Methodological consequences of integrating explicitly concepts of social interaction in practice theoretical approaches


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Practice theoretical approaches seem to presuppose social interaction as an important part of the collective organisation of practices, thus also the patterns of reproduction and change of social life. In the research area of sociology of consumption, Warde (2005:133-35) underlines in his influential article that practices are not just coordinated entities, they are also constantly performed in order to exist as social entities. But although the importance of social interaction seems to be a working assumption in some of the key writings on use of practice theories in sociology of consumption (Shove et al, 2012; Warde, 2005), social interaction is here mostly treated implicitly, “dressed” conceptually as recognition or coordination (Røpke, 2009). The same kind of tendency appears to be the case in some of the most broadly used general contributions on practice theories. Here, social interactions are e.g. discarded as mental or symbolic exchanges (Reckwitz, 2002), or not explicitly defined (Schatzki, 2002).

My main argument in this paper is that if we as social scientific researchers agree that social interaction is one of the prerequisites for reproducing and changing practices, then we need to pay more attention to two analytical issues: First, how can social interactions be explicitly conceptualised within practice theories or in theoretical approaches that can be combined with a practice theoretical perspective? Second, what are the potential methodological consequences of conceptualising social interactions more explicitly and thus apparently put more weight on discursive elements of practices?

In the paper, I will discuss both issues on the basis of my research experiences in combining a practice theoretical perspective with a number of qualitative methods addressing social interaction and interpersonal communication. The discussions will take their starting point in examples from my empirical research in behaviour change campaigns, food and everyday life (Halkier, 2010).

My discussion of the first issue on theoretical conceptualisations of social interactions will address the potential of linking the performative element of practices with concepts of communication. The discussion will focus on combining conceptual elements from performance theory (Butler, 1990; Fenstermaker and West, 2002), already present in some versions of practice theories, with conceptual elements from the attempts to integrate a practice theoretical perspective in communication research (Couldry, 2004).

My specific discussion of the second issue on methodological consequences from conceptualising social interaction as (partly) discursive performances will address the analytical status of different qualitative data-production methods. There is an on-going discussion in the qualitative methodology literature on how to understand the differences and parallels between data based on participant observations of all kinds and interviews of all kinds (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003). This
discussion is central to methodological issues in using practice theories. In the general literature, there is a balance between the importance ascribed to the discursive and the tacit elements of practices, e.g. the basic concepts of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2002), and the conceptualisations of practices as organised by configurations (Reckwitz, 2002). However, there seems to be an up-coming tendency in applied use of practice theories to methodologically privilege participant observations and to criticise uses of interview data. I will argue that it is possible to methodologically combine the discursive and the tacit in valid ways by use of the understanding of social practicing as enactments in interaction (Atkinson and Coffey, 2003) which can characterise all types of qualitative data.

References


