

Practice Theory in International Relations

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Abstract: This paper reviews the practice turn in the international relations studies, and the development of its related theories. This paper, particularly focuses on the use of practice theory from different perspectives, further proposed a new hypothesis for the practice theory. In the future, this research may provide an idea for the development of the practice theory.

Keywords: Practice turn, Practice theory; International practice; Application of practice theory

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1. Introduction

One of the primary issues that is concerned with the theory of international relations is the problem of generativity, where neither the rationalism nor constructivism can answer the basic generative problem of the core concepts, in their respective theories. Rationalism fails to explain the meaning-making of interests and power, meanwhile constructivism ignored the generativity of identity and norms, and the process of interactive practice. Additionally, the mainstream of international relations theories, often fall into difficulties, and arouse many doubts due to the lack of the appropriate explanations, when facing the practical problems in the real world.

For a long time, there are still some problems in the mainstream of the international relations theory, such as the philosophical world outlook in binary opposition, representational bias ^[1], structuralism tendency, and the static way to deal with the formation process of structure ^[2], where it against the background of the new trend in the practice turn, has emerged in the field of international relations ^[3].

2. Analysis of several theories of practice in the international relations

The main purpose of the practical theory research is to promote the attention to daily practice, meanwhile the research agenda includes the discussion of the relationship between the actors and structures, leading to the production of the social factors, and systemic transformations ^[4]. However, the broad nature of the concept of practice, has given birth to different schools of practice theory, with different scholars hold different views on the relationship between the structure and actor. Further, the practice which contributes to the generation and the transformation of social structures is difficult to be unified. In summary, the current practice interpretation model in the international relations theory mainly includes the following five aspects as described below:

(1) The Bourdieu's theory of practice: Among the practical in the international relations theories, Bourdieu's theory of practice is an important theoretical source and status, because the methodology of the international relations studies is coherent or consistent with the Bourdieu's theory of practice, additionally, the core concepts of the Bourdieu's theory of practice are relevant to the international relations studies. For

example, the core concepts of habitus, field, and capital in the Bourdieu's theory of practice are similar to the strategy, conflict, and culture theory in the international relations study ^[5]. The concepts of habitus and field are the two of the most important pillars of Bourdieu's theory of practice. In his book 'Le Sens Pratique,' Bourdieu defines habitus in this way: "Habitus is a system of enduring, and transformable potential behavioral tendencies, some structured structure that tends to function as a pro-structured structure, and practical and representational activities generated, and organized by habitus can objectively adapt to their own intentions without setting conscious purposes ^[6]." Habitus is the source of practices, which can reproduce or change the pre-existing structures of the field, while these practices also can reshape the individual experiences of the actors, forming a new habits in the actors, while balancing the power structures in the field. In short, the Bourdieu's practice theory, and the relational framework of analysis not only overcomes the dualistic paradigm of subject-object opposition, but also emphasizes the critical reflexivity helps in the international relations researchers to move forward from their own legitimacy constructions towards a more social, reflexive analysis ^[7].

(2) Community of practice theory: In the organizational sociology and management, the community of practice theory has been developed into a matured theoretical framework. Etienne Wenger, and Jean Lave are representative of this theory, where their central concern is on how the human learning process are unfolds, and what is the best route to facilitate it. In the book "Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation," Wenger and Lave introduced the concept of situated learning, where learning is a situation in a particular context, which is permeated by a particular social and natural environment ^[8]. Additionally, followed by Wenger's next book on "Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity," which further systematically elaborated on the communities of practice, which led to the theory involvement in the interdisciplinary path, subsequently become one of the key theories in the multiple disciplines such as educational studies, management theory, and organizational sociology ^[9]. In the field of international relations, Emanuel Adler is the first to introduce the theory on how to analyze in the international relations studies, where he described the popular concept of community, which has a good research potential in the combination with the core concepts in the field of international relations, such as the relationship between actors and structure, identity or change ^[10]. Currently, the theory of community of practice, has been used to analyze security communities, foreign policy, terrorism, and pirate groups. The community of practice theory has three core elements, where, firstly it considers the collective or organization as a unit of analysis, with the learning relationship is the most important relationship between the linked actors. Secondly, learning takes place through practice, with the participation of the actors in a community of shared practices, and lastly, the result of learning is a form of identity formation, where to learn means to be a part of a community or to be a practitioner of knowledge within the community.

(3) Narrative practice: At present, the study of the concept of narrative is a new trend in the social sciences. Narrative is used in different conceptual systems, for example, in the textualism, narratives are considered as the synonymous with the discourses, collective myths or ideologies, meanwhile, the narratives which are related to the strategic action, and imaginative narratives are considered as a cognitive framework, arguments or action scripts. Additionally, practice theory takes a processual approach to understand the narrative, by emphasizing the narrative or storytelling functions as a social bond or 'glue' that gives the practice a stable space and time. However, the narrative or storytelling is not a stand-alone act, but it is a part of the practice that implies a collective action. The narrative mode of practice has three important foundations, which are, the narrative needs to be understood as a way of interaction between storyteller and audience, the narrative implies a power relationship in practice, and lastly the narrative organizes discourses into a story. The narrative model is essentially in a linguistic dimension of practice, focusing on what is said rather than how is done, by downplaying the material dimension of practice. This model is an important part of the practice theory research, and more directly linked to the cultural studies than other explanatory models.

(4) Actor Network Theory: Actor network theory is a sociological analysis proposed by French sociologists, Michel Callon, and Bruno Latour. The theory examines the heterogeneous networks, which is formed between the human and non-human actors, arguing that the scientific practices, and their social contexts emerge from the same process, where not causally related. They also proposed to integrate the macro- and micro- analyses of technology, further to extend the social construction of technology to a construction of the relationship between science, technology, and society. The basic concept is the scientific and technological practice as a dynamic process of networks, which is formed by the interconnection and mutual construction of the multiple heterogeneous components ^[11]. Meanwhile, the basic methodological rule is to follow the actor, for example, choose one actor from various heterogeneous actors, with the network construction process is centered on the actor to the reader. Currently, the actor network theory has been used in the analysis of international relations phenomena. Christian Bueger described that, the international relations are a web of relations and meanings, where he used actor network theory to illustrate the democratic peace theory facts by creating or translating it into a foreign policy agenda ^[12]. Additionally, Maximilian Mayer uses actor network theory, to analyze how the securitization of climate changes depends on the different material outcomes ^[13]. In conclusion, actor network theory is more focused on the micro-types of research, and it has a strong explanatory power, when analyzing the emerging international phenomena, and the role of material factors in the international relations.

(5) Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology: Boltanski's pragmatic sociology is less used than other models in the theoretical analysis of international relations practice, however it still has an important theoretical value. Boltanski's greatest contribution in the practice, is his creative in combining the Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological tradition, with John Dewey's pragmatic theory of behaviour ^[14]. This enables the international relations scholars to translate the abstract, philosophical pragmatism into an empirical research approach for the practical research. In short, Boltanski's pragmatic sociology primarily emphasizes the normative and moral dimensions of practice. At present, the pragmatist sociology has been expanded from an interpretation of justification in international relations to the other modes of action, such as, love or violence. This can be seen as a development in the general sociological theory of conflict. The use of pragmatist sociology to explain the competing legitimacies in international relations is becoming a new path of the research ^[15].

In addition, some scholars, from the perspective of structure and agency, based on Bourdieu's theory of practice, have summarized the crisis-habitus model of practice explanation, arguing that the evolution of structure has a relative nature, for example, the stability of the structure is not an absolute state of stability, but a relative stability which can change over time ^[16].

3. Evaluation and analysis of practice theory

A practice theory mentioned that the practices of actors always take place in the specific spatial, temporal domains, and social contexts. Alexander Wendt described that, the structural contexts provide a platform for the formation of a collective identities at the regional or global systemic level, therefore the contexts or the structural contexts become an important aspect of the practice of the international interaction ^[17], however, how does the contexts work, Wendt does not provide a clear explanation on this. In fact, it is the crisis context, which has a great impact on the changes of the social structure in the process of contextual change. According to the social practice theory, major changes in the social structure arise from the interaction between the routines and crises in practice, with the shift in the structure of the situation, which drives the evolution of the overall social structure.

In theories that focus on the analysis from a structural or action perspective, the individual and society, the actor and the structure, and the micro and the macro are two established phenomena that are distinctly

separate, reflecting a deep-rooted dichotomy. It is for this reason, that the construction of a dynamic theory that transcends dichotomies has become an important task and agenda for the study of international relations theory. Since the 1980s, scholars of the international relations theory have focused on how to address the structure-agency dichotomy, inspired by Giddens' structuration theory ^[18], Roy Bhaskar's scientific positivism ^[19], and Margaret Archer's morphogenesis ^[20]. The structure can be seen as a process, rather than a state, where the structure and action interact with each other. In fact, the existence and the function of the structures, is largely dependent on the practical activities of the individual actor, which are generated and developed following the actor's practice. Structure is therefore is a process of evolution rather than a static and fixed state. Thus, practical action based on practice rationality becomes a third logic of action, distinct from the logic of consequence, and the logic of appropriateness, for example, the logic of Praxis, which is the unreflective action of the actor that is naturally facilitated by the practice. In the light of Giddens and Bourdieu's theory of practice, this paper proposes three assumptions about the practical action, which are, firstly, the logic of action of actors in habitual situations is a practice logic guided by the practical consciousness, further manifested as a routine action. Secondly, actors are motivated by the fundamental need for ontological security, and practice to maintain the ontological security of the actors. Thirdly, in a crisis situation, actors promote changes, and innovations in the social structure through a new practice, resulting in a new sense of practice and social structure. The three assumptions are the process of actors' practical action in the contextual model.

In summary, the study of practice theory, which is embedded in the international relations theory is becoming one of the main research paths in this discipline, pushing the 'practice turn' towards a more systematic, and theoretical direction.

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Author contributions

G.H. was the sole author of this article.

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