An outline of a theory of practice methodologies: Education research as an expansive-activist endeavour

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the notion of *activist practice methodologies*, illuminated through a focus on education research that is informed by practice theory and framed by an explicitly normative regard for education. It identifies and responds to some of the topographies of *expansive practice theories*; some of the onto-epistemological challenges these topographies create for researchers; and the relationship between methodologies and axiology, especially within education research where social justice values collide spectacularly with policy discourses around competition, the market and particular framings of evidence. Thus established, the chapter outlines key features of research that deploy theories of practice in pursuit of normative ends, developed in conversation with other chapters in this collection. We theorise that within education research, methodologies informed by expansive practice theories are derived from research axiologies that are activist in intent and that they respond to the onto-epistemological challenges of those same theories. In our account, activist practice methodologies are invested with normative ideals, specifically to advance social justice—in this case, in and through education. This work often involves novel arrangements of theory, new approaches to data, and experimental approaches to research writing. Amid the onto-epistemological angst thrown up by expansive practice theories, activist practice methodologies do not give up on method but persist in developing new ways to apprehend and engage practice. Five interrelated aspects of activist practice methodologies are discussed: activist axiologies; re-constituting the ethical subject in research practice; theory as method; more-than-representational data; and restive accounts of research.

Introduction

The introductory chapter to our previous volume, *Practice Theory and Education* (Lynch, Rowlands, Gale & Skourdoumbis, 2017a), noted that in commenting on the *practice turn* (Schatzki 2001) some scholars allude to methodological trends and challenges in practice research. We also drew attention to Miettinen, Samya-Fredericks and Yanow's (2009, p. 1314) discussion of a 'methods agenda' within practice theory and what Kemmis (cited in Green and Hopwood 2015, pp. 5–6) dubbed 'philosophical-empirical inquiry'. The suggestion we take from these references is that, just as we can talk sensibly (although with caveats) about *practice theory*, in the same way we can and should talk about *practice methodology*—the research

practices that emerge from practice theory and in response to the challenges practice theory provokes.

In this chapter we take up this challenge to outline a theory of practice methodologies for education research. Implications for such methodologies derive from a consideration of how practice theory interfaces with the axiology of education. We discuss how particular conceptions of the purpose of education research are informed by, and inform the use of, practice theory, and we tease out certain methodological logics and directions that follow. We argue that practice theory—focusing on elaborating the complexity of practice, and being consistent with what Biesta (2015) referred to as *non-technological* conceptions of education—is most often deployed in the service of research agendas seeking to support social transformation, where change is understood as both a constant (definitional) feature of practice but one that resists notions of linear, instrumental change. This intersection of practice theory with the axiology of education research throws up philosophical dilemmas that demand *experimental* approaches to methodology; that is, they motivate researchers to try out non-conventional approaches 'to see what will happen' (Thrift 2008[1]). Some of these dilemmas and possible ways forward are identified and discussed in this chapter, in our exploration of approaches to: working with practitioners; repurposing empirical data; working with the interrelations of theory and practice; and representing practice and research into practice.
As we see them, the methodological ways forward are framed as five interrelated aspects of what we name *activist practice methodologies*: activist axiologies, re-constituting the ethical subject in research practice, theory as method, more-than-representational data, and restive accounts of research. This builds on the work of practice theory scholars (e.g., Green 2009a, 2009b, 2015; Green & Hopwood 2015; Miettinen et al 2009; Reckwitz 2002, Schatzki 1996, 2001, 2012; Thrift 1996) who have elaborated the tenets of practice theory; what we refer to in this chapter as *expansive* practice theory. Some of these scholars have pointed to methodological implications and agendas but they do not elaborate these beyond discussions of the methodological dialectic between close-up empirical work and philosophical inquiry (Jonas, Littig & Wroblewski 2017). We begin that expansive-activist work in this chapter.

Topographies of expansive practice theories

Conversations about relations between practice theory and methodology are especially important in education research where practice theory is so central to how practice is understood, and where much practice theory has been developed. Regrettably, education

research that is focused on practice is also where such conversations are too often absent. More often, particular research traditions are evoked and particular research practices are deployed without explicit engagement with tensions between research practices and the theoretical resources of practice theory. Many factors contribute to contradictions and slippages between how practice theories conceptualise practice and how research into practice is undertaken. The naming of *practice theory*[2] is not helpful in this regard. Practice theory scholars (e.g., Green 2009b; Lynch, Rowlands, Gale & Skourdoumbis 2017b) have noted the slipperiness of the word *practice*, which can be taken up in so many different (and sometimes antithetical) ways. *Practice theory*—as a conceptual category—does not include all theories of practice, but this is not readily apparent in the term or to those researchers who are not already familiar with practice theory scholarship. In this chapter, we want to avoid misapprehension by avoiding a simple use of the term 'practice theory', instead referring to *expansive theories of practice* as a way of being more precise in our meaning. To be clear on this, below we revisit the onto-epistemological topographies of *expansive* theories of practice: those features that support the notion of a constellation of social theories, which despite their often significant points of difference, together 'form a broad family of theoretical and philosophical work for which the notion of practice has become something of an organising principle' (Green 2015, p. 1). We then consider the methodological challenges these onto-epistemological topographies create for researchers, especially in the context of the axiology of education research, and possible responses to them.

Expansive theories of practice are distinct from narrower conceptions of practice found in structuralist, liberal-humanist, rational-economic, techno-rationalist, representationalist and neoliberal capitalist research traditions.[3] By way of contrast, below we sketch out some interrelated features of expansive theories of practice that help to articulate the distinctiveness of this approach. These features draw across the work of theorists such as Barad, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Deleuze, Latour, Marx, Charles Taylor and Vygotsky, who in their own work speak to these points in their writings. While we do refer to examples from particular theorists, our intention is not to note all theorists who contribute to these understandings or to map the differences that are in the detail between theorists, but instead to crystallise those features that make *expansive theories of practice* recognisable.

In expansive theories of practice:

- Practices are extra-individual (Trowler 2014). They do not belong to or emanate from individual human agents, and they prefigure individuals' engagement in them (Bourdieu 1990a; Schatzki 2001). Kemmis et al. (2012, p. 34) invite us to consider practices as living entities that exist beyond those who engage in them and beyond any singular manifestation of practice. For practice theorists, practices are the primary units of the social (Green 2009a, 2009b; Miettinen et al. 2009): they 'contain their own conditions of intelligibility' (Hodge & Parker 2017, p. 40) and social worlds are understood as effects of practices, and vice versa. Practices are intelligible in this way because they implicate a nexus of artefacts, ideas, people, places, tools and other practices that coordinate people's engagements in them (Smith 2017, p. 31).
- Practices are enacted as situated, embodied 'doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' (Schatzki 2001, p. 56), and it is these enactments of practices that are the focus of empirical inquiry by researchers informed by practice theories. 'Doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' are unique in their manifestation—'starting with the ongoing of people's actualities means that nothing is ever quite the same as it was before or will be, though many if not most changes may be imperceptible' (Smith 2017, p.23). Some researchers refer to their focus on actualities as a rendering of the *everydayness* of practices; notably de Certeau (1984, p. ix, 96) in his 'science of singularity' where 'everyday practice' is synonymous with 'lived practice' and where 'everyday stories' (p. 122) are stories of practitioners actual undertakings.
- Practices implicate and are constituted via complex arrangements of, and relations between, human, non-human and discursive materials (e.g., Haraway 1992; Schatzki 2001; Kemmis & Grootenboer 2008; Fenwick & Edwards 2010). Discursive materials—including ideas and accounts of ideas—are positioned by practice theorists as part of the real and as having more-than-representational force (Law & Urry 2004; Lynch et al. 2017b) as they operate in relation with other entities.
- Practice is not simply actions and not all actions are practice (Gale et al. this volume). Mechanical reactions that are pre-programmed and predictable in a Pavlovian sense are not practice in the way we understand it here (Rowlands & Gale 2017; Schatzki 1996). Engagement in practices is purposeful and meaningful; however, they are not subject to rational, conscious control. The futurity of practices reaches beyond the singularity of sense-making and conscious anticipation, to include the unthought, affect, and forces operating beyond the level of human perception (e.g., Bourdieu 1990b; Taylor 1992).

For example, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus rejects a dichotomy of mechanical determinations and conscious will; instead it provides space for both the perpetuation of a practice *and* for spontaneity and improvisation (Bourdieu 1976). Thus, practices activate human capacities and generate potential futures, even though they are not subject to rational control.

- Practices involve past, present and future. However, conceptions of temporality are also central to understandings of practice as a theoretical category (Pickering 1995; Shove 2009) and to understandings of particular practices (Johnnson 2012; Reckwitz 2002, p. 255). Practices are *both* temporarily structured *and* constitutive of lived temporalities (Schatzki 1996, 2009; Shove 2009). Practices are frequently associated with routine activities, with purposeful actions performed repeatedly (though with difference) (Schäfer 2017). Johnnson (2012, p. 52) refers to this as the 'tempo-rhythm of practice'. Thus spatiotemporal considerations involve more than the historical situatedness of enacted practices: there are iterative, relational interactions between practices and space and time (spacetime).
- Practices change via an ongoing dialogic interplay between reproduction (via repeated routine activity) and production (via the insinuation of difference). Reckwitz (2002, p. 255) located the potential for change in the everyday enactment of practices when he wrote: 'The "breaking" and "shifting" of structures must take place in everyday crises of routines, in constellations of interpretative interdeterminacy and of the inadequacy of knowledge with which the agent, carrying out a practice, is confronted in the face of a "situation".' Kemmis et al. (2012) also note that practices involve dialogic relationships between existing arrangements and emerging circumstances (Kemmis et al. 2012).

Dilemmas pertaining to ontology (theories of being and reality) and epistemology (theories of knowing and what constitutes knowing) are taken up explicitly by expansive theories of practice. The term *onto-epistemology* refers to the inseparable relation between ontology and epistemology. That is, although we can provide distinct definitions of ontology and epistemology, they are not independent considerations. Indeed, the privileging of the *onto-* emphasises the encompassing of *knowing* into *being* and underlines the position of the researcher as productively stuck in the world—which happens as soon as you start working with expansive theories of practice—and the processes and productions of research as part of

and affecting the world. Thus, *onto-epistemology* suggests that epistemology is subsumed by ontology. Accordingly, within expansive theories of practice, knowledge production practices are necessarily implicated in what is known—in what is taken to be *real*—and indeed in *the real* itself. That is, what is known is a function of knowledge making practices and what is known interacts relationally with practices (e.g., Law & Urry 2004). This contrasts with representationalist approaches to research, where concepts are intended to correspond with the real (Rorty 1979; Haraway 1996; St Pierre 2019), and where knowledge *about* the real is thought to be somehow separate from it—what Schatzki referred to as a 'spectator view of knowledge' (cited in Green 2009, p. 50). In expansive theories of practice, researchers and the concepts and representations they develop are positioned *within* the meshwork of the practices that they study, which raises questions about the purpose and value of research and its outputs. Methodologies derived from expansive theories of practice therefore position theory differently to positivist approaches derived from realist ontologies. Activist practice methodologies, which we elaborate further below, do not seek correspondence between concepts and the empirical world. Instead, they take their understanding of practice from their *engagement* with practice and its imbrication with theory.

Practice axiologies in education research

Axiology goes to the heart of why we characterise practice research as an expansive-activist endeavour within education research. In his paper on cultures of education research, Biesta (2015, p. 12) describes a number of splits within the field of education research:

> … splits in contemporary educational research are partly of an *intellectual* nature, where they have to do with differences in theoretical orientation and methodological outlook. … In addition, there is a clear *political* dimension, in that different schools, approaches and styles of research are based on particular beliefs and normative preferences about what educational research is, what it ought to be and what it ought to achieve (which includes beliefs and preferences about the relationship between research and policy and the relationship between research and practice).

Biesta goes on to describe a particular split between a techno-rationalist view of education as governed by cause and effect relationships and a view of education as comprising communication and meaning making 'in which questions of cause and effect actually have no place' (Biesta 2015, p. 12). These contrasting conceptions reflect the axiology of education, what Biesta describes as the 'values that give direction to education' (Biesta 2015, p. 18). They

have fundamental implications for education research and education research methodologies, and therefore for practice methodologies. For example, they drive what research we think is important and what is not; they drive how we think research should be undertaken; and, more fundamentally, they drive what we think the purposes of education should be and, similarly, the purposes of education research.

In an attempt to be inclusive in naming the purposes of education, Biesta points to the centrality of 'change', where education seeks to enable, support and promote change. Explicitly, change-focused axiologies are central to how we conceive of activist practice methodologies. Expansive notions of practice support researchers to consider how practices develop, persist over time and change, and how a transformation of practices might be promoted. Within education research, these considerations are central to the pursuit of transformational agendas, such as those focused on social justice (e.g. inclusive curricula, the professionalization of education workers, etc.). Such considerations lead researchers to ask: how is it that inequitable practices arise and are enabled to persist in the face of structural changes intended to support equity?; how might inequitable practices be interrupted so that more equitable practices can be developed and sustained?; and so on. Expansive notions of practice are fundamental to the pursuit of such questions.

Informed by conceptual resources for inquiring about and understanding change (or non-change), education research that deploys expansive theories of practice often seeks to promote change *through* research processes. Haraway speaks to this ethics and normativity when she writes: 'The point is to make a difference in the world, to cast our lot for some ways of life and not others' (Haraway 1996, p. 439). Such approaches to research are framed by more-than-representational (after Lorimer 2005) axiologies, where interference is repositioned as a potential value of research practice. Change-focused axiologies appear incompatible with methodologies and methods that are aimed at developing concepts and representations that correspond with the 'real' (descriptions of the world), and which have become conventions within education research. Seeking to promote change *through* research processes ascribes different types of value to representations than in positivist traditions. Green (2009a) raises this issue in his discussion of alignments between practice theory and non-representational theory where he argues that researchers can ascribe to non-representational onto-epistemologies as part of expansive theories of practice, but that this requires a reformulation of what representations do. We describe this as resisting representationalist logics. *Practice*

Methodologies in Education Research was conceived in this space. It seeks to identify and respond to some of the methodological challenges of researching education practice thrown up by expansive theories of practice.

Activist Practice methodologies

We are making an explicit argument for (the importance of) an intellectual *and* political demarcation in relation to practice methodologies within education research. If we are to respond to the onto-epistemological implications of expansive practice theories and thus to the slipperiness of practice, new approaches to methodologies are needed. We name these approaches as *activist practice methodologies* and develop them below in conversation with the chapters in this collection. The authors of these chapters each set out to articulate and respond to particular challenges stimulated by engagements with particular practice theories during the conduct of education research, or where they have found expansive theories of practice to be efficacious in the face of tricky methodological problems. Five interrelated aspects of practice methodologies are discussed: activist axiologies, re-constituting the ethical subject in research practice, theory as method, more-than-representational data, and restive accounts of research.

Existing practice methodology scholarship identifies two interrelated and interacting threads of work, both of which inform and progress understandings of particular practices and of practice as a theoretical category. One thread involves particular types of empirical work; the other involves particular types of theoretical work (Green & Hopwood 2015; Miettinen, Samya-Fredericks & Yanow 2009). In relation to the first, ethnographic approaches to research have been identified as an important aspect of empirical work that engages with expansive theories of practice. Schatzki (2012, p. 25) argues that research into practice must be ethnographic in its approach to empirical inquiry: 'There is no alternative to hanging out with, joining in with, talking to and watching, and getting together with the people concerned'. Schatzki refers here to '"ethnography" writ large'—a broadly conceived view of what constitutes ethnographic methods, which are primarily qualitative. While he is quite specific about what he argues is a need to observe people's interactions directly and to talk to those people involved in a practice, he also argues that it is necessary to move beyond the here and now. So, for example, he advocates using oral histories generated via interview methods that allow researchers to get beyond the contemporaneous aspects of practices to inquire how they are historically constituted. But while Schatzki emphasises the importance of observing

people's doings and sayings, and explicitly critiques research that makes 'comparisons at high levels of generality' without accounting for the particularities of what people actually do, he is also clear that practices cannot be observed directly; that is, there is more to practices than what is directly observable.

Miettinen, Samya-Fredericks and Yanow (2009, p. 1312) similarly identify practice research as 'ethnographic in its sensibility,' with an emphasis on what humans actually do. They refer to a methods agenda that involves 'studying a living practice "here and now" and relating it to the history of practice'. This agenda 'intertwines' detailed empirical work with theoretical work that addresses ontological and epistemological considerations. They argue that researching practice requires work that is simultaneously theoretical and empirical. Green and Hopwood (2015, p. 5) describe this as 'combining rigorous, expansive, explicitly theoretical or conceptual inquiry with detailed empirical work, whether by way of case-study or other forms of qualitative inquiry, within a broadly ethnographic framework'. Many of the chapters in this collection engage with empirical data generated via methods that can be characterised broadly as ethnographic, such as field work, observation, informal or semi-structured interviews, videography and the collection and generation of artefacts. Several chapters also engage with other methodological considerations that can be traced back to ethnographic origins, particularly those concerning the ethics and politics of how the researcher and the researched are positioned in research.

Not all chapters in this collection engage with empirical data. From our perspective, these non-empirical engagements are equally important for understanding human practice. Philosophical accounts of practice can explore axiological issues that cannot be answered through empirical research alone (Standish 2019). Among authors in the collection who do engage with the empirical, some make explicit critiques of 'close up' methods and data as they are conventionally utilised, and call for more experimental approaches that try out alternative methods for apprehending and engaging with practice. Others trouble the privileging of direct observation and the very utility of concepts of the *here and now*.

Reading into and across these chapters, we identify five main, interrelated characteristics of activist practice methodologies: activist axiologies; moving beyond humanist interpretations of ethics; theory as method; more-than-representational data; and restive accounts of research. Not all chapters in this collection speak to all of these characteristics. However, read as part of

the collection, each chapter has something to bring to our understandings of activist practice methodologies in education research. In this sense, our reading of the chapters is diffractive (Lynch et al. 2017b), focusing not on mapping different perspectives but on what is produced when we read the chapters through one another (Barad 2007) and in the face of the wicked problems of researching educational practices (Trowler 2012).

Activist axiologies

Our first proposition is that activist practice methodologies have a distinctive axiology that parallels that of expansive practice theories. Such theories are most often associated with transformative purposes, where scholarship is intended to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions and habitual interpretations and behaviours, and to promote educational and social change. Most scholars who have developed expansive theories of practice take explicit positions within such agendas. Activist practice methodologies draw on a similar heritage. They deliberately set out to challenge, disturb, and change education practices. This might be said of education research generally (even in its most techno-rationalist, scientistic forms; e.g. 'what works' and interventionist research such as random control trials in education), where the purpose of education research is to contribute to the improvement of education, however defined. Activist practice methodologies are distinct from these in both how they conceive of practice and in how they conceive of how this can and should be researched. In particular, they support a critique of hegemonic arrangements and a desire for more equitable, more inclusive and more ethical practices. However, they move well beyond critique, embracing explicitly transformational agendas where particular visions and values are pursued, not only as agendas to which research outputs might contribute, but as actions and engagements that research processes initiate and enact. Activist practice methodologies embrace activist axiologies, where the purpose of research is not (cannot be) merely to inquire or to contribute to understandings of the state of things (and maybe that is what we can do least, when we take practice theory seriously), but extends to intentional efforts to change practices through research engagements. There is something of a doubleness here. We claim above that practice defies intentional manipulations and that practice theory suggests it is impossible to deliberately invoke a particular change in practice through strategic intent. This argument is also made by authors in this collection. For example, Steven Hodge and Stephen Parker, when considering Charles Taylor's *social imaginaries* as a theory of practice, note that the desire of some researchers to intervene in and change an imaginary, is fraught with difficulty due to the historical and deep-rooted understandings that constitute them. Sawchuk notes (citing Ollman) this same

conundrum of researching 'the world we inhabit'. Indeed, it is a conundrum present in all practice theories, such that the concept of effecting change through research is highly problematic from a practice perspective. Yet education researchers who evoke such theories seek change nonetheless, often through humble but persistent interference, or what Rowan (2012, p. 61) refers to as the 'ceaseless introduction of difference'. We seek change but cannot necessarily produce change in the way we want it, when we want it.

Expansive theories of practice do not support complete knowledge of practice or instrumental change. However, just because our knowledge is not complete, does not mean that we can know nothing about practice. Or, as Sawchuk (p. X this volume) puts it in response to the onto-epistemology of dialectical materialism, 'it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand anything'. On the contrary, activist practice methodologies proceed from an assumption that both researchers and research participants do have powerful insights into practice. Similarly, expansive theories of practice do not support notions of grand visions of orchestrated change but instead, through activist practice methodologies, support a gradual chipping away towards more socially just futures. Change does not unfold in linear, orchestrated ways, but change does happen and research practices have a part to play, even if that part involves some experimentations, some happenstance, some unplanned, emergent moments through which both researchers and 'the researched' might learn, and some exposure of researcher vulnerabilities.

Numerous methodological tactics (Lynch & Greaves 2017) are evident in the chapters in this volume, where research processes and artefacts are repurposed and redeployed in ways that are intended to challenge and to change practices. These involve novel arrangements and nonconventional approaches to theory and data, as well as experimental approaches to representing research. Perhaps ironically, their *activist* axiologies are not named as such – very few authors use the term *axiology* (the exceptions being Lynch & O'Mara, Rowlands & Rawolle and Courtney & Gunter) – but axiological concerns, such as the value and purpose of research, are addressed nonetheless.

Re-constituting the ethical subject in research practice

Second, activist practice methodologies involve complex ethical considerations that go beyond adherence to human research ethics codes. Human research ethics is an important and challenging aspect of education research. Within activist practice methodologies, agendas of transformation and the particularities of theorisations of practice provide further challenges,

provoking new types of research engagements and new understandings of what ethical research practice entails.

Human research ethics has grown out of a concern for the burden and harm inflicted on human participants in research, and from the consideration of who benefits and is served by research. However, questions of whose interests are served are not straightforward in education research and include considerations of participants' personhoods and agencies in research, and the practices of research through which research participants and social groups are produced as subjects (Alldred & Gillies 2002; Small 2001). Desires to treat research participants respectfully have influenced research approaches and methods where efforts are made to affirm participant accounts of practice, but how to treat research participants respectfully is not always self-evident (Small 2001).

Treating practitioner accounts as truthful is not necessarily the most respectful treatment, nor is it the most productive treatment within research axiologies seeking change. This is exemplified in the Steven Courtney and Helen Gunter chapter where they investigate how corporate identities and practices are enabled by English headteachers and become apparent through what the authors describe as *corporate fabrications*. For Courtney and Gunter the methodological challenge is not only to focus on what headteachers *say*, but to consider what this exposes. To do this they draw on two empirical case studies to produce excerpts of professional biographies of two English headteachers. Courtney and Gunter produce two contrasting accounts of each biography, the first being a functionalist reading and the second being an alternative interpretation that demonstrates how corporatised fabrications are present, and their consequences. They explicitly propose an alternative approach to practice methodology which includes a reframing of ethics to overturn assumptions that 'participants accounts are truth and therefore … should be privileged' (Courtney & Gunter this volume, p. X). The chapter by Courtney and Gunter raises questions about how expansive theories of practice can challenge us to rethink traditional notions of ethical research practices that reify participants' accounts.

Expansive theories of practice also problematise the treatment of research participants' accounts as reflections of practice. The onto-epistemologies of practice theory support that practitioners are important informants on practice, not because practitioners necessarily *know* or can articulate the practices they engage in, but because practitioners' self-interpretations are a part of practice (Taylor 1985).[4] This suggests that participants' accounts should be scrutinised for what they do and do not reveal, and that methods other than generating practitioner accounts may be needed to 'uncover' practice. In their chapter, Trevor Gale, Russell Cross and Carmen

Mills use classroom video data in stimulated recall sessions as a way of moving beyond the 'empirically observable' to get at the 'unthoughtness' of dispositions that serve as a precursor to practice. They devised a particular methodology that employed videos of teacher practice not as data but as a prompt for generating data that would otherwise remain 'hidden', rendering dispositions (not amenable to direct observation) researchable. It was the teachers' responses to videos of their own practice that became the data. Whilst some video excerpts reflected close alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practice, there were also instances where contradictions were evident and both teachers and researchers engaged and struggled with these. Later in the research, teachers viewed video excerpts of the teaching practice of other teacher participants so as to again provoke them to critically engage with their own teaching practice. In all these ways, this research sought to bring to conscious deliberation the enactment of practices by research participants that might be inconsistent with their stated beliefs and thus 'uncover the dispositions that informed their actions' (Gale et al. p. X this volume). In both the Courtney et al. chapter and the Gale et al. chapter, research methods engage research participants' accounts in ways that involve both critique and transformation, looking to what participants' accounts *do*, *can do* and *cannot do*.

A commonality of expansive theories of practice is their elaborations of relational understandings of subjectivity that resist individualist and rationalist conceptions of the human subject and that also reject structuralist dichotomies such as individual versus society, agency versus structure, and object versus subject. Despite this commonality, the constitution of the subject also provides an important source of heterogeneity among different theorisations of practice[5]. Education researchers using approaches as diverse as post-qualitative research, actor network theory, science and technology studies, and new materialism take the decentring of the rational, knowing, human subject further than theorisations that focus on embodiment and dispositions, problematising the focus on the 'human' and the very notion of an individuated human subject (e.g., Snaza & Weaver 2015; Ulmer 2017).

The focus within human research ethics on the protection of a freely consenting human participant does not reflect or encompass posthuman approaches to education research. Elizabeth de Freitas speaks to this critique in her chapter on technologies that generate data by tracking changes imperceptible by humans, often without conscious consent, as the by-product of other activities. Supported by understandings from contemporary neuroscience, de Freitas argues that digital sensing data undermine conventional notions of subjectivity that are based on an individuated, comprehending, deliberating, human subject. Her argumentation challenges the concepts 'close-up' and 'in-situ' as commonly understood in qualitative

methodology, as well as other concepts that assume the centrality of a bounded, sentient human such as *embodiment*, *lived experience* and *situatedness*. de Freitas articulates an ontology (drawing on Hansen, Protevi, and Deleuze) in which sensing data is no longer understood as belonging to an individual human body (emanating from, or representing, the activity of an individual human brain), but is conceived as *environmental.* Such ontologies point to the difficult work that still needs to be done to develop and codify ethical practices in the face of the interpenetration between the human and the nonhuman that they articulate.

Theory as method

A third characteristic of activist practice methodologies is that theory is imbricated with method. Indeed, an overarching theme in expansive theories of practice is a view of theory as not independent, outside of or transcending practice (Hodge & Parker 2017). Theories are part of practice and are constituted through practice. Expansive theories of practice therefore tend to resist and critique the notion that theories can be *applied* to empirical contexts in unproblematic ways. A notable example is evident in the work of de Certeau, who emphasises the singularity of everyday practice and criticises approaches to theory that involves applying concepts developed elsewhere to different circumstances (Highmore 2006, pp. 5-7). Similarly, for Deleuzian scholars, concepts are the outputs of philosophical work, not the inputs, and the *application* of concepts detracts from an appreciation of the richness, contingency and singularity of experiences (Stagoll 2016). Within activist practice methodologies, theory is not intended to be a reflection of the real nor to provide predictive power. Aligned with activist axiologies, expansive theories of practice are most often used by researchers as a tool to disrupt and as a mechanism for offering counter-hegemonic narratives of education practices. Theory can be described *as* method, where concepts are used as methodological tools to 'reorient thought' (St Pierre 2019, p. 9), frame methodology and guide method, but without subscribing to representationalist logics. In such cases theory *is* method.

The notion of 'theory as method'—amid a predominance of realist ontologies and positive approaches to education research—is an uncomfortable one. Actor-network theory (ANT) provides an interesting and contested case in point, where proponents who elaborate ANT *as* a method expended significant efforts in emphasising this and resisting misapprehensions of ANT as a social theory (e.g., Latour 1999). Latour (2005, p. 142) describes ANT as a 'theory about *how* to study things, or rather how *not* to study them', suggesting that the onto-epistemology elaborated by ANT provides particular methodological directions. Fenwick and

Edwards (2010, pp. 1-23) summarised this understanding of ANT as using ideas as 'a way to intervene, not a theory of what to think'. This approach to theory can be found in the enactment of other practice theories, where theory provides approaches and methods of analysis that exceed more conventional usages of theory to describe and explain. Cultural-Historic Activity Theory (CHAT) is further example. Featured in the Gale et al. chapter, it is a theory of activity, of relations between elements of an activity system, directed at mapping that system and where change might be effected within that system. In effect, it presents a method for documenting the conditions of practice and thus the wherewithal to transform existing conditions to result in different outcomes.

In this collection, several chapters engage with theory *as method*. However, authors also grapple openly with how difficult this can be *in practice*. Julia Miller, Joseph Ferrare and Michael Apple engage with onto-epistemological challenges of expansive theories of practice to develop a new methodology, arguing that when as researchers we compare two or more different groups in relation to a particular outcome or process, such as with studies of the effects of different social classes upon education attainment, we are effectively focusing on the structural position as being the only, or a significant, source of difference. They assert that such between-group comparison within research practice is inconsistent with expansive theories of practice which generally consider agency and structure as being interwoven, with neither being ontologically privileged. In response Miller et al. propose a form of within-group analysis as a new methodological approach to temper studies that focus on comparing groups. However they also highlight how tricky working with expansive theories of practice can be and the kinds of intrinsic methodological challenges that can result.

The chapter by Peter Sawchuk similarly critiques methodological approaches that do not align with the espoused philosophical foundations of research studies—in his case, he critiques usages of dialectical materialist philosophy. He explains that the conceptual tools of dialectical materialism suggest a specific methodological logic, and—consistent with Latour's point about ANT quoted above—additionally suggest what approaches ought to be rejected. He critiques analyses that tend towards unifying, non-contradictory representations of practice, and that erase the relational effects of difference and variation supported by dialectical materialist ontologies. Sawchuk draws on a study of the practice of welfare workers in Ontario, Canada (Sawchuk 2013), using it to explain how researchers might bridge 'the gap between *talking about* and *doing* dialectics' (Sawchuk this volume, p. xx; emphasis added). For Sawchuk, it is

only in its application (and the explanation of its application) that dialectical materialist methodology can be truly grasped. This point is consistent with the philosophical−empirical dialect found in many manifestations of activist practice methodologies and which is formative to the foundational work of many practice theorists.

For other chapters, theory as method is more prosaic. Describing their research into academic governance as a particular form of practice, Julie Rowlands and Shaun Rawolle draw extensively on Bourdieu's theory of fields of practice. In Bourdieuian-informed practice research, the more usual approach is to focus on the role of habitus in generating practices. While not discounting habitus in their theorisation, Rowlands and Rawolle focus attention on the somewhat more neglected role of fields as contested sites where practice takes place and on the role of practices in defining and bounding fields. Further, they ask how Bourdieu's theory of fields of practice can assist in developing understandings of both why and how certain research topics can become taboo or heterodox. That is, they seek to employ Bourdieu's theory of fields of practice as a methodological tool.

Drawing on diverse philosophical foundations, practice theorists invest theory with productive force. For example, drawing on onto-epistemologies of ANT, Law and Urry (2004) argue that social inquiry and its methods contribute to the production of social realities and they illustrate how theoretical concepts developed by researchers have shaped practices. The role of theory—distorted and mutated over centuries—is also central to Charles Taylor's work on the social imaginary (Taylor 2007; Hodge & Parker 2017). In their chapter in this volume, Hodge and Parker outline the three main 'mutations' of the social imaginary proffered by Taylor, each of which has its historical antecedents in the theories of elite scholars (e.g. John Locke, Adam Smith or other thinkers of the Enlightenment). As with the Gale et al. chapter, the interest is not in these theories per se but in the ways in which these have circulated among societies, how they have mutated and persisted and shaped the 'background understanding' (Taylor 1992) that consists of humans' most fundamental taken-for-granted beliefs about themselves.

Thus, expansive theories of practice suggest particular methodological logics and provide planforms from which scholars can critique and resist approaches based on more reductive conceptions of practice. Aligning philosophy and methodology is not easy when working with expansive theories of practice, and complete alignment is definitively impossible due to the onto-epistemological features of practice theory. Nonetheless researchers employing activist

practice methodologies seek better alignment even if this work is frequently one step forward and two steps back.

More-than-representational approaches to data

Fourth, activist practice methodologies challenge positivist aspirations for a correspondence between theory and the real and instead develop methods for engaging *in practice*. Expansive theories of practice raise particular challenges to the concept and perceived efficacies of empirical data. In particular, their onto-epistemologies raise questions about the knowability of practice—when practice is understood as not amenable to empirical observation—and emphasise the ways that researchers are implicated in research processes, outcomes and outputs, including in the generation, treatment and representation of data. Yet, as noted above, empirical data has an important place in the history and practice of practice research, with researchers tending to approach the particularities of practice via fieldwork (Miettinen, Samya-Fredericks & Yanow 2009; Schatzki 2012) and the 'close-up' in-situ methods associated with ethnography (Trowler 2014). In fact, many practice theorists developed their conceptual resources via empirical engagements 'in the field', where dominant understandings were challenged by the observed particularities of practices enacted in relation with particular circumstances. For example, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition (Bourdieu 2000) and empirical work in schools, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) developed a theory of cultural reproduction, in which schools are understood to recognise and reward the valued knowledges of the dominant social classes through the awarding of education credentials. Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of cultural reproduction challenges understandings that success in schooling is achieved on the basis of academic merit. This points to yet another *doubleness* of practice methodologies: they tend to privilege fieldwork in the generation of 'close-up' empirical data when the very theories that underpin them problematize such work.

Just as expansive theories of practice challenge positivist approaches to theory, expansive practice theorists recognise that data is a construction—a function of researcher positioning, research methods and research processes, intertwined with theory. This is an onto-epistemological point that is common to diverse practice theories. A notable example is ANT which, growing out of Science and Technology Studies, foregrounds the technical and conceptual apparatuses through which data are created, manipulated and circulated in research, and which tend to be naturalised in research work (Law 2004). Additionally, some practice theories (e.g., ANT and work influenced by Deleuze and Guattari) reject the implication of ontological depth associated with essentialising, reifying treatments of data. Several chapters

in this collection explicitly draw attention to the constructed nature of data. For example, Julianne Lynch and Joanne O'Mara—who engage with the onto-epistemological implications of fractal geometry to rethink classroom technology practices—emphasise the crudeness of human perception and the instrumentation of knowledge-making practices. They suggest a need for pragmatism in research where knowledge is understood as composites of partial, fractured views delimited by conceptual and technical frames. Lynch and O'Mara intersperse their accounts of empirical data with commentary on the instrumentation of their data generation and the efficacy of different types of accounts of practice.

As well as emphasising that data are a function of research practices, engagement with onto-epistemological critique (i.e. the untenability of data) stimulates and requires method innovations. Practice methodologies repurpose empirical data and research methods in the service of more-than-representational agendas, using data and methods in ways that deliberately challenge conventional representationalist logics and that are intended to produce other types of research effects. For example, as discussed above, Gale et al. use video of teacher practice in ways that deliberately question the representational value of data. For Gale et al., data are not the video record of practice but what are produced through researcher and participant engagement with these representations. Similarly, Courtney and Gunter look beyond what was said at face value by headteacher, to consider how headteachers facilitate the corporatisation of schools. That is, they actively question and look beyond the representational value of the data these interviews generated to produce an alternative account that provokes new understandings of education leadership practices. The reconceptualisation of the value of conventional interview data can be seen in the chapter by Paula Cameron, Anna MacLeod, Jonathan Tummons, Olga Kits and Rola Ajjawi, who report a study of the practice of videoconferenced lectures in a Canadian medical school. These authors point out the irony of the efficacy of interviewing in their case. Established ways of working with interview data have been criticised for privileging an essential human subject that the interview recording/transcript is thought to represent (e.g., Mazzei 2013). Influenced by sociomaterial approaches to research (Fenwick & Nimmo 2015), Cameron et al. use their interview data, not as a window into individuals' attitudes or perspectives, but as sources of insight into how the materialities of videoconferencing technologies were entangled with humans through practice.

While Cameron et al. demonstrate how interview data can be used to provide insights other than views into individual human subjects, Lynch and O'Mara provide an example of how

empirical data can be used as a starting point for moving beyond the empirical setting. They use classroom observation data generated at a particular locale at a particular time as stimulus for moving to other locations and times, providing a more historical and dispersed view of the classroom activities they observed. Thus, expansive theories of practice support a rethinking of 'close-up' research methods such as interview and observation, with activist practice methodologies involving more-than-'close-up' methods of inquiry that move outside of a bounded individual and outside of bounded spacetimes.

Restive accounts of research

Finally, researchers who mobilise activist practice methodologies are concerned with how practice is accounted for and by whom, who has authority to give practice its meaning, and how writing and representation can be used as a method for inquiring of practice.

Like any other practice, research is emergent, distributed and without clear boundaries and it involves bodies, particularly the bodies of researchers. However, dominant approaches to research 'reportage'—such as that found in positivist and sometimes interpretivist approaches—represent research as an entirely cognitive undertaking that unfolds in a tidy, linear and easily defined fashion (Green 2015; Law 2004; Lynch & Greaves 2017; Petersen 2015). In fact, the term *reportage* is problematic here, implying that data are somehow separate from how we generate, manipulate, think about and discuss them, and that the route between the generation and treatment of data and research representations is passive, linear, straightforward and easily describable. Expansive theories of practice attune researchers to this contradiction between research *as it is practiced* and research *as it is represented* in research dissemination and publication.

Writing is an important and neglected aspect of research methodology (Green 2015). It is frequently overlooked as part of research processes and is seldom considered a part of method, with most methodological traditions focusing on research processes and artefacts engaged *prior* to the 'writing up' of 'the findings', and with general research methodology textbooks tending to exclude research writing practices from their bailiwicks. Instead, the authoritative voices of researchers within research accounts tend towards erasure of the specificity and embodiment of research practices and of the rhetorical devises used in research writing. Discussing the rhetorical positioning of researchers in accounts of research, Haraway (1996, p. 429) refers to 'the extraordinary conventions of self-invisibility'. Petersen (2015, p. 158) refers to these

conventions as ‘traditional academic storytelling practices’, while Lynch and Greaves (2017) (after de Certeau) refer to the fictionalizing work of academic writing practices.

Activist practice methodologies tend to resist these dominant research writing practices and experiment with counter-hegemonic approaches; for example, by revealing some of the messiness of research; by referring to the embodied nature of research as a human practice; by exploring the interpenetration of the human and the technical in research practices; and by resisting convergent, representationalist rhetoric that might erase these aspects of research.

Several chapters in this collection, supported by engagements with particular practice theories, demonstrate how writing techniques can resist representationalist logics. In particular, Eva Petersen experiments with the juxtaposing of accounts, combining a ‘diffractive listing’ methodology (drawing on Mol & Law (2002)) with a ‘juxtatext’. As she points out, the juxtatext is a form of *writing story* (Richardson & St Pierre 2008). It provides a narrative about how the account came about, frequently raising doubts and questions. Thus, the juxtatext highlights the struggle of writing, where no representation is sufficient to the task of representing practice.

Similarly, Catherine Doherty offers a challenge to writing practices that use mono-vocal, unifying narratives to draw together data to form a singular account of a practice, without due recognition of the textual politics involved in such writing. She notes that particular forms of reportage can exclude certain objects or features of practice, with conventional research reportage tending to favour convergent analyses and to exclude aspects of practice that are considered irrational or exceptional. Doherty discusses the efficacy of verbatim theatre as an alternative method of providing an account of practice, illustrating how her play script juxtaposes conflicting voices and fragments of other texts, where no resolution is offered. She argues that verbatim theatre, as a form of performed ethnography, provides a way to process and present data without erasing the research participants’ creative responses to everyday professional dilemmas. In her chapter, Doherty usefully describes the work she did to develop skills in the writing of verbatim theatre, noting some of the textual devices used to produce particular effects. She also provides commentary on the process of drafting and redrafting, including considerations of how she, as author of the text, was represented in the text. Doherty explains how this work should be considered as both analytic and interpretive *and* creative and productive, thus pointing to the more-than-representational axiologies of activist practice research.

Both Petersen's and Doherty's chapters also position the audiences of research in ways that resist conventional writer–reader politics. Petersen's text anticipates and directly addresses an academic audience. She builds intimacy with a reader who is an insider to the practices of academia by explicitly acknowledging shared practices and anxieties. And, she builds other intimacies via direct reference to material contexts (sitting on a chair) and bodily processes (lactation). Additionally, the juxtatext provides an emergent reading that interacts with the other parts of the text, noting that the presentation offers fragments to the audience without summing up or analysing, leaving that work to the audience 'if you feel so inclined' (p. x). Petersen also invites the audience/reader to add items to her list. These invitations draw on Haraway's (1992) theorisation of encounters between texts, and between texts and readers, as diffractive—as promoting productive rather than receptive textual relations. Through these textual devices Petersen refuses to settle for a single account of a practice.

Distinct from other chapters in this volume, Doherty addresses the challenge of speaking to non-academic audiences—in her case, pre-service teachers—and of inviting these stakeholders into the interpretive processes of research. She argues that by resisting an interpretative stance and letting different data fragments sit side by side, her verbatim play invites the audience to bring their own interpretations. She also describes how a post-performance discussion with audience members provided an opportunity for interpretative dialogue with these stakeholders. Thus for practice methodologies, research writing is positioned as part of method, no less tricky than other aspects. Activist practice methodologies foreground the methods of research (conceptual and technical), which includes the technicalities of research writing. And particular textual strategies are used in chapters in this volume with the intention of resisting certain field effects of academic writing practice that subsume a non-linear, embodied, sometimes contradictory, research process into a representation that presumes to be linear, progressive and entirely rational.

Conclusion

There are no definitive methodological solutions to the onto-epistemological challenges of expansive theories of practice. They demand improvisation and bespoke innovation, and responses are necessarily partial and contain contradictions. Particular challenges are evident within education research that is oriented towards change and transformation, as expansive theories of practice offer no obvious fulcrum from which such agendas can gain leverage. Supported by the platform of the different research engagements illustrated in the chapters in

this collection, a set of interrelated methodological responses emerge (as well as areas for future work), which we name *activist practice methodologies*.

Informed by activist axiologies, our theory of practice methodologies suggests that:

- Activist practice methodologies pursue transformation in the face of philosophy that dethrones the rational human subject and debunks instrumental change. This requires understandings of change as non-linear, relational, and incremental; and as something with which research endeavours are entangled, rather than lead.
- Activist practice methodologies engage with research participants in ways that exceed conventional human research ethics' concern for protecting individuals who are in unequal power relations. Issues such as informed consent and harm minimisation are first steps in an ethical research practice that is attuned to managing risk, but they are insufficient for an ethical research practice that is framed by and desires productive research encounters. Respectful research relations involve both affirmation and critique; this can be supported through dialogic relationships and encounters that are not necessarily anticipated by the codification of human research ethics (or by the researchers involved with them), and that can appear at odds with conventional ethical protocols. For example, they might support planned participant and researcher discomfiture or, conversely, unplanned, emergent action/interaction.
- Activist practice methodologies work theory in ways that help researchers to apprehend (if partially) the particular objects of their inquiries, while understanding that demarcations of objects of inquiry are themselves imbricated with practices. Within activist practice methodologies, theory is not intended to describe the world, but to suggest ways to approach it and ways to manipulate some of the stuff of the world that resist slipping into reductive views of practice and reflective views of research.
- Activist practice methodologies generate, manipulate and deploy empirical data in ways that expose its artifactualism, and that look to see what data *does* and *can be made to do* in relational research endeavours. This recognises both the constructed, compromised nature of data and its generative potential.

Across these interrelated aspects, we identify the productive doubleness or dialectic of education research that is informed by expansive theories of practice, where researchers work to promote change despite understandings that change cannot be evoked in instrumental ways; where researchers *use* theory even though practice theory emphasises our imbrication with

theory; where researchers pursue fieldwork in the face of understandings that problematize such work; and where researchers continue to work with representations of practice and of research despite the artefactualism of such representations. This apparent duplicity and obstinacy of activist practice methodologies is based on a re-attunement of conventional research methodology that resists representationalist logics by focusing on the productive, diffractive potentials of method. Thus activist practice methodologies provide ways forward while simultaneously (and deliberately) unsettling understandings of practice and understandings of how we might know practice. Activist practice methodologies resist the dominant representationalist logics of research writing by seeking to produce a sense of the fragmented, partial nature of knowledge; the non-linear, contingent and both embodied and dispersed nature of knowledge-making; and the evasiveness of the practices that education researchers pursue.

Critique, redeployment, provocation and experimentation are all necessary when attempting to apprehend practice in ways that support the activist agendas of education research informed by expansive theories of practice. This type of work pushes the boundaries of research practice in ways that are uncomfortable in the face of research orthodoxies and that might not be recognised as research in some circles. It also requires a degree of obstinacy in the face of the contradictory, the incongruent and the paradoxical, where the aspirations of activist practice methodologies cannot be fully attained and each step forward is couched in philosophical qualification due to the dialectic of activist practice methodologies that simultaneously critique and persist with method. For these reasons, activist practice methodologies require researchers to engage in a constant renegotiation of the emergent aims, enactment and outcomes of their work in the face of inherent pervasive contradictions that necessarily cannot be resolved.

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[1] In 'trying out', Thrift (2008, p.12) means to distinguish between *truly* experimental approaches and narrow conceptions of laboratory experiments.
[2] Schatzki (1997, p. 1) coins the term 'practice theorists' to refer to those social theorists who position practices 'as the central constitutive phenomenon in social life [and] as the site where understanding is ordered and intelligibility articulated' (p. 110).
[3] There is not space in this chapter to elaborate these positions/traditions/programs which each have attracted extensive and ongoing scholarly discussion and critique. That said, Green (2009, pp. 49-51, citing Thrift, Schatzki

and Hacking) usefully discusses *representationalism* and critiques relevant to practice theory, where representationalist onto-epistemologies are realist in assumptions and intent, emanating from a Cartesian separation of mind from activity and knowledge from practice, and privileging the former in each case. *Techno-rationalist* refers to the theories of action that follow representationalist views of knowledge. In relation to this, Green cites Schatzki's (1996, p.293) 'representational theory of action' and Kemmis's (2005, p. 392) 'rationalist theory of action'. In relation to professional practice, Lynch (2017) elaborates *technicist* approaches as involving linear, causative links between actions and their outcomes, where it is assumed that the outcomes of professional practice can be predicted and therefore preprogrammed.

[4] Taylor's (1985) ontology suggests that participants' accounts are neither incorrigible nor 'shot through' with ideology and that their accounts need to be taken seriously because self-interpretation is an aspect of practices that suggest how theories interrelate with practice.

[5] Jonas, Littig and Wroblewski (2017, p. xvi) claim that the different theorisations of subjectivity within expansive theories of practice is what 'puts a stop to potential canonisation attempts' within this family of theories.