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Introduction

Using practice theory to research social life

Gert Spaargaren, Machiel Lamers and Don Weenink

> Not, then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men
> Erving Goffman, 1967, p. 3

Introduction

Why and how are you reading this book? Maybe you read a review of it in a social science journal. Perhaps you were advised to do so by your lecturer to prepare that paper on practice-based research. Maybe you noticed a new cover and interesting title during your monthly stroll through the local library and read for another two minutes before deciding to take it on loan. Or perhaps you are sitting behind your office-desk and just received the book that you ordered online after a 'content alert' from the publisher.

Whatever made you reading this text as part of your daily activities, it is you as a unique individual who knows what you are up to do next. You are familiar with the situation and you know how to go on in daily life, how to take the next step. But suppose you were asked to study the behaviours and motivations of people going through similar moments like you now. People who are about to read and study a book on practices. How would you, in this particular case, frame and organize your research, both theoretically and methodologically? Theoretically, by asking yourself what kind of 'decisions' are at stake, and which factors are assumed to influence the process. Do emotions play a role in this? Do you happen to know the authors? Did the title of the book seduce you? The theoretical lens you decide to use will influence what you see and how much emphasis you will give to particular items and factors. Methodologically, you might wonder what qualitative and quantitative methods are available for getting to the situation in such a way that you gain the knowledge needed to understand similar situations elsewhere.

The methodological approach which is often suggested in situations like this is that you develop a survey or interview topic list to ask people about their motivations, meanings, experiences and interests for reading books in the first place and for selecting this book on practices in particular. Your research-focus

in that case could be on a set of more or less well-known background variables (education, income, job, discipline, gender) combined with some stated preferences and values of the individuals. They are combined methodologically in order to predict future behaviours or to understand their meanings. Maybe you will be able to show that for students income turns out to be a more decisive factor when compared with tenured staff.

There is however an alternative approach possible. One that is challenging the assumptions behind the conventional approaches to study human behaviour and social change. This alternative approach is the central theme of the present volume. Theoretically, it suggests shifting the research focus away from studying individuals, their motives and background features primarily, towards a more in-depth investigation of 'context', or the activities, the social practices, they engage in. For our example of reading this book, the classroom, the library and the office are now included in the enquiries, as are the time-slots and the reading time being available (or not) for actually reading the book. The projected activities of the reading – glancing through, reading-with-highlighting, studying-while-abstracting – are not just contextualized but also investigated for their functionality in relation to the wider projects or programmes in which the reading activities of individuals are embedded. For example, perhaps you aimed to share your findings with a group of fellow students in next week's class or you intend to write a book review for the journal of which you are an associate editor. Methodologically, the alternative approach suggests to employ methods of data collection and techniques of data analysis that allow you to gain a rich and detailed understanding of the situation. This implies that you consider using a range of techniques that are particularly relevant for 'praxeologizing' the would-be readers and their contexts. Both the theoretical and the methodological aspects of the alternative approach will be introduced and enhanced in this volume, by presenting key characteristics of contemporary practice theories and by showing how they can be put to use in empirical research.

The idea of shifting the analytical emphasis from the individual to the situation however is not new at all. When the sociologist Erving Goffman developed his micro-sociological or interactionist approach in the early 1960s, he emphasized the impact of contextual factors on even our 'smallest behaviors'. To understand how people 'behave in public places' (Goffman, 1963) and 'present themselves in everyday life' (Goffman, 1959), sociologists must investigate the particular situations or moments as contexts which co-constitute behaviour. Goffman showed that analysing situations is an indispensable tool for understanding why and how people act and talk the way they do. Together with their fellow actors, individuals create a social unit which cannot be reduced to the motives, intentions and meanings of single individuals. The situation represents more than the sum of its constituting elements. Therefore Goffman (1963: 3) suggests that social scientists better focus their attention to 'moments and their men', or – as in the case of this volume – on 'practices and their participants' instead of using isolated individuals as the privileged starting point for theorizing and doing empirical research on the social.

The Goffman-motto of starting from situations while bracketing the individual is one of the key assumptions which are broadly shared among theorists of practices. We will discuss key assumptions and characteristics of theories of social practices in the sections to follow. The core assumptions refer to the nature of social practices and how they should be defined (or not), to the role of material, both human-made and naturally occurring objects and human agents within social practices, and to the more general assumption that society, social life that is, should be conceived in terms of interconnected practices (and nothing else). These assumptions of course influence the research design and the use of concepts and methodologies for analysing the dynamics of society. Because practice theories are rather young and not yet mainstream in social science, their application in empirical research tends to raise a number of questions that need to be confronted in some detail. With this book, we aimed to select a set of relevant questions and to elaborate them in both theoretical and empirical contexts.

Aims of the book

The family of practice theories, the key ontological assumptions they represent, the methodological and epistemological issues involved in the application of practice theories in empirical research, and the relevance of practice-based research for understanding social change in contemporary societies, are the central topics discussed throughout this volume. This seems like a rather broad agenda, but we will show that it is one with a clear focus. The aims of the book are twofold:

1   to demonstrate how practice theories can be used for empirical analyses that aim to understand social reproduction and social change;
2   to outline the conceptual and methodological challenges related to the use of practice theories when applied to both small and large social phenomena.

To meet these objectives the book includes a number of theoretical chapters that discuss the foundations of practice theory, that propose ways to conceptualize agency and power and their role in social change, and that clarify some of the methodological principles and discussions. Together with this introductory chapter, these theoretical and methodological chapters form Part I of the volume. Next to these theoretical chapters, the book offers empirical chapters that show how practice theories can be put to use in a wide variety of social contexts, while also taking up and discussing the conceptual and methodological challenges of practice approaches along the way. The empirical chapters focus on the analysis and assessment of social change in the situated here and now of single practices or small phenomena, such as being violent, playing tennis and undergoing medical treatment (Part II), as well as on changes in large phenomena, e.g. in bundles of practices extending in a wider scope of time-space, such as conservation tourism partnerships and the sustainable management of forests (Part III).

In order to prepare the reader for what comes next, this introductory chapter aims to provide a brief discussion of central concepts and key assumptions in practice theories, the debate between practice approaches and transition theory approaches with regard to the analysis of social change, and some of the methodological and policy aspects of practice-based empirical research. We conclude this introductory chapter by outlining the subsequent chapters in this volume.

Practice theories: key concepts and assumptions

Since *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001) practice theories seem to be steadily on the rise within the social sciences. Despite their popularity however, practice theories have not yet been assigned the status of a distinct family or category of social thinking, such as post-structuralism or interpretive sociology. So far, they do not appear as separate sections in the social theory handbooks and introductions, which appear so regularly nowadays (Calhoun *et al.*, 2012; Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Of course the authors associated with the emergence of the field of practice theory are discussed in these volumes, most notably Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. They are considered the founders of a movement or approach that laid out the conceptualization of the agency-structure relation as one of the key themes in social theory (King, 2004). Giddens and Bourdieu are – together with Bruno Latour – also a source of inspiration for contemporary practice theorists, such as Davide Nicolini, Annemarie Mol, Andreas Reckwitz, Theodore Schatzki, Elizabeth Shove, Alan Warde, Robert Schmidt and many others. These contemporary scholars carry out their practice theory inspired research in a variety of fields, such as food and health, sustainable consumption, sports, work and organization, and urban provisioning of energy, water and food.

Practice theories form a lively field of debates, conceptual innovation and research. They represent a contemporary social theory that inspires and appeals to many (PhD) students, since they expect the theory to offer them guidance on how to organize social science research. When using the lens of practice theories, researchers show particular sensitivities and preferences, while being keen on avoiding well-known pitfalls. The preferences often mentioned are to approach the social world as open, contingent, transitory and horizontal. Practice theories appeal to researchers' intuitions as they seem to match well with the dynamics of the current horizontal, fluid and global network society (Castells, 1996, 2009; Urry, 2000). The pitfalls that practice-based researchers are keen to avoid refer to two forms of reductionism. The first are individualistic accounts of the social and the second are system perspectives of all kinds that emphasize order, systemic principles, structures and hierarchies. Research based on practice theories seeks to find the middle ground between voluntarist or subjectivist (society as the result of actions, values and preferences of sovereign individuals) and structural or objectivist (society as made up by structures which 'govern' the grand totality behind the backs of human actors) accounts of the social.

This book has been developed to comment on the present state of affairs in the field of practice theories and to make visible the kind of contributions practice theories can make to empirical research on social change. It draws upon different streams of practice theories and their authors, and shows the application of their concepts and ideas to a wide variety of social themes and contexts. With the book we do not claim to represent 'the' practice approach. We contend that practice theory should be seen as a family of theories, consisting, among others, of the above mentioned authors and their critics. Their ideas and contributions inspire us and are discussed in different chapters of the book. In this section, we share with the reader some of the conceptual issues and debates that are prominent among practice theorists. For each topic we indicate how we intend to deal with them in the context of the present volume.

Defining social practices?

All practice theorists claim that the study of social life should start with social practices. But what exactly is a 'social practice'? A quick scan of the literature will tell you that there is not a single best definition of social practices around. Some authors even suggest not trying to provide one, since such a definition would run counter to the style of thinking and working represented by the open-ended practices ontology (Nicolini, 2012). We nevertheless selected a few definitions to develop a feel for the game.

Andreas Reckwitz regards practices as 'routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice' (Reckwitz, 2002a: 255). So there are elements which interconnect or organize social practices. Taking practices as the unit of analysis implies looking into the properties or elements that go together in human activity and that do not appear when studying human individuals or institutions at large. But what exactly are the components or elements? Practice theorists seem to agree on what they are, but they use different concepts to refer to them and provide different explanations for how they contribute to the organizing of practices. For example, with Shove *et al.* (2012) practices are constituted by combining (only) three main components: materials (e.g. bodies, things, technologies and tangible physical entities), competences (e.g. skills, know-how, techniques) and meanings (e.g. symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations). It is through recurrent enactments (i.e. practices-as-performances) that a distinct and recognizable conjunction of these elements is established over time, with social practices then becoming visible as entities (practices-as-entities) which are embedded in broader nexuses or bundles of practices. As Shove *et al.* indicate themselves, although working with only three components or elements might be helpful when organizing empirical research on social change, it is at the expense of simplifying what social practices are about (Shove *et al.*, 2012: 15).

A more elaborate description of elements of social practices is provided by Schatzki (2002, 2010) who argues that they consist of doings and sayings and

material arrangements that hang together, organized by practical understanding, general understanding, rules and teleo-affective structures. A similar, even more elaborate definition of a practice is provided by (again) Reckwitz:

> a routinized type of behaviour which consist 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.
>
> (Reckwitz, 2002a: 249)

This definition is among the most cited and used ones. Both his and Schatzki's definitions are very helpful with regard to theoretical clarification and debate, but rather difficult to operationalize into designs for empirical research on social change.

Instead of going for the most adequate definition, we would argue with Nicolini (2012) that practice researchers profit from taking into account the different formulations of the concept of social practices currently in use, using them to shape the research design in a way that fits best the theoretical or empirical tasks at hand. When quickly mapping practices for their key components, elements or dimensions, researchers can create room for more in-depth analyses of specific elements, their hanging together in practices and their dynamics of change. As we will show in the empirical chapters of the book, just mapping designated practices for their (for example three, with Shove *et al.*, 2012) components, will not do when the aim is to arrive at a convincing analysis of the dynamics of change in society. For a more in-depth understanding of social change, the rules and teleo-affective structures that organize practices, the emotions at stake and the ways in which social practices are part of wider bundles of practices, all need to be taken into account.

In our view, going through the set of definitions on offer in the practice literature is a useful and necessary exercise for researchers who engage in practice-based research. When the authors of this book gathered to discuss their particular take on how to define and approach social practices, the editors suggested to combine elements of Giddens, Schatzki and Shove into the following working-definition: social practices are shared, routinized, ordinary ways of doings and sayings, enacted by knowledgeable and capable human agents who – while interacting with the material elements that co-constitute the practice – know what to do next in a non-discursive, practical manner.

The material dimension of social practices

All practice theories acknowledge the important, co-constituting role of material objects in social life. One cannot claim to use a practice-based approach when neglecting the role of material objects, symbols, things, technologies and infrastructures as the crucial hardware of the social. Beyond this broad consensus

however, there exist significant differences among practice theorists when it comes to conceptualizing the material in relation to the social. For example both Reckwitz (2002a, 2002b) and Shove (2003) go a long way in arguing for a formulation of practice theory that resembles the strong emphasis of material semiotics, also known as actor network theory, on the independent role of objects vis à vis human agents. Also Rick Wilk (2009) argues for a concept of 'distributed agency' in which objects have their fair share.

Schatzki on the other hand makes an effort to specify the crucial differences between human and non-human activity chains. In his recent work in particular, Schatzki contrasted his formulation of practice theory versus Latour's material semiotics perspective (see Chapter 2 of this volume). Although the plenum of the social is populated by practice-arrangement-bundles that always and inherently so represent the going together of social practices and material arrangements, for Schatzki it is human agency that makes the difference, e.g. that what makes practice theories theories of social practices. With respect to analysing the role and status of material objects in social practices, the approaches of Schatzki and Shove seem to be different as well, for example when it comes to the conceptual position of Shove's material element (Shove *et al.*, 2012) in comparison with Schatzki's material arrangement (Schatzki, 2002). While Shove *et al.* put materials on a par with meanings and competences, Schatzki sees material arrangement as being employed, manipulated and constructed by the participants in their doings and sayings. The theoretical and epistemological debates on what objects 'do' in practices will be one of the recurrent themes in this book. It is to just inform the reader that when discussing the material dimension of practices, the editors are more close to the position of Schatzki (1996, 2002, 2010). Notably, in his conceptualization of the material versus the social, the role of human agency is recognized and defended in a much more explicit way as compared to practice theories that are closer to material semiotics (Latour, 2005; Reckwitz, 2002a, 2002b; Shove *et al.*, 2012). We think that the concept of agency and its relation to social reproduction and change is crucial and hence deserves further discussion and exploration.

Agency and practice theory: social reproduction as a practical, 'taken-for-granted' affair?

Practice theories foreground what people actually do in ordinary life. They emphasize the fact that the social is more than language, discourse or communication. As Warde has argued, practice theorists 'give precedence to practical activity as the means by which people secure their passage through the world, thereby emphasizing doing over thinking, practical competence over strategic reasoning, mutual intelligibility over personal motivation and body over mind' (Warde, 2013: 18). At the same time, practice theories emphasize the fact that the doings and sayings of social life are not only practical in nature but also taken for granted, habitual, and routinized (Evans *et al.*, 2012). This implies that

agency and power are exerted most of the times in a non-discursive, non-cognitive and routinized way. Within the family of practice theories, the routinized and habitual nature of the social is being discussed at some length, relating the topic of the taken-for-granted nature of doings and sayings with standing debates in the social sciences on the exact meaning of agency, and its relationship to power and social change (Wilk, 2009; Welch and Warde, 2015). When summarized in a negative way, the practice stance on agency could be depicted as the homo practicus who, submerged in practices, just follows the existing routines in an intuitive and taken for granted way. This formulation of course does not do justice to all the nuances being made by different authors in this field. It does however indicate in a strong way the difference between practice theories on the one hand and competing approaches in economics and psychology on the other hand, where human agency is connected primarily with the conscious, rational decision making of individuals who follow orders from inside. So how is the 'practical nature' of the reproduction of social practices conceptualized?

Schatzki (2010) introduces the concept of practical intelligibility to discuss the intuitive, practical, embodied ways in which human actors know what to do next in a given situation. Practical intelligibility tells individuals what makes sense for them to do next 'given that such and such is the case' Schatzki (2010: 114). The such and such refers to many things at the same time: the set of goals (telos) that are involved in the practice, the emotions at stake, the ways in which objects invite or trigger certain behaviours, and the relationships of relative autonomy and interdependence with other participants of the practice. Although Schatzki claims that his concept of 'practical intelligibility' is more convincing – since more specific and contextual – when compared to Bourdieu's 'sens pratique' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979) and Giddens' 'practical consciousness' (Giddens, 1984), we think these differences are less important than the shared assumption that most of the times most things are being dealt with by human agents in a non-discursive manner. Non-discursivity however does not imply that people are stupid, ignorant of what is going on, or cultural dopes. When things move smoothly, when practices can be enacted on the automatic pilot, and when performances are successful the way they have been done in the recent past, there is no need to shift to the 'cognitive driving modality'. Only when special occasions occur, for example when new objects or ideas are brought into the practice, or when practices collapse, are disturbed or de-routinized in ways that courses of future action are no longer innate to the practice and no longer 'obvious' for the practitioners, only then a temporary switch is being made to the discursive, reflexive, cognitive, conflict or consensus generating mode of doing and saying. The fact that social life is taken for granted most of the times, does not preclude creativity, reflexivity and social innovation to play an important role in the process of social (re)production.

When discussing human agency in relation to practice theories, we think that the works of Giddens, Schatzki and Bourdieu represent a perspective on agency and subjectivity that distances itself from more individualist, cognitive and

voluntarist accounts of agency. At the same time, however, these authors tried to avoid the portrayal of human agents as 'cultural dopes' or as passive recipients of the dynamics of social structures. Human agents are intelligible, knowledge-able and capable agents who know what to do next most of the time, and how to move around in the world. The 'third way' approach of Giddens and Bourdieu to the issue of subjectivism versus objectivism has gained broad recognition in the social sciences. For the original agency – structure problem there are by now about fifty shades of structuration available in the practice literature. Against this background, we would like to emphasize two items which we consider important for the central theme of this book.

First, we suggest that agency should be discussed and accounted for both in relation to social practices and in relation to how embodied human actors parti-cipate in these practices. The added value of practice theories is their claim that both accounts of agency cannot be developed independently. In some variants of practice theory, the individual seems to almost disappear from view (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Welch and Warde, 2015). We think that being silent about the role of individual human actors in the reproduction of practices is not the most promis-ing strategy. Instead, the role of individual actors as 'practitioners' should be conceptualized in more convincing ways. So yes, individual human actors or agents exert agency, have a lifestyle, and possess transformative capacities. The skills, capacities, competences, values and emotions at stake can be observed, measured and monitored in social science research. However, they cannot be analysed and properly understood when they are treated in isolation, without taking into account the practices they are connected with and originate from. Practice theories argue that the very capacity of individual human actors to act upon and to intervene in the world, is produced in and through existing constel-lations of social practices. Practices produce human agents as much as human agents produce practices. In more historical terms: situated groups of people in a particular society derive their existence as social actors from the very same his-torically evolving patchwork of social practices they are part of and help repro-duce. Those quilts tell their participants who they are, what they should do in different situations and how they can act upon the situation given the opportun-ities and constraints inherent in the practices they engage in. Human agents have no choice other than to accept their destiny to act as the co-creators of society under given, ever changing circumstances which they are never fully aware of and which they can never fully control. Hence the practice theoretical adage of 'bounded agency' can exist side by side to the practice theoretical adage of social life being 'open-ended and dynamic' in nature.

Second, we argue that practice theories can benefit from a new round of dis-cussion and theorizing of the nature and role of human agency in the reproduc-tion and transformation of social practices. Social practices are not just moments of instantiation or the reproduction of a set of programs, or hybrids of the social and the material etcetera. They are as well 'Erlebnissen', fun to do, suffering, exciting, boring, risky, tasteful, abhorrent, etcetera. In Chapter 4 of this volume,

Weenink and Spaargaren make a case for conceptualizing the role of emotions in practices, which has been an almost neglected element of social practices so far. Making use of the sociology of emotions as a prospering branch of sociology, they argue that emotions navigate practices. This may sound like a rather revolutionary approach to the reproduction of social practices. In the work of Schatzki however there are several clues on how to elaborate a theory of emotions in the context of practice theory. When combined with Randal Collins' work on Interaction Ritual chains (1993; 2004), emotions can be shown to be important drivers of change, whether analysed in terms of embodied responses or in terms of emotional energies produced in and through social practices of interaction.

The plenum of the social: populated by practices that are clustered and related in different ways

The fourth and final key element to be discussed here refers to the notion that practice theories represent a flat ontology. This assumption is at the core of the chapter that Schatzki contributes to this volume. Embracing a flat ontology implies that the social is approached as being one of a kind. There is no distinction made into different social realms with distinct characteristics, as for example suggested by micro- versus macro-analyses, by the agency – structure dualism, and by the distinction between landscape, regime and niche actors and dynamics in transition theory (see below). Also Manuel Castells' distinction between the different time-space dynamics of what he labels as 'space of flows' versus 'space of places' would not be a conceptual candidate to be used in the context of a flat ontology. In practice theories, there are no levels of the social which represent different dynamics of social change. A flat ontology entails that practice theories accept no stratification of social reality when it comes to the workings and mechanisms of the social. The constitution of society evolves through, and takes the form of, a myriad of interconnected social practices being (re)produced in time and space. The dynamics of society are one of a kind, even though the reproduction of the web of social practices is generating different kinds of inequalities. Unequal relations of power and the unequal distribution of emotional energies, values, knowledge and skills among groups of social actors do not go against the flat ontology of practice theories.

When reviewing the empirical examples used by practice theorists and the kind of empirical studies conducted with the help of practice approaches so far, there seems to exist a preference for studying everyday life, ordinary, rather 'small' social phenomena. The typical examples in Shoves' work for example are about doing the laundry, taking a shower and going for a Nordic walk. With such an emphasis on small phenomena, it is difficult to provide inputs to actors and organizations involved in the governance of social change at the national and international levels. In this volume, we are keen to elaborate the consequences of working with a flat ontology in empirical research when the focus is on 'larger' social phenomena as well. Largeness here refers to extension of

bundles of practices in time and space. Since it is ontologically inadequate to distinguish between different levels or layers within the social, we have to find or invent other concepts that specify what is 'large' and what is 'small' within the framework of practice theory. Shove *et al.* (2012), Schatzki (2015; forthcoming) and Nicolini (2012) have set themselves to the task of further elaborating practice theories so that they allow for the analysis and investigation of larger social phenomena.

Social practices can be more or less frequent, prominent and visible in the plenum. They can show different patterns of distribution through time-space, they can be more or less firmly clustered and embedded in wider networks of practices and they can be related to and (made) dependent from other practices in more or less stringent and enduring ways. In the past few years, a number of concepts has been suggested by practice theorists to specify the distribution of practices over time-space and to characterize their modalities of being interconnected and clustered. Schatzki uses the concept of bundles – or more correctly practice-arrangement-bundles –, to organize the discussion on small versus larger social phenomena (Schatzki, forthcoming). Practice-arrangement bundles refer to sets of social practices and material arrangements that hang together and are interconnected in more or less strong and enduring ways. When studying larger practice-arrangement bundles in particular, it seems attractive from a methodological point of view to approach the plenum of practices in what Nicolini (2012) refers to as the zoomed-out modus. Taking a helicopter view of the plenum is instrumental for identifying smaller and larger bundles of practices and the patterns they weave through time-space.

When practice-arrangement bundles are anchored at specific places – as in the case of airports, hospitals or industrial parks – Shove refers to them as complexes. In the case that well-defined strings of interconnected practices are lightened up by the practice lens, they can be called chains or nexuses, for example in the empirical study of international food chains (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012). When particular kinds of practices are shown to appear together with two other kinds of social practices often, they could be referred to in terms of connecting or mediating practices (see Chapter 10 of this volume). Shove *et al.* (2012) also discuss recurring patterns of practices in time-space using the concepts of dominant pathways and circuits of reproduction. Again, for these dominant pathways to become visible for the researcher, one has to zoom-out and consider a larger slice of the plenum through the lens of practice theory. Without going into more detail here, the reader will grasp the basic idea of what it is like to research aspects of the plenum of practices with the analytical lens on a wider scope. Such a modality of looking at social practices was referred to by Giddens (1984) in terms of 'institutional analyses' of social practices. In such a mode of doing research, practices as embedded entities and practice-arrangement bundles are being investigated while bracketing the performances of the practices through the interplay of agents and objects.

Throughout the book, we will provide further discussion and empirical examples to substantiate the claim that practice theories are not just valuable when the analysis focuses on the enactment of situated practices with the analytical lens zoomed-in, but that they also have promising potential when larger social phenomena are considered, analysed with a zoomed-out practice lens to grasp recurring patterns within the plenum. Before we introduce some methodological considerations that are specifically related to doing practice-based research, we have one more set of theoretical issues to deal with: the ways in which practice theories approach and conceptualize social change.

Practice theories and research on social change

In Chapter 2 of this volume, Schatzki argues in some detail why there is nothing beyond 'the level of social practices' and why, for that reason, the multi-level perspective as implied in transition theory (Grin *et al.*, 2012; Geels *et al.*, 2015) is difficult to reconcile with a practice ontology. According to some authors, however, the 'flat ontology assumption' of theories of social practices can be shown to seriously hamper the potential of practice theories to analyse and understand the bigger picture of 'episodic transformations' (Giddens, 1984) or 'transitions (Geels, 2002; De Haan and Rotmans, 2011).[1] The flat ontology thereby seems to stand in the way of practice theories' potential to gain direct relevance for the understanding and governance of social change of large phenomena in particular. How can social scientists be so naive to think that the worlds of multinationals and the unemployed, of global superpowers and small-island states, of Nobel prize winners and the illiterate or of dictators and prisoners, can be regarded as made from the same ground materials and as essentially the same? Are there no institutions (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church, Museums, Capitalism, the Olympics Games) of hundreds of years old that play a dominant role in the development of society as a whole? The flat ontology assumption in general seems to generate fierce discussions among a broader range of authors who raise different kinds of criticisms in this respect (Shove *et al.*, 2007; Thornton *et al.*, 2012; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Elder-Vass, 2010; Sayer, 2013; Geels *et al.*, 2015).

In this volume, the supposed incommensurability of transition theory and practice theories is foregrounded and discussed both in theoretical chapters and in chapters reporting on empirical analyses. We think this debate is much needed and to be welcomed, especially since it is the ambition of practice research to move beyond analysing and researching 'small' social phenomena only. We shortly comment on one chapter of the book in some more detail here, since it offers a nice illustration of the way in which practice theory can be used to confront social change in relation to both smaller and larger social phenomena. Van der Poel and Bakker (Chapter 8) take playing tennis as their starting point, a social practice which has been analysed before in relation to the works of Elias and Bourdieu (Bowen *et al.*, 2013). Having their lens zoomed in on the performances of the

practice, van der Poel and Bakker show how in time-space specific perform-
ances, bodies and both smaller and larger material objects play a crucial role.
They argue that small material objects like tennis-balls, tennis-shoes and rackets
are material elements of a different kind as compared to the larger material
objects and infrastructures that form the surfaces on which the tennis-play is per-
formed. With their lens in the zoomed out position, they then go on to show how
playgrounds are involved not just in the situated performances of tennis players,
but also in the organization and management of tennis as a field of sports, with
particular standards, and designated roles and responsibilities of governing
bodies. Using the concept of 'affordances', they elaborate on Shove's analyses
with respect to the role of material objects and they show how both small and
large objects co-determine future performances, albeit in ways that are different
for smaller and larger objects. We offer this as an example of how we think prac-
tice theories could and should be developed both conceptually and methodologi-
cally in order to cover not just small but larger phenomena as well.

With respect to analysing the dynamics of larger scale social phenomena,
authors who work in the tradition of transition theory have made significant con-
tributions to the social sciences over the past decades. Transition studies have
become famous for their sensitivity to history and their relevance for policy pro-
cesses, the governance of sustainability transitions in particular. Historical
studies and integrated assessments have appeared on transitions in systems of
(auto)mobility (Geels *et al.*, 2012), food consumption, -retail and -production
(Spaargaren *et al.*, 2012), the uses of energy (Verbong *et al.*, 2013) and of health
care (Broerse *et al.*, 2012). The concepts and ideas developed by Johan Schot,
Rene Kemp, Frank Geels, Jan Rotmans, Derk Loorbach, John Grin, Tom Har-
greaves, Ken Green, Frans Berkhout and many others explicitly aim to illustrate
specific dynamics of social change based on models that are built on historical
cases. Firmly anchored in the Science and Technology Studies school of thought,
concepts such as lock-in, strategic niche management, acceleration, momentum,
and dominant and alternative regimes, were added to the jargon of the social sci-
ences. A multi-level perspective is used to show that social changes take distinct
shapes at different levels (i.e. niches, regimes and landscapes, in the terminology
of transition theory) of the social. Niche developments that occur in socio-
technical innovations are of a different kind and thereby require different gov-
ernance and management approaches as compared to the higher level of
well-established regimes which appear in the reproduction of large socio-
technical systems. Also, so called landscape factors which are conceptualized as
being 'external' to even the largest socio-technical systems, represent their own
specific dynamics of social change.

Practice theories and their flat ontology collide with transition theoretical
studies not so much – so we would argue – on the relevant units of analysis. It
can be argued that the concept of practice-arrangement bundles as recently sug-
gested by Schatzki, is of a similar theoretical kind as the notions of socio-
technical or socio-material systems used in transition studies (McMeekin and

Southerton, 2012). When Shove *et al.* (2012) discuss how novel practices emerge and go through early phases of development and stabilization, one could easily recognize the similarities with the niche-innovation concept. Also, their 'dominant circuits' and 'pathways of reproduction' are not that far removed from what is called 'dominant regimes' in transition theory. However, both approaches seem less reconcilable with respect to their basic assumptions about the nature and dynamics of social change, and in particular the multi-level perspective assumption in transition theory that the social is made up of three different kinds of dynamics of social change. In a flat ontology it is not possible to speak of a 'landscape' level (i.e. macro level) that represents fundamentally different dynamics of change in relation to processes of social change at the levels of regimes (i.e. meso) or niches (i.e. micro) level. In practice-theoretical terms, there is no area or region within the plenum where human agency does not appear or where it plays a different role in the reproduction of socio-technical systems and their regimes.

In the concluding chapter of the book, we argue for a continued debate and exchange of ideas between practice theorists and authors from the school of transition studies. Both streams of social scientific research have specific contributions to make to the analysis of social change, and there is an increasing number of authors combining both approaches or at least showing an open attitude towards finding syntheses and building bridges (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2013; Geels *et al.*, 2015; Rauschmayer *et al.*, 2015). As the work of Shove *et al.* (2012) and Schatzki (forthcoming) demonstrate, efforts are now being made to develop more elaborate and concrete ideas on 'pathways of change' within configurations of social practices. We consider the shared interest in looking for historical patterns or pathways of change with respect to large social phenomena to be an important meeting ground of practice theories and transition theories.

Finally, with respect to the analyses of social change in contemporary societies, we think practice theorists could benefit from a suggestion made by Anthony King (2010) to take a critical and more distant look at the kind of conceptual issues – agency, structure, objectivism, subjectivism – that kept social theorists busy over the last decades. The question is how relevant agency-structure debates still are, when they are reviewed from the perspective of sociological theories of the network-society as formulated by Manuel Castells (1996, 2009), John Urry (2000), Saskia Sassen (2006) and others. Network theories seem to offer a range of concepts that are particularly useful when researching the plenum of the social with the practice-lens in the zoomed-out modality. Agency and power in the global network society gain particular characteristics which deserve the analytical attention of practice theorists as well. The role of network codes and standards as well as the idea of groups of actors being actively involved in the making and breaking of linkages between different networks are two examples that are in need of further elaboration from a practice theoretical point of views We will follow-up on King's suggestion in different chapters of the book, and in the concluding chapter in particular.

Methodological issues in practices-oriented research

According to Davide Nicolini (2012), practice-based research approaches are not just build upon a flat ontology, they also use a specific methodology and a particular 'style of writing'. The latter points refer to a particular reflexive style of engagement in social science research that is further elaborated by Robert Schmidt in Chapter 3 of this volume. Since one of our aims of this book is to demonstrate that practice theories can be used for empirical analyses, some further reflection on epistemological and methodological issues seems inevitable and useful. What can be said about the position of practice theory researchers vis-à-vis their objects of research? How do researchers themselves connect to the practices they study? We shortly discuss two modalities of looking at and investigating practices: analysing them with the lens zoomed-in, and taking a helicopter view on the plenum with the lens zoomed-out.

Practice research with the lens zoomed-in: focusing on situated practices and their (historical) development

According to Robert Schmidt (Chapter 3), participation of researchers in the social practices they investigate is necessary and a prerequisite. His praxeology shows a clear and substantively justified preference for ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, manipulative observation, shadowing and first and second person observation. Such methods bring along different forms of participation from the part of researchers. Only by actively participating in the practices under study, researchers gain practical understanding and are able to acquire inside knowledge and skills in relation to the nature of the practices, their rules and teleo-affectivities. However, forms of participation from the side of researchers are not unproblematic and can generate both intended and unintended results and have effects on the practice which themselves can be turned into further objects of empirical research. Schmidt's contribution is not intended as the final word on the relationship between practice theories and research methodology. Nevertheless, a consensus seems to exist on the primacy of qualitative methods. Some authors argue on theoretical grounds against the use of quantitative survey methods (Arts *et al.*, 2012; Nicolini, 2012). Others however argue that practice theories are tolerant to all types of research methodology, including forms of (practice-based) modelling (Holtz, 2014) and quantitative representations and investigations on the rhythms of practices (Pantzar, 2013).

   Although we tend to take a pragmatic approach with regard to the use of more or less standardized or more or less qualitative or quantitative research methods, we do think that more open, qualitative methodological approaches are indispensable to conduct research on practices. This is because such approaches reveal the rich detail of practices and the ways they unfold. The *in situ* reproduction of practices (Stones, 2005) can be researched by using ethnographic

methods for deciphering the codes of situated practices, for carefully describing the objects involved and their particular uses. Qualitative methods are indispensable when seeking to describe the emotions at stake, the shifting of performances from front-stage to back-stage and vice versa, and for investigating the things being taken for granted or made into objects of reflection and discussion.

To refer to all the detailed, close-up, engaged ways of looking at and diving in to situated performances, Nicolini (2012) has suggested the metaphor of 'zooming in' on social practices. Zooming in is about taking a closer look, and taking a closer look means first of all getting engaged, becoming submerged in the practices and experiencing first-hand what it is like to be a participant to the practice. The best way to dive into kitchen practices is to participate in doing the cooking or dish-washing (Martens, 2012). By using different forms of participating and participatory observation, the researcher develops a feel for the game, a first-hand experience of the doings and sayings at stake. He or she is able to record in detail the physical aspects of local context, the objects and material elements involved and the codes of the practices as enacted by the participants of the practice. Methods developed by ethno-methodologists can be used to crack the code, for example by creating circumstances that go against the rules of the practices.

A well-known method for getting to know the rules and teleo-affective structures of the practices is to enter into the practice as a novice. Recognized newcomers to the practice are often granted the right to experiment, to ask basic or stupid questions, to find out about the expected doings and sayings, to learn how activities and projects are being carried out, and what kind of power relations are at stake. Their position of 'legitimate peripheral participators' (Nicolini, 2012; Lave and Wenger, 1991) makes things possible that otherwise would be regarded as being out of order.

Another method or circumstance would be to observe and participate in the temporary breakdown of routines and the ensuing attempts of normalization or re-routinization. Goffman's discussion of the many ways in which the interaction order can be endangered by the behaviour of its participants, is required reading for all practice-oriented researchers (Goffman, 1967). When routines are disrupted, doings and sayings which are normally taken for granted can become an object of reflection from the side of participants, which may result in a discussion of the key characteristics of the practice among the participants (Spaargaren *et al.*, 2013). De-routinization does not have to be triggered by human agents but can result from breakdowns in technologies and infrastructures involved in the reproduction of practices as well: the energy system going down and the city being flooded as the result of extreme rainfall are examples here.

Finally, an important form of practice research with the lens zoomed-in is to closely follow the trajectory or the life of a specific social practice. By studying the 'life of practices' (Shove *et al.*, 2012), researchers try to find out how and when a practice emerged, how it developed, matured, aged and perhaps disappeared or dissolved into other practices. It can be investigated how specific

practices 'travel' through time-space and with what other kind of practices they tend to team up, or not. Historicizing social practices provides knowledge about the robustness or resilience of the practice, about the contextual conditions under which it prospers and about the ways in which particular emotions can become attached or detached from the practice (Wertheim-Heck and Spaargaren, 2015).

It is difficult to image practice-based research in which the lens is not at any one time being brought into the zoomed-in position. This is because of the assumption of practice theories that performances, bodily presence, emotions, practical intelligibilities and more in general forms of 'social integration' are the heart of the matter. Without 'thick' analyses of the life of situated practices, no valid sociological knowledge on the constitution of social practices is possible. In the process of reproduction, social practices create meanings, symbols, ways of using things, emotions, projects and programmes to be further developed. Social practices are at the origin of the social and studying them in detail informs researchers about the ways things are.

Practice research with the lens in the zoomed-out position: connectivity and dynamic patterning

While most practice theorists still would agree upon the primacy of zoomed-in methodologies and the kind of knowledge they generate, there has recently emerged a debate on the limitations and potential weaknesses of just doing analyses of situated practices. Especially when the interest is about understanding and explaining wider processes of social change, is it recognized that the zoomed-in methods, data and interpretations need to be complemented with questions, data and methodologies that require the practice-lens being put in the zoomed-out modality. Or more correctly formulated, when researching social change, researchers inspired by practice theories are advised to use their analytical lens alternately in a zoomed-in and zoomed-out position. What kind of questions guide practice inspired research that looks at the plenum in the zoomed-out modality? What kind of methods are being used and what kind of knowledge is expected to result from this? When searching for answers to these questions, there are at least three topics we think need to be considered: connectivity between social practices, dynamic patterning within the plenum and identifying promising entry points for ensuing research in the zoomed-in modality.

Connectivity has been discussed already in terms of social practices hanging together in practice-arrangement bundles of smaller or larger size. The bindings between practices can be shown to be of different kinds, more or less enduring, in some cases place-specific and organized via one or more elements of the practices. At the moment, a number of authors in the field of practice theories are busy elaborating the theme of connectivity between practices, thereby suggesting new concepts to be added to the vocabulary of practice theories (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Warde, 2013; Kuijer, 2013; Lamers and Pashkevich, 2015). Next to the hanging together via shared rules, values, emotions, material objects, competences or teleo-affective

structures, practices can also be connected via groups of human agents with similar lifestyles (Giddens, 1991) or a corresponding habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979). When discussing the role of human actors as 'bodily intersections' of social practices, it would be interesting to investigate how people reflect upon the status of the practices they are involved in. As Elder-Vass (2012) has suggested in relation to norm circles, it could perhaps be interesting to investigate the (causal) power of practices and practice-arrangement bundles as perceived by and acted upon from the side of the practitioners. How widely dispersed in time-space do practitioners think the practice-arrangement bundles to be? Is 'it' being done in China and Brazil as well, and has it been around for a long time already? Think about Nordic walking, or playing soccer or growing food at your rooftop in the city. The size of the 'imagined practice-arrangement bundle' influences the enactment of the practitioners, their assessment of the competences and the emotional energy they might derive from doing it. When entering into this kind of research, we discuss connectivity not just in terms of practices being interconnected but as well in terms of being enacted as power relation (see Chapter 10).

Dynamic patterning is about the ways in which practice-arrangement bundles develop over time. Without going into detail on the kind of patterns to be discerned and the kind of dynamics at play, we think there is a common ground for research on social change between practice theories on the one hand and transition theories on the other. Transition studies have identified pathways of change based on historical research. Next to transitions being successful or failing, a number of patterns have been identified that vary with respect to their pace of change and overall impact on the plenum. Thus, in terms of transition theory, 'substitution' and 'transformation' indicate changes in the overall configuration of practices that are less profound, spectacular and visible as compared with 'reconfiguration' and 'de- and re-alignment' (Grin *et al.*, 2010). Departing from a practice theory perspective, Schatzki has recently suggested a number of concepts that very much resemble these forms of dynamic patterning. Practice-arrangement bundles can diffuse, collide, collapse, co-evolve, be transformed or de-aligned, etcetera. (Schatzki, forthcoming). In the concluding chapter we will return to this issue of how to conceptualize social change within the flat ontology of practice theories. There, we are going to make a case for thinking about and analysing dynamic patterning without losing sight of human agency and subjectivity. Patterns are not just the result of technological innovations diffusing through the plenum. Patterns are made, constructed, attempted and achieved by groups of actors using their powers to achieve certain ends.

The helicopter-view that comes along with the zoomed-out modality allows for the identification of promising spots to be investigated in the next round of research with the lens zooming in on particular practices or practice-arrangement bundles. When particular connections between practices are rare or abundant, they might deserve a next round of investigation. When bundles of practices seem to break down into smaller bundles at particular sites or moments, this asks for zooming in and finding out what causes the breakdown or split. Only when

alternating the lens between the zoomed-in and the zoomed-out modality, a rich account of social change in the plenum of practices can be realized. And this is what explains the structure of the book as discussed in the next section.

Outline of the book

The book is organized in three Parts and 12 Chapters. The first part discusses theoretical and methodological issues, and includes three chapters in addition to the present introductory chapter. Parts II and III present empirical research conducted with the practice lens alternating between zoomed-in and zoomed-out modalities. The chapters in Part II primarily use the zoomed-in modality while those in Part III represent studies with the lens zoomed-out.

In Chapter 2, Schatzki presents the claim that practice theory as social ontology holds that the realm of the social is entirely laid out on a single level. The chapter discusses the kind of social ontology that is promulgated in practice theories and emphasizes one particular feature of this ontology, namely, its 'flat' character. The chapter discusses his claim in relation to other social theories that advance flat social ontologies, as well as theories that proclaim a multi-level perspective (transition theory). Schatzki concludes that practice theory presents a unique flat ontology that has significant implications for investigation and explanation.

In Chapter 3, Schmidt addresses the praxeological implications of conducting research based on practice theory, or the methodology and methods of the practice of doing research on practices. Using the empirical example of academic writing, the chapter proposes a procedure of praxeologizing the objects of inquiry. The focus is on the methodological tasks and empirical challenges, the epistemological aspects, and the conceptual tool kit for the task of praxeologizing. Schmidt argues for a double hermeneutic of understanding social phenomenon as being members' work, that is, as being naturally organized and accomplished by the participants (including the researcher).

In Chapter 4, Weenink and Spaargaren review the role of human agency and power in practice theory and argue for the relevance of emotion in the analysis of social change in (networks of) practices. Their exploration of the concepts of emotions, emotional agency and emotional energy is framed in relation to the practice theory family while using insights from the sociology of emotions and Randall Collins' (2004) theory of Interaction Rituals. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of power, agency and social change, informed by Manuel Castells' concept of power in network society.

Part II: Zooming in on practices as performances

The second part contains five empirical chapters which have the lens 'zoomed in', focusing on understanding situated practices of such diverse nature as youth violence, home divestment, playing tennis and the role of good care in complex hospital practices. Here the concepts of shared understandings, portfolios of

skills, experiences and competences, distributed agency, transformative capacity, lifestyles, power in interaction, teleo-affective structures, learning and being participants in practices are all shown to contribute in a particular way to understanding practice as performance, e.g. to the reproduction and change of situated, individual practices by knowledgeable and capable human agents.

In Chapter 5 Glover outlines and analyses practices of material divestment for household durable objects. Based on a series of interviews with households in Australia and the Netherlands, participant observation, and a review of documentation, the chapter yields three identifiable sets of practices for material divestment, i.e. making do, passing on and selling. Glover shows that a practice approach captures the emotional and procedural rationales of digitally mediated forms of divestment as much as analogue, and that innovations in divestment practice are not occurring in isolation, since they reflect more widespread innovations in practices, such as the proliferation of internet connectivity, e-commerce, and digital photography.

In Chapter 6, Weenink analyses actual interactions in youth street violence, as interactions are generally overlooked in the violence literature that focuses on features of perpetrators, victims or neighbourhoods to assess the likelihood for violence to occur. Based on an analysis of judicial files, this chapter discusses how and why violence can be regarded as a practice in which people mutually attune their actions toward a shared goal, how these teleological actions are related to material arrangements, and what can be learnt from approaching violence in this way. The chapter also attempts to evaluate how a practice approach may contribute to the study of violence compared with other perspectives that give analytical priority to the situation rather than to individuals or institutions, such as interactionist and micro-sociological approaches.

In Chapter 7, Vosman, Den Bakker and Weenink argue that passibility (Ricoeur's passibilité) is crucial to understand the role of patients in care practices: to be subjected to what comes and what that brings about in the form of inner movements, experiences and emotions. While passibility is often not manifestly open to the immediate gaze, its latency can be turned into a focus of attention. The authors identify two leads in this respect. The first is by position-taking, an awareness of stepping to another position, to the patients as co-actors and to get in touch with passibility as it acts. The second is to acknowledge that suffering, undergoing, is a crucial part of the practice of care.

In Chapter 8, van der Poel and Bakker address the role of material elements in the constitution of practices, using tennis as a case study. Based on a large-scale survey among Dutch tennis players, the authors analyse how various surface types make a difference in the performance of tennis as a practice. The authors claim that a conceptual distinction between various kinds of material arrangements has to be made, as changing court surfaces or tennis rackets require a different kind of agency. The chapter therefore also discusses the practice of managing tennis facilities and how outcomes of this practice have an affect in the practice of playing tennis.

Part III: Zooming out on practices as embedded entities

In the third part of the book the emphasis shifts by presenting three chapters written while using the zoomed-in and zoomed-out modus more interchangeably. The social practices of urban gardening, conservation tourism and sustainable forestry are discussed both for their contents and performances as well as for being embedded in wider nexuses, networks or chains of practices. These chapters focus on understanding the dynamics of change in practices that originate from the fact that practices are part of complexes or bundles of practices. Understanding the kind of relationships or 'bindings' that exist in time and space between practices as entities is shown to be of particular relevance for understanding institutional changes in contemporary societies. Here it is argued that, especially for the practice bundles or complexes that are more extended in time and space, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is of special relevance.

In Chapter 9, Dobernig, Veen and Oosterveer demonstrate that the comparative study of the emergence, persistence and disappearance of practices is a way to understand social change from the perspective of practice theory. By comparing two urban food production projects in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and New York, the United States, the chapter asks what we mean by urban food growing as a practice, and how this practice relates to other relevant social practices already in existence and unfolding in urban spatial contexts. By developing a three-step analysis of synchronic comparison, diachronic comparison and tracing the embedding of the practice in wider networks of practices, the chapter argues that particularly the New York case represents a really new, distinct social practice of urban food growing with new combinations of elements or components, a specific historical trajectory and a unique set of relationships with other sustainability practices in urban space.

In Chapter 10, Lamers and Van der Duim conceptualize conservation tourism partnerships as deliberate attempts to create connections between existing practices and material arrangements to tackle societal challenges. The empirical setting of this study are the tourism conservation enterprises developed and implemented by the African Wildlife Foundation in various Eastern African countries. Based on a comparison of two cases in Kenya, the authors argue that, and examine how, tourism conservation enterprises emerge out of connections between three existing practices: conservation practices of NGOs, livelihood practices (pastoralism) of local communities and business venturing practices of tourism entrepreneurs. These three constituting practices hang together through a new hybrid nexus of practices, so called connecting practices, such as the brokering of the partnership, the funding and building of a lodge, the zoning of land, the communication at trust meetings and the sharing of benefits.

In Chapter 11, Arts, Kleinschmit and Pülzl argue that the way forests are being governed and managed in many countries and sites around the world has

been influenced by discourses and practices of sustainable forest management, decentralized forest management and participatory forest management. Contrary to dominant hierarchical perspectives (regime theory or international political economy), this chapter advocates a 'flat ontology' by analysing how ideas, norms and rules travel through 'glocal' networks that bind practices at a world-wide scale. The authors show that global discourses on National Forest Programmes and Participatory Forestry Management have diffused in tailor-made ways to various sites around the world.

In the final chapter, we make up the balance of the book and present a number of key findings that are relevant in the light of the two main aims of the book as identified above. Also, we consider the future research agenda of practice theories and the kind of theoretical and methodological challenges which have to be confronted in order for practice-based research to further develop into a recognized and valued strand of social science.

Note

1 Both the concept of 'episodic transformation' and 'transitions' are used to discuss longer-term and wider processes of change in societies, taking place in specific time-spaces, and characterized by a certain direction or telos. Think about the industrial revolution or the emergence of automobility.

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