Introduction

This book is about the practice of doing practice research. It is conceived as a narrative process that tells stories about practice-based studies and intends to communicate the multiplicity of ways of doing empirical research on practices. Therefore, it can only begin by telling an exemplary story about a social practice.

At the beginning of 2018, when I began to work on the second edition of this book, the Italian press published a news story that captured my attention. I could hear Horace whispering in my ear: ‘de te fabula narratur’, meaning ‘about you the tale is told’ and I narrate it for the readers as an invitation to start to explore with me the realm of social practices. This is the story:

A huge debate was spread by rumour of the introduction of a wireless bracelet (a newly announced practice) at Amazon in Italy, where two new centres have been opened, for a total of 1600 jobs. The bracelet, just patented in the US, had been designed to speed up the search for products stored in warehouses by employees, monitoring where they put their hands, vibrating to guide them in the right direction, and actually controlling all their movements. These details were to be transmitted to the minicomputer on the employee’s wrist, guiding them to take the goods, put them in a box, and switch to the next task. News of the patent appeared in nearly all the newspapers, and almost all the exponents of the government and political parties reacted on social media, accusing the company of transforming their employees into new slaves of the capitalist system. Speaker of the House Laura Boldrini declared that ‘working is not a crime’, and called the proposal ‘degrading and offensive’. Even the Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni put a word in, saying that the challenge facing Italians was ‘quality jobs, not jobs with wristbands’, and that Italy (differently from other countries) has labour laws that apply to every company.

What did a wireless bracelet – a new tool that was not yet in use – produce? It made evident the sociomaterial relations in a texture of practices, producing an agencement in which the reputation of a company (that turns employees, paid little, into human robots who work near real robots, carrying out repetitive packaging tasks as quickly as possible, with the goal of achieving the ambitious delivery targets set by Amazon) was materialized. Moreover, the story of the wireless bracelet produced the visibility of the operational logic of retail services that work with thin profit.
margins, that minimize the cost of labour, that use work contracts that advise workers of their schedule time with little notice and that use algorithms to organize staffing according to optimization of presence. We can see the bracelet’s performativity not only in its capacity to reveal the connections between working and organizing practices, but also in its capacity to bring to light a question of moral (and not only economic) value. The bracelet made audible/readable/tangible/knowable a societal issue: What is the value of work? What is the meaning of work in a life and in a society? The (potential) political and ethical materialization of a practice within a society (and differently from other societies) is made sayable.

The Amazon story may exemplify how a rumour (but was it a rumour rather than a non-accomplished intention?) was transmitted and spread within a social network of people that used several material media of transmission, which materialized as activities of relating, linking and connecting (Kuhn et al., 2017). The sociomateriality of the bracelet activated multiple connections, and it was a different ‘thing’ within multiple relations: from being an instrument in a cooperative relation with humans, to being a material symbol of slavery, to being an issue of labour relations. Moreover, in this story communication is seen as a performative practice whose logic unfolds into the future along a trajectory, and communicative practice is seen as a site of struggles over meaning.

What is the moral of this story? Aesop teaches us that every story has a message for the listener. In my formulation of such a question there is an implicit invitation to leave behind questions about ontology (what practice is) for questions about performativity (what practice does). In other words, empirical ontologies are ‘done’ in specific and situated epistemological practices, as John Law (2004) and Annemarie Mol (2010), among many others, have illustrated. The passage from the singular ‘ontology’ to the plural ‘ontologies’ has marked the way for considering multiplicity and indeterminacy. Therefore, the reflection on how we do empirical research is an epistemological reflection about how ‘things’ are made to matter and how epistemological relations make ‘things’ acquire a situated position. In my opinion this is the first lesson to be learnt when the question ‘why a practice approach’ is posed. In fact, researching social practices is a social practice in its own right and it is a performative practice that produces realities, instead of representing realities ‘out there’.

Telling stories about practice is a methodological strategy that rests on the power of narrative knowledge as opposed to paradigmatic knowledge. The distinction between paradigmatic (or logical-scientific) knowledge and narrative knowledge is developed by Bruner (1986). While the former is aimed at categorizing and reducing events to general laws, the latter is aimed at the understanding and interpretation of meanings and the way
in which individuals organize their experience. Telling stories as a research practice has a tradition in Actor-Network Theory, and Annemarie Mol (2002, p. 31) defines her ethnography of practice as ‘praxiography’, a story about practices.

I shall follow a narrative approach, and this is the reason for choosing methodology as the main entrance to practice theories, since my aim is to illustrate how ‘doing practice theory’ rests on methods that enact realities. Nevertheless, this is not a book on research methodology in the conventional sense. It is not intended to be a handbook of the ‘how to do it’ type, because I believe that it is not through a prescriptive and routinized methodology that one can learn how to conduct research. The fact that methodology texts are more comprehensible to those who already know how to do research compared with those who read such texts to learn how to do it, is well known but rarely taken seriously. The alternative suggested is to furnish narratives of the research process so that the practices of doing research are reconstructed (Roth, 2005). It is this awareness that has induced me to write a book which gives space to narratives from the field, so that substantive knowledge of the subject is combined with methodological awareness.

In setting and pursuing this objective, I have made a specific methodological choice. It consists in introducing the reader to research which may be considered in a certain sense ‘classic’ within practice-based studies, the purpose being to provide contact with authors and topics that, to my mind, are significant in developing a methodological sensibility. In this way, the reader will be introduced to diverse authors who have conducted practice-based empirical research, and he/she may come into contact with the methodological apparatus evinced by the examples. I have accordingly constructed brief case studies consisting of short stories from field research so as to elicit methodological reflection which works inductively. Moreover, the brief case studies, disseminated in the book as ‘boxes’, can be used in the classroom for teaching purposes.

In this introduction I anticipate some of the basic assumptions of the approach, although these will only be discussed expressly in the book’s conclusions. I shall therefore start by framing the practice-based approach within organizational studies and the conception of organization that they adopt.

To assume a practice point of view is therefore to develop a conception of organizing as taking place within a texture of practices which extend internally and externally to the organization. We may therefore say that practices constitute a mode of ordering the flow of organizational relations. They furnish an ordering principle as the institutionalization of activities and ways of doing which are sustained by sociomaterial relations.
Simultaneously, however, this ordering principle is also temporary and unstable, and is therefore a disordering principle as well. By means of practices, organizations solve the problem of their everyday reproduction, so that practices are an answer to the problem of how to reduce uncertainty. It can also be said that practices introduce indeterminacy because they always express a rationality that is contingent and in a ‘becoming’. In fact, with a ‘becoming’ epistemology (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980), we may keep open the possibility that things might be different.

Why assume practices as the units of analysis of organizing? The simplest answer is that practices are loci – spatial and temporal – in which working, organizing, innovating and reproducing occur. At a disciplinary level, this makes it possible to bring the study of work closer to the study of organizing, and to view both of them not only in their interrelations but as processes which take place in time and space, therefore in a ‘becoming’.

There is consequently an empirical interest in assuming practices as the units of analysis of organizing but there is an epistemological reason as well. The renewed interest in the study of practices – beside the traditional theories of practice in sociology – has arisen within the so-called ‘post-epistemologies’. The aim of a renewed interest in practice is to go beyond problematic dualisms (action/structure, human/nonhuman, mind/body), to see reason not as an innate mental faculty, but as a practice phenomenon, and to question individual actions and their status as building blocks of the social (Schatzki, 2001, p.10). Hence a practice should not be 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 which achieve agency by being interconnected. Humans do not occupy a privileged position in this field of dynamic interconnections. To use Law’s (1994) expression, it is relational materialism which provides the basis on which to construe the interconnections between humans, nonhumans, discourses and sociomaterial relations. In other words, I shall assume a posthumanist onto-epistemology (Gherardi, 2015a) that displaces the human subject as the centre seat of agency, the one in control of the world, the one from whom intentional actions emanate, thus differentiating it from human-centred practice theories (that study humans and their practices). De-centring the subject does not mean removing it, but placing subjects, objects and instruments in an agential and material-discursive environment.

The book is organized so that the reader can gradually acquire the lexicon for the empirical analysis of practices and thus develop a sense of how to set about identifying the salient aspects of the practice-based approach that I propose and the elements that are of theoretical importance for empirical analysis. Only in the final chapter do I draw the complete picture
of what I mean with the term ‘a posthuman approach to practice-based studies’.

The first chapter invites the reader to consider practices within a processual view, as accomplishment. Its purpose is therefore to emphasize that working and organizing are situated and emergent processes. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter introduces the topics of situatedness and of knowing-in-practice as a situated activity in accomplishing a practice. The second chapter illustrates practice as a collective knowledgeable doing. Putting a set of activities into practice requires both individual and collective work and competent participation in a practice (that is, learning) is achieved by maintaining a common orientation. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter demonstrates the continuity between learning and knowing, and between knowing and doing.

The third chapter introduces the topic of sensible knowledge and, in making ‘present’ the body and its sensible knowing, opens to sociomateriality beginning with the physical materialities of gendered and knowable bodies. Thus, I have considered it important to position the body at the outset of an analysis intended to destabilize taken-for-granted dichotomies (mind/body, nature/culture) and to sustain a vision of practice as the site where tacit, elusive, pre-verbal and aesthetic knowledge is kept.

The fourth chapter takes sociomateriality to the world of nonhumans and what they do and get done. From the theoretical point of view, this chapter concerns sociomaterial relations with artefacts within a framework of relations that Knorr Cetina (1997) has called ‘post-social’. When analysing a practice, the tools of that practice, the technologies and the material setting itself can be considered the relational infrastructure (Star, 1999) which supports performance of the practice while at the same time being invisible.

The fifth chapter deals with what we may call another relational infrastructure: namely the support which rules – given and emergent – provide for situated practising. From a theoretical point of view, practices enable us to see how normativity (of sense, consensus, as well as prescription) emerges from situated action, whilst from the methodological point of view, the practice-based approach enables us to analyse a practice as the locus of ordinary prescription.

The sixth chapter focuses on discursive practices. It stresses that the concept of practice, qualified in the previous chapters as sociomaterial, can also be defined as materialsemiotic. Discursive practices are of particular importance for showing that people work not only by doing, but also by saying. Saying in a situation is also a ‘doing’, and discursiveness is a means by which researchers (and not only practitioners) gain access to how individuals in situations construct those situations themselves and the objects/subjects of discourses.
The seventh chapter asks the following question: how are the practices socially sustained? It illustrates how aesthetic and ethical judgement sustains a normative understanding of appropriate activities within a practice, while affection is manifest in the practitioners’ engagement with the object of practice. Such engagement – aesthetic, ethical, affective – is formative of the object of practice (be it a physical object, like a crafted product or an abstract object, like care). Formativeness is illustrated as a form of knowing that, while doing, invents the way of doing and thus sustains the accomplishment of the practice and its appropriateness.

The eighth chapter introduces the concept of the texture of practices to illustrate how the single practice that the researcher has isolated for heuristic reasons, is not ‘a reality in itself’, it is not ‘given in the order of things’ (to use Foucault’s phrase) but rather is part of a fabric of connections to other interdependent practices. In this way the micro/macro distinction is dissolved within the practice-based approach and a methodology (the spiral case-study) is developed to trace and map the connections between practices.

The methodological reflection continues in Chapter 9 in the form of ‘tricks of the trade’, that is, in a non-systematic way. The chapter offers the reader some suggestions that come principally, but not exclusively, from my experience in conducting practice-based studies. So, I introduce the reader to some tricks to access the tacit knowledge of practitioners, such as the interview with the double, ethnography of the object, and affective ethnography. The purpose of this chapter is to stress that one of the main motivations for studying practices is the purpose of changing, refining them and empowering the practitioners. Thus knowing-in-practice becomes transformative.

The book finishes with a concluding chapter which has two purposes: on the one hand, to review the theoretical background that has generated the interest and field of studies that have formed under the umbrella concept of practice-based studies; on the other hand, to systematize the conceptual and analytical framework on which this book is based. The message is that theorizing on the field of ‘practice-based studies’ is a theorizing in the making, that is, a collaborative activity with others that unfolds in time.

The first and the second editions of this book spring from my experience during the past eighteen years of teaching undergraduates and doctoral students at the University of Trento and other universities, and from the innumerable international doctoral seminars which I have organized in Trento and elsewhere, together with my colleagues of the Research Unit on Communication, Organizational Learning and Aesthetics (RUCOLA). I draw inspiration from the research that my colleagues at Rucola and I have personally conducted in these years as my theorization on the
practice-based approach originated and developed as a collective enterprise based on the empirical analysis of working practices. In addition, the first edition of this book was accompanied by a ‘twin’ book, *Learning and Knowing in Practice-based Studies*, in which I and my colleague Antonio Strati collected the main articles that marked the path traced by Rucola in practice-based studies. The twin books intend to solicit a methodological sensibility that the reader may possess and/or may have developed from contact with other researchers, gaining understanding of the types of questions that other authors have posed, how they have sought answers to those questions, what further questions remain open and how to set up future research. The book’s aim is therefore to engage in dialogue with those who share common interests in the study of working practices and to construct an ideal community of intellectual inquiry.

NOTES

1. The pleasure of narrating lies in telling the same story over and over again and I have already told this story about the constitutive construction of communication and the discussion of the book by Kuhn et al. (2017) in a special Forum of the journal *Management Communication Quarterly* (Gherardi, 2019b).

2. A texture of practices can be defined as composed of activities and practices interconnected in constantly changing patterns (see Chapter 8). Other authors have used similar terms like constellation (Wenger, 2000), mangle of practices (Pickering, 1993), bundles, nexus, or plenum (Hui et al., 2016).

3. The term ‘performativity’ has been used with several meanings in organization studies. Gond et al. (2016), in introducing the ‘performative turn’ identify five conceptualizations of performativity: *doing things with words* (Austin); *searching for efficiency* (Lyotard); *constituting the self* (Butler, Derrida); *bringing theory into being* (Callon and MacKenzie); and *sociomateriality mattering* (Barad). My use of the concept follows Actor-Network Theory for which I am indebted to Karen Barad (2007).

4. I use the concept of situatedness following the tradition of Haraway (1988) and Suchman (2007), that is, as situated knowledge and situated action. Situation has also a root in symbolic interactionism, as illustrated in Chapter 10. There is an assonance with Schatzki’s (2005) ‘site ontology’ and Nicolini’s (2011) elaboration of it; however, apart from the similarity, the two terms come from different vocabularies and serve different purposes.