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Silvia Gherardi

How to Conduct a Practice-based Study: Problems and Methods. 2nd Edition, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2019, pp. 295

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As a renowned scholar within organization studies, Silvia Gherardi needs little introduction. Spanning topics such as work, organizational learning, sociomaterial practices, and more recently, affectivity, Gherardi’s work is generally known for its ability to introduce and reinforce insightful new perspectives in a timely manner. Most prominently, Gherardi’s work has been influential in establishing practice-based thinking around the same time that the notion of a ‘turn to practice’ gained traction. It is thus fitting that the latest edition of her book *How to conduct a practice-based study* manages to reflect much of the range of her and her colleagues research with specific attention to practice.

In so far as the book covers research, it more importantly covers the process of doing research. The book is not a standard book on methods but one that engages with giving some idea of how phenomena can be conceptualized in a practice-based manner and in presenting stories of how practice-based studies are possible. Consequently, the book is not a summary of research findings or a step-by-step guide on how research is done. While possibly confusing at first for those who might want an easy read on what they should be doing in research, the narrative approach

makes for an excellent run-through of the actual challenges of doing practice-based research.

Given the scholarship of Gherardi, the book can be assumed to be primarily intended for audiences in organization studies. However, it is fair to state that the book is relevant to other audiences. Not only is this notable in the inspirations Gherardi draws from, e.g. microsociology, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and feminist theory, but also the themes covered in the book. Next, I give a short summary of each chapter to clarify the main themes of the book.

In Chapter 1, the book posits a general position of practices as interesting units of study and a means to re-conceptualize traditional understandings of the social. This position is based upon Gherardi's reading of microsociology, i.e. ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology, i.e. Schütz and Merleau-Ponty. Drawing on these insights the book lifts the embodied character of practical knowledge, an important staple of Gherardi's theory of practice. Moreover, it positions such knowledge as essentially collective and situated. Practice is not individual doing but collective knowledgeable doing that happens somewhere.

The chapters that follow generally expand upon Gherardi's introductory definition of practices and how they can be studied. In Chapter 2, the topic of knowledgeable doing is fleshed out by illustrating its collective nature in workspaces. In Chapter 3, the embodied aspect of practical knowing put forth and illustrated in terms of how aspects of the body, as well as the gendered body, matter in practices. Chapter 4 presents how an interest in practices also can extend beyond the confines of classical sociology. Most notably, Gherardi draws upon insights from science and technology studies and post-humanist feminist theory in suggesting the performativity and agency of materiality.

In Chapter 5, Gherardi discusses the issue of normativity in practices and how rules are instantiated and used as resources for practical doing. Chapter 6 follows this by discussing the discursive nature of practices and its study, channeled in a methodology to grasp language-in-use and communicative practices. Chapter 7 then expands upon why practitioners engage in practices, and the concerns and issues that drive them. To accomplish this, Gherardi connects to wider theoretical discussions on topics ranging from aesthetics, ethics, and affectivity.

As she posits, a study of practice can more justly be defined as always engaging with aesthetic sensibility, ethical dimensions, and the affectivity that suffuses practical doing. Here Gherardi makes her interest clear in bridging the study of practice into domains that could both be seen as enriching it while also being theoretically compatible. With the emphasis on doing research, the book goes beyond others (e.g. Andreas Reckwitz), who made similar conceptual points to discuss more concrete examples of an expanded study of practice. In Chapter 8, Gherardi connects the

notion of studying practices with the issue of studying multiple practices, i.e. nets or complexes of practices. Drawing upon her previous work, Gherardi defines a line of inquiry involved in understanding the relationality of practices in what she refers to as the *texture of practice*. Moreover, she expands upon her earlier definitions of this by connecting with an interest in the assemblages of the sociomaterial world, or as she prefers to regard it: the *agencement* involved in the texture of practice.

The final two chapters stand out from the rest in having different ambitions. Chapter 9 presents some more hands-on advice in terms of techniques in the study of practice. Topics such as doing interviews and ethnographic research are given particular attention. Finally, Chapter 10 lays the foundation for Gherardi's more recent theorizing as a means to tie together the various themes of her research mentioned in the book. Here, at the center, lies an explicit idea of a post-humanist understanding of practice, and more so, a post-humanist practice theory. This chapter goes beyond Chapter 4 in discussing the conceptual implications of such theory, while simultaneously making room for all themes covered in the book.

Readers of new materialism will most likely feel a sense of familiarity when approaching the theoretical synthesis of Gherardi. Even though Gherardi draws from social phenomenology and classical microsociology, her doing so is largely accomplished in order for it to be compatible with posthumanist reasoning. This is not particularly surprising for those who have kept tabs on the development of practice-based thinking. Departing from its classical theoretical form in the works of Bourdieu and Giddens, practice scholars have been open towards critiques of humanist thinking in efforts to treat materiality. Given the rise of new technologies, ongoing climate change, and – more recently – pandemics, making an explicit posthumanist point can be seen as warranted for practice scholars to better assess these new challenges methodologically.

In her final chapter, Gherardi states that she is aware that her work draws from multiple traditions that differ in terms of assumptions, lines of inquiry and methods. Nonetheless, she bridges these differences to suggest important commonalities to be gained by framing these perspectives under the umbrella of practice-based studies. The most important among these – given the context of the book – is that practitioners' practices and researchers' practices are to be conceptualized as interlinked. Rather than the pursuit of the study of the 'Other' through some form of distanced, rationalistic inquiry, practice-based scholarship realizes that researchers are not withdrawing from the world when engaging in scholarship but very much engaged with their bodies, affects, non-humans, pursued ends, ethics, and so on.

Having summarized the chapters and the book's central message, a fitting question to ask is whether the new edition of book has anything new to offer for those who have read the first edition. The major differences can be posed as follows: some chapters have been re-structured to

more poignantly present particular themes of practice-based research. In addition, the description of practice theory has been reframed and Gherardi makes a more distinct effort in presenting her own theorizing. These changes are welcome as they make the book and its contents stand out more distinctly and simultaneously be more accessible.

Some things in the book can, however, be critiqued. I must first signal that my impression of the book is colored by my own background in organization studies. I originally read both editions of the book with an explicit interest in practice theories in particular and their implications for organizational scholarship. From this perspective, the book can be posed as providing an introduction to practice thinking, fit for those who might wonder what practice approaches are good for and what they mean for research practice. The ties to organizational scholarship are, however, not particularly prominent. There is no grand effort in mounting a major offense on mainstream organizational theory here from a practice-based perspective. This is not a detriment of the book as such, and perhaps suggests that it is more appealing for a broad readership.

Leaving organization studies aside, the book can also be judged on the basis of its appeal for scholars of practice. For those expecting a book with a focus on practice theory—this book is not immediately for you. In contrast to another popular textbook on practice studies (Nicolini 2012), Gherardi makes no major effort to account for a genealogy of practice theory nor does she make any major effort in defining the family of intellectual inspirations connected to practice theory. While some assessment of the tradition of practice research is present, it mostly is directed towards a short excursion into classic microsociology and the sociology of science. A reader of classical practice theory, e.g. Bourdieu and Giddens, would perhaps also not immediately feel at home with some of the connections drawn. Here, I object to the emphasis on Alfred Schütz phenomenology as a guiding inspiration for practice theory on the basis that it underplays the legacy of Heidegger's philosophy in the theorizing of Bourdieu and Giddens, and more recently: Theodore Schatzki. This objection, however, rests upon a specific understanding of the genealogy of practice thinking; one among others that are not brought forth here.

While one could argue that making a deep dive into theoretical elaboration is not necessary there are a couple of important implications. First, and as stated above, this book does not fully analyze core assumptions of the various theoretical approaches discussed. Secondly, due to the book's nature of being oriented towards the craft of research, the book is less evidently related to later, prominent developments in practice theory (e.g. Schatzki 2019; Shove et al. 2012). When they are mentioned, they are only discussed in superficial manner. While not necessarily a problematic issue, there are parts of Gherardi's text that can be seen as polemic in nature. Indirectly, the book is found in a discussion with alternative accounts of practice that are never properly presented in the book. This

implies that the uninitiated readers are left in the dark concerning the full implications of Gherardi's methodological reasoning. Third, the book also does not deal with some of the critique leveraged against practice theory (Turner 1994). It can, at times, appear to be a text dedicated less to argue in favor for its assumptions and more in line with helping scholars who are already on-board in their research.

These aspects are not necessarily major flaws, and for some readers these are possibly irrelevant concerns. I would go as far as to say that the lack of theoretical emphasis makes this book particularly helpful for scholars of practice. Unlike much discussions on practice theory, Gherardi launches directly into discussions of epistemology – practice as epistemology in her terminology – and in discussions of actually doing research. As much thinking in regards to practice theory has been marshaled in conceptualizations rather than actual empirical elaborations, Gherardi's emphasis is sorely needed.

To conclude, this book is of value for all those interested in pursuing practice-based scholarship empirically. More so, one could claim that the book provides an interesting read for all interested in anecdotes that cover the processes of doing qualitative research. Given its style and the themes covered, the book can be seen as relevant across the social sciences including thus STS.

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