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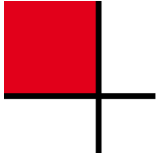
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A posthumanist approach to practice and knowledge

Laura Lucia Parolin

review of

Gherardi, S. (2019) *How to conduct a practice-based study: Problems and methods. Second edition.* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. (302 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78897-355-7 (hbk), eISBN: 978-1-78897-356-4 (ebk)).

Introduction

In an increasingly vibrant research landscape, where practice studies has become a well-established stream of research in management and organization (Nicolini, 2012; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017), it is no surprise to see a second edition of this influential book. Considering the significance of Gherardi's contribution, I focus primarily on the similarities and differences between the first and second editions, showing how the latter offers a view of the state of the art of Practice Approach within the recent debate in social studies. This new edition, organized along the same lines as the original structure, focuses on the pillars of her practice-based approach, namely: situatedness, knowing in practice, embodied and aesthetic knowing, technological, normative, discursive and social infrastructures. In addition, however, it includes new insights that underscore the fine-grained nuances that coalesce under the umbrella of practice studies in management and

organization. More broadly, Gherardi distinguishes between humanistic approaches to practice that focus on humans, and their practices and posthumanist approaches that, instead, focus on the very process of connecting, in which all mobilized elements achieve agency through their connections. In my view, this is the main innovation of this second edition. Indeed, the text explicitly connects with the broader debate in the social sciences about the centrality of humans, taking sides with relational materialism (Law, 1994) and other posthumanist perspectives (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019). I will now briefly outline the general structure and content of the book, before looking in greater detail at the significant new content.

Readers familiar with the first edition will remember a peculiarity of that volume was that it not only offered excerpts and extracts of research to introduce the practice-based approach but also showed how such approach enabled empirical analysis. Indeed, one of the main features of the first edition was to introduce the practice studies of working, learning and organizing, whilst at the same time arguing for their implication in undertaking empirical research. This remains central to a book whose title promises to explain how to practice empirical research using this approach. This should not be confused with offering a simple recipe that provides step by step instructions that anyone can easily follow. Rather, it offers a composite view of the practice(s) of research the approach enables. The book offers a sophisticated entry point to the entanglements that hold together theoretical reflections about practices and the multiplicity of ways of doing empirical research on work practices. In the introduction, Gherardi stresses how the act of embracing a practice-based approach means to dispense with questions of ontology (what practice is) in favour of questions about performativity (what practice does), suggesting that reflections on how we do empirical research is an epistemological process about how 'things' are made to matter, and how epistemological relations make 'things' acquire a situated position.

In the opening chapter, Gherardi immediately directs the reader to the core of her concept, showing how practice can be investigated as the spatial-temporal accomplishment with specific tools, discourses, technologies and rules. It emerges with a definition of practices as modes of action and knowledge that characterize a new strand of social studies on working and organizing called

‘practice-based studies’ or ‘studies of knowing in practice’. The use of both labels is not casual. *Contra* other practice scholars, Gherardi’s conceptualization of practice is based on the consideration of knowing as a situated activity (Gherardi, 2000). This conceptualization is the root of what has been defined as a practice-view on organizational knowing and learning (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), and grounds her view in a critique of the rationality of social action. According to Gherardi, practising is ‘knowing how’ and knowing ‘what next’ to contribute to ongoing situated working practice. Thus, even when performed by a single social actor, practice is always something more than activities or courses of action as a practice is socially sustained by a normative base (ethical, affective and aesthetic) and continually reproduced and/or contested within the community, which sustains it.

Chapter two extends this interpretation of practice as collectively knowledgeable doing. Mobilizing examples mostly from ethnomethodological studies of coordination centres, the chapter shows how coordination is obtained through different kinds of participation and common orientation. In so doing, Gherardi shows how activities that deploy the collective knowledgeable accomplishment of a practice can be accounted for. The examples, taken together with reference to Hutching’s work, and an example of teleconsultation, illustrate the concept of the workspace as relationally enacted and introduce the notion that practising is a performance in an equipped environment (see also Chapter four). These strands of research contribute to the project of overcoming the ‘classical’ concept of ‘task’ (individual task) that is argued to be inappropriate in describing how people work in complex and irregular processes. From this vantage point, the conception of work as a competent performance, which mobilizes relevant resources from the social and physical environment, is developed. Thus, practising should be read as the ongoing accomplishment achieved through collective knowledgeable doing.

To better explain the need to study work practices empirically, Chapter three is focused on studying knowledge as a practical phenomenon. Gherardi argues that practice studies collaborate in an alternative way of conceptualizing knowledge that differs from common ways of reading it as mental and cognitive phenomena. This view allows for the consideration of knowledge

that is not only embedded in the practise of a practice but also one that is embodied in knowledgeable bodies that participate in it. It is here that Gherardi discloses her contiguity with both aesthetic approaches to organization – based on phenomenological grounds – as well as organizational symbolism. This is not by chance, as they are among the most relevant *loci* where the critique of the rationalist paradigm within organization studies has emerged. Gherardi mobilizes these approaches to address how bodies and senses are used in work practices, highlighting how practices cannot be meaningfully reduced to their activities. Indeed, practices are also composed by pathos, involvement, passion and meaning of doing in relation to the world. Here Gherardi is also opening further considerations of how practice theory connects with affect theory (Massumi, 1995) and its uses in recent management and organization literature (Gherardi, 2017). The examples of research illustrated in this chapter show how professional competence emerges from educating senses to develop a shared aesthetic judgement within a particular practice. Abilities, then, commonly attributed to talent (and thus considered innate), are instead conceptualized as the effect of social practices, on the one hand, and a collective process of learning and knowing-in-practice, on the other.

The relational epistemology of Gherardi's approach is even more evident when she maintains that practices must be conceptualized as sociomaterial phenomena. The fourth chapter underlines how all practices are necessarily sociomaterial because the social world and materiality are strictly relationally entangled. In recognizing that her epistemology 'does not distinguish between the production of knowledge and construction of the object of knowledge' (82), she positions her approach within agential realism (Barad, 2007). Agential realism is ontologically opposed to considering the material and the social as separate issues, as Scott and Orlikowski (2013) put it, 'agential realism is a break with the dichotomy established by naïve realism and social constructivism, both of which retain commitments to separatism and representationalism' (Scott and Orlikowski, 2013: 78). In so doing, Gherardi explicitly collocates her proposal as part of a broader conversation – within posthumanism and relational materialism – that suggests the displacement of the human subject as the central seat of agency, and the recognition of the social as material, and the material as social. Indeed, for

Gherardi, the epistemology of practice is essentially a posthumanist project that decentralizes the human actor and reconfigures the concept of agency within sociomaterial practices. I would argue that this elucidation is the main innovation in this edition. Moreover, Gherardi clarifies how practice conceptualized as epistemology differs from other practice theories that consider practice itself as the object of inquiry.

In the following two chapters, Gherardi takes up some key themes of practice-based studies covered in the first edition. Chapter five is dedicated to discussing the relationship between practices and the normative infrastructure. In this regard, the focus is primarily on how practitioners convert norms into a resource for action. This approach highlights how rules (and protocols) acquire meaning through the shared experience of the practitioners, and they often require additional ‘invisible work’ to become practically usable. Next is a focus on discursive practices and language as mediator. In this sense, practicing is also conceived as ‘doing’ and ‘knowing how to do’, with words, and so concomitantly it should be analyzed as a ‘discursive practice’ that is normatively sustained by a community and learned and performed as part of practitioners’ competence. This practice approach allows for the exploration of expertise and professional competence as it is deployed in discursive practices, showing both the knowledge embedded in meaningful interactions and the relevance of such expertise for the nexus of practices (Parolin, 2020).

Chapter seven constitutes a second important novelty in this edition: a focus on the socially sustained and contested aspect of practices. By maintaining that one way of practising is sustained and contested by the practitioners through discussion over aesthetic, ethical and affective judgments, Gherardi proposes original ways to account for these discussions. Looking at practices as matters of concern and matters of care (Mol et al., 2015), as opposed to matters of fact, she highlights the collective attachment of practitioners to the object of practice and shows the plurality and situatedness of judgements on what constitutes a good practice. In her proposal, attachment is expressed and sustained by four sources: situated aesthetic judgment in the form of taste-making (Hennion, 2007); ethics as practice; ordinary affect; and formativeness. Here Gherardi tries to connect the traditions of aesthetics to organization and management studies (Cook and Yanow, 1993; Martin, 2002;

Strati, 1998, 2000) with relational approaches like Hennion's (1997), Mol's (2008) and Massumi's (1995).

The innovations in this second edition continue through the next chapter, which focuses on practices' interdependencies as the texture of practices, explicitly framing the epistemology of practice as a posthuman project showing how practices are connected with, and anchored to, other practices. The introduction of the concept of *agencements*, intended as 'being in connection with' by Deleuze and Guattari, arguably overcomes the creaking structure/agency dichotomy by directing attention to the process of linking heterogeneous elements in 'an open-ended process' (182). Similar to DeLanda (2016), Gherardi suggests avoiding a focus on the final status of the sociomaterial assemblage, stressing instead the pertinence of the process of emergence. In this respect, Gherardi draws the readers' attention to a consideration of becoming, reminding us that organizational phenomena do not have to be considered entities, but rather unfolding processes. In doing so, she is contributing to the line of enquiry that regards organization less as a noun and more as a verb (Law, 1994).

If the previous edition was focused on establishing a coherent framework of practice-based studies and illustrating how to use it in empirical research, then this edition has an even more ambitious goal. It aims to clarify the location of this (particular) practice approach within recent debates in social and organization studies. In this new edition, the concept of 'texture of practices' is, thus, enriched by the two concepts of *agencements* and becoming considered as part of the same vocabulary 'that with slightly different nuances refers to territorialization, temporality and processes of achieving agency' (184). Gherardi explains her methodological suggestion to follow the practices as a movement up and down on the axis that connects the institutional order to the individual-in-situation. In this section, she also introduces her spiral case study design as a research method for mapping a texture of practices.

In Chapter nine, titled 'Tricks of the Trade', Gherardi furnishes the reader with an overview of the different methods used in practice-based research. Significantly, she highlights the performativity of the researcher's practices, suggesting how (and how not) to practise practice theory, which helps to produce the realities that it describes. It follows then, that her suggestion is

to strive for a ‘more-than-representational’ language that, ‘is a search for the expression of the elusive knowledge embedded and embodied in practising, their enactments and affectivity, instead of just their representation as “true phenomena”’ (224).

Gherardi articulates some crucial claims to conclude the book. Unambiguous, she explicitly declares that she is theorizing a posthuman practice approach, and it is this that constitutes the core and innovative character of the second edition of the book. In this respect, she is not simply explaining ‘how to conduct a practice study’, but explicitly setting out what the ontological consequences of adopting this approach are, and how the approach itself relates to recent debates in organization and social science. To frame practice-based studies in the conversation around posthumanism means to rethink the subject/object divide, and consequently, the paradigms that have nurtured them. Indeed, while these approaches focus on the human subject and human agency in the world, a posthumanist approach to practice focuses on the *relations* from which the subject/object emerges. Here, Gherardi distinguishes her approach from practice approaches that focus on human actions (i.e. *a la* Bourdieu).

At the core of Gherardi’s posthuman theoretical framework on practice are three conceptual pillars: *agencements*; formativeness; and affect. As noted above, the concept of *agencements* connects Gherardi’s proposal to Deleuzian and Guattarian philosophy, describing practice as a ‘heuristic move that de-territorializes and re-territorializes the unfolding flow of practising’. In her proposal, practising is conceptualized as a rhizomatic movement that, through *agencements*, creates and dissolves connections without any pre-defined order. This sense of movement also characterizes the concept of formativeness. Drawing on Pareyson’s philosophy (Pareyson, 1954), formativeness is a concept that connects practice with creativity and learning, and ‘denotes “a doing” such that while it does, it invents the way of doing’ (241). The knowing process becomes a material and formative process that progresses toward a final result based on attempting, correcting and re-doing. With this concept, Gherardi promises to grasp the co-penetration between production and invention while focusing on relationships where the subject/object emerges. Beyond Gherardi’s specific concept (formativeness) to

promote it,¹ I genuinely believe this to be a promising line of inquiry, one that could contribute to a renewed centrality of learning and knowing in organizational and management studies – a concept of learning and knowing that exclusively focuses neither on intentional learning, nor on human actors.

Finally, Gherardi underlines the importance of the concept of affect from Massumi's (1995) conceptualization, as the ability to affect and be affected. Suggesting a dialogue between turn to practice and turn to affect (Gherardi, 2017), she proposes to consider the body of the researcher as the material presence of a knowing subject in the encounters with other knowledgeable beings within the epistemic process.

As it should be clear, this second edition is less a restatement and more of a new challenge to organizational scholars in several ways. Methodological and theoretical challenges arise from the conceptualization of organizational phenomena as unfolding processes, whose characteristics are described throughout the chapters. Other challenges derive from being able to follow, as well as to participate and narrate, the relationality that constitutes the epistemic practice of conducting a posthuman practice study. In every sense, this book provides an occasion to seriously consider relational epistemology in organizational research.

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¹ Mattozzi and Parolin (2021) arrive to similar findings using ANT and highlighting the emergence of human and non-human bodies as a continuous process of transformation (instauration).

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