

Mol meets Knorr Cetina or:

Dealing with the multiplicity of theories of practice¹

Stefan Laube & Katja Schönian

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Comments welcome.

Contact:

Stefan Laube

IFK Junior Fellow
IFK Internationales Forschungszentrum
Kulturwissenschaften, Vienna
email: laube@ifk.ac.at
<http://www.ifk.ac.at>

PhD Student
Department for Sociology
University of Constance, Germany
email: stefan.laube@uni-konstanz.de

Katja Schönian

PhD Scholar
Department of Sociology
Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS),
Vienna
email: schoenian@ihs.ac.at
www.ihs.ac.at

PhD Student
Faculty of Social and Cultural Sciences
European University Viadrina,
Frankfurt/Oder, Germany
www.katjaschoenian.org

1.

A distinguishing feature of practice theories is the variety of backgrounds informing different concepts and understandings. Indeed, it is practice theories, not practice theory. While this characteristic is widely recognized (Reckwitz 2002: 244; Knorr Cetina 1997: 138; Turner 1994), it is quite unclear what it might implicate for doing empirical research. With respect to this question, our paper argues that the multiplicity of practice theories is not a restriction, but a rich resource.²

We develop our argument in two steps. At first, our paper imagines a meeting between two popular characters in the field – Karin Knorr Cetina and Annemarie Mol. The reason for this fiction is twofold: It serves as a starting point for our discussion. In addition, we actually enjoyed writing this part! Secondly, however, we will step out of our imagined conversation and ask ourselves what we may learn from this imagined meeting. Here, we turn to our empirical studies: In Katja's case these are work practices around the application and uses of intranet software, in Stefan's case practices of financial trading. While doing so, we want to illustrate how these different concepts helped us approaching our research sites. Against this background, we finally suggest considering practice theories as analytical monocles; that is, artefacts helping the researcher to assemble the observability of the phenomenon he or she studies.

2.

Our anticipated meeting envisions Annemarie Mol and Karin Knorr Cetina at a round table. There are no further seats available; it is just the two of them. After a few never-ending seconds, Annemarie Mol says: *"I guess we sit here because both of us have*

engaged with the notion of practice. I mean”, she goes on, *“empirical work relying on the notion of practice”*. Karin Knorr Cetina seems to think. After a while she says: *“If you mean both of us have worked with sophisticated concepts of practice, those that do not simply equate practice with performances or habits or routines and, of course, human actors – then I would definitely agree”*.

“Hm,” Mol replies, *“I certainly like the idea of human actors not being the authors of practices. But I would suggest to take this idea one step further”*. *“Hm”*, Karin Knorr says, *“I’m afraid, here we face very soon the differences between our concepts”* she adds with a little smile. *“To me“*, Karin Knorr Cetina goes on, *„it is very much about merging the idea of practice with a certain understanding of culture. Indeed, in my writings I used the term **culture-as-practice** to circumscribe this idea”*. *“Yes”*, Annemarie Mol replies, *“you seem to see something in the notion of culture that adds something to the term practice”*. In fact, here Annemarie Mol refers to Knorr Cetina’s understanding that practices not only encompass materiality and embodied uses; for Knorr Cetina (1999: 9–12; 2007), practices also include a symbolic dimension, that is, meanings enacted by participants. In this view, both dimensions are intertwined and implicate one another.

Now, Karin Knorr Cetina slowly takes off her glasses, leans back, takes a sip from her tiny water bottle and asks: *“So! What do you think about that”*? After a moment of silence Annemarie Mol says: *“To be honest: I think there’s no need to merge the concept of practice with that of culture, whatsoever”*. *“Alright”*, says Knorr Cetina, *“I think I read this objection in your book on the **multiple enactments of atherosclerosis**”*. At this point, Knorr Cetina hints at Mol (2002: 77–78; 82–83) rejecting the notion of

culture for an understanding of practices. Indeed, one may say that in Mol's view the concept of multiple enactments does not need the notion of culture since it already takes into account what the term 'culture' indicates: differences, multiple realities, distinct local circumstances and their differentiating effects.

It is very unlikely that Annemarie Mol and Karin Knorr Cetina stop their discussion at this point. Indeed, they may have just warmed up. However, for the purpose of our talk, we now leave their conversation and ask ourselves another question: What can we learn from our imagined discussion – especially with respect to comparing and connecting different concepts of practice?

3.

To start with, the first thing we can learn from this debate is the fact that both notions of practice are sophisticated in the sense that they do not equate practices with human routines, habits or performances. In both cases practices encompass more than just human participants and their intentions. But the question arises, who or what exactly are the participants of practices?

The second insight we get is that the two notions of practice provide quite different answers to this question. This is because they each construct practices in distinct ways. Thus, the two conceptions implicate different layers or dimensions for the empirical study of practices. The idea of *culture as practice* suggests focusing on the relationship of symbolic and behavioural/material dimensions that characterize a specific culture (e.g. the epistemic culture of high energy physics – Knorr Cetina's example). The notion of *practice as multiple enactments*, on the other hand, focuses much more on

differences and fractions. It investigates how certain objects or entities, like atherosclerosis (Mol 2002) or diabetes (Mol 2008), or even the bush pump in Zimbabwe (Mol and de Laet 2000) are enacted in very heterogeneous ways; enacted across different sites of an organisation or within the Zimbabwean countryside.³

However, we believe there is no need to worry about these conceptual differences that enact practices in very different ways. On the contrary, we think that these differences point to a strength of the so-called practice turn in the social sciences. This strength is the *multiplicity* of analytical perspectives, *a multiplicity that enables the researcher to work back and forth between data and theories in a variety of ways.*⁴

To illuminate this idea we'd like to consider practice theories as a specific type of artefact helping to assemble the observability of the phenomena one studies⁵. This can be illustrated by what we call *the Ruth Gordon way of relating oneself to theories*. Ruth Gordon (1896-1985) was not only a famous actress, but in her early days, she was carrying a monocle. Wearing a monocle, only one eye is enhanced, whereas the other one is not. This enables a perspective informed by the experience of the researcher and simultaneously shaped by a theory. To be clear, the way we understand the monocle does not re-introduce a subject-object distinction nor does it suggest a positivistic understanding of theories as instruments simply 'revealing' or 'disclosing' reality. Instead, we propose to view theories as actively engaged participants in the research process which we highlight through the image of the monocle. However, our point here is that the heterogeneity of practice theories makes them ideal candidates for acting as monocles. As such, they might help the researcher to assemble the observability of practices in various ways: First, different concepts of practice might sensitize for

different focuses and observations when doing fieldwork, thus strategically stimulating the production of data; secondly, they might shape different analytical views helping to look differently at already generated fieldwork data; and thirdly, they might lead to new and possibly more sophisticated questions about the field that is studied.

Please note: The *Ruth Gordon way of relating oneself to theories* differs from other ways of considering practice theories as glasses. First, it differs from what might be termed *the Elton John way of relating oneself to theories*. Here, people choose their glasses in accordance with others' expectations. Wearing glasses becomes, in other words, a matter of impression management. Secondly, our way of approaching practice theories as monocles also differs from what might be termed *the Karl Lagerfeld way of relating oneself to theories*. In fact, coloured glasses can prevent the brightness of the outer world and allow the carrier to hide away, thus bypassing certain interaction principles, for instance not to gaze at strangers. But perhaps most importantly for our present discussion: coloured glasses award a glamorous and mysterious appearance.

Let us explicate our understanding of approaching practice theories as monocles by at least briefly referring to our own research projects. In what respect did the different theories and especially the concept of *culture as practice*, on the one hand, and the *praxiography of multiple enactments*, on the other hand, help us in doing our research?

Stefan's project investigates practices of financial trading; his fieldwork in financial trading rooms faced him with a series of puzzles. One puzzle was about the vocabulary of traders, treating the market as a living being. In fact, the market was referred to as being "nervous", "crazy" and "dangerous" or even "dead". Was this just a metaphorical

way of talking about the market or is there more to it? Stefan thought quite a while about this puzzle, trying to relate to several theoretical approaches; finally he got help making sense of this puzzle through the *culture-as-practice-monocle*. This monocle lead him to consider the ways in which the meanings enacted by traders implicate and relate to specific material and behavioural elements. Indeed, it opens up new perspectives to analyse trading practices, for instance, how traders observe the market by engaging in what Stefan calls “alert crying”. “Alert crying” refers to traders observing a “nervous” and potentially “dangerous” market by uttering and listening to certain speech sounds in the trading room.

In Katja’s case the exchange between theory and empirical fieldwork is a different one. Her research site is the global application of intranet software in today’s so-called ‘knowledge societies’. The initial attitude, to follow an object within different sites of an organisation stems from Mol’s book on atherosclerosis; it introduced her to the fluidity of ‘an object’. However, the possibilities and impossibilities of her fieldwork – for instance, it turned out she is less able to generate observational data than expected – made her turn to the variety of practice-theoretic approaches once more. To keep a long story short: at present her work is inspired and sensitised, obviously, by the idea that objects are enacted in multiple ways; moreover, it also relates to an understanding of the intranet as a *centre* or rather as a *carrier* of specific meanings as well as bodily competences. In addition, the intranet carries practices which are not just existent in one place but globally present. This is where the notion of practices and their journey across time and space comes into play. However, this is not an arbitrary potpourri or mixture of combining these different approaches, but of working back and forth between theory and empirical research.

4.

To conclude: Preparing this paper made us realise once more that no theory entirely “covers”, so to say, the fields we study. But this is neither trivial nor tragic. Rather, it is a rich resource because it informs and configures our empirical research- not in a universal, but in multiple ways.

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Endnotes:

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² In general, our argument does not classify theories of practice in relation to the variety of social or cultural theories in the social sciences (Reckwitz 2002). Instead, we would like to advocate another way of approaching them, that is, to consider them as a kind of research attitude rather than a set of theories (see also Schmidt 2012).

³ Against the background of these differences (and a few similarities), we want to make a claim which is at this stage of our work in progress much more a suspicion. But we still believe it is worth investigating. This suspicion stems from a sociology of knowledge point of view, sensitizing a contextual and praxeological view of engaging with the situatedness of our two concepts of practice. That is, we think that the difference of these concepts is not an arbitrary result of the cognitive work done by the two characters of our imagined meeting. Rather, we suspect that they are related and possibly implicated by other differences apparent in the work of these two scholars, in fact differences that concern their preferred settings for field studies, how they ethnographically construct these settings, the ways of dealing with the complexities and differences in these settings and, finally, their attitude towards social theory in general (“Gesellschaftstheorie”). Although we cannot back up this suspicion at the present stage of our work, we believe this endeavour would be a productive way to contribute to the task of comparing and connecting concepts of practice.

⁴ Isn't this true for any kind of theory? Doesn't any social theory make an equally good analytical monocle? Yes and no. Of course, you can take another type of theory, for instance Luhmann's system theory, but it won't work so well as an analytical monocle in the way many theories of practice do. This is because practice theories do not seek for universal generalisations as other theories in the social sciences do. Instead, they seek for context-specific and situated generalisations; in fact, practice theories are theoretical concepts that serve as analytical monocles in order to investigate other empirical research sites, without claiming to know in advance how specific practices may operate. In short: practice theories are better suited to act as analytical monocles than other kind of theories because of their limited and focused range of generalisation.

⁵ For our discussion we adapted the term “Theorien als Seehilfe” by Thomas Scheffer (2002: 370).