



## Similarity and difference: The shared ontology and diverse epistemologies of practice theory

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### review of

Davide Nicolini (2012) *Practice Theory, Work & Organization: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (PB, pp. 320, US\$40.50, ISBN 978-0199231591)

### Aim of the book

'Good' science, writes Nicolini, involves becoming 'more articulate and capable of perceiving differences (and thus meaning)' [216]. Such an undertaking is 'generative, not eliminativist: its goal is to increase our capacity to make connections among phenomena, not to eradicate interesting features in the name of generalization' [ibid]. In attempting an 'introduction' to the ecumenical and keenly topical world of organizational practice theory, Nicolini has set himself the challenging task of achieving lucid summary of a difficult, somewhat diverse field without resorting to abstraction. That he largely succeeds is testament to a sureness of footing in the different philosophical and theoretical traditions underpinning the various practice approaches introduced in the book.

### Structure

The book is broadly divisible into two parts. The early chapters provide a historical outline of the development of notions of 'praxis' and early attempts to operationalize this in 'praxeology', whilst the later chapters explain the different conceptual underpinnings, methodological emphases and empirical affordances

of five current approaches to studying practice: communities of practice, activity theory, ethnomethodology, Schatzki's theory of practice, and discourse analysis. The final chapter encourages researchers to draw selectively on elements of these approaches to illuminate different aspects of organizational practice. What's nice about this book is its demonstration of each of these approaches' different commitments to practice as the emergent, relationally-constituted and non-dualistic stuff of which the organizational world is comprised. In turn, at a time when the ubiquity and modishness of 'practice' invites casual use, this book also demonstrates the commitment demanded of the researcher: practice theory is not for the ontologically faint-hearted.

### Early praxis and praxeology

To underscore the seriousness of this commitment and start the sensitising process, Chapter 2 outlines the historical demotion of practice in the Western tradition, 'to illustrate what historical baggage a practice view has to lose in order to generate an alternative view of the world' [23]. The chapter is essentially a summary of Aristotle's early exposition of *praxis* and its later 'rediscovery' by Marx, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. In establishing Aristotle's contribution, Nicolini is however careful not to over-simplify. He juxtaposes Aristotle's emphasis on forms of practical knowledge - *praxis* as knowledgeable action performed in real time (supported by *phronesis*, or practical wisdom) – with *episteme*, Plato's abstracted, contemplative knowledge. According to Nicolini, this opposition hardened over the centuries into the Western tradition: 'an opposition between theoretical thought and almost any kind of human activity' [28].

Nicolini singles out three 'founding fathers' of modern practice theory, to whom he primarily attributes the 'rediscovery' of activity. He argues that Marx's transformational materialism reconnected thought, activity, and the world, and underscored the inherently political nature of the social and historical context in which all human action takes place. Equally important for Nicolini is Heidegger's phenomenological emphasis on the everyday, affectively-inflected practice that is prior to representation – the gestalt of background totality: 'although Heidegger did not develop a coherent theory of practice, by reversing the Cartesian tradition and making the individual subject dependent on a web of social practices, he made it possible for others to develop one' [37]. Third, Nicolini ascribes importance to Wittgenstein's insight that our absorption of pre-reflexive, unarticulated social rules, whose relevance and meaning only appear in contextual relation to unfolding purposive action, means that 'language and world are interwoven through a huge manifold of interrelated practices' [40]. These last two 'background' writers laid much of the theoretical ground for

Schatzki's agential humanism, the subject of possibly the most interesting chapter in the book, to which I turn later.

Chapter 3 sees Nicolini move onto the 'social praxeologists', Giddens and Bourdieu, each of whom attempted to build out a sociological framework capable of elucidating the interrelationships between the structures and relations among practices. Bourdieu fares better than Giddens under Nicolini's critical gaze. In developing 'a social theory that makes room for a subject without lapsing into subjectivism' [44], Nicolini points out that Giddens has attracted criticism (e.g. Schatzki, 1997) for adopting an overly voluntarist account of agency, in which 'practices remain ontologically subordinate to actors' [52]. Such a view has undoubtedly led to Giddens' ideas falling from fashion within current practice theory. As I have argued elsewhere however (Thompson, 2012), this perception may stem in part from a tendency to focus on Giddens' structuralist model (Nicolini's own account centres on Giddens' 'structurationism') at the expense of the broader hinterland of his ideas, which allow more of a back-door sensitivity to socially conditioned unconscious and affective structures that inflect agential behaviour. Reading Nicolini, I wondered whether the academy has perhaps been too hasty in following Schatzki's dismissal of Giddens.

Although he considers Bourdieu more readily operationalisable, Nicolini nonetheless holds Bourdieu accountable for a lingering structuralism that mirrors the charges of voluntarism levelled at Giddens. This would appear fair: Bourdieu's concept of habitus, in particular – 'practical knowledge which is at the same time inscribed in the body and sustained within a collectivity' [67] – is conceived by Bourdieu himself as a "structuring structured structure" (Bourdieu, 1990b: 52-53) whose internalization and embodiment within the actor implies 'that agents are ultimately reducible to social structures' (Kemp, 2010: 9). Nicolini levels three criticisms at Bourdieu: first, such a primary focus is less sensitive to the way in which habitus (and fields) mutate over time; second, Bourdieu's preoccupation with cultural inscriptions leaves him with little to say about technology and other forms of mediation (Lash, 1993); and third, habitus offers little explanation of agents' reflexive monitoring of conduct – something that recursively affects practices. That said, in showing how 'practically intelligible, creative agency, and institutionalized patterns of action are not opposed and, in fact, co-exist and presuppose each other in practice' [69], Bourdieu's praxeology 'provides what is probably one of the most convincing ways of understanding practice and its central role in explaining social order' [ibid].

## Five approaches to practice

Having set out these important foundations for current practice theory, Nicolini provides a summary of more recent developments across five strands of literature that can all be loosely ascribed to a practice-based ontology. In Chapter 4, although not the first to say so, Nicolini rightly laments the way in which Lave and Wenger's (1991) delicate and emergent dynamic 'legitimate peripheral participation' has too often become hardened into the more entitative 'communities of practice'. Such hardening has occurred to the detriment of the original concept, whose strength lies in its highlighting of the relational unfolding of mutual engagement, social identification, and learning.

Chapter 5 offers a nice account of Engeström's broadening (e.g. 1995; 1999) of the Marxian Activity Theory of Vygotsky and Leont'ev to incorporate activities' embeddedness, and mediation, within broader systems. Nicolini draws attention to Activity Theory's strength in engaging with multivocality and contradiction, drawn from its dialectical roots, whilst also rightly noting the dangers of a latent structuralism in researchers' focus on the 'system' as object of analysis (see also Thompson, 2004). This caution is reflected in a concern for what researchers may miss in the pursuit of activity theory's relentless focus on object-oriented mediation.

In Chapter 6, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (intelligibility as practical everyday accomplishment) is distinguished as resistant to 'theories' of practice, which 'would substitute theoretical constructs for the "real thing"' [147]. Nicolini acknowledges the constricting gaze of localism that characterises many ethnomethodology approaches, suggesting a remedial programme of 'interactional constructivism, an approach in which practice and its relations, and not practices in isolation, become the main topic of study' [152].

Chapter 7 outlines some of the 'post individualist' [178] implications of some more recent formulations of practice theory, particularly as developed by Schatzki's (2005) 'Heideggerian/Wittgensteinian tradition' (see also Hopwood, 2013, for a useful annotated bibliography offering greater depth on the development of Schatzki's ideas). *Contra* Latour's principle of generalised symmetry between people and things, Schatzki's project offers an agential humanism in which teleo-affective structure and practical understanding are practised by humans alone – albeit that these are emergent from social and material 'orders' that are instantiated in the nexuses of practices (other writers, for example Pickering and Barad, lie somewhere along the continuum between these two positions).

It would seem to me that Latour's and Schatzki's differing emphases on the interrelationship between agency and structure constitute battlegrounds for important ontological questions – such as the dialogue between agential and critical realism (Leonardi, 2013), which contains within it for example the question of whether 'agency/structure' is a duality or a dualism. Whilst acknowledging that pushing the ontological frontiers of practice theory lies beyond the scope of this book, I found myself wanting more. Given limited space though, Nicolini is right to move on to his critique of Schatzki's formulation of practice. This is in two areas: its limiting 'spatial language' [180] – 'units' and 'frontiers' of practice – as well as a tendency for over-prescription, something that Latour's 'open-ended infra-language' [180] avoided, in leaving local interpretation to the researcher.

In Chapter 8, Nicolini undertakes a similarly useful mapping of the discourse-as-practice literature, comprising a 'continuum delimited by two divergent versions of discourse: one that sees discourse mainly, if not exclusively, as a local achievement, and the other which conceives discourse as a broad system for the formation and articulation of ways of thinking, behaving, and, eventually, being' [190]. The former is characterised by conversation analysis, or CA (e.g. Sacks, 1984); the latter by Foucault's 'discursive formations', leading to 'orders of discourse' – and by critical discourse analysis, or CDA (e.g. Fairclough, 1992, 1995). Following Nicolini, from a practice perspective both CA and CDA suffer from the weaknesses one might expect: CA in focusing overly on the micro-level, at the expense of the macro-level dimensions of unfolding reality, and CDA in losing the middle ground of situated social activity in zig-zagging dialectically between macro and micro. A third framework, mediated discourse analysis, or MDA (Scollon, 2001), is then commended as particularly relevant for practice approaches in viewing discourse as a form of social action itself; mediated, social-material, and clustered into recognisable practices. Nicolini suggests that this more mediated approach might benefit from a dialogue with actor network theory's 'assemblages, conjunctures, and organized forms of social order' [207]. Like Giddens' account of social generation, actor network theory may have fallen from fashion somewhat prematurely, perhaps.

### Nicolini's 'toolkit'

Nicolini's whirlwind tour of these five strands of organizational practice literature will provide a highly useful mapping of the territory for organization researchers seeking to deepen their understanding of the practice field. However, his distinction in each case between the comparative advantages and limitations of each framework all lead up to the most original contribution in the book: the

final chapter entitled ‘bringing it all together’, in which he argues ‘the need for a toolkit approach’ [214]. The hub of this final chapter is a ‘theory-method package’ enabling the researcher to ‘zoom in’ and ‘zoom out’ iteratively between situated specificity and wider space-time relations. This zooming method is offered as ‘an encouragement to appreciate and expose the connectedness of practices by patiently expanding the hermeneutic circle’ [239].

Although Nicolini is careful not to present his ‘package’ as some meta-approach to supersede others, I suspect that some who acknowledge the importance of collapsing both macro-and micro-level dimensions into their own accounts of practice will nonetheless remain suspicious of an explicitly multi-method toolkit such as he proposes. I believe that his ‘sensitising questions’ will be useful methodological checks for organization researchers in incorporating the multidimensionality of practice, even if their ability to ‘zoom’ in and out iteratively is constrained by the need to offer depth and conviction in a primary idiom. Similarly, Nicolini’s rolling telemedicine account, appended as a coda to most chapters and ably performed in the idiom of each, offers readers a very useful illustration of each approach’s relative advantages and disadvantages, whilst perhaps unintentionally also illustrating the depth limitations of multi-method methodologies.

### Who should read this book

This introduction will be of interest to organization researchers who are relatively new to practice-based approaches, as well as to many existing practice scholars. For comparative newcomers to ‘practice’, the early chapters are useful in explaining the fundamental ontological commitment to process that underlies the entire practice family – whilst the later chapters introduce the important differences of emphasis and approach that characterise each tradition. This tension between ontological similarity and epistemological difference is well-handled throughout the book. For this reason, researchers already labouring within the trench of their own chosen practice approach are also likely to find this book useful: moving through the chapters, Nicolini’s bird’s eye view of any one tradition in relation to neighbouring traditions is at times topographically revealing. In summary, Nicolini delivers a highly useful map of the territory of the emergent, consubstantial, and provisional within current organization research from which different researchers will take different things.

Nicolini’s book ably illustrates the reasons why many organizational practice researchers have come to see the study of *organizing* as more fruitful than the study of *organizations* how, in many ways, we amount to little more than the

work that we practise. In doing so, he has offered us a timely and accessible introduction to a complex topic that embraces the diversity of current approaches to organizational praxis, whilst underscoring the ontological commitments common to them all. It is because it succeeds in these aims that I am sure this book will be widely used by practice researchers for some time to come.

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