



## Book Review

# Davide Nicolini (2013): Practice Theory, Work, and Organization. An Introduction, Oxford University Press, x + 222 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-923159-1

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Practice theory seems to be both a very influential and at the same time a rather neglected source of influence on working life studies. It is only with this special issue on practice-based approaches to working life studies that this journal deals explicitly with practice theoretical perspectives on working life. But a more thorough review of working life studies soon reveals that many investigations have been inspired by the works of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, discourse analysis, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), ethnomethodology or Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's studies of learning in communities of practice. Although different sources and theoretical strands inspire these studies, they seem to have one thing in common: They have an interest in understanding and describing actors' activity, interactions and performances. In short, they seek to understand the practices that actors (re)produce in working life. Viewed from this perspective, it is a warranted claim that working life studies are immensely inspired by theories of practice. However, one could claim that such a perspective just juxtaposes loosely related and random coupled theories. Is it useful, or of interest at all, to couple such diverse theories just because they all—in one way or another—deal with practice? Davide Nicolini thinks so.

Nicolini sets out to demonstrate that all the before-mentioned theoretical stands do not only have in common that they deal with activity, action, and work, but they also have much more in common. The theories are also united in stressing that social life must be understood and investigated as a material and corporeal reality where activity transpires. They are all preoccupied with allowing room for the individual actions of actors, and they are all skeptic about rationalist and reductionist explanations of conduct (*homo economicus*) and sociological accounts that see action as rule or norm governed (*homo sociologicus*). Instead, they strive to understand individual action as both structured and emergent and creative. All the mentioned theories object to representationalist construals of knowledge, meaning, and discourse. Our access to reality is always mediated through our social and corporeal activities. Finally, Nicolini makes

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clear that all the theories stress the importance of focusing on power relations, conflicts, and interest. Practice is thus perceived as a field of tensions where actors produce and reproduce differences and inequalities. By focusing on the practices in working life—and not separately on the individual practitioners—practice theory envisions a relational and dynamic perspective that encompasses the complexity of working life. It fosters a sensitivity that can accommodate both the routines of working life and the breaches of routine.

Nicolini traces the roots of practice theories back to Aristotle and Marx's different concepts of Praxis and to the modern philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Nicolini call attention to Wittgenstein and Heidegger as the modern fathers of the practice theoretical perspective in philosophy and social science. Wittgenstein demonstrated that conceptual understanding always presupposes a fundamental unarticulated practice, and Heidegger showed us that being-in-the-world is foremost a matter of practical and unproblematized coping in action. Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger opposed the Cartesian worldview that separates the thinking and perceiving subject (*res cogitans*) from the exterior world (*res extensa*). Practice theories thus decline to accept the modernist perspective that actors are isolated and decoupled individuals that through their actions seek to interact with one another and the world. The point of departure for an analysis should lean on the opposite premise. As actors, we are 'always already' interconnected with other actors and the world. We always take part in and perform social practices.

On the basis of this philosophical orientation toward practice, Nicolini demonstrate how different theoretical approaches contribute to practice theoretical understandings of human activity. Nicolini dedicate separate chapters to explain how different theoretical developments within social science can be seen as contributions to a practice theoretical approach. He examines both Giddens and Bourdieu's praxiological perspectives, Lave and Wenger's theory about learning in communities of practice, cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), ethnomethodology, and various discourse analytical approaches. There is also a separate chapter on newer social science approaches that explicitly take their point of departure in a Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian conception of practices. Here, Theodore Schatzki's contribution is given special attention. Nicolini's examination of the various social science approaches and theories is very illuminating and gives the reader a useful overview. It critically examines each theory's main points of focus and blind spots. Nicolini thus provides a systematic and critical introduction to a number of social science traditions and explicates how they, in different ways, all set out to understand and explain social practices. It is the strength of the introduction that it succeeds in both surveying a broad and complex theoretical landscape while still providing a critical assessment of each theory's potentials and shortcomings.

Although this feat deserves much credit, I still have a reservation with Nicolini's narrative. The introduction to practice theory—or theories dealing with practice—has almost no mention of the important intellectual tradition of American pragmatism. This omission strikes me as strange. Classical American pragmatist and contemporary neo-pragmatist accounts of action focus explicitly on practices, habits, doings, work, and so on, and should thus be obvious companions in the 'turn to practice'. Both practice theory and American pragmatism, as for example found in classical positions such as William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, agree that human experience is produced by purposive socially mediated doings saturated with affects and emotions

and tempered by the physical arrangements that embed bodily activity. The social ontology in pragmatism and practice theory has in common the critique of Cartesian subject-object dualism, of mentalism and psychologism, and other dualisms. They both strive to develop their theorizing of human experience according to a non-representationalist ontology. Furthermore, their ontologies do not naively stipulate a predefined inventory of 'reality', but they both pay attention to the (social and 'natural'/material) events and phenomena that confront us as practice unfolds and we inquire more about the nature of the world. This sets of the ontologies of both practice theories and pragmatism on a processual and relational path, the knower and the known, (wo-)man and the world are not set apart, but intimately intertwined in action. Another point of convergence concerns the role, for example, Dewey gives to 'habit' in social conduct, and how practice theory theorizes practical understandings according to tacit, routinized, and drill-induced patterns of behavior. Nicolini states (p. 41) that 'his work should probably be recast as an attempt to make a Continental history of the concept of practice'. But then again, he devotes a chapter to the American philosopher Theodore Schatzki's account of social practice and another chapter to American learning theorist Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's account of learning in practice. So why not include the more than hundred-year-old and strongly influential tradition of American pragmatism?

In a concluding and synthesizing chapter, Nicolini accounts for the relevance and usability of practice theory in contemporary social science. His recommendation is that practice theory should be used as a resource in eclectic and pluralist ways. The researcher must use the specific resources that each practice theory conveys in pragmatic and critically reflected ways. Nicolini sees practice theories as composing a toolkit. The researcher must carefully select the right tool (theoretical perspective) for the job at hand. He recommends that the researcher engage in a process of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' to understand how practices are stabilized or changed, and how different practices interconnect in time and space. As an example, the researcher might at one stage in the research process use ethnomethodology or conversational analysis to zoom in on the micro-processes in situations, while in a later phase of the research process reach out for praxiological tools made available by, for example, Bourdieu to illuminate macro-features of practices. The point is that a process needs to be established where the researcher shifts zooming in and out in order to comprehend the many aspects and components that make up practices. Practices are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional phenomena that are only adequately understood by approaching them with complementary perspectives.

All in all, Nicolini's introduction to practice theory is an insightful book with many nuances, although the account would have benefited by including and reflecting the contributions from pragmatist philosophers and social scientists. It has much to offer working life studies. Nicolini navigates elegantly within a complicated theoretical landscape of social science theory and methodology and he manages to turn the theoretical insights into useful recommendations that can facilitate research endeavors in many fields.