

Call for Conference Papers

From “Practice Turn” to “Praxeological Mainstream”?

Since the proclamation of a *practice turn* in the year 2001, practice based sociological approaches have gained increasing relevance in the social sciences debate. Even though these approaches are fed from very heterogeneous sources and different disciplines – and thus do not convey a homogeneous image – reference is made with increasing regularity in research projects and publications to a practice based sociological perspective.

Several approaches are considered to be the cornerstones of such a practice based sociological perspective, including Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, Michel Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, but also Erving Goffman’s frame analysis. A common aspect in all these approaches is that they do not endeavor to explain human action primarily on either the individual or the structural level. Instead, they seek to analyze chains of action from a perspective which considers both the actions open to individual actors as well as the effect of socialized structures. Social practices are one of the central concepts here.

Depending on the epistemological area of interest, various other sociological concepts also play a constitutive role in the conception of social practices. Central approaches in this context are those which refer for example to the physicality of any actions, the routinization of behavior, the relevance of tacit knowledge, the bearing of material artifacts on behavior, as well as the effects of explicit rules. While social practices can be isolated and analyzed individually, the practice related sociological debate assumes that sociality is constituted by the overlapping and crossing of different social practices. Social practices work on their own and in bundles as links between the behavior of the actors and the institutionalization of structural elements. In the sociologies of social practices, the basic theoretical problem shifts from the question of how actions are coordinated on a social level to that of the maintenance and reproduction of specific social structures and configurations over time.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, a number of articles and papers have addressed the issue of social practices from both a general and a specialized sociology perspective. In the German-speaking countries, proposals are in place for a cultural theory based praxeological research program. In the United States, the “site ontologies” approach in social philosophy has significantly extended the explanatory range and claims of a social theory based on the concept of social practices. In gender research, performance theories have been particularly important in initiating a change in direction. The praxeological approach is gaining increasing relevance in medical sociology, while a number of ethnographic studies are providing important impetus in practice based sociology. Practice based sociological approaches are also being gainfully used in the sociologies of work and education, science and technology, space, business and consumption, as well as in political science, medical anthropology, geography or multi-disciplinary areas like sustainability research.

Practice theory approaches are therefore extremely versatile, not just in social theory terms, but also from a method/methodology perspective and in empirical use. The Wittgenstein-like “family resemblance” accorded to practice based theory approaches is often described as one of their advantages, because it opens up space for diversity to develop and puts paid to any attempts at canonization. But it also raises questions regarding their scope and boundaries, the potential advantages and disadvantages of this diversity as well as method and methodology related issues.

- Does the diversity attributed to praxeological approaches eventually become arbitrary and, if so, at what point does this happen? What differentiates a praxiography of a social phenomenon from an ethnography? Where do the potential borders lie between practice based sociological research and other perspectives and approaches like discourse analysis or hermeneutics?
- Is it possible to identify a practice theory based research program that is more than just an eclectic assembly of individual elements? Is there such a thing as a praxeological mainstream? Would this actually be desirable?
- Which other approaches could praxeological research link in with to extend its analysis options? Might a praxeological perspective not also raise a demand for new social theory concepts because the existing basic concepts would prove too cumbersome to permit integration?
- What consequences are linked to the application of a praxeological perspective in empirical research when it comes to the choice of methods? Is there such a thing as an ideal path to follow in praxeological empirical research? What relationship is there here between qualitative and quantitative approaches?

These questions will be the focus of discussion at a conference to be held on 6/7 June 2013 at the Institute for Advanced Studies (Institut für Höhere Studien, IHS) in Vienna, Austria. The event is being organized by the institute's Sociology department, where the sociology of social practices forms the subject of a three-year postgraduate diploma and research program (for more information see <http://www.ihs.ac.at/vienna/IHS-Departments-2/Sociology-1/Teaching-2.htm>).

This is a call for submissions which address the above-mentioned issues from a theoretical perspective or describe the empirical study of social phenomena using a praxeological approach.

Colleagues who are interested in presenting a paper at this event are cordially invited to submit a corresponding **abstract (maximum 700-800 words) by 15 December 2012** to office.soz@ihs.ac.at. Notification of the acceptance of an abstract will be sent by the end of 2012.

A publication containing selected papers from the conference is also planned.