

Can applying the practice sensibility involve a critical and radical approach to change processes?

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Abstract

The practice sensibility is an acquired way of seeing social practices in operation (Trowler, 2020). Its acquisition involves shifting in perception away from individualism and psychologism towards seeing recurrent practices in operation. This sensibility appreciates the structural conditioning of these practices by ideologies, discourses, symbolic structures as well as by contextually-specific materiality, power plays and intersubjectivities. But it also appreciates the agentic ability to reconfigure practices.

Social practice theory, from which this sensibility is derived, has been criticised for having a conservative approach to change, for not being critical and for being overly structurally determinist (Archer, 2008). The argument runs that practice theory explains stasis well, but cannot explain change, only describe it. This is because the theory of change, such as it is, in social practice theory, involves seeing changes as emergent from the past, as incremental and as heavily influenced and constrained by present practices and structures.

Change agents with a practice sensibility, say the critics, adopt a social democratic reformist approach which fails to challenge inequities of various sorts. Naidoo's think piece alerts us to the "erosion of criticality" within higher education, and sounds alarm bells about "the trap of cynicism and despair". Practice theory could be accused of under-reaching for the types of fundamental change which involve "thinking otherwise".

A **critical** practice sensibility, set out in this paper, pays special attention to the values, perspectives and symbolic structures of those in positions of subordination. Like institutional ethnography, it has positionality. Like CDA it is focused on inequities. It sees how practices in place advantage some and disadvantage others. It sees how discourses shape what can be said and what cannot be said, and to whose advantage. It sees how "problems" come to be defined as such, and how that definition works for some and not for others. It does not take an individualistic "standpoint" position, as institutional ethnography sometimes does, but sees the larger factors in play conditioning practices, and their differential outcomes.

The critical practice sensibility uses social practice approaches to change to reveal how practices can be re-crafted to redistribute advantage. It works to privilege the underprivileged in terms of their perspectives, discourses and rewards.

References

Archer, M. (2008) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Trowler, P. (2020) *Accomplishing Change in Teaching and Learning Regimes: Higher education and the practice sensibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Keywords

Social practice theory, practice sensibility, critical theory