The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory

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1   Practice as collective action

Barry Barnes

References to shared practices or to agreement in practice have long figured in the discourse of sociologists, but in recent years they have taken on an enhanced importance. Social systems have been characterized as ongoing, self-reproducing arrays of shared practices, and structured dispositions to generate such practices have been made central to the understanding of social and cultural phenomena of every kind. In extreme extensions of approaches of this kind, it may even be argued that as far as the sociologist is concerned practice is all there is to study and describe. An unkind account of this development might regard 'practice' as part of the debris produced by the disintegration of Marxism, a concept carried by refugee theorists who have found new homes in various 'post-Marxist' forms of sociology and social theory. But a much kinder account of the basis of the current interest in practice can be given, and should indeed be accepted. Accounts of societies as practices may be regarded as attempts to remedy the technical deficiencies of the idealist forms of theory that hitherto were dominant in this context.

One of the central tasks of theory in the social sciences is to specify what distinguishes the members of a culture or a collective from outsiders, and on what basis they sustain orderly activities and relationships amongst themselves. Often this is seen as equivalent to identifying what members have in common, or what they share with each other and not outsiders. One approach is to describe the shared theories, ideas, beliefs or abstractly specified rules or norms that allegedly 'govern' their behavior. Two major difficulties are routinely associated with this approach. One is that ideas, beliefs, norms, and so forth are conceived of as being internal to individuals, and hence as invisible entities, all descriptions of which are bound to be highly conjectural. The second is the fact that these entities almost invariably serve as the basis of questionable passive actor theories of order and agreement: the entities are presumed to have fixed and definite implications, which those who cleave to them are obliged to enact. In contrast, to insist that the bedrock of all order and agreement is agreement in practice is to cite something public and visible, something that is manifest in what members do. Moreover, accounts of order and agreement that refer to practice presume not passive actors but active members, members who reconstitute the system of shared practices by

drawing upon it as a set of resources in the course of living their lives. It is now generally recognized that accounts of this kind are more satisfactory empirically than passive actor theories.[1]

I am myself in sympathy with the turn to 'practice' I have just described, and in particular with the implied reaction against idealism. But for all its merits the relevant literature remains unsatisfactory, even in the most elementary respects. It fails to make clear just what social practices are. And its vision of the scope and power of 'theories of practice' is nowhere adequately justified. Mindful that this is the first contribution to the volume, the argument here will focus on these elementary issues. It will seek to set out just what a shared practice consists in. It will emphasize that no 'theory of practice' can be a sufficient basis for an understanding of human behavior, or even that part of it which is orderly and routine. But it will conclude by showing that a correct understanding of the nature of shared practices is necessary notwithstanding, if that is our goal.

Examples of practices

The overall argument of this paper leads to clear recommendations concerning how shared practices should be understood and defined. But people may agree to differ on matters of verbal definition, when nothing substantial has been shown to be at stake. Hence it is best to begin not with definitions but with examples, with exemplary instances that almost everyone is likely to accept as instances of practices. Consider then, as a first example, vegetarianism. This particular example nicely points up the difficulties that arise from treating shared activity as 'governed' by ideas or theories. Vegetarians do not employ scientific experts or modern laboratory techniques to separate the animal and the vegetable. Nor does one vegetarian community necessarily follow the same dietary prohibitions as another. Nor is it possible to provide an algorithm for vegetarianism, as it is expressed in any particular vegetarian community: vegetarianism is not a matter of behaving in ways that can be exhaustively specified by abstract verbal rules. Nonetheless vegetarianism is routinely recognizable as coherent social activity; we encounter it as custom and practice, and acknowledge that membership of a specific vegetarian community will involve acceptance of its distinctive customs and shared practices.

As a second example let us turn to an esoteric technical activity. Acupuncture is now routinely employed in Western countries as a way of achieving anesthesia, in dentistry for example. Consider that dentists may share the practice of acupuncture, pass it on to trainees as a skill, and yet have no elaborated verbal theory of what it is or how it works. Here is a nice example for those who would define practice in contrast with theory, seen as no more than a rationalizing gloss laid upon it, as it were. In its move from the context of its development into Western medicine, acupuncture lost its theoretical baggage and acquired a different overlay of glosses. Or so they might wish to say. For there is an alternative conception, according to which acupuncture is

now two different practices, two different bundles of practical activity and linguistic activity, one Western one Eastern, each of which may now develop and grow in different directions.

Finally let us take an example from a military context. Consider the members of a company of cavalry. They too might be said to be the possessors of a shared practice: manifest in their riding, in their use of weapons, and generally in the business of mounted combat. Such practices may be acquired through an extended military training and sustained and developed as part of a military culture transmitted from generation to generation. The reason for the choice of this example will become clear later. For the moment, simply note that to master the practice of mounted combat in a cavalry company is to participate in something done by a group.

I shall rely heavily on these examples in what follows, but whilst ostension will remain my favored method of addressing practices it may be worth supplementing it with a rough and ready verbal statement. Let practices be socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly. This is a very broad description, but it nonetheless fails to encompass many ways of understanding practices encountered in the literature and it may prove useful for just that reason.

On the scope of theories of practice

If we move on now, and use the examples to explore what accounts of practice can and cannot do, we shall at the same time become more familiar with practices and with the problems involved in describing them adequately. As Ted Schatzki has remarked (this volume), practice is now frequently identified as 'the primary generic social thing.' Indeed it is sometimes said to be the only social thing. And there are 'theories of practice' wherein this assertion plays an essential role, and its oxymoronic character seems to go wholly unremarked. Perhaps it is typical of newly introduced theories that exaggerated claims are made for their scope. In any event, it is important to recognize that exaggeration is involved here, and that a more modest account of the scope of 'theories of practice' must be accepted. In particular, it must be recognized that: (a) no simple either/or contrast can be made between 'theory' and 'practice'; (b) no indefeasible distinction can be established between visible external practices and invisible, internal states; (c) any attempt to give a satisfactory description of social life must make reference to much else besides practice; and (d) practice does not account for its own production and reproduction.

Let us take the four points in order. The acupuncture example is a good basis for dealing with the first point. It beautifully illustrates the flaw in any view which places theory prior to practice and sees the latter as somehow 'implied by' the former. But whilst it is indeed important that the sticking-in of needles is not seen purely as the expression of a theory of the body, as an effort

to balance ying and yang in the patient for example, it is equally wrong to invert the relationship. The practice of acupuncture is not the sticking-in of needles without thought. The practice should be treated as involving thought and action together, and in so far as this is the case, embodied theory, as it were, is a part of practice itself. This, of course, is a standard point, but it is an important one. Indeed, if the practice of acupuncture is understood in this way it will serve also as a reminder of the way that agreement in practice characterizes collectives in many other esoteric technical fields, including even the 'pure' natural sciences. Thomas Kuhn's identification of scientific paradigms as the crucial foci of agreement in scientific communities is consistent with this. Paradigms are not theories but practices, 'accepted examples of actual scientific practice – examples which include law, theory, application and instrumentation together; they are examples selected as model achievements, ways of solving problems known to work in one case and available to guide practice in other cases' (Kuhn 1970: 10). In operating on the basis of a shared paradigm scientists in a given field agree in their practice. It is perfectly possible for them to press forward cooperatively on the basis of this agreement, whilst being in radical disagreement with each other at the level of 'philosophy' or in their abstract theoretical ideas.

With regard to the second point, it is a great virtue of accounts of social practices that they are based on something observable. But it is important not to be tempted into a positivist or phenomenalist or behaviorist justification of them. Practices are forms of action, and all the familiar arguments about the difference between action and behavior are relevant here. Descriptions of social life as practice are, in the last analysis, as 'theory laden' as any other descriptions. It is worth pointing out also, indeed it is probably the more important point, that ordinary members take a theoretical perspective in orienting to each other's practice. When one member successfully engages in a practice, what this invariably betokens to others is the possession of a competence or a power. The inference from performance to capacity is made. Thus, the membership as a whole conies to know itself not as a performing membership but as a membership with the power to perform – as, that is, a set of competent members. And the use of these two last words indicates that many social theorists themselves see social life in much the same way, not merely as members doing things but as members able to do a range of things. In the last analysis, talk of practices is talk of powers – and all the difficulties associated by theories of social power have to be faced by accounts of practices.[2]

To engage in a practice is to exercise a power. This equivalence is worth bearing in mind in considering the third point made above. Powers are exercised at need by active agents; they are, as it were, switched on and off as expediency or inclination or whatever else requires. Practices are enacted in the same way. Or rather, what is called the active exercise of a power may equally be called the enactment of a practice. But a whole range of further sociologically interesting factors are material to understanding the exercise of powers. A cavalry charge is a fearful unleashing of powers. It may unfold as a

practiced routine, a manifestation of a shared social practice, but the target of the charge and the signal that unleashes it are further features of equal sociological interest. Both these things are extrinsic to the 'shared practice' itself, and need to be understood by reference to 'members' knowledge' in a broader sense. The company of cavalry knows that it should charge on the signal of its commanders.[3] The commander selects the target of the charge mindful partly of the lie of the land and the enemy dispositions, partly of an accepted and authoritative body of knowledge of military strategy, partly of memories of past charges. Notice too how the company of cavalry may stand fast and not charge at all, and even conceivably decide the course of the battle by standing fast, by its latent powers being taken into account in the calculations of the commanders of other military formations and thereby affecting their strategies. This indeed is a nice symbol of the necessity of references to knowledge and experience in making sense of social activities.

A charge of cavalry must be understood not as the mere enactment of a practice, but as its knowledgeable, informed and goal-directed enactment. It is necessary to make reference to more than practice itself in order to understand it. It is true that idealist writers have sometimes overlooked the role of practice altogether in contexts like this, and described military engagements purely by reference to the ratiocination of generals (and their outcomes by reference to the 'genius' of one and the 'stupidity' of another). But to react against excesses of this kind by giving attention exclusively to the role of practice is merely to indulge in another form of excess. It amounts to an ungrounded prejudice in favor of know-how at the expense of know-that, in favor of skill and competence at the expense of information and representation. In the vocabulary of psychology, wherein valuable empirical studies of both exist, it amounts to an exclusive concentration on procedural memory and a corresponding neglect of descriptive memory. Both of these forms of memory need to be taken into account; both are socially structured and both are implicated in social action.

The same example will serve as the basis for the discussion of the fourth and final point. Practices are often cited in order to explain things, including notably their own enactment. It may be said, for example, that something is done because it is traditionally done, or routinely done, or done because it is part of the practice of the collective. The problem of why human beings should enact the practice is thereby completely glossed over. It is as if the cavalry has to charge, twice a week perhaps, simply because it can charge, as if there is something automatic and compelling about the enactment of practices which makes it unnecessary to consider what moves or inspires the human beings involved.[4]

What are shared practices?

Practices are enacted by people, and simply because of this they are an insufficient basis for an understanding of the ongoing pattern of social life

that they constitute. It is always necessary to ask what disposes people to enact the practices they do, how and when they do; and their aims, their lived experience and their inherited knowledge will surely figure amongst the factors of interest here. But it is not just a matter of asking what contingencies incline people to enact, or not to enact, practices, as if they exist like tools in a toolbox and it is merely a matter of explaining when and why one or another is picked out. The relationship of practices and people is far more intimate and profound than this. The next part of the discussion is concerned precisely with this relationship, but to appreciate what it involves it is necessary first to probe more deeply into the nature of shared practices.

An extended and detailed analysis by Stephen Turner (1994) has highlighted the difficulties that have to be faced in this context. If there are shared practices, then what is it that is shared? Turner confronts us with the horns of a dilemma: is a shared practice a single object (an essence, it is tempting to say, although Turner does not), when the problem of how the object/essence is transmitted and disseminated pure and unchanged must be faced; or is shared practice merely an aggregate of separate individual elements, when reference to practice ceases to have any fundamental theoretical interest? Turner notes that sociological theorists are especially prone to treat shared practice as a unity, a single object. They explain other things by reference to a shared practice conceived of as a real collective entity. Durkheim and Sumner are cited as examples here, and Turner emphatically rejects their collectivist approach, which speaks of 'society' or 'custom' or 'the mores' as a single object with causal powers. There is neither ground nor evidence for belief in the existence of shared practice as a unitary object, says Turner, and no theory of cultural transmission and dissemination which allows us to understand how such an object could pass from person to person unchanged. What we refer to as shared practice is actually a composite: it is constituted of so many separate individual habits, habits sufficiently alike for us to get along together on the basis of them, but individual entities nonetheless, and not collective ones. Hence, references to practice should be discontinued and social theory should focus instead upon habit and habituation.

Turner's book offers a radically individualistic critique of social theory that would have profound implications if accepted. It would not just be 'shared practice' that belonged in the waste bin; 'tradition,' 'form of life,' 'habitus,' 'tacit knowledge,' and many other 'collective' terms would have to be consigned there as well, or so we are told. Nonetheless, we should surely accept Turner's first claim. Shared practice cannot be treated as a single real object in the usual sense; certainly it cannot be treated as an essence. It can no more be treated in this way than can 'rule' or 'norm' or 'ideas'; the familiar formal arguments against essentialism in relation to these entities will extend routinely to shared practice. Indeed, it is easy to illustrate the problems here by direct reference to examples. Consider the shared practice of our company of cavalry. What happens if the horses, or the saddles, or the swords of the members are all switched around? A diminution of fighting power is the

immediate consequence, at least temporarily. For each member is attuned to a particular sword and a specific horse: the 'shared practice' of the company is apparently made up of different skills and competences, differently manifested in different performances. References to shared practice here seem to mask a motley of distinct individual capabilities.

Turner suggests that the relevant individual capabilities here are habits, and that social theory should concern itself not with practice but with habits and habituation. He is not, of course, referring to addictive habituation here, of the kind induced by cigarette smoking or heroin injection. Rather, he is speaking of things that people have learned by repetition so that they can do them smoothly, easily and competently. Habits are individual competences for Turner, not individual compulsions. His objective is to redescribe 'shared practice' as clusters of individual habits which, precisely because they are individual, all differ in detail from each other. He wants us to see routine practice at the collective level as just so many distinct individuals behaving in their own habituated ways, ways sufficiently similar through shared teaching to fit with each other for given purposes, but nonetheless distinct and different.

It is surely correct that a very careful detailed account of 'shared practice' would reveal all kinds of differences in individual behavior. And a first response to this could well be the thought that Turner's account must be correct, that shared practice can actually be nothing more than habituated individual behavior. Recourse to examples, however, quickly reveals the inadequacies of this radically individualistic approach. Consider some routine activity that might, prima facie, be counted part of the 'shared practice' of a company of cavalry, say the routine practice of riding in formation. Can this be reconceptualized as a collage of individual actions, each intelligible as an expression of habit? Certainly, references to the habituated skills of individuals will contribute to an understanding of the routine practice: without the relevant individual skills riding in formation is unlikely to be possible. On the other hand, the mere following of habit is most unlikely to result in performance of the routine. A plausible account of riding in formation must surely refer to calculation, and even creative imagination, on the part of riders actively involved in the business of remaining coordinated with each other: constant adjustment and modification of habit will be required of them to make this possible. We must imagine individual riders taking account of variations in terrain, monitoring the actions of others and adapting accordingly, even perhaps imagining future scenarios, for example the consequences of a possible slow-down at the front as a slope is encountered, well before they occur. Only in this way will coordination be retained and a shared practice enacted. Only in this way will a social power be exercised. The successful execution of routines at the collective level will involve the overriding and modification of routines at the individual level. Practice at the collective level is not a simple summation of practices at the individual level (habits). Shared practice is, as the ethnomethodologists say, a collective accomplishment.

It might be objected that the example cited is not an example of routine

practice at all, that by definition something is routine only when it involves no active calculative intervention and proceeds automatically. But this would be a perverse definition. Scarcely anything (routinely) regarded as routine at the collective level could plausibly be made out as routine on this basis. Next to nothing of the 'routine practice' of a collective could be so described. (Indeed it is interesting also to reflect that scarcely anything in the way of routine individual behavior could be so described. Even at this level a distinction must be marked between the automatic/habitual and the routine: starting the day with coffee, walking down the stairs to the street, catching the bus to work, may be daily routines for an individual, but their accomplishment will require constant active modification of what comes automatically or habitually. 'Habit' actually faces all the problems identified by Turner as confronting 'shared practice.')

Turner's argument merits detailed attention because it articulates a very widely held conception of the basic difference between individualist/psychological and collectivist/sociological approaches to social activity. The former speaks of aggregates of separate individuals and individual actions; the latter refers to unitary collective entities. A standard exemplification of the difference is the contrast between rational choice theory and theories of societies as systems of social norms. Indeed many theorists are likely to think of this contrast when they read Turner, and see the horns of his dilemma as akin to these two alternative forms of theory. But this very widely held conception is in truth a misconception, which fails to grasp the nature of a properly sociological approach to social life. The horns of Turner's dilemma are merely alternative expressions of a fundamentally individualistic mode of thought. In the explicitly individualistic view of practice as diversity, there are so many independent individuals moved by habits. In the alternative allegedly 'collectivist' view of practice as a unity there are so many independent individuals moved by a single object or essence. Neither view can throw light on a simple collective routine like riding in formation. What is required to understand a practice of this kind is not individuals oriented primarily by their own habits, nor is it individuals oriented by the same collective object; rather it is human beings oriented to *each other*. Human beings can ride in formation, not because they are independent individuals who possess the same habits, but because they are interdependent social agents, linked by a profound mutual susceptibility,[5] who constantly modify their habituated individual responses as they interact with others, in order to sustain a shared practice.

In formulating the horns of his dilemma Turner overlooked this genuinely sociological way of understanding human activity, just as it has been overlooked in many other contexts of debate. As Zygmunt Bauman has rightly complained, far too many theorists have contrasted the individual and the societal and forgotten altogether about the social (1989 p. 179). Once this lapse is remedied it is possible to move to an adequate understanding of shared practices. They are indeed not stable unitary essences, but neither are they clusters of habitual individual actions. Shared practices are the accomplishments of

competent members of collectives. They are accomplishments readily achieved by, and routinely to be expected of members acting together, but they nonetheless have to be generated on every occasion, by agents concerned all the time to retain coordination and alignment with each other in order to bring them about. Although they are routine at the collective level, they are not routine at the individual level. This is why there is point in referring to a practice as the shared possession of a collective. (There is a sense, of course, in which the shared practice imputed here is a reification, derived from performances all accomplished slightly differently in varying conditions and circumstances; but it is a useful reification and a harmless one, akin to such useful notions as 'skill,' for example, at the individual level.)

It might be objected that a great deal has been made of a single, possibly atypical example, that of cavalry riding in formation, and that there is a need to check on the scope of the argument. The first thing to note by way of reply here is that examples of shared practices collectively executed, like riding in formation, are legion: they include fighting together, hunting together, sailing together, singing together, even, in the present-day world, doing science together. No wholly individualistic account will succeed in accounting for these examples. Individual habits will diverge over time, however rigorously they are initially inculcated, and cannot in any case account for the constant coordination of actions that is evident in examples of the routine practice of an interacting collective.

There are, however, many practices that are carried out solo. Acupuncture is normally administered by a single dentist. A vegetarian meal can be eaten alone. How is this distinct class of practices to be addressed? The answer proposed here is that they should not be treated as a distinct class at all: the need is to see these examples as just like the example of riding in formation. If riding in formation is an example nicely designed to expose the limitations of individualism, these further examples will serve to reveal those limitations as universal ones manifest in all its applications.

Both riding in formation and acupuncture are practices learned from other people, in these instances from fellow occupants of specific occupational roles. And in both instances learning continues after the initial acquisition of 'competent member' status, as part of the business of participation in practice itself. It is part of the nature of a shared practice that learning what it is and enacting it are inseparable. This is one reason why shared practices change. The cavalry company gets better at riding in formation as it rides, even to the extent perhaps that what it counts as riding in formation changes and last year's adequate efforts are this year accounted failures and causes for concern. Shared practices like acupuncture develop similarly, so that acupunctural techniques change over time and what counts as the administration of acupuncture changes. Not every well-intentioned prod with a needle is acupuncture: some prods fall outside the practice, some are more or less adequate expressions of it, some few may be so remarkable that they play major roles in extending existing conceptions of what the practice is.[6]

Thus although acupuncture is individually administered it is administered as acupuncture by a member who, in realizing that shared practice, has to be sensitive to what other practitioners are doing. The acupuncturist must interact with fellow practitioners, and be both cognizant of and disposed to move in the direction of their practice in order to be a practitioner herself. It is only through the interaction of a membership characterized by mutual intelligibility and mutual susceptibility that something identifiable as shared practice can be sustained, and its correct enactment distinguished from what is defective or incompetent. Indeed we might use this as a neat way of distinguishing habit and practice: habit is not enacted well or badly, but practice is. Thus the difference between riding in formation and administering acupuncture is only the contingent one that the necessary interactions for the maintenance of practice are more concentrated and immediately apparent in the former case. Acupuncturists we might say merely operate in a more spread-out mode than cavalry.

It is, of course, when practice is manifest in the actions of isolated individuals that individualistic misconceptions of what is involved are most plausible. Not only habit-individualism but rule-individualism, norm-individualism, and other idealist forms of individualism, are deployed to describe what is involved. All alike are unsatisfactory. Individuals who privately follow rules, for example, will be liable to diverge in their practice over time just as individuals who privately follow habit will. Rules can never be sufficiently informative or well exemplified to keep instances of rule-following behavior relevantly identical in all the diverse situations wherein rules are followed. Only agents actively concerned to modify their idiosyncratic rule-following activities appropriately are able to sustain a shared sense of what it is to follow a rule. Whatever is accounted agreement in the following of a rule is produced by the membership that follows it, not by 'the rule itself.'[7]

Thus, in conclusion, we can see that the adoption even of an apparently simple and anodyne account of social life as practice has profound theoretical implications. These are well brought out by considering Turner's challenging criticisms of 'theories of practice.' Not only does Turner demolish a number of shoddy examples of such theories, much more importantly he allows us to see that no invocation of 'shared practice,' however carefully conceived, is compatible with individualism. An individualist will readily perceive the merits of such a contribution. But an anti-individualist may also be thankful for it. From that perspective, Turner demonstrates that the notions of 'shared practice' and 'agreement in practice' can only be defended as components in a genuinely sociological account of social life, one wherein they feature as accomplishments of those human beings collectively engaged in the task of sustaining them. Such human beings cannot be understood as independent calculative individuals; they stand revealed in their practice as profoundly interdependent, mutually susceptible social agents.

Notes

1   The contribution of ethnomethodology has been decisive here. See Garfinkel (1967) and Heritage (1984). Among the conventional sociological theories to build upon their work is that of Giddens (1984).

2   What a membership is able to do as a matter of routine practice is a tolerable first-order description of its power, i.e. of the power constituted in and as it (Barnes 1988). It is interesting to note here that the social power of a membership typically greatly exceeds the sum of the powers or capacities inherent in members considered as independent individuals, because those individual powers may be combined and coordinated to constitute what otherwise would be nonexistent powers or capacities. This is why the old zero-sum theory of social power has long been discredited. Power is emergent out of order: being a variable dependent on the degree and nature of the order in the collective it cannot be treated as a fixed quantity which can only be concentrated at one point or be put at the discretion of one member by being drawn off from another point or removed from the discretion of other members. Thus, social power is not so many individual powers or capacities separately accounted. It is powers or capacities collectively constituted and visibly expressed in the ongoing routine practice of the membership. In the most profound sense, it is shared practice.

3   The power of the commander to instigate the charge is a consequence of the distribution of knowledge across the army. See Barnes (1988) for a discussion of 'power over' of this kind as related to a distribution of self-referring knowledge – knowledge, incidentally, which cannot be rendered as practice.

4   There are accounts at the most general 'macro' level of social theory that apparently circumvent this problem (Giddens 1984). They emphasize the general dependence of members on the existing repertoire of practices in their society. Members may have innumerable objectives and interests, and very many different beliefs and theories, but whatever their objectives and whatever their beliefs about how to attain them, they will have to draw on that existing repertoire. There is nothing else. Hence the system of practices will in effect reproduce itself by being drawn upon, and this can confidently be predicted without any knowledge of what prompts the specific actions wherein it is drawn upon. Its very existence will indeed account for its continuation: practice will account for practice. This argument, however, is hard to square with the uncontroversial observation that the repertoire of practices changes over time. This evident mutability clearly implies that practices do not self-reproduce, and that to the extent that they are reproduced this must be understood by reference to contingencies external to practices, arguably contingencies to do with the human beings who reproduce them.

5   In this paper it suffices to speak of the interdependence of social agents. Elsewhere I insist that this interdependence takes the form of mutual susceptibility and is *causal*. The link must be made causally, rather than via reason, because it is necessary to account for coordinated understanding as well as coordinated action, and links mediated by reason (i.e. verbal communications rationally addressed) presume coordinated understanding and cannot occur until it exists. See Barnes (1995, 2000).

6   A more satisfactory exposition of these points is part of MacIntyre's brilliant discussion of practices (1981). His definition of 'practice' is, however, much narrower than the one adopted here to suit the needs of the present paper and this is why I have not made use of his highly distinctive but wonderfully insightful account.

7   The argument against 'practice individualism' in this paper parallels familiar
arguments against 'rule individualism' and on behalf of collectivist accounts of
rules (Wittgenstein 1958; Kripke 1982; Bloor 1997). Rule collectivism is a view I
myself advocate, for example, in Barnes (1995). It is a view that follows naturally
from a finitist understanding of the nature of rules and meanings, such as that
given in Barnes et al. (1996).

2   Human practices and the observability of the 'macro-social'

Jeff Coulter

Garfinkel's remarkably innovative vision of a mode of sociological analysis he
termed 'ethnomethodology'[1] has in recent years become detached from its
historical relationship to key issues in social theory, in large measure due to
the success of the technical field of 'conversation analysis' which owes its
genesis to many of his theoretical contributions. However, an abiding issue
within ethnomethodology broadly conceived has been the nature of social
order and social organization and the appropriate methods for investigating
the properties of these phenomena. Among the primary problems confronted
by contemporary social theorists has been the development of an adequate
conceptual framework for the depiction of the nature of 'macro-social'
phenomena. I submit in this essay that various theses advanced within
ethnomethodology permit us to cast this issue in a novel fashion and enable us
to approach some viable solutions to the problems which are generated by
contemplations of the nature of macro-social phenomena and their relation-
ship(s) to quotidian human conduct.

   The 'micro–macro' linkage problem, as it is called in contemporary socio-
logical theory,[2] is an issue which requires intensive logical analysis. However,
notwithstanding various current treatments which it has received, I believe
that a proper logical solution has not (yet) been forthcoming, and if it has, I
am not aware of it. It is the purpose of this essay to argue for what I shall claim
is a contribution to the solution of the core problems. Identifying what
constitute the 'core problems' will itself require detailed discussion. In my
view this must involve, and in the first instance, an analysis of the ontological
problems arising out of a consideration of the nature of macro- (as well as
micro-) social phenomena, from the solution of which significant method-
ological implications may be derived. I have visited this issue before,[3]
although this earlier treatment was almost certainly considered (by those
whom it sought to engage) as merely a reiteration of what was then taken to be
a conventional 'ethnomethodological' position. In what follows, I shall
advance a series of arguments designed to show that the proper route to a
solution to the 'micro–macro' relationship problem is to be found in a
systematic elucidation of the logic of our ordinary practices (including our
communicative practices) in our ordinary life circumstances. If this means