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Conclusion

The relevance of practice theory for researching social change

Machiel Lamers, Gert Spaargaren and Don Weenink

Introduction

Conceptual elaboration of practice theories and their positioning in the academic field are important because this makes them more visible and prominent in academic research as well as in education.¹ The distinctiveness and attractiveness of practice theory has been linked to its ability to offer a third-way perspective on society, moving beyond individualist/subjectivist and structuralist/objectivist understandings of the social. Not individual agents or social structures, but social practices are put forward as the adequate starting point for organizing both theorizing and carrying out empirical research.

However, practice theories are frequently seen as being relevant for the study of small social phenomena only, such as daily routinized activities and face-to-face interactions. Studies on situated practices (Stones, 2005) praxeologize the realm of the social by diving into, taking a close look, developing a view from within and providing thick descriptions of social practices that most of us are familiar with. It is true that numerous practice-based studies of mundane activities at the micro level have been carried out the last decade, such as washing practices, Nordic walking practices, medical practices, canteen practices, energy practices, sports practices and day trading practices (e.g. Schmidt, 2012; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Kuijter, 2014; Nicolini, 2012; Spaargaren *et al.*, 2013; Naus *et al.*, 2014). However, social life also consists of large social phenomena, such as industries, markets, civil aviation, educational systems, sports leagues and international organizations. Until recently, the characteristics and transformations in these large social phenomena were the domain of other social and economic theories, like neo-institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983) and transition theory (Grin *et al.*, 2010; Geels *et al.*, 2015), while hardly any practice-based studies existed of such phenomena. This situation is now changing as practice theorists and practice-based researchers are starting to think big. Nicolini (2012) and Schatzki (forthcoming) have been theorizing how to analyse large scale social phenomena from a practice perspective, while others have engaged in empirical research of complex chains of social practices (Lamers and Pashkevich, 2015), transitions in global food practices (Spaargaren *et al.*, 2012) and the governance of sustainable

development practices (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Shove and Spurling, 2013). While this book shows how practice-based research can be put to use to study a wide variety of small scale social phenomena, it also contributes to the ambition of practice theories to investigate larger scale social phenomena.

The objectives of this book were two-fold: first, to demonstrate how practice theories can be used for empirical analyses that aim to understand social reproduction and social change; and second, to outline the conceptual and methodological challenges connected with the use of practice theories when applied to both small and large social phenomena.

To meet these objectives the contributions to this book were organized in three main ways. First, by combining research on small and large phenomena into one book, we aimed to show that research on social practices can and must engage with practice-arrangement bundles of different sizes. Practice-arrangement bundles refer to interconnected social practices and material arrangements (Schatzki, forthcoming). They can be more or less stretched out in time and space, and their extensiveness can be investigated with the lens alternating from the proximity modus to ever more distant views, and back. Second, since the focus of the book is on conceptualizing and researching the dynamics in contemporary societies, the contributions cover a diverse set of empirical phenomena. The reader is introduced in social phenomena as diverse as street violence, playing tennis, growing food, preventing waste, governing forests, suffering in medical care practices and managing conservation tourism partnerships. By exploring such diverse corners and segments of the plenum, practice theories are tested for their most generic and specific qualities at the same time. Generic in the sense that the book demonstrates that taking social practices as the privileged unit of analysis is instrumental for generating new knowledge about the social across a wide range of social phenomena. Specific in the sense that when practice theories are applied to, for example, the field of violence research, they are shown to be innovative on a number of aspects in that domain, which are however less relevant for the positioning of practice theories in, for example, sports or forest governance. Third, we also invited the authors of this volume to be sensitive about the policy or governance dimension of their research. Reflecting on the socio-political impact of research is important because new knowledge can be used in the ongoing reproduction of social practices by different actors in different ways. Furthermore, being more clear on the insights that practice-based research delivers for policy making and evaluation raises its overall relevance.

This chapter will discuss how and to what extent we have reached the aims of this book. The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. In the next section we will make up the balance of the book, highlighting the key contributions made by both the individual chapters and the book as a whole. The chapter will conclude with a future agenda for practice theory and practice-based research.

Making up the balance

In this section we discuss the conceptual and methodological insights for praxeologizing the social, the merits of a flat ontology for analysing small and large social phenomena, the value of practice theories for understanding social change, notably in large scale phenomena, and the insights that practice-based studies yield for governance.

Concepts and methods for praxeologizing the social

One of the first challenges faced by researchers interested in using practice theories is how to identify social practices as the central unit of analysis. Identifying a relevant set of practices for research depends on both theoretical and empirical criteria, as well as on practical and pragmatic considerations, such as having access to the practices as a researcher. When Weenink in his study of street violence aimed to reconstruct what happens within and between groups of youngsters in the minutes preceding the actual acts of street violence, he depended on the official written court reports of these cases by legal authorities (Chapter 6). In contrast, the analyses of practices in hospital care (Chapter 7) and conservation tourism partnerships (Chapter 10) were based on extensive periods of fieldwork. Also, when writing their chapter on the social practice of playing tennis (Chapter 8), it was of help to the authors that they are not just well-trained sociologists but also reasonable tennis players with some experience in the management of tennis clubs. Empirical criteria for selecting the set of practices are used by Dobernig *et al.* (Chapter 9) when they define their key objects of growing food in urban areas. In Glover's chapter (Chapter 5), the decision to look at domestic practices of divesting household materials against the background of preventing waste also already narrows down the range of potentially relevant practices. Most discussed in this book, however, are the theoretical criteria for deciding what counts as a relevant set or bundle of social practices. In an effort to pinpoint what comprises a social practice, Shove *et al.* (2012) proposed three basic clusters of elements: materials, competences and meanings. This three-component model provides an easy entry when embarking on a study informed by practice theory. It turned out that most authors in this volume discuss and use these Shovian elements to specify the characteristics of a practice, to compare different practices, and to analyse the ways in which practices can change. However, when they engage in empirical research on how and why these elements combine, interconnect and align, the chapters in this volume tend to rely on one or more of Schatzki's (2002; 2010) organizing principles (i.e. practical and general understandings, rules and teleo-affective structures). Especially the concept of teleo-affective structure is used by a number of authors to discuss the goals of the practices, their directionality, and the kind of affects and emotions that play a role in the enactment of the practice. For example, in explaining the integration of practices of youth violence (Chapter 6) the teleo-affective structure

is used as a decisive organizational principle. This is expressed in the names Weenink uses for the situated practices that are the objects of his research: 'contesting dominance' and 'performing badness'. When characterizing the engagement of households with divestment practices, Glover (Chapter 5) also emphasizes the importance of the teleo-affective structure and also uses this concept to identify particular ways of handling things at home: 'making do', 'passing on' and 'getting something for it'.

Based on how the authors of this volume tried to make sense of what social practices are about conceptually, we propose that future studies use different conceptualizations of social practices that are available in the social practice literature, while seeking to avoid only snapshot like descriptions of the elements of social practices. Defining practices, we argue, requires at least three steps: providing a description of the relevant components and how they combine; looking at the embeddedness of the social practices in broader sets or bundles of practices and material arrangements; and making an analysis of the trajectory of the practice, i.e. its historical development and its connections with other practices. This strategy was followed by Dobernig *et al.* (Chapter 9) in their contribution on growing food in urban settings. After having conducted a short historical analysis of growing food in urban environments, they then used the three Shovian elements in comparative analyses of 'similar' practices in Amsterdam and New York, ending up with a discussion on how the networks of related practices have been developing over the past decades in both cities. Only by playing all three analytical cards at the same time, the authors were able to arrive at their conclusion regarding the novelty of the practices under investigation. As a conclusion we would argue that studying 'the dynamics of practices' (Shove *et al.*, 2012) is not possible by just mapping the elements and by discussing the ways in which they hang together. Studying stability and change in social practices implies taking a comparative and historical perspective to dive into the trajectory of specific practices and their changing embeddedness in wider practice-arrangement bundles. In the next section we will provide a more detailed discussion on the concepts suggested for studying the embeddedness and connectivity of social practices.

Another point we want to make on theoretical work is that several chapters suggest conceptual innovations regarding the elements to be studied of social practices. In their chapter that is almost completely focused on the role of emotions in the reproduction and change of social practices, Weenink and Spaargaren (Chapter 4) argue that the emotional dimension of practices deserves wider discussion within theories of practices. The authors suggest connecting practice theories with Randall Collins' (2004) Interaction Ritual Theory in particular, since this Gofmanian and Durkheimian view on how practices produce emotions fits very well with the key assumptions of practice theories. Emotions navigate the social in important and circumscribed ways, as Weenink shows in his chapter on street violence (Chapter 6). The relevance of emotions are obvious again in the chapter by Vosman *et al.* (Chapter 7), who investigate the position of patients in practices of giving and receiving care. Concerning the teleo-affectivities of care practices, the authors

propose the concept of ‘passibility’ to describe a specific ‘non-doing’ or rather ‘undergoing’ as a kind of agency in the enactment of practices. Finally, when they discuss the ways in which material elements of different kinds are involved in the spatial structuring of the practice of playing tennis, van der Poel and Bakker (Chapter 8) put forward the concept of ‘affordances’ to capture the interplay of objectivities and subjectivities in the performance of the practice. The concept of affordances is not new in sociology but has not been discussed much among theorists of practices so far (Gibson, 1979/1986; Schmidt, 2012).

Next to making theoretical contributions, the book aimed to show how practice theories can be put to work in empirical research, which involves the elaboration of methodological issues. The chapter by Robert Schmidt in particular discusses epistemological and methodological aspects of using practice theories. Schmidt offers the concept of praxeologizing to refer to the kind of engagement of social scientists with their object of study. Researchers should be aware – so he argues – about the problematic distinction between theory and theorizing on the one hand, and doing research on empirical reality on the other. He argues that Bourdieu’s theoretical-cum-empirical approach still serves as a role model for doing social science in a reflexive manner, with researchers being aware of their role as co-constructors of the very kind of reality they help constitute with their (practice) theories.

The empirical chapters rely on a diverse range of methodological tools, albeit of a rather conventional nature. Although some authors express a clear preference for qualitative, ethnographic and ethnomethodological approaches and comparative case studies (Chapters 9, 10, 11), quantitative methods (Chapters 6 and 8) can be found as well. As Schmidt argues in his chapter on praxeologizing (Chapter 3) it seems difficult to imagine practice-based research without qualitative methods being applied. Most authors seem to be at ease with Nicolini’s suggestion of taking the best of all available instruments that are around, with the research questions indicating the kind of combinations of methodologies to consider (Nicolini, 2012). His suggestion of using the metaphor of zooming in and zooming out on the plenum of practices was made into a central theme throughout the book, and we think with satisfying results. Schmidt’s argument (Chapter 3) that quantitative methods should only figure as subordinated procedures in praxeologizing perhaps needs some nuancing. Our position is that there is a place for both qualitative and quantitative methods when used in the right way at the right moment, whereby the first appears to be indispensable when zooming in and the latter being particularly helpful when zooming out (see also Higginson *et al.*, 2014; Holz, 2014).

The merits of a flat ontology for researching both small and large social phenomena

As indicated above, the emphasis on providing understandings of small phenomena has resulted in practice theories being judged as irrelevant for the

understanding and steering of social changes in large phenomena, such as transnational organizations, carbon markets or the tourism sector. In an effort to make up for this shortcoming, some practice theorists started to reflect on conceptual ways to enrich practice theories with new concepts for studying the plenum with the practice lens in the zoomed-out position (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, forthcoming). In the chapter by Schatzki (Chapter 2), a conceptual foundation is provided to study large social phenomena without going against the flat ontology which is essential for practice theories. Schatzki starts his chapter by stating that the differences between small and large phenomena are not qualitative in nature. Thus, from the perspective advanced in this book, the difference between what is called micro or macro is just a matter of scale, a matter of differences in extensiveness across time and space. Macro phenomena are made up of the same material as micro phenomena: there is no social reality other than practices. Macro-sociological phenomena such as states, globalization, capitalism, institutions or social structures more generally, are conceptual short hands to denote degrees of extensiveness. That is to say they are ‘dense’ or ‘thick’ in terms of the connections between activities within practices and between practice-arrangement bundles, ‘far-flung’ or ‘large’ in terms of their spatiality and ‘long-lasting’ or ‘durable’ in terms of their existence over time (see also Schatzki, forthcoming). There is no ontological difference between micro and macro phenomena; the social happens at only one level and not – as in transition theory – at three distinct levels, such as landscape, regime and niche.

We believe that the concept of practice-arrangement bundles is the most general concept to refer to the mass of social practices that fill the plenum. Throughout this book, however, many different concepts are used to refer to such practice-arrangement bundles, such as pairs, chains, nexuses, compounds, complexes, circuits, constellations, networks or configurations of social practices. All give a specific colour to the idea of connections between practices. We think this conceptual diversity has to do with the rather recent emphasis within the family of practice theories on the analysis of large social phenomena. We argue that the concept of practice-arrangement bundles deserves further elaboration when discussing non-singular practices, since this concept highlights the hanging together of the social and material components in social practices. Practice-arrangement bundles are open-ended in the sense that every act of reproduction is also a creative act of the production of something (most of the time slightly or marginally) new or different at the same time. This is to prevent deterministic views on causality and social change, and to give proper weight to the notion of double hermeneutics at work in praxeologizing the social (see Chapter 3).

In several chapters of the book, practice-based approaches are used to understand larger scale phenomena in more or less explicit ways. In Chapter 5, Glover demonstrates how smaller scale household divestment processes are affected by the larger scale social diffusion of information and communication technologies. Practical information on repairing is now readily available from Youtube, and communication between buyers and sellers of household materials is now

extended over much larger distances. In Chapter 8, van der Poel and Bakker argue how in decision-making practices on tennis court surfaces the number and types of actors involved is extended considerably, during the tennis clubs' Annual General Meetings, but also because of the market supply of innovative material arrangements by private companies and the experiences of other tennis clubs in the region. The chapters in Part III of the book have an explicit focus on practices as embedded in larger practice-arrangement bundles. First, Dobernig *et al.* (Chapter 9) show how food growing in urban areas can be seen as a larger social phenomena by comparing the emergence of urban food growing practice-arrangement bundles in two global cities, as well as by analysing the ways in which practices of urban food growing are more or less connected to wider bundles of social practices in the plenum. Particularly their research in Brooklyn Grange, New York, demonstrates how rooftop food growing becomes embedded in thicker and more extensive bundles of other practices and material arrangements, such as leisure and lifestyle practices (e.g. yoga) and gastronomical, educational and managerial practices. Second, in their chapter on conservation tourism partnerships, Lamers and Van der Duim make an explicit attempt to discuss how connections between bundles of practices and material arrangements are formed. They show how efforts are being made to combine and integrate three formerly separate practice-arrangements bundles: pastoral cattle herding, conserving wildlife and nature-based tourism. Although the three bundles themselves are composed of smaller bundles of practices and arrangements, the integration of these specific bundles into a larger kind of conservation tourism practice arrangement bundle is aimed for by different groups of stakeholders. For this integration to occur, Lamers and Van der Duim argue that the organized doings and sayings of a specific group of 'connectors' are crucial. The practices performed by these connectors are labelled as 'connecting practices' by the authors. Connectors bring specific 'local' knowledges from, for example, international NGOs or cattle herders together, and recognize when and how programmes of stakeholders do (not) easily go together to form a larger bundle. When connecting practices manage to survive and prosper, the original practices undergo gradual changes as they become more and more directed to the rules and teleo-affective structures of the larger practice arrangement bundle. This analysis resembles Castells' (2009) understanding of the operation of power through organized groups of programmers and switchers in networks. Managing connectivity is their main task and the legitimation of their activities. Third, the chapter by Arts, Kleinschmit and Pülzl (Chapter 11) considers the relationships between small and large arrangements for the worldwide sustainable governance of forests. They argue that a practice-based 'flat' analysis results in richer, more creative and dynamic insights in global forestry governance than the vertical and multilevelled perspectives that have dominated this field of research so far. They propose perceiving forest governance in terms of the travelling through the plenum of (new, more sustainable) ideas and discourses, standards and procedures, and technologies and resources. Inspired by the ideas of Shove *et al.* (2012) and Latour (2005) on how

components of practices travel, and how they are translated and adapted to site-specific circumstances and contexts, they offer two forestry governance cases to illustrate the horizontal movement and diffusion of different elements of practices through the plenum. The flat ontology claim is here used to criticize existing theories and policy arrangements and to produce a radically different view of forest governance in an open, flexible, glocalized network society.

Practice theories and social change at large

All large scale social phenomena must bear upon actual doings and sayings that take place in concrete, physical space, if not they are reifications rather than concepts that approach the empirical reality of social phenomena (see also Collins, 1981). Macro-sociological phenomena, such as states, globalization, capitalism, global cities, transnational tourism networks or other social structures, do not act. The movement, the energy, what brings about something else in the plenum of practices as a more or less extensive repetitive pattern across time and space, must be located in social practices (see again Collins, 1981). If we accept that social practices are the entities of social life, then we should see large scale social changes as series of connected changes that happen to the practices of the more extensive practice-arrangement bundles of which they are part. Also, the cause of any large social change should then be found in the multitude of causes of smaller changes in these bundles of practices (Schatzki, forthcoming). However, this does not deny the fact that macroprocesses can influence these mechanisms: they may alter, redirect, restrict, emphasize, extend or delimit the causal nexus of practices. In each of the three chapters presenting analyses of embedded practices we have seen how the authors both base and also translate the extension of the practice-arrangement bundles back to changes in situated performed practices.

We argue that as practice theories are moving into the terrain of studying the dynamics of large phenomena, a discussion with transition theory, or other theories on social change and transformation, becomes unavoidable and indispensable. Some practice theorists, such as Shove and Walker (2007) and Spaargaren (Spaargaren *et al.*, 2012), recognize the relevance of transition studies as developed in Europe over the past decades. Concepts like co-evolution, socio-technical innovations, non-linear processes of change, multi-actor processes, analyses of pathways of change and the governance of transitions seem to be of shared interest to both practice theorists and transition theorists. While the issue of a flat ontology seems to stand in the way of combining both kinds of theories in empirical research (see Chapter 2), both approaches can learn from each other when it comes to analysing particular aspects of social change. As transition theories are strong on mapping historical pathways of change in large phenomena, and practice theories are strong on showing the open, undetermined character of the reproduction and innovation of both small and large practice-arrangement bundles, both approaches could profit from a rapprochement and constructive dialogue on how to understand and govern transitions in social life.

In the context of our discussion on practice theories and (the management of) social change, it is important to take a closer look at what practice theories have to offer when it comes to analysing and characterizing patterns of change in smaller and larger practice-arrangement bundles. In practice theory, questions about causality tend to be taken as retrospective how questions. Causal explanation then involves the description of change extending over time. Both Nicolini (2012) and Schatzki (forthcoming) suggest tracking large scale changes in the 'zoomed-out' or 'overview' modes respectively. Overviewing involves a combination of sketching or tracking down the chain of movements in series of practices that have brought about the patterning in time and space on the one hand, and showing how the causal nexus worked in particular significant practices or in, and between, practice-arrangement bundles on the other hand. The chapters presented in Part III of this volume are telling illustrations of this approach. For example, in Chapter 10 (this volume) Lamers and Van der Duim show how reflexive and discursive practices (i.e. the trust board where partnership issues are discussed and decided), as well as material arrangements (i.e. the zonation of the land and the eco-lodge), are used to connect a range of practice-arrangement bundles and trace the changes in each of these constituting practices over time. Similarly, Arts *et al.*, (Chapter 11) demonstrate how contemporary forestry governance approaches, like Participatory Forestry Management, can be tracked as they circulate across the world and arrive in different contextual settings where they are unpacked and implemented. In other words, in association with other land-use practices these conservation tourism partnerships or forestry management approaches are interwoven and solidified, leading to their persistence, accumulation and aggregation, or to their separation or dissolution. To get a further sense of how an analysis of change in large scale phenomena by tracking the multitude of smaller scale changes that comprise them could be understood, Schatzki (forthcoming) provides a series of concepts that capture the variety of changes that happen in extensive phenomena, such as those presented in this book. With concepts like association, aggregation, disassociation, dissolution, absorption, diffusion, circulation, solidification, persistence, bifurcation, differentiation, interweaving, convergence, divergence and separation, he allows researchers to describe the variety of happenings in complex action chains that bring about the formation, persistence and dissolution of large phenomena. With Schatzki we argue that when tracking the causal processes that undergird large scale phenomena, it is particularly helpful to focus the attention on governance and monitoring activities, coordinating devices and discourses, and material infrastructures that provide the backbone of the causal nexus.

Practice-based insights for policy and governance

Reflecting on the socio-political impact of research is important because new knowledge can be used in the ongoing reproduction of social practices by different actors in different ways. This general fact of life gains particular relevance when

dealing with social practices that lead to impacts or relations that are societally deemed as undesirable, such as environmental degradation, poverty, social marginalization and cost overrun, or more desirable, such as sustainable development and fair play. Each of the empirical chapters presented in this volume is situated in a particular and different socio-political setting, formed by different constellations of governance actors. Each of the empirical chapters contributes in their own way to better understanding undesirable social practices (e.g. youth violence, suffering, deforestation) in order to advise more effective policies, or highlights how more desirable social practices emerge and can be fostered by policy, such as alternative material divestment, local food production and consumption and conservation tourism partnerships. Practice-based research is valuable for its unpacking and ‘opening up’ of social phenomena like household divestment, playing tennis, undergoing a medical treatment in a hospital, or experiencing nature. Praxeologies show how these practices are performed by different groups of participants in different ways, while analysing how they emerge, diffuse, change and dissolve. Moreover, the chapter by Lamers and Van der Duim (Chapter 10) shows that new social practices can also be deliberately introduced by change agents in particular governance arrangements, by connecting undesirable practices with more desirable ones in order to derive more desirable output.

In all the practices mentioned, power relations between attackers and victims, managers and employees, doctors and nurses, tourism entrepreneurs and local pastoralists are shown to be a relevant axis along which the reproduction of these practices are organized. However, the knowledge generated by practice-based researchers could in principle be (mis)used by those in power to further increase their control of the settings under investigation. Andrew Sayer argues that this risk is enhanced by a focus on small social phenomena without taking into account the bigger picture of the embedding of social practices (Sayer, 2013). Of course the very same knowledge can also be used by subordinated actors in their efforts to diminish existing inequalities while empowering certain groups of participants. Social science researchers do not write the scripts for the future reproduction of the practices under study and they do not control the impact of their knowledge. They do however share responsibilities for the future state of social affairs and for the possible impacts and consequences of their research. Reflecting on these impacts and consequences, by actively using the practice zoom lens, should be part and parcel of praxeologizing to make practice-based research more policy relevant.

Finally, by adopting a practice-based perspective several of the chapters in this volume challenge the dominant paradigms that inform and legitimize policies of both state and non-state actors. Schmidt suggests following Bourdieu’s ‘negative’ way of praxeologizing the social, whereby existing modes of governance are shown to rest on core assumptions that can be criticized on scientific grounds. For instance Weenink (Chapter 6) argues that there is no such thing as senseless violence and that more attention for the interactions between youngsters before and during violent encounters generates more valuable insights for policy rather than relying on categorical explanations of, for

instance, degree of urbanization, class or ethnicity. Arts *et al.* (Chapter 11) show that standing debates on sustainable forest management can profit from doing away with hierarchical, top-down schemes of governance while opening up for thinking about local to global interfaces in terms of a practice theory's flat ontology. Also, Lamers and Van der Duim (Chapter 10) argue that a practice-based perspective on the governance arrangements of conservation tourism partnerships can generate in-depth insights for policy-making and evaluation that remain hidden from view if they had been analysed with the rational actor perspectives that had informed the various groups that formed these partnerships in the first place. Reflecting on the policy and governance aspects of practice research is an important first step for improving the receptiveness of companies, politicians and NGOs for practice-based approaches and research designs for both small and large social phenomena.

A future agenda: practice theory and large scale social change

In this final chapter we have made up the balance of this book. We conclude that practice theory and practice-based research holds added value for understanding and steering social change. Whatever the speed or extensiveness of social changes, the challenge for practice-based research is to demonstrate that everything happens in the plenum of social practices. We close this chapter by identifying directions in which practice theory could venture to further enhance its relevance for understanding the dynamics of large scale social phenomena. We have already argued for a continuation of the discussion between social practice theorists and theorists of societal transitions in this regard. In addition, we see two important but relatively unexplored domains that open up opportunities for further empirical and conceptual development of practice theories.

First, Anthony King (2010) has argued that the practice theories that were developed by Bourdieu and Giddens in the 1970s, in their fixation on the agency–structure conundrum, have failed to spot one of the most important trends in the social sciences today: the conceptualization of a globalizing network society. To quote King at length:

A new consensus is apparent in sociology globally which no longer understands social reality in terms of structure and agency but in terms of networks. Instead of the closed systems so favoured by functionalist sociology in the middle of the twentieth century, many sociologists are now more interested in the open and indeterminate social webs which transcend national borders, precipitating particular kinds of activity at specific locations.

(King, 2010: 256)

Practice theories have not been connecting to this increasingly influential view of the social as a networked and networking phenomenon explicitly – even

though their core assumptions fit very well to it. Since analyses of the dynamics of contemporary large-to-small practice-arrangement bundles take place in the present historical phase of the globalizing network society, we argue that practice theories could benefit from sociological theories which use network concepts to depict the horizontal, open and fluid character of the social. More specifically, we would be in favour of a theoretical confrontation and dialogue with the work of Manuel Castells, John Urry and Saskia Sassen, amongst others (Castells, 1996, 2009; Urry, 2000, 2003; Sassen, 2006). In practice theory terms, these social theorists describe the social as a globally networked constellation of practice-arrangement bundles. We think it would be useful to discuss this issue more often, by different members of the practice family, in different ways.

The second domain is related to the analysis of social changes that occur at a faster pace in the plenum of social practices. More specifically, we think of the travelling of objects or ideas that are strongly emotionally charged with group feelings. Such symbols of group membership are always tied to a particular group, as they emerged from local group dynamics (see Chapter 4). However, it is their intense emotional loading that allows for travelling of these symbols across the plenum of practices. For instance, in a snowball-like manner, social practices that revolve around these symbols can attract more and more participants if they sense that these symbols belong to a group that is gaining more and more support, or when they sense they belong to a winning party. In this way, new political ideas and or the reputation of charismatic leaders can attract the attention in surges of emotional energy that spreads rapidly across the plenum (see also Collins, 1981). Waves of enthusiasm, or 'belief-desire-emotion flows' (Schatzki, forthcoming) bring about swift changes in many connected social practices. However, the support for these ideas or the belief in reputations may also decline dramatically. In addition to these emotion flows, emotions also directly affect the purposiveness of practical intelligence: they change what is important and meaningful for people to do, hence bringing about changes in the distribution of participants over (bundles of) practices (see again Chapter 4). In our view, the incorporation of emotions to study rapid, large scale social changes provides a promising domain for practice based research, both empirically and theoretically.

Note

- 1 As far as we know, practice theories are not yet discussed as such – as a category, a school or a bandwagon (Corradi and Gherardi, 2010) – in the major textbooks on contemporary social theory.

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