

Practice Theories and Critical Security Studies

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Over the past 10+ years, practice theories have evolved into a dynamic and diverse research programme in the discipline of International Relations (IR). Their successful evolution speaks to an ongoing trend in theorizing International Relations beyond the grand theories (or ‘-isms’) of the past and towards a focus on much more multi-faceted, often mid-level analysis. Having been imported from wider social and political theory, insights into practices have inspired deeply empirical research into a wide range of international phenomena from diplomacy to peacekeeping, from piracy to bureaucracy, from EU integration to disarmament. Indeed, it is the way in which practices draw attention to how politics and international relations happens in the everyday that makes them such useful analytical concepts. Practices are the fabric of the social. Theorizing and studying them therefore offers insights into the inner workings of international relations.

The research agendas that practice theories inspire in IR are constantly evolving. In this piece, I want to speak to one of these evolving agendas, the growing dialogue/combination of practice theories and (critical) security studies building on the insight that security is a practice that needs to be unpacked. In particular, I draw attention to both an omission and a trend in this emerging field. My reflections are inspired by my ongoing work on the relationship between practices and emerging norms in the context of weaponised Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Old wine in new bottles, or who is a practice theorist?

Practices were fundamental analytical concepts in IR long before the programme of practice theories was introduced to the discipline in the late 2000s. This

starting point prompts me to make two observations. First, there are many earlier contributions to IR that speak to practices and share similar aims but do not use the language of practice theories. These include groundbreaking contributions by feminist scholars and critical security scholars. Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe, as exemplified in her famous work *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Enloe 2014)¹, endeavours to make the actions of diverse women visible and thereby expose the actual working of international politics. Much like focusing on practices, scholars like Enloe focus on the everyday realities of these women, thereby broadening what is considered as international and what is considered as political. Potentially, there is therefore a broad group of scholars who speak of practice. What this means for practice theorists remains unclear. Scholars writing in the context of the practice turn in IR argue that the language of practice theories can theorise practices in helpful ways that go beyond what was present in IR already, thereby enriching our analytical understanding of practice. However, the usefulness of this analytical language arguably depends on how and what we capture to be part of the practice theoretical programme.

Second, while loosely uniting around the concept of practice, in social and political theory practice theories are by definition plural, diverse, and multi-faceted – and this is their strength. But we can see selective tendencies as to how they have been introduced to IR. Further, from the beginning, there have also been attempts to unify practice theories in order to make the programme more appealing to the discipline – and potentially put it on par with the established ‘grand’ theories of IR (Adler and Pouliot 2011). This selective-

¹ First published in 1990.

ness of IR touches both upon who is recognized as a practice theorist and what are recognized as essential features of practice. Practice theories in IR chiefly recur on a comparatively limited range of canonical white male Western sociologists. As Lauren Wilcox has highlighted, this list does not even include hyper-prominent gender theorist Judith Butler whose work speaks very clearly to practices (Wilcox 2017). Even though such omissions may be happenstance, they clearly point to exclusionary dynamics in IR's 'practice turn'.

Another aspect of selectiveness touches upon basic conceptualizations of practice. Practices are deeply procedural; they only reveal their own conditions of possibility through how they are performed in social contexts. While their embodied and non-verbal character is vital to how many social and political theorists understand practices, this dimension is typically less prominent in IR iterations. Instead, IR has often privileged practices of 'saying', or what I call verbal practices, relegating the notion of practices that are non-verbal, bodily, embodied or performed by bodies to less relevant afterthoughts. They end up being subsumed into discursive practices rather than treated as a distinct source of the social.

To my mind, these are problematic omissions both historically and at present because they limit the significant analytical potential of practice theories to a singular (and seemingly exclusive) group of scholars, understandings, and conceptualizations. These omissions need to be critically addressed in order for practice theories to fulfil their potential. Practice theories have much more to gain from not only remaining diverse, but also from actively expanding that diversity.

Practices and norms

We can identify a number of analytical themes that have animated new research in practice theories over time, dynamics of change or consolidation being a perennial topic. Investigating the relationship between practices and norms is another of these emerging topics. It started off with casting a critical look at how practice theoretical analyses that do not pay attention to norms or normative theory end up reifying existing power structures without problematizing them (Ralph and Gifkins 2017). Further contributors point to how practice theories can provide vantage points for normative critique (Schindler and

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Wille 2019). Indeed, I argue that examining the interplay of practices and norms can allow researchers to sketch out innovative analytical avenues that build on plural understandings of practices as verbal and non-verbal. Verbal practices are practices of saying; they are publicly voiced, considered, and negotiated. They are verbalised and discussed in some type of deliberative forum. And, as I addressed in the previous section, they de facto dominate IR scholarship on norms and on practice theories. Non-verbal practices refer to bodily performed, operational practices. Such non-verbal practices may be observable acts of doing but also include non-observable thought processes that go into/precede acts of doing. The concept of non-verbal practices also captures practices of violence or practices performed in the service of violence. Paraphrasing Cynthia Enloe (2014), I argue that the workings of norms can be exposed by making especially the non-verbal practices of a wider range of actors visible. Conceptually, practices and norms are not easily separable as the content of norms only manifests itself in the practices that are performed to enact and sustain it.

How practices shape norms: weaponizing AI

My conceptual thoughts on normativity emerging in practices that are not verbalized are inspired by empirical observations relating to the international

debate on integrating AI-driven technologies into weapon systems. Often, these technologies are referred to as lethal autonomous weapons systems or LAWS, defined as ‘weapons that, once activated, can select and engage targets without further human intervention’ (Heyns 2016). Since 2017, international debate on this topic happens chiefly in the context of a Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Systems (CCW) at the United Nations in Geneva. Here, the notion of meaningful human control has been introduced as a potential new norm to govern the integration of AI-driven features in weapons systems. If the debate proceeded towards a negotiation stage, weapon systems without meaningful human control could be prohibited. Interestingly, the debate on LAWS speaks to the future rather than the present or the past. As a consequence, it rarely speaks to how AI-driven features have already been integrated into the critical – that is, targeting – functions of widely used weapon systems.

Some of these technologies, such as air defence systems, have been in use by a global spread of states for decades (Bode and Watts 2021). In this time, non-verbal practices of testing, developing, and operating air defence systems have incrementally contributed to shaping an emerging, silent norm of ‘meaningful’ human control. I understand norms loosely as understandings of appropriateness (Bode and Huelss 2018). They do not necessarily point to what is universally appropriate, but often to what a particular group of actors deems as suitable in a particular context. This emerging norm is potentially undesirable if it comes to stand for what meaningful human control means in practice – a diminished decision-making capacity of human operators in specific use of force situations is seen as ‘appropriate’ and ‘acceptable’. In this, non-verbal practices have shaped a tacit understanding of ‘meaningful’ human control that runs counter to explicit, verbal efforts of shaping normativity. In fact, the international debate on LAWS has yet to acknowledge or scrutinize this emerging norm. How non-verbal practices shape norms therefore risks undercutting potential international efforts to regulate LAWS through codifying human control in a deliberative forum such as the GGE.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is a lot in practice theories to inspire innovative theorizing. Indeed, thinking about how practices constitute the social allows us to reveal the inner workings of phenomena in international relations. But that potential is arguably tied to increasing rather than decreasing the theoretical sources of

the practice turn in IR to go beyond what has become a canonical list of practice theorists. In going beyond selectivity, practice theories can animate unusual analyses of empirical puzzles – including critical approaches to the normative pull of non-verbal practices.

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