The performativity of critique

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Abstract

This paper rethinks critical research by defining critique as a performative sociomaterial practice through which reality is being enacted differently. Such critical practices originate from an expanded concept of agency where both humans and nonhumans actively participate. This conception of critique aims to address the theory/practice divide and the humanistic assumptions within most critical research. Critical research as a form of theorising could gain new impetus when it focuses on the multiple ways in which forms of domination are challenged through everyday practices.

Introduction

This paper wants to rethink the nature and focus of critical research on the basis of a conceptualisation of critique as primarily performative sociomaterial tactical action through which particular kinds of realities are being enacted. This conception of critique aims to address the theory/practice divide and the humanistic assumptions within most critical research. It attempts to identify and enhance critical practices that could make material differences. It is argued that critical research should follow and theorise critical practices rather than attempt to provide prescriptions for critical transformative practices.

Critique is mainly conceptualised as a form of theory which could only provide true insight if it is divorced from the messiness of practice. Theory has to illuminate and guide transformative practices. Forms of critique based on Critical Theory rely on the autonomous and rational human agent who conceptualises transformation from a position of moral and cognitive privilege. Such humanist forms of critique mainly operate in the theoretical sphere where ideologies and false consciousness are uncovered and where transformative praxis is based on insights and beliefs. According to postmodern forms of critique reality is discursively constructed and could be reconstituted through a deconstruction of the discourse. This form of critique remains in the sphere of discourse and is divorced from practice.

A divide exists between critical theories and the transformation of practice. In general terms, theories are seen as rational constructions that aim to illuminate unjust and
inform transformative practices. In opposition to practices theories are seen to represent a form of knowledge that is more universal and therefore more reliable. Practices themselves are characterised by limited self-understanding, repressive hegemony, false consciousness, and the operation of ideologies that hide contradictions. Because of this divide critical researchers find it difficult to relate their theories to the transformation of practice. This divide is characterised not only by the separation of theory and practice, but also by the prioritisation of theory and by the belief that critique is mainly and firstly a form of theory.

In contrast to this belief in the superiority of theory, this article argues for a turn to practice. Critique should in the first place be associated with those kinds of practices that disrupt practices of oppressive power. A focus on the ‘vibrancy of matter’ (Bennet, 2010) and ‘everyday practices’ (De Certeau, 1984) may reveal a vast body of practices that already enact critique. The important shift that this focus on the practice of critique wants to make is the basic claim that the significance of ordinary (everyday) practices, experiences and popular knowledges should not be devalued through constructs such as interpellation (Althusser, 1971), hegemony (Gramsci) and false consciousness. A careful investigation of certain practices may reveal multiple ways in which action is taken that is not determined by powerful discourses and hegemonic ideologies. Such practices are significant for an understanding of critique. Although they are not necessarily informed by critical theories they challenge the same kinds of practices identified by critical theories as dominating and oppressive. The effect of this gap is that critical theorising remains largely separated from the agents of transformation within practices. It remains a problem in critical research to enlighten and activate the critical practitioner.

Investigating critique this way starts with an ethnographic ‘following of the practices wherever they go’ (Latour, 2004a, p. 67). The selection of practices that are to be investigated is informed by two considerations: 1) The selection is motivated by a ‘critical intent’ (Stahl, 2008), an eye on the conflict between critical values and organisational or work practices. The selection of a practice is also (2) informed by the detection of disruptive or alternative actions within a sphere of domination. This focus on the active role of subjects in practices is different from traditional critical studies that investigate the ways and extent to which the critical values are violated and where the ‘dominated’ or ‘oppressed’ are portrayed as passive victims.

This paper firstly describes the predominance of theory in critical research. Next, a case is selected on the basis of the two considerations mentioned above. The ways in which this case constitutes critical practice is subsequently analysed. The case is, firstly related to critical frameworks such as rationalisation and feminism in order to show the ‘critical intent’. The ways in which dominant practices are disrupted are consequently described by means of the analytical frames of sociomateriality, performativity and a notion of everyday practices. Such a framing of the case is needed in order to show why and how it could be seen as a practice of critique. In an attempt to perform critique as defined, some reflexive notes are made about the nature of critical theorising and research.
A theory/practice gap

This gap between the theory and practice in critical research is testified to by McGrath (2005, p. 86):

Overall, I argue that we have made a significant effort conceptualizing critical research, a lesser effort practising critical research, and virtually no effort reflecting upon the conduct of critical research. In effect, the IS field has not yet reached a position where the theory and practice of doing critical research are informing each other.

While McGrath’s description recognises that a divide exists between conceptualising and practising critical research, it does not elaborate on the kind of practices critical research should focus on. In an attempt to overcome the gap and to become more relevant and effective, critical research has turned to empirical investigations (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This has, however, not brought about a significant shift in the relationship between theory and practice although it has led towards a much more sophisticated and modest use of theory and claims to knowledge.

The basic problem is the conceptualisation of critique mainly as a form of discourse and theory in opposition to practices and materialities. Critique is largely confined to (linguistic) discursivity and is mainly understood as a form of theoretical knowledge. This emphasis on critique as theory is highlighted when Myers and Klein (2011, p. 26) comment that many researchers ‘simply use critical theory as a synonym for critical research’. The assumption is that transformative practice should follow from critical analysis, and should be an application of critical theories. This reliance on theory could be related to how critique draws on the communicative theories of Habermas and the (linguistic) discourse of Foucault (Brooke, 2002).

The emphasis on language, discourse and theory could be illustrated with reference to some of the central texts in critical studies of management and information systems. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) identify three tasks to define the task of critique: insight, critique and transformative redefinition. Insight develops a hermeneutic understanding of the current state of affairs. The hermeneutic understanding is largely based on the interpretation of the views and discourses of participants. Critique is dependent on insight and goes further to question participants’ accounts, by drawing on relevant (critical) theories in an attempt to relate the particular situation to deeper (structural) and broader contexts. It would show, for example, how the discourse in a particular organisation may relate to male domination or to rationalisation. Critique aims to provide a different perspective which uncovers the real forms of domination and oppression. It uses theoretical tools to analyse how power and ideology operate to produce asymmetrical relations. On the basis of insight and critique it is now possible for critical research to provide a transformative redefinition of the situation. This ‘enables change and provides skills for new ways of operating’ (p.19). This should lead towards ‘more progressive and mutually satisfying’ (p.20) forms of management. In this process more concrete indications are provided of how the situation may be transformed. This description of critical research shows how theories and (linguistic) discourse are prioritised, how theorising is an activity of the intellectual and it is relatively independent from concrete practices. Such practices themselves are deficient and in need of interpretation, critique and redefinition. While it is acknowledged that practices could only be changed by the practitioners themselves, these research subjects have to be educated according to Freire whose ‘conception of conscientização’
locates a meaningful role for intellectuals in the construction of human agents – that is, subjects who choose to make their own history’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 145). Although the authors are aware of the danger of misinterpreting the data in the light of theories, the theoretical orientation ultimately guides the research and interpretation of the data.

A second example: Myers and Klein (2011) identify six principles for the conduction of critical field studies in information systems which they relate to the 2nd and 3rd tasks of Alvesson and Deetz (2000). (The first task, insight, applies only to interpretative studies.) Three of the six principles relate to each of the elements of critique and transformative redefinition. The first principle states that critical research should ‘organize their data collection and analysis around core concepts and ideas from one or more critical theorists’ (Myers & Klein, 2011, p. 25). They state that critical researchers ‘start out with a priori theoretical concepts derived from one or more critical theorist’ (p. 26). In this process people are enlightened about their real situation (p. 27). Although it is acknowledged that transformation should come from ‘internal, self-formative governing processes, in which critical theorists must not be given special powers of authority’ (p. 28), they do not clarify how this relates to the critical analysis. The divide between the two comes to the fore when the authors pronounce that ‘not all critical theorists are optimistic that much social improvement is possible’ (p. 28).

A third example: The title of collection of critical research in information systems by Howcroft and Trauth (2005), Handbook of Critical Information Systems Research. Theory and Application, already indicates how the relation between theory and practice is seen. Part 1 of the volume provides an account of various theories, and Part 2, entitled Theory and Application, consists of the discussion of various case studies. In these studies theories are applied. Besides ‘application’, other terms and phrases such as ‘translate’, ‘guiding theories’ and ‘drawing on theories’ are often used. While the relation between critical research and practice is increasingly seen as a problem, the emphasis on empirical studies suggests closer attentiveness to practices.

Where critical studies do as a matter of fact deal with materialities, the focus is still on the immaterial way in which subjects understand their world. For example, Alvarez (2008) investigates the technology in the implementation of an Enterprise System (ES) by focusing on the way the subjects make sense of their world and not so much on how they might transform it. Although he elaborates on the workaround practices of these subjects, he does not acknowledge the critical possibilities that might lie in the materialities of the additional documentation and processes by means of which Scheduling Representatives manipulate the ES in order to maintain some of the control they had in the legacy system.

Closer to the argument that is being developed in this article, in their development of the notion of performativity in CMS, Spicer et al. (2009) focus only on (linguistic) discursive elements when they draw on Austin (1962) and Butler (1993) while the material transformation of practice is largely absent:

This leads us to look at performativity as the practical and sometimes parodic use of discourse. (p.538)

This broad argument leads us to identify five elements of a performative approach to CMS: an affirmative stance, an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities, and a normative orientation. (p.545)
Some references to materialities are present when they refer to workers’ control of the means of production or the construction of women’s space at work (p.552), but the material entanglements of these shifts are not investigated.

The employment of actor-network theory (ANT) in critical studies is significant for this article. Doolin and Lowe (2002) explain how ANT provides the analytical tools to reveal how relations of power became embedded in assemblages in relation to the way ANT traces heterogeneous processes of translation and enrolment. The authors define critique as this process of revealing. It makes public how power operates and how it becomes entrenched by opening the black box of technology. This process of revealing remains, however, in their account a form of knowledge and insight available to researchers and research subjects and does not extend to the active role of materialities.

Similarly, while Alcadipani and Hassard (2010) draw on ANT to elaborate on a critical performativity (CP), they still define critique discursively:

As such, by performing accounts that show how ‘the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation’ (Domain statement, Critical Management Division, Academy of Management) and discussing alternatives for management and organizations, critical work in MOS may help to undermine dominant practices or, at least, to enact them in specific places where they can be challenged. [emphasis –DP]

From the perspective of the argument that is being developed in this article, these ‘accounts’ would only be sociomaterially performative when they become part of heterogeneous assemblies that enact a particular reality. A sociomaterial approach would emphasise that ‘alternatives for management and organizations’ should not only be discussed, and ‘dominant practices’ should not only be undermined, but alternative practices should be enacted.

The examples above have indicated that the critical research in these fields remains at the levels of theory and (linguistic) discourse. This entails a separation of theory and practice and a prioritising of theory. The basic approach is that general theories define what critique is and their application within a particular context would enable critical, transformative practice. Practice is largely seen as critically passive, awaiting theoretical enlightenment. Theory is seen as the preparation and orientation for, and the illumination of, practices. Transformative practices remain the outcome of critical theories.

What is not attended to, are the ways in which practitioners may enact reality differently. Orlikowski’s (2010) reference to the ontological or agential priority that is given to human actors could be used to point to the limitations of a kind of critique that does not take the agency of matter into account. This ontology of human agency entails assumptions about the nature of and boundaries between human and nonhuman entities. It is generally an ontology of human agency and material passivity.

**Critical practice**

This section jumps from theory of critique to a critical practice. This is not to create or reaffirm a gap between the two but to theorise the practice. This section reports the research of Mayère & Cooren (2011) in which they describe a case of the ‘paperless ward’.
The authors focus in particular on the strategy to establish the ‘paperless ward’ through the implementation of electronic medical records (EMR). The paperless approach entails that there ‘should be no more material support for writing and reading practices apart from computers, electronic networks, and the linked software and data’ (p.10). The purpose was to reduce the amount of paperwork and to have an electronic record of all events in order to centralise and facilitate decisionmaking and accounting processes. The project was sanctioned by the (French) government who made accreditation of the hospital dependent on its implementation. The purpose was also to reduce face-to-face communication during relief meetings when medical teams change shifts. Such cases of ‘unnecessary’ conversation should be reduced to improve accuracy and efficiency. It was also motivated by the belief that the ease and availability of complete and up-to-date information would facilitate patient care and management.

The EMR system wanted in particular to eliminate ‘paper reminders’ that were used by nurses and physicians. Through strategic location of computer stations throughout the hospital comprehensive and accumulative information could be accessed.

The system has various effects, either by design or by means of the way in which it was realised. These effects could not be traced to any particular intention other than the agency of the heterogeneous assemblage. One effect was the regulation of access to information. Through the use of access codes some kinds of information were only accessible to physicians who are placed in the exclusive position from where they take important medical decisions. Through this division of labour, nurses are interpellated as executioners of physicians’ decisions (p.32). In the process it promotes the expert knowledge and power of physicians and marginalises the knowledge nurses may contribute. Another effect was the way data and knowledge are enacted. Data is defined as something that pre-exists the decisionmaking process and is captured in a neutral and context-independent way. The assumption was that, once all the data had been fully captured and organised, proper decisions could be taken. The EMR also follows a linear process from diagnosis to decisions, treatment and planning which do not provide for the complexity and unpredictability of medical practices.

From the account of Mayère & Cooren it is clear that the EMR could not meet all requirements of the complex and fluid nature of the nurses’ practice such as the way information is generated and stored through particular work processes. This led to the need for what Berg (1996, p. 424) calls the ‘repair work’ of medical practitioners. They found that, in contrast to the singular way a computerised system such as an EMR produces knowledge, ‘[c]onversations, reading and writing activities are mobilised in the production of collective sense making required for dealing with highly complex and changing situations’ (p. 35). In this process various artefacts, such as the paper-based memory device is persistently used as a necessary means to maintain vigilance.

The particular nature of nurses’ work is described in this report as ‘watchfulness’ or ‘vigilance’. This entails the continual administration of medication, the monitoring of the changing condition and progress of patients, and the discharge process. In order to ensure watchfulness a variety of processes and administrative actions are needed. In these processes various material artefacts are assembled and kept at hand. ‘Setting up material grips help focussing on the question to be solved from step to step. The material signs are actants that tell what has already been done and what has to be done’ (p. 24). ‘All along these combined processes, watchfulness is produced through
cooperation with material elements that play an important role in distributed cognition’ (21).

It is clear that the EMR aimed to eliminate the dependence on some of the material artefacts but it failed to adequately enable the constant need for watchfulness (p.17). The fluid nature of the practice caused the EMR to be constantly behind, with the result that it could not be relied on to provide information that is relevant and on time. This is particularly the case with the administration of medicine which is a complex process involving a variety of actants (p. 20).

Because of the particular requirements of nurses’ practice, they found new ways to bypass, add on to, or work around the EMR. Paper is an important agent within these practices. While it was the purpose of the EMR to replace the paper reminders in order to achieve the ‘paperless ward’, medical personnel (nurses and physicians) found paper an essential device and agent that enables them to fully particulate in the complex practice. The paper reminder started as a computer printout of a document which contains basic patient information. As the patient progresses through the processes of medical care, hand-written notes are added and additional pieces of paper are attached. Such notes provide information about the physical location of the patient, information about the last diagnosis and treatment and the current prescription. It acts as a live record of on-going treatment and changes in the patient. Nurses found the use of paper reminders necessary because they are always at hand in the pocket, they could be used to add notes related to on-going treatment and changes to the patient’s condition identifying the most relevant elements. It acts as a depository of the unpredictable and fluid nature of daily medical practice.

Here is one example of how the paper reminders contribute to the promotion of watchfulness in the discharge practice:

Let’s focus on the preparation of the discharge itself. The nurse takes an envelope, writes the name, the code of the patient, his/her room number. She prints a predesigned to-do list, writes the discharge time, and checks the required items, made of medicine, documents that will be given to the patient or sent to the next establishment, the pharmacy, or whatever. The nurse will quote the assembled items in the completion of the process. The paper list is a material reminder: the nurse will be interrupted; she will have to wait for an additional item, check whether something else is needed. The list is a very loose scenario, it has to be specified according to the different information gathered previously or that can be asked for or told by different actants. The list and the envelope are the sentinels and depository of the work on hand. They also form a collective grip on the ward life: by looking at the envelopes, other nurses or physicians will check the future discharge and thus confirm what has been previously mentioned in relief meetings. (p.18) [draft conference paper edited – author]

The paper reminder also fulfils an important role at the relief meetings where incoming staff is briefed. These meetings provide the occasion to synthesise and convey key information. The paper reminders are used as the basis of these meetings because they are the deposit of the most important and up-to-date information. This continued to happen even though these pieces of paper were officially prohibited and their use was discouraged by the head nurses.

The paper reminders also fulfil a central role in the process of decision making. According to the legal procedure and regulated by the EMR, medical decision making is the sole responsibility of physicians. When the process of decision making is traced a different picture appears from what the EMR wanted to regulate. Within the on-going
practice knowledge emerges as open, situated and distributed. The process of decision making (officially by the physician) can be traced and could be followed back to notes and cues on the paper reminders. The comments and notes and annotations as they emerge from the nurses’ daily practice fulfil therefore an important role in the generation of information and cues that would lead to the final decision making. The result is that the clear separation between the roles of physicians and nurses is blurred as decision making becomes a collective process.

Critical frameworks

Critique is defined by the way it challenges and changes practices and institutional forms of inequality, injustice, domination and oppression on the basis of values such as equality, justice, dignity, ecological harmony. While critical research identifies practices where these values are violated, critical management studies focus in particular on the context of organisations and the workplace. The challenges are labelled within CMS as rationalisation, neoliberalism, bureaucratisation, neo-colonialism. These labels provide important insights that contribute towards the meaning of the values and the identification of ways in which they are violated. They also provide the framework for the ‘critical intent’ which guides the focus of critical research. Two such frameworks could be highlighted to position the case in a critical context.

The investigation of Mayère & Cooren (2011) is located by the authors within the critical framework of organisational rationalisation through information and communication technologies (ICTs) which entails among others the computerisation of medical and nursing records. They indicate that rationalisation reaches a further level by entering the terrain of knowledge work. As part of this process of rationalisation employees ‘have to conduct reflexive monitoring to contribute to organizational optimization, codification and justification’ (p.8). They argue that ‘immaterialities’ such as information and communication matter because the rationalisation takes place through material means such as ‘machines, artefacts, networks, and computerized methods such as ERP (enterprise resource planning) workflow, or databases and software dedicated to quality and risk management’ (p. 9). ‘Mattering’ refers to both the materialisation of information and its significance. In their critique on the process of rationalisation Mayère & Cooren (2011) argue that that rationalisation is unpredictable and that it limits communication actions. They seem to draw on Habermas’ (1984) distinction between system and life world when they portray the EMR as limiting communicative interaction. The computerised processes of rationalisation in general and EMR in particular have been criticised because they attempt to exert control from a single position (Berg, 1997).

A second framework that could be employed is that of feminist critique of the way nurses’ work loses status in relation to the male-dominated work of physicians. The case could also be located within the critical framework of feminism that analyses the sexual division of labour in the medical field where women’s work is defined as caring and given a low status (Riska, 2001).
Typifying critique

While the previous section located the practices within the context critical theories, this section draws on various bodies of research in an attempt to describe aspects of the practice of critique. The following are attended to:

- Critique as diffraction
- The sociomateriality of practice
- Agency and performativity
- The ordinariness of practices

**Diffraction**

The nature of critical practice could be described by means of the metaphor of diffraction as developed by Haraway (1992) and Barad (2007). In Physics diffraction refers to the well-known phenomenon of interference when waves bend around an object resulting in various patterns. Diffraction is different from reflection, another optical metaphor often used when referring to knowledge and thinking. Whereas reflection draws on a definition of light as particles, diffraction draws on a more complex view of light where both the particle- and the wave qualities are used. Diffraction emphasises the differences and the unexpected amplitudes caused by interferences.

Barad (2007, p. 76) illustrates the phenomenon of diffraction by pointing towards the light and dark patterns that form around the edges of the shadow of a sharp object such as a razor blade, illuminated by a monochromatic light source. She observes that the boundaries of the edges are not clear and that light and dark patterns are visible. What she found particularly significant is that light and dark patterns alternate each other. These are some dark patches within the light ones. From this she concludes as follows:

> I argue that phenomena are not the mere result of laboratory exercises engineered by human subjects but differential patterns of mattering ("diffraction patterns") produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production, where apparatuses are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices - specific material (re)configur-ings of the world - which come to matter. (Barad, 2007, p. 206)

When critical practice is seen as ‘diffractive’ it creates ‘little differences’ (Haraway, 1992) to the well-defined nature and boundaries of objects such as dominant practices. Critique as diffraction is not simply rebellion or resistance which opposes dominant practices head-on in an attempt to overthrow them. Diffraction creates the blurring of boundaries, it promotes uncertainty, it points towards cracks where things appear to be smooth. It renders an object different to what it seems and to how it is experienced. It creates a difference within and does not stand against the practices it diffracts. It is an internal process of making a difference.

Rather to be an "inappropriate/d other" means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nality - as the means of making potent connection that exceeds domination. To be inappropriate/d is not to fit in the taxon, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by
difference. To be inappropriate/d is to be neither modern nor postmodern, but to insist on the amodern. Trinh was looking for a way to figure "difference" as a "critical difference within," and not as special taxonomic marks grounding difference as apartheid. She was writing about people; I wonder if the same observations might apply to humans and to both organic and technological non-humans. (Haraway, 1992)

The case described above could be seen as an example of critique as a diffractive practice. The critical practice takes place within the dominant practices to create a difference within. The nurses fully participate in various medical practices, but they act differently. They do not perform the identities as prescribed by the EMR. They diffract their interpellation of mere providers of information. Critique as diffraction makes little differences that may seem insignificant because it does not bring about a major change. Although the differences are small, their significance should not be underestimated. The diffractive practice of the nurses changes the origins of medical knowledge and reclaim control over an own practice. These different practices may enact patient care in different ways with different implications for medical practice.

**Sociomateriality**

It is important for this critical practice that not only humans act, but that the agent is a heterogeneous assemblage as defined by the concept *sociomateriality*. The notion of sociomateriality refers to the coming together of humans and nonhumans (artefacts, objects, technology) in ways that the boundaries become diffused and agency emergent. *Sociomateriality* is different from both socio-technical views and from Pickering’s (1995) notion of the ‘mangle of practice’ where the separation between human and nonhuman is maintained. By refusing to make any *a priori* distinctions between different entities a sociomaterial approach is able to trace how identities and agency emerge from an assemblage. The concept sociomateriality assists us to understand that agency is not a uniquely human ability and that humanity itself is mediated through various kinds of other agents.

Reference is made to two sources of the concept sociomateriality, the notion of symmetry in actor-network theory (ANT) and Barad’s (2007) notion of intra-action. In ANT the actor-network is a heterogeneous assemblage from which identities and reality emerge. The symmetry-thesis states that all possible actants (or agents) should be treated in the same way regardless of what kind of entity they are. This requires that no *a priori* distinction should be made between the roles of humans and nonhumans (ideas, machines, laws, nature). ANT is centrally interested in the actor, but refrains from deciding beforehand who/what it is. The principle of symmetry leads to the acceptance of the inherent heterogeneity of any network and the realisation that it is made up of different kinds of entities. The thesis of symmetry employed by ANT is a manifestation of methodological monism used to overcome well-established dualisms of micro/macro, subject/object, and nature/society. Applied to the social/natural division, Callon & Latour (1992:348) state:

> Our general symmetry principle is thus not to alternate between natural realism and social realism but to obtain nature and society as twin results of another activity, one that is more interesting for us. We call it network building, or collective things or quasi-objects, or trials of force.

Barad (2007) also draws on scientific experimentation when developing the notion of *intra-action*. Intra-action is different from interaction which refers to the relation and cooperation between well-defined entities. For Barad entities do not exist prior to the
relation. Intra-action refers to the coming into being of the different entities together with the coming into being of reality. The different entities become as a result of the intra-action, they constitute the others and themselves simultaneously.

In the case of the paperless ward we could see how nurses do not exist outside the assemblage of an institution, protocols, instruments, information technology (IT), procedures, files, etc. The introduction of another agent, the EMR, intra-act with nurses to produce different identities and effects. In the nurses’ diffractive practices where they fail to use the EMR as prescribed but revert to paper reminders, they intra-act with the paper to become a different kind of professional. The paper act on and with the nurses in the production of subaltern knowledge, a kind of knowledge that is different from what the EMR allows and legitimises.

The perspective of sociomateriality is important to describe a regime of power. A powerful agent comes into being through the successful enrolment of multiple other heterogeneous agents. The rationalised system in the hospital is established and maintained through the active participation of heterogeneous agents such as humans, an EMR, government and incentives. The intra-action between these various agents is such that it is not clear anymore where human actions and intentions begin or end. Such a powerful heterogeneous agent could only be diffracted through a similar heterogeneous one. A sociomaterial perspective makes it possible to identify such critical practices and to show in what ways they make a difference. Critique is therefore not simply the process where the underlying human interests are uncovered, but also the one where the effects of the assemblages are traced which may or may not coincide with particular human interests.

**Agency and performativity**

The shift from critique as theory to critique as practice should further be understood against the background of the way reality is performed through agential practices. Practices are heterogeneous agents and agency is the effect of a sociomaterial assemblages. Agency is present where a difference is made (Latour, 2004b, p. 68). Through agency reality is performed (enacted). The notion of sociomateriality already suggests that no distinction could be made between the natural and the social. Similarly, no distinction could be made between the individual (reality as experienced, phenomenological), social (reality as a social construction) and natural realities. Reality is in a continual process of becoming through (the performativity of) heterogeneous practices.

Three sources are used to explore the concepts of agency and performativity. In actor-network theory (ANT) Latour (2004b) develops a dynamic conception of reality through an investigation of how entities come about in science. His study of Pasteur’s work indicates how microbes came into existence. The existence of microbes was not simply a discovery of something out there, nor was it an arbitrary decision by scientists. As a matter of concern microbes slowly came into existence through the process of ‘gathering’ inside and outside the laboratory. Latour argues that the more scientists construct facts in the laboratory, the more real these entities become. Pasteur’s microbes were neither constructed nor discovered in the laboratory, but they came into being through laborious processes of association and translation. In this way reality comes about when entities find their place in the network through associations. Reality
The sociomaterial agency and performativity of critical practices contribute to their effectivity and endurance. As a sociomaterial practice it does not merely effect a social reality (identities and relations between humans), but it changes the relations between things. It is an ontological politics where the configuration of reality is changed.

**Practices**

Although the alternative practices of nurses could be identified, analysed and evaluated by means of various critical theories, attention is drawn in this article to the way the practice itself is a material form of critique through which reality is enacted differently. De Certeau’s (1984) description of how ‘everyday practices’ challenge and change a
dominant order, provides further insight into the nature of critical practices. It helps us to see that critical practices are everywhere and not a special case which occurs only under very particular circumstances. Critical practices are associated with De Certeau's notion of 'tactical action' which should be contrasted with dominant practices, or 'strategic action'.

I call a strategy the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed. As in management, every "strategic" rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its "own" place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an "environment." A Cartesian attitude, if you wish: it is an effort. (p.35)

I call a "tactic," on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. (p. xix)

Whereas strategic action characterises any dominant order, multiple tactical actions perform differences. Whereas strategic action defines the proper place where panoptic knowledge reigns, tactical action does not have a proper place, but prioritises time, or timing. When something is gained through tactical action, it cannot be kept. It is the art of the weak (p.37), limited by blindness and relies on trickery. De Certeau claims that many everyday practices such as walking, reading, walking about, cooking, are of a tactical nature. He expands the agency of such practices to the tricks of plants and fishes thereby giving it a nonhuman character. One example of tactical action is 'la perruque' (p. 25), the tactics of employees where they do their own work disguised as the work of the employee. De Certeau finds that this phenomenon, which is different from pilfering or absenteeism, is becoming more common.

De Certeau (p.83) draws on the Greek concept of mētis which refers to the use of minimum force to achieve the maximum effect to explain role of memory in tactical action:

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<td>IV. More effects</td>
<td>III. Less time</td>
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(added to the scheme are arrows pointing from I to II, II to III and III to IV)

(De Certeau, 1984, p. 83)

The relevance of this insight is illustrated with reference to the memory devices of the paper reminders which is part of the nurses’ tactical action. The use of paper constitutes 'less force' since they are apparently innocuous, hidden away and kept in a pocket. They contain however more memory since they capture the nurses' notes in relation to their observations, decisions and tasks. Less time refers to the right moment, the kairos, when the knowledge is presented, particularly when important decisions have to be taken during the relief meetings. Because the right information is given at the right time, it has more effects:

In the mode of the "right point in time" (kairos), it produces a founding rupture or break. Its foreignness makes possible a transgression of the law of the place. (p.85)
The nurse/paper assemblage could provide something the EMR cannot: knowledge at the right time and place, 'the instant of art' (86).

**Conclusion**

Instead of providing prescriptions for transformative practices, critical research should be able to identify alternative enactments of reality which challenge in material ways dominant forms of marginalisation, domination and oppression by performing reality differently. Theorising should then accompany and reinforce such critical practices. Critical research should therefore not so much direct and guide critical practices as assist them by identifying, describing and analysing ways in which forms of exclusion, domination and oppression are challenged within practices. The framing practices of theorising is essential in order to relate different localities of critical practices and to make visible the multitude of tactical activities.

This article points towards what must be established through empirical investigations. On the basis of theories of agency, materiality, and practices it suggests that critique is an everyday practice. It has to be noted, however, that these theories are not distant ways of looking (theoria), but that have been developed through close engagement with realities. If this is the case, then it is the task of critical research to investigate these practices. The purpose is not to develop a strategy of critique within which space is claimed and 'others' created, but to assist and enhance multiple tactics of critique.

**References**


