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Book review:
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How to conduct a practice-based study:
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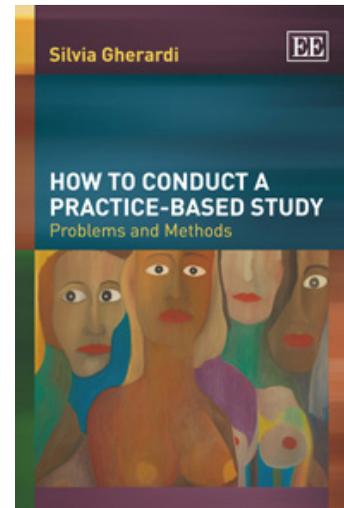
Silvia GHERARDI (2013).
How to conduct a practice-based study:
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Practice-based studies of work, organizing, innovation and technology have attracted increasing interest in recent years. The label 'practice-based studies' and the significant dissemination of the concept (Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni, 2010) has given rise to a range of research orientations and perspectives associated with the notion of practice. Given the variety of these approaches and interests it is becoming difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to identify any common ground between them. It seems fair to state that its methodological and theoretical systematization is just about to begin. However, despite the variety of research interests in play, the common starting point of the so-called practice-based approaches in organization studies is a desire to shed new light on organizational phenomena by getting closer to the 'real' work in organizations. Following the motto 'bringing work back in' (Barley & Kunda, 2001), one criticism to have been leveled at traditional approaches in the field is that they have been concerned with a formal, static and rather reductionist analysis of organizations by focusing on their structural aspects only, thereby neglecting the manifold practices that are performed at all levels of the organization (Gherardi, 2000; Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow, 2003). In contrast, practice-based approaches are meant to get a grip on the various deeply embedded processes of acting and doing, shedding light on the everyday activities performed within the organization (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). So far, practice-based studies have been most influential in debates centering around our understanding of learning and knowing, they have enriched our thinking about technology in organizations, they help shed new light on the way strategies are actually accomplished in organizations, they provide a novel perspective for our understanding of routines and coordination processes, and, more broadly, they allow us to understand that organizing is a socio-material entanglement.

Practice-based studies have epistemological and methodological implications for our understanding of, and the way we study, organizations which are impossible to separate from one another. Whilst there seems to be a broad consensus that on a theoretical level practice-based studies aim at overcoming problematic dualisms such as action/structure and human/non-human and

that on a methodological level they go hand-in-hand with an ethnographic orientation, there is less clarity as to how the two are actually theoretically intertwined. Taking practice-based studies seriously entails more than simply studying individual actions on a micro-level; it means taking into account the epistemological implications of the concept of practice.

This is precisely the point which Silvia Gherardi's recent book sets out to make. It was Silvia Gherardi who actually gave rise to the concept of practice in organization studies in the 1990s, and the special issue of Organization which she edited in 2000 certainly offered the cornerstone from which the debate departed. In this new work, Gherardi aims to review and consolidate the debate, which has gained significant momentum since those early beginnings. In particular, the book familiarizes readers with the most important topics and methods that can be included under the heading of practice-based studies, whilst at the same time pointing to their inextricable epistemological and methodological underpinnings.

Thus, the title of the book is slightly misleading, since there is a clear intention to avoid methodological simplification in the sense of providing routinized or standardized prescriptions how to conduct practice-based studies. Instead, the book gives a very instructive introduction and overview of the most significant approaches used within those practice-based studies which might already be seen as "classics". Beyond just introducing this work, however, Silvia Gherardi provides illustrative examples from original data (collected by her and others) and shows how these have been interpreted; the book thereby familiarizes readers with the practice of carrying out practice-based studies. Instead of providing clear guidelines, the book uses many original data to demonstrate how such work has been done in the past, without going so far as to suggest that this is the only and best way to go about it. The reader thus becomes a sort of apprentice who follows this competent author's approach as she goes about her research. The book works on the premise that competent qualitative research is itself a practice that can only be learned by sharing the practice; it is therefore a socialization into practice-based studies.

The book is more than an oeuvre on methodology, however; in introducing the different approaches, Silvia Gherardi first points to their epistemological underpinnings and then illustrates the methodological practices which follow on from them. This is particularly valuable since it ultimately clarifies that adopting a practice perspective entails making both epistemological and methodological choices. As a first 'cut' through the various approaches of practice-based studies, the book differentiates between three perspectives through which practices can be studied and interpreted: from the outside, from the inside and from the point of view of the social effects which they produce. According to her system of categorization, studying practices from the outside means that practices are used as a lens to study the fine details of how people use available resources to accomplish work. Seen this way, practices refer to a set of activities: a patterned way of doing things. Practices can also be studied from the inside, however, by taking their normative-epistemological power seriously. From an internal perspective one notices the normative power of practices, not in the sense of a best practice of how things should be done but in the sense that practices represent the accepted, good ways of doing things. Practices reflect, sustain, produce and reproduce norms; on the one hand they define the norms of a particular group, and on the other hand they reproduce those

norms through ongoing practicing: "actors share a practice if their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct or incorrect practice' (Rouse, 2001: 190). This rather unreflected process of reproduction leads to the institutionalization of these practices; they become the governing and accepted ways of doing and performing. Thirdly, it is possible to study the social effects which practices produce and reproduce. Practices are thus the unit of analysis for understanding how social relations (like class relations or notions of gender) are produced, why certain technologies 'succeed' over others and how power relations evolve and are sustained.

The main part of the book consequently follows this broad structure: The first chapter introduces the reader to practices as working practices and shows the situated nature of working and organizing. This makes us aware that many practice-based studies have their origins in phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, which developed the idea of situated action. This idea is taken further in organization studies to include research on knowing and learning. In particular, the organizational learning debate arose as a precursor to the question of how practical knowledge is created, disseminated and sustained in practice. The notion of knowing in practice points to the inextricable relationship between knowing and practice. Consequently, the first chapter is designed to introduce the reader to these fundamental underpinnings of practice-based studies and shows the methodological implications of this paradigm shift. The second chapter takes this thought one step further by showing how coordination centers became the main reference point for the studies of knowing in practice. Building on the studies of coordination at the London Bakerloo control room by Heath and Luff (1992) and on Suchman's (1997) study of air traffic control centers, the interaction between humans and non-humans is given central importance for our understanding of practices. These studies show that technology is not an abstract artifact but rather a practice in itself and in this sense is inseparable from its enactment. Technology as practice has since then been one of the classic domains of practice-based studies and the book offers valuable insights into how such studies have been conducted.

The third chapter starts digging deeper, since practices are now seen from the 'inside' and, in particular, their embodied and aesthetic qualities are highlighted. In this chapter, Gherardi uses well-chosen examples to demonstrate that the body is the seat of sensible knowledge and therefore practices have tacit, sensory and aesthetic qualities. The book provides very detailed examples of how sensible knowledge results from working with the hands, the feet, the ears, the nose and the mouth with feeling and tools and shows how such studies can be conducted. The notion of sensible knowledge opens new avenues for understanding and describing practices, and helps in explaining better how aesthetic judgments about taste (the like or dislike of certain practices) are formed and sustained.

In the fourth chapter, these considerations are expanded to include not only the sensible body but also the technologies used in performing a particular practice. It introduces the reader to the notion of relational epistemology, which stresses that practices are not simply empirical objects (entities) to be studied but rather practices are presented as a mode of ordering the social in which doing and knowing are not separated and the knowing subject and the known object emerge in the ongoing interaction. The focus is therefore not on

objects but on the processual relations and the continuous becoming of subject and object, which are mutually constitutive of each other. This fundamental and necessary epistemological positioning of practice-based studies allows us to shift to the notion of socio-materiality, which holds that the social and the material are mutually constitutive of each other and inextricably related: there is nothing social that is not material and nothing material that is not social (Orlikowski, 2007). In order to present to the reader both the epistemological and the methodological consequences of this important shift towards a relational epistemology which emphasizes socio-materiality, numerous empirical examples are presented granting the reader deep insights into how such studies are actually conducted. Since the socio-material perspective within practice-based studies is just about to emerge, this chapter is enormously valuable for anyone who wishes to conduct technology studies: it provides the first overview of the work done in this area so far.

Chapter Five is again devoted to the study of practices from the inside and stresses their material-semiotic qualities. Just as practices are carried out through sensory knowledge and the body, people also work with language and communication situated in their interactions. Here, Gherardi points to conversation analysis and the sociology of communication as intellectual roots of practice-based studies. Furthermore, she introduces the concept of 'discursive practices' in order to refer to situated forms of the linguistic mediation of work activities. Just like the 'material' practices introduced before, discursive practices are also understood as unfolding normative power since they regulate what can be said in a particular community and are learned and performed in practice. With various and very telling empirical examples, Gherardi differentiates between institutional discursive practices, material-semiotic practices in which talk is subordinate to activity, camouflaging practices where backstage talk is hidden, more reflective communicative practices where talk is used to understand and speak about practice, practices where talk is used to overcome co-presence, and practices where talk is used to create a specific identity of a community. Overall, this chapter is a very instructive and interesting compilation of work that points to the communicative characteristics of practices and connects practice-based studies with communication studies. Indeed, the connection which is made in this chapter is both underexplored and very promising. A communicative perspective for our understanding of practices is just about to emerge and the present chapter does a brilliant job in organizing and exemplifying the research in this area whilst at the same time connecting it with its intellectual roots.

In Chapter Six the book turns to another prominent theme in practice-based studies which has its origins in workplace studies and the sociology of work: the relationship between organizational rules and what people actually do in their situated practices. Exploring the gap between what organizational rules prescribe and what is actually done and understanding how these rules are interpreted, how sense is made, how people learn these rules and how they apply them in different situations builds one of the most prominent streams in organizational practice-based studies. Differentiating between rules as language and their use in specific situations as parole opened up entirely new perspectives for our understanding of how structure and action are interrelated and, as a result, how stability and change can be seen as dualities: mutually enabling and constraining forces. The chapter introduces the reader to the

intellectual roots of this debate and demonstrates with various empirical examples the potential of this important perspective for organizational studies. In Chapters Seven and Eight, the book makes a twist in its perspective: whilst in Chapters One to Six the performance of practices built the core, Chapter Seven turns to the social effects practices produce and is more methodological in nature. Here, Gherardi unfolds her concept of the texture of practices and shows, again with numerous examples, how practices are interwoven and come to constitute an entire field of practices. It is argued that practices cannot be studied and understood in isolation but instead build a connection in action. Studying a field of practices actually means understanding how connections come about, which connections are and are not established and why, and how connections are maintained or altered. Only then, it is argued in this chapter, can one understand the meaning and purpose of practices and their practitioners. In the methodological part the chapter introduces the interview with the double as an interesting and novel approach for gaining access to tacit and sensitive knowledge; this nonetheless has to be complemented with other techniques, such as participant observation or shadowing, in order not only to understand what the interviewee thinks about what he/she is doing but also to comprehend what is actually being done. More importantly, however, the spiral case study is introduced in the chapter as a means of mapping the texture of practices. With an example from her own research, Gherardi introduces the reader to this case-study method, which is of the utmost importance for analyzing the texture of practice. Chapter Eight picks up again on the study of communication and information technologies and familiarizes the reader with the different streams that use ethnographic methods for the study of technology: the computer-supported cooperative work stream, research interested in participatory design and workplace studies. All these research streams make extensive use of ethnographic methods for describing and understanding work in situations, and the chapter exemplifies how these studies are conducted. This also introduces us to a fascinating stream of ethnographic work.

The final chapter in the book aims to bring the different threads together again: it reviews the overall theoretical background that has generated the field of practice-based studies, while also systematizing the conceptual and analytical framework on which the book is based.

Overall, this book is a very commendable resource for all researchers interested in practice-based studies. It makes essential reading for all those who too often claim to engage in practice-based work without considering the intellectual and methodological roots of the field. This work is therefore far more than a methodological handbook; it makes readers aware of the rich intellectual traditions from which practice-based studies have originated, which have important consequences for the way we understand and study practices. It is demonstrated that practice-based research is not an easy-to-apply, easy-to-use umbrella concept for all the kinds of process research which are currently in vogue. Without understanding the theoretical and methodological implications of practice-based research, one cannot carry it out. Whilst Gherardi excels in introducing us to the manifold strands and roots of practice-based studies, the volume's inclusiveness may also be its weakness. On the one hand, the reader may decide not to read the book from beginning to end, focusing instead on a specific chapter; this provides the reader with rapid access to the particular problem being dealt with. On the other hand,

this gives the erroneous impression that it is possible to choose whether one wishes to study practices from the outside, from the inside or from the point of view of social consequences. In fact, though, this is not a matter of either/or: a serious study of organizational practices has to take all perspectives into account; otherwise, one does not really do justice to the concept. The sound theoretical underpinnings the volume offers are less inclusive than they may appear. Making this voice even stronger would have helped in carrying out even tougher cuts through the vast body of literature jumping on the bandwagon of practice-based studies. Because the concept is becoming so popular at the moment and thus risks losing its distinctiveness, it is crucial that we remind ourselves of its original intention and familiarize ourselves with its intellectual roots. The present book is a highly commendable means of doing that.

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