

Security as practice¹

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Practice theoretical perspectives are a relative newcomer in security studies. Drawing on many of the insights of poststructuralism and broader cultural theory, the main reference point is the practice turn across the social sciences (Schatzki et al. 2001; Spiegel 2005; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). The core claim of this turn is to take ‘practices’ as the smallest unit of analysis. It is neither actors (politicians, professionals, states, etc.), nor structures (the international system, regions, etc.) which are in focus, but organized forms of doing and saying and the relations established therein. Turning to practices is seen as beneficial for several reasons. Firstly, it allows transcending many of the dichotomies that have haunted security studies for decades, such as those between agency and structures, the ideational and the material, or the exception and the everyday (Neumann 2002, Adler and Pouliot 2011, Bueger and Gadinger 2014). Secondly, it promises new methodological strategies geared at proximity to those engaging in the production of security, and hence allows enriching the empirical basis of security studies. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the move to practice has the objective to produce knowledge of practical value that can speak to societal and political concerns.

Practice theory is, however, not a unified perspective. It is best understood as a family of different frameworks and attempts to develop new vocabularies which centre on practices as the main unit of analysis. In security studies three approaches have become particularly influential:

- 1) Accounts that draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and study security as a distinct field of practice,
- 2) the security community of practice approach, which argues that security is embedded in community structures, and
- 3) relationalist perspectives which study the relations that produce security.

This chapter has four main parts. Before we revisit the features of each approach, I will introduce the basic premises of the practice theoretical perspective. Drawing on this discussion, I show how the three approaches develop these insights and use them to study security related phenomena. I end with a brief discussion of some of the future challenges of the security as practice agenda.

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UNDERSTANDING THE PRACTICE TURN

Practice theories are developed in various social science disciplines. Notably the fields of science and technology studies, organization studies, anthropology and social theory have spearheaded the discussion. The denominator ‘practice theory’ emerged in the 1980s (Ortner 1984), yet, a common signpost became the 2001 volume *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki et al. 2001). The book not only announced that a new ‘turn’ was underway, it also documented how far advanced and varied practice theorizing is.

Practice theories are developed from a range of traditions (Hillebrandt 2014; Miettinen et al. 2009). Appreciating these traditions gives us a first approximation of the core concerns of practice theory. One reference point is the early work of Karl Marx. In his *Theses on Feuerbach* he pointed to the importance of practice as the fundamental category of human life (Marx 1845[2002]). As he argued, ‘all social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice’ (Marx 1845[2002]). He made two important arguments: firstly, that also theorizing should be understood as a practical activity, secondly, that practices are material and ‘sensuous’ activities, and one, hence, needs to appreciate the reciprocity of ideational and material dimensions of action.

A second source is the relational thinking of pragmatists such as John Dewey and the late Ludwig Wittgenstein. Dewey and Wittgenstein argued that rule following is to be understood as a practice. Knowing how to follow a rule requires knowledge which is not contained in the rule itself. Instead a practical knowledge of how to follow a rule is necessary (Miettinen et al. 2009, Pritzlaff and Nullmeier 2011).

A third source is notably important in methodological terms, that is, the ethno-methodological research tradition established by Harold Garfinkel. Ethno-methodology is centered on the study of everyday production of meaning and how actors create a stable social order through their everyday activities (Gad and Bruun Jensen 2014).

A fourth source is post-structuralist thought, and in many ways practice theories can be understood as a further advancement of this perspective (Neumann 2002). Practice theories advance the core claim of post-structuralism that essentialist understandings need to be overcome and that the contingent nature of the world and the ways by which it is produced need appreciation. Themes such as the links between theory and practice and between the material and the ideational, as well as contingency and practical knowledge are hence crucial for practice theoretical thinking.

Situating practice theory

If practice theory draws on these traditions, how can practice theory be situated in the theory landscape? German social theorist Andreas Reckwitz (2002) developed a useful overview which gives us a good understanding of how practice theory differs from other

approaches to security. Reckwitz suggested that there are three different ways to think about action: rational choice theory, norm constructivism, and cultural theories.

Rational choice theories take the strategic interaction of interest driven individuals as the main explanatory factor. We find such thinking for instance in deterrence theory (Quackenbush 2011; Knopf 2010). Norm constructivists assume that individuals are driven by norms and that a normative consensus can explain the coordination of individual actions (see in security studies for instance Farell 2002; Katzenstein 1996). Both perspectives have significant limits, as Reckwitz (2002) argues, since they neither can fully grasp where interests and norms actually come from, nor the collective dimensions of action. This is exactly the strength of what Reckwitz calls cultural theories. They focus on the underlying knowledge and symbolic orders that makes action possible in the first place.

Practice theories are one branch of cultural theory. To understand their distinctiveness, Reckwitz suggests differentiating them from two other types of theories, namely mentalism and textualism. All three differ in where they locate knowledge and meaning. For mentalist theories, knowledge is to be located in the mind of people. In security studies, such theories for instance study the belief systems of elites or processes of threat perceptions and frames (Hudson 2005; Noreen and Sjöstedt 2004; Stein 2013). The other type of theories, Reckwitz labels as textualism. Here the focus is on external structures of meaning. We find expressions of textualist perspectives for instance in works on security discourses (for instance Campbell 1992; Hansen 2006; Herschinger 2010).

Practice theories differ: 'The focus is neither solely on the internal (inside the head of actors), nor on the external (in some form of structure)' (Bueger and Gadinger 2015: 6). Practices are in-between the inside and the outside. Practice theorists hence 'identify the social in the mind (since individuals are carriers of practices), but also in symbolic structures (since practices form more or less extra-subjective structures and patterns of action)' (Bueger and Gadinger 2015: 6). It is important not to overplay these differences, since in many ways practice theorists advance mentalist and textualist perspectives and there are no clear intellectual boundaries.

What is a practice?

There is a variety of definitions of practice. These definitions, however, agree more or less on three core elements of which a practice is composed of. This is firstly, bodily movements in the form of doing and sayings, secondly, practical knowledge which might be tacit or explicit, and thirdly, objects (artifacts and things) used in a practice. Consider the practice of cooking. Cooking requires basic bodily movements such as cutting or stirring, but also more complex cooking techniques such as steaming, barbecuing, or deep frying. Advanced cooking is usually conducted by a team of chefs, these have to communicate, hence, also sayings are involved. Various objects and artefacts are handled in the practice of cooking. One uses ingredients (things), but also

artefacts specifically designed for the practice of cooking such as knives, ovens, pots or pans.

Also, different types of knowledge matter. Recipes and cookbooks provide explicit knowledge. Yet, as anyone who has tried to make a mayonnaise by recipe might have experienced, more knowledge is required. Practical experience on timing and when to throw in what ingredient, or how fast to stir will be needed for a good mayonnaise. One also requires a sense of what is tasty and what disgusting. To cook a tasty meal all these elements need to be carefully arranged in a certain way. The example is also telling since, I think, it is easy to agree that in order to understand cooking, it would make little sense to study only texts and cookbooks or rely on abstract principles of gastrosophy. This is why practice theorists often accuse other cultural theorists of over-intellectualising social life. Sometimes matters are more mundane and practical than academics are trained to assume.

Practical configurations

A practice does not develop out of nowhere. When a new practice emerges it draws on elements of prior practices. Think about microwave cooking: it is a new practice and changes how we cook, notably its speed, but much of the food and recipes stay the same. One wouldn't discard the global history of food just because a new practice enters the game. Practices hence form chains across time and space and should not be seen in isolation but as part of larger practical configurations.

Theorists have developed different terms to speak about these larger configurations. The most established ones, to which we shall come back to, are the concepts of 'fields', 'community', 'actor-network', and 'assemblage'. Although practices are always part of larger configurations, it is important to recognize that these do not structure or even determine a practice. Practice theorists develop a very distinct understanding of the relation of micro and macro. A practice is dependent on enactments in concrete situations. To come back to the practice of cooking: there are some overarching features of the practice, yet, the practice is dependent on what happens at restaurants and home kitchens around the world where the practice is enacted. Any act of cooking will differ. My mayonnaise is certainly different than yours. Yet, any mayonnaise making will rely on a broader configuration (ingredients, equipment, recipes, skills, tastes, etc.) on how to make it, how we eat it and why we like (or dislike) it.

In summary, bodily movements, practical knowledge, objects and practical configurations are the basic categories of practice theories. Yet, as we will see in the formulations of practice theory in security studies, there is quite some variance over how these are interpreted and emphasized.

BOURDIEU IN SECURITY STUDIES

Pierre Bourdieu is alongside with Anthony Giddens the most famous advocate of practice theory. It is hence unsurprising that security studies have paid special attention to his concepts when the practice turn was introduced to the field. Scholars drawing on Bourdieu's work are sometimes known as *The Paris School*. The idea of a Paris School was invented by Ole Wæver in order to signify that there was a remarkable body of research that differed in its arguments from securitization research and to initiate a debate between both schools (Wæver 2004). We shall come back to the differences between securitization research and the security as practice agenda later. Wæver's label of a Paris School was perhaps as much a misfit as the term Copenhagen school. Although especially Didier Bigo, a core advocate of Bourdieusan approaches was based in Paris, many others advancing the perspective, such as Jef Huysmans, Michael Williams or Trine Villumsen Berling, were not.

Within a broader IR context Richard Ashley (1987) and Stefano Guzzini (2000) had already pointed prominently to the value of Bourdieu's work. Yet, it was Bigo (e.g. 1994, 2002) who was one of the first to demonstrate how the Bourdieusan framework could be utilized empirically to study security. Bigo's core argument was that we need to study the practices by which security is made and issues become known as threats. Drawing on case study work on the relation between migration and security in Europe, he argued that it was pivotally the practices of experts, professionals and bureaucrats working in governments, international organizations, think tanks or universities that mattered (Bigo 2002). These actors form a field of security practice which determines the meaning of security, what should count as threats and what responses would be required. Bigo (2002) opposed the idea that security was the outcome of a public spectacle. Rather it was made in everyday practices, such as producing statistics or threat assessments.

To understand Bigo's argument it is useful to very briefly investigate Bourdieu's version of practice theory. Bourdieu's practice theory is relatively complex and places emphasis on practical knowledge and larger configurations.² Four terms are crucial. With the terms 'doxa' and 'habitus' Bourdieu grasps practical knowledge. 'Habitus' refers to the practical knowledge which is inscribed in individual bodies on the basis of collective experiences across time and space. The term 'doxa' refers to the practical knowledge of larger practical configurations, which Bourdieu described as 'fields'.

Bourdieu drew on a gambling metaphor to explore the relations between these concepts. The 'field' constitutes the game, the 'doxa' of the field are the explicit and tacit rules of that game, and 'habitus' is the experience that the players bring to that game. Within fields actors compete against each other and struggle for status and resources ('capital') useful for dominating the game, policing its boundaries and excluding actors from playing in it. Bourdieu developed these concepts mainly through studies of French society and argued to understand society as composed of various fields (e.g. the

² For detailed discussions on these concepts and their importance for Security Studies, see the contributions in Adler-Nissen (2013).

economic, artistic or academic fields). With his interest in domination and exclusion as core mechanisms of fields, his calls for emancipation and understanding theory as a form of practice, Bourdieu's theory follows visibly a Marxist tradition of practice theory (Joas and Knöbl 2009).

Security Studies scholars drawing on Bourdieu tend to emphasize one of these concepts. Advancing the line of reasoning of Bigo's perspective on experts and professionals, the concept of 'doxa' is for instance crucial in Berling's work (2012, 2015). Arguing that European security constitutes a distinct field, she sets out to understand the 'doxa' of that field by following the work of security intellectuals, theorists and experts, paying attention to think tanks in particular. As she demonstrates, such an account can more fully explain the transformations that occurred in the European security landscape of the 1990s. With her emphasis on theorizing as a key practice in the field, she also shows how the Marxist and Bourdieusan concerns over theory as practice can be turned into a productive empirical agenda which has little to do with self-contemplation.

Others prioritize the 'field' as the core category. Huysmans (2002), for instance, discussed NATO's transformation during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, by arguing that NATO had entered a new international field of practice, the humanitarian field. Williams (2012) draws on the concept of fields to argue that there is a new economy of security. Following Bourdieu's argument that competition between actors is the core driver of fields, he diagnoses that the rise of private security companies has radically increased competition in the security field.

If the European discussions have a core interest in the power dimension and the emancipatory and critical potential of Bourdieu, this is less of a concern in the North American debate. Habitus has been the core concept in this debate, not the least because the concept allows for easier links to norm-oriented and mentalist versions of constructivism. Vincent Pouliot (2008) and Ted Hopf (2010) for instance drew on the habitus to argue for the importance of practical knowledge and the way it conditions security relations.

SECURITY COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A second version of practice theory draws on the writings of the organizational sociologist Etienne Wenger and his framework of communities of practices (Wenger 1998; Lave and Wenger 1991). This approach centres on the collective character of practice and suggests to grasp practical configurations as communities. The communities of practice approach (CPA) was introduced to security studies by Emanuel Adler. In the introduction to his 2005 book Adler pointed to the usefulness of the approach and the new paths it opens in particular for the study of security communities. In two following articles he specified how the framework provides new directions for security community research (Adler 2008; Adler and Greve 2009).

The core question that Wenger tried to address in developing CPA was how to understand when and how learning occurs. The initial book, co-authored with Lave

argued that learning has to be grasped as the socialization into a practical configuration (Lave and Wenger 1991). Learning hence should not be understood as an individual mental affair, but as a collective process, and moreover, following up on the general tenets of practice theory, as a bodily activity. Learning is thus taken as equivocal to the acquisition of practical collectively shared knowledge and the capacity to enact it. Lave and Wenger described this process as a movement in which a learner starts out at the periphery of a practical configuration, then moves closer to the centre and becomes a master in the practical skills required to perform well. In his second book, Wenger (1998) generalized the concept of communities of practice and theorized it as a basic social category which is driven by learning, everyday interaction and shared repertoires of practice.

Security communities were introduced in the literature as a concept that refers to a group of states which have overcome the security dilemma and among whose members' war has become an unthinkable option. Frequent interactions between states and a shared identity or culture were identified as mechanism for the emergence of such communities (Deutsch et al. 1957; Adler and Barnett 1998). These two mechanisms provided the anchoring points for re-conceptualizing security communities as practical configurations, that is, communities which achieve coherence through practice.

As Adler (2008) argued in drawing on the case of NATO, security communities are driven by practices of self-restraint. They develop a shared repertoire of practices, such as cooperative security, shared understandings of security and partnership projects. Adler offers a powerful practice-based re-interpretation of security institutions and regimes centered on the identification of types of practices which make war unthinkable. The importance of shared understandings in the repertoires of communities, moreover, enables a direct link to securitization. A security community implies that members securitize together (Buzan and Wæver 2009). Such an interpretation also makes the approach productive to study how looser transnational community structures develop in response to a distinct threat, such as piracy (Bueger 2013).

RELATIONAL SECURITY APPROACHES

If the first two approaches are clearly associated with the work of a distinct theorist, this becomes fuzzier when we consider the third approach, namely relationalist practice theory.³ Relationalist approaches draw on a broad repertoire and seek inspiration in particular from actor-network theory and assemblage theory, associated with names such as Bruno Latour, John Law, Michel Callon, Annemarie Mol, or Giles Deleuze. In their emphasis on relations, this account comes very close to post-structuralist concerns. Indeed, Law (2009) argued that one should understand such approaches as providing micro-oriented and empirical versions of post-structuralist ideas.

³ All practice theories emphasize the importance of relations, yet in those approaches which can be clustered around term "relationalist approaches" relations become the primary category and understanding of practice.

The importance of objects and technology is foregrounded much stronger than in the other approaches. The starting point is to investigate how practical configurations emerge, how they are maintained and when and how they erode in the face of controversy. The terms ‘actor-network’, ‘agencement’ or ‘assemblage’ are used to signify practical configurations. As Law (2012: 157) argues, practices are from this perspective ‘detectable and somewhat ordered sets of material-semiotic relations’. And as he further develops this argument, the analytical and empirical task is in

‘exploring possible patterns of relations, and how it is that these get assembled in particular locations. It is to treat the real as whatever it is that is being assembled, materially and semiotically in a sense of analytical interest. Realities, objects, subjects, materials, and meanings, whatever form they take these are all explored as an effect of the relations that are assembling and doing them. Practices, then, are assemblages of relations’ (Law 2012: 157).

With this definition of tasks, Law points to two core tenets of the approach. That is, firstly, conceptual parsimony. If Bourdieu and Wenger elaborate quite a nuanced and complex conceptual apparatus in order to study practice, relationalists want to do analysis with a range of basic concepts, such as relations and assemblage. They focus on empirical descriptions of situations and employ further concepts only in so far as they have been identified in the actual practical configuration.

Secondly, a position is taken which wants to put equal weight on the ideational and the material as well as the human and the non-human. This has been called a ‘symmetrical’ position. The concept of an ‘actant’ gathered from semiotics is important to achieve this symmetry. An actant is any element in an assemblage that has the capacity to act. According to this idea, agency should not be seen as the property of humans, but as the effect of relations. In consequence, also non-humans, such as technologies can in principle carry agency. It is, however, important to emphasize that this is not an argument for prioritizing non-humans. The argument is for symmetry after all.

Core ideas of relationalism were introduced to International Relations by Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon (1999) or Xavier Guillaume (2007). In security studies these arguments were, however, dormant for quite some time, until a wave of scholars started to become concerned about the role of science, technology, and expertise. Bueger and Villumsen (2007) provided one of the first articles in security studies to draw on Latour’s actor-network theory. They argued that the approach is particularly useful to understand how scientific expertise enters the domain of foreign and security policy. Studying how an actor-network was woven around the fact that democracies do not wage war against each other, they showed that relationalism is particularly important to understand the rise of new practical configurations. Bueger and Bethke (2014) continued this line of reasoning. Employing the actor-network theory approach more fully, they showed how the concept of the ‘failed state’ emerged and argued that a significant network of various allies was required to turn the ‘failed state’ into a core security problematique.

Another line of reasoning focuses on the role of technology in security, in particular surveillance and weapon technology. Per Schouten, for instance, studies the airport as a

relational configuration. He shows how security is assembled at this location by relations of all sorts of things and activities, including checkpoints, passengers, screening technology or patrols (Schouten 2014). Walters (2014) analyses drone strikes from this perspective and shows how the military and drone technology is assembled. The studies of Schouten and Walters however do not only provide powerful examples of how relationalist approaches re-think the materiality of security. They also show that in contrast to the two other approaches, which understand practices as routines, repertoires and stability, relationalist accounts are better equipped to analyse change, contention and political controversy.

THE SECURITY AS PRACTICE AGENDA: CONCLUSION

Approaches developed from Bourdieu, Wenger and relationalist ideas, provide us with three different accounts of how the core ideas of practice theory can be translated into research frameworks for the study of security. They offer three different versions of how to conceptualize practical configurations as a rather structured field, as coherent community structures, or as looser heterogeneous networks. They also emphasize core elements of practice differently (Bueger and Gadinger 2014). If in relationalism bodies and artefacts achieve a central role, the two other approaches emphasize knowledge (habitus, learning) much stronger.

The security as practice agenda is growing and new theoretical ideas and other approaches continue to be introduced. The field will hence widen over the coming years. The agenda is in the meantime well-established. This is not the least because the practice perspective succeeds to integrate concerns of other approaches such as securitization theory or constructivist approaches. Indeed, the security as practice perspective develops core insights from traditional securitization theory further. There are two core points of departure. Practice theorists aim at going beyond the focus on linguistic practices of traditional securitization research. The aim is to include material aspects, stretching from the role of the body, to artefacts and technologies in the analysis. Practice theory, moreover, switches emphasis towards the everyday production of security. In many ways, making security is a matter of routine and reproduction. This does not question the claims of traditional securitization theory. Rather is it to claim that the speech acts described in the traditional securitization account are the exception rather than the norm. Both practice theory and securitization theory share the emphasis on performativity, yet in practice theory the emphasis is on routinized performances. With discursive approaches increasingly moving beyond text and starting to rethink their concepts of action and materiality (Aradau et al. 2014), there is also an increasing convergence with this field of research. This conversation will also spur conceptual innovation and new research puzzles (Balzaq et al. 2010). Also the question of how to conceptualize the normativity of practice and hence relate the practice agenda to the concerns of norm constructivism and international political theory is promising research avenue.

It is important to note, however, that the security as practice perspective is in the first place an empirical agenda. Although many efforts have focussed on developing

concepts, practice approaches, notably relational ones, place heavy burden on empirical work. This essentially implies to go beyond text, since it is difficult to reconstruct practices on the basis of documents. The intent is to explore the broader spectrum of ethnographic methods (Bueger and Mireanu 2014; Gad and Bruun Jensen 2014). In the face of the cultures of secrecy and violence that much of security studies deals with, the methodological implications of the practice perspective and how practice theoretical concepts can be put to good empirical use, will drive the future agenda and ultimately decide over the future direction of research.

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