

What is a Social Practice?

1. Methodological Preliminaries

I ask the question, "What is a social practice?" from within critical theory.

Social critics don't merely systematize common sense or popularize scientific findings. Social critics seek to inform, and possibly shape, public opinion with clear and careful thinking, well-established facts, and moral insight. They will of course draw on and engage both common sense and scientific thought, but they do so without taking a slavish attitude toward either. (Shelby 2014, 63)

Why, then, should a social critic be interested in social practices? Some reasons:

- Practices are a site of socially organized agency, a nexus where individual agency is enabled and constrained by social factors.
- Practices produce, distribute, and organize, things taken to have value: material goods, time, knowledge, status, authority/power, health/well-being, security, etc.
- Practices are, at least in some sense, "up to us," so are a potential site for change.

Practices: Timing of meals; cuisine; clothing styles

Interconnected practices = structures: Transportation systems; Education systems; Market exchange/wage labor

2. Phenomena

a. Practices provide a "stage setting" for action

In the case of actions specified by practices it is logically impossible to perform them outside the stage-setting provided by those practices, for unless there is the practice, and unless the requisite proprieties are fulfilled, whatever one does, whatever movements one makes, will fail to count as a form of action which the practice specifies. (Rawls 1955, 25)

However, practices can be more or less explicit, transparent, rule-governed, or intentional. On the less explicit...intentional end, practices are certain regularities or patterns in behavior that are guided by shared schemas acquired through primitive forms of social mentality (including cognition, affect, experience). On the rationalistic end of the spectrum, the patterns in behavior are guided by highly sophisticated forms of social cognition and intentional agency (McGeer 2007, Zawidzki 2013).

- This suggests that anything we might reasonably count as social agency takes place within a domain structured by shared schemas for interpreting and coordinating with others. Let's consider the coordinating role of practices a bit further.

b. Coordination and Social Meaning

Human beings are distinguished from other mammals by their extreme sociality. Because of this, solving problems of coordination with our fellows is our most pressing ecological task. (Zawidzki 2008, 198)

Culture defines the terms of coordination for a group. William Sewell captures the idea: 'Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society...' (Sewell 2005, 49). He continues:

This implies that users of culture will form a semiotic community – in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions [/meanings] and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action. To use the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, they will be capable of using the "grammar" of the semiotic system to make understandable "utterances." (49)

There are two ways in which culture can facilitate coordination. One is by shaping our cognition, perception, attention, and memory.

...race belongs to the manifold of social reality, and helps structure our experience, our immediate experience, of the world. Often enough, we directly perceive racial phenomena: we just see race, the way we just see home runs and rude gestures....Black people look dangerous, or unreliable, or like bad credit risks... (p. 22) (Also Siegel 2011)

A second way that culture aids coordination is by taking the concepts, scripts, and meanings to be normative for members of the group. So when encountering others who are similarly socialized, we begin with the assumption that they will do things the "right way" and feel entitled to criticize them if they don't (Zawidzki 2008, 204-5).

- So, thus far, we've seen that practices (a) provide a "stage setting" for action that gives us roles to occupy and reasons to act, and (b) do so by drawing on shared (and normatively laden) meanings and schemas for experiencing and interpreting the world.

c. Fragmentation and Agency

Culture is not a hegemonic "system," but a frame for agency.

- i) Tools: Ann Swidler (1986) suggests that '[c]ulture influences action...by shaping a

repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action' (p. 273).

ii) Vectors: social vectors provide 'forms of causality that are conduit-like rather than strictly cause-effect, directional rather than distinctly determinative, and relational rather than cleanly linear.' (Richardson 2014, 221) Social structures provide, in effect, a topology upon which specific causal factors interact to produce probabilistic effects; cultural scripts and narratives create valleys in the topology along with agency easily flows. However, although it may be easier to flow in the valley, we have choices to climb the peaks instead.

○ It would seem, then, that practices draw on cultural "tools" to provide "paths" across the social landscape in ways that facilitate coordination. But how should we understand this notion of landscape?

d. Materiality

What things in the world *are* is never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them – this also depends on their preexisting physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors. The world is recalcitrant to our predications of meaning. (Sewell 2005, 51)

The social landscape is malleable, but not infinitely so. Something becomes a *resource* when its value (economic, aesthetic, moral, prudential) is recognized. It becomes, thereby, a potential site of a coordination problem. Access to it is something to be managed because access to resources is, e.g., a source of power or pleasure, etc. *Schemas* evolve to enable us to perceive, produce, and organize the resource. In interaction with the resource and each other, we reconceive it, change it, and prompt new responses. Thinking and acting evolve along with the object/artifact. (Rabbits)

The fact that we rely on cultural schemas to interact not only with each other, but also the world, changes the world to conform to the schemas we bring to it. This has significant epistemic effects: the schemas we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped. Thus it becomes difficult to change schemas, for they appear to have epistemic warrant.

e. Explanation and Interpretation

Accounts of social practices fall on continuum between "thin" and "thick" conceptions. Thin: practices are simply patterns of interaction, or regularities in our

behavior. Thick: relevant patterns emerge because the participants "understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way." (Martin 2009, 7)

If one adopts a thick conception of practices according to which the existence of a practice depends shared or complementary intentions, this leaves no gap "between the subjective conceptions of actors and the action patterns that an analysis might uncover." (Martin 2009, 6) However, a social critic will want to allow the theoretical possibility that agents can be confused or misled about the social practices that they enact; also different agents can participate in the same practice with different intentions. (Men opening doors for women) For this reason, neither social practices nor social relations need be transparent: I may not understand the nature of my relations with others and may actually misunderstand our relationship. (God's chosen people.) An explanatory social theory may explicitly debunk social self-understandings by re-describing our social relations in terms we, the participants, would reject.

We should also be wary of a view that takes social practices to be just any regularity in behavior or interaction. The postulation of something as a practice plays an explanatory role. To identify something as an instance of a practice is to situate it within a web of social meanings that function to coordinate our behavior around resources. The interpretation of meaning, however, is open to contestation.

3. Practices as Interdependent Schemas and Resources

Take schemas to include the array of social meanings, concepts, symbols, scripts, tropes, etc., that provide the tools of culture, then

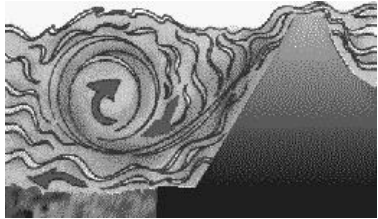
Practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources "when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time." (Sewell 1992, 13); sets of interdependent practices constitute social structures.

Further, a '*cultural technē*' is the schematic aspect of a social structure. An '*ideology*' is a cultural *technē* that partly constitutes an unjust structure.

4. Example: Racism

I suggest that racism is constituted by an interconnected web of unjust social practices that unjustly disadvantage certain racial groups, e.g., residential segregation, police brutality, biased hiring and wage inequity, educational disadvantage, etc. These are not random practices, but are connected by a racist *technē*.

What explains enduring racial inequality/injustice? Racial inequality is a dynamic homeostasis (Mallon 2003, Boyd 1999). Plausibly, any stable society is a dynamic



homeostasis. The economy, the culture, the geographic conditions, the food supply, the legal system, transportation system etc., enable individuals to coordinate.

There are multiple determinants of social stratification in a society. And in a stratified society, there are mechanisms that stably position groups hierarchically along these dimensions. But the system is dynamic: although relatively stable, there is a historical development. For example, in the case of African-Americans, slavery evolved into Jim Crow segregation, which evolved into the current hierarchy maintained by mass incarceration and felonization, ghettoization, economic marginalization, and cultural stigma.

6. Conclusion