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What's 'Natural' About Disasters? Practice Theory as an Emancipatory Lens for Reconceptualising the Social Construction of Disasters

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Abstract

Practice theory constitutes an emancipatory lens for reconceptualising the social construction of disaster. Framing extreme weather disasters, such as floods, fires and tropical storms as natural, places them beyond human action. By contrast, a practice lens places their consequences firmly within the realm of human action. Drawing on practice theory, we explain why framing disasters as natural exacerbates their prevalence. We note that the practices of everyday life and striving to resume those practices after disaster often take precedence over alleviating the sources of disaster. Furthermore, these practices are distributed across time and space in patterns of social order that perpetuate the tendency for disaster to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. We conclude by issuing a call to arms to embrace the emancipatory potential of practice scholarship by exposing the disastrous consequences of mundane practice, critiquing the dominant ways of knowing that contribute to existing constructions of disaster and using social science to advocate for fundamental change.

Keywords

equity, natural disaster, social construction, vulnerability

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Introduction

This essay proposes a practice theoretical lens for examining the phenomena of so-called 'natural' disasters on communities, meaning those that are framed as natural because they are caused by extreme weather or seismological events. A practice lens allows scholars to move beyond considering these disasters as exceptional natural events that cannot be controlled to considering how framing them as natural contributes to the increasing prevalence of disaster in everyday life. By reconceptualising the social construction of disaster through a practice lens, scholars can expose, analyse, and reconfigure the nexus of practices within which disasters are enacted to potentially decrease their incidence and devastating effects.

Disasters arising from earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts, floods, and wildfires are often referred to as 'natural' to distinguish them from those arising from human error, such as explosions, oil spills, and health crises. When disasters are conceptualised as exceptional natural events, they are considered to exist outside human action (Revet 2020). Yet disaster is certainly not exceptional. Over the last 50 years, a disaster related to climate, weather, or water hazards has occurred every day, resulting in an average of 115 deaths and US\$202 million in losses daily (World Meteorological Organization 2023). Disasters might thus be understood as frequent, normal, and a devastating part of many people's everyday lives, particularly for those in the Global South (Reice 2001).

In response, a more critical approach has arisen, emphasising that disasters are not inevitable and that they disproportionately effect the most vulnerable (Kelman 2020). For example, some 91% of the deaths in the above WMO figures occurred in developing economies, and even in advanced economies, devastation from extreme weather is exacerbated for minorities and the poor. The disastrous consequences of 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were compounded for those vulnerable due to poor-quality housing in the path of the hurricane and with fewer economic resources to avoid the consequences (Congressional Research Service 2005). Increasingly, therefore, there are calls to focus on the moral (Steinberg 2006) implications of conceptualising disasters as natural. Such concepts have economic and political expediency (Blaikie et al. 2014) that legitimise the failure to act on preventing the occurrence of disasters (Clarke and Dercon 2016). In this paper, we argue that practice theory can elicit a more critical understanding of disasters that can be emancipatory, including in altering our scholarly practice.

Practice Theory Premises

Our practice perspective is grounded in three key premises. First, practice occurs within in-the-moment sites of doing and sayings that are purposive but largely mundane, enacting aspects of everyday life such as commuting, working, family life, and socialising in ways that are not necessarily purposeful (Blue and Shove 2016; Chia and Holt 2006). Such moments are multiple and intersecting (Schatzki 2002). Practice is a complex nexus of moments that intersect and sustain people's everyday ability to act in their many social arenas (Giddens 1984). While it may sometimes involve purposeful, conscious and reflexive choices, it is mostly about the practical consciousness of enacting everyday life (Bruder 2025).

Second, this nexus of moments constitutes a flow of becoming (Shove et al. 2012; Tsoukas and Chia 2002) in which habitual yet dynamic patterns of commuting, working, and socialising are continuously being constructed. Each moment, while mundane, is also highly consequential in constructing the taken-for-granted patterning of social order (Giddens 1984). These moments are distributed across people and over time, cumulatively weaving the social fabric of communities and societies (Shove et al. 2012). This interplay between the in-the-moment and the flow of becoming over time makes practice theory 'scalable' from everyday practices by individuals, to the patterns of societal order that are always becoming within those practices (Jarzabkowski et al. 2015).

Third, these broader patterns of social order, constructed across time and space, are imbued with power and agency. The nexus of practices that enable social coordination also produces patterns of privilege and power (Bourdieu 1992; Foucault 1980; Giddens 1984). In particular, the practices through which power circulates within society produce patterns that accord some actors rights that are not accessible to all (Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016). Patterns of social order are thus patterns of power and privilege that also perpetuate patterns of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Practice Theory in Reconceptualising the Social Construction of Disaster

These three key premises of practice theorising – that practice inheres in the moment; that multiple moments across time and space are consequential in constituting unfolding patterns of social order; and that these patterns reproduce power and privilege – help to reconceptualise disaster as enacted within mundane human action, rather than as an exceptional 'act of nature'.

A Vignette of Reproducing Disaster in Everyday Practice

On a research field trip, we were looking at places where homes had been purchased and demolished after a catastrophic flood. The programme was voluntary, offered to those who wanted to move away from the disaster zone. Their homes were then fully demolished and rezoned as either parkland or environmental land. The birdlife was abundant, and we all remarked on the beauty of these reclaimed sites in this largely lower socioeconomic area. Some, backing onto streams and forested areas, had been planted to blend in with the forest, creating pockets of wildlife habitat. Others were small parks dotted among the suburban landscape.

The sense of peace was at total odds with the raging torrent that had ripped through this area only three years ago, devastating homes and livelihoods. And had also ripped through the neighbourhood 11 years before that. It seemed impossible that this serene working-class neighbourhood could have been the scene of such devastation.

We were surprised to see many houses adjacent to or in the middle of a strip of reclaimed land. These houses, mostly of a relatively cheap building type to provide affordable housing for population growth, were also flooded in the recent event and had no apparent advantages over the houses that had been demolished. Why hadn't their owners moved? The project manager explained that many people found moving stressful and beyond their capabilities to find somewhere new and affordable to live. All around us, people were going about their everyday lives, with little evidence of the trauma that had been visited on this neighbourhood twice in the past 20 years. It seemed a normal, pleasant place to live.

Our first premise, that mundane action is purposive in enacting immediate moments of getting things done rather than changing how and why those things are done (Bruder 2025; Chia and Holt 2006; Shove et al. 2012), helps explain how disaster is conceptualised as outside everyday experience (Revet 2020). While disaster is part of an increasing number of people's everyday experience, a flood or hurricane does not happen to those people every day. Most people's activities are, therefore, directed at enacting everyday life, rather than averting disaster.

Living in disaster-prone contexts is rarely a matter of conscious choice (Kelman 2020; Reice 2001). Rather, as shown in our vignette, people find themselves in contexts like floodplains through other aspects of everyday life, such as access to jobs, personal finances, affordable housing, and places to raise children in

compatible communities; contexts not perceived as 'disaster-prone'. Hence, when disaster happens, it appears random and exceptional (Blaikie et al. 2014). After the disaster, the focus is, understandably, on securing homes and resuming everyday life as quickly as possible. The magnitude of enacting everyday life after a disaster, often in temporary or sub-standard accommodation, takes precedence over how to change that everyday life, such as moving away from a disaster zone. While some people move, the many who remain underscore the stabilising effects of the moment-by-moment activities within which people construct everyday life (Bruder 2025; Rouse 2007; Shove et al. 2012) even within the disruption generated by disaster. Practice theory thus helps explain why enacting 'normal' everyday living takes precedence over enacting living without disaster. Everyday practice has a profound stabilising effect in reconstructing patterns of social order that tend to embed the experience of disaster as outside human action.

In our second premise, communities come about, and societal orders are constructed within many entangled moments (Nicolini 2013; Schatzki 2002). For example, the housing development in our vignette came about within government and industry activities that generate jobs, affordable housing, and educational facilities that attract and retain communities. Where and how people live is a nexus of multiple entwined practices where many purposive but also mundane activities, distributed over time and space (Blue and Shove 2016; Rouse 2007), come together to construct the dense legacy of communities as places to live, even so that they are in the path of, and exacerbate the likelihood of, disaster. In their everyday practices, people, businesses, and governments have constructed the disaster as an exceptional event, rather than one to which their practices have contributed.

This nexus of distributed practices within which social order is constructed is also key to reconceptualizing disaster. These communities and their propensity to disaster have been enacted over many decades of mundane action (Giddens 1984; Rouse 2007) that reinforce the building, rebuilding, and growth of such communities, even where that exacerbates the likelihood of disaster (Davis [1998] 2022). While an individual can make choices to move, the disasters that are enacted are not solely the consequence of that individual's actions. Rather, they are the outcomes of a nexus of mundane actions by many people, organisations, and governments over time. Hence, instead of wondering why people in our field study did not move, we might rather query 'why – through what nexus of practices – has that housing been built there?' The prevailing patterns of social order through which people live in the path of disaster have been enacted within mundane and distributed actions across society over time. Rather than existing outside human action, the disaster that eventuates from any such pattern is a consequence of distributed human action.

In our third premise, distributed human action incorporates power and privilege in constructing disaster in ways that exacerbate its consequences. Patterns of social ordering have long entrenched inequity in living conditions (Elliott 2021). Conceptualising disasters as exceptions of nature is one means of perpetuating this inequity (Kelman, 2020). If a disaster is natural, action by those with greater access to power could not have prevented this “Act of God” (Steinberg, 2006). Similarly, if a disaster is exceptional, it does not warrant changes that might be costly, uncomfortable, and disrupt existing social order (Feldman and Pentland, 2022; Rouse, 2007). Hence, houses continue to be built in places and with materials that exacerbate the incidence of disaster and sold through the mortgage, and real estate institutions that we have constructed.

Often, lower socioeconomic areas are associated with cheaper forms of ‘affordable’ housing and less resilient building materials, thereby embedding inequitable consequences when disaster strikes. However, the pervasiveness of constructing disasters as outside human action is not solely driven by inequity. As demonstrated by repeated wildfires in California—of which the 2025 fires in LA were merely the latest at the time of writing—many different societal institutions are deeply entangled in perpetuating living in the path of disasters (Davis [1998] 2022). The practices of municipalities, state and federal governments, private and public insurance, taxation, wealth creation, construction codes, urban planning, and legislation all conspire to support the reestablishment of such communities. When these communities are displaced by disaster, other institutions for disaster relief and humanitarian aid are enacted to get them back on their feet (Clarke and Dercon 2016). Often in precisely the same places where they have already been knocked down (Elliott 2021). But the fundamental questions of whether people should live in such places and how practice can be reconstructed to move communities out of harm’s way—in effect preventing disaster—are lost in the reproduction of existing patterns of socioeconomic order.

Conceptualising disasters as exceptional and natural thus perpetuates the circuits of power in which they happen (Foucault 1980; Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016). As long as the disastrous consequences of prevailing social patterns are largely contained to those with the least access to power and privilege, and those consequences are seen as exceptional, they can persist. If disaster is an exceptional act of nature, there is no need for those with greater access to the means of change to painstakingly rebuild a society in which such disasters are less likely. By contrast, practice theory helps to firmly ground disaster in human action.

A Call to Arms: Practice Theory as an Emancipatory Lens on Disaster

From a practice perspective, the disastrous effects of extreme weather are enacted within mundane human actions. Focusing on mundane actions is emancipatory because such actions are in continuous flux, always constituting the potential for change despite their profound stability (Bruder 2025; Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Schatzki 2019; Shove et al. 2012; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). However, a critical and reflexive approach is needed to support changes in social order (Danner-Schröder et al. 2025; Feldman and Pentland 2022; Galvin and Sunikka-Blank 2016; Gherardi 2009). We call for practice scholars to engage in studies that emancipate society from existing patterns and reflexively reconstruct them to alleviate the consequences of disaster, based on three key points.

Point 1. Practice researchers could find new and more accessible formats for exposing the disastrous consequences of mundane practices. Practice scholars typically use immersive methods to understand their participants' lived experiences, endeavouring to render those experiences 'real' in their writing. We urge practice scholars to go beyond writing for their disciplinary communities to making their participants' lived experiences of disaster available to wider audiences. These methods might include visual essays, documentaries, and alternative media.

In one salient example, Sou and Douglas (2019) use a cartoon format to display everyday recovery from Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, where post-disaster deaths escalated to over 3,000 due to power outages. The accessible cartoon format evocatively captures the lived experiences of families; graphically exposing the fragility of taken-for-granted practices for the supply of power, water, food, shelter, and medical care in the face of a disaster, the effort of restoring household practices in these conditions, and how recovery varies according to gender, ethnicity and class. The cartoon communicates the researcher's deep knowledge about how disaster is framed, who is disproportionately affected, the arduous work of recovery, and how disastrous effects might be alleviated (Sou et al. 2021). Despite making no reference to theories, the format is theoretically informed, displaying the complex relationality of practices (Bruder 2025; Jarzabkowski et al. 2015) associated with experiencing and recovering from disaster.

Our first key point, therefore, is for practice researchers to find new and more accessible formats for representing the entanglement of practices within which disasters are socially constructed, exacerbated, and potentially alleviated. These formats could both enable participants to reflect on their experiences

and communicate them evocatively to audiences that are not part of the researcher's cognate community, provoking awareness, understanding, and the potential for change.

Point 2. Practice scholars could critically interrogate the interdisciplinary ways of knowing through which disaster is constructed. The complex practices entangled in the social construction of disasters demand interdisciplinary collaboration. While interdisciplinarity is proposed as a means of reorientation to complex problems (Anderson 2013; Ergene et al. 2021), our point goes beyond gaining a more comprehensive understanding of complex problems. Of course, that is important to our agenda. For example, engineers and architects are knowledgeable about the built environment, meteorologists have extreme-weather expertise, and political scientists, economists, and sociologists can explain relationships between housing, labour, and economic productivity. The tools, data, and ways of knowing from these and other disciplines are important for understanding the nexus of practices within which situations, such as the 2025 LA wildfires, become disasters. Beyond this, however, different disciplines construct and embed taken-for-granted practices about what is 'known' and how (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Hence, these entangled yet often siloed disciplinary ways of knowing embed and normalise the very practices that place people and properties in contexts that exacerbate disaster risk.

Our second key point, therefore, is for practice scholars to zoom in on interdisciplinary ways of knowing (Nicolini, 2009), tracing how they inform economic, housing, planning, and development practices that maintain and exacerbate the incidence of disaster. They might then incorporate other disciplines to generate new ways of knowing and acting (Blue and Shove 2016; Danner-Schröder et al. 2025). In doing so, practice scholars will have to go beyond the canonical ways of knowing and representing knowledge in their own disciplines. Stepping outside our disciplinary comfort zones will be challenging, but also emancipatory, in supporting a more critical practice agenda for studying disaster.

Point 3. Practice scholars could use their science to advocate for fundamental change in the practices that exacerbate disaster. Building on the above points, we urge practice scholars to embrace the responsibility of science to society (Hilgartner et al. 2015) by using their research for advocacy (Williams et al. 2025). Science informs and can even be co-opted into constructing societal patterns that preserve existing patterns of socio-economic power and privilege that perpetuate disaster. However, science is not neutral and can also contribute to the redistribution of power and wealth, as well as new ways of living (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Hilgartner et al. 2015). As society faces ever-greater challenges from climate change,

inequality, poverty, and injustice, practice scholars could be more than scientific bystanders to disaster, actively advocating for change (Williams et al. 2025).

Our practice theory call to arms, therefore, is to reconceptualise disaster as social, not natural phenomena; develop societal forms of knowing how to act differently; and actively advocate for fundamental changes in everyday practice. Doing so will require courage, persistence, and humility (Jarzabkowski et al. 2025) and may not garner the multiple publications and rapid career progression that are the typical rewards of academia (Williams et al. 2025). Yet, practice scholars are well placed to take up this emancipatory work of engaging science to reconceptualise the societal approach to disaster.

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