THE PRACTICE TURN CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIALISATION AND DECISION-MAKING RESEARCH IN EU STUDIES

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Abstract: "Practice turn" can potentially influence both the theory and methods applied in EU studies. This paper attempts to grasp the most important features of this approach, as they could prove relevant to the study of decision-making at the European level. The point of departure is a research project on the role of socialisation mechanisms in the Council of the European Union, which was rooted in constructivism and used process tracing type case studies as its main method. The paper explores the principles and promises of practice turn and, more generally, of interpretive social science. It describes methods and practical considerations of tracing practices and studying the understandings they contain. Showing the limitations of a more conventional approach to issues such as supranational socialisation and decision-making, the paper argues for practice-oriented research by describing the opportunities and advantages it offers.

Keywords: constructivism, interpretive methodology, interpretive methods, meaning-making, social practices.

Introduction

A new trend has recently become evident in EU studies. Dissatisfied with what "standard" theories and methodologies offer, researchers are turning towards alternative approaches which hold the promise that "another theory is possible" (Manners and Whitman, 2016). The current "boom in critical and reflexivist works on European integration" (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015, p.157) is accompanied by methodological developments influenced by international relations scholarship which are known as 'the practice turn'. Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2016b) describes

practice turn as providing "the prospect of leaving the armchair and exploring the EU from the point of view of the people actually producing it 'from above' and 'from below'" (p. 87–88). However, practice turn is not just "a field research turn", but a more ambitious (and contested) proposition that promises to resolve old theoretical problems and help generate new knowledge based on solid empirical work, thereby fruitfully contributing to various fields of study. It is particularly relevant for EU studies localised within political science, which tends to focus on formal European institutions and organisations rather than on the people who act within them. Practice turn could therefore enrich such studies with greater sociological and anthropological awareness.

"Practices" or "social practices" are "ways of doing things" (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p.300), "competent performances" (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.4), or to put it in more elaborate terms, "socially meaningful and organised patterns of activities" (Pouliot, 2015, p.241). The concept of practice is relational and processual, and it involves doing something in "a socially recognisable way" (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, pp.299–300), which means practices are enacted in social environments, including those of interest to researchers. By focusing on how things are done in a particular formal organisation or informal group, social scientists engage with the meanings these actions have within these communities. Thus, a practice turn is not only about conducting empirical, field research, but also about focusing on meaning-making, which is one of the principles of interpretive methodology (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p.XIV).

This paper presents an argument for the embrace of practice turn within socialisation and decision-making research in EU studies. The first section of the paper explores the principles and promises of practice turn and, more generally, of interpretive social science. In particular, I show what differentiates these approaches from others. The second section then moves towards the methods and practical considerations of tracing practices and studying the understandings they contain. Next, in the third section, the limitations of a more conventional approach to issues such as supranational socialisation and decision-making are discussed – before, in the final section, being compared with the opportunities and advantages which practice-oriented research offers.

Practice turn and practice theory

"Practice turns" take place in various areas of research, including international relations (Adler, 2008; Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Hay, 2011; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Navari, 2011;

Ringmar, 2014; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015). "Practice" is unsurprisingly the most important concept of this movement, but there is no single definition on which all practice theorists would agree. Practice can be defined at different levels of generality and sophistication. For the purpose of this paper, I accept the definition proposed by Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011, p.4): "practices are socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world". The breadth of this and other definitions of practices provokes criticism against the proponents of practice turn – namely, that practices were often, if not always, well within the interest of scholars who have explored the politics of European integration and international relations. However, practices were rarely given a leading role in such inquiries and have remained undertheorised. The intention of practice turn is to bring practices to the fore, at the same time avoiding the mistake of analysing practices without a proper theoretical framework or seeing almost everything as practice (Ringmar, 2014, p.6; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.450).

According to practice theorists, practices are patterned, iterative performances which exist only in their unfolding (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.6; cf. Ringmar, 2014, p.5). This patterned nature is what differentiates practices from the more general category of social action (any meaningful behaviour, cf. Adler and Pouliot 2011: 5). They also represent the third element in addition to structures and agents. Practices are neither manifestations of structural influence nor actor individualism, but combine the two in mutually constitutive relationships (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, pp.4–5).

Practices combine mental and bodily aspects, including background knowledge, emotions, motivations, interactions with things and the ways of using them (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.451). Thus, practices weave together material and discursive elements of the social world. They exists through time and are a means of bringing the past into the present and conserving the present into the future (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, pp.3, 7, 12).

Particularly important for research on decision-making is the fact that practice theory departs from social theories of action which either focus on interest-based (rationalist) calculations, or are norm-oriented and consider decisions to be the results of evaluating relevant social norms. Instead, practice theories belong to the family of cultural/social theories that ask what in the first place sustains the social actors' belief in the ordering of the social world – in turn allowing them

to act upon this world. In this understanding, knowledge exists in the unfolding of practices, which means it is located in-between "the inside" (mental states) and the outside (texts of various kinds) (cf. Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.14; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, pp.449–451).

Performing a common practice produces and sustains social order – it is "performed into being" through practices (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.451; Adler-Nissen, 2016a, p.37). At the same time, the practices themselves rest on background knowledge – a kind of knowledge which is oriented towards action and impossible to grasp outside the practice to which it relates. Background knowledge encompasses the non-intentional or pre-intentional abilities which allow the intentional mental states to emerge. Practices can be seen as a means of translating this ideational background into intentional and socially meaningful action. Knowledge is therefore not simply enabling practices, but is bound up within them. People who are engaged in a practice are socialised into such background knowledge. The concept of background knowledge emphasises the interdependence between practitioners. Any given practice (unlike e.g. a habit) is socially recognisable and can be practiced with varying degrees of competence. Practices can be performed correctly or incorrectly – which, of course, is a socially determined evaluation (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, pp.6–7, 16–17, 23).

There is an important point of contention in the literature regarding the nature of practice theory as either "a particularly fertile focal point for interparadigmatic dialogue" (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.3) or a more cohesive, "distinctive way of studying the world" (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.449). Adler and Pouliot (2011) argue that "practices" can provide a common language for different strands of IR scholarship, making space for dialogue and bridge-building, which, according to them, is necessary for the advancement of scientific knowledge (cf. Ringmar, 2014, pp.3–4). On the other hand, Bueger and Gadinger (2015, p.450) insist that a research programme lacking solid and distinctive conceptual foundations is doomed to fail by becoming too vague to productively direct and support new research. This approach is also supported by Ringmar (2014), who proposes that the only way forward for any kind of "turn" in social science is to make explicit theoretical choices.

My approach here is more in line with the latter position, but it would be erroneous to conclude that this interpretation of practice theory envisions it as a uniform way of thinking about political phenomena. In fact, Bueger and Gadinger (2015, p.450), intending to propose a positive definition of practice theory, emphasise the diversity of practice turn: rather than listing any strict

principles or concrete hypotheses for the theory, they propose six commitments which practice theorists ought to share in order to retain the distinctiveness of their approach. These commitments are: 1) focusing on process rather than stasis; 2) situating knowledge in practice; 3) considering "knowing" to be collective in character; 4) emphasising the materiality of practices; 5) perceiving social order as a multiplicity; and 6) understanding the social world as performed into being (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, pp.452–454).

Further theorisation of practices requires, on the one hand, appreciation of the influence that philosophy has on practice-oriented approaches in social science (cf. Ringmar, 2014, pp.4–5), and, on the other hand, awareness that the way practices are understood and conceptualised in IR is not necessarily congruent with the practice theories developed by sociologists, critical theorists or philosophers. Bueger and Gadinger (2015, p.454) note the prevalence of Bourdieu-inspired theories in IR's practice turn and point toward several different approaches, including Deleuze's "assemblage", critical theoretical approaches (including global governmentality and other approaches which focus on power, domination and resistance, all drawing on Foucault), Wenger's "community of practice", Latour's "actor-network", as well as some varieties of pragmatism. These philosophical routes serve different purposes in empirical, social scientific research. For example, the critical theory of practice emphasises how practices stabilise the social order, while the pragmatist practice theory helps to show how practices, as practical reasoning (*phronesis*), can become the means of change (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, pp.455–456). It can therefore be valuable for researchers working in IR and European studies to continually engage in multidisciplinary dialogue regarding practice theory, rather than to restrict themselves to the practice-oriented approaches already familiar in their own disciplines.

Proponents of practice turn in IR argue that practices offer a better way of looking at international politics as it unfolds in action – as "doing". For example, practice theory can provide a new outlook on international socialisation, which, rather than conditioning action, is preceded by practice or unfolds in tandem with it (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.23).

The meaning behind concepts is constructed in practice. Definitions detached from practice can obscure the ways in which e.g. certain policies affect people and societies (cf. Shore, 2011). This observation emphasises the critical potential of practice turn. In fact, practice turn can help the study of power, asymmetry and conflict hidden behind the apparent stability of constitutive relations present in various socio-political contexts (Adler-Nissen 2016: 95).

Practices are conceptually versatile regarding different levels of aggregation – from the very detailed micro-practices to more general "bundles" of social practice like "international summitry" (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.8; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.456).

Practice turn can also help bridge, transcend or at least justifiably bracket out certain entrenched theoretical dichotomies. First, social practices contain meaningful aspects that are both material and ideational. Second, they can be a force of continuity, because of their recursiveness, and also of change, because they can evolve, e.g. thought failures in their practicing (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, pp.15, 18; Ringmar, 2014, p.19). This argument is criticised (cf. Ringmar, 2014, pp.14–18), but the question of whether any given practice is contributing to continuity or change in a social order is ultimately not a theoretical, but an analytical one, to be answered through empirical inquiry (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.456).

Arguably, practices are particularly important regarding a third dichotomy, playing their part opposite agents and structures. Practices are neither individual nor structural, but are simultaneously constituted by agents and structures and they themselves constitute both individual agents and social structures. In such a view of the social order, agents and structures emerge as truly social from the unfolding of practices (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p.16; Ringmar, 2014, pp.15–17).

This section began with a general criticism of practice-oriented research as not being truly novel in any meaningful way, because practices of some kind were always central to the study of international politics. This criticism is justified to the extent that practice turn is often defined mostly by what it is not, rather than what it is. The set of commitments quoted above goes towards building a more cohesive, positive programme of practice turn. However, one element is still missing – the methodology, including concrete research methods, which researchers who welcome practice turn could use – in other words, the "how" of practice turn (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, pp.452, 457). In the next section I propose that practice turn should embrace interpretivism as its leading methodological approach.

Interpretive methodology and methods

The current practice turn in IR and European studies has important links with interpretive methodology (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p.302). Adler and Pouliot (2011, p.8) emphasise the importance of sense-making and situatedness for the practice-oriented study of international

politics. This assertion points towards an array of approaches which can be called interpretive. Interpretive social science puts meaning-making at the centre of researchers' interest and emphasises the importance of contextuality. At the same time, it rests its claims on science, referring to the basic tenets of "systematicity coupled with an attitude of doubt" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p.4) and (in contrast with positivism) insisting that natural science it not the only source of scientific standards (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p.XVII). Rather than searching for universally applicable "objective truths", interpretive methodology tends towards more pragmatist conceptions of scientific enterprise (cf. Rorty, 1989, p.4) and attempts to grasp the highly contextual ways in which social reality is constructed.

Meaning-making is important for understanding "situated" or "constitutive" causality (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp.51–53; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p.XIV). More generally, understanding the way people do different things and what meaning they associate with their actions is necessary to make sense of many social phenomena, both micro- and macro-scale (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p.300). Practice-oriented researchers claim that macro-scale phenomena emerge from everyday social interactions (Adler-Nissen 2016: 99). Interpretive methodology assumes that various "interpretations" shape actors' actions in the social context, including in the form of social practices (Hay, 2011, pp.168–169). Both interpretivism and practice turn prefer an ontological position which attempts to reconcile individual agency *and* the importance of social structures without falling into the traps of methodological individualism or structuralism (Adler-Nissen, 2016b, p.88).

For example, language is used by individuals, but studying words by themselves is not sufficient to understand social processes – it is necessary to take into account how these words are used, i.e. their social context. On a larger scale, this approach shows how the apparent stability of social systems is always dependent on agents' practices and thus contingent (Adler-Nissen, 2016b, p.92). On the other hand, Colin Hay suggests that interpretive approaches better explain continuity than change and proposes to include non-ideational institutional factors to remedy this (Hay, 2011).

The other "interpretation" that interpretive approaches emphasise is the one made by the researcher. Because they are always situated in a social context of some kind, the knowledge produced is inevitably "shaped by local conditions in which is it practiced and institutionalised" (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015, p.163). This way both interpretivism and practice turn reject the

aim of building sweeping generalisations in the form of social laws or grand theories. Instead, their followers focus on case-specific explanations and attempts at understanding the complex meanings and beliefs of actors involved in the parts of the social world under study (Hay, 2011, p.171). More generally, all social life is seen by both interpretivism and practice theory as "deeply situated" (Adler-Nissen, 2016a, p.28).

Interpretivism highlights the difference between experience-near concepts (i.e. concepts as used by practitioners) and experience-distant concepts (i.e. concepts used by the scientific community). The aim of interpretive social science is to bridge this distinction and make a connection between these two sets of concepts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp.49–50), which necessitates the adoption of relevant research methods and techniques, enabling a scholar to generate and successfully analyse empirical material.

Practice turn points towards the need of more empirical, thorough and descriptive research, in which any "theory of practice" is primarily a sensitising framework or heuristic aid rather than the focus of researcher's attention (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.457). Interpretivism is suitable to such an approach, with its "high and demanding methodological standard" regarding empirical material breadth and depth (Hay, 2011, p.173).

Interpretive social science emphasises the links between methodology and methods. Interpretivist research uses "standard" methods, but with "interpretive sensibility" (Schwartz-Shea, 2015). The empirical focus of interpretive studies means they are often based on abundant empirical material. However, knowing cannot proceed from observation alone, as "evidence is not manifest in the observational world" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, pp.10–11).

Evidence in social science is generated, it is not an objective measure of the world. Interpretivists thus prefer to talk about generating material rather than collecting data (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, p.XXI). Regardless of the naming convention, practice-oriented and interpretive research requires variety within empirical material. The researcher needs to achieve a sufficient exposure to an assortment of different meanings present in the studied social context, ever learning as they conduct their research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.34).

Evidence takes various forms, each has specific advantages and limitations from the perspective of practice-oriented or interpretive research. For example, documents are convenient to access, but their usefulness is limited by factors which determine what is recorded in them, and what is omitted. On the other hand, interviews are flexible and close to social actors, but their self-

reported character can distort researcher's conclusions if interviewees follow their preconceived "script". Conducting interpretive interviews might then require more skill, but should also be more rewarding in bringing the researcher closer to the understanding they seek. Observation could also be a useful method in such research projects, but in political science it often proves to be difficult to conduct because of limited access (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015, p.457; Adler-Nissen, 2016b, pp.97–98).

Interpretive research is related to the abductive mode of reasoning (cf. Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp.26–34). Its point of departure is a puzzle, a question regarding some element of the social world. The researcher applying this mode of reasoning attempts to determine under what conditions would this puzzling phenomenon be more "normal". Abduction is iterative, recursive, it follows the principles of hermeneutic circle and the explanations it provides are situated.

One of the important aspects of interpretive research is achieving scientific trustworthiness. According to Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (2009; 2012) this can be achieved by following six principles:

- thick description (enough details to warrant sense-making);

- reflexivity (how positionality affects knowledge claims);

- intertextuality/triangulation (across evidentiary sources), which is also linked to the notion of exposure to varied understanding during fieldwork;

- detailed record of research and rationale for diversions from research design;

- negative case analysis (checking one's sense-making against alternative understandings, continuous re-evaluation of evidence);

- member checking/revision (letting participants check and provide their comments to transcripts, drafts or finishes manuscripts) (see: Locke and Velamuri, 2009).

While interpretive research designs might appear underdeveloped because of their flexibility (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.55), they offer avenues for problematising in different research areas (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). Interpretive practice-oriented studies require openness, willingness to revise researcher's preconceptions and tolerance for ambiguity (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, pp.74–75). A practice turn could bring ethnographic and sociological sensitivity to European studies (cf. Bellier, 2002; Zwolski, 2014). For example, it

could favour the observation that international organisations, including the EU, are bureaucracies in the sociological sense and can be studied as such (Zwolski, 2014, pp.948–949).

In order to illustrate the potential of practice turn, in the next section I will briefly describe a research project I was recently engaged in, one which was qualitative, but not interpretive. Although the project brought valuable findings, I will focus on the methodological limitations that became apparent in the course of its implementation.

Constructivist process tracing and its limitations

The Council of the European Union is a complex structure, and its decision-making processes are complex and varied depending on the segment and layer. However, there are some common characteristics of this process, like reliance on bureaucratic decision-making (genuine ministerial participation is limited, cf. Fouilleux *et al.* 2005; Häge 2008; Grøn and Salomonsen 2015), the strength of informal norms (Lewis, 2003; Lewis, 2010; Reh et al., 2013), and the culture of consensus (Heisenberg, 2005; Lempp and Altenschmidt, 2008; Häge, 2013; Ławniczak, 2018). Constructivist scholarship often links these features with socialisation taking place between national officials, who work together in the Council's many working parties and committees (cf. Ławniczak, 2015). With the help of process tracing (Beach and Pedersen, 2013), a constructivist scholar can search for causal mechanisms linking socialisation to the course and outcomes of the decision-making process in the Council of the EU and shed some light on their significance.

Such an approach, because of its scientific realist epistemology, can employ the potential of constructivism while taking into account and engaging the rationalist position, looking for the prospects for dialogue and mutual complementarity at the frontier of both paradigms. The main rational-choice assumption here would be that actors make decisions by calculating the costs and benefits of possible actions. The constructivist position would be given credence by describing other mechanisms that do not fit this instrumental logic, but instead rely on the socialisation of certain behaviours, beliefs or even identities, and showing how they affect the process of decision-making. In this section, I will explore the lessons which could be drawn from a research project in which I have attempted to do just that.

Like most constructivist work in IR and European studies, the inquiry described here used qualitative methodology, but not of a qualitative interpretive kind (cf. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014, pp.XVII–XXI). However, the techniques applied for the generation of empirical material

are similar in both kinds of qualitative research, at least on the surface level. In the case of my project, these were in-depth, semi-structured interviews with officials who had considerable work experience in the Council's preparatory bodies.

As mentioned above, the most important method of data analysis used in the project was process tracing (Bennett and George, 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2013; Bennett and Checkel, 2015a). It was used to develop and test the hypothesised influence of socialisation on decision-making. Process tracing is "the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case" (Bennett and Checkel, 2015b, p.7). The method attempts to specify the causal process, it is concerned with the micro-foundations of observed processes and relations, and allows us to look inside the "black box" of causality (Bennett and George, 2005; Beach and Pedersen, 2013). Colin Hay calls the ambition of process tracing "laudable"; however, he accuses it of being not really new, because "all good social science traces processes and always has" (Hay, 2016, pp.500–501). This attitude mirrors similar criticism of practice turn.

In the project, process tracing was used in both its inductive and deductive variants, both constructivist and rationalist explanations were first conceptualised and then tested. Despite claims that process tracing is gaining popularity, its application is often shallow or purely declaratory. The research described in this section adhered to all constitutive elements of the method, which contrasts with studies only applying selected features of the method (e.g. Smeets, 2015).

The research results supported the existence of constructivist mechanisms, although at the same time the alternative explanations could not be ruled out. I concluded that socialisation influences the course (and potentially the results) of the decision-making process, but does not fully explain the specific features of decision-making in the Council listed above. Its effects vary, especially because of the complexity of the internal organisation of the Council. It can also be seen that the linear perception of socialisation as a transition from national loyalty and government-oriented behaviour to transnational loyalty and the attitude towards agreeing on a common position is often inaccurate. I have not documented significant changes in preferences or some sort of redefinition of identity. However, new elements of group loyalty and the sense of community at the supranational level seemed to supplement national loyalty and identity. The study showed that both kinds of behaviours and loyalties can coexist. Officials are socialised not only to the norms

that favour supranational compromises, but also to the particular perceptions (or performances) of their role as responsible for effective representation of national interests and the success of decision-making at the supranational level. Moreover, socialisation does not happen evenly among all, be they even from the same country and share similarly lengthy work experience (Ławniczak, 2017).

Altogether, while the results of the project contained many helpful insights, they did not conclusively answer important parts of the research problem. In particular, the deficiencies of the competitive theorising approach became evident and process tracing, while providing a rich and systematic overview of contending causal mechanism, did not prove effective at comparing them (cf. Hay, 2016, p.501). Many of the dualisms this approach favours proved to be of limited use when confronted with empirical material, including such apparently important theoretical distinctions as interest vs identities, agents vs structures, causation vs constitution, or changes in behaviour vs changes in properties.

The way from these conclusions to the practice-oriented approach leads through the different varieties of constructivism. In fact, IR constructivism as such is not far from practice turn regarding fundamental ontological and methodological assumptions. The approach in the project was derived mostly from the writings of Alexander Wendt (1999)[1]. As Friedrich Kratochwil (2006) argues, this kind of constructivism ("a reasonable middle ground") focuses on ontological distinctiveness, but accepts epistemological positions which are close to positivist social science. Mainstream IR constructivism compromised its sociological and philosophical roots to better fit into contemporary positivist political science (cf. Adler-Nissen, 2016a, p.29).

The methodological approach which followed proved to be ill-suited to grasping the often unsaid and taken for granted parts of the processes which take place in the Council's preparatory bodies, especially the "tacit knowledge" of their officials. Dual distinctions which guided the conceptualisation of causal mechanisms and effects of socialisation were of limited use when confronted with empirical material, which proved to be much more nuanced and often seemed contradictory (cf. Adler-Nissen, 2016b, p.93).

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[1] I am grateful to Xymena Kurowska, whose guest lecture in Warsaw in March 2016 proved to be an important inspiration for the theoretical and methodological explorations described here.

What was perhaps the biggest mistake of that approach was the assumption – explicit in the case of rationalist approach, but also implicitly accepted by the kind of constructivism applied in the project – that decisions by social actors are typically subject to their critical reflection, while in fact they often might not be so (Ringmar, 2014, p.13). By moving the focus from what happens in people's heads (calculation? norm evaluation? etc.) to what goes on between them, practice turn might help overcome this problem (Adler-Nissen, 2016a, p.37). Below is a more extensive discussion of potential contributions of practice turn in EU decision-making research, with some helpful illustrations from the empirical material gathered for the project described above.

How can interpretive practice-oriented research contribute?

First and most obviously, focusing on practices can help avoid (if not solve) some difficult and probably otherwise unresolvable issues regarding agent-structure relations. This is important for any research on topics related to socialisation. For example, Zürn and Checkel (2007) suggest classifying socialisation mechanisms as emerging from agents or structures. However, deciding whether a particular piece of empirical material fits one or the other category is often problematic. In interview material, it is often the case that the interviewees mention beliefs or actions with the implication of them being shared among their peers. They phrase such statements avoiding "me" or "them", simply describing the way things are, for example: "One can always get along" (Interview 5) or "When it is known that something is very important for someone, it is necessary to address this" (Interview 9). However, it is usually impossible to determine whether such behaviours and beliefs result from individual-level persuasion or structurally-upheld social roles, because such differences have not been registered on the conscious level by the interviewees themselves.

Official often speak about their work in the Council in a way that is easier to analyse by turning away from another dual opposition, which is often seen as central for socialisation – between the behaviour of social actors and their internal characteristics, including beliefs and identities. For example, when interviewees say that things are done in particular way ("one typically argues for rather than against something", Interview 8; "consensus is being sought", Interview 10) or that everyone thinks so and so ("everyone understands that", Interview 4; "everyone knows how instructions are sometimes", Interview 5), they are in fact speaking about what they do and, at the same time, how it is understood, hinting at their agreement, perhaps belief.

Practice turn provides tools to analyse the ways in which norms can be performed (practiced) without becoming integral part of individuals' characteristics and still be important for the political processes in which such individuals takes part (Adler-Nissen 2016: 93).

Within the approach described in the previous section, this kind of empirical material would require determining in what way the officials believe or agree that a certain way of doing things is right – e.g. by trying to apply a rationalist or norm-oriented logic of action. Practice-oriented research eschews such questions, instead sticking to data and describing "what is done" as practices. It does not attempt to test some theoretical expectation, but pursues an understanding of the variety of ways those practices can be performed. Moreover, focusing on social practices reveals other logics of action, like the logic of habit (Hopf, 2010) in a taken-for-granted lifeworld, or the logic of practicality (Pouliot, 2008), which denotes commonsensical action.

In fact, research on socialisation and consensus-seeking can encounter contradictions in the empirical material regarding how the officials speak about their work (e.g. stating that something "happens sometimes (…) but it is unprofessional", Interview 7). This might show tensions which could provide valuable avenues for more in-depth empirical inquiry characteristic for interpretive research. People can be engaged in a common practice, but understand it differently. To some extent, practices can be seen as tools – we cannot be sure why they are practiced without studying intentions (Ringmar, 2014, pp.11–13).

It is necessary to closely read interview transcripts, inferring from missing information or from how certain statements are phrased. For example, when an interviewee says that something is done "occasionally" (Interview 2) it is probably not an established practice, or if an interviewee states "we deal with problems at informal meetings" (Interview 7), it suggests formal meetings are not for solving problems.

Interviewees can describe how a certain practice has several different meanings associated with it (e.g. "Information sharing has a somewhat friendly and somewhat interest-based dimension", Interview 9). Sometimes they try to justify what they do by referencing a wider context, in particular the goals of the institutions ("we are a part of the Council, we constitute it, we constitute an EU institution together", Interview 2) or the legitimacy of the whole process ("achieving an overwhelming majority ensures the greater legitimacy of decisions", Interview 9).

Finally, interpretivism and (some variants of) constructivism can go hand in hand (Hay, 2011) and process tracing might not be the only way of tracing social processes in the black box

of causality (Hay, 2016, p.502). Practice tracing (Pouliot, 2015) is an interpretive rendition of process tracing (the single case study method concerned with tracing causal mechanisms), which focuses on social practices (the patterned and socially meaningful human action). It is a way of sense-making, aiming at capturing the logic of practicality and establish "localised causality" – that is, at saying why and how given practices, as understood and practiced by human actors, produce the outcome of interest. Practice tracing also serves to conceptualise mechanisms (not *causal mechanisms*), but sees them differently than process tracing – as analytic constructs (or "analytic generalities") belonging to the realm of social science. In this sense, mechanisms serve to theoretically communicate the typical aspects of unique, localised social practices. The aims of practice tracing require an analysis of not only what happens (in the case of observation) and what is said (in case of both observation and interviewing), but also of the unsaid – the unarticulated assumptions or "tacit knowledge" of the members of a community of practice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for the embracing of practice turn in the study of decision-making in the Council of the European Union. It has presented the main commitments of practice theory, as well as some of the criticism it receives. The interpretive approach has been shown to be the appropriate methodological counterpart for practice-oriented research, offering methods most useful for studying the way practices are performed and understood. The paper has compared this approach with a more conventional way of dealing with issues such as supranational socialisation and decision making. The last section has reviewed the opportunities and advantages which practice-oriented research offers.

One specific area in which practice turn could prove highly relevant is the consensual decision-making in the Council of the European Union. The puzzle(s) of consensus has received considerable attention and a number of explanations underpinned by various theoretical standpoints. However, most of these explanations focus on some sort of general logic or mechanism, in which the participants of the negotiation process play their prescribed roles (either of national representatives of norm-driven group members). In this way, the officials in the Council are, one way or another, deprived of agency and are not really of interest to researchers (other than as sources of information).

Practice-oriented research could help face with these deficiencies. By producing rich empirical material, it could substantiate the diverse explanations of consensus and serve to show how they relate to the experiences and understandings of those who practice consensus within the institution. Moreover, studying practices can reveal hierarchies hidden in the social order. Socialisation does also not always produce harmonious, conflict-free groups. Practices can sustain privilege, exclusion, and different forms of hierarchy (Beyers, 2010). This can also be relevant to the ways in which the practice of consensus is performed in the Council.

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