# 04 / The Practice Turn in Policy and Administration: Reflections and Prospects

**Topic :** WORKSHOPS

**Chair :** Hendrik Wagenaar (University of Vienna)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

It has been over 30 years since the practice turn arrived in social theory. Seminal works by Bourdieu, Schatzki, Lave, Shove, Nicolini and others argued for a fundamental reorientation of the way people relate to the social and material world. As Cook and Wagenaar summarized the practice approach: “knowledge and context can be explained in terms of—and are evoked within—practice, and not the other way round—and that this transpires within real worlds each of which has its own unique constraints and affordances, histories and futures.” (2011) Practice studies were enthusiastically adopted among others in organizational studies, international relations, sociology of science, science and technology studies, and, more haltingly, in policy studies and public administration.

If we stick with policy and administration, we can discern a development in approaches to practice studies. Early contributions functioned primarily as a critical lens. They revealed what rationalist and technocratic models of policy systematically obscured. Later, policy is theorised not just as something that happens in practice, but as meaning in action (Wagenaar 2011; Shove et. al 2012). Meaning is no longer located in texts, intentions, discourse or design, but emerges through situated interaction over time. Currently, practice theory takes it cue from critical anthropology (Escobar et al. 2025), feminist theory (Tronto 2003; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) and STS (Law 2002 Mol 2003). Practice is no longer just the site where policy happens, or where meaning emerges. Practice becomes the condition through which realities come into being. Policy objects are not discovered; they are enacted. Uncertainty is no longer framed as a problem of limited knowledge, but as an ontological feature of the world itself. Multiplicity, instability, and emergence are “all the way down. (personal communication Severine van Bommel) Embracing a deeply relational stance towards social and material world, contemporary practice theory raises pointed questions about the ethics of practice and its relevance for democracy.

Despite an abundance of excellent conceptual and empirical literature, we can safely conclude that practice thinking has made few inroads into our institutions of governance and learning. Although careful research has shown that such institutions get by because of the informal practices of their employees, the official story is one of better, more authoritative, knowledge marshalled to improve policy making and public administration. Policy is made based on ‘the best available evidence’ – read RTCs. Governing bodies commission state-of-the-art reports which do not necessarily relate to the decision making process. Texts in interpretive policy analysis rarely devote more than lip service to the practice approach. Instead of relationality we encounter all the traditional dualisms – facts vs values, subject vs object, knowledge vs emotion - that characterize Western high modernity. All this, while Axelrod and Cohen convincingly argued 25 years ago that the best we can expect is that we harness complexity by acting wisely with insufficient knowledge.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The goal of this panel is to take stock of and reflect on the practice turn in policy studies and public administration, and to look forward. The panel invites conceptual, empirical and methodological papers on the practice approach in public policy and public administration.

*Conceptual papers* may explore questions such as: What have learned about the role of practice in policy and administration? What is the relationship between relationality and practice. Why has the practice turn barely been acknowledged in our institutions of governance and learning? Does the practice approach have a specific ontology? What does an ethics of practice look like? What is the relationship between a practice approach and deepening democracy?

*Empirical papers* may explore questions such as: How is policy making and public administration done differently when practice is foregrounded? Is there still space for administrative discretion or is the introduction of algorithms in public administration marginalizing human judgement?

*Methodological papers* may explore issues such as: Do practice studies require a particular methodology? What is the role of practice in Deliberative Policy Analysis? Is action research the methodology of choice for studies?