

In/Equality through data practices. A posthumanist, praxeological approach to understand the matrix of domination within data.

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Current social life, including management, is increasingly hallmarked by data practices. Data practices comprise different layers and ranges from generating, collecting, and analyzing data (Decuyper 2021). They materialize in different data infrastructures, such as platforms and algorithmic decision-making systems. In a sense, data can be seen as fuel for digitalization (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2016; Davenport and Patil 2018) and a link between humans and machines. Specifically, data practices co-shape human humans' social practices while they are simultaneously a manifestation of social practices (cf. Orlikowski 1992; 2010). Social practice comprises the doings, sayings and relatings of people (Kemmis et al., 2014; Schatzki, 2019), which are "governed by a largely normative array of understandings, rules, teleologies, and emotions" (Schatzki, 2019, p. 35). Within this perspective the world is seen as an "ongoing routinized and recurrent accomplishment" (Nicolini, 2013, p. 3). From this perspective, data is understood as part of an agencement and formativeness of humans and non-humans within digitality. Agencement refers to the 'fitting' or the establishment of connections, while formativeness focuses on the process of inventing the way of doing (Gherardi 2016). This means, that data and humans are part of an agencement (assemblage), i.e. are connected and establish connections both between the machines and humans as well as amongst humans. Moreover, humans – and machines – can use not only to make sense of social phenomena, but also to find new ways of doing (formativeness). In short: data practices permeate many aspects of management while they also change and further develop ways of managing people and work.

There are many promises linked to data practices. The use of (big) data within management allows for more individualization. The volume, velocity and variety of available data as well as computing potential promises more nuanced and timely understandings of what is happening within and in the ecologies of organizations (George et al. 2016; George, Haas, and Pentland 2014). Generative artificial intelligence seems to be capable in producing (standardized) outputs within a glimpse. And, algorithmic decision management promises a more objective, neutral and effective decision making process. In sum, there is the potential that data practices contribute to make work less boring and management not only more effective but also fair.

Yet, it was shown that data practices can (re)produce inequality. Data sets can be biased with the result that recruiting and promoting activities are disadvantaging for women and minoritized people (Lambrecht and Tucker 2019; Dastin 2018; O'Neil 2016). But also design and decisions made, based on the output of artificial intelligence can promote inequality practices (Kelan 2023). Management by algorithms can further increase inequality and workers' exploitation as they might be inclined to 'pacify' the algorithm and put in extra work to ensure they can continue to work (Bucher, Schou, and Waldkirch 2021). In short, data practices can also be seen as part of an inequality

regime (Acker 2009; 2006) as they not only reflect but also reinforce racialized, classed and gendered organizational processes.

To better understand how inequality gets promoted through and manifest itself in data practices, this paper examines the matrix of domination (Collins 2000; 2019) in the agencement and formativeness (Gherardi 2016) of data practices. In doing so, different strands of feminist theorizing are put in dialogue, specifically posthumanist praxeological approaches and intersectionality.

From a posthumanist approach much attention is given to the entanglement of different agents – humans and non-humans. Barad (2007) argues that we do not stand outside the world but are strongly entangled with its different entities. Consequently, there is no interaction but intra-action, and the decisions different agents take, the tools they use – be it a researcher on their apparatus (Barad 2007; Orlikowski 2010) or a HR practitioner evaluating candidates using AI – changes the perceived reality. Barad (2007) calls this the agential cut, indicating that agents choose their apparatus and hereby making a cut on what slice of reality they want to examine. By making decisions on what to focus on and what to emphasize through the agential cut, agents also determine what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad 2007, 148). Consequently, from a posthumanist perspective knowing and creating knowledge is understood “as material engagement with the world” (Cozza and Gherardi 2023, 4). This perspective allows not only to perceive the interconnectedness of the material, digital and social world but also to identify scopes for agency. Specifically, when looking at the agencement (loosely and to some extent mis-leadingly translated as assemblage) of different agents, it is not just about the sayings, doings and relatings linked to social practices (Schatzki 2019) but also about the connecting and being interconnected (Gherardi 2016; Cozza and Gherardi 2023). Or in other words: of the becoming and being as an agent within an ecology that also includes other human and non-human agents. In this regard the ‘way of doing’ connections, of establishing and reformulating connections – or formativeness (Gherardi 2016)– is also of interest, as it can help us to zoom in on the logics, affects and sensations of these processes. When it comes to data practices, for instance, we know it is crucial to understand the interplay of and within humans, computers and data, their way of becoming and being.

Yet, there is also the risk to miss out to capture the different patterns of domination, privileges and penalties related to it. For instance, there is a risk in decentering humans to overlook the dehumanizing or neglect of people that still exists. To this end, I propose to look at the matrix of domination and the different power domains within, i.e. the structural, the disciplinary, the hegemonic and the inter-personal domain of power (Collins 2000). By looking at the different domains of power and its manifestations in privilege and penalties (Collins 2000; 2019) amongst (human) agents specifically, we might find ways to better capture how inequalities within data practices persist as well as what could be done to overcome them.

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