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THE PRIMACY OF PARTICIPATION. THE CRITIQUE, DEVELOPMENT AND REDESIGN OF ETIENNE WENGER'S SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

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Abstract

The social learning theory presented by Etienne Wenger is referred to as one of the most cited contemporary learning theories (Fejes & Nylander, 2015; Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2020). This paper first outlines the development of Wenger's social learning theory with an overview of central elements in the theory. Focusing on the epistemological substructure of Wenger's theory, the presentation outlines three main areas of critique that the theory has met: a) transformative learning (DePalma, 2009), b) the context for learning in the 21st century (Engeström, 2007), and c) the primacy of participation (Lövgren, 2017). Two redesigns of Wenger's initial theory are presented in answer to the first two areas of critique (DePalma, 2009, Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The third area of critique puts focus on Wenger's depiction of the "duality of meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p.55). Responding to the epistemological presumptions behind Wenger's description of reification and participation as reciprocal, I have postulated "the Primacy of Participation". To illustrate the centrality of this critique for social science research, the paper ends by referring to the inceptory role participation is given in the development of contemporary social science research.

Keywords: Etienne Wenger, social learning theory, learning theory, primacy of participation, epistemology, communities of practise.

Introduction

While Etienne Wenger's social learning theory and the concept of Communities of practice have been one of the most referred contemporary learning theories (Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2020; Nylander, et al., 2018; Sarid & Levanon, 2022) there have been comparatively few articles published that analyses the history and critique of the concepts (Dingyloudi and Strijbos, 2020, p. 1052). As Dingyloudi and Strijbos conclude their

analysis of community notions they note the need for “Future analysis on the development of these learning community notions...” (2020, p.1068). The presented paper aspires to cover some of that need.

The article initially presents an overview of the development of the social learning theory presented by Etienne Wenger. As the development of Wenger’s theory is traced, central concepts connected to the Community of practice theory are explicated. The epistemological focus of the article becomes most evident in the final part where three of the main lines of critique of Wenger’s theory are outlined. The initial critique and redesign are developed by Renee De Palma in her article *Leaving Alinsu. Towards a transformative community of practice* from 2009. She builds her redesign of the Community of Practice theory on what she sees as “instigations” that have not been fully developed by Wenger. The second redesign is developed by Etienne Wenger himself and was first introduced in Blackmore’s 2010 anthology *Social learning systems and Communities of Practice* under the title *Landscapes of practice* and later developed further in other publications (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The third area of critique is developed in response to Wenger’s description of the reciprocal relationship between reification and participation (Wenger, 1998, pp.62–71). In response to what I understand as an epistemological fallacy in the Community of Practice theory I have postulated the notion of “the primacy of participation” (Lövgren, 2017). This notion have later been developed in several empirical studies (Lövgren, 2019; Lövgren, 2022; Lövgren, 2023; Lövgren 2025). In the last section the role of practice as primary to reification is explained and expanded by referring to publications that have been central to the theoretical and methodological development of contemporary social science research.

Even though the presentation follows the critique and development of Wenger’s theories of social learning it is not intended as a structured overview of his work and development. Rather it presents what become the central elements needed to answer the epistemological critique that the theory has met. That is to say, that both the themes chosen for the presentation and the concepts emphasized within each of these themes are shaped by what I have found to be central following the critique that Wenger’s theory has met. The presentation builds on the development of a theme initiated in my doctoral thesis (Lövgren, 2017) and will therefore focus on the elements that were brought forward in these processes and the selection of critique and redesigns developed by other researchers is chosen to highlight this development.

The development of Wenger’s theory of social learning

The emergence of Wenger’s social learning theory has been described in stages (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The initial stage is inferred by the publication of the book *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* in 1991. The second stage in the development of Wenger’s social learning

theory starts with the publication of his book *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity* in 1998. The third stage is marked by the considerable response that Wenger's 1998 book received and by his engagement in the practical application of his theories (Wenger, et. al, 2002). A redesign developed by Wenger (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) is presented in the later part of this paper. This can be seen as a fourth stage in the development of Wenger's social learning theory.

The apprenticeship metaphor

The initial stage is initiated by the publication of the book *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* in 1991. Lave and Wenger's book was initially a working paper produced while they were fellow researchers at the Institute for Research on Learning in California in the late 1980s. The paper was later expanded, but the main text still covers less than 100 pages. Wenger has later defined the book's main intention as an effort to revitalize the concept of apprenticeship (Wenger, 1998, p.11).

Cox describes Lave and Wengers' publication as a "short monograph proposing a theoretical concept in outline" (2005, p.21). Despite its slim volume, the publication has received much attention both as a basic theory for further research (Cox, 2005), in discussions on social learning theory (Afdal, 2013, pp.175- 176; Barton & Tusting, 2005) and in the critique of the theory of communities of practice (Hughes et al., 2007). The epistemological influence of the book has been emphasized by several authors as representing a break with "the 'standard paradigm' of learning" (DePalma, 2009; Hughes et al., 2007, p.31; Engeström, 2007, p.42, Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2020, p. 1059) and the importance of the book has been accentuated (Guile, 2006). This also includes articles critical to Wenger's social learning theory (Fuller, 2013, p.17; Engeström, 2007, p.41). They point out how the center of Lave and Wenger's work consists of a clear departure from earlier, more individualistic theories with a focus on cognitive learning (Cox, 2005; Dingyloudi & Strijbos, 2020).

The rationale behind the book was later described by Wenger as seeking to present "an account of the social nature of human learning inspired by anthropology and social theory" (Wenger, 2010, p.179). He refers to the book as leaving much unfinished, like "the concept of identity and communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p.11). The following paragraphs will focus on a central concept in the initial publication.

Legitimate peripheral participation

To define the further development of Wenger's social learning theory it is essential to understand some of the epistemological limitations discussed in the critique of Lave and Wenger's book from 1991. The apprenticeship metaphor can be said to carry much of the strength, as well as the weakness of the first stage in the development of the theory.

This metaphor can be seen in a central concept in Lave and Wenger's initial publication, learning described as legitimate peripheral participation.

With the introduction of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, Lave and Wenger give the metaphor of apprenticeship a central position in their social theory of learning. Lave and Wenger adopt the position of the apprentice, where a newly established member is introduced into a community and taught the skills and knowledge required for becoming a legitimate member as a model for social learning. To support the theory with empirical examples the authors relate ethnographic studies of midwives, tailors, quartermasters, butchers and non-drinking alcoholics (1991, p.65–83). Wenger and Lave argue that these examples describe a basic learning structure: *legitimate peripheral participation*. The apprentice metaphor is based on the author's analysis of how new participants gain access to a community in a position that is peripheral in the sense that they are only just starting to learn to function within the fellowship's social structure, craft, or trade. At the same time, their memberships are legitimate, and the apprentices have acquired a starting position for entering further into the community. As a model for learning it is important to notice that the curriculum that is the goal for the learning process of the apprentice is not defined by a syllabus or found in a textbook, it is defined as a part of the community of practice itself (Wenger, 1998, p.100).

As situated learning opens up for a new vision of learning, legitimate peripheral participation instigates what many critical voices have interpreted as a limited epistemology (Guile, 2006; Afdal, 2013, pp.174–176). The concept is mentioned in Wenger's later writing (1998, pp.11,100–101), but it does not occupy a central role in the further developments of his theory. The limitations of the historical metaphor of apprenticeship have been a major reason for the epistemological critique that the theory has met (ref).

The propositional character of Lave and Wenger's short monograph, breaking new ground, but at the same time leaving much unfinished, has given room for both individual interpretations and misconceptions (DePalma, 2009; Blikstad-Balas, 2014). Cox (2005) presents a comparative review of Wenger's central publications. In his description of Lave and Wenger's 1991 publication, he writes that "the book has often been read or cited in more crude senses" (2005, p.5). It seems to me that the discussions on epistemology that followed Wenger's development of his social learning theory often dwell on themes based on the open and unfinished character of the concepts presented by Lave and Wenger (Roberts, 2006, pp.634–635). These "crude" interpretations of what must be seen as a basic draft for a theory of social learning have, I would argue, accompanied the reading of Wenger's social learning theory and shaped some of the critique that it has met.

Wenger develops further the concept of communities in practice

The second stage in the development of Wenger's social learning theory is initiated by the publication of the book *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity* in 1998. Here Wenger develops the concept of communities of practice. Wenger connects his theoretical conception to a broad background of theoretical perspectives, including anthropology and aspects of social theory (1998, p.14). The book has been widely used (Fejes & Nylander, 2015; Ryan, 2023), discussed (Afdal, 2013; Blikstad-Balas, 2014; DePalma, 2009; Sarid & Levanon, 2022), and criticized (Hannington & Govender, 2024; Hughes, et. al., 2007).

The empirical material used by Wenger throughout his book is taken from his own observations of the claims processing department in a large insurance company given the fictive name Alinsu. Wenger portrays the relationships between the claim processors, the procedures that their work pertains and the explanations they use to cope with the everyday struggles in what is seen as a low status, monotonous occupation (Wenger, 1998, pp.18-41). Central to this picture is the production of meaning and identity that Wenger upholds to be the most decisive element in the social structures of a Community of Practice like Alinsu.

Defining Communities of Practice

The concept of Community of Practice is further defined in Wenger's 1998 publication and becomes central to the further development to his theory of social learning. Though the Communities of Practice as a concept was first used explicitly by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in in 1991, several authors have shown that the concept can be found in earlier publications. Dingyloudi and Strijbos (2020, pp.1054–1055) trace the community construct back to early ecological perspectives in the beginning of the 20th century. Barton and Tusting (2005, p.4) trace the concept back to Lave's earlier writings (1984; 1988) and to the work of Scribner and Cole (1981).

When Wenger sets out to define what constitutes a Communities of Practice, he applies three sets of concepts: *mutual engagement* in a shared practice, *negotiation of a joint enterprise* and development of a *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998, pp.72–85).

Mutual engagement is a defining characteristic of the concept because the community exists primarily as engagement in "what they are there to do" (Wenger, 1998, p.74). Wenger warns against a romanticized image of a community of practice (Cox, 2005, p.10). Mutual engagement defines a community not as a homogenous characteristic, but as a diverse unit. Mutual engagement is about "doing things together" and can connect to all kinds of causes, also those destructive to members or to society (Wenger, 1998, p.77).

Another defining process in the social learning Wenger describes in a community is the members *negotiation of a joint enterprise*. The process of negotiation is for

Wenger fundamental in supplying meaning for the members as they participate in their mutual practice. The negotiation of meaning in their joint enterprise will be a “collective process defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it” (Wenger, 1998, p.77). The enterprise is joint because the meaning of the participation is an indigenous product formed by the community and so owned by the members. The ongoing process of negotiation produces a framework of accountability, both to the formal and informal rules that govern the communal practices.

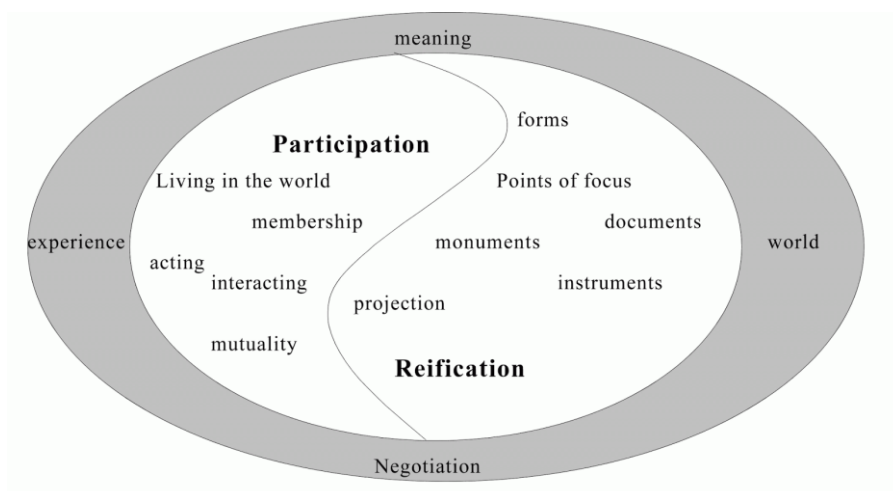
Thirdly, practice gives rise to the community by producing a *shared repertoire*. Two characteristics (develop) allow the shared repertoire to become a source of meaning. The community's shared history of mutual engagement has produced common points of reference that can both be re-enacted in the same practice or be sources of new interpretations (Wenger, 1998, p.83).

The duality of meaning

A key to understanding three other central elements in Wenger’s model of social learning can be found in his much-cited illustration, the duality of meaning (1998, p.62). Wenger’s describes this illustration as a depiction of key concepts needed to understand an interplay that is “fundamental to the human experience of meaning and thus to the nature of practice” (p.52).

Figure 1

The duality of meaning



The duality of meaning is illustrated by Wenger (1998, see Figure 1) in a design showing the relationship between three major parts in Wenger's theory of practice: negotiation, participation and reification. Reification and participation are seen as dual processes where the complementarity of the two makes up for their respective limitations (Farnsworth, et al., 2016, p.8). By using an image with a likeness to a "yin and yang" depiction, the design reflects the interplay and complementarity that is essential in Wenger's description of the concepts.

The concept of participation is used in a sense very close to the general meaning of the word. It suggests at the same time action and connection, relating both to how we take part in a practice and to the relationships with others that reflect this process (Wenger 1998, p.55).

Reification is the second half of Wenger's depiction of how humans engage in the world and produce meaning. The concept is less common than participation and Wenger's use of the terminology has been described as formative for its use in several areas of research (Honneth, 2008; Lane, et al., 2006; Roberts, 2006). In Wenger's usage of the term, reification represents the objects and symbols that a practice is built around. Reifications function as stabilizers, creating continuity and shape to the participation in its practices. The reifications applied by a community will also function as projections of the members into the world and constitute the formal framework of their participation. This said it is important to note that according to Wenger's theory the reifications alone cannot generate meaning (Farnsworth, et al., 2016, p.9). Without participation a reification will become disconnected and frozen, losing its ability to capture "the richness of live experience" (Wenger 1998, p.61).

The interplay of reification and participation makes up the framework where meaning is negotiated. Wenger sees all human activity as a more or less active negotiation of meaning. He emphasizes the position that negotiation has for understanding the concept of practice: "Negotiation of meaning ... is the level of discourse at which the concept of practice should be understood." (1998, p.72)

As a community develops a shared repertoire of practice, its members take part in the negotiation of meaning. To Wenger, the process of explaining and giving meaning to participation in a community of practice is the driving force in learning.

Balancing out the social by applying the concept of identity

As a balance to the focus on the social aspect of learning Wenger develops the theme of identity. This development, which makes up the second half of Wenger's 1998 book, is introduced not as a change of topic, but as a change of focus within the same general topic. By this double focus on community and identity he seeks to "avoid a simplistic individual-social dichotomy without doing away with the distinction" (1998, p.145).

Afdal points out how Wenger develops the concept of identity in a balance between the individual and the social (2013, pp.179–180). In his book from 1998 Wenger uses the concept of identity on the one hand as developed through participation in social practices, while on the other hand it is described as individually negotiated. In his definition of the term, identity traces each individual's learning trajectory. In Wenger's use of the concept, *the negotiation of identity* traces a trajectory in relation to a nexus of multimembership where each individual develops degrees of ownership in the different communities to which they relate (1998, pp.158–161).

The focus on learning as the negotiation of identity is essential for the understanding of Wenger's social learning theory. Negotiation of identity is a theoretical construction that is reiterated throughout Wenger's writing (Farnsworth, et al. 2016). The construct becomes even more integral in the later redesign of Wenger's social learning theory (Wenger, 2010, pp.184–186; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp.19–27) where concepts such as multimembership and the negotiation of a learning trajectory are further developed (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp.22–24).

Limitations of the Community of Practice theory

The community of practice theory has been at the center of much debate (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Hughes et al., 2007; DePalma, 2009; Dingyloudi and Strijbos, 2020; Hannington & Govender, 2024). The following section three major lines in the critique that Wenger's social learning theory has met. The epistemological aspects of these critiques are accentuated as these responses, and the line of development that follows them, are central to the problem addressed by this paper.

Historically limited

The central line of epistemological critique against the community of practice theory argues that the concept of apprenticeship as presented by Lave and Wenger in 1991 and further developed by Wenger is historically and epistemologically limited (DePalma, 2009).

Lave and Wenger (1991, pp.29–34) proposed the community of practice theory to vitalize the concept of apprenticeship (Blackmore 2010, p.213). In their 1991 book, they describe the inbound learning trajectory of moving from the position of a legitimate peripheral participant towards the centre of full knowledge (Lave & Wenger 1991, pp.62–64). The first major line of epistemological critique argues that the learning trajectory of apprenticeship gives limited relevance in contemporary social science research. According to this critique, the apprenticeship metaphor necessarily relates to a community where learning involves reproducing knowledge accumulated by the master (Lövgren, 2019).

The apprenticeship metaphor in Lave and Wenger's 1991 publication together with the theories further development in Wenger's 1998 book is described as limited to describing an inwardly projected learning trajectory (DePalma, 2009). Engeström argues that these historical and epistemological limitations make the theory unfit to describe the need for expansive learning that characterizes the 21st century (Engeström, 2007).

Power

A second line of critique can be compiled under as a rough summary under the heading of power. According to this critique, conflicts of gender, class, and race are not sufficiently covered within Wenger's community of practice theory (Brannan, 2007; DePalma, 2009; Hannington & Govender, 2024; Roberts, 2006, pp.626–628). Both in the apprenticeship metaphor and in Wenger's observations from Alinsu, his theory describes conservative communities. This limits the theory to describing the inbound learning trajectory of apprenticeship (Engeström 2007, p.42; DePalma 2009, p.360; Lövgren 2019). As a result, the theory becomes locked in a reproductive community and prevented from describing transformative learning on an outbound learning trajectory. Thus, the theory allows little or no room for criticism against established power structures.

DePalma (2009) supports the critique of Wenger's model of learning as limited to describe "relatively simplistic, closed, and reproductive systems," but she also contends that his theory holds "both reproductive and transformative potentials" (p.354). She points out that Wenger's presentation allows an opening for "shared ownership of meaning" as he describes how members can be "activated in the process of negotiation" (1998, p.236). In the next section of this paper DePalma's critique is further developed as it outlines her reconstruction of Wenger's theory. Her redesign of the community of practice theory has been constructed to enhance the room given to critical thinking and noncompliance with established power structures.

Participation

Wenger's development of "the duality of meaning" describes the inter-relationship between two parts reification and practice (1998, pp.65–71). Both in his description of the two concepts and in the much-referred illustration of these, the two parts are described as having a reciprocal relationship of mutual dependency (see Figure 1 with comments).

In response to Wenger's conceptualisation of "the primacy of participation" this captures a central element in my own struggle with Wenger's theories and his conceptualisation of the duality of meaning. A central strand in my own research on learning

processes and epistemology (Lövgren, 2018; 2019; 2023; 2025) has been the importance of practice as primary to reification. The final section of this paper develops this epistemological critique of Wenger's theory by referring to examples of the central place given to practice in the development of contemporary social science research.

Answering the critique – redesigning Wenger's social learning theory

Though many articles present a critical edge towards Wenger's social theory, few of these deny the impact it has had on learning theory (DePalma 2009, p.356; Hughes et al., 2007, p.2, 31; Engeström, 2007, p.42). A number of publications debating the relevance of Wenger's social learning theory also discuss in what situations the theory of communities of practice can be a good analytical tool (Afdal, 2013, p.186; Cox, 2005, p.23; Barton & Tusting 2005). As I proceed to trace the development of Wenger's social learning theory, my ambition is to further develop the critique of the theory while at the same time presenting possible models of redesigns. The presentation will focus on three developments of the theory and connect these to the application of these in empirical research.

The first is presented by DePalma in her article from 2009 where she develops Wenger's theory to describe a reflective community of practice. A second example is Wenger's own revision of the theory as it is presented in his later publications (2010, Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015). Wenger's own redesign defines what has been described as the last stage in the development of his social learning theory (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The third part of this section outlines a participatory epistemology that has been developed in connection with my own work with international research on transformative pedagogy and participatory research.

Describing a transformative community of practice

DePalma (2009, pp.367–369) develops these instigations as signs of a "transformative community of practice" in which members participate in "reflective practices." These practices open the possibility of an outbound learning trajectory and enable the community to show respect for "the wisdom of peripherality" (DePalma 2009, p.367). The limited learning described in the concept of apprenticeship thus is opened by DePalma using terms proposed, but left undeveloped by Wenger.

De Palma's critique has an epistemological focus, developing instigations she sees in Wenger's writings which opens up his theory to more reflective forms of learning. Her development aims at breaking the pre-determined inward learning trajectory that can be seen both in Lave and Wenger's initial development of the learning metaphor of apprenticeship, and in Wenger's 1998 book building on the reproductive learning of the insurance company Alinsu.

Renée DePalma published her article *Leaving Alinsu. Towards a transformative community of practice* in 2009. She describes several limitations in Wenger's 1998 book *Communities of practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*. As the title of DePalma's article suggests, her main critique centers on the impact that the empirical material of the book inflicts on the theory. Wenger relates the presentation of his theory to observations of the medical claims department of an assurance company given the pseudonym Alinsu. DePalma argues that the theory must be related to types of empirical material which describe more reflective learning. Such materials would, according to DePalma, open up the possibility for the theory to describe a transformative community of practice. "My purpose in this article is to recapture some of the complexities and possibilities of the community of practice models that have been undermined by the Alinsu instantiation." (DePalma, 2009, p.354)

To show how the theory can be used to describe more reflective learning, she develops what she sees as instigations in Wenger's book. The critique and the development of her redesign are built on a comparison between the insurance company of Alinsu and a community she herself has helped to design, the No Outsiders project.

The No Outsiders project is a community of primary school teachers and theorists that through action research challenges "heteronormativity and homophobia in primary schools" (DePalma, 2009, p.355). The name is taken from an interview with Bishop Desmond Tutu where he expresses his disappointment with how some African church provinces treat the debate over homosexuality. Tutu states that: "Everyone is an insider, there are no outsiders, whatever their beliefs, whatever their colour, gender, or sexuality." (Afrol News, 2004)

In her article, DePalma uses the disparity between what she sees as the reproductive community of Alinsu and the community of the No Outsiders project to illustrate what she sees as Wenger's unused potential. She understands the "simplistic and closed" view of learning connected with the communities of practice to be caused mainly by the limitation that the empirical example of Alinsu imparts on the theoretical perspectives developed in Wenger's book. DePalma argues that the lack of room for criticism against established power structures in Wenger's theory is more about his example than limitations necessarily connected to the construction of the theory.

DePalma further develops Wenger's term shared ownership of meaning and the notion of members being activated in the process of negotiation (Wenger, 1998, p.236). These are used to describe a transformative community of practice. A transformative community of practice means that members are activated in the process of negotiation. As an example of this, DePalma shows how the No Outsiders project constantly challenges its members to take part in the negotiation of meaning. Here, as opposed to in Alinsu, they are forced to gain personal ownership of the meaning given to the practices in the community (DePalma, 2009, pp.367–369).

Another sign of a transformative community is the concept of reflective practices (Wenger, 1998, p.217; DePalma, 2009, p.367; Lövgren, 2022). In Lave and Wenger's initial presentation of the notion of communities of practice, they describe the role of an apprentice moving gradually closer towards a given center of full knowledge in an inbound trajectory of learning. In a reflective practice, DePalma claims that there must be the possibility of an outbound learning trajectory. Here, the community allows for a movement out, away from the community's central values. In this picture, there is also room for an "outsider" in the community who represents the community's ability to respect what Wenger calls the wisdom of peripherality (1998, p.216). The outsider views the practice from the point of view of a non-participant and can, if respected, contribute with the wisdom of peripherality. Through its reflective practice, a transformative community of practice can include the outsider, and through him or her be exposed to the particular wisdom that this position has to offer.

Landscapes of practice

In some of his later articles, Wenger recognizes the validity (at least partly) of the critique that is referred to in the sections above (Wenger- Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Farnsworth, et al., 2016). In response to the referred debate, he presents what he characterizes as a third stage in the development of the concept of communities (Blackmore, 2010). He refers to several of the mentioned areas, but the focus of his redefinition is on the critique of the theory's historical and epistemological limitation (Wenger, 2010, pp.187–192). This means that his redesign endeavors to move beyond the apprenticeship metaphor. To satisfy the arguments indicated by the critique, he presents a redefinition of central concepts in the theoretical foundation of his theory of social learning.

Wenger acknowledges the description of the learning situation of the 21st century as more complex than a simple learning trajectory into a single community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.25). He describes how a contemporary learner will be more isolated in his or her task to model an identity than in the described model of apprenticeship.

Learning in the 21st century takes place, according to Wenger, in a landscape of practices characterized by boundary encounters with a multitude of communities. Through the process of globalization, and increased access to travel and new technologies, the possibility of relating to a large number of communities has expanded (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.15; Cambridge et al., 2024). The boundary encounters with large numbers of communities that these developments have generated require a competence beyond that of a single community. Wenger coins a new concept – *knowledgeability* – that is intended to describe the capacity needed to navigate in a landscape of practices. When an individual chooses which communities to relate to, these do not

just represent sources of information, but are, in Wenger's definition of a community, sources for developing the person's whole identity.

Wenger uses the metaphor of a journey through a landscape of practices (Wenger, 2010, pp.185–186; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, pp.15–27) to describe this new framework for learning. To meet the epistemological critique of his earlier writings, Wenger creates a metaphor that projects a learning trajectory that is not directed towards a single predetermined goal. The journey metaphor describes how an individual connects in varying degrees with a number of different practices. The competence that is developed in a single community is still relevant in relation the specific practices of that community, but the redesign projects a learning trajectory with varying degrees of engagement in diverse practices with related communities. Through the journey metaphor Wenger describes how learners are: “[...] becoming a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our trajectory through that landscape. This journey within and across practices shapes who we are.” (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015, p.19)

Wenger calls this process of learning *modulation of identification* and he develops the concept of *knowledgeability* to describe the capacity needed to navigate in a landscape of practices. This ability to modulate identity in relation to a number of communities is achieved through the process of identification and dis-identification.

In this process of identity formation, the boundaries of communities become central. As an individual is confronted with the boundaries of a community, the identity formation is intensified (Wenger, 2010, p.186). Wenger shows how these boundaries constitute meeting points where individuals are forced to negotiate in what way and to what degree they connect to a new community.

When Wenger and his cowriters discuss what this means for educational institutions (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger Trayner, 2015, p.18), they develop the term boundary-oriented pedagogy. While traditional educational institutions focus on building and maintaining community boundaries, they argue that the demands of learning in the 21st century challenges school systems to focus on how to educate for boundary meetings and the crossing of borders.

The primacy of participation

Bibliographic research and citation indexes illustrate the central position that Wenger's social learning theory holds in social science research (Fejes & Nylander, 2015). The following sections develop what I would argue to be the main epistemological problem with Wenger's social learning theory. Wenger's theoretical of the duality of meaning (Wenger, 1998, p.62) that elucidates the reciprocal relationship between reification and participation has been widely cited and used. The central role of the theory accentuates

the importance of developing relevant critique related to possible epistemological misconception that this conceptualisation implies. In the following section the role of practice as primary to reification is explained and expanded by referring to publications that have been central to the theoretical and methodological development of contemporary social science research.

The researchers that are referred to in this section represent different fields within the social sciences. Although their argumentations follow different paths and their conclusions often differ, they are included here to explicate further the epistemological critique of Wenger's theory that lies behind *the Primacy of Participation*.

Central publications on social science research

Robert K. Yin's book *Case Study Research: design and methods* (2018) is recognized as one of the most cited publications within social science methodology (Katalog für..., 2025) He argues for the use of case study method when research projects seek understanding of complex social phenomena. The close connection between the case study method and practice can be seen when Yin writes: "the case study method allows investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events...". (2018, p.4)

Another publication that serves to exemplify the central role given to participation is *Making Social Science Matter* by the Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg (2009). The book starts by referring to "the Science Wars" in the 1990's where central representatives from natural science criticized what they perceived as "anti-rationalism and relativism in social science". Flyvbjerg argues that the discussion following "the Science Wars" was misguided. To demonstrate a more productive response to the referred critique he develops "Methodological, guidelines for a reformed social science" (2009, pp. 129-140). Based on an Aristotelean understanding he outlines a form of Phronetic research that: "focuses on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations". (2009, p.134)

The practice turn

The epistemological critique of Wenger's theory of social learning can be connected to what Cetina, Schatzki & Von Savigny calls *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (2005). *The practice turn* has been used to describe the pragmatic turn in different fields within the social sciences (Cetina, et al., 2005; Lissillour & Silva, 2024). In the anthology edited by Cetina, Schatzki & Von Savigny Collins presents a paper on the importance of seeking *tacit knowledge* within the field of sociology. This can be done, Collin argues, by mastering the practices of the communities that they study through "prolonged social interactions with members of the culture that embeds the practice."

(2005, p.107). In the same publication Thévenot argues for a more reality oriented pragmatism referring to efforts made by Bourdieu and Giddens to integrate between macrosocial structures and microsocial behavior. He criticizes pragmatic regimes for lacking in realism and moral engagement and argues that research needs to take into account the values of the practitioners (2005, pp. 58–60).

Values in practice

The theme of values is also developed in the legal research of Joseph Raz and his much cited publication *The practice of Value* (2005). Here Raz argues that values are, directly or indirectly, dependent on practice (Raz et al., 2005, pp.19–36). Central to Raz's reasoning is a double thesis of practice and valuers. He argues that values primarily exist only if there are social practices sustaining them (p.19). Raz encapsulates his theory in the concise statement: "There is no point to value without valuers." (p.27).

Raz's work on the concept of values in the field of legal philosophy is an example of what Schatzki calls "the practice turn in contemporary theory" (2006). Raz's description of the relationship between values and practice is one of many developments within the practice turn that can be seen as examples of the central position given to the primacy of participation within the development of contemporary social science research.

In the final section of the presented paper I argue for the significance of the *Primacy of Participation* by the interpolating of short comments on central developments within social science research. The referred publications are included to exemplify the primary role given to participation in social science research. The section connects central publications within social science to argue for the empirical consequences of the epistemological misconception that I would argue is connected to Etienne Wenger's conceptualisation of reification and practice as a reciprocal concepts.

Summary

This article starts with an overview of the development of Etienne Wenger's social learning theory expanding on central conceptualizations of Wenger's Community of Practice theory. The focus of this overview is on the two initial stages where the basic structure and epistemological aspects of Wenger's theory were developed.

This paper is opened by an overview of the social learning theory presented by Etienne Wenger. The development of the theory is traced and central conceptualizations in Wenger's Community of practice theory are explained. Building on the initial overview three lines of epistemological critique are developed. An initial critique is developed by Renee De Palma in her article *Leaving Alinsu. Towards a transformative community of practice* from 2009. She builds her redesign of the Community of Practice theory on what she sees as "instigations" that have not been fully developed by Wenger.

The second redesign has been published by Etienne Wenger and was first introduced in Blackmore's 2010 anthology *Social learning systems and Communities of Practice* under the title *Landscapes of practice*. The redesign has been expanded upon in later publications (Wenger, 2015; Farnsworth, et al., 2016).

The third area of critique is developed in response to Wenger's description of the reciprocal relationship between reification and participation (Wenger, 1998, pp.62–71). In response to what I understand as an epistemological fallacy in the Community of Practice theory I postulated the notion of "the primacy of participation" (Lövgren, 2017). This notion have later been developed in several empirical studies (Lövgren, 2019; Lövgren, 2022; Lövgren, 2023; Lövgren 2025). The final section of this paper explicates the epistemological critique of Wenger's duality of meaning by outlining the role given to practice in the development of contemporary social science research.

The theoretical systems developed by Wenger is one of the most cited theories in research connected to organization and learning (Fejes & Nylander, 2015). This enhances the importance of articles that focus on the development and critique of Wenger's theories. The aim of this paper has been to show the epistemological limitations that Wenger's theoretical system conveys, while at the same time implicating how the theory can be redesigned in ways that widen its applicability.

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