

## Ann Swidler „Anchor Practices“ - Summary & Questions

In the text „What anchors cultural practices?“ Ann Swidler aims to further develop a conception of „culture as practice“ within social theory. In this context Swidler wants to tackle the question as to whether practices are structured hierarchically and whether there are certain practices that organize and constrain others. Swidler refers to such practices as „anchor practices“.

### Summary

Swidler identifies four problems that she claims practice theory has solved (pp. 83-88):

1. subjectivity of meaning: practice theory, according to Swidler, overcomes the methodically individualist conception of „ideas“ within traditional sociology. Ideas dissolve into practices and discourse.
2. empirical observability: in opposition to subjective ideas, semiotic meaning systems and social practices are public rather than private phenomena. Therefore they are empirically accessible observable theoretical objects.
3. culture vs. action: Once the notion of social practice was conceptually available the problematic duality between culture and action ceased away. Social practice (singular) is always action and social practices (plural) are always culture.
4. culture vs. structure distinction: The problem is how to determine: „the relative weight of ‘cultural’ vs. ‘structural’ factors in explaining social outcomes“ (p. 86). Here again she criticizes the dissolution of action and structure of the Weberian social ontology within which virtual and material aspects are separated into two individual entities of theoretical inquiry. Swidler draws on Sewell’s account of practices as always structured through a symbiotic relationship (looping) between schemas (systems of semiotic meanings) and resources (significant material objects) in order to demonstrate that practice theory found a fruitful way to overcome the separation of virtual (=cultural) and material (=structural) aspects of social life.

After explaining why practice theory may be useful for social theory, she turns to a problem practice theory faces. This problem is also the main question of the paper: „How are practices organized?“ (In her own words: „Are all practices equal, or are some more equal than others?“, p. 88).

- Swidler briefly mentions two extreme ways in which practices could be organized. The one extreme is, if *“practices are part of unified systems, reflecting some single, underlying logic”* (p. 88). In this model practices would be organized in a very hierarchical way. The other extreme is, if there is a multitude of practices with no hierarchy at all. Swidler rejects both extremes without further discussion.
- Swidler also rejects Sewell’s differentiation of depth and power of practices (again: without further explanation).
- Swidler then gives the example of an architect who draws a plan for a house. She illustrates how one practice always relies on a whole set of other practices. Within such a “flat account”, practices mutually sustain each other (or are more loosely coupled), and maybe also

contradict each other. In any case: In the “flat account” there is no hierarchy, we cannot distinguish dominant practices.

- Rejecting a flat account and calling for an anchoring account of practices:
  - Swidler challenges this flat account and asks whether “*among all these various kinds of practices we can distinguish some that are more central, more controlling, more determinative than others*” (p. 90)

This leads to the main claim of her paper which is that there are in fact practices which are more central, more controlling, more determinative than others. Swidler calls these practices “anchor practices”. She continues by presenting three examples to illustrate what she means by the term “anchor practices”:

- The Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade example (pp. 90-92): anchor practices are practices that enact constitutive rules, thereby anchoring larger domains of practice and discourse. In addition she furthermore claims that public rituals may be helpful to fulfill this task. The anchoring concerns the schema-side of the practice: an anchor practice encodes the dominant schema - a schema which helps constitute the schemata of a larger set of practices.
- The “fabrication of labor” example (pp. 92-94): anchor practices don’t have to be particularly public or even visible - they can also be “silent” enactments of constitutive rules. Furthermore, Swidler suggests that antagonistic interchanges tend to stabilize anchor practices (if workers and owners fight over wages they reinforce the notion of labor as a commodity).
- The (US-)American voluntarism example (pp. 96-99): anchor practices don’t have to be located exclusively in one specific social institution (e. g. labor market, school, court room, etc.). Rather they provide the default options for every interchange in each of these institutions. She especially emphasizes that practices of “repeated ritual confirmations” enact constitutive rules, and further anchors other practices.

So finally, Swidler has three claims about anchor practices:

1. Anchor practices set constitutive rules and spill over to a broader domain of practices.
2. At the center of antagonistic social relationships, practices may be more firmly anchored.
3. The visible, public enactment of new patterns is more significant than the time or repetition of habits.

## Problems

1. **The central question shifts.** At first Swidler wants to know what helps us think “about the different kinds of structures and practices and about whether or when some practices govern others.” (p. 88) (a) On page 90 the question changes to what captures “the causal significance of cultural practices?” (b) only to shift again on page 93 to why some practices have the “power to define reality?” Charitable reading: It is always the same question, just put in different words.
2. **The main question (a) is not really being answered but delegated.** “Continued attention to carefully developed empirical cases, where we can see how key structures are constituted by practices, may finally help us to a better understanding of when and how practices anchor or organize systems of practice, discourse, and action.” (p. 100) Charitable reading: The text is programmatic.

3. **The meaning of central concepts shifts.** One example: On page 94 Swidler writes about what distinguishes social practices from most habits whereas on page 95 she writes that practices might be “more persistent and more likely to structure other domains of thought and action when they constitute social relationships (the negotiations between managers and workers; the relations that are the ‘gay community’) than when they are simply habits” - are practices something other than habits or are anchoring practices and habits both practices?

## Questions

1. It is ambiguous to draw from Swidler's ideas about how exactly practices are anchored and transformed. According to Swidler “practices enact constitutive rules...are likely to be central, anchoring whole larger domains of practice and discourse” (pp. 96). But How does this happen exactly?
  - a. How did the central practice come into existence in the first place (purely random, or based on some other habitual behavior)?<sup>1</sup> And how can an anchoring practice be transformed or substituted?
  - b. When the central practice enacts constitutive rules for itself, how does it transmit the constitutive rules to other practices and shape them?<sup>2</sup> Particularly speaking, how can constitutive rules enacted in informal practices (such as parade, public rituals, social antagonism, everyday-life interactions) influence and reshape more formal and significant practices (such as substantial legal practices, enforcement of governmental authority, etc.)<sup>3</sup>?
2. How materialist is Swidler's account? And can capitalism be understood in terms of anchor practices? It seems to depend on how one reads the following quote that - after many times posing the question whether some practices are more fundamental than others - says:

*“We take for granted that some structures and their associated practices are, in Sewell's sense, deeper, more fundamental, more powerful than others. So the*

---

<sup>1</sup> If rituals bring about Anchor Practices then where do Rituals come from? Aren't rituals habitualized behavior patterns that relate to cultural Schemas? (which again brings us back to Looping Effects) If this is true for Swidler it contradicts her thesis about anchor practices being not related to habits. On the other hand if this is not the case where do anchor practices come from? Are they random events (Sewell)?

<sup>2</sup> What exactly is the relation of anchoring practices to other practices? The text provides the following range of relation terms:

Anchoring practices are:

- ❖ “more equal than”
- ❖ more central than
- ❖ governing
- ❖ constraining
- ❖ organizing
- ❖ have causal significance for
- ❖ more controlling than
- ❖ more determinative than

other practices. Is this all sucked up into the function of establishing a constitutive rule? Charitable reading: It is again the same idea just expressed in different terms (but which idea?)

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in reductive accounts such as Guala & Hindriks (2015), it is understood that constitutive rules are ontologically dependent on the correlated equilibria and its regulative rules, such that constitutive rules do not change without the change in regulative rules of the correlated equilibria. Then, it seems that for central practices spilling over to broader practices, it requires also the correlated equilibria in a small scale spilling over to a broader scale. It seems mysterious how this could happen without a collective change of agents' actions. Perhaps, we can further explain this mystery on the coarse-grained level with an explanation at a fine-grained level: agents are “cultivated” with new modes of actions in equilibria of informal actions, and stick to these newly-cultivated mode of actions in their formal actions and thus bring about new equilibria in formal actions, such that central practices spill over to broader practices. Citation: Guala & Hindriks (2015) "A Unified Social Ontology," *Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (2015), pp. 177-201

*structures of capitalism and its associated practices, such as paying to buy or build a house which one then owns, are more fundamental—more enduring, more pervasive, more influential in shaping or constraining action—than this year’s fad in kitchen countertops, or even the practices of housewifery that make an easy-to-clean countertop desirable. But does such a hierarchy of practices, corresponding roughly to the nested (or un-nested) hierarchy of social organization, really capture the causal significance of cultural practices? Let me take a concrete example [...]*” (p. 90)

Is Swidler asking here of “cultural practices” in opposition to practices that make up capitalism or would she say that one or several anchoring cultural practices constitute capitalism?

3. Independently of Swidler: Do we find the concept of anchor practices helpful? Should we think of anchoring as one among other ways in which practices are structured/hierarchized or as the central concept applying to all cases of some practices being “more equal than others”?