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How should we understand 'general understandings'?

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1. Introduction

Practice theory is increasingly prominent in social scientific analysis. Hence, its virtues and its defects are being subjected to greater scrutiny. As part of that exercise, we examine the conceptualisation of widespread cultural understandings in the social scientific use of practice theory. Schatzki's (1996, 2002) schema of practice components has proved generative, particularly as adapted by Warde (2005) and Shove et al. (2012). However, virtually no attention has been paid to Schatzki's (2002) concept of "general understandings", which is one potentially relevant instrument to address this challenge.¹ In *The Site of the Social*, Schatzki (2002) introduces the category of general understandings into his schema of components of practice; an addition to his earlier tri-partite model of "practical understandings", "rules" and "teleoaffective structures" (1996). In this chapter we seek to open up issues posed by general understandings as a category within a schema of generic practice components. The concept of general understandings promises to deal with broad cultural conceptions which transcend the boundaries between "integrative practices" (Schatzki, 2002).

General understandings might include such things as concepts, values, and categories. Specific candidates might include: collective concepts, such as nation, state, economy or organisation; membership categories, such as ethnicity or gender; fundamental, culturally structuring concepts, such as animal\human or private\public; and diffuse but culturally significant understandings, such as notions of convenience, cosmopolitanism or authenticity. Of course, many of these kinds of general understandings are the objects of whole fields of social scientific inquiry. Furthermore, we claim no originality in conceiving such objects of analysis in terms of practice. The movement away from substantialist ontologies in social science has seen the widespread reformulation of fixed social entities and collective concepts, such as nation or gender, as processes of enactment and (specific) categories of practice (e.g. Brubaker 1996; Butler 1993). We do not presume to add insight into the operations of specific kinds of general understandings (e.g. membership categories, values etcetera). This chapter, rather, aims to cast light on the theoretical issues posed by the concept of general understandings in the spirit of Schatzki's formulation.

The chapter proceeds by first examining Schatzki's use of the category of general understandings and its relation to "teleoaffective structures" (Section 2), "practical understandings" and Schatzki's concept of "practical intelligibility" (Section 3). We explore how general understandings might serve cultural analysis, or play a part in a model of culture-in-practice (Section 4). In section 5 we identify three putative general features of the diffusion, persistence and actuation of general understandings through illustrative examples. First, they may have their origins either in discourse or in practices. Second, they may display intimately connected tacit and discursive elements. Third, they circulate between integrative practices through typical channels, processes and mechanisms. We conclude by summarising the core features and effects of general understandings and their potential explanatory power.

2. The Category of General Understandings

General understandings, in Schatzki's (2002) formulation, are common to many practices, condition the manner in which practices are carried out and are expressed in their performance. Schatzki gives the example of the Shaker view of labour as a sanctification of the earthly sphere, which conditioned how labouring practices were carried out, as well as being explicitly formulated in doings and sayings (2002, p. 86). The simplest way to approach general understandings, then, is as ideational elements common to multiple practices. That general understandings are formulated in *both* doings and sayings gestures towards a central feature of the category – that it sits across the boundary between the discursive and the nondiscursive. The category thus immediately inveigles itself into two thorny problematics for practice theory: how to conceptualise the relation between practices and discourse (see Schatzki, this volume), and how to understand the tacit (see, Collins 2001, 2010; Rouse 2001, 2007).

Schemas which lack analytical differentiation between diffuse cultural understandings and practice-specific understandings risk obscuring important dynamics and processes (Welch and Warde, 2015). Pellandini-Simányi (2014) usefully suggests two different forms of change in ideational elements common to multiple practices, which we might think of as two ideal-typical processes.ⁱⁱ One form of change is when an element, such as the ideal of masculinity, is affected by changes within one practice – for example a work practice – which in turn has knock-on effects on the ideal of masculinity in other practices, say, domestic cooking. A second form of change is when general understandings are connected as elements in a more or less coherent axiology, or “cosmology” as Pellandini-Simányi (2014) has it. Schatzki (2010) alludes to such configurations of general understandings in the context of his discussion of Eliade's work on ritual. Schatzki observes that cosmological general understandings establish, for Eliade, “basic features of religious man's being-in-the-world” and that this “complex of general understandings informs the teleological organisation of religious man's life” (2010, p. 151).ⁱⁱⁱ Changes in one element of such a complex of general understandings may trigger changes in other elements of that complex as well. The example Pellandini-Simányi (2014, p. 139) gives is that of the “ethical vision of gentility”, which contained (in our terms) the general understandings of masculinity and of luxury. As masculinity became increasingly defined in terms of rationality, previous notions of opulence were challenged, and the ideal of luxury came to be redefined in rational terms, as a controlled expression of taste. A focus on general understandings thus foregrounds the issue of how to articulate analytically specific practices, say cooking, with wider configurations like domestic organisation

Nicolini plausibly suggests general understandings constitute “external understandings” of the overall project in which the practice is engaged (2012, p. 167). How should we think about that externality? *Where*, external to the focal practice, does the general understanding lie, or rather, come from? The *external* here hints at a supra-practice level which threatens to undo the “high order ontological sameness” of Schatzki's flat ontology of the social (Schatzki 2011, p. 4). Thus Caldwell suggests that the notion of “general understandings” potentially leads Schatzki back to the position from which his work aims to escape: “the “social” conceived as “general understandings” may presuppose an object of enquiry that goes beyond the practices in which it is carried or enacted” (2012: 291). However, Caldwell evinces a widely held misunderstanding that Schatzki's general position amounts to a kind of “Il n'y a rien en dehors du pratique”. Caldwell assumes either that general understandings presuppose a distinct ontological level (perhaps implied by the relative

coherence that complexes of general understandings may assume), or that they are carried in discursive formations exhibiting forms of organisation other than that of integrative practices and therefore debarred from Schatzki's ontology. To take the latter possibility first, as Schatzki makes clear in his contribution to this volume, discursive formations exhibiting their own forms of organisation are entirely compatible with his ontology. Schatzki shows that various forms of discursive organisation intersect with integrative practices in the form of sayings and texts incorporated into and carried by them. It is an empirical matter how more or less integrated those discursive formations are with specific configurations of practices. As for the former, no distinct ontological level is necessarily implied by the category of general understandings. The "external" or "beyond" in which general understandings subsist simply *is* configurational, whether found specifically in discourse^{iv}, or in heterogeneous assemblages of practice and discourse. A number of ontologically compatible concepts of such assemblages are already common conceptual currency, such as Foucault's "dispositif", Boltanski and Thevenot's (2005) "orders of worth", or Hajer's (1995) "discourse coalitions".

Schatzki (2002), however, offers a new configurational concept to "illustrate" general understandings, although he does not develop it, that of "teleoaffective regime". This refers to something beyond the teleoaffective structure characteristic of specific practices. He gives three examples of teleoaffective regimes among the Shakers: a religious faith in salvation through Shaker existence and belief that the Shaker's lived order was the kingdom of God on earth; governing hierarchies through which Shaker life was administered; and a commitment to communal property and living (2002, p. 28). Schatzki's (2002) fleeting deployment of teleoaffective regime in his account of the Shakers underscores how a focus on general understandings often foregrounds the configuration of sets of practices. General understandings are the property of integrative practices. But to convincingly articulate the role of these central beliefs in the Shakers' cultural life and social organisation Schatzki has recourse to a configurational concept that expresses organisation beyond the integrative practices that subtend it. It seems that teleoaffective regime here does the conceptual work at the level of the sociocultural group that teleoaffective structures cannot, given the latter "are not equivalent to collectively willed ends and projects (e.g. the general will or the intentions of a group)", but are the property of individual practices (Schatzki 2002, p. 81). Teleoaffective regimes by contrast enjoin common ends. They articulate teleology and affect across practices, conditioning the teleoaffective structures of the practices they govern, and subsequently becoming instantiated in situated activity through their performance (Welch and Yates, forthcoming). However, each of the Shaker teleoaffective regimes—belief in the Shaker order as the Kingdom of God on Earth, and commitment to the hierarchical and communistic principles—could itself be conceptualised in terms of a general understanding. Hence the relation between general understandings and teleoaffective regimes as conceptual categories in Schatzki's (2002) account is therefore somewhat obscure.^v Nevertheless it might be profitable to specify further the category of teleoaffective regime even if the category of general understandings does much of the conceptual work.

General understandings, then, may inform the normative ordering of the teleoaffective structure of practices and may partake of axiologies which subtend the teleoaffective structures of multiple individual practices. General understandings may invoke or adjudicate normative controversy in the proper pursuit of practice, both in the sense of justifications and conventions discursively deployed

in situations of contention (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), and in the broader sense in which the use of categories is both descriptive and normative (Bowker and Star 2000, Jayyusi 2013).

We now address how general understandings relate, firstly, to the practice component “practical understandings”, and secondly, “practical intelligibility” (Schatzki, 2002). This former allows us to clearly distinguish between the pre-reflexive or tacit aspects of general understandings and the tacit aspects of practical understandings. The latter informs the role of general understandings in situated performance.

3. General understandings, practical understandings and practical intelligibility

Schatzki’s (2002) category of *practical understandings* refers to abilities germane to the practical procedures of practices, the sense of how to go on with an activity, identify it *as such-and-such* activity or respond appropriately: “a skill or capacity that underlies activity” (Schatzki, 2002, p.79). The most common forms of practical understandings are: “knowing how to X, knowing how to identify X-ings, and knowing how to prompt as well as respond to X-ings” (ibid. p.77). For example: “Shaker medicinal herb production practices were linked by an interdependent pool of practical understandings of grinding, macerating, drying, storing, mixing, labelling, feeding, and printing labels” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 78).

Whilst practical understandings are components of practice, *practical intelligibility*, for Schatzki, is a property of individuals, not practices: “It is always to an individual that a specific action makes sense” (2002 p. 75). “Practical intelligibility determines what it is that a person does next in the flow of conduct” (Schatzki, 2010 p. 114). Practical understanding executes what practical intelligibility selects to do. In Schatzki’s account, to the extent that practices determine practical intelligibility, they do so by moulding “mental conditions” of individuals, such as those formed by the learning of practices, or the ends and projects that individuals pursue, as well as affectivity (2002, p.75 fn. 220; p.81) General understandings inform practical intelligibility and govern activity by conditioning practical intelligibility, or the normative form that practical intelligibility can assume. For example, European tourists in, say, Mexico, may decide to forego eating at the local MacDonalds in favour of eating traditional Mexican food, because their general understanding of authenticity informs them that this accords with authentic cultural experience.

Practical understanding for Schatzki does not therefore mean a sort of general know-how lying behind most or all of human behaviour that exhibits sensitivity to context, such as Bourdieu’s (1977) habitus or “sens pratique” or Giddens’ (1984) “practical consciousness”. By contrast, practical understandings are the property of *particular* practices. For Bourdieu and Giddens it is these *general* know-hows that determine what people do in specific contexts. For Schatzki (2002), however, practical understandings do not *govern* activity or *determine* what it makes sense for people to do: that aspect of activity instead is governed by practical intelligibility.

It is far less common for general understandings to directly shape practical understandings. Think, for example, of the relationship between the Shakers’ general understanding of the sanctification of labour and the practical understandings of their herb production practices, such as grinding, macerating or drying. While the general understandings inform the teleoaffectivity of herb production practices it leaves their practical procedures undisturbed. The Shakers are highly atypical

of commonplace contemporary social conditions, in the extent to which their core religious understandings suffused and orientated all their everyday practices. But even in this situation, unusually strongly governed by general understandings, it was only those specifically religious practices, where their religious general understandings were intrinsic, as it were, to the practice, that general understandings directly shaped practical understandings. By contrast there is contingency between their general understandings and herb production practices, even in the light of the autotelic imperative of the belief in the sanctification of labour.

We have to signal some disquiet with this account of practical intelligibility, which potentially has voluntaristic and individualistic implications for an account of social action which sit uneasily with stronger pragmatic and practice theoretical understandings of human activity. This potential is the more so, we suggest, in the context of an account of general understandings, where the latter might be misconstrued as anterior drivers of the subject's activity (Whitford 2002). Having explicated the place of general understandings within Schatzki's schema we now turn to the functions of the category for sociological analysis more broadly.

4. General understandings and culture

General understandings—all the more so when we invoke notions of *complexes* of general understandings, such as cosmologies or teleoaffective regimes—raise the question of how to understand the relation between culture and action. As noted above, the example of the Shakers is highly atypical of contemporary sociocultural milieu and thus of the place of general understandings within them. The Shakers were an unusually homogeneous sociocultural group, among whom foundational general understandings invested all practices. Furthermore, the sociocultural group was coextensive with a complex of practices: an orthopraxy animated by an orthodoxy of general understandings.

Despite the simplicity of the case, the question remains of how the Shakers' general understandings related to situated activity; or, how does this resolve the problem of, as it is commonly phrased, culture in action (Swidler 1986). Schatzki invokes the Shakers' belief in the sanctification of labour in the context of evidence for the Shakers' propensity to toil hard for long hours. No doubt individual Shakers' engagement in their labours was invested with a sense of higher purpose and this served a strong motivating function. However, the danger would be to fall back into an account of social action where general understandings serve as anterior motivation for action and where declarative cultural commitments provide explanation (Whitford 2002, Lizardo 2012).

Instead, general understandings may contribute to a model of culture in practice; an alternative to both a Parsonian account of culture as internalised propositional knowledge, or a Geertzian account of culture as externalised sign system (Biernacki 2000, Lizardo and Strand 2010, Warde 2015). Biernacki argues that cultural meaning is generated by the ties between “an order of representations *and* an order of practice that connects representation to a context of social exchange” such that “we can concentrate analysis on variation in those types of ties” (2000 p.302). That is to say, exploration of culture in practice might profitably proceed by addressing empirical questions regarding the relationships between general understandings and configurations of practice. We offer examples of such accounts below.

Invoking representation here suggests that we should specify the relation between the discursive and the nondiscursive aspects of general understandings. General understandings sit across the discursive and the nondiscursive divide, and may exhibit pre-reflexive or tacit aspects. There is no need to establish a phenomenological boundary between the discursive and the tacit (Rouse, 2001, 2007; Collins 2001, 2010). As Biernacki (2000) argues, a pragmatics of the relation between representation and practice moves one away from “a purely discursive notion of culture without...counterposing “corporeal” practice in a binary opposite that is inaccessible” (p. 308). Furthermore, the notion of discursive practice holds that linguistic expression and understanding is integral to practical competence (Rouse, 2007).

Sayer usefully articulates how values—a particular kind of general understanding—combine conceptual, pre-reflexive and affective components:

“Values are ‘sedimented’ valuations of things (including persons, ideas, behaviours, practices etc.) that have become attitudes or dispositions, which we come to regard as justified. They merge into emotional dispositions, and inform the evaluations we make of particular things, as part of our conceptual and affective apparatus.” (Sayer, 2012 p. 171)

Values are both pre-reflexive “moral intuitions” (Haidt, 2007; cf. Vaisey, 2009) which inform the cognitive and affective dispositions through which individuals respond to their environment, and are deployed in discursive practice in justification and contention (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The example of values illustrates how general understandings may combine the tacit and the discursive, the linkage of which we explore further in the following section.

5. General understandings in action

If we follow this line of reasoning, the category of general understandings does not, contra Caldwell (2012), suggest a model of the social that undermines the social ontology of practice. Rather, general understandings may inform a framework of culture-in-practice consistent with the social ontology of practice theories. The tight enmeshing of Shaker orthopraxy in teleoaffective regimes might be misleading when studying the functioning of general understandings in contemporary milieux with which sociological inquiry is commonly concerned. Let us therefore look to contrasting examples. Multiple existing examples of broadly practice theoretical accounts, even if not framed as such, address the emergence and entanglement of general understandings within contexts of practice. We will briefly examine three exemplary cases. In this section we examine different examples of how general understandings are articulated with configurations of practice, or of culture in practice, in order to identify some general processes and mechanisms which might sensitise future inquiry.

Central questions for sociology include where general understandings come from and what social processes and mechanisms convey them between different domains or configurations of practice. We begin with two ideal-typical processes concerning translation from discourse to praxis, on the one hand, and from praxis to discourse on the other.

Taylor (2004) offers examples of the first process in the emergence of the three “modern social imaginaries”: the public sphere, the market economy and the sovereign people. These imaginaries are fundamental cultural constituents of Western modernity: widely shared, pre-reflexive, background understandings that make possible certain common practices. Modern social

imaginaries are congruent with secular “meta-topical spaces” present to their members as “framework[s] that exists prior to and independent of their actions” (Taylor, 2002, p. 115). However, the contents of the modern social imaginaries do not originate at this nondiscursive level. Rather, they began life, in Taylor’s account, as theory that gradually “infiltrates and transmutes” an existing social imaginary, whose horizon they breach (Taylor, 2004, p. 109). Taylor is alert to “the spectre of idealism”, however, and thus grounds these processes in the practices that carry those general understandings (imaginaries), which “are the essential condition of the practice making the sense that it does to the participants” (2004 p. 31-32). As Taylor has it, “If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding” (2004, p.25).

Taylor suggests two kinds of processes through which transference comes about: firstly, a “theory may inspire a new kind of activity with new practices, and in this way form the imaginary of whatever groups adopt these practices” (2004, p. 109). An example is the theological innovation that the first Puritan churches formed around the notion of covenant which came to influence the civil structures of the American colonies. Secondly, a change may come about with a reinterpretation of a practice. The novel concept of popular sovereignty in the American Revolution found a propitious home in the existing institutions of elected legislatures in the colonies, such that: “Older forms of legitimacy are colonized...with new understandings of order, and then...transformed...without a clear break” (Taylor, 2004 p. 110).

This latter example draws our attention to how, as Brubaker puts it when discussing ethnonational identities, general understandings “need ecological niches in which to survive and flourish” (2002 p.185). Also, as Biernacki (2000) notes, in the context of Communist ideology in Eastern Europe, the life world may prove barren ground for ideological innovations: while some aspects of State ideology, such as production as the creator of value, became “natural givens among working populations”, other ideological aspects, such as collective authority over the generation of wealth “were never accepted as genuine or taken for granted” (Biernacki, 2000, p. 306). A belief, furthermore, “may appear specious if it is not an implicit organising principle of practice” (Biernacki, 2000, p. 308).

In the second, reverse, process general understandings arise unbidden from practice. Swidler (2001) draws on an analysis of the formation and unification of the gay community in San Francisco from the early 1970s onward, and asks how, in the space of just a few years did the adoption of one of a proliferating number of ‘identities’ become a crucial feature of membership in the wider lesbian and gay community? Notably, the community’s diversity was enacted in the Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade “with floats, contingents, and marchers representing a panoply of more or less flamboyant identities” (Swidler, 2001, p. 91). From this condition, without any discursive coordination, a general understanding was formulated “that diverse identities did not split the community, but united it; that organizers should not aspire to create a single unified organization to represent the community; that the discovery and public assertion of new identities was part of the community building project” (Swidler, 2001, p. 91). In the parade itself: “groups apply to have a float included in the parade...and the more diverse their identity displays the more successful, exciting, and newsworthy the parade is” (Swidler, 2001, p.92); anchoring the general understanding that the ‘community’ as composed of multiple identity groups. Swidler (2001) argues that the general understanding was precipitated from the practices involved in setting up the parade.

Our second illustrative case concerns issues of national identity. Anderson (1991) famously saw nations as imagined communities. Imagined communities exemplify the mutual dependency of representation and practice in the successful establishment of a general understanding of national belonging, including their pre-reflexive and affective aspects. In Anderson's (1991) account the discursive and symbolic aspects of nationality are not sufficient in themselves to anchor the understanding of national membership or citizen obligation. Rather, he finds the basis of perceived solidarity in the practice of reading the morning newspaper, a routine shared by anonymous millions within the national boundaries, which enacts the core principle of that community. However, such diffuse general understandings of the existence of a nation—or, indeed of the public sphere, economy, society, or authenticity—extend beyond the immediate background understanding that makes sense of particular practices. In such vein, Taylor speaks not just of modern social *imaginaries* but of *the* social imaginary, the “inarticulate understanding of our whole situation” (2004 p. 25). This “background” does not have clear limits, but nor is it limitless, and despite being largely unstructured it is neither inaccessible nor in-articulate.

Billig's (1995) analysis of nation and nationalism gives some substance to a claim that the broad background transcends the boundary between the articulated-discursive and the pre-reflexive, tacit, diffused and habituated. Billig's concern is not with expressly nationalist mobilisation but with the sentiments lying behind and within the political arrangements of well-established Western polities which require no regular appeals for positive commitment or support for activities promoting national consciousness. How can a mostly dormant idea, with which most members of the population are not engaged, be credibly and effectively mobilised on occasion for political purposes by Western governments? Billig's answer is that national identity is reproduced in a habitual and mundane fashion as a type of nationalism specific to the West: *banal* nationalism. Billig writes:

“[T]he ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced...are not removed from everyday life...Daily, the nation is indicated, or “flagged”, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition.” (Billig, 1995, p. 6)

It is an ideological form which grounds an effective call to action or sacrifice when circumstances require it. But it is not consciously, intentionally, mindfully present in the populations affected by it. Rather it lies in the background, signalled by cues in the environment, in commentaries on sport and cultural performances, in newspaper columns and stories. It is present and perceptible, but beneath the threshold of conscious attention. As Billig puts it:

“[N]ationhood provides a continual background for political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers. In so many little ways, the citizenry are reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.” (Billig, 1995, p. 8)

The un-waved flag, a symbolic object to which no attention is paid, is yet the means by which nationhood is ‘constantly flagged’. Billig employs an analysis of the sports pages which “day after day, invite “us”, the readers, to support the national cause” (Billig, 1995, p. 11). The regular and routine use of ‘we’ and ‘us’ – in international sports coverage or news broadcasts is a form of banal

appeal to a political identity which mostly exists at the preconscious level, presuming an acceptance of allegiance and obligation upon which people neither reflect nor meditate. Nations, nationhood and national identity are sometimes topics attracting deliberate and discursive attention, as explanations and justifications of behaviour, general understandings expressed and contested in an explicit manner. However, they are probably much more often present and effective as tacit background to understandings and experience of other practices like spectatorship at sports events, listening to radio reports on issues of international relations, or encountering people with a different coloured skin on the bus to work. Traces of them are all around in the environment. Their taken-for-granted ubiquity is the source of their strength. In Billig's terms, banal nationalism has "the powers of an ideology which is so familiar that it hardly seems noticeable" (Billig, 1995, p.12). Thus nation stands as an exemplary instance of a general understanding which operates across the divide between the discursive on the one hand, and the pre-reflexive, dispositional, and affective on the other.

A third illustrative case of general understandings in circulation concerns the cultural understanding of *authenticity*. The concept of authenticity plays a prominent role in modern Western cultural history and we have a number of authoritative accounts of its translations. Lindholm notes:

"[T]here are two overlapping modes for characterising any entity as authentic: genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (content). Authentic objects, persons and collectives are original, real, and pure; they are what they purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one." (Lindholm, 2007, p. 2)

Such understandings of authenticity are carried in diverse practices. Tourists seek authentic cultural experiences. Food connoisseurs seek authentic dishes. Brand managers regard the authenticity of their brands as of foremost importance. The commonality amongst this diversity is that these disparate practices all in some way relate to identity, whether cultural, organisational, or personal.

The concept of authenticity demonstrates how general understandings may both subtend and precipitate from broad cultural shifts, and become instantiated in diverse practices thus creating novel configurations. It is possible to follow various translations of the idea of authenticity: from Protestant religiosity to Romantic literary innovation, to a pre-reflexive, background condition of modern identity (Taylor 1989); from a value of the Modernist artistic avant garde to a commonplace of modern consumer culture (Trilling 1972, Orvell 1989, Holt 2002); and from the ideal of the anti-bourgeois individual to a buzzword of contemporary work place 'employee engagement' (Berman 1970, Honneth 2004). Space does not allow a detailed exposition but instances of authenticity illustrate several social processes and mechanisms by means of which general understandings may be conveyed from domain to domain, from the extra-mundane to the mundane, and between the discursive and pre-reflexive. Its progress poses the always empirical questions of to what extent, and in what ways, do the general understandings condition those practices in which they are taken up, and in what ways are they conditioned by them?

One feature of this story involves mediation by new *material* modes of communication. For example, the development in the eighteenth century of printing technology, and the emergence of "print capitalism", saw secular literary genres develop, disseminating Romanticism to a new reading public, and a novel cultural concern with "the authenticity of the selves who wrote such works" (Sinanan and Milnes 2010 p. 2). In addition to material affordances the diffusion of general understandings

requires space or need for novel cultural understandings, a “demand for intelligibility” which exerts “pressure for greater explanation” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005 p. 103). Cultural dislocation is one regular explanation given for the fertility of the idea of authenticity, for example in the association of authenticity with commodities in the context of the cultural dislocations of nineteenth century urbanisation and industrialisation (Orvell 1989). Another push comes from specific groups of cultural innovators and intermediaries who are often the *Träger* of general understandings and the translators of understandings across domains. Thus as well as artistic avant gardes, practitioners of commercial communications have played a key role in the translation of authenticity from, for example, 1960s counter-culture to mainstream consumer and commercial culture (Frank 1997, Welch 2012).

To conclude our excursion into authenticity, the above cited genealogies demonstrate historical translations of authenticity from explicit discursive and symbolic articulation to pre-reflexive background understanding and back again. For example, the radical reflexivity of the modern self becomes ground for the Romantic cult of the artist; Modernism gives explicit voice to the notion of authenticity, which is diffused into wider culture by novel forms of media, finding receptive cultural niches at anomic moments of social and economic transformation.

As with Billig’s “banal nationalism”, authenticity figures as diffuse background understanding, sedimented in cognitive and affective dispositions, and activated and transmitted by diverse discursive, symbolic and material elements of popular and consumer culture. It became a pre-reflexive background understanding to the concept of identity, which itself came under intense scrutiny in the scholarship of the later twentieth century. It is central to commonplace modern axiology and informs the teleoaffective structures of diverse practices across multiple domains, from the religious to the artistic to the commercial, from cultural production to technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988). Its ubiquitous taken-for-granted-ness enables its transposition into novel practical and discursive contexts, as for example with the *prima facie* unlikely instance of the identity of brands and organisations (Holt 2002, Welch 2012).

Our cases have highlighted not only that general understandings may be implicated across diverse domains, but also the diverse processes and dynamics through which general understandings are translated, diffused and instantiated. A genealogy of general understandings will necessarily trace a contingent historical path where understandings are articulated within different institutional contexts.

6. Conclusion

We have drawn attention to how general understandings operate both discursively and pre-reflexively. Thus, for example, contemporary seekers of authentic experience do not have to resort to discursive articulations in order to recognise and embody authenticity. The same claim could be made for nationality. Also, general understandings may be articulated in the ‘sayings’ of various practices, and in their discursive form link practices together in ways unachievable through nondiscursive performances. They may partake of teleoaffective formations that reign over complexes of practice, sociocultural groups, professions, cultural domains or other slices of praxis, and thus offer insight into larger configurational phenomena. The concept potentially therefore contributes to the practice theoretical analysis of larger scale social and cultural phenomena; it might stretch beyond local phenomena or situated activity to which analysis practice theory is all too

often relegated (see Nicolini, this volume; cf. Schatzki, 2016). It offers the analytical affordances of practice theory without debarring traditional sociological concerns with 'macro' phenomena, providing a route through which the characteristics of the 'macro' can be generated from a flat ontology of practice. Common to the illustrations above is the articulation of macro-sociological concerns (regarding modernity and nationalism, for example) with micro-sociological contexts, or put it in other ways, of the level of discursive formation with that of situated activity, or of the level of the institutional with that of affective, embodied dispositions.

We suggest that general understandings exhibit at least three functions. Firstly, general understandings may have an integrating or organising function, as is demonstrated by Schatzki's (2002) analysis of the Shakers, for whom general understandings integrated practice into an overarching cultural formation, or by Swidler's (1986) case of the organisation of the San Franciscan gay and lesbian community through diverse identities. Billig's (1995) "banal nationalism" demonstrates a second possible function—justification, which sits across the pre-reflexive responses of affective disposition and discursive contention. Third, general understandings have a function of enabling intelligibility, as when general understandings animated the everyday practice of the Shakers, or when the quest for authentic self-expression motivates and orientates artistic endeavours. General understandings inform practical intelligibility, which governs individual conduct (Schatzki, 2002), albeit always through the "normative accountability" of practices (Rouse, 2007, p. 529). They are among the shared presuppositions which ground the intelligibility of social practices (ibid. p. 517).

There are several things that a theory of practice might want to do with a notion of general understanding. First, general understandings permit the analysis of large scale phenomena. Second, the concept presents a way to explicate the role of culture in practice, accounting for how very general ideas are incorporated into practice; it captures how such understandings are transmitted, translated and appropriated by practices, how they inform and shape practices, and in turn how they are themselves conditioned by practices. General understandings are experienced, articulated and negotiated in situated and embodied activity and thereby transpose the cultural to situated activity. They encompass the pre-reflexive and thus help us understand forms of transmission of practice *without* discursive articulation as well as the actuation of dispositions and orientation of action through environmental cues. Third, the concept might also show how adjacent and distant practices might borrow from and change one another. As general understandings inform multiple practices, they could also help us to answer questions about the role of cultural intermediaries in transferring meanings and understandings, and about the effect of intermediation on practices. Lastly, general understandings mediate discursive formations and practices, linking a focal practice to the discourses which inform and condition it and in the process become practical categories of identification, justification and evaluation.

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ⁱ The only exceptions we are aware of are Caldwell (2012), Jarzabkowski et al (2015) and Keller and Vihalemm (2015).

ⁱⁱ Pellandini-Simányi's (2014) concern is with the nature of "consumption norms", the extrapolation to general understandings is our own.

ⁱⁱⁱ Such a complex, its manner of organisation, and its modes of instantiation, are therefore central objects of study. The extent to which general understandings were more common in the past, as Schatzki (2010, p. 151) intuits, how we might characterise such complexes (for example, in relation to sign modalities), whether general understandings play a different role, or are more or less integrated, in different times and places, and so forth, are fundamental questions of social science. We do not attempt to address any such fundamental questions here.

^{iv} We are quite capable of articulating in talk and text relatively coherent worldviews, ideologies, etcetera.

^v Schatzki notes: "General understandings combine with teleology in the determination of human activity. They specify ends and purposes, stipulate forms of activity, and inform how objects and events can be used in the pursuit of particular ends and purposes..." (2010 p. 152)