How Crisis Reveals the Structures of Practices

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The speed, scope and scale of changes wreaked by the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 onwards raise challenging questions for practice theorists. After all, practice theory has generally emphasized continuity. According to Reckwitz (2002, p. 249), practices are 'routinized types of behaviour'. For Nicolini (2012, p. 3) practices are 'very resilient and often difficult to change because, qua practices, they are taken for granted and often considered as part of the natural order of things'. Where practice theorists have explored change, they have often focused on slow-cooked transformations, for instance the spread of showering from the 1870s onwards (Shove et al., 2012), the emergence of the Kentucky bourbon industry in the mid-19th Century (Schatzki, 2019), or the decades-long shifts in the practices of strategy in modern Western businesses (Whittington, 2019). The Covid-19 changes have an intensity that is quite other to these leisurely evolutions.

Our argument here is that the Covid-19 crisis, challenging as it is, in fact provides an opportunity for practice theorists. As a set of extreme events, it exposes for further investigation structural features of practices along two dimensions, external and internal. These structural features help us address two particularly tough questions raised by initial observations of the crisis. The first concerns difference: how can we explain why some practices have changed quickly and radically, while other related practices have been relatively stable? People have stopped coming to the office, but they still carry out old meeting routines, only with different means – on Zoom, raising hands is virtual. We shall argue that part of the explanation for such differences lies in external structural relationships between practices. The second question involves trajectories in time: to what extent is it possible to go back to earlier practices after the crisis? When people do resume office work, the meaning of ostensibly similar behaviours may shift – the 'same old' is in

fact not quite the same. This problem of reversibility puts the spotlight on the internal structures of practices.

These questions of difference and time are important for more than a practice-based analysis of the Covid-19 crisis. Greater understanding of this crisis can help practice theory extend its range from slow transformations to the rapid changes characteristic of other sudden crises, whether societal-level (for instance the Global Financial Crisis) or organizational-level (for instance the threat of bankruptcy). Practice theory has the opportunity in Covid-19 to develop a more comprehensive approach to change, embracing the crisis-prone nature of our world. Beyond that, the extremity of the Covid-19 crisis may produce insights into the external and internal structures of practices that help explain not only change, but also practice theory's central theme of continuity.

Differential Practice Change

In order to explain why crisis situations prompt certain practices to change quickly and radically while other practices remain relatively stable, we first might examine external structural relationships. Practices do not happen in isolation but are always related to other practices. Schatzki (2019) speaks of practices being embedded within larger *constellations of practices*. The stratified nature of practices within constellations is liable to affect the propensity for change. Such stratification may be shaped in two ways: by relations of dependence and by the organizing principles of relationships.

First, practices might be more or less dependent on other practices within their constellation (Shove et al., 2012). One practice 'depends on a second when the world is such that the first can obtain something it needs only from a second' (Schatzki, 2019, p. 45). For example, the practice of gaming relies on practices of selling hardware and software. Such structures of dependence shape the way practices change. Strong relations of dependence typically constrain changes to the focal practice but they can also shift the burdens of adjustment, so that some practices change more than others (Seidl et al., forthcoming). In particular, crises are liable to trigger unreflective change according to the stratification of dependencies rather than a more measured weighing of costs and benefits. For example, as Covid-19 ravaged national educational constellations, some countries imposed radical changes on school examination practices to ensure results and timescales that were compatible with the traditional admissions practices of universities. Thousands of schools revolutionized their practices; although far fewer, universities maintained broad continuity.

Second, structural external relationships between practices in the same constellation may be shaped by these practices' 'organizing principles' (Schatzki, 2002). One important organizing principle is the telos. As Schatzki writes, all practices have 'a set of ends that participants should or may pursue' and which are 'incorporated into different participants' minds and actions' (Schatzki, 2002, p. 80). Another important organizing principle is the so-called general understanding, which are 'ethoses or general senses of things' (Schatzki, 2019, p. 30). As a result of these two organizing principles some practices are accepted as more central or fundamental while others are taken to be more peripheral or dispensable. That is, some practices become more important within their constellations because of a shared acceptance of their teloi and ethoses. As a consequence,

more peripheral practices might be readily changed in order to hold other more central practices stable. For example, despite its dangers of the Covid-19 crisis, voting in person was still widely allowed in the 2020 American presidential elections because this is understood as a central organizing principle of the nation's democracy. However, the party conventions that formally select the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates are more peripheral and accordingly they chose to vote virtually.

Reversibility of Practice Change

Related to our second question about the reversibility of practice change, we might need to address the internal structure of practices as well. Again practices' organizing principles are important, but here the focus is not on external relationships but on how these principles relate to other internal structural elements of the practice. In particular, the Covid-19 crisis highlights how adaptations in the behaviours of practices may impact the organizing principles of telos and ethos. These are liable to be particularly sensitive to experience over time: temporary adaptations leave scars. This has implications for reversibility. Post-crisis, old practices are not likely simply to snap back.

The Covid-19 crisis has prompted behavioural adaptations that shift the internal structures of practices. To start with, new behaviours might lead to a change of telos. Performance enables the discovery of additional or alternative ends (see Dittrich and Seidl, 2018). For example, online dating has changed during the crisis as the adoption of new video-conferencing technologies allows the public sharing of encounters. As participants use video dates to enhance their social media profiles, the telos of dating incorporates fame as well as romance. This change in the behaviours of daters during the crisis is liable to be irreversible as video technology not only makes initial dates safer and more convenient, but also offers addictive new rewards.

In a similar way, adaptations during the crisis may lead to permanent shifts in practice ethos. At a minimum, general understandings post-crisis will include an awareness of the contingency of the old practice; that is, the fact that a change in practice is possible. Based on this understanding, the original behaviours will lose their taken-for-granted status. For example, religions whose practices traditionally insist on weekly worship in sacred spaces have accepted virtual presence during the pandemic, in a way that may be hard to forget whatever religious leaders or texts might say. The temporary acceptance of virtuality is liable to have enduring implications not only for the performance of worship, but also for religious authority. Adaptations may also threaten the traditional 'virtues' (MacIntyre, 2013) associated with particular practices, with temporary compromises solidifying into permanent shifts in professional standards. For example, a general medical practitioner might switch to online consultations as an emergency measure at the start of the crisis, accepting that her treatment of patients might temporarily fall short of usual standards. However, this lapse in standards leaves a memory. For both medics and patients, over time new consulting behaviours routinize. A new ethos may generally emerge, in which the cold efficiency discovered in virtual workarounds becomes the norm, while the sensitivity and reassurance of traditional physical examinations are forgotten.

Directions for the Future

We argue that the Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity as much as a challenge for practice-based research. At a basic empirical level, Covid-19 may stimulate practice theorists to extend their range from slow transformations to the rapid, crisis-driven changes that are also a chronic feature of contemporary societies and organizations. But there are theoretical insight to be gained as well. Investigating puzzles such as the differential nature of practice change during crisis, or the possibility of reversing temporary change, highlights the importance of two structural dimensions of practices.

On the one hand, the external structure of relations between practices appears potentially helpful to explaining why some practices change radically, while others maintain relative stability. Dependencies within stratified constellations of practices define where the burden of major adjustment lands. Understanding the distribution of change requires more research on the stratification of practices within their constellations. On the other hand, the internal structure of practices, particularly the relationship between behaviours and organizing principles, needs fuller recognition for gauging the reversibility of change. Temporary changes in behaviour may uncover new teloi and subvert old ethoses. While surface behaviours may return, teloi and ethoses are more vulnerable to permanent change. Acknowledging this internal structure implies that revivified behaviours do not necessarily denote recovered practices: their purposes and assumptions may be permanently altered.

In sum, the Covid-19 crisis directs practice theorists' attention towards the external and internal structures of practices – relationships both between practices and inside them. Greater understanding of these structures can illuminate rapid change in general, going beyond this particular crisis. But the theoretical insights gained from the study of crisis may also shed light on the base-case for practice theory, practice continuity. There is symmetry in structural effects. Where in crisis practice dependencies determine the relative burdens of change, and behavioural adaptations influence the organizing principles of telos and ethos, the reverse may be true in normal times. Dependencies can constrain change: university admission practices impose standard examination systems on schools. Telos and ethos can rein back behavioural slippages: professional conscience nags practitioners back into line. The Covid-19 crisis provides insights into practice structures that are as good for normal continuity as for rapid change.

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