

# New Voices, New Directions: Why International Practice Theory Has Not Yet Disappeared

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*After 'New Voices in International Practice Research', an online conference with over 100 participants in February 2021, the event's co-organizer Dr Frank Gadinger, who co-authored the seminal 'International Practice Theory' (Palgrave, 2nd ed. 2018) provides a highly interesting insight into the state of the art and a profound reflection on this trending, yet hotly debated research field.*

International Practice Theory is still flourishing. During the second lockdown in grey November 2020, my colleague Christian Bueger and I had the idea to organize the online event 'New Voices in International Practice Research' as an attempt to bring together practice-oriented scholars who, like us, were missing the personal exchange over research ideas at conferences. Back then, we did not anticipate the enthusiastic participation of over 100 scholars, who would proceed to spend two days passionately discussing their arguments about new directions of the practice turn. Of course, such overwhelming moments might result from the boring times at home (as a positive side effect of the COVID-19 pandemic), but we would interpret it as a broader positive trend on how the practice turn has developed. Two decades ago, when Iver Neumann (2002) made a first strong claim for studying practices and even ten years later when Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011) published the game-changing edited volume *International Practices*, it was not clear that Davide Nicolini (2013), as a pioneer of practice research in organization studies, would discuss his understanding of theory with International Relations (IR) scholars on common grounds. Nor was it apparent that conceptual refinements of Bourdieusian field theory, discussions on the positionality of researchers, and possibilities of criticizing practices, or practical questions around methods and writing about practices would be the norm in today's scholarly practice.

Such a productive development is remarkable, but we know from examples of earlier turns (constructivism) as well as from insights by historians and sociologists of science, like Thomas Kuhn, that promising concepts

and programmes disappear and that academic disciplines have limited attention spans and are subject to what Randall Collins calls 'the law of small numbers' (1988). As I argue in the joint publication with Christian (Bueger and Gadinger 2018), academic disciplines are subject to trends, fashion, and fads as new perspectives, turns, and theorists come and go. At some point in time, the discussions (some critics call it a hype) surrounding the practice turn, practice theory, and the concept of practice may fade away. Another related option for International Practice Theory is mainstreaming. In a positive reading, the decreasing attractiveness of practice as a concept results from the integration of its core insights into general academic knowledge. Scholars would no longer speak about practice all the time, but they would use it rather naturally while doing research. A disappearance, therefore, is not necessarily tantamount to a failure of the practice turn. The pessimistic reading, however, is that practice theory is a mere fad, a short hype, nothing more. The opposite of disappearance or mainstreaming is paradigmaticization.

As some external observers of our online event might argue, the group of practice-oriented scholars have still established a common language by using, for instance, some seminal authors as reference points. The fact that this event emerged from the institutionalization as a standing section ('International Practices') in the context of the European International Studies Association (EISA) signals that doing practice theory has become part of a professionalization process. Historian of science Ilana Löwy (1992) described such a development of scholars establishing a common identity

around shared premises and concepts as a shift from a more loosely organized ‘trading zone’, to a more stabilized ‘pidgin zone’, to a more fully institutionalized ‘creole zone’. Landing in the creole zone would signify the establishment of International Practice Theory as a new paradigm in the IR discipline, comprised of an established in-group and a periphery, agreed definitions and tools, a common ‘thought-style’ (Ludwik Fleck 1980), and a set of clearly laid out questions to be addressed. Practice theory would then become stylized in handbook chapters and be discussed in IR textbooks as a paradigm alongside realism and constructivism. Someone may then state, with the same conviction that some would have today in claiming to be a realist: ‘I am a practice theorist’. Such a scenario would imply that scholars increasingly agree on core concepts and their definitions.

### **The major advantage of understanding practice research as a trading zone**

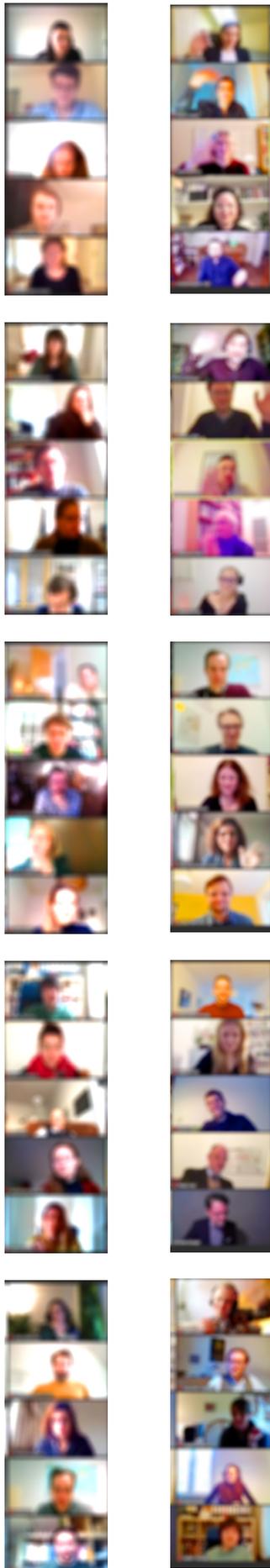
Although practice theory can be found in some handbooks and textbooks, and there are also some seminal authors and publications such as Adler and Pouliot’s work, or our overview work on key approaches, main conceptual challenges, and promising research techniques (Bueger and Gadinger 2018), it is rather daring to regard practice theory as a new paradigm. As Ted Hopf (2021) observed in a recent reflection on the practice turn, Adler and Pouliot’s work is the most quoted but also the most criticized one due to their paradigmatic claims, which many scholars seem to dislike (see, e.g., Joseph and Kurki (2018)). In comparison, Hopf (2021: forthcoming) described our approach as the one in the current debate which ‘let[s] thousand flowers bloom’. We do not disagree with his metaphorical description, as it nicely fits to our notion of understanding the conversation around the concept of practice as a ‘trading zone’ in the tradition of Peter Galison. Galison (1997) introduced the notion of scrutinizing how scientists can cooperate and exchange results and concepts, while simultaneously disagreeing on their general or global meanings. We argue that the turn to International Practice Theory can be understood as such an intellectual trading zone. Scholars are bound together by their shared understanding of the value of studying ‘practice’. In this space, different scholars meet and trade ideas of how to conduct intelligible IR research relying on concepts of practice. Whilst engaging in this exchange, practice-oriented scholars may still continue to fundamentally disagree over the meaning of core concepts.

We are aware that such an understanding may be criticized as loose and incoherent, but we would argue that the notion of the trading zone, where thousand

flowers are allowed to bloom, ‘from Bourdieu to Dewey, from Foucault to Latour, from Wenger to Reckwitz, from Boltanski to Schatzki, and many others’ (Hopf 2021: forthcoming), is an expression of intellectual strength, not weakness. Rather than directing efforts towards agreement, the exchanges and tensions need to be preserved. A recent example for the productivity of such tensions can be found in Catriona Standfield’s intervention (2020) to consider a feminist perspective in exploring diplomatic practices. Other instances include Sebastian Schindler and Tobias Wille’s (2019) claim that the dispute between practice-oriented scholars over the role of critique results from different epistemic premises and political concerns, or the philosophical intervention by Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost (2018), among others, which argues that Wittgenstein’s notion of practice as language-games needs more consideration to address the underlying normativity of practice. These examples demonstrate that a narrow agreement on one distinct approach, as Bourdieu’s praxeology seemed to be in the pioneer period, would hinder the exploration of new empirical results, conceptual refinements and methodological reflections. However, such a notion of trading ideas does not mean that everybody can or should be a practice theorist, as some scholars earlier claimed in a form of over-optimism. As argued earlier (Bueger and Gadinger 2015), doing practice research needs some core commitments, such as the rejection of substantialist notions of agency and structure in terms of methodological individualism or collectivism, the consideration of materiality, the notion of social order in terms of multiplicity, the performativity of the world, or the primacy of the empirical. Not everybody would subscribe to these commitments, particularly to start any kind of research with practices, and not with actors and their interests as many IR scholars still prefer. But even a rather inconspicuous claim such as the primacy of the empirical has broader implications than some scholars are able to accept.

### **Practice theory as a methodological orientation for praxiographic research**

As Davide Nicolini emphasized in his keynote speech, such an understanding of doing practice-oriented research implies a different notion of theory. Practice theory then refers to ‘new ways of seeing and interpreting the world’. In their most sophisticated version, practice theories provide ‘resources for making new things thinkable and communicable’ (Nicolini 2021). Nicolini also used Bruno Latour’s term ‘infra-language’, which means that doing practice research is an ongoing process between empirical work and conceptual refinement and does not follow a form of meta-language in fixed assumptions. In live-



ly chat discussions with participants during the conference, Nicolini later argued to understand practice theory as a methodological orientation, which comes close to our own understanding of regarding International Practice Theory as an empirical project rather than a theoretical one. What we need, however, are 'sensitizing concepts' (as Herbert Blumer termed it), to know how to start with research and to have some guidance for seeing what is relevant. Concepts such as field (Pierre Bourdieu), dispute (Luc Boltanski), or community (Etienne Wenger) have no direct empirical reference, yet they provide promising heuristic devices for empirical research. Understood in this sense, practice theory provides a methodological orientation for praxiographic research.

In our joint book, we advance the notion of praxiography as the set of methods and techniques corresponding to practice theory's needs. The term praxiography (originally coined by Annemarie Mol) implies that the study of practices has much in common with ethnography (and other related procedures in interpretive social science). The common concern is to record, to describe, and to reconstruct (graphy); however, the interest lies not in culture (ethno) but practice (praxis). Doing praxiography therefore implies to recognize that theorizing is a practice as well as undertaking research. The major aim of talking and reflecting about praxiography is not to throw another term into the debate but to push the rather hesitant discussion on how to study international practices and how to write about it in books and journal articles. It seems to us that these questions are still sidelined and not at the heart of recent debates. If, as we hope, International Practice Theory should develop as a productive trading zone, it might be one of the keys to focus more on research strategies, methods, and techniques, as well as to reflect more on ethical issues such as the positionality of the researcher. These debates are not completely new, as feminist and postcolonial scholars remind us and have demonstrated in their work from the beginning.

#### **Future directions of the practice turn?**

If we reflect in the concluding section on how the practice turn will develop and which directions are the most promising ones, it makes sense to evaluate the starting promises. From the beginning, International Practice Theory came with several promises: getting closer to the actions, routines, and lifeworlds of practitioners who practice IR, producing knowledge that is of relevance beyond the immediate group of peers, avoiding intellectual dualisms such as agency and structure, developing a perspective that is receptive to change, and the reproduction, or more fully inte-

grating material aspects, ranging from bodily movements to objects and artefacts.

As it can be seen today, International Practice Theory has performed well on some of these promises but less so on others. The presentations and discussions at the event underline earlier observations that practice research is particularly strong in showing the material side of doing world politics and overcoming existing dualisms by starting with practices as core units of analysis. Whether practice theory is able to deal simultaneously with order and change remains one of the key challenges and has been controversially discussed in recent debates. The first promise on the proximity to practice presents, however, a mixed record. There is a turn towards empirical work driven by new methods, such as field work. In the study of diplomacy, researchers now seek to speak with diplomats and participate in their meetings, while in Security Studies researchers shadow security experts or spend time at airports and military headquarters (see, e.g., Schmitt (2017)). We know more about some phenomena such as the inner workings of the European Union, diplomatic practices, and the rituals of the United Nations Security Council. The narratives become richer and thicker. Yet, some fields of research are still underexplored such as everyday life in international organizations. We assume that International Practice Theory will not disappear from the stage as long as practice-oriented scholars present novel empirical results by using innovative methods and thereby demonstrate the value added by a turn to practices. The empirical results presented by some 'new voices' at the conference, for instance, on the postcolonial field of policing practices (Lou Pingeot), practice change in UN peacekeeping (Marion Laurence), and the emergence of new expert practices in international organizations (Aurel Niederberger) demonstrate that the trading zone works well and that the primacy of empirical research nevertheless allows to reflect on concepts and research methodologies.

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