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Introduction: The Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice Theory

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Reading is one of the most common activities of our academic practices: we read in order to teach, to do research, to deal with organizing practices, and sometimes simply for the pleasure of doing it. It happens that we read and a few hours later, we have already forgotten what we have read, while at other times—in special moments of grace—we read a passage that remains engraved in the heart and stays in our memory for a long time. A fragment of text strikes us, it talks to us, and perhaps it has particular aesthetic qualities, but perhaps not. The fact is that it becomes embodied; it becomes part of our flesh and our sentient world. Perhaps it also arouses a less than noble feeling, such as envy of the author for his or her ability to do things with words. We chose to begin the introduction

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to this book by sharing with the reader such a moment of grace in the encounter with Patti Lather's and Elisabeth St. Pierre's (2013, p. 630) words:

How do we determine the "object of our knowledge"—the "problem" we want to study in assemblage? Can we disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow (Self) and then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle (Other) long enough to study it? What ontology has enabled us to believe the world is stable so that we can do all that individuating? And at what price? How do we think a "research problem" in the imbrication of an agentic assemblage of diverse elements that are constantly intra-acting, never stable, never the same?

What about the categories "interviewing" and "observation," the privileged face-to-face methods of data collection in humanist qualitative inquiry? If we give up phenomenology, we can no longer privilege the immediacy, the "now," the "being there" of qualitative interviewing and observation that assume both the "presence" of essential voices and the foundational nature of authentic lived experience. Where/how do voices from post-humanist humans fit into the new inquiry? Are they voices after all? (Does that word work?).

In reading these questions, written for the introduction to a special issue entitled "Post-qualitative research" in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* we entered into a new world in which colleagues from another discipline were posing the same questions that in a remote corner of organization studies, practice theorists were struggling with. Educationalist and organization scholars do not have many opportunities for meeting and sharing ideas; however, it is not surprising that when disciplines meet, they discover they have much more in common than they anticipated, especially when a common interest is constituted by doing qualitative research in empirical settings. What is surprising—on a subjective level—is finding oneself experiencing a sense of wonder (MacLure, 2013), a potential that is felt in special, spontaneous moments that can animate further thought. Wonder is not a safe, comforting, positive affect; rather, it is described as a relational, uncomfortable feeling of something "out there" that is also "in" the person who experiences it and that MacLure (2013, p. 229), in accordance with Massumi, (2002,

p. 19), refers to as “the privilege of a headache. Not the answer to a question, but the astute crafting of a problem and a challenge: what next?” We want to pass on this headache to our readers, proposing that they follow along to find out how practice theorists have their own headache and where they look for answers to the “what next” question. However, before taking the reader for a long journey into what has been formulated as “the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory,” we anticipate that there is a point of contact between what educationalists have framed as “post-qualitative inquiry” and what organization scholars have named “the turn to practice.” The common cause of their respective headaches is “entanglement”—as we have suspected from the initial questions—and as we recognize in thinking about a practice as constituted by entangled elements: humans (researchers included), nonhumans, material discursive, earthly.

The Re-discovery of Practice in Organization Studies

As an introduction to our story about the turn to practice, let us mention the journal *Organization* as a precursor of the turn to practice, since it published, in 2000, a special issue on “*Practice-based theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations*” (Gherardi, 2000), in which several practice theories are invoked in a conversation about their commonalities in theorizing practice, notwithstanding their different vocabularies and epistemologies. It has already been 20 years since organization scholars re-discovered practice theories, and now contemporary practice theorists are re-interpreting the concept of practice rather than simply re-turning to classical practice theories. Since then, the literature has grown considerably and several specialized books (Gherardi, 2019a; Nicolini, 2012; Shove, 2022; Shove et al., 2012) and literature reviews (Erden et al., 2014; Guzman, 2013; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) are readily available. At the beginning, it was important to create a bandwagon effect to consolidate what were called “practice-based studies” (Corradi et al., 2010); hence, internal differences

were downplayed. Now, however, distinctions can be made, and differences may be appreciated.

One relevant line of difference can be drawn between humanist and posthumanist practice approaches. Humanist approaches start from human beings as the main (or only) source of agency and methodologically study “humans and their practices,” positioning the material world in relation to, but outside, practice. The so-called second wave of practice theorists (Bourdieu, Foucault, Garfinkel, Giddens, and Schatzki) are still part of a humanist paradigm. Posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013) is concerned with overcoming the limits of how our humanness has been theorized in dualist categories that privilege one term over the other (nature/culture, subject/object, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, and so on). A posthumanist practice theory assumes a relational epistemology, thus joining contemporary debates on a family of post-epistemologies—new feminist materialisms, relational sociologies, affect theory, post-qualitative inquiry—that blur the boundaries between ontology and epistemology. After the linguistic turn, once we assume that the nature of objects (ontology) is done through linguistic and discursive practices, then epistemic practices enact the object of study. Moreover, taking a process approach entities emerge out of a process of *becoming* rather than *being*; they are always in formation over time and space and never exist as entities in themselves. According to Whitehead, everything *is* how it has developed: “How an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is” (Whitehead, 1978, p. 23). In other words, social phenomena cannot be understood as stable and given entities, but rather materialize and become meaningful through particular knowing practices. The terms onto-epistemology and ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) signal an approach in which the object of knowledge takes form from epistemic practices, and ethics contribute to form it. When knowing is understood as a material engagement with the world, it becomes inseparable from the practice of responding to the Other as an ethical and political obligation.

To briefly sketch the trajectory of the turn to practice we have to keep in mind that in organization studies the interest in studying everyday practices originated in a pervasive dissatisfaction with abstract descriptions and prescriptions of work and a need to know how work “really” takes place. Working practices were therefore individuated, as the realm

of everyday organizational life, and behind this interest, there was a dual motivation: (1) to study real (i.e., situated) activities as they were performed, and (2) to pin down slippery knowledge somehow circulating within a certain way of practicing. The epistemology of practice made its appearance in contrast to the epistemology of possession. While an epistemology of possession treats knowledge as something an individual (or an organization) has, an epistemology of practice stresses that not all of what is known is captured by this understanding of knowledge, and there is more epistemic work being done in what we know how to do that cannot be accounted for in terms of the knowledge possessed. Thus, knowledge and knowing are interrelated, and knowing and doing are not temporally separated. Cook and Brown (1999, p. 382) give a telling example:

To say, for example, “Robert is fixing cars” points not only to knowledge he possesses but also to things he is doing. To give an account of what Robert knows, we claim, calls for an understanding of the epistemic work done, which needs to include both the knowledge he possesses and the actions he carries out.

In this example we can notice how the epistemology of possession (knowledge) does not contradict an epistemology of practice (knowing), and both knowledge and knowing constitute what is called epistemic work: both are “done” while “fixing cars.” The knowledge used in action and the knowing as part of action form what Cook and Brown (1999, p. 383; emphasis in original) call a *generative dance*: “the source of *new* knowledge and knowing lies in the use of knowledge as a tool of knowing within situated interaction in the social and physical world.”

The turn to practice thus introduces a renewed conception of knowledge as an activity, rather than as an object (Gherardi, 2019a) and we can appreciate both the epistemological move from knowledge as a noun to knowing as a verb, and the displacement of knowledge from the cognitive domain to the domain of performativity. In moving from the noun to the verb, we also move from questions of ontology (what a practice *is*) to questions of epistemology (how a practice is *done*) to questions of onto-epistemology that is, how the researcher’s language and epistemic

practices construct the object of inquiry. Practices, rather than substances, structures, or actors, are the fundamental unit of analysis. As the term onto-epistemology (Barad, 2003) signals the inseparability of ontology from epistemology, the move described here implies that the researchers focus their attention not only on what practitioners “do” but also on how their epistemic apparatus becomes part of the object under study. The researcher is always part of the phenomenon that is being investigated (Barla, 2021; Mol et al., 2010). It is only through research practices that “ontologies are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices” (Mol, 2002, p. 6). Ontology-in-practice is multiple and is enacted through researchers’ epistemic practices.

To fully appreciate this change in the nature of knowledge, we can recall the concept of “situated knowledge” as formulated by Donna Haraway (1991) in feminist studies and by Lucy Suchman (1987) in relation to situated action. The expression “situated knowledge” comes from the feminist critique of knowledge “from nowhere,” a critique of what Donna Haraway (1991, p. 191) calls “ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively.” It is therefore necessary to replace this claim of universal knowledge with “views from somewhere,” with a located accountability (Suchman, 1994) and with partial, locatable, and critical knowledges. Knowledge always has to do with circumscribed domains, not with transcendence and a subject/object dichotomy. Moreover, one of the reasons for assuming practice as the unit of analysis (instead of structures or agencies) is to overcome the dichotomy between knowing and doing. Therefore, situated knowledge is entangled with situated action.

Lucy Suchman (1987), in her book significantly entitled *Plans and Situated Action*, affirms that plans—as something located in the actors’ head, and which direct their behavior—should not be confused with *situated actions*. Before action, plans have only a predictive or organizational purpose; after action, plans serve to justify the actions undertaken. An example provided by Suchman is how canoeing down a river emphasizes the distinction between a practice as a plan and a practice as situated action. Before setting off, the canoeist may plan a course for descending the river, but when s/he reaches the rapids, s/he sets the plan aside and

resorts to skill to act in context and succeed in the task at hand. Hence, a plan is an ingredient of practical action, in the sense that it is an artifact that helps one to reason about the action, but it is not a mechanism that is generative of the action. Central to the concept of situatedness is also a revised conception of context as no longer a container of action but a situation in which the interests of the actors involved and the opportunities in the environment meet and are reciprocally defined. Therefore, of central importance in studying situated practices are interactions with others, situated communication, the construction of situations, the relationship with the physical environment and the objects in it, and especially the idea that these elements are “entangled” and they express a contingent, practical logic that is embedded in the situation. The collapse of boundaries between the human and the more-than-human, the animate and the inanimate, proposes a shift—according to Hughes and Lury (2013)—from social to ecological epistemology to account for how we live in relation to a more-and-other-than-human world. An epistemology, necessarily relational and process-oriented, focused on how things change rather than how things are, requires a non-essentialist understanding of the identity of things, in which it is the relationship between an entity and its environment that are constitutive of what something “is” and what it can be.

Relational Materiality

The understanding of agency is deeply changed within practice theories that de-center the human subject and attribute agency only or mainly to humans. While in “humans and their practices” agency is still a prerogative of humans that extends this capacity to other nonhuman agencies, in posthumanist epistemology of practice theory agency is attributed to the entanglement of elements that achieve agency, and agency flows within a practice (Gherardi, 2022).

This shift from entities that have agency to relations that perform entities is at the core of the principle of relational thinking (Østerlund & Carlile, 2005, p. 92) that “is neither a theory nor a method in itself, but rather, a loosely structured framework or scaffold around which various

practice theories and methods are being developed.” To illustrate the consequences of the collapse of the divide between humans and nonhumans between the material and the discursive on a relational epistemology of practice, let us refer to the principle of symmetry between humans and nonhumans, which has its roots in actor–network theory and its relational epistemology (Law, 1992). A relational epistemology, namely, one that prioritizes the ever-evolving “relations” over “entities,” is present (albeit in different nuances) in most of the current posthumanist conversations that seek to de-center the human subject and in the new (feminist) materialisms that question the notion of agency.

While many kinds of distinctions can be drawn within the family of new materialisms, they all have in common a “turn to matter” and a focus on social production rather than social construction. The term “new” in new materialisms is intended to differentiate these perspectives from the “old” historical materialisms, rejecting the earlier materialism’s deterministic explanations of social action.¹ According to Fox and Alldred (2017, pp. 2–3), among the radical claims of new materialist theorists are the propositions that: (1) the material world and its contents are not fixed, stable entities, but relational, uneven processes in constant flux; (2) “nature” and “culture” should not to be treated as distinct realms but as parts of a continuum of materiality; and (3) a capacity for “agency,” that is, the actions that produce the social world, extends beyond human actors to the nonhuman and inanimate. Posthumanist practice theory takes part in the ongoing conversations among actor–network theory, affect theory, feminist new materialism, and feminist posthumanism that focus in particular on the material-semiotic (following Law, 2009), naturesculture (Haraway, 2008), vital materiality (Bennett, 2010, 2020), the physicality of affects (Brennan, 2004), sociomateriality (Orlikowski, 2007), and conversations around the Anthropocene in a world more-than-human and more-than-capitalist (Calás & Smircich, 2023). In particular, in a posthumanist practice theory, sociomateriality is a key concept for organization studies; we will briefly trace its trajectory in relation to the epistemology of practice.

¹ It is opportune to remind how the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ are always positioned within Western systems of thought, as Indigenous Studies have stressed (Rosiek et al., 2020).

The concept of sociomateriality also has a long history in the study of working practices connected to information systems (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014) and in education studies (Fenwick et al., 2015). Within these fields of research, “the material” in sociomateriality is mainly technological but not only. In new feminist materialisms, for instance, the “material” and the “vibrant matter” are connected to the body, embodiment, and intercorporeality (Bennett, 2010). The two ways to grasp sociomateriality (via technology and via corporeality) do not contradict each other: it is important to consider both at the same time, in their relationality and in the intimacy that many technologies establish with the interior of bodies and their functioning. The physical “matter” of the body, its material-discursive production, its sensible knowing, and its choreography of becoming, are all instances of embodiment as irreducibly material, social, and situated in practices. Embodiment is in fact a key concept in practice theories. Reich and Hager (2014) consider it one of the six threads of the literature on practice—the others being: knowing-in-practice, the sociomateriality of practices, relationality, the historical and social shaping of practices, and the emergent nature of practices.

The term “sociomateriality” was introduced into organization studies by Orlikowski (2007, 2010) in reference to the feminist onto-epistemology of Barad (2003), and by Orlikowski and Scott (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014). These authors use the concepts of “entanglement” and “generative entanglement” and adopt a relational ontology akin to the relational materialism discussed by Law (1992) and the performativity assumed by actor-network theory. These concepts indicate that, within a practice, meaning and matter, the social and the technological, are inseparable and do not have inherently determinate boundaries and properties. They are constituted as relational effects performed in a texture of situated practices.

The theme of materiality is, in effect, the watershed between two different strands of practice theory—namely between human-centered theories and posthumanist perspectives. For the former, materiality is something that mediates human activities and is external to practice, whereas for the latter it is viewed as constitutive of practice, thus overcoming the dualism between the social and the material. According to Barad (2007), to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with

another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. This author defines her epistemological position as agential realism:

as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism. (Barad, 2007, p. 26)

Hence, reality is defined as things-in-phenomena and not as things-in-themselves. In fact, “phenomena” are considered as the primary ontological units, recalling Bohr’s definition of phenomena as observations under specific circumstances that include an account of the whole experimental arrangement. In the absence of a given apparatus, there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the object and the agencies of observation: an apparatus must be introduced to resolve the ambiguity, but then the apparatus must be understood as part of what is being described.

Both Haraway’s and Barad’s work are reflections on epistemic practices, and both talk about a way of knowing in which the knower is not external or pre-existing to the world; rather, the knower and “things” do not pre-exist their interactions but emerge through, and as part of, their material-discursive intra-relating. Also, the contemporary debate on new materialisms reminds us that materiality is always more than matter: it is an excessive energy, a vitality, a relationality that makes matter active in what happens within a practice (Coole & Frost, 2010). These assumptions allow us to reformulate the notion of agency and transcend the duality of social versus material agency, human versus more-than-human agency, and material versus discursive agency.

Practice as *Agencement*

As previously mentioned, any organizational or working practice (be it a human relationship or a risk communication practice, the adoption of a new information system or a new strategic plan) may be conceived of as a collective knowledgeable doing, whereby “the collective” is made up of entanglements of humans and nonhumans (including more-than-human, more-than-living beings) working together. This section introduces the notions of normativity and *agencement* to describe how all the practice elements hold together in a way that is recognized as belonging to that practice and is socially sustained (ethically, aesthetically, and emotionally) as the appropriate “way of doing things together”.

According to Rouse (2007, p. 53) practices are a source of normativity because they are constituted in terms of the mutual accountability of their constituent performances:

Normativity involves a complex pattern of interrelations among performances through time. Such performances are normative when they are directed toward one another as mutually accountable to common stakes, albeit stakes whose correct formulation is always at issue within the practice.

Normativity is thus an answer to the question of what keeps *a* practice together and/or several practices woven together into a texture of practices. Another way of framing this question is to ask how agency is achieved by a practice, or how a practice becomes performative, given that being a human subject is not a precondition of agency.

The process of *agencement* illustrates how the elements within a practice or within a texture of practices connect and acquire agency through their connectedness. Hence, a practice is not viewed as a unit circumscribed by given boundaries and constituted by defined elements but rather as a connection-in-action: that is, as an *agencement* (Gherardi, 2016) of elements that achieve agency by being interconnected.

Agencement is a word currently used in French as a synonym of “arrangement,” “fitting” or “fixing,” and it has been used as a philosophical term by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) with the meaning of “in connection with.” For Deleuze and Guattari, a philosophical concept never

operates in isolation but its meaning develops through the connection with other meaning. This meaning of “being in connection with” gives a first good approximation of the term. The problem, however, is its translation into English as “assemblage,” which has changed the original meaning. The meaning in use in English is thus different, and there is a tension implied in the respective uses of the term *assemblage* (as a final state) and *agencement* (as the process of connecting). While the English term *assemblage* may be used to refer to final or stable states, thus emphasizing “thingness,” the French term *agencement* works as an evocation of agency, emergence, and heterogeneity, thus emphasizing process and dynamics. We can also study the failures of *agencement*, the process of its wear and tear, its maintenance, and its alternatives.

In studying a practice, the researchers and their epistemic practices are part of the same research practice *agencement* when they empirically follow and describe the process whereby humans, artifacts, rules, technologies, sensible knowledge, legitimacy, discourses, and any other practice resource become connected due to a collective knowledgeable doing. At the same time, any single and situated practice is connected to other practices, and it is the process of *agencement* itself that makes a texture of practices agential. When studying a practice processually, both materiality and the process of production matter, since multiple realities may be enacted through different spacings, timings, and actings. The challenge is to produce narratives of *agencements* that capture the materiality, the passions and beliefs, the practices of attraction and engagement within these complex nests of associations. The advantage of using the concept of *agencement* in a posthumanist practice epistemology is in the reformulation of agency as the outcome of the process of establishing associations and material-discursive relationships from which humans and nonhumans emerge, since these are not a sort of a priori with respect to their associations.

We can now inquire into how the entangled elements within an *agencement* either change or persist or, more generally, flow into their becoming, into their being practiced. We have two concepts that may interpret this process: formativeness and affect, which will be discussed further below. But first, it should be noted that one of the main concerns of the study of situated working practices is to discern the situated logic of the

agencement connecting the inner intra-actions of the elements of these working practices and, on this basis, to prefigure the performance of the practice as an on-going accomplishment. Knowing-in-practice is a contingent ordering of provisional connections, the effect of the ability of practitioners to find their bearings using the context as a resource and to articulate the matter of the world (objects, artifacts, technologies, discourses) within a form. In order to see how materiality is embedded in an on-going project and to investigate the process whereby doing and knowing unite into a form, we can turn to organizational aesthetics (Strati, 1999), and particularly to Pareyson's (1960) concept of formativeness, which influences the philosophical foundations of materiality.

Formativeness is defined as "a doing" such that, while it does, it invents the "way of doing." Thus, "simultaneously invented in doing is the 'way of doing': realization is only achieved by proceeding to the result by trial and error, thus producing works that are 'forms'" (Pareyson, 1960, p. vi). Forming also implies a relationship with materiality, that is, forming a material, and the resulting work is nothing other than formed material. In the process of the formation of matter, the work also acts as a former, that is, creator of forms, even before it exists as formed, that is, created form. Formativeness illustrates how, in knowing-in-practice, practitioners develop and invent new ways of establishing connections and, in this process, the *agencement* of the practice elements are transformed, re-connected or just dis-connected: they are always in flux. When the researcher is interested in understanding the becoming of a practice, the term "formativeness" can be used to describe how the object in the process of managing is formed and how, in its forming, the necessary knowledge is invented and deployed.

Moreover, the concept of affect can be used to describe the force in motion that is mobilized to form the object. All matter within an *agencement*, be it human or nonhuman, is vital and has the capacity to affect and be affected (Massumi, 2017). Therefore, how the different capacities of an *agencement* are produced depends on how the connections within a practice are formed and changed. Affect theory contributes to practice theory by elaborating a notion of affect as an energetic stream:

"To say that affect is an energetic stream is to insist on a force in motion even while speaking of 'it' as a noun. As a verb, affect moves in a few

ways. First, it touches and changes bodies, stirring them to feel, become, and do” (Kuhn et al., 2017, p. 60).

Thinking and talking of practices as affective spaces (Gherardi, 2017; Reckwitz, 2017), and envisioning how to conduct affective ethnography (Gherardi, 2019b), are recent and promising themes in practice theories. A posthumanist approach blurs the boundaries between theory and method, and in a posthumanist epistemology, humans are neither center stage nor separated from nonhumans, the environment, the world, and the researchers’ epistemic apparatus. From this point onward, future research will become quite challenging because the concept of entanglement renders problematic all categories of humanist qualitative research: “data,” “interview,” “voice,” and the “I” (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Post-qualitative inquiry raises an interesting question of how to conceive of method.

Overcoming the Theory/Method Divide

Broadly meant, in social sciences the term “method” describes a set of techniques and pre-defined procedures that can successfully lead to knowledge production (i.e., scientific knowledge). Such an understanding of method implies its *application* by a subject who aims to know or intervene in the world and, possibly, simplify its complexity by using categories or other analytic constructs. Such a view is grounded in the humanist, anthropocentric, Western epistemology which took from the Enlightenment its emancipatory belief in the universal power of scientific reason and in the “perfectibility of Man through scientific rationality” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 59). It is also based on the Cartesian dualism according to which objects are generally assumed to exist independently from the subject that perceives them (Cunliffe, 2011; Helin, 2013; Shotter, 2006). With this book, we would like to question such a disembodied paradigm and queer not only the distinction between knowledge and practice, theory and method, but also the externality of data and the proceduralism of data analysis.

We do this by “working the ruins” of methodology (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), that is, deconstructing and re-imagining those categories that

science has created—to rationalize, normalize, and regulate research, *to tell the truth* in forms of *scientific contributions*—and that the social sciences have appropriated. Data have a special place in the traditional methodology that relies on “a boundary between ‘what *has* a voice’ and what doesn’t” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2019, p. 17; emphasis in original)—respectively, the knower and the known. A posthumanist epistemology of practice theory, instead, conceives of the “I” of the researcher “as a mangle composed of multiple elements” (Hekman, 2010, p. 100). Hence, data should also be (re)conceived as part of this *agencement* whereby they *move* along with thoughts, emotions, relationships, intra-actions, and events arising in the research setting. Data “move” both in the sense of being in movement—following a becoming ontology and changing in relation to their materiality and the materiality with which they intra-act—and in the sense of their being “moving,” that is, affecting the researcher, provoking a “special gut feeling” while s/he is engaged in the fieldwork (Gherardi & Cozza, 2022). Similarly, we can say that data *glow*: “some detail—a fieldnote fragment or video image—starts to glimmer, gathering our attention,” stimulating “sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain—frissons of excitement, energy, laughter, silliness” (MacLure, 2010, p. 282). Therefore, it is not only the researcher doing something to data but also data doing something to the researcher (Gherardi & Benozzo, 2021). The researcher’s “I” is always in an assemblage and, therefore, it is no longer possible to “think of doers (agents) behind deeds or actions giving ‘voice’ to an experience” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2019, p. 18). What a researcher can do is notice the traces that this affective entanglement leaves in the becoming of research practices and that often get lost in the making of scientific knowledge.

A posthumanist epistemology of practice theory makes “room for mutation, for difference, for an opening toward the as-yet-unseen, the as-yet-unthought, the as-yet-unfelt” (Manning, 2016, p. 23). “[T]he common sense *doxa* of a linear past, present, and future—the idea of time as a moving forward” (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 9; emphasis in original), with which the concepts of *research design* or *research process* are imbued, do not help us to study organizational life, which is increasingly fluid, flexible, and fleet of foot and in which “being there” “out in the field” “to collect data” is becoming increasingly problematic (Pritchard, 2011;

Chap. 8 in this book). We may ask if talking about data makes sense from this point of view, or if this term—data—is colonized (Mejias & Couldry, 2019) to the point that a posthumanist epistemology of practice theory should include the refusal of it along with analytical practices—like coding and categorizing—*applied* to them. Such a rejection is not a stubborn disavowal of methods but rather an opening to the world and its complex messiness.

No doubt some things in the world can indeed be made clear and definite. Income distributions, global CO₂ emissions, the boundaries of nation states, and terms of trade, these are the kinds of provisionally stable realities that social and natural science deal with more or less effectively. But alongside such phenomena the world is also textured in quite different ways. My argument is that academic methods of inquiry don't really catch these. So what are the textures they are missing out on? (Law, 2004, p. 2)

Most qualitative and post-qualitative social scientists are used to such a messiness that becomes data and undergoes a process of transformation. However, until that moment, this messiness is a space of indeterminacy, an interstice of the as-yet, where the shadow represents the dynamics of what is undermined. “The image of a space where light and dark intra-act and become an ever-changing zone of indeterminacy may help us see the research process differently, to have a different idea of what takes place in the zone of indeterminacy before ‘data’ get formed, i.e., in that area of ‘not-yet data’” (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 148). Engaging with data in this space of indeterminacy calls for a capacity to “feel wonder” (MacLure, 2013). Knowledge is not meant as the result of a cognitive act of *mining* from a reality out there, but rather as an esthetic, sensory learning “to dwell in indeterminacy” (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 156). In proposing such a reconceptualization of data, we are also proposing the interrogation of *coding*, which is the analytical practice usually associated with interviewing as a predominant technique with which to collect data in the social sciences.

[W]e are concerned about analysis that treats words (e.g., participants' words in interview transcripts) as brute data waiting to be coded, labeled

with other brute words (and even counted), perhaps entered into statistical programs to be manipulated by computers, and so on. In some cases, words are reduced to numbers. We argue that coding data in that way is thinkable and doable only in a Cartesian ontological realism that assumes data exist out there somewhere in the real world to be found, collected, and coded. (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 715)

Yet, from a conventional humanist qualitative perspective grounded in Cartesianism, not all data are worth being collected and coded. Data are only those facts that enable the identification of *patterns* (i.e., a set of data that follows a recognizable form) because patterns, in turn, meet the demand of *systematicity* and allow *interpretation*, which is indeed based on the same principle of *sameness* that a pattern *represents*. Stuck in patterning, the researcher cannot experience the freedom allied “to the *agencement* that opens the event [with which the researcher intra-acts] to the fullness of its potential” (Manning, 2016, p. 23; emphasis in original).

Rather than freedom, the mechanical application of methods may determine methodological anxiety, which for example manifests in “a vacuum cleaner approach” to data collection so that data that *do not fit* (like those portions of transcripts about body language or emotions) are swept up because they are obstacles to the production of *good data*, *clear ideas*, or *trustworthy accounts*. Similarly, the coding imperative to reach *data saturation* may turn into an agonizing data collection stretched in the hope that saturation will magically happen because, despite everything, evidence will be evident and will declare the process over! Yet, we can keep asking not only “What is the code that lies beneath the code?” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 811) but also “Who gets to know? Who gets known? Where is knowledge kept, and kept legitimated? What knowledge is desirable? Who profits? Who loses/pays/gives something away? Who is coerced, empowered, appointed to give away knowledge? There are the analytic questions that drive beyond coding” (p. 812). We may also ask, “What is coding for?” Our critical response is that coding is inevitably a practice of *cutting together-apart* (Barad, 2007) which enables us as researchers to *claim* that we have learned something from our data or, better, that we have managed them so well that eventually we can make a *contribution*. We, as authors, have been coding, too—sometime

using qualitative tools (e.g., Atlas.ti, NVivo)—and we are familiar with the machine, its appealing affordance to sort things out, and *tagging* qualitative insights (Fairchild et al., 2023). Overall, “[c]laiming is an act of possessing, of making property, of enclosure” reducing research to “becoming-claims” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 814). This is not a *becoming* on the same onto-epistemological plane of immanence where a posthumanist practice theory is situated, but rather it is on a plane of transcendence, of organizing data toward their *stabilization*. In this book, we invite the reader to embrace the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory as an invitation to *re-imagine concepts* (Part I) and *re-imagine methods* (Part II).

Re-imagining Concepts

Overcoming the separation between theory and method is possible through an onto-epistemological process of making and unmaking to create something new, exceeding traditional notions of agency and subjectivity along with the category of data (Chap. 3 in this book). This is a process of *plugging* of theory *into* data *into* theory, which does not only correspond to a folding of data into theory and vice versa, but also of ourselves as researchers into the assemblage of diverse elements with which we constantly intra-act. “Plugging in” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) is a concept borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari when focusing on writing as a professional practice (Chap. 2 in this book). They say that “when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be *plugged into*, must be *plugged into* in order to work” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 4; emphasis added). Precisely, it involves at least three maneuvers attuned with the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory: (1) overcoming the theory/method divide; (2) conceiving of the researchers and their epistemic practices as part of the same research practice *agencement*; (3) embracing the “*suppleness of both theory and data when plugged in*” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 10; emphasis in original).

Moving from the fixity of methodological proceduralism to the fluidity of plugging in means resisting the linear route of knowledge making. It is a “more-than-representational” (Lorimer, 2005) research practice

that questions the mediation of the relationship between the knower and the world to order and categorize thinking.

[R]epresentationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held independent of all practices of representing (...) [This] generates questions of the accuracy of representations. For example, does scientific knowledge accurately represent an independently existing reality? Does language accurately represent its referent? (Barad, 2003, p. 804)

Plugging in invites us as researchers to abandon any ambition *to tell the truth* because “there is no perfect way to tell the story of process[es] (...) This has the advantage of highlighting relationality or what happens in the *encounter between* influx and efflux” (2020, p. 84; emphasis in original), in the “in-and-out, the comings and goings, as exteriorities cross (always permeable) borders to become interiorities that soon exude” (p. x). A relational disposition helps us as researchers to acknowledge our own porous fleshy boundaries to a world with which we intra-act (Chap. 4 in this book). Such a methodological posture manifests in post-inquiry umbrellas of *thinking without* fixed structures, names, and labels of the conventional research enterprise, which may discourage, if not prohibit, creativity; *thinking with* other humans, objects, things, animals, and elements populating the research setting; *thinking differently*, to explore conceptual alternatives to methodological orthodoxy (Ulmer, 2017).

Picking up this discussion in the quest for new concepts, we highlight that “theory is one practice among many” (MacLure, 2010, p. 281; emphasis in original). If theorizing is (re)conceived as not only an epistemological endeavor but a practice that produces what it seeks to know (i.e., theory is onto-epistemological), then *concepts* orient thinking and can be used *as/instead of a method* (Gherardi, 2019b; Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017). Approaching research through concepts *as/instead of a method* involves experimenting with emergent, fragmented, non-stratified strategies. Concepts do not pre-exist thought (as in method) but emerge while the researcher creatively intra-acts with the various elements constituting the research assemblage, which includes sensations, emotions, and affects.

Examples of experimentation enabling the emergence of something new, something as yet unthought, can be found in the second part of the book, which focuses on re-imagining methods.

Re-imagining Methods

When pointing out the relationship between the messiness of the world and academic method of inquiry, John Law was also inviting social scientists to work creatively and generously, in a way that is less dependent on method-as-usual and “more in and through slow method, or vulnerable method, or quiet method. Multiple method. Modest method. Uncertain method. Diverse method” (2004, p. 11). We would like to add *arts-based method* to this list, in that such methods encourage “thinking ‘outside the box’, generating new ways of interrogating and understanding the social” (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 548). Arts-based research is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of different methodologies employing some art form as a method and pedagogy (Hickey-Moody et al., 2016; Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015), such as dance (Chap. 5 in this book) and theater (Chap. 6 in this book). They activate an embodied and affective learning (Mandalaki et al., 2022) which may facilitate navigating increasingly complex and uncertain organizational environments. Furthermore, arts-based methods enable the creation of an “*interspace* in which the customary norms embedded in the organizational culture are temporarily suspended to enable experimentation” (Lafaire et al., 2022, p. 231; emphasis in original). In this interspace the “I” is “in the midst” and the capacity to wonder is key to encountering the others and staying open to the world (Ahmed, 2014). Arts-based methods can be thought of as an apparatus for *thinking differently* about organizational phenomena. Research practices belonging to this apparatus disrupt traditional methodological conventions and invite us, as researchers, to become *nomadic* subjects and engage in *nomadic inquiry* (Braidotti, 2012; Chap. 7 in this book), which calls for letting go of our old ways of thinking and becoming open to new ideas and modes of being. In this regard, we point out that the nomadic subject is a figuration and *figuring* is another possible way to re-imagine methods.

According to Kathrin Thiele (2021, p. 229) “[f]iguration as a speculative relational technique for a different vision on and for the world is one of the most promising feminist in(ter)ventions toward an ontoepistemological methodology for feminist research and practice.” Knowledge production via figuring or figurations (for example, Haraway’s cyborg or Braidotti’s nomadic subject) is not a mimetic practice of reproducing dominant scientific discourses but, rather, material-semiotic wor(l)dings.

Figuration (...) is about the creation of different relations between words and things—between wording and worldings (...) Figures (...) can be read as tools to produce thought; they constitute rather than they reflect. Figures intervene into the world: they *are*, and they do their work, by participating in the stories told instead of speaking from outside or beyond. (Thiele, 2021, pp. 232–233; emphasis in original).

Differently put, the type of intervention produced by figuring is embodied and situated in the world. Figuring or thinking with figures is not aimed at distancing the subject from the object: such a gap is not assumed at all. Figures emerge in a speculative research-creation process of engagement with the world to express what cannot be articulated in words and what still has its own vibrant materiality and agential capacity to affect the researcher. Hence, figuring does not correspond to generating metaphors because figures are always grounded, situated, and entangled with the world (Braidotti, 2014). They enable us to ask “What if?” and to imagine alternative scenarios (Chap. 5 in this book) and characters (Chap. 6 in this book) involved in the knowledge-making process. The validity of the representation produced by figuring is not contemplated because figures are multiple and not *the same*. The what-if question enables us—as researchers—to wonder about how life could be different and, eventually, to explore how we might do social science differently. “This can involve taking a simple characteristic of this world and continuously stretching and distorting it until it becomes almost unrecognizable but is clearly an evolution or involution of the original” (De Freitas, 2017, n.pag.) We can say that, (1) figures are material semiotic signposts toward ways of knowing, understanding, and inhabiting the world; (2) they are technologies of power that act on situated bodies, generating

emotional and affective responses and feelings and as such can be mobilized for particular purposes; (3) figures can be used to bring about change, to question and to amplify other ways of being and living (Dawney, 2022). Figuring is needed to replace anthropocentric and representational methods in which the “I” of the researcher is firmly positioned outside the assemblage of which s/he is, in fact, a part. Figures enable researchers to work the methodological ruins or work through the methodological breakdowns (Koro, 2022) generated by questioning normative rules and linear procedures. In so doing, it becomes possible to envision methodology otherwise.

However, re-imagining methods should go along with a practice of *decolonizing* them from systems of power with which they are imbued. To take the research practice of decolonizing seriously, it is of the utmost importance to emphasize once more that:

[t]he methodologies we [researchers] follow are the very technology that shapes the nature of our research questions and, ultimately, our answers to such questions—what we look for or overlook in our data sets. Mainstream research methodologies (...) are defined by and carry the values of those in power (...) [and they] hide more than they reveal. (Ndhlovu, 2021, p. 193)

As we said at the beginning of this Introduction, knowledge always embodies a view from somewhere. Postcolonial scholars point out that most of the methodologies we learn and (alas) teach often time are “shaped by colonial understandings of what constitutes valid and legitimate knowledge [and reproduce] the Eurocentric perspective: the central themes on rationality, linearity, development, and disembodiment of science” (p. 194). Hence, decolonizing methodologies must not be reduced to a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012) because such a use would domesticate decolonization and ultimately compromise the possibility to “think multiply,” that is, “to think in the register of the hyphen, of the differential” (Manning, 2016, p. 13). To stay true to the purpose of decolonization, we should acknowledge that qualitative and postqualitative inquiries are themselves colonized. They are entwined with feminist (new) materialism, which has developed its more-than-human philosophical approach

by drawing from Western thinkers such as Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari. Hence Western feminist materialist scholars:

have been rightly criticized for lack of attention to preexisting ways of thinking about the relationship between humans and other creatures and things, including the millennia-old philosophies of non-Western, Indigenous, and First Nations people. There is much to be gained from acknowledging the array of perspectives espoused across these philosophies (Lupton et al., 2022, pp. 364–365).

Decolonizing methodology calls for (1) developing new narratives, new words, new grammars, and new vocabularies that increase other voices speaking from different methodological postures that are yet to be tried and tested; (2) bringing together diverse cultures and traditions of knowing; (3) fostering a convivial scholarship underpinned by the power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections (Ndhlovu, 2021).

Overcoming the divide between theory and method opens the door to re-imagining concepts—through plugging in and by using concepts as/ instead of method—and re-imagining methods—through arts-based methods, figuring, and decolonizing. Moving from these premises, the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory is an apparatus that enables us as researchers to think differently about our own research practices as entangled with the situated practice that we study.

The Structure of the Book

In questioning the main categories of humanist qualitative research, in this book we propose the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory as an alternative knowledge-making apparatus. We do so together with the authors of the following chapters who offer theoretical and experimental elaborations of what re-imagining concepts and methods may entail and what research may become when, within a research *agencement*, situated practices are studied and specific research practices are mobilized.

In Chap. 2, Isto Huvila, Olle Sköld, and Lisa Andersson inquire into how two specific types of epistemic artifacts—*traces* and *ingredients*—work together and against each other in conveying understanding of past knowledge-making activities. Focusing on the *practice of report-writing*, the authors draw from their analysis of Swedish and French archeological investigation reports as a specific genre. They discuss how traces and ingredients contribute to knowing-in-practice in multiple parallel ways as a part of an archeological practice—literally *in practice*. Traces and ingredients have different epistemic opportunities and limitations on their ability to serve as records of the past and goads to action even if many traces can serve as ingredients and vice versa albeit with certain limitations. The authors point out that being aware of how an epistemic artifact works in an epistemic sense—for example as a trace or an ingredient—can help to use it accordingly to what it is capable of, to avoid uses that go against its potential, and to develop better ones.

In Chap. 3, Anders Buch, Verner Larsen, and Bo Klindt Poulsen are inspired by the metaphor of *shadow organizing* to explore research practices and the enactment of data and knowledge. They point to the enactment of data that happens *betwixt and between* canonical research practices and ask how to go on enacting research practices in the production of data and new knowledge. Finally, the authors explore how some enactments of knowledge are relegated to the *apocryphal*. Specifically, the authors focus on the *codex of responsible research practice* and how paradoxically its implementation may turn data into *no-longer data*. The discussion draws on a research project, undertaken by the authors, in which interviewees withdrew their consent to use the interview data. Despite being withdrawn, the consent had already affected the researchers and the time cannot be rewound. Consequently, that knowledge became apocryphal. The concept of shadow organizing allows us to understand the enactment of research practices as complex shadowy looping of not-yet data, data, and no-longer data. The attentiveness brought about enables the researchers to reflect on the normativities involved in the enactment of research practices and the production of new knowledge. However, as they continue, it is questionable whether this apocryphal knowledge can in fact be legitimized in prevailing research practices. Hence, they leave us with the question, “What are the last data standing?”

In Chap. 4, Ludovica Rubini e Assunta Viteritti draws our attention to the ontology and the concept of *becoming together* of researchers and research practices. By questioning the subject/object divide, the chapter revolves around two situated practices: the first concerns the use of bio-engineered laboratory animals, and the second the use of medical devices for the management and treatment of diabetes. The first is conducted in a cellular and molecular biology laboratory where the ethnographer and the laboratory experts engage in creating self-narratives about the complex embodied learning processes involving humans and nonhumans. The second is grounded in interviews *around* and *with* objects. In this case, medical devices for the management and treatment of diabetes become relational objects allowing the co-construction of a common knowledge between the researchers and the participants. In both examples, the authors show how the researcher affects and is affected by the *texture* of practices in which she becomes and with which she intra-acts. Affective ethnography is thus an affective methodology in which texts, bodies of humans and other living beings, the materiality of objects and technologies, and language are entangled.

In Chap. 5, Silvia Bruzzone and Henny Stridsberg explore how *arts-based practices*, informed by posthuman feminism, contribute to expanding ways of learning and knowing on sustainability. By embracing posthuman feminist and similarly questioning traditional conceptualizations of agency and subjectivity, the authors think using their own figurations of *body of water* and *watered subjectivity* to inspire an alternative educational research agenda on (urban) water and sustainability. They discuss the activities conducted during a workshop for industrial engineering students in which *dance* was used to explore urban flooding through corporeal interactions and creative tasks. Students and teachers became bodies of (flooded) water encountering and intra-acting with “hard,” protective infrastructures and more sustainable solutions, under the new paradigm “more room for water.” Through bodily practices, students multiplied ways of experiencing connectedness with urban water as part of a watery subjectivity, beyond a problem-solving engineering paradigm.

In Chap. 6, Carmen Pellegrinelli and Laura Lucia Parolin recall the tragic experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and position their *art-based*

practice in Bergamo (Italy), where more than 6000 people died and the pandemic strained the emergency facilities over several months. In January 2022, a group of ER doctors and nurses of the Papa Giovanni XXIII hospital decided to enact a collegial reflection on how they experienced the pandemic. As the authors tell us, the group set up a one-year-long *theater workshop* involving about 20 ER practitioners, with the purpose of preparing a theater show. By participating in this theater workshop, the researchers engaged in a collaborative affective ethnography to investigate the esthetic dimension of the ER professionals' work practices during the pandemic. By invoking *Alice in Wonderland*, the authors challenge a representational approach to these dramatic events and embrace an arts-based onto-epistemology to attune with the bodily vibrancies and affective intensities of the theater workshop atmosphere.

In Chap. 7, Donata Puntil disrupts traditional notions of doing research in social sciences and language education studies, adopting an onto-epistemology blurring the separation between theory and practice, subject and object, and researcher and researched. As an alternative, the author proposes *researching* as a generative and performative practice embodying and containing both researcher-researched and the act of doing-being research. Also, the author questions the idea of identity as something fixed and stable and the linearity of traditional epistemological categories in favor of rhizomatic connections, oppositions, and affective entanglements to explore the complex, fluid, non-linear, zig-zagging path of the language professionals in training. Employing a variety of semiotic fields of representation, from the spoken and written word to the use of cartographies and artifacts, the author invites us to get lost in the becoming of the research and embrace the creative uncertainty of *nomadic inquiry*.

The book closes with an afterword by Lucy Suchman who explores the implications of the relationship between a world made up of definite objects that researchers have not yet properly understood and one in which the researchers experience or encounter indefiniteness. This tension frames the author's discussion of *data* as a dominant technology of knowledge-making in the contemporary moment. Drawing from her research on the limits of *datafication*, the author begins with projects undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s and closes with her current focus on

tracing some through lines of datafication's politics in the context of initiatives in military command and control. She argues that data-centric approaches to security, particularly those promoted under the sign of artificial intelligence, require closed worlds for their operation, and that understanding that requirement can help to clarify data's limits. Practice-based investigations can help to recover the complex relationships, irremediable ambivalences, and irreducible multiplicities that escape the operations of data, opening up spaces in which to consider the political economies of datafication and the possibility of knowing otherwise.

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