# What is a Social Practice (and Why Does It Matter)?

## 1. Methodological Preliminaries

The question, "What is a social practice?" is not intended here as a traditional philosophical question that can be answered a priori through introspection on our linguistic judgments. I raise it within the project of critical theory.

> Social critics seek to inform, and possibly shape, public opinion with clear and careful thinking, well-established facts, and moral insight. They will of course draw on and engage both common sense and scientific thought, but they do so without taking a slavish attitude toward either. (Shelby 2014, 63)

Why should a social critic be interested in social practices? Some reasons:

- Practices are a site of socially organized agency, a nexus where individual agency is enabled and constrained by social factors.
- Practices produce, distribute, and organize, things taken to have value: material goods, time, knowledge, status, authority/power, health/well-being, security, etc. They also distribute things of disvalue, e.g., toxic waste, menial work, vulnerability. I call these (+ and -) *resources.*
- Practices are, in some sense, "up to us," so are a potential site for change.

Let's start with some cases to situate the discussion.
*Practices:* Timing of meals; cuisine; clothing styles; academic lectures.
*Interconnected practices = structures:* systems of food production & distribution, education, transportation, market exchange/wage labor.

## 2. Towards a Theory: Some Considerations

*a. Practices provide a "stage setting" for action*
In "Two Concepts of Rules," (1955) Rawls argues that practices (such as promising) are defined by a set of rules that are *prior to* the behavior and states of mind of the participants. They render our action meaningful. They constitute reasons for action. What does it mean to say that the practice is "logically prior" to the behavior and states of mind of the participants? Rawls (1995) suggests that practices are *necessary* in order to perform certain kinds of actions:

> In the case of actions specified by practices it is logically impossible to perform them outside the stage-setting provided by those practices, for unless there is the practice, and unless the requisite proprieties are fulfilled, whatever one does, whatever movements one makes, will fail to count as a form of action which the practice specifies. (Rawls 1955, 25)

As Rawls suggests, institutionalized and ritualized practices constitute reasons for action. For example, Akna performs a ritual with maize *because* this is a way to worship. The terms of the practice constitute her reason. She may also believe that performing the ritual will have good effects and that others will respect her if she does. But even if these beliefs are false, she has reason to perform it because she is committed to the practice, and this is what the practice requires. This action may be constitutive of her role, her identity, who she is.

Often philosophers invoke a distinction between "mere behavior" and "intentional action." Mere behavior, e.g., sneezing or tripping, is assumed to be involuntary and not indicative of our attitudes. Intentional actions, in contrast, are guided by intentions, and we typically do them for reasons. Thus, when acting intentionally we are capable of representing, at least in principle, *what we are doing* or at least *undertaking* to do.

Much of our behavior, however, is somewhere between the two. Our agency is responsive to the world and each other in ways that are not always easily accessible to the agent or governed by intentions. One reason is that what action I perform depends not just on me, but on the social meanings of my milieu, e.g., in a foreign culture one can easily offend, insult, or invite, unintentionally. On a social "stage," a practice can determine the meaning of one's action, like it or not. As a result, one can also navigate a social world without even needing to represent what one is doing. Embodying social codes opens doors. So practices are not only necessary for (certain kinds of) agency, but behavior in their terms can also be sufficient for enacting a practice.

➢ Practices fall along a spectrum from explicitly coordinated behavior that is rule-governed, intentional, voluntary (e.g., games), to regularities in patterns in behavior that are the result of shared cultural schemas or *social meanings* that have been acquired through socialization and shape primitive psychological mechanisms governing cognition, affect, and experience (e.g., clothing choices?). (McGeer 2007, Zawidzki 2013) Anything we might reasonably count as social agency plausibly takes place within a domain structured by shared schemas for interpreting and coordinating with others.

➢ One's beliefs, intentions, and such, do not determine the meaning of one's action.

*b. Coordination and Social Meaning*
Social practices are not mere regularities in behavior (cf. blinking, squinting in bright light) in another way too. Practices are *normative.* They provide, among other things, systems of coordination; and coordination is not optional for us.

> Human beings are distinguished from other mammals by their extreme sociality. Because of this, solving problems of coordination with our fellows is our most pressing ecological task. (Zawidzki 2008, 198)

Because of the huge cognitive demands of coordination across highly varying and variable circumstances, humans cannot rely on "preinstalled, competence-specific information" (Sterelny 2012, xi). Humans evolved to be social foragers

in a broad variety of ecological contexts.  This required social learning, reliable cross-generational transmission, and the material and technological resources for building on what came before (Sterelny 2012, esp. Chs. 2-3).

Culture defines the terms of coordination for a social group and so gives its members some reason to act in accordance with those terms.  William Sewell captures the idea: 'Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society...' (Sewell 2005, 49).  He continues (49):

> This implies that users of culture will form a semiotic community – in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions [/meanings] and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action. To use the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, they will be capable of using the "grammar" of the semiotic system to make understandable "utterances."

This notion of *culture*, is introduced as an explanatory device:

> The point of conceptualizing culture as a system of symbols and meanings is to disentangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from the other sorts of influences – demographic, geographical, biological, technological, economic, and so on – that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior.  (44)

Sometimes the semiotic "grammar" is explicit, e.g., incentivized and enforced by law.  But much of our coordination is achieved informally. Members of a group take the culture's concepts, scripts, and meanings to be *normative* for members of the group in the following sense: when encountering others who are similarly socialized, we begin with the assumption that they will do things the "right way" and feel entitled to criticize them if they don't (Zawidzki 2008, 204-5).  Example: navigating traffic.

However, to say that practices are normative is ambiguous. Systems of coordination provide us with better and worse ways of going on.  It might mean simply that the relevant regularities are in fact encouraged or enforced, or it might mean that they are *properly* or *appropriately* encouraged or enforced.  Not all actual social norms, or their corresponding social practices, are legitimate or warranted.  For the time being, let's bracket the evaluation or critique of social norms and practices, and focus on what we might call the descriptive normativity that makes a regularity a practice.

Practices, then, are certain kinds of normatively unified regularities.  Following Joseph Rouse, we might say that they are those dynamic patterns of action over time in which performances are held mutually accountable:

> …the bounds of a practice are identified by the ways in which its constitutive performances bear upon one another….One performance expresses a response to another, for example, by correcting it, rewarding or punishing its performer, drawing inferences from it, translating it, imitating it (perhaps under different circumstances), circumventing its effects, and so on. (Rouse 2006, 530)

➢ So, thus far, it appears that practices (a) provide a "stage setting" for coordinated action that gives us roles to occupy, norms to follow, and reasons to act, and (b) do so by drawing on learned, locally transmitted social meanings that enable *mutually accountable* performances.

*c. Fragmentation and Agency*
Culture is not a unified hegemonic "system" that maps onto a society. It is as fragmented as the multiple practices that coordinate us in different social spaces for different purposes.  It shapes our behavior without undermining our agency. How?

Tools: Ann Swidler (1986) suggests that '[c]ulture influences action...by shaping a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action' (p. 273).
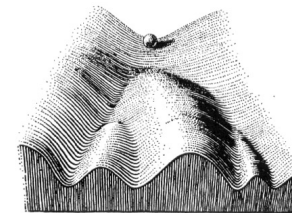
Vectors: social vectors provide 'forms of causality that are conduit-like rather than strictly cause-effect, directional rather than distinctly determinative, and relational rather than cleanly linear.' (Richardson 2014, 221) Social practices and structures provide, in effect, a topography upon which specific causal factors interact to produce probabilistic effects; cultural scripts and narratives create valleys in the topography along which agency easily flows. Although it may be easier to flow in the valley, we have choices to climb the peaks instead.

➢ The "stage setting" that practices provide consists of cultural "tools" that provide agents multiple "paths" across the social landscape, some easier to navigate than others (and some more oppressive than others?).  This is compatible with constrained and often fragmented agency.
➢ The fragmentation of agency in different practices provides resources for critique.

*d. Materiality and Resources*
How should we understand the social "landscape"?  Is it entirely up to us?

> What things in the world *are* is never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them – this also depends on their preexisting physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors. The world is recalcitrant to our predications of meaning.

(Sewell 2005, 51)

The social landscape is malleable, but not infinitely so. Something becomes a *resource* when its value (+/-), whether economic, aesthetic, moral, prudential, spiritual, is recognized. (Rabbits: pet, food, pelt?) It becomes, thereby, a potential site of a coordination problem. Access to it is something to be managed because access is a source of power or pleasure, etc. Social meanings evolve to enable us to perceive, produce, and organize the resource.

Kukla and Lance (2014) use the example of rain. Due to our particular form of embodiment, some things are good to do in the rain, or with the rain, or in spite of the rain, and some not. So "…the material features of rain constrain what sorts of world-involving normative practices can be developed in relation to it, and once these are developed, rain has concrete normative significance from inside these practices." (26)

So the materiality of our practices offers another source of critical resistance. If our schemas lead us to interpret some parts of the world as valuable for a particular purpose, but the world does not substantiate such valuing, then the practice becomes harder to sustain on its own terms, e.g., keeping tigers as pets, commodifying water. Coordination is, in part, a social engineering problem: how do we facilitate cooperation efficiently (Kukla and Lance 2014, 36). But because practices are structured in relation to a (purported) resource, there is a further epistemic question: is this resource valued aptly?

This is not a simple question: We rely on cultural schemas not only to interact with each other, but also the world; this changes the world to conform to the schemas we bring to it. There are significant epistemic effects: the schemas we employ to interpret the world are confirmed by the world they have shaped. Thus it becomes difficult to even see that schemas/practices are problematic, for they appear to have epistemic warrant, e.g., we allow Nestle to drain local springs in order to bottle water, leaving a less potable public water supply, giving people reason to drink bottled water (sustaining this practice); thus reinforcing the practice of granting water rights to corporations such as Nestle.

➤ Practices are embodied engagements with the material world that distribute things of purported (+/-) value. There are potential differences in practices, however, in the extent to which they succeed in tracking what is valuable.

*e. Explanation and Interpretation*
Accounts of social practices fall on continuum between "thin" and "thick" conceptions. Thin: practices are simply patterns of interaction, or regularities in our behavior. Thick: relevant patterns emerge because the participants "understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way." (Martin 2009, 7) These two approaches are often linked to forms of social explanation:

should we understand the social world by seeking causal explanations, or by rationalizing behavior (*verstehen*).

*Against very thick:* If one adopts a thick conception of practices according to which the existence of a practice depends shared or complementary intentions, this leaves no gap "between the subjective conceptions of actors and the action patterns that an analysis might uncover." (Martin 2009, 6) However, a social critic will want to allow the theoretical possibility that agents can be confused or misled about the social practices that they enact; also different agents can participate in the same practice with different intentions (e.g., men opening doors for women). For this reason, neither social practices nor social relations need be transparent: I may not understand the nature of my relations with others and may actually misunderstand our relationship. (God's chosen people.) An explanatory social theory may explicitly debunk social self-understandings by re-describing our social relations in terms we, the participants, would reject.

*Against very thin:* We should also be wary of a view that takes social practices to be just any regularity in behavior or interaction (as noted above). And the suggestion that social science provides causal laws is not plausible.

If explanations are answers to questions, however, then there are more questions we might ask, and at different levels of analysis (Garfinkel 1981, Risjord, Haslanger 2016). Action is conditioned by multiple factors (recall Sewell's list). To identify something as an instance of a practice is to situate it within a web of social meanings that function to coordinate our behavior around resources. The interpretation of meaning and the choice of resources, however, is open to contestation.

### 3. Practices as Interdependent Schemas and Resources
Drawing on the considerations sketched in §2, we can say that practices are patterns of behavior that enable us to coordinate due to learned skills and locally transmitted information, in response to resources, and whose performances are "mutually accountable" by reference to shared cultural schemas/social meanings.

So far, so good. But a crucial feature of practices is their looping effect (Hacking 1995; Mallon 2016): social practices constitute a form of social niche construction (Sterelny 2012, Zawidzki 2013). In the past I have relied on William Sewell's idea that:

> Practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources "when they mutually *imply* and *sustain* each other over time" (Sewell 1992, 13 (my italics).

We now have resources to develop this idea further.

→ Schemas give us tools to *interpret* the value of resources (in a context, along some dimension) and to coordinate in their *production, maintenance, distribution, elimination, etc.*

← Resources are potential sites of value that can be shaped and transformed so that they (seem to) *warrant* and so *reinforce* the schemas we apply to them.
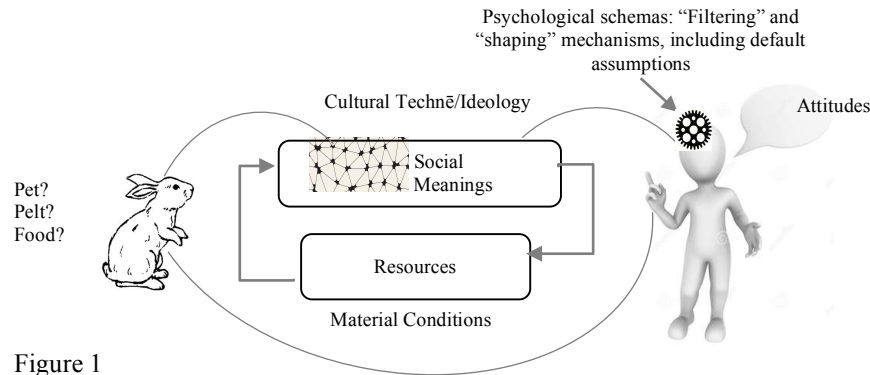


Figure 1

So: *Practices are patterns of behavior that enable us to coordinate due to learned skills and locally transmitted information in response to resources that are interpreted and shaped by shared cultural schemas/social meanings, and whose performances are "mutually accountable" by reference to those meanings.* To engage in a practice is to act in relation to others and to the relevant resources, in ways that are (interpretable as) part of a pattern or system of coordination, and to be subject to the relevant norms.

Terminology: '*cultural technē*' is the schematic aspect of a social structure. An '*ideology*' is a cultural technē that partly constitutes an unjust structure.

## 6. Conclusion

Much of philosophy (and even social theory!) relies on a form of individualism according to which the social world consists of psychologically sophisticated individuals who form intentions and/or commitments (consciously or unconsciously) to act. Usually they say what they mean and mean what they say in a context of cooperative communication. Sometimes they act together, or at least coordinate, under conditions of common knowledge. Sometimes they share knowledge by giving testimony, or disagree with each other. They design practices for particular purposes and enact them for reasons. When problems arise, they must have made a factual error, or been wrong about their reasons.

I don't deny that this is some of what goes on in the social world. However, these sophisticated forms interaction depend on more basic capacities for and

forms of sociality that provide the preconditions for human thinking and acting. Practices are constitutive of social agency, enable coordination around things of value, and are a site for social intervention. An account of social practices such as the one I've offered, illuminates how individual behavior, culture, and other economic and physical determinants of social life are interdependent in ways that explain their stability, but also indicate sites and opportunities for change. (Challenge social meanings! Intervene in the material conditions!)

Where do we go from here? The account I've sketched fits well with one tradition in critical theory according to which ideology "has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation" (Hall 1996/2006, 24-25). If ideology is not a set of beliefs, but concerns the sources of our practical orientations, i.e., the basis of our social fluency in unjust practices and structures, then how should we undertake ideology critique?

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