

Rudiments of a value praxeology

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Abstract

This commentary complements Karababa and Kjeldgaard's fine review paper. It discusses how a practice theory of value might be developed. It suggest value is one outcome of practices. And it draws attention to how value producing practices might differ depending upon what regime of value dominates. It encourages us to think that value producing practices critical to consumer culture differ from those in other cultural contexts.

Keywords

Value, regimes of value, practice theory

Value is perhaps a chimera in the managerial and social sciences, but it has proved to be a compelling one. Consistent with Karababa and Kjeldgaard's aims, this commentary launches some transects across the terrain of value creation with recurrent references to certain ideas that appear key to me. In contrast to other approaches to explanation, practice theoretical approaches emphasize the centrality of coordinated human action in the production and reproduction of organized, collective outcomes, some of which are values (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). As we know, practices consist of discursive knowledge and tacit knowledge sometimes grouped together as competences, materials and affective engagements. These elements are described in detailed theoretical discussions that need not be rehearsed here (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001; Warde, 2005). In addition, practice theory offers a solution to the perennial structure–agency problem in social theory insofar as it takes structures and agents both to be contingent outcomes of practices.

Value as outcome

One of the collective outcomes of interest is value, since seeking after value appears in our deepest archaeological evidence forward. Pervasively in human endeavour, people seek after value through

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exchange and use. Thinking about the value consequences of practice engagement follows on from recent social scientific thinking about value creation (Graeber, 2001), which with Simmel (2004[1904]) holds that value is neither objective as economists might argue nor subjective as a psychologist might, but rather a contingent effect of interaction. Moreover, in this view value ‘does not reside in an individual, independent of his actual actions, nor in a good, independent of the interaction to which it is subjected’ (Ramirez, 1999: 51). This is an important move away from marginalist economic thought. In short, value resides in the actions and interactions, which resources make possible or support, a point taken up in the service dominant logic framework.

Definitional digression

Following Graeber (2001), we may diverge from the conventional marketing framings of use value that Karababa and Kjeldgaard review suggesting use value is neither in a thing nor in perceptions of a thing. Instead we can think of value to consumers – as distinct from other kinds of human subjects—as consisting in meaningful differences following Baudrillard, and more broadly as meaningful distinctions that refine identities and ‘count’ as significant achievements following Bourdieu. This value emerges from what people do; that is to say, the social pursuit of those meaningful distinctions typically through the exchange of resources between actors. Social worth (whether we are talking about personal prestige or organizational brand equity), which is another way of talking about achievement, is established through these resource exchanges. But now suddenly we are talking about exchange value, which may of course be unequal, sometimes systematically and dramatically so as students of Marx or international development have argued.

Microsocial decomposition of value

Shifting perspective to the level of practice performances, and pairing the conception of individuals as ‘carriers of practice’, that is, as ‘unique crossing points of practices’ (Reckwitz, 2002: 256) with the notion of practices as ‘carriers of value’ (Schau et al., 2009), we could say that use value is realized in the two moments in the performance of practices following Warde (2005). Practice performances have productive moments, that is, resources of some kind are offered. This may be information, affect, objects, experiences and so on. Practice performances also have consumptive moments; resources of some kind are received. Informational, affective, material or experiential resources may be accepted. Through experience of these moments, value is realized.

These performative crossing points take place within social fields that defines and are defined by ongoing performative moments; diachronicity accounts for updating of what is valued and how such things are valued. A dimension of these performative fields is that they are composed of relatively active carriers of practice and relatively inactive carriers of practice (persons, things and networks of these). All the carriers of practice in a field are potential performers whose knowledge of ‘what is going on here’ is updated through active and passive participation in practice performance. Value may be realized through active performance. Observing how others offer and receive resources can inspire desires to participate and inform how to do so adroitly.

Unifying regimes of value

It may be naive to think so, but it is possible a practice theoretical approach to value creation allows us to agree with Marx that human creative activity is foundational to value; with Simmel that

interaction between entities is involved; with much economic anthropology that gift, barter and commodity constitute and are constituted in regimes of value (Appadurai, 1986), as are kinds of the subjects who participate in such regimes; and with Saussure and early Baudrillard (1996) that what constitutes value is fundamentally a matter of distinction. Moreover, such an approach may help us develop a model in which two distinct kinds of value prevalent in the literature and exemplified in the contrast that Kjeldgaard and Karababa (this volume) draw between economic exchange value and social value. The former refers foundationally to relative ratios of value however crudely or precisely calculated and ultimately determined by a standard equivalent, that is, money, and the latter refers to valued end states always (?) imprecisely determined. The practice approach allows us to suggest that human creative activity is at the foundation of value creation, an important twist on Marx's view that encompasses productive activity in cultural and contexts where there is no emic conception of labour. We can agree with Simmel about the role of interaction since as mentioned practice approaches to value creation suggest that the interaction of productive and consumptive moments is key to the realization of use values.

But rather than dissolving kinds of value into a typology as Holbrook (1999) has done and as Kjeldgaard and Karababa review, it might be useful to think in terms of regimes of value creation and the relationships between them. The problem with typological approaches is that they neglect that all values cannot be obtained, or perhaps are not prioritized, through the kind of exchange that predominates in capitalist market economies and to which these typologies are limited. The focus on advanced market economies creates theoretical discontinuities and blinkers. To develop a praxeology of value, we might build upon our already existing models of value creation to ask what kinds of value are produced in regimes that we have termed gift, barter or market. What classes of value are produced in each of these; and how do they vary systematically?

What these regimes all have in common is to produce models of the proper relationships between things and persons, material relations in the former case and social relations in the latter. They also differ systematically. Systems of gift exchange personify things, deny the alienability of both persons and things and embed persons in systems of intergroup relationships, producing these systems as they do so. Non-equivalence of things especially evident in elaborate system of ranked exchange goods is a watchword, since it is through non-equivalence that social relations may be perpetuated.

Systems of barter by contrast objectify things; things are alienated but not the persons exchanging, as no standard unit of production exists and indeed often cannot be known. These systems aim to produce contingent equivalence; that is, to define those things exchanged as essentially unities – so much of this is the *same* as so much of that (Strathern, 1992). The issue of social relations is fraught; barter relationships are rarely one-off transactions, as they can only occur if the parties to the exchange have agreed that they are qualified to do so. Nonetheless, such exchanges are often fundamentally agonistic.

Finally, as we know in market exchange both things and persons are alienated; people from the products of their labour and from their labour itself as they are imagined to have a dual existence as sensuous human beings and as mere, essentially equivalent, units of labour power. As Karababa and Kjeldgaard argue, 'marketing is involved in the evaluation of sociocultural differences and the articulation of the economic worth of these differences... marketing can be understood as a practice of configuration of commodified value system potentials rather than a meaning transfer institution'. This position is consistent with the insight Graeber (2005: 450) offers to that effect that in advanced consumer culture the key value or the ultimate use value is the self. The implicit project of consumption is restoring the subject divided by capitalism to unity:

[In consumer culture] Each person is assumed to be unique and thus, by definition, incomparable. If all individuals are values unto themselves [an idea which he traces back to Christian ideas about the value of the immortal soul], none can be treated as intrinsically superior to any other. It is this which has allowed the market, as the sphere of individual self-realisation, to become the hierarchically dominant, highest sphere [of value].

And consequently we might argue that all the many values elaborated by Holbrook (1999) fetishize the quest for the unified sense of being capitalism sunders.

What then of the key or ultimate value in gift giving. If we follow Mauss and his successors, we know that the gift is peaceful relations among human groups in the absence of the State, that is, sociality. Contemporary research shows how gift giving still articulates the moral economy and produces the grounds of sociality even within the firm (Alter, 2010; Cheal, 1988). Unfortunately, the gift giving literature in consumer culture theory generally focuses on dyadic or monadic gift giving (Belk, 2010; Mick and DeMoss, 1990; Sherry, 1983), and even when cognizing broader social systems (Fischer and Arnold, 1990) has not tended to focus on the value, for example, kin relationships, created through gift giving as it might do. More recent work begins to resituate consumer gift giving within its proper frame as a rhizomatic social system of value creation (Giesler, 2006). Weinberger and Wallengord (2012) is a rare example of intracommunity gift giving research that shows how tournaments of value produce and reproduce a prestige hierarchy. Moreover, this article addresses the linkages between the market sphere of value creation and the gift sphere insofar as elite members of Mardi Gras Krewes transform market system exchange value into prestige value through the Mardi Gras gifting of spectacle and beads and subtle reciprocal acts of admiration and legitimation.

Recent research leads one to propose that the key value in the barter economy is the reproduction of meaningful boundaries (Humphreys and Hugh-Jones, 1992). One can say this because one finds that barter exists at the boundaries of distinctive ecological systems and once instituted contributes to the elaboration of cultural distinctions around economic specializations (Gell, 1992). While noted very much in passing in early work on consumer to consumer exchange networks (Belk et al., 1988), one of the few examples of discussion of bartering in consumer culture theory literature is at Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002). While we are told that reciprocal exchanges are required among festival goers, we do not know how the negotiation of equivalence, which lies at the heart of a barter system (Gell, 1992; Strathern, 1992), occurs. We also have tantalizing hints from the Burning Man context that there are linkages between regimes of value creation as when festival organizers grant privileges or status marks to those who have offered compelling performances, but this discussion too is underdeveloped.

We may thank Karababa and Kjeldgaard for synthesizing how our field tends to conceptualize value from within the logic of late capitalism. Readers may conclude from my commentary that a praxeology of value is under construction. Future research opportunities lie first in the domain of how value is routinely created rather than what kinds of value are created. Second, a major white space can be identified in the intersection and translation between regimes of value production, through which we might better apprehend the social life of things and the material life of human beings.

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