

## Ceci n'est pas un livre de méthodologie

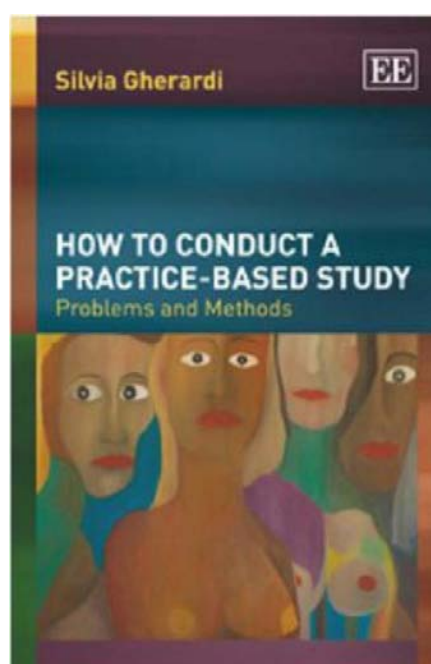
À propos de *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study: Problems and Methods*

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The purpose of the book (Gherardi, 2012) is to present the methodology developed by scholars using the practice-based approach in organization studies. Nevertheless, this is not a book on research methodology in the conventional sense. Its title wants to be ironic since it is not intended to be a handbook of the “how to do it” type. In fact, it is not through a prescriptive and routinized methodology that one can learn how to conduct research on practices. Thus, the book intends to solicit a methodological sensibility, gaining understanding of the types of questions that other authors have posed, how they have sought answers to those questions, what further questions remain and how to set up future search.

In setting and pursuing this objective, I have made a specific methodological choice. It consists in introducing the reader to research which may be considered in a certain sense “classic” within practice-based studies, the purpose being to provide contact with authors and topics that are significant in developing a methodological sensibility. The reader will therefore find numerous examples drawn from empirical research intended to present or to illustrate a concept, a perspective or an experience in the field. In this way, the reader will be introduced to diverse authors who have conducted field research, and he/she may enter in contact with the methodological apparatus evinced by the examples contained in short specific “boxes”, each constructed as a brief case study. My intent is therefore to familiarize the reader with the topics, methods and issues that can be included under the heading “practice-based studies”.

To assume a practice point of view means to develop a conception of the organization as a texture of practices which extend internally and externally to the organization. In fact, practices constitute a mode of ordering the flow of organizing and working. They furnish an ordering principle as the institutionalization of ways of doing which are sustained by aesthetic, material and social knowing. Simultaneously, however,



this ordering principle is also temporary and unstable, and is therefore a disordering principle as well. By means of practices, organizations solve the problem of their everyday reproduction, so that practices are an answer to the problem of how to reduce uncertainty. At the same time they introduce indeterminacy because they always express a rationality that is contingent and in “becoming”.

Why assume practices as the units of analysis of organizing? The book answers that practices are loci – spatial and temporal – in which working, organizing, innovating and reproducing occur. Thus a practice-based perspective makes it possible to bring the study of working closer to the study of organizing, and to view both of them not only in their interrelations but as processes which take place in time. The categories of performance, practical accomplishment and becoming will be those that illustrate the temporality and processuality inscribed in practices.

The study of practices can be associated with the simply descriptive purpose of depicting the activities that make up a practice, so that practices are seen “from the outside” as a set of activities (performed in sociomaterial relationships) which form a pattern. Nevertheless a practice-based perspective may offer a more complex view of organizing through a reading of practices “from the inside” and in their “circuit of reproduction”, whereas giving normativity to practices is a dynamic internal to the devisers of practices, who define them as such on the basis of judgements as to what constitutes a good practice or a beautiful practice. In other words, practices are sustained by normative conceptions. Hence, when studying practices, the researcher is interested in understanding how they are seen “from inside”, how conceptions and discussions form around the mode of practising a set of activities, and therefore how society is produced and reproduced through practices and in their being practiced.

There is consequently an empirical interest in assuming practices as the units of analysis of organizing; but there is an epistemological reason as well. The renewed interest in the study of practices 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 reason not as an innate mental faculty, but as a practice phenomenon. Hence a practice should not be viewed as a unit circumscribed by given boundaries and constituted by defined elements, but rather as an *agencement*, i.e. as connection-in-action, as an interweaving of elements which are shaped by being interconnected. Humans do not occupy a privileged



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position in this field of dynamic interconnecting. It is relational materialism which provides the basis on which to construe the interconnections between humans, non-humans and sociomaterial relations.

The book is organized so that the reader can gradually acquire partial notions about practices and develop a sense of how to set about identifying the salient aspects of a practice-based approach. The first chapter invites the reader to consider

practices as working practices. Its purpose is therefore to emphasize that working and organizing are situated processes. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter introduces the topics of situatedness, and of knowing-in-practice. The second chapter introduces a circumscribed scenario in which coordination centers are the prototypical workplaces where issues to do with knowing-in-practice were first studied, and where the interaction between humans, artefacts and technologies is the main unit of analysis. This set of studies has generated one of the most useful concepts with which to understand practice as a collective knowledgeable doing. When knowing is considered as an activity rather than an object, it requires both individual and collective work; and competent participation in a practice is achieved by maintaining a common orientation. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter demonstrates the continuity between learning and knowing, and between knowing and doing.

The third chapter introduces the topic of materiality through the presence of the body and sensible knowledge. The body constitutes an awkward presence, so much so that it is usually removed from organization studies. Whilst it is important to start from the body as carrier of practices and sensible knowing for an analysis intended to destabilize taken-for-granted dichotomies. This interpretative lens reveals numerous features of practice, primarily the facts that people work through bodies, that bodies are differently sexed and that organizational practices are gendered. But the main theoretical contribution originates from showing that the body knows, that it is the seat of embodied knowledge, and therefore that the notion of sensible knowledge entails detachment from the cognitivist view of knowing and organizing. The concept of practice gives visibility and thematizability to the tacit, sensory and aesthetic knowledge comprised in knowing as a collective and situated activity.

The fourth chapter introduces the world of non-humans and what they do and get done. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter concerns sociomaterial relations with artefacts within a framework of relations that has been called “post-social”. When analyzing a practice – the objects, artifacts, and the technologies in it – the material setting can be considered the relational infrastructure which supports performance of the practice while at the same time being invisible.

The fifth chapter focuses on discursive practices. It stresses that the concept of practice, qualified in the previous chapter as sociomaterial, can also be defined as materialesemiotic. Discursive practices are of particular importance for showing that people work not only by sensing and doing, but also by saying. Saying in a situation is also a “doing”, and discursiveness is both an end of a practice, as for instance in institutional discourses, and a means by which researchers (and not only practitioners) gain access to how individuals in situations construct those situations themselves and the objects/subjects of discourses.

The sixth chapter deals with what we may call a normative relational infrastructure: namely the support which rules – given and emergent – provide for situated practices. From a theoretical point of view, practices enable us to see how normativity (of sense, consensus, as well as prescription) emerges from situated action; whilst from the methodological point of view, the practice-based approach enables us to analyze a practice as the locus of ordinary prescription. We may say that the analysis of practices comprises the methodological recommendation that researchers should investigate prescription using a “bottom-up” or emergent approach. It is curious to note that one of the inducements to study situated practices and one of the meanings

implicit in the term “in practice” are constructed by the opposition between what is prescribed – for example, how the work should be done – and how “it is really done”. The antithesis between formal and real, between prescribed work and real work, has for a long time been an interpretative key used by the sociology of work, even before the “practice turn” resumed similar topics with a different vocabulary.

The seventh and eighth chapters slightly change the expository logic hitherto followed. In fact, whilst Chapters 1 to 6 showed the principal supports for the performance of a practice, and which therefore constitute its resources – like maintaining a common orientation, sensible knowledge, the technological infrastructure, discursive practices and the normative infrastructure – the following two chapters address the problem of how to represent practices and why. They start from the assumption that practices are as opaque to practitioners as they are to researchers, but precisely for this reason their description and reflection on practice are potential means to empower practitioners. Chapter 7 seeks to answer the question of why use should be made of a practice-based approach which is not solely descriptive but can be included in the action-research tradition in the general sense – or which anyway is of applicative interest. The eighth chapter illustrates how a second tradition of research – which seeks to construct or describe technologies for the support of situated work – has engaged in the study of practices and with what methodological tools. The methodological discussion becomes more explicit in these two chapters. Chapter 7 examines what research design is able to consider the constant interconnection of practices, and therefore how to explore a “texture of practices”, while Chapter 8 illustrates the relation between the study of practices and rediscovery of ethnographic studies within the analysis of organizations and information systems.

It will have been noted that the book is structured around methodological concerns, but while space is given to the themes of research design, the choice of topics, and the aims of an anti-rationalist and anti-cognitivist approach, little space is devoted to research techniques. This is not to imply that the latter are of little importance; but rather that, like all the tools of a good craftsman, they must be adapted, invented and made the object of bricolage, not of worship. It will also have been noticed that qualitative research is better able to answer questions as to the “how” of a process, its temporality and the meaning attributed to it. It will be seen that many of those who adopt a qualitative research strategy resort to participant observation, the ethnography of objects, shadowing, conversation analysis and the interview with the double method, but the range of possible tools is not restricted to these techniques, and the development of a new approach should also stimulate the invention of new research techniques.

The book finishes with a concluding chapter which has two purposes: on the one hand, to review the theoretical background that has generated the interest and field of studies that have formed under the umbrella concept of practice-based studies; on the other hand, to systematize the conceptual and analytical framework on which this book is based.

Obviously the conceptual and the analytical framework are intimately linked, nevertheless the analytic proposal is based on the assumption that the empirical study of organizing as knowing-in-practice requires analysis of how, in working practices, resources are collectively activated and aligned with competence. This activity is not extemporaneous; on the contrary, what makes practices “plastic” –

that is, relatively stable and mutable – is the activity that stabilizes the conditions for them. This framework allows the description of how the activation of resources accompanies their anchoring in the material world, in language, and in the institutional, normative and aesthetic dimensions. Describing practices is not an aim in itself rather it is the pre-condition for the negotiation and the eventual change of them.

In outlining the conceptual framework I stress the importance of practice theorists for renewing the epistemology for the study of working practices and not only for studying them as an empirical phenomenon. In other words I advocate the use of practice as epistemology.

Usually, epistemology concerns itself with the validity conditions of knowledge (logic of verification) or, like pragmatism, with the conditions for the production of knowledge (logic of discovery). What is still beyond its reach is the study of the epistemological conditions of the circulation of knowledge, which means *how knowledge transforms itself through its use* – what we could term “logic of transformation”.

The usefulness of considering practice as epistemology has been proven particularly within Information Systems and study of technology in use. In this context the main contribution has been framed in terms of how sociomateriality enable the study of the constitutive entanglement of the social and the material (Gherardi, 2016, forthcoming). In introducing a Special issue that critically reflects on the sociomateriality of Information System (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014, p. 821) wrote that:

It is important to note, however, that practice as epistemology is not a ready-made methodology that one can apply as a script, step by step. It is a research philosophy as much as a methodology, one that often involves experimentation, improvisation, and critical reflection.

Their words convey the spirit of the book more effectively than my own.

This book springs from my experience during the past twenty years of teaching “a practice-based approach” to undergraduates and doctoral students at the University of Trento and other universities, and from the innumerable international doctoral seminars, organized together with my colleagues of RUCOLA (the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics – [www.unitn.it/rucola](http://www.unitn.it/rucola)). For this reason Edward Elgar published in contemporary to *How to conduct a practice-based study* a companion book – *Learning and Knowing in practice-based studies* (2012) – edited with Antonio Strati and collecting a series of articles – based on empirical research conducted in different fields – that illustrate the practice approach adopted by the researchers in RUCOLA ■

## References

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