

Towards a new linguistic and social paradigm: from individual creativity to community of practice

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The sociology of practice contains the conceptual resources necessary to address what had been an important issue for the philosophy of praxis, namely, the relationship between large-scale historical processes and subjective experience. Practice entered the vocabulary of social scientific research and featured in several strands of the social sciences themselves in the 1990s. Schatzki (2001) conceptualises social changes as configurations of significant differences in sets of material arrangements and practices. The author argues that chains of action combine with material processes and events to cause social change. Practices are approaches that highlight what is situated, observable and meaningful, i.e. social events performed linguistically or through body movement and/or with the contribution of material artefacts. This scholar argues that practice theories present pluralistic and flexible images rooted in both social life and local contexts that successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities, so much so that both social order and individuality result from practices.

Keywords: *community of practice; individual creativity; practices and social change; language as a social practice, tacit knowing.*

1. Language and “practical knowledge”

Language, acquired phylogenetically in the course of humanity’s development, constitutes the hinge between behaviour and cognition, between human and acquired: it is innate in *homo sapiens*, but each language is learned within a culture enabling the acquisition of all that such culture knows, individually and collectively (Morin 1989, 135). The formation of a subject, in its broadest sense, can facilitate knowledge-rich processes that occur through “doing” and “saying” in work practice, incorporating meanings and values (technical, cultural, historical, relational, etc.). Practical knowledge is characterized by the fact that its content is formed, in part, in the concrete situation in which it is realized; that is why it is also

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called “situated” knowledge. Piaget (1974), discussing symbolic content, also speaks of the ego’s need for expansion, compensation, or simply continuation of real life. Affective life, like intellectual life, is a continuous and interdependent adaptation since feelings repress the interests and values of actions of which intelligence constitutes the structure.

“Social facts” are manners of doing and thinking, acting and feeling, that are external to individuals who conform to them at all times (Durkheim 1978). This externality causes “social facts” to exert a strong influence on individuals, who realize that they can be similar to other members of society. Indeed, understanding improves work practices and develops knowledge, both of the individual and social contexts in general. Formation for work depends, in part, on how we understand work: not only as a form of acquired knowledge, nor just as a place of application of acquired or acquirable knowledge, but also of training and standardized learning of knowledge and skills. This type of formative “didactics” is based on the understanding of different work practices, and such understanding depends in part on language practices (Tacconi 2014). In recent decades there has been an epistemological shift in work practice that has also given room for the reflective shift in the way formation is conceived and carried out.

From this perspective, work is no longer regarded as something that should come after a period of training, but rather as a specific formative place where it is possible to develop even theoretical personal skills that were acquired through what, for several decades now, has been known as “practical knowledge” (*Practice-based Studies*), centred on a reflective school in which the term “practice” is to be understood as “technical rationality” (Schön 2016). What becomes relevant, therefore, is the knowledge embedded in the practices and artefacts that are produced by working and putting into practice the tacit knowledge of those who work, and their ability to make explicit the processes of knowledge transfer within and between organizations. Work practices, then, are seen as modes of action and knowledge, emerging *in situ* from the dynamics of interactions (Bruni et al. 2007, 23).

Practical rationality is an enactment of knowledge born out of theoretical “knowing”, capable of applying a reflective rationality that stimulates learning, and facilitates and brings out implicit awareness of the meanings at play in experience (hence the targeted internships) (Schön 2016). While learning, the environment is defined as a space in which actors are “active participants” in the practices of social communities and in the construction of their identity in relation to these communities (Wenger 1998).

Language is deeply social and has a hidden power of which people are not always aware. Bourdieu (2009) observes that subjects are not always aware of the meaning of what they do: in fact, discourses are almost always resources that can

be drawn on to produce new discourses, and these are not indicative of colonization, but rather of an appropriation that is, in turn, a form of learning which can then become a tool for emancipation (Fairclough 2003).

The body is conceived as a medium and instrument of practical knowledge; moreover, the embodiment of cognitive structures is just the other side of the cognitive structuring of the body, regarded by Bourdieu (2009) as an instrument of knowledge in which discontinuity or rupture may be seen as innovation and creativity. For Bourdieu, language not only names things but makes them, shaping the perception and representation of the world. Linguistic exchanges also determine power relations between speakers and their respective groups. This relationship gives discourse certain properties that allow distinctions to be made across categories².

Practical action, governed by *habitus*, may result in strategies since it determines conducts or practices that optimize performance and effects. The first trait that distinguishes practical knowledge from theoretical knowledge, from abstract speculations or scientific knowledge, can be found in the fact that it is implicit in action (Schön 2016); it is a “tacit knowing”. This means that when subjects are engaged in an activity, when they try to solve novel problems or perform a task, while demonstrating expertise, they can hardly describe it, and can hardly explain/justify how and why they make certain decisions. Teaching, parenting, designing an educational intervention: these are all experiences that incorporate intuitive, creative and implicit “know how” that is not immediately explicable. In this sense, the “knowing how to do” is not immediately formalized into models or procedures, it is not systematized or explicable like a scientific theory. Only after the action is completed can the subjects understand how and why they made certain choices, pursued certain commitments or approached problems from a particular point of view. As Polanyi (1979) would say, they embody tacit knowing. This shows that most often those who are engaged in certain activities can hardly describe or formalize their expertise, i.e., the implicit “know how”, proving that we know many more things than we can explain (Mezirow et al. 2011). The “knowing how to do” is not systematized and explainable as if it were a known theory. It arises from the reflective processes that, at that moment, seem to offer the best solution to contingent problems (Fabbri 2007). The understanding of one’s action occurs only at the end of the action itself,

² “Categorize” comes from Latin, meaning to order, to classify, to distinguish into categories. The verb means “to accuse publicly” and, therefore, to judge. Thus, it means to create structured and structuring differences through words.

under the guidance of the “tacit mind” that allowed one to approach problems from a particular perspective (Cranton 1997).

For Bourdieu (2009, 5), the *habitus* is a system of dispositions acquired by the actor over time, beginning in childhood, which the system introjects as mental structures. These outstanding principles of worldview enable one to act as if there is a rule that goes far beyond the rules (Santoro 2009). Practice-based studies are not a homogeneous field, nonetheless they are bound together by the fact that they view work as a “situated activity” taking place in a context in which people and technologies collaborate or collide, and that it is accomplished through a set of practical knowledge.

2. Practice-based studies

“Know-how” indicates the set of knowledge required to perform a particular job. This term refers to knowledge and rules of procedures that are acquired through research activities or on-the-job experience (Ryle 2007). Also included in “know-how” are cognitive skills, that are not easy either to verbalize or to transmit.³ The meaning of this expression is close to “tacit knowledge” or “practical knowledge”, which, together with skills, i.e., competencies, are concepts implicitly used by people to give “shape” to practice and, therefore, give “meaning” to their experience. Practical knowledge is distinct from technical knowledge because the former is implicit in action (Schön, 2016) and is part of a tacit plan (Polanyi 1979).

The social field, as a field of embodied and materially interwoven practices, is culturally organized around shared practices. The community of practices encompasses resource fields, knowledge domains, struggles over resources; ultimately, interactions are not always friendly. Moreover, the community of practices is a space where knowledge is produced, but also negotiated and contested. This space is understood as the site of social and political change through collective learning (Schatzki 2001).

New categories for studying situated work have developed and focused on the collective and corporate dimensions of “doing together in situation”. Thus, one can also speak of the category of work as a narrative emphasizing the link between the interactive features of discourse and the occasion on which it is produced. Narratives, e.g. of what has happened or is to be expected to happen, also highlight that work is an activity requiring communication skills and, like discursive practices,

³ The difference between *know-how* and *know that*: the former is based on experience, the latter on rules and operating procedures.

it is constituted by the situated doing, but also by the occupational identity of the narrator. Knowing how to do originates from professional skills that give the ability to let people “know the trade”, alongside “knowing how to be”. In the present day, the transformation of work is bringing about an increase in immaterial, relational, intangible and innovative work (Negrelli 2005, 14). In industrialized countries, work in so-called “knowledge” societies is currently undergoing a transition from a natural resource-based economy to an intellectual resource-based economy. Situated work refers to the fact that it is mediated by the body, technology, objects, rules, discourses, and cultural history, all of which are expressed in such mediations.

The community of practice, then, is a network of relationships between people, activities and the environment, in continuous communication and encounter with other communities. Activities take shape through social interactions, so specific skills and experiences become part of the individual and stabilize within the community itself (Bruni et al. 2007, 37)⁴. Tacconi (2014) notes that one should look at work as a peculiar place of formation, in which it is possible to develop the personal skills that used to be considered not practical but theoretical training paths. When we talk about practices, the focus shifts from the “person doing” to the “doing”, which is attributed not only to human workers but also to machines. Practice is therefore the joint effect of people and things working together: humans no longer have absolute supremacy over the non-human, to be understood as inert matter. Practices are aimed at the work activity that uses the resources at hand (Bruni et al. 2007, 16). All practices are socially recognized and supported modes of performing certain activities in a certain way. Behind every practice there is a community of practitioners consisting of legitimate participants of a “situated doing”, which is understood as the correct mode⁵. Society may not be understood as a defined structure, but as a performance that continually needs to be fine-tuned. Practices enact (perform) their conditions of practicability (Garfinkel 1967). Communication itself is not a mere practice, but a process laying the foundation of our relationship with the world; it is the essence of our social being. Communication means building relationships, weaving bonds among individuals belonging to a community. Language enables people to construct the

⁴ Among the new practices, teleconsultation emerges as a new type of medical practice: a kind of hybridization of preexisting practices compelling the two specialists to embrace new ways of working, and thus to learn to act as “a whole” within different types of knowledge and relationships (Bruni et al. 2007, 38).

⁵ Garfinkel (1967), Bourdieu (2009 and Giddens (1990) and Schütz (2018) have contributed to the study of practices, all of whom are in some way indebted to Schütz and his definition of the social world as a reality consisting of many “finite provinces of meaning”.

meaningful experiences they have in their existence and to narrate them to themselves and others.

One can understand the social as a field of embodied and materially interwoven practices, centrally organized around shared practical understandings (Schatzki 2001, 12). These practices include aspects of domination and conflict that, in any case, are present in social interactions; light can be shed on the dynamics of relational power within knowledge domains. Thus, negotiation of meaning in community of practices often occurs when taken-for-granted notions of identity (“who we are” and “what we do”) become unstable. At the same time, the collective is what enables the relationship between individuals, making them psychically individuated subjects, but as subjects: human beings are connected to each other in the collective not so much as individuals, but as subjects, that is, as beings containing something pre-individual. Individuations, psychic and collective, stand in a reciprocal relationship and allow us to define the category of the trans-individual, that is, of internal (psychic) and external (collective) individuation, in which the individual participates from a pre-individual reality, in a step-by-step process towards individuation (Simondon 2006, 197).

3. Conclusion

Knowledge does not need to be acquired before exposure to practice, and then applied to concrete situations: it must emerge from the action itself. When reflecting on action, knowledge is grasped as embedded in what one does, or as required by what one plans to do. There is a form of learning that does not come through words, but through experience, that is, learning by doing, as discussed by Dewey (2014), giving the subject a relational protagonism when learning. This provides access to a real form of “tacit knowledge”, which has to do with practical skill and can be transmitted through concrete example.

Every society requires a coherent “tacit plan”, which often lacks. Shared meaning is indeed the cement of society (society, in its broad sense, possesses a very incoherent set of meanings). Truth emerges from the tacit mind, which, in order to be realized, must make meanings coherent if the perception of truth or truth participation is what is aimed at. This last sentence refers to Bohm’s second foundational idea, namely: what does it mean to understand wholes? According to Bohm, the whole is too much, there is no way by which thought can get hold of the whole, because thought can only abstract, delimit and define. The idea of abstracting instead of considering the whole is illustrated by Buber, the existentialist philosopher, when he asks what it means to fully understand the

wholeness of a person: it is simply to see a person as a Thou, “neighbourless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament” (Buber 2011, 42).

Schütz (2018) makes a fundamental contribution for the beginning of a phenomenology of the living world as a basis for the foundation of social sciences. He shows that thematic, interpretive and motivational relevance structure and guide human actions in everyday life, and they reveal the significance when certain events emerge from the mundane. They play a fundamental part in establishing and developing the “background of consciousness”, that is, the tacit consciousness we carry with us, and on the basis of which we interpret all reality. Schütz studies the genesis of the structure of theoretical and practical life to arrive at a complete theory of social action.

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