

Silvia Gherardi's influence on practice-based studies and organizational research

Organizational and management qualitative research gained new possibilities with the advent of practice-based studies (PBS), which is strongly oriented towards what I call "Trento's School of Thought" (TST). This comprised a group of researchers gathered in Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics (RUCOLA) forming a movement that introduced aspects such as aesthetics, embodiment and sociomateriality – usually neglected by organization and management scholars – paying special attention to PBS, offering new perspectives in organizational phenomena and influencing research methodologies.

Silvia Gherardi, who developed a post-humanist practice theory, is a former scholar of the PBS movement. Her recent book, *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study: Problems and Methods*, in its second and renewed edition summarizes her theoretical and methodological thoughts in the empirical study of social practices.

She developed her own practice theory and proposed a research design, methodology and methods based on an onto-epistemology of practice that displaces the human subject as the central seat of agency, the one in control of the world, the one from whom intentional actions emanate, thus differentiating it from human-centred practice theories (that study humans *and* their practices). De-centring the subject does not mean removing it, but placing subjects, objects and instruments in an agential and material-discursive environment (see [Moura and Bispo, 2019](#)).

When the "Practice Turn" ([Schatzki, 2001](#)) paved the way to create the "practice scholars" group, at the same time, a special issue of the journal *Organization* ([Gherardi, 2000](#)) opened the debate on practice theories under the heading, "Practice-Based Studies", in the context of organization and management studies. It is obvious that the way in which practice scholars adopt the notion of "practice" in their work varies. My focus in this paper is to introduce Silvia Gherardi's practice theory and its influences on qualitative research.

The term "Practice-Based Studies" is the outcome of the initial effort of some scholars (many of them from Rucola at the University of Trento) trying to set in dialogue their diverse theoretical approaches commonly sharing an interest in understanding organizational phenomena as processual and performative, that is, "as practice". They gathered to discuss organizational phenomena through different theoretical possibilities focussing on collective forms of knowing, doing and organizing ([Gherardi, 2006](#); [Bispo, 2013](#)). The first formal meeting was in 1998 at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in a symposium organized by Davide Nicolini and Dvora Yanow. Further, some of the papers presented in the symposium were published in a special issue of the journal *Organization* in 2000. In 2003, Davide Nicolini, Silvia Gherardi and Dvora Yanow edited a book, *Knowing in Organizations: A Practice-Based Approach*, consolidating the meaning of the term "Practice-Based Studies" in organization ([Bispo, 2013](#)).

The term "Practice-Based Studies" is concerned with the knowledge set enacted by this movement and was highly influenced by Trento's scholars, especially Silvia Gherardi, Davide Nicolini, Antonio Strati and Attila Bruni. The most important contributions from TST to PBS



are (1) focus on the non-human agency, (2) organizational aesthetics and philosophy and (3) focus on the body and embodied knowing.

This brief story mentioned above helps us understand some of the subtle differences between the terms “Practice-Based Studies” and “Practice Theories”. Practice-based studies is an umbrella concept (see [Gherardi, 2006, 2019](#); [Nicolini, 2013](#)) covering many theoretical orientations and focussed on empirical contexts of research. Practice theories are specific theorizations of what constitutes a “practice”. The works of [Bourdieu \(1990\)](#), [Giddens \(1984\)](#), [Schatzki \(1996, 2001\)](#), [Shove et al. \(2012\)](#), [Antonacopoulou \(2015\)](#) and [Gherardi \(2019\)](#) are examples of practice theories. There is, consequently, an empirical interest in assuming practices as units of analysis of organizing; however, this can be attributed to an epistemological reason as well. A renewed interest in the study of practices – besides the traditional theories of practice in sociology – has arisen within the so-called post-epistemologies. The aim of a renewed interest in practice is to go beyond problematic dualisms (action/structure, human/non-human, mind/body), to see practices as a connection-in-action, that is, as an *agencement* of elements (bodies, materialities, discourses and knowledges) which achieve agency by being interconnected.

Silvia Gherardi is interested in how “organizing” takes place, and she introduces the concept of texture of practices to illustrate how a single practice that a researcher has isolated for heuristic reasons is not “a reality in itself”, not a “given in the order of things” (to use Foucault’s phrase), but rather is part of a fabric of connections to other interdependent practices. In this way, the micro/macro distinction is dissolved and a methodology is developed to trace and map the connections between practices. Silvia Gherardi’s new book ([2019](#)) aims to disclose in detail and with many empirical examples how her post-humanist practice theory drives organizational researchers’ methodological practices and their reflexivity. In fact, “the object of research” does not have an ontology in itself, but is constructed differently within different epistemic practices by the people in the field and by the researchers’ choices. The book aims at illustrating the multiplicity and indeterminacy of the object of research based on researchers’ epistemic practices.

The second edition of the book is substantially different from its first edition published in 2012. However, from my perspective, the most relevant contribution of this new version is the careful and in-depth work that reveals to the reader Silvia Gherardi’s post-humanist theory of practice and its influence on researchers’ methodological choices. As [Gherardi \(2019, p. 1\)](#) states in the first line of the introduction, “[t]his book is about the practice of doing practice research. It is conceived as a narrative process that tells stories about PBSS and intends to communicate the multiplicity of ways of doing empirical research on practices”.

The first and the second chapters “Practice as accomplishment” and “Practice as collective knowledgeable doing”, respectively, introduce the basis for understanding knowledge as an activity situated within practices. “Practice” is seen as a collective accomplishment, wherein it may be approached processually as a collective knowledgeable doing. She illustrates how a working practice may be framed as a processual and ongoing accomplishment in which people collectively negotiate its performance in a continuous knowing-in-practice. She draws attention to the workplace as a entanglement of humans and nonhumans, especially with the advent of information and communication technologies. The author uses four examples of co-ordination centres to illustrate how a co-ordination practice is a collective knowledgeable doing of all human and non-human agents that keep “a common orientation, performing ‘presence,’ co-piloting scaffolding learning and knowing in practice, and mobilizing border resources” ([Gherardi, 2019, p. 53](#)).

The third chapter, “Practice as sensible knowing”, highlights the embodied knowledge supported by knowledgeable bodies and gendered bodies. Drawing on an aesthetic perspective, [Gherardi \(2019, p. 78\)](#) says,

embodiment is bidirectional in that the body is sentient and sensible: it sees and is seen, hears and is heard, touches and is touched. Thus, embodiment is neither idea nor matter, neither subject nor object, but both at the same time.

Gherardi (2019) holds that sensible knowledge has not only an individual feature but a collective one as well wherein social practice is situated, seeing, saying and doing.

The fourth chapter, titled “Practice as sociomateriality”, discusses how the sociality of the material and the materiality of the social are entangled in the concept of sociomateriality, but this time not in relation to bodies, as in the previous chapter, rather in relation to technologies, tools and objects. Practices are portrayed as taking place in an equipped environment that facilitates its recursive practising and that becomes “equipped” through improvisational choreography. The message of the chapter is that practice rests on a relational technological infrastructure.

The fifth chapter, “The normative infrastructure of practice”, focusses on how rules are resources for practical activities. It examines what rules “do” in sustaining or hampering a practice, and how practitioners “do” rules by negotiating the ambiguity of rules and dwelling in relays of ordinary prescription informed by attention rules. The normative infrastructuring of a practice is thus illustrated.

In the sixth chapter, “Talking while practising”, Gherardi (2019) opens room for discussion on the role of language and discursive practices in the workplace. Talking while working is a specific practical activity, forming a practice and its institutional environment. Discursive practices are entangled and sociomaterial activities that achieve several goals: creating identity and professional competence, performing mutual understanding, overcoming absence and distance, and building a community by sharing stories. Discursive practices form the discursive infrastructure of a practice.

The seventh chapter, “Practices as socially sustained,” brings up the aesthetics, ethics and affective judgements that sustain a social practice. Practices are facilitated and sustained by a technological, normative and discursive process of infrastructuring that is accountable to what is possible/allowed/appropriated within a practice and what is not. In other words, practices are socially sustained by aesthetic, ethical and affective judgements. Practising may be conceived as a process of knowing that, in doing, the way of doing is invented. It is, therefore, “formativeness” (Gherardi and Perrotta, 2014), a concept that expresses both how practices are changed and how they persist.

Chapter eight, “The texture of practices”, is one of the most important in the book due to its explicit methodological focus. The metaphor of a texture of practices allows the micro/macro dichotomy to be dismantled and the weaving of practices to be followed, tracking their traces in all directions. The chapter introduces the concept of *agencement* to interpret a practice as a process of establishing connections amongst its elements or amongst practices and seeing how agency emerges in time-space horizons. Resorting to the methodology of the spiral case study, Gherardi (2009) illustrates how one practice connects to another and the possibility of investigating and moving in the texture from any point on it. The core methodological aspect of practice-based research is to follow “the practice” and not the people.

In chapters one to eight, the book develops a theoretical framework in which a practice is approached through its processual unfolding and is contained by relational infrastructures (embedded knowing, technological, normative, discursive and social) that maybe analysed when a researcher is interested in exploring practice as an empirical phenomenon.

In chapter nine, “Tricks of the trade”, Gherardi (2019) goes through the methods involved in PBSs drawing on her empirical research experience over the last decades. The important takeaway from the chapter is that methodology can be conceived as bricolage, as experimentation and as a process of transformative knowing. The author focusses on those

“tricks” that, in her experience, work better and illustrates three methods: the interview with the double, the ethnography of the object and affective ethnography. The chapter ends by discussing how most PBSs are conducted with the explicit aim of changing the practices in a participative engagement with the practitioners.

Finally, in chapter ten, “Theorizing a posthumanist practice approach”, Gherardi (2019) presents her philosophical and theoretical influences by presenting her viewpoint on what she understands as a PBS. The author positions herself as post-humanist anchored in feminist philosophy and on the traditions of Science and Technology Studies, actor–network theory and other relational epistemologies. Although she does not explicitly mention it in the chapter, I too consider her to be strongly influenced by ethnomethodology.

One can understand Silvia Gherardi’s way of thinking social practices on reading the book carefully. She has a particular understanding of how organizational phenomena should be investigated, and this has influenced the work of many scholars not only in Italy, but in countries such as Australia, Denmark, Norway and Brazil. Silvia Gherardi is the pioneer of the “Trento’s School of Thought” currently followed by many scholars not only from the field of management and organization studies but from several other disciplines such as education, tourism and technology as well.

Any researcher drawing on Silvia Gherardi’s practice theory to investigate organizational phenomena will be methodologically influenced to assume theory as performative. It means avoiding rigid protocols and putting techniques to work based on theoretical understandings. In Gherardi’s words, a researcher’s posture demands “agencement”, “formativeness” and “affective judgment” to obtain an understanding of the practice under investigation from within. A researcher’s reflexivity paves the way for a flesh-and-blood knowing investigation posture (Bispo and Gherardi, 2019). Gherardi’s contribution to qualitative research may be easily traced through her articles published in the journal *Qualitative Research in Organization and Management*, where one can read about the confluence of the turn to practice and the turn to affect (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018), about shadow organizing as a metaphor for studying organizing as the effect of multiple intra-acting elements and as the locus to ponder over what researchers do to “not-yet data”, that is, when they are not (yet) black-boxed as data, and, at the same time, to ponder on what “not-yet data” do to researchers (Benozzo and Gherardi, 2019). Her interest in post-qualitative research methods can be seen both in the book and in her most recent articles as well.

Silvia Gherardi’s practice theory strongly sustains the need for coherence in the onto-epistemological construction of the “object of research”, the methodology of study and the conclusions viewed through the theoretical lens. Qualitative and organizational researchers would stand to gain immensely from reading Silvia Gherardi’s new book and thinking about research practices outside the box.

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