with other practices, they are also associated with a given constituency, which in turn keeps the practice alive by (re)producing it (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such reference group provides the *milieu* to socialise newcomers and pass competencies to the next generation while constituting the forum where what counts as acceptable is debated and decided. Thus, practices and their normativity are apprehended together. As practices are learnt and performed, the mutual accountability among practitioners establish a sense of right and wrong (so that not 'everything goes' in practice!) and restrictions (what is acceptable and what constitutes overstepping the mark).
- 5 As Rouse notes, actors share a practice "If their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct and incorrect practice" (Rouse, 2001, p. 190). This means that the normativity of practices is not found in the ability to follow general rules but in the mutual (and personal) scrutiny of its constituency. Far from being just descriptive devices that summarise what people do, practices are sanctioned 'real-life mechanisms' that select appropriate conducts and acceptable attributions of intelligibility. Accordingly, we not only tend to follow practices blindly but practices inexorably create worlds: not 'everything goes' in practice.
- 6 Practices are inherently material in nature. Consider online trading, for example. Like all practices, it unfolds amid and through a specific material arrangement that is often mission-critical: without computers, there would be no calculations on a trading floor (Beunza & Stark, 2004). Practices thus bring to the fore the critical and active role of material things in all social affairs (Orlikowski, 2010). In line with this focus on the material side of social life, most practice theories give prominence to habituated or educated bodies. As we have seen above, practices are often inscribed in bodies through learning and repeated injunctions (e.g., seating straight at table). This means that we do not really follow practices, rather we absorb them and are absorbed in them, producing a sense of "What comes next" based on our participation (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998). For practice theory, we think with our bodies, and in a real sense we are the practice.
- 7 There are always partial inconsistencies and tensions within the components of a practice and among different practices. Conflicts may arise from the misalignment of the elements of a practice; from the competition between old and new ways of doing things; or from the introduction of novelty, such as new technologies or rules. The resolution of clashes often triggers the expansion of the practice, the development of different ways of doing things, the introduction of new artefacts or shifts of meaning (Engeström, 1987; Nicolini, 2007). It may also trigger the importation of new elements from other practices, the dissolution of traditional alliances between practices, and the establishment of new ones. These dynamics keep practices in constant movement.
- 8 All practices have a history and are historically situated. First, practices are not events as they entail an element of duration and perpetuation. This is obtained mostly through reiterated performances (which is different from identical 'repetition') and the socialisation of newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Artefacts (which inscribe programmes of action and memories held by those who make up the social constituency of the practice) also perpetuate practices in time and allow for lags in reproduction without them being lost. In this way, the social, conventionalised, normative, and durable nature of practices means practices sustain one another and we can say that practices constitute regimes of activity – in the dual sense of constituting regulated ordered ways of doing and sayings and unfolding processes that flow in time governed by specific conditions.
- 9 The social and material nature of practices also makes them inherently situated in a particular moment in time, space, and history. Cooking, teaching a class, and performing heart surgery necessarily 'depend' on the combination of ingredients which go into them as well as the conditions within which the practice unfolds. In this sense, all practices are different each time round – they are inherently local and accomplished each time for the first time. The puzzle for social scientists is that of explaining the apparent similarities of practices in space and time rather than their

differences. For the same reason, the past does not determine the future accomplishment of practices as any accomplishment is both context perpetuating (confirms the existing regime) and context renewing (it sets up new conditions).

- 10 The indeterminacy of practices allows scope for initiative, creativity, and biographies. Performing a practice always requires adapting to new circumstances, as its accomplishment is neither mindless repetition nor complete invention. Yet individual performances take place and are intelligible against the "more or less stable background of other practices" (Rouse, 2007, p. 505). Hence, the existence of a practice does not equate to the action of an individual but is part of regimes of activity (see above). While *homo economicus* is conceived as a (semi) rational decision maker and *homo sociologicus* is depicted as a norm-following, role-performing individual, *homo practicus* is conceived as a carrier of practices, a body/mind who 'carries', but also 'carries out', practices (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256).
- 11 Practices and their assemblages empower certain courses of action (and those positioned to take them) over others. In this sense, no one can ever step aside from the circuits of power just as they cannot step out of the texture of practices – which is synonymous to social life (Schatzki, 2002). However, given their indeterminacy and dynamic nature, practices also create openings for resistance and change as when actors reflect and ask themselves "What does it make sense to do in this situation?" Practice approaches thus carve out a specific space for collective and individual agency and agents – although the world is highly unequal as access to such agency (which means 'power' by any other name) is unevenly distributed.

The foregoing tenets constitute the main characteristics of practices. Together, they show that practices are meaning-making, order-producing, and reality-shaping activities. That is, orderly sets of materially mediated doings and sayings aimed at identifiable ends. We call such regimes of activity *practices* when they have a history, a constituency, and normative dimension. With a 'real' purchase in the regulated manufacturing of reality, practices contrast with hidden forces other social theories talk about.

Despite (or by virtue of) constituting the everyday background amid and through which social life unfolds, they do not have a self-evident nature. Practices need to be thematised and turned into discursive objects in order to be examined as entities both by practitioners and/or social scientists (i.e., a specific practice such as teaching). Since representations always foreground certain elements and hide others, representing practice is a theoretical and political project. The idea that practices can be simply observed and neutrally chronicled is to subscribe to specific ideological projects (willingly or otherwise) and/or scant sophistication.

It follows that as we scrutinise practices, we must attend to two activities simultaneously: (1) the practices we aim to investigate; (2) the practices through which we attempt to re-present them (i.e., our representational activities and vocabulary). This holds both for practitioners and social scientists. The differences between the two are that while practitioners usually thematise contentious aspects of practices (e.g., broken rules; shifts of meanings; recalcitrant tools), social scientists strive for panoramic descriptions – an expectation that in turn stems from the current practices of their scholar community.

## 2. WHAT THE PRACTICE-BASED APPROACH IS NOT

A good way to clarify a concept or a theory is to contrast it with alternative views and explain what the concept or theory does *not* mean. Here we contrast the practice approach with three alternative views with which it is sometimes confused: (1) the idea that to study practice means simply to report what people say or do; (2) the related idea that practices equal to actions carried out by individuals (influenced by a given structure); and (3) the idea that practice is the instantiation of something else so that to study practice is to reveal the hidden forces, mechanism, or logics that lie behind it.

### Box 7.1 Skiing as a Personal Action

Skiers decide to go skiing. They go skiing. They go up the mountain and ski down the slope. They have skills – either they stay upright or fall over. They follow rules — or break them. We can interview them, film them. We can try to create a catalogue of the ways people behave on the slopes and use this list (and related tree of codes) to describe skiing (skiing is about going down, turning and stopping). We can even produce a numbered list of the practices that go into skiing (e.g., skiing comprises nine main practices). If you have never been skiing, you may marvel at the categorised description of the different ways of skiing. The text banks on the exotic nature of the topic, the unfamiliarity of the readers or a bit of both. If you are a good skier, however, you would probably find all this a bit odd and ask yourself what all the fuss is about. What, you might wonder, do we learn that we did not know before? In such case, you will be likely to say “So what?”

## 2.1 Practice Is More than What People Do

All practice approaches give prominence to situated, observable, and meaningful social occurrences performed linguistically, through bodily movements and with the contribution of material artefacts. However, their focus is on the *regimes* of doings and sayings (the activity or practice at hand) rather than merely what people do and say (Geiger, 2009; Whittington, 2011). Thus, the basic unit of analysis of practice-oriented scholars is systems of activities (Engeström, 1987), organised sets of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2002), discourses and discursive formations

(Foucault, 1977), or the resources and procedures that produce mutually intelligible scenes and coursea of action (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

Take, for example, the case of Alpine skiing (see Box 7.1 and 7.2). A focus on skiers and ‘what they do’ would in fact explain skiing in terms of personal motives, competences, rules, or a combination of the above. On the other hand, for the practice approach, while in agreement with the importance of familiarising yourself with skiing (possibly spending a day on the slopes and putting on the skis yourself), also asks the researcher to consider a number of other things besides the cognitions and behaviours of skiers going down the slope.

### Box 7.2 Skiing as a Social Practice

Focussing on skiing as a socially organised activity entails that there is much more to the eyes than just what *skiers* do. For example, to understand skiing as a social practice requires that we also consider skis and poles (different skis require different competencies); the slopes (different slopes perform very different skiers owing to the challenges they pose); the lifts that take you at the top of the mountain (and those who run them); the technical jargon used by skiers (if you are a beginner you want to know what a “black run” means as you should avoid them at all cost).

To understand modern skiing and what people do on the slopes, we also need to take the skiing community into account, its composition, and internal differentiation (Sunday skiers, racers, downhill, cross-country skiers); the dynamics between them (e.g., the ongoing rift between skiers and snowboarders and how this affects the division of spaces in a ski resort); how you learn to ski (who give you access to the practice in the first place? What sort of social groups does skiing generate?); the evolution of different genres of skiing, their rules and aesthetic criteria (what counts as skiing and what not); and how such criteria have co-evolved with the materials needed to ski (which also requires consideration of the makers of ski equipment). Critically, a focus on the social practice of skiing would foreground that what people do and say on the pistes depends on and intersects with a number of ‘organisational’ practices such as running the ski lifts, preparing the pistes, and smoothing them up (so that out-of-shape high-income earners can have fun without being too fit); checking for avalanches; catering (in Europe, going to ski often implies the consumption of specific foods and beverages); renting equipment; transporting goods and people; weather forecasting, etc.

What people do and say on the slopes is only the point of departure for exploring the well-oiled net of activities, people, and materials that taken together make up skiing and allow it to happen. Or as Bourdieu would put it, the conditions of possibility for skiing (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). To study the practice of skiing entails examining how and under which material and historical conditions all these elements cohere, what tensions they harbour, what sort of practice of skiing results from their combination, and hence what “going to ski” and “knowing how to ski” means in any specific situation. In turn, “skiing as done in this particular place and time” can be used as an ingredient to explain a variety of other things, including regional economic development, human sociality (ski clubs and association and their role in society), middle-class ways of “doing family,” all the way to the reproduction or contestation of gender stereotypes (is it appropriate for women to ski?).

What skiers do is indeed central to this large dynamic construction given that if skiers do not show up, the whole construction collapses. Equally, regional economic development is strictly linked to what counts as good skiing and what people do on the slopes. The new way of skiing (carving) and the associated new types of skis require wide pistes. This has put older skiing stations (with their steep narrow pistes, which suited the old ways of skiing) out of business. While understanding what people do is critical to the practice approach, studying practice (as in ‘skiing’) is much more than merely chronicling people doing things. Spending a day on the slopes doing interviews and watching people ski is thus only a small part of what studying the social practice of skiing entails (Nicolini, 2009b).

## **2.2 Practice Is Not Synonymous with Individual Action or Heroic Agency**

Because of the attention the practice approach pays to real-time activity, practice studies are at times mistakenly equated to, or associated

with, the traditional sociology of action à la Parsons or more contemporary variants, as those stemming from evolutionary and behavioural economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Nelson & Sidney, 1982). On the contrary, practice approaches are fundamentally different from these orientations, criticised for being based on methodological individualist premises. In short, all practice approaches agree that taking well-formed individuals as the basic unit of social and organisational analysis leads to a variety of theoretical and empirical conundrums. The same applies if we assume that phenomena can be explained in terms of (more or less rational) individual choices or (more or less successful) efforts to instantiate pre-existing rules, plans of action, or mental schemes (for an in-depth discussion, see Schatzki, 1996, 2002).

To avoid such conundrums, all practice approaches take organised activities (practices) as the basic unit of analysis – conceiving individuals as carriers and performers of practices. The assumption is that actions, decisions, and agency (what to do next, if anything) only acquire meaning as part of a practice and its temporal and historical unfolding. Returning to the example above, practice approaches suggest that it makes little sense to speak of skiers as independent from or existing prior to the practice of skiing. Skiing and skiers emerge together, and talking about one without the other makes little sense. In a world without snow (but also without skis or without transportation), there would be no skiing and therefore no skiers. The same applies to other typical dimensions in the analysis of social affairs such as agency (the fact that skiers decide to turn up on a slope only makes sense and is materially possible within the alignment of practices and conditions described above); meaning (looking at a person walking up the slope does not make sense, until we realise she is checking for signs of possible impending avalanches), and intentions (what to do next on a slope depends on the practice you are carrying out – in other situations, people

rarely throw themselves down an extremely steep and dangerous mountain).

The methodological lesson is that rather than searching for the reasons of (organisational or social) behaviour inside people, practice approaches urge one to look for relations, how regimes of actions are knotted together, and what this implies in terms of agency, meaning, and empowerment. Rather than focussing on discrete actions, motivations, and individual rational decisions, practice approaches foreground flow and sequence, the learning process that allow newcomers to attune to the shared understanding of a community of practitioners and the dispositions and practical wisdom that comes with being part of an ongoing regime of activity. Instead of explaining regularity in terms of mental habits or externalised routines, practice approaches – including those authors who take a practice view of routines such as Feldman and Pentland (2003) – one should ask how: (1) habituation is obtained and sustained; (2) individuals participate in the perpetuation or interruption of regular behaviour; and (3) routinised courses of actions are knotted and kept together by other routinised actions or objects (or a combination of the two).

From a practice perspective, attributing agency and authorship is always a political project that creates heroes out of relations and institutes asymmetries – for example, between soldiers and generals, great men and their wives, humans and animals, and human and nonhumans. In this sense, practice theory takes seriously Berthold Brecht's observation that although history is narrated as the results of the actions of great leaders, it is in fact made by assemblages of ordinary things:

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
In the books you will read the names of kings.  
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? [...] The young Alexander conquered India.  
Was he alone?  
Caesar defeated the Gauls.  
Did he not even have a cook with him?  
Bertold Brecht (1935)

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### **2.3 Practices Are Not the Instantiation of Metaphysical Entities**

Finally, practice approaches oppose the idea that ordinary actions are the instantiation of something else, so that to understand practices we need to search for the hidden forces that preside over them. Practice-based approaches are therefore opposed to the idea that the aim of organisation and social theory is to identify/reconstruct mechanisms or forces that 'lie behind' the world, regardless of how such imagined elements are called (e.g., structural mechanisms, institutional logics, norms and value systems, group mental models, collective unconscious, ostensive features, etc.). When applied coherently, this means rejecting ideas such as a distinction between praxis and practice (with the latter being an instantiation of the former) and theories that explain social processes in terms of (hidden) 'logics'.

The idea of some 'thing' as 'the praxis of skiing' instantiated by humans according to their context as they produce the 'the practice of skiing' is untenable – and, frankly, an obscure form of metaphysics imported into social sciences. Even worse, assuming such 'praxis' (or logics or structural mechanisms) exists by influencing actors (behind their back), leaves us with the classic problem of the cultural dope, strongly fought against by practice theorists such as Garfinkel, this time only rebranded as 'praxis dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967). Practice theories thus wholeheartedly embrace Wittgenstein's principle that "nothing is hidden, everything is in plain view" and just because we may struggle to explain things in terms of what is said and done, we do not need to start searching for hidden causes that "elude us" (Wittgenstein, 1958, §435–6).

Going back to the previous example, to understand skiing, we need to unravel the thick network of relations that links the "here and now" of one skier with the "here and now" of other skiers and with the "there and then" of other practices that take place in

distant spaces and times. Tracing these associations do not lead us to the world of meta-physical elements (e.g., the praxis of skiing or the institutional logic of skiing) but rather to the many places where new ways of skiing are imagined, enacted, and conventionalised: cafes and clubs where devoted skiers meet and discuss new ideas on how to do things differently; skiing schools where teachers think of safer or more 'elegant' ways of going down the pistes; meetings of marketing executives who think how to promote new ways of skiing so that they can sell the necessary equipment; conventions of skiing enthusiasts where famous skiers (sponsored by said marketers) promote the 'great new idea of going down the piste backwards' that others will pick up and share on the web. There are no hidden forces at work. Expressions such as the 'new way of skiing' do not refer to mysterious entities that exert pressure on individuals. They are simply a convenient way to refer to the dense network of relationships, machinations, and efforts that brings about a new way of skiing.

This in turn leads to review the idea of levels of reality in two ways, reflecting different perspectives under the practice approach. On one hand, practice scholars insist that what is usually called 'micro' and 'macro' is made of the same stuff and that this distinction should be repurposed as one of 'large' and 'small' phenomena (Schatzki, 2011). Both the skiing industry and skiers on the pistes transpire through bundles of activities made up of humans, artefacts, and discourses. Yet, while we can directly observe a skiing race, the same is not true for the resort system in the Alps. This is not because the skiing industry is made of some transcendental elements (e.g., institutional logics or social forces), rather it is due to its complex, vast, ramified reality, beyond the reach of single study (Schatzki, 2011). Hence, when faced with trans-local ('macro') phenomena, we need to trace inter-connections and follow the steps that lead to certain outcomes over others. In the case of the sky industry, this might mean attending events in which the leadership and business

representatives of skiing resorts congregate, exploring the history of how certain standards and procedures in resort management emerged and even shadowing individuals who interact with multiple skiing organisations, such as consultants in the industry.

On the other hand, theorists associated with an ethno-methodological tradition propose turning the idea of 'macro' on its head (Llewellyn and Spence, 2009). What is more 'macro' (in the sense of being part of the life of millions of individuals across the globe) than the ordinary act of exchanging money, making a phone call, or having a meeting? Hence, a study of the ski industry would probably focus on highly common practices central to the industry such as hotel check-in and check-out or the preparation to go down the slope. What both positions agree is that the coherent application of the practice lens leads to a view of social and organisational phenomena in terms of a flat and relational ontology in which the 'macro' always boil down to concrete practices (Emirbayer, 1997; Latour, 2005).

### 3. FOUR RESEARCH STRATEGIES FOR ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

To summarise from the two sections above, practice approaches constitute a family of procedures for praxeologising social and organisational phenomena. When used coherently, they populate the social world (and the analytical products of social scientists) with orderly sets of materially mediated doing and sayings ('practices') rather than, for example, action systems, classes, logics, structures, etc. However, the principles outlined above are only the beginning. The practice perspective, reduced to pure theory, would in fact be contradictory. For this approach, the value of a theory can only be ascertained on the basis of the concrete, practical consequences it brings to bear in the act of inquiry and what difference it makes (James, 1907). The fact that at

the time of writing this chapter several authors prefer to focus on the issue of “what practice theory is” rather than using the approach to study social phenomena is simply a consequence of the state of the organisational studies field and a reflection of the contemporary idea of a presumed hierarchy of knowledge between pure data and theory. By putting a premium on abstract concepts, this traditional distinction generates a diffusion of ‘scholastic approaches’ marked by the aspiration of social scientists to become (metaphysical) social theorists as well as the endless search for more and more hidden causes and invisible mechanisms only gifted scholars might unveil. Thus, the issue is how we can put the practice lens to work in terms of research design and methods.

Elsewhere, we have referred to the practice approach as packages of theory, method, and narrative style (Nicolini, 2012, chapter 8). Four of these packages, that is, four ways of addressing the task of praxeologising organisational and management issues seem prevalent in current research. They are the *situational* approach (addressing the local accomplishment, production, and reproduction of practices); the *genealogic* approach (which investigates the natural life of practices); the *configurational* approach (which explores how practices are knotted together into configurations, examining the trans-situated nature of practices); and the *dialectical* approach (which focuses on how tension, contradictions, and power imbalances produced by practices keep them in constant flux).

### 3.1 The Situational Approach

A first way to put the practice perspective to work is to focus on the concerted accomplishment of practices within orderly scenes of actions such as meetings (Boden, 1994; Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008), shop floors (Ahrens and Mollona, 2007), restaurants (Bouty and Gomez, 2013), control rooms (Heath and Luff, 1992), hospital wards (Mol,

2002), or classes (Scollon, 2004). Orderly scenes of actions are occasions where regimes of activity manifest themselves, meet, intersect, collide, and work together more or less successfully. By scrutinising these sites, we can document how practices are actually accomplished, extended in time, and reiterated through doings, saying, bodily skills, and the mediation of artefacts, objects, and spaces. In rare and fortunate instances, we can also observe how practices are disrupted and even interrupted.

Imagine we are observing the practice of teaching a class. We would then focus on such things as: How does ‘doing a class’ unfold in real time? What doings and sayings go into making a class? What difference does changing types of doings and saying or introducing new technologies make? What do teachers and students see as the meaning and end of the activity? Are their understandings aligned? What materials are involved? In which way do they concur to actively shape the scene of action? Which idea of practice is inscribed in the artefacts present in the scene (think ‘sitting at desks’ versus ‘sitting around a table’)? What bodily and discursive competencies are used? When are these competencies learnt? The key in all these (research) questions is that the focus is not on how people perform the practice but rather the performance itself.

Direct observation of scenes of action is the preferred method of inquiry to study practices situationally – which is not to say that this is the only way to study practice in general. This is for two main reasons. First, practices look very different when observed in the present or recounted in the past (Bourdieu, 1977). Secondly, practitioners tend to take for granted critical aspects of their activity (Suchman, 1995). If we ask practitioners to describe their practice, they customarily omit the work features they consider basic. Thus, witnessing scenes of action as they happen is critical to studying the accomplishment of practices: *Post hoc* narrations inherently yield impoverished, highly interpreted, and often subject-centred accounts. Studies that do not entail

some direct access to the sites where practices unfold risk missing important aspects of them (although, as we discussed above, the study of practices should not be mechanically equated with the mere documentation of what is going on at a particular site).

One of the challenges of studying practices situationally is that when we witness a scene of action, we are exposed to a variety of actions, projects, and ensembles of tasks belonging to several distinct practices rather than a single one. Think of a train station, a hospital emergency room, or a corporate office. Several practices happen at the same time. Scenes of action are thus nexuses where several accomplishments intersect and through which several practices are re-produced at the same time (Scollon, 2004). The challenge for empirical researchers is to find out which practices are relevant or happening in a situation before they proceed to study them in detail.

### **3.2 The Genealogic Approach**

While studying practice situationally remains central, other scholars embrace a different strategy. Rather than deconstructing scenes of actions, their strategy is to focus on the development of discrete practices: how concerted accomplishments become a regime, how it is perpetuated and changed, and why it disappears. In short, they take the natural life of practices instead of their accomplishment as the object of inquiry. The processes whereby practices are performed remain central, but the processual aspects (i.e., the situated ongoing accomplishment) are bracketed.

This approach enables us to examine how (individual) practices emerge, evolve, recruit participants, compete for resources, merge, or disappear without having to posit that direct human intentionality is guiding the process. For example, Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) have conducted a number of studies on the dynamics of practices related to the consumption of commodities, sport, and lifestyle (see also Warde, 2005). To do

so, they developed a (lean) version of practice theory based on the work of Reckwitz (2002), which assumes that practice emerges from/is constituted by the association of meaning, skills, and tools. The study of practices thus becomes the empirical study of how these elements are associated, and with whom and under what conditions they become a practice.

In the case of teaching, this combinatory tactic would allow us to study practice origin and variation stemming from changes in its elements. For example, we could investigate when and how was the modern practice of doing a class assembled by asking: On what elements of other practices did it build upon? How did this way of doing recruit participants? How were they convinced to stick to it? What other ways of doing class were weeded out? By the same token, the approach allows us to focus on how teaching might evolve, compete, or form alliances with other practices. For example, we could examine how teaching in a classroom differs from the rise of online teaching, or even how open courses such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) compete with traditional ones.

One of the main challenges of the genealogical strategy is circumscribing the object of inquiry. In short, the need to decide what is the practice under scrutiny and to construct it as an epistemic object. In this effort, we are helped by the fact that practitioners also customarily name and examine practices in objectified terms (e.g., skiers often talk disparagingly about snowboarders). Unfortunately, the step from the construction of practices as epistemic objects to reifying them as a 'thing with boundaries' is very short. Questions such as "What is practice?" and "What are its limits?" soon emerge, mostly because we are so bad at dealing with performances (instead of entities). Studying the dynamic of individual social practices thus requires that we remain aware that (a) we are studying the re-production of performances, not the construction of 'things'; and (b) what constitutes the boundary of a practice (i.e., understanding

when a practice becomes something else) is an empirical not a theoretical question. When a democratic vote ceases to be democratic, when teaching is not teaching but becomes just imparting a curriculum are issues that people fight for in the street (or moan about in their offices), not something for academics to decide.

### **3.3 The Configurational Approach**

Studying how concerted accomplishments and performances are connected and hang together to form constellations or larger assemblages is a third possibility. This requires surfacing spatial-temporal connections and observing their effects. All practices are in fact necessarily situated (their accomplishment always takes place within specifiable situations) and trans-situated – practices take place within specifiable historic, discursive, and material situations (for a discussion, see Holland and Lave (2009); Schmidt and Volbers (2011)). This is why practice-based approaches agree that human affairs can be understood from the world in which they come into being. For example, teaching only exists within a matrix of several other practices (from publishing textbooks to enrolling students).

The idea of trans-situatedness brings to the fore the wider texture of which the phenomenon is part and directs us to observe it as part of something that, at the same time, is more extended and articulated. In this, it questions the traditional idea that the context is some kind of passive background: the relation between the accomplishment of a practice and its context resembles the relationship between a city and its hinterland – rather than that of an object and its container (Law, 2004). Thus, studying the configurations of practices requires one to empirically localise complex and global formations which are simultaneously taking place at different sites.

For example, if we were to research teaching from this approach, we would pay attention to what other activities are related to the

practice of teaching a class (cleaning, administration, catering) and the nature of such associations. Are they simply happening in the same place (teaching and catering)? Have they been orchestrated (teaching and working hours of parents)? Are they interdependent? What type of work or activity or material objects keeps them together (managing)? How was such an association established?

In this, we embrace the prescription of post-human practice perspectives to follow intermediaries – actors, artefacts, texts, etc. (see Nicolini, 2009a) – and shed light on how multi-sited objects and phenomena are continuously and multi-locally generated (Marcus, 1995). This way, we can processually explore seemingly stable features of the social world we live in, from large industrial bureaucracies to markets. From a practice perspective, these sacrosanct phenomena are conceived as the result of vast action nets kept together by the unremitting work of both human and non-human entities (Czarniawska, 2004).

### **3.4 The Dialectical Approach**

A final and somewhat less frequently used strategy is to inquire into the dialectic of practices, i.e., the co-evolution, conflict, and interference of two or more practices. One of the reasons why this strategy is uncommon is because it very much depends on all the three strategies above. Yet, paradoxically, this way of looking at practices may also yield some of the most valuable findings as it addresses issues on which the interests of academics and practitioners coincide. This is very visible in the cultural historical activity tradition (Engeström, Miettinen, and Punamäki, 1999), with its focus on the study of contradictions and how they are solved. This perspective is in fact predicated on analysing practices, surfacing tensions and contradictions, and offering their findings to the practitioners themselves – based on the assumption that reflecting on re-presentations of practices often triggers generative and expansive (learning) processes.

In the case of teaching, we could focus on who is empowered and disempowered by the particular configuration of practices. We would then ask questions such as: What types of students are favoured by a certain way of doing classes? What subject positions and forms of agency are made available by this particular configuration of practices? Who is empowered – does the person in front of the desks control the discussion? What alternative forms of agencies (teaching) and subject positions (teacher) would emerge from alternative configurations?

Focussing on conflict and interference is also important because it represents a promising way to interrogate practices and their associations in terms of the effects that they produce (thus addressing the issue of power that is otherwise notably absent). For example, we know that empowerment, scope for agency, and voice are effects of practices and how they are associated. Thus, beyond the issue of “how practices hang together”, there are many issues on the effects this association has on those who dwell within such nexuses and assemblages. Are these practices aligned in the same direction? Are they good at the purpose they were set up to serve? What type of practical ‘identity’ of those involved do they prefigure? Is such practical identity (what the people involved do) aligned with their desired identity (what they think they should do)? Although challenging, some of the most promising ways forward for practice theory rest on investigating the contrast between the emergent versus the intended object of a practice, exploring different time horizons to generate different understandings and investigating change as the result of contradictions between elements of practices and their accumulation.

These approaches represent alternative ways to praxeologise organisation and management themes. In line with the eclecticism that characterises the approach, they cover the main strategies employed by practice students. Given the complex and multidimensional nature of social phenomena, each one

unveils specific aspects of practices that fit particular research questions.

#### 4 EPILOGUE: CAN THERE BE A THEORY OF PRACTICE?

In this chapter, we introduced the practice approach in terms of a family of theoretical and methodological sensitivities and procedures to praxeologise social and organisational phenomena. Our argument is that when used coherently, the practice lens presents us with a view of the world where local scenes of action and broader social phenomena emerge from and transpire through complex textures of interconnected and concrete practices. Thus, it constitutes a primary form of processual thinking in organisation studies and social theory at large. This is because they consider organisational phenomena as dynamic, unfolding, and situated occurrences rather than as *faits accomplis* (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010).

However, practice-based approaches add to the traditional processual view (stemming from the tradition of Bergson and Whitehead) by being especially sensitive to artefacts, the body, and the historical and social conditions within which processes take place. Practice is always in time and space, and this in turn requires relentless attention to how material economic elements, power relations, and the production of meaning and differences constantly play upon one another (Hart, 2002, p. 297).

One remaining question is what sort of theory is produced by the practice approach, given that at the outset we suggested that it is not a single ‘theory’? We can start by observing that the goal of practice-based studies is not producing and refining one or more theories of practice, at least not where theory is understood as a system of general propositions (Abend, 2008). Rather, the approach signals a set of ontological and methodological commitments. While it is possible (and analytically valuable) to identify the constitutive

elements of practices (see the first section “What Are Practices?”), these should be conceived as handles for empirical research.

Practice-based studies do not investigate practices as abstract entities but rather it “praxeologises” phenomena, turning the study of decision making into the study of decision-making practices or the study of strategy into the study of strategy-making practices. The list would be as long as the topics in organisation and management scholarship. This means that it makes little sense to speak of theorising practice as if there was a common equivalent among phenomena as diverse as supply management and marketing. Reducing intricate processes to principles often leaves us with propositions that are as broad reaching as they are inconsequential (e.g., organisations are permeated by political conflicts; see Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011, for a discussion). Even worse, such propositions may constrain analytical work by introducing normative checklists, which run counter the abductive nature of the practice approach (Blumer, 1954).

The results of practice-based research are not presumed to be transcendental principles behind practices. As Bourdieu reminded us, this misguided enterprise populates the world with the results of our thinking granting them causal powers (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). This happens, for example, when we attribute the capacity of managers to handle multiple requests in a firm to disembodied concepts such as cognitive abilities, mental schemes, or professional values. We forget, in fact, that cognitive abilities and mental schemes are our own creations, so that while they can help to understand what is going on, they cannot causally explain real-world phenomena. Thus, the strength of the practice approach resides in grounding explanations in what is empirically observable, patiently tracing back phenomena to arrangements of concrete elements that produce the state of affairs under investigation – instead of analytically hiding in vague notions or mechanisms.

Thus, embracing a practice-based sensitivity (as well other processual ways of thinking)

requires qualifying the nature and role of theory. This entails navigating between the Scylla of populating the world with abstract ‘scholastic’ concepts and the Charybdis of suggesting a naive approach where we can dispose of theory altogether and let facts (and practices) speak for themselves. The risk is that without theory we may “collect empirical regularities ... without understanding the fundamental whys and hows” (Lounsbury and Beckman, 2014, p. 3).

Theory, in the practice approach, is less a direct description of the social world and more a device to grasp and represent it. It should be considered mainly as a heuristic package to plot the social world via an infra-language – instead of a meta-language from which to subsume all phenomena (Latour, 1988). Theorising in turn must be conceived as the effort to expand our understanding based on the accumulation of local specificities rather than the creation of abstract categories (Becker, 2014). As Heuts and Mol (2013) nicely put it, “crafting a rich theoretical repertoire ... does not work by laying out solid abstracting generalisations but rather by adding together ever shifting cases and learning from their specificities” (p. 127). Theorising proceeds in the search of non-general principles that as much as surprising lessons (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). The potential reward is not only more interesting and effective ways to understand and describe the world, but also new ways of connecting research with practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011).

Rich representations of practices are promising tools for practitioner reflection. By bringing into language ordinary and concrete practices, thick representations of activities may in fact help practitioners to see through conventional ways of doing and saying. These may help them to explore the world of possibilities beyond what is currently the accepted norm (enacting a new practice is, of course, a different matter) and generate opportunities for abductive learning. To the extent that practices are mostly absorbed through tips, hints, and

exemplars, the best we can do to support practitioners refine their practice is to offer them rich examples they can use. Such examples enable practitioners to interrogate their own activity and explore new ways of doing, saying, and being (Eikeland and Nicolini, 2011).

## NOTE

- 1 We are paraphrasing Geertz's story about an Englishman who, having been told by an Indian man that the world rested on a platform, which rested on the back of an elephant, which in turn rested on the back of a turtle, was asked what the turtle rested on. 'Another turtle', was the response. 'And that turtle?' rebuked the Englishman 'Aha, Sahib', said the Indian, 'after that it is turtles all the way down' (Geertz, 1973). Geertz himself probably 'borrowed' the story from William James' who likely borrowed from someone else.

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### **Author Query**

1. 1936 in references
2. 1935 or 1936? 1935 in text?