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COMMUNITIES OR PRACTICE: 
DIVERGENT VIEWS AND UNTAPPED POTENTIALS

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Abstract

While traditional community studies focus on predefined dimensions to identify entities, communities of practice (CoP) literature emphasizes boundaries that arise as results of simultaneous observations of similarities and differences in practices and preferences. Recently however, there has been an increase in the treatment of CoPs as idealized entities, assuming away the relational tensions that surround them. By explicating some of the strict and implicit assumptions in influential CoP studies and comparing them to the original formulation of practice theory by Bourdieu, I aim to highlight how essentialistic thinking might have permeated the CoP literature and encourage new avenues of inquiry by recognizing multiple boundaries surrounding practice and shifting competitive dynamics over time. Finally, I offer some guidelines to aid empirical researchers interested in practice theory.

Keywords: Practice theory, communities, communities of practice, boundaries, distinctions, relational tensions