TURNING PRACTICALLY – BROADENING THE HORIZON

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The purpose of this position paper is to trigger a discussion on different methods that can be used to produce change and to support development through reflecting back practices to the practitioners. Our aim is to discuss their similarities and differences and how these methods fit within the broader horizon of engaged research. We do this by relating the discussion to the current "turn to practice" within organisation and management studies (Gherardi, 2001; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Nicolini, 2009). We present a preliminary sketch of the kinds of approaches we believe need to be included and related in order to fully see the potentials, the limitations, and the significance of a practical turn and practice based theorizing within social research. We do this because all these kinds of approaches are normally *not* gathered and discussed together in relation to each other, and because we think they should. We're pleading for a broad and inclusive but also critical exchange and dialogue, and hopefully this short introduction can at least suggest some reasons why and how. Without providing final answers, then, we want to raise a few questions about the meaning of "turning to practice" and "practice *based* studies" when addressing the issue of reflection. What does it mean for social

researchers to turn to practice and *base* their studies on practice, and (why) should it be done?

Different ways of turning to practice

The idea of reflecting back practices to the practitioners as a way of triggering group and organisational transformation is quite intriguing. Its translation in practice is not without problems, however. One the one hand, developmental reflection poses a variety of methodological, practical, and ethical challenges that can undermine the benefits of the approach. As the papers in this issue make clear, different ways to respond to these challenges have been developed by distinct intervention traditions. At the same time, however, using re-presentation practices to stimulate change also creates theoretical and methodological challenges. One reason for this is because the ideas of reflection and mirroring are particularly perilous in social science as they sit on the watershed between alternative paradigms. The image of a "mirror of nature" (Rorty, 1979) is in fact at the root of the traditional functionalist model of social science understood as the attempt to provide true descriptions of social facts. Simultaneously, the idea of reflecting back findings to the practitioners in conditions of dialogue (making the reflection a potentially endless array of mirrors) is also the starting point for an alternative and non-conventional way of conceiving the social science project as an interpretive and / or performative endeavour. Reflection can thus be used *either* as a more sophisticated way to pursue a conventional type of detached social science *or* as a way to explore alternative ways of interpreting the study of the social (and being social scientists) as a form of entanglement and engagement. That is to say, there are different and in many ways alternative ways to use reflection and to turn to practice.

In order to shed light on the issue we would like to introduce a simple classification of ways of putting practice at the centre of the concern of social scientists. Our classification, adapted from Eikeland (2006, 2007; 2008 pp.458ff.) is summarised in table 1.

DIRECTION OF INTEREST		
	Broadly practical Aim: triggering action, producing change and improvement	*Broadly theoretical* Aim: gaining insights, producing understanding or explanations
From outside and above From a spectator position outside the action concerned	**1** **Develop specialized techniques/applied research**	**2** **Normal science (explanatory *and* interpretive approaches) [theoresis]**
From within and below From a position immersed in the action concerned	**3** **Inform deliberation [phrónêsis]**	**4** **Trigger critical dialogue – Immanent Critique [theoria]**

STARTING POINT

Table 1: Ways of turning to practice in social science

Space constraints prevent us from exploring and discussing the different cells in details. In general terms, however, according to this view the interest of social scientists for practice can be motivated either by theoretical interests and the desire to merely gain knowledge and understanding according to the idea of "detached" research; or alternatively it can be stimulated and directed by broad practical interests in decision-making, action, change, or improvement according to the model of "engaged" inquiry. These interests can be pursued in quite different ways starting from different positions. Researchers can either start from "above" in a segregated spectator position approaching the object/practice "from the outside" through explicitly theoretical lenses (upper row of table); or they can start from "below" and "within", that is, from being practically immersed in the practice being studied (lower row).

According to this classification, most conventional applied or engaged social research would fall within cell 1 as it aims at using established theory or established and specialised research methods to support or create organisational changes, often in technical ways. Conventional "basic social research" – whether interpretive or

explanatory – which normally gathers data and tests theories imaginatively created and chosen from a segregated position would fit in cell 2. Most action research and collaborative development work, like the ones in this special issue, focus on improving practices through different deliberative approaches would fit into cell 3, or in cell 1 again, when the approach is used simply to facilitate the use of extant knowledge and conventional methods[1] .

Finally, attempts directed specifically at developing theory from practical involvement and practically acquired experience where the object of study is the practice of the knowers themselves would fit in cell 4. Unfortunately, in real life this cell would be almost empty. Examples of social science research fitting this category are few and far between. We argue that this is highly significant as the lack of research falling in cell 4 suggests that most current social science approaches are practice oriented in an insufficient or inadequate way (Eikeland, 2008). In spite of the great brouhaha about social science's turning to practice (see, e.g., Schatzki et al., 2001), our view is that such turn may very well be considered only partial and certainly incomplete.

Practice based studies: an incomplete turn?

Our classification above is intended to be sketchy, suggestive, and preliminary. Still, it helps suggesting that turning to practice does not necessarily or simply equate with becoming more engaged, or with making social science relevant (from a distant starting point), or with moving social science closer to the practical concerns of separate practitioners.

Our observation is particularly important for the authors and studies that in recent years have taken the idea of practice as the starting point of their scholarly effort. Within the current emerging trend or bandwagon of practice based studies (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010) there are in fact many different ways of "turning to practice" for social researchers -- at least as many as there are different *theories* of

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[1] Of course, the relationship between cells 1 and 3 raises the broad hermeneutical and phronesis-inspired question of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1989) of what it means to "apply" theory. How is it done and what is implied?

practice circulating in the profession. What Judi Marshall (2011) writes about the turn to practice has become a truth to take to heart, that "there is no one '*it*' but only "a plethora of movements concerned with practice coming from different traditions such as reflection, and potential for change, which are in more or less connection with each other".

What matters here is that each of these approaches gives a different answer to what it means to turn towards practice. Above all, many of them still speak from an outsider and spectator perspective. The practice studied remains the practice of the others. The practice turn has been interpreted mainly from a traditional stance as another way of observing, interpreting, and explaining work, organizing, and activity from the outside. Researchers have turned their *gaze* more closely towards the practice "on the other side" while still standing apart on the mainstream mainland. As such, the turn to practice tends to remain a theoretical position in cell 2 in the table, merely replacing former theoretical "lenses" with "the lens of practice theory[2]" (Gherardi, 2009). The risk is that the practice turn remains an academic fad which nurtures the traditional outsider and "spectator" position with its conventional research methods, instead of fundamentally challenging entrenched constellations of research and practice with their institutionalised divisions of labour between researchers and researched. The crucial question seems to be: What does it mean *practically* to turn to practice and to claim that studies are "practice-*based*"?

Is living separate lives still an option?

The mutual segregation of the activities in the cells of our table is a problem that affects not only the relevance, validity, and "actionability" of academic research. It affects the effectiveness of engaged scholarship and action research practice as well.

Traditionally engaged scholars and action researchers have understood their relationship with practitioners in terms of "collaboration". As they seldom pause to unpack this concept they fail to understand that the idea of collaboration often hides what is at stake. The *research question* of turning to practice contains considerably more than merely collaborating and contributing from different areas of expertise --

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[2] By the way, we are just as guilty as others: see Nicolini, 2010 and 2011 for two recent examples.

sometimes reducing the collaborative efforts to teaching co-researchers how to conduct statistically based surveys. Also, the action research community has often understood turning to practice as turning away from theory altogether, more or less abdicating from every effort at producing substantial theory from practice. And the reflective turn whereby researchers mirror practitioners may end up at a similar point, bringing along already established theory and methods as mere instruments.

As a result of this situation, the so-called practice-based studies mostly remain in the second and more traditional cell of the table with a focus on studying the others, while the communities of action research and organisation development linger in the first and third cells neglecting theory development or merely applying established conventional theory. In spite of the turn to practice, all these approaches continue to live their separate and complementary lives and rarely really meet, or talk, or challenge each other.

We argue, however, that *both* turning the gaze theoretically towards practice by switching theoretical lenses (cell 2) *and* turning practically away from theory generation (cell 1 and 3) represent insufficient turns towards practice. Without entering and exploring cell 4 of the table, a split between theoretical and practical interests seems to be reproduced and perpetuated even within the broad plethora of approaches concerned with practice.

The problem, of course, is that this incompleteness and separation is not only an unfortunately missed opportunity for both camps. It is increasingly an option that wider societal transformations are making less and less viable. As the discussions about "the new production of knowledge" (Gibbons et al, 1994, Nowotny et al, 2001) indicates, some of the contemporary changes concerning the distribution and reshuffling of knowledge generation between conventional academic institutions and "non-academic" workplaces are already steering towards a profound turn to practice challenging the division of intellectual labour. Turning to practice merely *within* the cells 1, 2 and 3 is insufficient. More thorough practical connections are becoming necessary not merely in order for researchers to become relevant for practitioners producing "actionable knowledge" (Argyris, 1996), but in order to develop, improve,

and validate substantial theory of a different, more "methodological" kind (cf. Eikeland, 2006, 2008, 2009).

Social scientists are increasingly pressed to produce not only better and more adequate theory *simpliciter* but a different *type* of theory that can be put to work not only by an interpretive community of fellow segregated theorists and subsequently "translated" for practitioners, but also more directly by a broader group of potential users, similarly to how "methods" are enacted by researchers. This indicates a necessity to ground even theory development and theoretical insight in *the practice of the knower*, not just in the increasingly close observation of the practice of others. Of course, a call for theory based in the practice of the knower challenges the methodological and institutional division of labour between researchers-knowers and researched-known. Since it is hardly obvious how such a challenge can be met, the question naturally arises: What would an alternative look like, transcending these modernist "iron cages" entrapping both theorists and practitioners, both researchers and researched in methodologically and institutionally segregated positions?

A different kind of theory

To the extent that social science is pushed more or less reluctantly towards cell 4 in the table, then, the search is for a new type of "detached" research aiming at knowledge and understanding from within the knowers' own practice, not from a segregated position outside.

Elaborating in details how this might be done goes beyond the scope of this text as it now stands. We maintain, however, that a key aspect of the way forward is to profoundly overcome the basic modernist mould taken over from physics and astronomy, which models theory building after the study of remote objects moving and changing independently from and uninfluenced by knowers as mere observers (even qualitative interpretive social research is tainted with the remains from this mould). In its stead, the effort should be at producing a type of theory that helps practitioners articulate what they already do, and therefore somehow know, leaving traces in their everyday speech. "To articulate" is used here in the double sense of bringing into language and ordering by spelling it out, similarly to what Garfinkel

(1967) called making something "ac-countable". The model for this way of theorising would therefore be *not* physics or astronomy but rather *grammar* -- a discipline that although just as old, has been based traditionally on a very different relationship between knower and known. This different relationship is important.

Grammar -- understood *not* as a collection of explicit rules constituting "school grammar" but as the contextually sensitive articulation of language games and language-in-use (Wittgenstein, 1953) -- is in fact basically a theorisation about ourselves as native speakers of a language. It expresses and organises certain aspects of our linguistic *practice* as more or less stable patterns that repeat themselves in certain ways in our performance. Grammar is descriptive and analytical, but it is also normative, since it sets standards for correct speech and writing. The *basis* for grammatical knowledge is the practical competence, or the patterns and structures in the acquired practical experience of the knower. In some sense, then, we are internal to grammar, or grammar is internal to us. Grammatical knowledge coordinates aspects of our practice, and all language users – the practitioners – have the same relationship to grammar as their theory, somewhat like the relationship between researchers and their research methodology. We may be novices or experts in using the language and at different levels of tacitness or articulation of the common forms. But as practitioners, we have grammar in common, and we relate to the grammar of our spoken language as equals.

Knowledge forms like grammar organise and structure the competence of their carriers, within a certain field or in general, and become primarily a qualification of their carriers themselves, individually and collectively. Although normative, the grammatical articulation of practice (as theory or rules) is secondary and auxiliary. Practice and gradually acquired *habitus* is primary and generative. Grammatical knowledge forms, in this sense, reflect and produce a specific competent *habitus* (as virtue), and validity comes from adhering to this *habitus* of the knower, not from the capacity of representing a presumed external object -- some *thing* known (cf. Eikeland, 2009).

Hence, grammar as a form of theorisation is different, as its validity comes from adhering to the *habitus* of the knower, not from the capacity of representing a

presumed external object. As Aristotle noted long ago, these two types of theorising -- reconstructed and discussed in depth in Eikeland (2008) as "theoria" and "theoresis" -- are complementary but still suited to very different types of practical purposes. Theoresis aims at representing and modelling from the outside and, as "applied", at intervening, controlling, and manipulating technically (upper row in table 1). It also results in hierarchies among knowledges and knowers. Theoria, however, is about proceeding from within an activity, making its "grammar" explicit, opening new possibilities for action, and informing mindful, caring, and wise conduct (lower row in the table).

When conceived and formulated after a grammatical model, theory as "theoria" thus becomes a resource to be used in action and for action to produce emancipatory visibilisation and expansive articulation. Emancipatory visibilisation and expansive articulation refer to the capacity that theory offers to practitioners to liberate themselves from the constraints imposed by a given practice (Engeström, 1987; Clot, 1999). Practicing is in fact by definition accepting to operate within a tradition of doing into which one is socialised during apprenticeship. While this offers the advantage of building on the stock of existing experience and refinement, it also prefigures a reduced and pre-structured horizon of intelligibility for practitioners (MacIntyre, 1981). Emancipatory visibilisation is the act of "seeing through" these constraints at least appreciating the world of possibilities that exists beyond what is currently the accepted norm (enacting a new practice is of course a very different matter). By providing the means for visibilising and spelling out practice in all its complexity, a grammar-type of theory can thus be used by practitioners for interrogating their own activity and exploring new ways of doing, saying, and being. Theory becomes thus what it was always meant to be, a tool for seeing, i.e. for insight, and an intermediary; an opportunity for practitioners to see beyond the current horizon of their own practice and expand the existing practice in new and groundbreaking directions.

Like all grammatical knowledge, this sort of theorising is joined at the hip with practicing. The validity of such theory is in fact internally determined. The emancipatory grammar and vocabulary are by definition open to changes, tested in the

field by acquiring practical participative experience, and incrementally expanded. If a separate "field" can be maintained, it can always bite back and refute theories as unusable, inadequate, or irrelevant.

Also, the formulation of such theory is no small feat. As already suggested, asking the practitioners to hold up the mirror of nature does not necessarily constitute a significant advance as many of the problems with traditional social science are left unaddressed, unsolved, and possibly exacerbated by the non-professional status of the new observers. Producing grammatical theory is a practice in its own right that requires learning, dedication, and refinement. In the new scenario, there is still room for theory making as a separate practical endeavour, provided for in ancient philosophy (Plato, Aristotle) by requiring interspersed leisure (skholê, *otium*) -- a reflective space -- for dialogical reflection. Although a technical division of labour may remain between some involved in performing the substantial activity concerned and others involved in the reflective practice of theorising it, the scope for using such divisions to build institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge and privileges is dramatically reduced since the alternation between performance and reflection may just as well be merely temporal concerning the same individual or collective. In this way -- focusing on the practices of the knowers themselves -- practitioners practically turn theoretical, theorists work practice-based, practically.

In conclusion, our argument here is that in social science, like elsewhere, paradigmatic distinctions stem from the actual research and textual practices of the scientists rather than from the ideas they use to justify them. Using reflection (in cells 1 and 3 of our table) and carrying out practice based studies (in cell 3) is not a guarantee of novelty and paradigmatic rupture. The basic "grammar" of such knowledge tends to remain the same. The lack of contributions to cell 4 of our table is a strong case in point. Our argument is that such contributions are both possible and needed, and that relevant "paradigms" exist. Our purpose is certainly not to disavow any of the approaches outlined in the table above. But in terms of the table, inadequacies in squares 1 to 3 and the lack of communication between the cells may be resolved by developing the content of cell 4. Our call is for a different kind of

theory developed from within the practice of the knowers, as a kind of grammar of social practices.

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