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## **IS SMALL THE ONLY BEAUTIFUL? MAKING SENSE OF 'LARGE PHENOMENA' FROM A PRACTICE-BASED PERSPECTIVE**

### **Abstract**

In this chapter I discuss how a practice-based sensitivity can be used to address big issues and 'large scale' (social) phenomena. This is of importance because practice-based sensitivities are often pigeonholed as part of micro-sociology and therefore deemed unsuitable to deal with some of the big issues of our time. The chapter starts by contrasting the position of practice-based approaches vis-à-vis the idea of macro phenomena, levels of reality and localism. I then examine three ways in which practice oriented scholars have addressed large phenomena namely studying connections in action, examining the global within the local and engaging with scalography, the practice of assembling large scale phenomena. For each approach I discuss the main affordances and limitations. I conclude that practice theory helps us to reconsider what counts as large scale phenomena and contributes to doing away with some traditional dichotomies in social science, for example the presumed difference between micro and macro, local and global and the misplaced idea that large scale phenomena are better understood from a distance.

In this chapter I will discuss how a practice-based sensitivity can be used to address big issues and ‘large scale phenomena’. Examples of big issues include the nature and functioning of the financial market, large institutional arrangements, the education system, bureaucracy and the future of the planet. The topic is central to the advancement of practice oriented studies. Practice-based sensitivities are often pigeonholed as part of micro-sociology and thus deemed unsuitable to deal with some of the big issues of our time and of scarce importance outside academic circles. How we address ‘large scale phenomena’ is therefore closely related to the issue of the relevance of practice-based studies and the practical uses of practice theories. In the chapter I will use the terms ‘practice-based studies’, ‘practice approach’, or ‘practice lens’ to denote a family of orientations that take practices as central for the understanding of organisational and social phenomena. Authors who embrace this orientation suggest that matters such as social order, knowledge, institutions, identity, power, inequalities and social change result from and transpire through social practices. While they all agree that the study of the social needs to start and end with social practices, they use different sensitizing theoretical categories, research methods and discursive genres. As I argued elsewhere (Nicolini, 2012), I see no merit in trying to reduce this multiplicity in search of a unitary or unified theory of practice, and this equally applies to a discussion of how practice-based scholars approach large scale phenomena. Accordingly my aim here is not to build a practice-based theory of big social phenomena or to theorize large scale social phenomena by building upon a specific type of theory. Rather, more modestly, I am interested in the different methodological and theoretical strategies that authors in the practice-based camp have used to address large scale social phenomena. While I do have my own view of what practices consist of<sup>i</sup>, I will here simply examine the question from different practice-based vantage points and discuss how ‘large phenomena’ transpire amid and emerge through different theories of practice.

I will start my discussion by contrasting the position of practice-based approaches to ‘large scale phenomena’ vis-à-vis the idea of macro phenomena, levels of reality and localism. I will then critically survey some of the ways in which practice oriented scholars have addressed ‘large phenomena’ and comment on their affordances and limitations.

## **On ‘large scale phenomena’ and praxeology**

### *Practice approaches and the ‘macro’: flat ontologies and layered reality*

One of the common characteristics of practice approaches is the belief that concrete human activities – with blood, sweat, tears and all – are critical for the study of the production, reproduction and change of social phenomena. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, indicated that to understand crucial aspects of French society we need look into ordinary settings such as kitchens and dining rooms rather than focussing on abstract domains populated with structures, functions and the like (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Similarly, one of the greatest recent social changes in North American history was triggered in the back of an old bus by a small number of courageous women and men who refused to leave their seats and in so doing interrupted the reproduction of segregation – in practice (Parks and Reed, 2000). This theoretical orientation has critical methodological implications. It suggests that in our investigation of social matters we need to engage with real time activity in its historical situatedness –although how this should be done constitutes one of the dimensions along which different practice approaches diverge.

More broadly, practice theorists, disagree on how to deal with the issue of scale and the traditional distinction between micro and macro social phenomena (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981). A first distinction exists between practice theorists who embrace a flat ontology and others who uphold a more traditional layered view of the social.

Some, albeit not all, practice theorists adopt a flat ontology and join forces with other relational sociologies that suggest that all social phenomena, small scale and large scale, are constituted through and experienced in terms of ‘micro’ situations (Ermibayer, 1997). For these authors, so called ‘large scale phenomena’ are constituted by and emerge through the aggregation of interrelated practices and their regimes of reproduction. The task of social scientists is to account for such processes of constitution and reproduction; they also have to display these processes in their texts, that is, reassemble the social in front of the eyes of the reader, viewer or listener (Latour, 2005). Authors who embrace a flat ontology caution that although practitioners customarily use abstractions to refer to ‘summaries of the distribution of different microbehaviors in time and space’ (Collins, 1981: 989) these abstractions and summaries do not have causal power and should not be turned into entities with autonomous

existence. Social reality has no ‘levels’: when it comes to the social, it is practices all the way down.

Not all practice theorists embrace a flat ontology. Two examples are Bourdieu and Giddens. Both authors believe that such things as structure, power and fields exist in their own right, although they need to be reproduced in and through practices. A similar stance has been adopted by authors such as Fairclough (2005; 2013), who combines an attention for (discursive) practices with a critical realist position; and Glynos and Horwarth (2007) who, building on a Lacanian sensitivity, suggest that practices are governed by a dialectic of social, political and fantasmatic logics – the latter providing an affective explanation of why specific practices and regimes grip subjects. Concepts such as structure, field and logics indicate that for these authors practices alone are not sufficient to explain social phenomena and the constitution of society.

This ontological position is reflected in conceptions of what counts as large phenomena. Authors like Bourdieu, Giddens, Fairclough and others who admit the existence of phenomena outside of the realm of practice conceive ‘macro’ social phenomena in terms of long-term, complex and far reaching social processes. These processes, which are beyond the discretion of any individual, constitute ‘external forces’ which structure people’s daily conduct. As such they should be treated as self-subsistent entities: social classes, the market, the state etc. For these authors, such entities need to be explained in terms that are different from those used to explain mundane social intercourse; in common parlance they constitute a different level of social reality. Micro and macro large scale social phenomena are made of different ontological stuff, so to speak.

Authors who embrace a more relational standpoint, on the contrary, reject this view and denounce it as a theoretical sleight of hand. Complexity and size have nothing to do with the existence of so called ‘macro’ phenomena, or at least they do not warrant granting such phenomena a different ontological status. For one thing, plenty of evidence exists that even the most ordinary ‘micro’ situations and discursive interactions are extremely complex and intricate. For example, the extensive work of conversation analysis has unearthed a Pandora’s box of mechanisms, effort, and skilled performance in even the most mundane of discursive interactions. At the same time, social conduct that according to the accepted views are considered ‘small scale’ –for example the practice of greeting other people at the beginning of a social encounter – are in fact ubiquitous, pervasive and critical to sustain the fabric of social

relationships and its orderliness. Indeed, one can hardly think of a phenomenon that is more ‘macro’ and ‘large scale’ than greetings.

For authors who subscribe to flat ontology, then, the idea of large phenomena points at issues that are highly ramified in time and space and for this reason difficult to grasp *and* represent. From this point of view, the ascription of a special ontological status to ‘large scale phenomena’ is a combination of lack of knowledge and frustration with the fact that we are unable to get our heads around them. In short, ‘macro sociology’ is a sociology for impatient people.

*Not all flat ontologies are equal: individualism, situationalism and relationalism*

Fundamental distinctions also exist among authors who subscribe to a flat ontology. These distinctions are closely related to the praxeological orientations they adopt.

First, there is a tendency – or maybe a risk – for practice oriented authors to fall back on the idea that large scale social phenomena can be explained because people perform or follow something that pre-exists them (a logic of action, a praxis, a template for action, a routine). In this view social phenomena arise from the fact that people perform practices -- the emphasis being on *people* as in ‘well-formed individuals’. This position is conducive to an overdetermined and over theorised outlook which explains social affairs in terms of rational individual choices or (more or less successful) efforts to realize pre-existing rules, plans of action or mental schemes (see Schatzki, 1996, 2002 for a discussion).

Second, a group of authors usually associated with ethnomethodology and its later development and diaspora endorse what Knorr Cetina (1981) describes as ‘methodological situationalism’. The notion of methodological situationalism adds a critical restrictive condition the flat ontology principle that ‘concrete social interactions’ should be considered the building blocks for macro-sociological conceptions’ (Knorr Cetina, 1981: 8). The supplementary condition is that nothing can be said of what happens beyond in-situ social interactions. From this perspective, the only empirically acceptable objects of conceptualization in social investigation are orderly scenes of action taken one at a time; nothing can be said outside these restrictive boundaries (Schegloff, 1997; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999). In this extreme version, large scale phenomena are not accepted as legitimate objects of inquiry per se. Phenomena can be considered large only by virtue of the number of

their repetitions and their relevance in sustaining the texture of the social (as in the example of greeting which is ubiquitous and critical for society to function).

In this very narrow interpretation, methodological situationalism risks becoming an instance of what Levinson (2005) calls ‘interactional reductionism’. The term foregrounds the risks of reducing all social phenomena to self-organizing local interactions. According to Levinson, this approach turns the potentially fruitful suggestion that social phenomena are assembled amid and through situated practices into an empirical straight jacket. This in turn restricts the range of empirical options and practical uses of practice approaches.

A third group of scholars, to which I belong and that will constitute the focus of the rest of the chapter, maintains a form of relational or *connected situationalism*. The basic intuition that distinguishes this group of scholars from the previous one is that the basic unit of analysis is not a single scene of action or a specific situation or instance of the accomplishment of a practice but rather a chain, sequence or combination of performances *plus* their relationships - what keeps them connected in space and time. From this perspective, which practice theorists share with other traditions such as multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2012), social phenomena are effects of and transpire through associations in time and space of situated performances. Performances therefore can be understood only if we take into account the nexus in which they come into being. What happens here and now and why (the conditions of possibility of any scene of action) is inextricably linked to what is happening in another ‘here and now’ or what has happened in another ‘here and now’ in the past (and sometimes in the future). The study of large scale phenomena from a methodological connected situationalism position is predisposed towards rhizomatic sensitivity. A rhizomatic sensitivity sees associations of practices as a living connection of performances and what keeps them together; it offers an image of how practices grow, expand and conquer new territory; it suggests that to study how large phenomena emerge from and transpire through connections between practices we should always start from a ‘here and now’ and follow connections (Nicolini, 2009); and it finally offers a model for representing the gamut of connections in action. As we will see below, depending on the sensitivity of the researcher this can take the form of an overview – so that large phenomena appear as textures, nexuses, meshes or assemblages of practices – although this is not inevitable and other options to praxeologise large phenomena are also available.

In summary, from a connected situationalism position the study of large phenomena amounts to (a) the investigation of what large rhizomatic assemblages of situated activities look like,

how they come into being, are reproduced and change; and (b) how these evolving assemblages are made available and become relevant and consequential in other situated activities or assemblages thereof by virtue of being turned into summaries and/or representations. How this can be done in practice is the subject of the rest of the chapter.

### **Three theory method packages through which to study large scale phenomena from a practice-based perspective**

In this section I will examine three practical responses to the question ‘how can we understand large scale phenomena using a practice-based sensitivity’? The first builds upon and develops what I call textile metaphors (texture, net, fabric, weaving); the second focuses on how the global manifests itself in the local; the third concentrate on the practices through which large scale phenomena are assembled. As we shall see, these broad approaches constitute what elsewhere I called ‘theory method packages’ (Nicolini, 2012). Although they are related in more than one way, these packages embrace slightly different ontological assumptions and propose different practical approaches to making sense, studying and representing large scale phenomena from a practice-based perspective.

#### *Large scale phenomena as a fabric of interconnected practices: from metaphor to method*

The first approach, which as we shall see includes some variants, builds on the work of authors who propose that large scale phenomena emerge from and transpire through the living and pulsating connections among practices. Schatzki (2015: 4) for example, suggests that large phenomena are ‘constellations of practice-arrangement bundles or of slices or features thereof’. The difference between small and large phenomena is essentially one of extension and number of the practices involved: ‘A bundle is a set of linked practices and arrangements. A constellation is a set of linked bundles... the kinds of link that exist among bundles are the kinds of link that connect practices and arrangements. A constellation, consequently, is just a larger and possibly more complex bundle, a larger and possibly more complex linkage of practices and arrangements’ (Schatzki, 2011: 8). Gherardi (2012) mobilises the image of texture (and sometimes web) to capture the interconnected nature of practices. According to her, fields of practices ‘arise in the interwoven texture that interconnects practices’ (Gherardi, 2012:131) and extend all the way to society. The concept of texture is used in an evocative way ‘to convey the image of shifting the analysis between studying practices from the inside



and the outside' (Gherardi, 2012: 2) and 'to follow the connections in action and investigating how action connects and disconnects' (ibid :156). Czarniawska (2004) similarly uses the image of the action net to achieve the same result. Large social phenomena such as institutions, business organizations and regional waste prevention programs are conceived as the result of weaving actions together and stabilizing the resulting arrangement, inscribing it in text, bodies and artefacts (Lindberg and Czarniawska; 2006; Corvellec and Czarniawska, 2014). The concepts of texture and action net are thus meant to capture both the connectivity and the work that goes into establishing and maintaining these ties. As with Schatzki, the view is that large phenomena are made of a complex web of living connections between practices. Concepts such as net, network, web, bundle, texture, confederation, congregation, assemblage, mesh and ecology are often used by practice oriented authors (and other relational social scientists) to describe how practices work together. All these metaphors conjure and promote the idea that large social phenomena emerge from the interconnection of social and material practices and evoke the image of a pulsating yet seemingly chaotic anthill-like world. However, these concepts are often used figuratively rather than analytically. While authors nurture the *imaginaire* of a world made of practices they offer relatively few pragmatic indications of how we could make sense of it or approach the study of such a world empirically. In short, the issue is how to operationalize this *imaginaire* in ways of seeing and writing.

### Uncovering the interconnection between practices through systematic analysis

Among the few authors who have offered a practical way to study and represent inter-connections among practices and their effects are Stephen Kemmis and his colleagues (Kemmis, 2005; Kemmis 2010; Kemmis, & Mutton, 2012; Kemmis et al, 2014). In a number of works spanning a decade these authors have developed a sophisticated grammar and set of methodological principles to understand and represent practices and their ecologies. Kemmis and colleagues conceive of practices as socially established cooperative human activities composed of the hanging together of saying, doings and social relatings. These activities are organised around projects, and by virtue of being reproduced in time they assume the character of practice-traditions. When participants engage in activities in the pursuit of projects, they do the things and they speak the language that are characteristic of the practice and enter relationships building on the 'memory' provided by the practice-tradition. Critically, however, doings, saying and relating only become intelligible within the pre-existing set of cultural-discursive, material economic and social-political conditions. Such conditions both enable the unfolding

of a practice (the practice memory, for example, is sedimented in the physical arrangements, language spoken, discourse used etc.) and constrain them (they establish what can be said and done). Kemmis and colleagues call this intersubjective space, ‘the architecture of practice’ –in effect, Kemmis’ Habermasian reinterpretation of Schatzki ‘orders’. To paraphrase Marx, people bring practices into being but not under conditions of their own choosing. However in contrast to the traditional Marxian interpretation, the relationship between practices and architectures is two-way (Schatzki, 2005 calls this a contextual relationship). When practices happen they become part of the happening: they take up available doings, saying and relating, they modify them and they leave behind traces that in turn become part of the practice architecture of future activities. Activities and the architectures within which they unfold are therefore shaped by other practices and their architectures, and in turn shape them. Practices thus ‘feed upon each other’ (Kemmis et al, 2014: 47) and in so doing constitute ecologies understood as “‘distinctive interconnected webs of human social activities that are mutually-necessary to order and sustain a practice as a practice of a particular kind and complexity (for example, a progressive educational practice)’ (Kemmis and Mutton 2012, p 15).

Kemmis and colleagues use this detailed theoretical construction to develop an empirical method to analyse practices and to study how they combine into large phenomena. They do so by providing an analytical tool (in the shape of an analysis checklist) for examining individual practices in terms sayings, doings and relatings, their project and the architecture amid which the practice unfolds. The same categories are then used to compare how different practices influence, enable or constrain each other and to examine how one practice ‘feeds upon’, ‘is inter-connected with’, or shapes or is shaped by other practices and whether the relationship is one of hospitality, symbiosis or suffocation (all these terms are used in Kemmis et al, 2014 ch.3). The result of this second type of analysis is a two-ways table that allows investigators to examine, for example, how the practice of student learning is shaped by teaching, teacher learning, leadership processes etc. It might be, for example, that exposing teachers to the practice of democratic and participative forms of school leadership creates a hospitable condition for specific active and participative teaching practices that in turn affects the practice of student learning. The table also helps show how student learning influences other practices. We thus find that the teacher’s practices are reflexively shaped by her observations and interpretations of how students respond to her teaching, and that positive changes in the practices of student reinforce the utilisation of democratic learning practices and initiatives at School district level.

The analytical ‘table of invention’ (a term underscoring its heuristic use) aims to support the empirical mapping, with some level of systematicity, of relationships between practices in specific parts of the ecology. Although in the existing practical examples the approach and the ‘sequential, systematic and repeated’ empirical analysis are limited to a specific part of the ecology, Kemmis is adamant that the same principle applies everywhere: ‘the educational practices in the Education Complex are not vast ‘social structures’ that order the world uniformly throughout a classroom, school, School District or national jurisdiction. On the contrary, they are realised in everyday interactions between people, and between people and other objects, in millions of diverse sites around the world’ (Kemmis et al, 2014, p.52). While ecological relationships may turn out to be more complex and less linear than this combinatorial approach suggests (Kemmis et al, 2012 begins to explore how principles from biological system theory can be brought into the discussion), the basic approach remains valid: if the world is flat, large scale social phenomena can be examined in terms of mutual relationship among practices.

Studying large scale phenomena by rhizomatically following connections between trans-situated practices

The work by Kemmis and colleagues has the advantage of enabling empirical analysis by making concrete the idea that large social phenomena are the result of nets, large confederations, and vast ecologies of practices tied together. It also offers a practical way of investigating them. One may not agree with Kemmis’ approach, which can be accused of being a bit mechanical and simplistic, recycling several elements of old style systems theory (via the action research tradition from which Kemmis derives). However, Kemmis’ work sheds light on what is at stake when using metaphors like web and net to study large phenomena from a praxeological perspective. For example, one of the things that becomes clear is that such metaphors are especially suitable for situations where there is *direct* interaction and contact among practices and their human and non-human carriers. However, this approach is not well suited to studying the increasing number of social phenomena that are global in scope and do not embrace direct interaction (or even prohibit it, as in the terrorist movement studies by Knorr Cetina, 2005). The challenge is to find ways of studying such phenomena that hold fast to the idea that practices are always social and materially situated and involve real time empirically observable scenes of action analogous to Bourdieu’s French dining room mentioned above. This can be done if we reconceptualise the notion of interdependence – expanding the variety of ways in which practices can influence each other – and replace a textile view (based on metaphors of

web and net) and research strategy with a rhizomatic approach. Progress in this sense has been made by a group of scholars who substitute the idea of web, net and network with the idea of nested relationality (Jarzabkowski et al, 2015), trans-situatedness (Nicolini et al. 2015) and complex global micro structures (Knorr Cetina, 2005; 2009). These authors offer a further way to translate in practice the assumption that large scale phenomena emerge from and transpire through connections among practices which differs from that proposed by Kemmis and associates. The idea in this case is that a number of large scale social phenomena emerge from active relationships between highly localized forms of activities that take place in dispersed places and time zones. What keeps these distant local practices in a nexus of connections is not some superordinate form of coordination such as that exerted by NATO. Rather, the connectivity stems from the nature and fabric of the practice itself. A concrete example will help to explain what is at stake here.

Jarzabkowski et al (2015) have utilized this approach to study the global market of re-insurance – that is, the place where insurance companies buy insurance policies for themselves. Using a zooming in and out research strategy (Nicolini, 2009; 2012) they patiently followed the practice of reinsurance, studying it in (extreme) depth in the five main global hubs where it unfolds through highly situated activities (meetings, conversation, calculations in offices, restaurants, parties). In each hub, they identified the practices through which consensus prices emerge, risk is modelled and trades are finalized. Among other things, they discovered that what makes this vast nexus of diverse elements and competing trades function as a recognizable market is that each of these practices constitutes the context for each other – first locally first and later trans-locally. The complex web of relationality that they patiently unravel is sustained through practitioners' membership of the same community of practice and utilization of specific scoping technologies (i.e., technologies that summarize the instant state of the market on a screen and allow at the same to intervene in it: see Knorr Cetina, 2005). Most important maintenance of the web also depends on the organizing effect afforded by (1) collective sharing by traders of the same set of *practical understandings*, that is, the know-hows that govern ordinary activities such as arriving at a quote in the absence of a centralized market or dealing with large adverse events; (2) the circulation of the same *general understanding* of how the network of relationships works, why and what is legitimate and acceptable within this particular regime of practice; and (3) the specific temporalities inscribed in and re-produced by the collective practice –e.g. periodical renewal dates punctuating the process which provide specific time horizons for the different activities and constitute an objects towards which the gamut of activities converge and precipitate. Unlike other markets where participants are connected through embodied presence (e.g., a traditional trading room full of screaming brokers) or response presence (e.g., modern trading floors where the

market is transformed into moving indexes on a computer screen to which human traders or non-human trading algorithms react), here we have a global market that which is built on a form of relational presence. In short, the market is brought into existence because the practices of underwriters are relational to one another, and collective activities are coordinated by virtue of being part of a same practice, despite the lack of spatial co-presence.

The approach is very promising in that it makes such relations tangible and further develops the idea that understanding and representing large scale phenomena requires a reiteration of two basic movements: zooming in on the situated accomplishments of practice, and zooming out to their relationships in space and time (Nicolini, 2009; 2012). This approach can be extended to phenomena that have a broad, even global breadth. The approach also invites us to expand the palette of methods through which we interrogate how these relationships are established, maintained and consumed beyond the transactional 'quid pro quo' principle that is built, for example, in Latour's notion of *interessement* (2005). General understandings, for example, connect practices mainly through discursive mediation and operate at a level that is both rational and affective. As authors like Laclau and Mouffe (1985) convincingly argue, discourse can govern and bring together practice at a distance through structuring the field of intelligibility and the related demands that this makes on upon social identities, relationships and systems of knowledge and belief – a case in point being the construction of national identity and other imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Much of this takes place at a level that is affective rather than rational and builds on the power of preconscious drives and impulses such as the sense of lack and incompleteness built into the fabric of individualization (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The point has been highlighted by Karin Knorr-Cetina (2005) who studied complex global micro structures -- structures which similarly to the reinsurance market above are driven by micro-interactions but are global in reach. Asking how the fragmentary kaleidoscope of often unconnected cells of Al Qaeda make for a global movement, she draws attention to the transcendent sense of temporality shared by affiliates (a temporality that transcends individual life and survival and that implies waiting, patience and preparedness); the use of media to communicate to the rest of the diaspora (terrorist attacks are also messages with a strong sensory, affective and motivating intent); and the strategic use of the narrative of an ongoing and persistent confrontation between a religiously defined Arabic diaspora and various Western empires (Karin Knorr-Cetina, 2005: 23). Al Qaeda as a global large scale phenomenon thrives on the principle of nested relationality and can only be studied by zooming in on its practices and following connections, provided we are prepared to think of such connections in much broader terms than in some current practice-based approaches.

In summary, the concepts of practice architecture, nested relationality and the related methodological principles of examining mutual influences between practices in situ and of tracking distant connections among local practices following human, material and discursive intermediaries, constitute a first practical answer to the question of how can we represent large scale phenomena from a practice-based perspective. The two strategies are complementary in that they operationalise the textile metaphors often used to conceptualise large phenomena from a practice perspective. They do so by holding fast to the ideas that practices are always manifest in empirically accessible social sites of activity (as this is how they perpetuate themselves) and that explaining how practices form constellations and wider configurations does not require presupposing the existence of mysterious superordinate entities. Trans-situated practices are connected through other practices such as those of visiting, writing and circulating artefacts; writing blogs to proselytise on the internet etc. We can thus understand the global using the same approach we use to examine the local.

#### *Examining the global in the local*

A second practical answer to the question of how can we represent large scale phenomena from a practice-based perspective is by focussing on how the global manifests itself in the local. In effect, the methodological movement in this case is complementary to the one used by the approaches above: rather than building on an inside-out strategy whereby researchers move from one locale to another until a 'global' overview emerges, here the focus is on how the global itself manifests in ordinary practices. As I discussed above, this view extends the intuition of ethnomethodology and conversational analysis by following sequences of action and talk in interaction beyond the boundaries of the specific scene of action (or text) under examination. The goal is to understand how the practical understandings, discursive resources and member categorizations used to accomplish practices in a specific locale are re-produced in time – rather than limiting exploration to their rules of application.

This approach has been developed into an explicit investigation strategy by Scollon and Scollon (2001; 2004; 2005), who call it 'nexus analysis'. These authors, who build on the insights of discourse analysis, think of large scale phenomena in analogy to large scale discursive formations or 'big D Discourses' (Gee, 1999). Discourses here are understood as the conditions that bestow a certain order and meaning on the statements which belong to it. Discursive formations, such as medicine, ethnicity, modern science or being a rock musician (or fan) were obtained by assembling existing discursive and non-discursive elements in a

novel way through the institutions of new social and discursive practices. These large discursive formations are socially constitutive in that they enact social identities, relationships between people, and bodies of knowledge. While most discourse analysts limit their focus on statements, text and how they are assembled and produced for the Scollons semiosis necessarily spills over beyond texts and into the world. Discursive formations provide the conditions for the accomplishment of all activities, not only discourse. In turn, discursive formations are socially and materially reproduced through the very conditions that they institute. Nexus analysis is the investigation of the forms of discursivity that circulate through specific sites of practice and which lead to the emergence of specific mediated actions and regimes of activity, for example doing a class or appearing in court

In detail, the analysis starts by examining a specific site of engagement (a time/space station where some practice is customarily reproduced) with special attention given to the social arrangements (interactional orders), the historical bodies of the participants (their lived experiences) and the discourses that are active in that particular scene, (the discourses toward which participants' attention appear to be directed). Analysis of the site of engagement and of mediated actions there enables the crucial discourses that operate in the scene to be identified. This is, however, only part of the task. The next step of the analysis consists of navigating between these discourses 'as a way of seeing how those moments are constituted out of past practices and how in turn they lead to new forms of action...' (Scollon and Scollon, 2004, p.29). This is achieved by 'circumferencing' the existing cycles of discourse (and practices), examining their historical origin and showing how they constitute local action through anticipating consequences and providing motives. Key to this task is the idea that discourse mutates in time through what Iedema calls 'resemiotization' (Iedema, 2001; 2003) and the deliberate use of different time scales by the researcher

The idea of resemiotization captures the process through which discourses are progressively materialised from situated and quite 'local' talk towards increasingly durable – because they are written, multiplied and filed – forms of language use (Iedema, 2003, p.42). When introduced into a different scene of action these durable manifestations of discourse are re-performed locally. For example, it may be decided (talk) to organise a focus group on certain social policies, and to invite a number of heads of household. The decision is then resemiotised in an invitation letter (text) that is sent to male addressees or householders (who are very often male). These people accept the invitation and participate in the focus group (talk). The site of engagement actively reproduces a gender bias that is brought to bear by a cycle of discourse. The gender-based discourse is both manifested in and perpetuated through

the nexus of practice: the ‘focus group’. The situation is compounded by the fact that male participants are likely carry into the scene historical bodies/ideas that predispose them to perceive themselves as the family spokesperson (even if they are not necessarily the actual breadwinner). The two cycles of discourse render participants doubly blind to the gendered nature of the practice. They do not see this gendering and they do not see the discourse that makes them not see. Retracing the multiple socio-historical chains of resemiotization, it is critical to uncover ‘how and why what we confront as ‘real’ has come about through networks of transmission and assemblage of semiotic resources (Iedema, full refibid. p.48). Nexus analysis therefore provides an understanding of which discourses circulate in any form of practice and accounts for how such large scale discursive formations are reproduced. Critical to this endeavour is also the deliberate deployment and manipulation of different time scales, the assumption being that when we change the temporality taken into account in our investigation, different types of phenomena become noticeable. For example, Scollon (2005) lists a number of cycles within which different aspects of human existence are entrained: respiratory cycles; metabolic and digestive cycles; circadian cycles of waking and sleeping; lunar cycles; solar cycles and the seasons; entropic cycles, and the formation and decay of material substances. The list, which is not meant to be exhaustive (for example, it does not include socially produced temporalities and cycles), is only a reminder that what counts as relevant and consequential changes depending upon which temporal horizon we employ. Large scale phenomena need to be made – they are not given – and what counts as large is very much an effect of our interests and practical concerns.

### *Studying scalography and playing with it*

A further way to answer the question of how can we represent large scale phenomena from a practice-based perspective is to address them directly through the idea of scalography (Hinchliffe, 2009). This third way is rather different from the two strategies examined above . Scalography refers in fact to the sceptical ethnographic study of scalar objects and practices, that is, the study of practices through which large scale phenomena are constructed.

Scalography can be used in a literal or in a reflexive way.

Used literally, scalography is the study of the scoping technologies (Knorr Cetina, 2005) and representation activities through which specific classes of practitioners construct and circulate ‘large scale phenomena’. Practitioners in several scientific domains use all manners of ‘summaries of the distribution of different microbehaviors in time and space’ (Collins, 1981:



989). These abstractions are expertly created for specific practical uses: guiding an army, controlling a city, producing a news bulletin, making policy or investment decisions. They are manufactured through ordinary practices and mobilised in centres of calculation such as control rooms, military command centres, news rooms, boardrooms of large corporations etc. (Latour, 2005). From this point of view, large scale phenomena exist only as the object of work in specific occupations. To understand large scale phenomena, defined in these terms, it makes sense to investigate the ordinary work of those who produce overviews, vistas and summaries of distributions. This can be done for example by attending to the creation of mobile intermediaries, following their circulation, and examining the assembling powers of skilled humans and scopic technologies (Callon and Latour, 1981; Knorr Cetina, 2005). Because such work is concrete and localised, we can apply one of the two strategies discussed above to investigate in which buildings, bureaus or departments large phenomena were and are manufactured and how this works. While the study of the practices through which macro phenomena are brought into being and differences of scale are produced is not specific to practice theory (the topic has been examined extensively by both STS and Actor network theory: see Latour, 2000; Hinchliffe, 2009), how these themselves are examined is new. Scalography however can also be used in an intentional yet reflexive way. As I suggested above, for practice-based studies and cognate approaches the problem is not that large phenomena are manufactured and used, but rather that this process is hidden from view, ignored or forgotten so that the map is confused with the territory. Social scientists are perfectly entitled to create partial, thumbnail abstracted representations of large phenomena for practical use as long as they do this in plain view and don't sever the link between representational practice and practice represented. In this sense, we can study large scale phenomena by taking the regular performances of a large number of similar activities across time and space as the object of interest. We can attribute a collective name to a number of individual instances and treat the resulting epistemic object as quasi-entity: for example, the 'macro practice' or 'practical regime' of showering, shopping in supermarkets, washing, teaching, cycling and trading in the market (all cases discussed in Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Such representational and processual quasi-entities can then be used to construct narratives of growth, survival and disappearance at a large spatial and temporal scale. The critical reflexive step is refrain from granting such quasi-entities direct causal power. Growth, competition and disappearance must also be explained by reference to specific events, local conditions and ordinary practices. This manoeuvre, which has been successfully adopted by a number of practice oriented scholars (see, e.g., Warde, 2005; Shove, Pantzar and

Watson, 2012; Shove and Spurling, 2013), lends itself to studying the relative success of practices in terms of competition for practitioners (their time and attention) and other resources ‘consumed’ by the practice. We can thus explain why showering seems to have won the competition with bathing, at least in most Western countries, by focussing on how an incremental changes of techniques, know-how, and ways of understanding bodily cleanliness came together to ‘created a space for showering to challenge the previously dominant way of doing bodily cleansing (that is bathing)’ (Southerton, Warde, and Hand, 2004: 42). By focussing on the particular connections between the ‘infrastructural, technological, rhetorical, and moral positioning of showering visa-a visa bathing’ (Hand, Shove and Southerton, 2005 :15) the approach provides an alternative, practice-based explanation of the process of ‘diffusion’ and how local innovations turn into large scale phenomena. It also leaves plenty of room for, and in fact invites us to take into account, individual calculation (costs), social mechanism (imitation and fashions) and affective as well as preconscious elements (for example the subconscious interpellation of cleanliness associated with late modernity: see Leader, 2002). By the same token, the approach also allows us to reason in terms of alliances, mutual support between practices and their components and even competitive appropriation. For example, the rapid success of car mobility can be explained by the fact that cars first shared and then appropriated (or ‘stole’) skills, material forms and even spaces that belonged to competing systems of mobility: horse carts, cycles and in certain case buses and train (Urry, 2004; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Finally and most important, the approach can be offered to practitioners who can use it to question regimes, ask how they were established, what different arrangements are possible and what it would take to transition to them. All this is at a level of detail that is compatible with practitioners’ daily experience and that they can therefore grasp.

In summary, by partially ‘entifying’ practices themselves and becoming reflexive scalographers, practice-oriented scholars open the possibility of studying practices in ways that are precluded by the other two approaches. We can thus learn interesting things by counting the frequency and variation of practices in time and across locales and studying them historically –something that other approaches struggle to do. This approach has the benefit of making room for contradictions, conflicts and tensions in the study of practices, all elements that tend to disappear when large phenomena are built from the bottom up as in the strategies described in the two previous sections (see Kwa, 2001 for a discussion). It, however, is not without its own risks. One of the main challenges facing this third strategy is to maintain a consistently reflexive attitude towards what is only ever temporary ‘entification’. It is easy to

slip between the step of constructing practices as analytical objects to reifying them as a ‘thing with boundaries’.. Questions about “What is practice?” and “What are its limits?” soon emerge, mostly because we are so bad at dealing with performances (instead of entities). The solution is to move quickly into Mrs & Mr Bourdieu’s dining room and ask “in which building did it happen?” and “who did it”. In short it is important not to get lost in this complex game of foregrounding and backgrounding and to remember that it is a game of our own making.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let’s return to the initial issue of how a practice-base sensitivity can be used to address big issues and ‘large scale phenomena’ The above discussion suggests that the question admits multiple related answers, even among practice-oriented scholars who subscribe to a relational and flat ontology (Ermibayer, 1997). Taken together these answers, which very often can be used in combination, suggest that adopting a practice – based orientation offers some specific affordances vis-à-vis competing or cognate orientations.

First, practice-based approaches join forces with other relational sociologies and invite us to rethink certain entrenched distinctions starting with the idea that micro and macro phenomena can be cleanly distinguished. Big issues exist, of course, but big issues do not necessarily concern large scale phenomena, and not all large scale phenomena are big issues. Large scale phenomena do not necessarily happen in places that are different from where ‘small’ ones occur. Presence and distance are not opposed and are only occasionally concerned with space and time. Large scale and global phenomena are not always things that can be seen from space.

Second, practice-based approaches suggest that large phenomena are made and that differences in scale are produced in practice and through practices. They also invite us to manipulate, play, and experiment with different methods of scale-making. The advantage of practice approaches vis-à-vis other theoretical sensitivities stems from its capacity to use more than one scale at the same time and to skilfully move between them. The challenge is how to conceive, talk and investigate large phenomena without letting old views return by the backdoor. The actors we encounter in our explorations also use abstract/vague entities such as ‘culture’ or ‘the spirit of the times’ to account for concrete activities. We therefore need to be vigilant and to refrain from colluding with them in believing that these abstractions are anything other than convenient summaries. This does not mean that ‘these abstractions and

summaries do not *do* anything’ as suggested by Collins (1981: 989). Abstractions such as ‘energy consumption’ and ‘leadership’ in fact do a lot of work, for example, in parliament, in the stock market and in workplaces all over. Moreover their capacity to produce effects is related to their assumed correspondence to what they summarise. Our job is not to denounce them as false idols but rather to ask through what practices and technologies of representation were they produced, in which observable scenes of actions were these summaries created and, most important, what effects do they produce when deployed in practice?

Finally, practice-based approaches allow us to abandon the idea that producing big abstract theories is the only way to study large scale phenomena. On the contrary, much is to be gained from resisting the temptation to study types of large phenomena as such<sup>ii</sup> –.

Accordingly, the objects of inquiry for practice-based approaches are not the financial market or schooling in the abstract but rather the market of reinsurance at the turn of the millennium or the school system in Alaska or in Australia. As soon as we set out to study ‘the market’ or ‘institutions’ or ‘the state’ in abstract theoretical terms (even if we use the word practice a thousand times), we abandon a practice oriented project and start doing something else. In the words of Collins (1981) ‘sociological concepts can be made fully empirical only by grounding them in a sample of the typical micro-events that make them up (p.988)’.

There are many good reasons for following this advice, but at least two in particular are worth mentioning here. First, there is increasing evidence that the idea that good social science is a science of abstract entities and systems is simply a symptom of what in jest we could call ‘economics envy’ or ‘Parson’s disease’. As Heuts and Mol (2013) nicely put it, ‘crafting a rich theoretical repertoire... does not work by laying out solid abstracting generalisations, but rather by adding together ever shifting cases and learning from their specificities’ (p.127).

Second, the type of representations produced by practice-based approaches are what practitioners often ask for. While practitioners at times make use of abstract concepts in making sense of problematic situations and charting new and unknown territories, they are always thirsty for descriptions of their daily practical concerns. This is because practitioners learn from others through hints, tips and examples; practitioners are always on the lookout for ideas and nuggets of wisdom that they can steal. Practice theory thus allows us to produce representations that practitioners can then use to talk about their own practice – and to thereby do something about it.

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<sup>i</sup> I think of social practices in terms of orderly regimes of mediated material and discursive activities that are aimed at identifiable objects and have a history, a constituency and a normative and affective dimension. For reasons of space I will not discuss or defend this stipulation in the present text. Readers are referred to other texts where I do so (Nicolini, 2012; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> I am in debt to Pedro Monteiro for this observation.