



Book Review

How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study. Problems and Methods. By Silvia Gherardi, University of Trento, Italy. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA, 2012, 241 pages

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The aim of Silvia Gherardi's book is to develop the readers' methodological sensibility. She does so through a presentation and discussion of the work of scholars, who use a practice-based approach in organization studies. In order to develop this methodological sensibility, she poses four basic questions: 1) which types of questions have the scholars posed?, 2) how have the scholars sought answers to their questions?, 3) what further questions remain?, and 4) how should future research be set up?

In this review I first present the structure of the book. Thereafter I focus on selected chapters. These are Chapter 2: How ordinary work is practically accomplished. The chapter is chosen because of its overall centrality of the relation between work, organization, and practice. Also selected is Chapter 3: Sensible knowledge and knowledgeable bodies. The chapter is chosen because it acknowledges the body and its senses as integrated part of understanding work.

A well-structured book

The book is structured within nine chapters. Each chapter has an informative title, which gives an overview of the content of the book, focusing on 'learning to talk in practice,' 'technological environments,' and 'knowing the rules.' Each chapter follows this structure:

- A clear introduction to the content and aim of the chapter;
- Two to five condensed positioning statements, like: 'Too often, in fact, it is forgotten that work activities are performed by a body, by its psycho-physical capacities, and that bodies are different sexed. Gender relations are therefore part of working practices' (p. 6);
- A box with examples from classical empirical studies;

- A summary;
- Notes elaborating on the text, references to further reading, touching upon relevant discussions.

This structure worked fine for me; the examples presented in boxes as 1–2 pages gave body to my thoughts and invited ongoing discussions with the text. The boxes were also refreshing for establishing rhythm in the reading. Empirical examples are also used across chapters. This links the discussion between chapters and supports the argumentation in the book. The many statements and summaries used in the book gives on the one hand a good overview; on the other hand, it makes the reader more dependent on Gherardi's reading of the classical studies.

How ordinary work is practically accomplished?

'What do people do when they work? When they work is that all they do? How does work differ from non-work?' (p. 6). Posing these questions Gherardi invites the reader to consider practices as working practices. Building her theoretical position on phenomenology (Alfred Schutz) and symbolic interactionism (Everett Hughes), she argues that work must be understood as a 'situated activity.' This is empirically illustrated by a well-written example on how a delivery boy uses many skills in his work; he uses his body, his senses (breathing the polluted air), his communicative skills, his technology skills, etc. Gherardi's choice of a practical study to illustrate her theoretical position is perfect. The job as a delivery boy would normally be understood as a banal job, but in the analysis it becomes clear how many skills the job demands. Gherardi hereby invites the reader to go into dialogue with the text.

I will also draw attention to Gherardi's understanding of 'practical knowledge.' Her main argument is that knowledge does not reside in the heads of people, but is anchored in the material world. In short form Gherardi characterizes practical knowledge as follows: A pragmatic stance (being able to take decisions); a specific temporality; an anchoring in materiality; an anchoring in discursive practices; a historical-cultural anchoring (p. 25). I find Gherardi's argument that knowledge is anchored in the material world convincing. Furthermore I find that she offers an analytical frame for doing empirical work, as these five elements must be integrated into an analysis. However, in the characteristic above I wonder why body is not mentioned explicitly.

Sensible knowledge and knowledgeable bodies

Gherardi wants in this chapter to show (1) how knowledge embedded in practices is an embodied knowledge, and (2) how people use their bodies to relate with the world and shape a knowledgeable body. To do so Gherardi presents a ray of interesting informative empirical studies. The first number of studies concerns the knowing body.

The intelligence of *hands* is illustrated with a study from a sawmill where the workers' hands are skilled to feel the difference between the planks. The intelligence of *feet* is illustrated by a study of workers at a roof, who know how to balance their bodies due

to the feelings from their feet. The intelligence of the *ears* is illustrated by an empirical study of flute makers, who are trained to listen for the right tone from the flute. The intelligence of the *nose* is illustrated by a study from the perfume industry and the intelligence of the *mouth* is illustrated by an empirical study in a restaurant. A more general feeling is illustrated by a study of safety on a building site, where the boss working with a sling is testing whether it is safe, through his feeling when he moves the sling. Finally a study of surgery shows how tools are used in a specific way in order to feel 'right' for doing a successful biopsy.

All these summaries of empirical studies indicate how senses are part of practices. Gherardi hereby makes her point clear that knowledge embedded in practices is embodied. The diversity of the studies gives at the same time a solid platform to convincingly illustrate the plentitude of situations in which knowledgeable bodies emerge. Another interesting aspect of the studies is the insight they produce in how we are trained in different professions.

Coming back to the assumption of work being constructed along gender lines Gherardi, in the last part of this chapter, poses the question: 'How do we learn to embody and enact the gendered professional selves required by and considered appropriate to particular workplace situations?' Gherardi's theoretical position is to see gender as a social practice within a texture of practices. Her empirical example is given by a female consultant, who enters a male-dominated consultant company and the example describes how the female consultant is being trained in gender switching during her stay in the company.

The chapter is interesting and informative in its richness of methodological studies. It also offers a short but clear introduction to gender seen as a social practice. However, I would have preferred a more nuanced analysis of the men in the consultant company, in order to avoid reproducing gendered stereotypes.

Conclusion

I will end this review by paraphrasing the questions posed by Gherardi in the introduction:

Which questions has Gherardi posed in this book?

The main question posed by Gherardi is how we can be capable of developing a methodological sensitiveness by learning from classical work studies under the umbrella of practice-based studies.

How has Gherardi sought her answers?

Gherardi has sought her answers in the body of practice-based studies and in her own position in practice theory, which she has developed from phenomenology (Schutz), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel), and symbolic interactionism (Hughes).

Which further questions remain after this work of Gherardi?

Gherardi has contributed especially to the field of work practices with this book. What remains is first and foremost to continue the work of conducting empirical and theoretical informed practice-based studies.



Gherardi has written this book based upon 12 years of teaching undergraduate and graduates in the field. This gives the book a special quality; Gherardi seems to be a lecturer who wants to share her knowledge respectfully both in relation to the student's prerequisites and in relation to the complex theories which she refers. The strength of the book is Gherardi's choices; she knows what she wants to present and seems quite confident by presenting her own theoretical position—which she invites us to share with her. The limitation of the book is the other side of the coin—this book is not the place for in-depth-going discussions of the presented studies, as her focus here is on the methodological aspects.

The book is relevant for all researchers who are interested in conducting practice-based studies. I will especially recommend the book for Master and Ph.D. students, who are in the process of designing their own empirical studies; but also more experienced researchers can learn from discussions with Gherardi's clear positions and the rich empirical studies.