

The Pragmatics of Qualia in Practice

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Abstract

This review addresses general anthropological understandings of practice and a technical semiotic approach to pragmatics through the concept of qualia. Qualia are pragmatic signals (indexes) that materialize phenomenally in human activity as sensuous qualities. The pragmatic role of qualia is observed through exemplary accounts of the “feeling of doing” from the ethnographic record of practice in four domains: linguistic practices, phatic practices organized explicitly around social relations, practices organized around external “things,” and body-focal practices. Attention to qualia enables anthropologists to consider ethnographically what is continuous semiotically across and within practices—from communication to embodiment. The article concludes with a discussion of praxis in relation to practice and pragmatics and offers suggestions for future research on qualia in the areas of awareness, language, and ritual.

INTRODUCTION

This review proceeds on the following points: (a) All sociocultural practice is fundamentally semiotic, constituted by sign processes; (b) specifically indexical modes of sign processes constitute the domain of pragmatics; (c) qualia are indexes that materialize phenomenally as sensuous qualities; and (d) qualia provide a methodological link between general anthropological understandings of practice and a technical semiotic approach to pragmatics. Let me explain each of these points in turn.

In contemporary anthropology, one can modify the term “practice” with practically any adjectival to highlight and delimit some form of historically contextualized action carried out by actants in the world, and thereby make that action available and legitimate for sociocultural analysis: religious practice, referential practice, counterrevolutionary practice, weaving practice, and the like. Indexical semiotic processes—presuming on prior contexts and causes, entailing new contexts and consequences—draw attention to the focal entities of action, outline connections among the internally organized elements of action, and point outward to the contextualization of action, such that “anything people do” (Ortner 1984, p. 149) becomes “a” practice, a “kind of” practice, “this” practice, and so on.

The pragmatic process of typifying anything people do as practice is an integral and inescapable *meta*-pragmatic orientation to human activity. And as Rupert Stasch (2014, p. 631) put it recently in a discussion of the methodological perils of reifying “practice” in anthropology, “having to imagine ‘pragmatics’ distinct from ‘semiosis’ would be like trying to imagine the part of snow that isn’t water.” This insight applies not only to the internal organization of types of practice, but also to processes by which human attention that is reflexively focused on its own activity facilitates the emergence, maintenance, or transformation of social groups; sustains or confronts implicit presuppositions and explicit beliefs; and draws attention to the wider significance and consequences of what we do.

One kind of pragmatic signal (i.e., index) has been of particular interest to anthropologists variously working on problems of the senses, materiality, aesthetics, affect, and the bodily dimensions of practice. This kind of index has been central to theories of the body in practice from Marx and Merleau-Ponty to Bourdieu and Butler. Following Chumley & Harkness (2013), I use the term “qualia” (singular, quale) to refer to indexes that materialize phenomenally in human activity as sign vehicles reflexively taken to be sensuous instances of abstract qualities (stink, warmth, hardness, straightness, etc.). If “anything which focuses the attention is an index” (Peirce 1932, section 2.285), qualia focus attention (in various modalities) on the pragmatic “feeling of doing.” Qualia emerge as points of orientation in social action and shape how such action is apperceived as a kind of practice conforming to material affordances and limits; in this way practice can be linked to groups and become productive of certain kinds of knowledge of “the way things are.” In asking how people orient to one another via qualia, my emphasis in this review (as opposed to much Western phenomenology) is on the intersubjective, interactional, and broader cultural place of pragmatic encounters with sensuous qualities “in practice,” which I take as primary, rather than on their derived status as subjective experiences of individuals.

In order to trace the pragmatics of qualia across the ethnographic record of practice, I have organized my review in what might appear to the phenomenologist to be a backward manner. I end, rather than begin, with a discussion of the body and the senses. Rather than beginning with anthropological themes most commonly and obviously associated with qualia, I proceed first with a discussion of qualia in linguistic practice, move on to qualia in practices organized explicitly around social relations, then turn to qualia in practices organized around external entities, and finally arrive at body-focal practice. This rhetorical sequence is meant to diagram the analytical chain shift from meaning to materiality enacted by decentering the semantico-referential function of a

now-superseded anthropological understanding of language in favor of a semiotic, and specifically pragmatic and metapragmatic, view of linguistic phenomena (Silverstein 1976). The broader argument I wish to make is that attention to qualia enables anthropologists to consider ethnographically what is continuous semiotically across and within practices—from communication to embodiment.

QUALIA IN LINGUISTIC PRACTICE

One of the most immediate consequences of the anthropological rethinking of language has been the recognition of the explanatory limits of formal structuralist analyses of a symbolic code, which largely presume language to be primarily a system for constructing propositions thinkable “about,” but not necessarily communicable “in,” the world. By viewing semantics (i.e., the truly symbolic mode of language) as a subfield of pragmatics (i.e., the indexical mode of language), propositional referring expressions become themselves analyzable as instances of complex, situated social action that are appropriate—or not—to the contexts in which they occur. Our recognition of the indexical basis of language has had further consequences for theories of language-as-practice that dwell on action as an exception or supplement to pure reference and predication (for discussions of Austin, Derrida, Grice, and Searle, see Lee 1997).

In the wake of such a dramatic dampening of the semantico-referentialist ideology of language, indexicality replaces denotation as the more encompassing dimension of social action carried out through spoken and inscribed language. Qualia in linguistic practice are usually embodied in the “sound shape” of language (Jakobson & Waugh 1979), e.g., phonetic variation, prosodic contour, voice quality, onomatopoeia, and other mimetic signals in speech (Barrett et al. 2014, Ninoshvili 2011, Sicoli 2010). And yet, qualia extend beyond straightforwardly isolable phonosonic signals to the broader pragmatic effects of stereotyped co-occurring signs in utterances. Such an extension expands the analysis of linguistic quality from a single pragmatic signal, such as in Sapir’s (1927, p. 895) classic example of a “strained or raucous voice” that might be taken erroneously as an emblem (i.e., a conventional iconic index) of “coarse-grained” character, to an entire way of speaking, such as in Bourdieu’s (1977, p. 661) example, half a century later, of *la gueule* and *la bouche*, respectively characterizing as masculine and feminine two registers of French speech and behavior based on two words referring to the mouth. Through the cultural regimentation of indexes, the qualia discernable in speech forms can extend from an emblematic feature like roughness of voice to multiple co-occurring material sign vehicles condensed in the metaphor of alternating terms for a single part of the human anatomy.

Such fundamentally aesthetic (Munn 2013) dimensions of practice have been shown to have highly consequential indexical effects based on their differential value as paradigmatic alternatives within genres of communication, that is, their imposition of register effects on such genres of verbal practice. For example, in her discussion of bilingual German-Magyar (Hungarian) speakers’ attribution of sensuous qualities to linguistic varieties of German, Gal (2013) compiled an illustrative list demonstrating just how central are namable qualia of enregistered speech practices to broader cultural frameworks of value:

“Hard words” among the Kaluli (Feld & Schieffelin 1982), “plain speaking” in American politics (Cmiel 1990), “talking straight” among Jewish Israelis (Katriel 1986). Kaluli contrast hard with unhard; American plain speaking excludes what is deemed florid. Contrastive lexicons of quality may distinguish different versions of entire languages: . . . “narrow” versus “embroidered” Bergamasco in northern Italy (Cavanaugh 2009), “sweet Hindi” in a Fijian Indian community (Brenneis 1984), “upside-down Walbiri” (Hale 1971) or Tamil that is “Jasmine-scented” (Bate 2009). These are characterizations from the perspective of those who use the speech forms. Qualities may also be projected onto speech by outsider

perspectives: English speakers say they hear Italian as soft, German as harsh. For intellectual men in nineteenth-century Japan, schoolgirls' speech was sugary, shallow and bouncing (Inoue 2006); Beijingers identify some of their own Mandarin as oily in contrast to southern speech (Zhang 2008), while the speech of trendy young people in Dublin sounds flat to other Dubliners (Moore 2011). In these and many similar examples, linguistic forms seem to partake of abstract qualities associated with sense modalities including sound, texture, taste, smell, shape and spatial orientation. (Gal 2013, pp. 12–13)

These various qualities (hardness, straightness, sweetness, oiliness, flatness, etc.) manifest in linguistic practices as qualia with pragmatic consequences. Via “fashions of speaking” [Whorf 1956 (1939), p. 158], metaphors are literalized, seeming to give language forms certain properties that are experienceable in, and emanate from, other realms of social practice. Among seventeenth-century Quakers, “plain speech” served as a religious emblem of identity that “challenged the social structure and the structure of social relations in very fundamental ways” (Bauman 1983, p. 55). Among Ilongot who had converted to Christianity, eschewing “curvy” speech with words “soft and sweet as ripened fruit” in favor of “straight” speech, with its potential to produce “words like arrows,” was a way of indexically displaying “new knowledge” (Rosaldo 1984). Among Christian converts in Sumba, “hard” and “soft” personal names were replaced with baptismal Christian names and status titles as a means of enacting Christian personhood (Kuipers 1998, pp. 95–124). And among Tibetan Buddhist monks in India, teachers deployed “affect indexicals of ‘aggression’” and “affect indexicals of ‘anger’” to socialize novices according to “morally weighted ideals concerning language, affect, and personhood” (Lempert 2012, p. 128) within a broader (albeit changing) pedagogical regime of harshness, communicative violence, and corporal punishment (on “affective” and “energetic” interpretants, see also Kockelman 2013). In these ethnographic examples, qualia emerge as consequential to communicative practice by providing aesthetic and moral anchors of orientation for reflexive, group-defining conduct and thus for the situated enactment of forms of personhood.

In this process, qualia are “rhematized” indexes (Gal 2013, Irvine & Gal 2000), that is, “downshifted” (Parmentier 1994) in the reflexive (un)conscious from the indexical to the iconic mode of signification (for a contrasting process of indexical interpretation, cf. Ball 2014 on “dicentization”). As a consequence of rhematization, sign vehicles across ontologically different domains no longer merely point to the same object, but also are construed as “like” the same object and thus “like” one another (Harkness 2013, Keane 2003). The semiotic “ground” of this likeness may undergo hypostatic abstraction, where a predicate (e.g., soft, straight, mean) is treated as an abstract quality (e.g., softness, straightness, meanness) (Parmentier 1994, pp. 28–29; Peirce 1933, section 4.549). This process makes possible the cline from vulgarly “coarse” to “ordinary” to exquisitely “refined” registers in Javanese (Errington 1988); the sensuous effects of Senegalese “griot”-talk and “noble”-talk (Irvine 1990); and the different greeting strategies of “aggressive” and “warlike” tribesmen versus “natural” and “softer” *sayyid* in Yemen (Caton 1986). Qualia emergent in linguistic practice condense as they instantiate cultural concepts regarding the characteristics presumed to inhere in or belong to categories of personhood, such as gender (Caton 1990, Eckert 2000, Herzfeld 1988, Inoue 2006, Kiesling 2001, Kulick 1998, Ochs 1992, Podesva 2007, Zimman 2014) or race (Alim 2004, Bucholtz 2011, Hill 2008, Reyes & Lo 2009, Wirtz 2014). In these cases, the qualia in enregistered speech practices instantiate abstract qualities that can be applied to broader forms of conduct, mobilized for illocutionary force, and linked to specific categories of personhood.

QUALIA IN PHATIC PRACTICE

The section above is concerned largely with indexical linkages between qualia emergent in kinds of verbal communication and their suggestion of relatively stable characteristics of kinds of persons. I

now turn to qualia in phatic practice, following Jakobson (and, distantly, Malinowski) in referring to pragmatic activity oriented to establishing, maintaining, or transforming social connections (physical or psychological) among people. Just as there are culturally stipulated kinds of persons, there are culturally stipulated kinds of relations among kinds of persons as well as normative qualities that people associate with these relations and in terms of which label them. The qualities of the relationships themselves come to consciousness via such labeling. Furthermore, there are ways of enacting these relational qualities through genred forms of communicative practice, both linguistic and nonlinguistic.

Rupert Stasch's (2009) ethnography of the Korowai in Papua New Guinea works through the semiotic intricacies of what he refers to as an "indigenous pragmatics of social bonds" (p. 14), showing how social attachment and avoidance, and familiarity and strangeness, are established by actively managing the qualia of the tactile, the visual, the edible, and the verbal as media for kinship, friendship, and other relations. Focusing on the quality of otherness or alterity as it emerges and is managed in practical acts of sociality, Stasch (2009, p. 174) argues that a "sensitivity about social relations . . . is thus also a sensitivity about qualities of action and their relation-defining effects." Nozawa (2015) develops similar themes of otherness and distance, sameness and closeness, in his analysis of what he calls a "fantasy of the phatic" in urban Tokyo, where "solitude and indifference [are not] a new problem simply awaiting a solution, [rather] they are in fact productive of a fantasy of sociality" (p. 377). Beginning with sensational news reports regarding elderly people (usually men) dying alone, unnoticed, among their own family, Nozawa contrasts *mu-en* (no relation), *en-giri* (disconnection), and "an anxious feeling of precarity that was already widely shared in various dimensions of Japanese society, across generational boundaries" (p. 380) with "idioms such as *fuwaei*, 'touching-together,' *tsunagari*, 'connecting,' and more recently in the aftermath of the 2011 triple disaster, *kizuna*, 'bonding'" (p. 383). In the phatic fantasy that Nozawa describes, "contact" serves as a trope for communication: "The implicit ideology of communication here—what might be called phatic-indexicalism—stipulates that relationality is, first and foremost, about making contact through indexical triggering (whatever else may also be accomplished)" (p. 386). The work of keeping the "infrastructure of indexicality" accessible, Nozawa notes, involves engaging in and evaluating communicative practice in terms of qualia: "skillful communicators facilitate the smooth circulation of the 'air' of conversation within an interactional space, as by an air conditioner" (p. 386). Qualia in practices organized explicitly around establishing and transforming social relations give sensuous form to cultural conceptualizations of the more abstract qualities that can precipitate affective states from phatic sensibilities.

Qualia in explicitly relational, phatic practice have emerged as a central concern in recent ethnographic research at vastly different scales, from the multimodal management of feelings of proximity in relation to notions of hierarchy and symmetry within a Badaga peasant community in South India (Heideman 2013), to the role of "density as a relational and social quality produced by identifiable associations, practices, and systems of human interactions" in Mumbai (Rao 2007, p. 227), or, in a locomotory reprise of Anderson's [2006 (1983), p. 145] notion of interdiscursive unisonance and its ritual effects, to gesture's place in "the embodied practices through which that feeling of 'us' and community was generated and replenished over the centuries, and which creates a sense of intimacy on the streets of a city of millions [Cairo]" (Elyachar 2011, p. 94).

Practices that can be characterized as overtly religious provide compelling examples of the role of qualia in anchoring and orienting human conduct around higher-order conceptualizations of the qualities of social relations. Consider Lester's (2005) account of prayerful postulants in a Roman Catholic convent in Mexico. Reminiscent of Bynum's (1987) discussions of medieval women's ecstatic unions with Christ through mass and their reception of the Eucharist, Lester describes a group of nuns-in-training for whom the qualia of prayer practice materialize as points

of orientation for a communicatively achieved social relation with their deity in a Pascalian fashion of bodily submission:

They must develop a sense of tactile meditation as they concentrate on the sensation of the rosary beads slipping through their fingers during the afternoon recitation. They must learn to walk gingerly back to their pews after receiving Holy Communion and to kneel in intense adoration as the body of Christ slowly dissolves in their mouths and becomes one with their own. And in all of these areas, they must be excruciatingly sensitive to their bodies—the pains, sensations, discomforts, and strains of their mortal flesh, as these, too, are thought to be avenues of communication with God. . . . [P]ractices of piety in the convent involve not simply the abstracted soul but the organized semiotic relationships of the bodied self to other bodied selves and to the divine. (Lester 2005, p. 174)

The qualia of divine phatic sociality and presence thus serve as key semiotic anchors of religious practice across culturally conceptualized domains of experience (Coleman 2011, Engelke 2007, Luhrmann 2012).

The “bundling” (Keane 2003) of qualities through the affective qualia of phatic practice is evident, for example, in Judith Irvine’s (1990) account of enregistered affect among Wolof speakers in Senegal. A person’s biologically inherited “temperament” or “capacity for emotionality” is linked to the “composition of liquid elements of the body” such as viscosity (Irvine 1990, p. 158 n. 13); it is further associated with the qualia of encounters with elements such as earth, air, fire, and water; it is yet further associated with stereotyped variations in verbal behavior and talk (breathy/sonorous, soft/loud, slow/fast, etc.); and these characterizations taken together are ascriptively associated with “noble” and “griot” categories of interactionally manifest personhood (Irvine 1990, pp. 133–35). The ethnographic record of the management and transformation of social relations is replete with accounts such as this, where culturally consistent sensuous experiences form pragmatic linkages among body parts such as hearts, stomachs, and livers; external materials and processes, such as fire and burning, wind and blowing, rot and purification; features of communicative forms, such as voice timbre, amplitude, and tempo; and relational identity, from immediate roles in interaction to more perduring notions of personhood (Beeman 2005, Brenneis 1987, Dent 2009, Feld 1982, Kulick 1998, Lutz 1988, Wilce 2009, Yano 2002).

In this regard, feelings experienced along such dimensions as hot-to-cold appear to be seemingly ubiquitous qualitative categories for organizing the qualia of social relations: for example, angry hearts that “spark” like fire among the Ilongot in relation to headhunting practices (Rosaldo 1980, p. 40), the “chill” or “warmth” of Soviet-era social relations and the role of “phatic experts” in managing such relations (Lemon 2013; other phatic qualia include “lustrous” and “dull,” “taut” and “lax”), and the “heat” and “fire” of Christian revival activity in relation to gendered practices and social relations among Guhu-Samane Christians in Papua New Guinea (Handman 2014). The very stuff of sociality comes to be known and managed through such qualia—with Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) classic formulation of “hot” and “cold” societies being an extreme example of just how good qualia are to think, that is, to index culturally conceptualized qualities that can be reapplied, analogically, to other social categories of experience and scales of social organization.

EXTERNAL QUALIA AND “THINGS OUT THERE”

Recent anthropology in the semiotics of materiality has explored the way multiple genres of practical conduct with respect to “things” and broader frameworks of value are oriented by the projective discernment of sensuous qualities (Hull 2012; Keane 1997, 2003; Manning 2012; Manning & Meneley 2008; Murphy 2015). A conceptual shift away from viewing language as

primarily a denotational system, i.e., “words for things,” and toward the enregistered pragmatics of verbal and other practices as social action has productively destabilized old scholarly ideologies not only of “words” but also of “things.”

Paul Manning’s (2012) study, *The Semiotics of Drink and Drinking*, elaborates on this issue, carefully distinguishing between these two perspectives. One is a “vaguely Saussurean or structuralist” approach, where “an object is not viewed semiotically in terms of its material qualities but rather in terms of its place within a system of structured oppositions and equivalences, giving it a differential purely negative value to which a positive meaning (sense) is arbitrarily assigned” (Manning 2012, p. 4). The other is the semiotics of embodied material culture, with multiply complex considerations of indexical relations among (indexical) practice and (meta-indexical) ideology, speech and consumption, and bodies and “things” as sites for attention. In an analysis ranging from water to vodka, soft drinks to beer, coffee to wine, Manning shows how durable material objects come to embody potentially meaningful, conventionalized qualities in the form of qualisigns that are indexically realized through the genred pragmatics of culturally interpreted drinking practices.

In this vein, the qualia of comestibles in culinary-gustatory practices in particular serve as crucial pragmatic signals for orienting to and manipulating things “out there in the world”: the “luminosity, liquidity, spreadability, durability” of olive oil in religious practices of the Mediterranean (Meneley 2008, p. 306); the various qualia of fatty substances in the mediation of all sorts of practices, from the production of the creamy, porky, fatty, homey qualia of genuine Bergamasco *lardo* to pornography (Kulick & Meneley 2005); gustatory qualia of all sorts, such as the various qualia of softness in the consumption of Korean *soju* (Harkness 2013) or of bitterness, which is as central to medicinal meals in China (Farquhar 2007) as it is, along with blandness, to the substances mediating the social visit among the Weyéwa on Sumba, Indonesia (Kuipers 1984). A broader literature on food practices has given extensive attention to qualia in relation to comestibles and *terroir* (Cavanaugh 2007, Manning 2012, Paxson 2013, Weiss 2011).

An anthropological concern with the senses (Classen 1993, Geurts 2002, Stoller 1989) as culturally conceptualized channels for qualia that provide knowledge about material “things” (Miller 2005, Tilley et al. 2006) can be situated within a broader program that considers the semiotic regimentation of qualia as cultural emergents, linked to genred activities organized explicitly around practical engagements with the “thinginess” of exteroceptively encountered entities. In Japan, olfactory qualia are mobilized in practices of “sniffing out” the smell of chemicals for treating leather as a clue to stigmatized Burakumin heritage (Hankins 2013). In Angola, various qualia of visibility and invisibility extend from diamonds, to diamond-trading practices, to the bodies of diamond traders (Calvão 2013). In Vietnam, the haptic and visual qualia of paper money take on significance in gift-giving and exchange (Truitt 2013). From the “sensory politics” of heat and public housing reform in Chicago (Fennell 2011) to dissonant and dysfunctional media in Kano, Nigeria (Larkin 2008), and from embodied aptitudes for managing and making traffic in Jakarta (Lee 2015) to daily encounters with disembodied characters in Tokyo (Nozawa 2013), practices that form around engagements with infrastructure produce recognizably urban qualia as pragmatic media for action. In transnational labor migration between China and the United States, various qualia of motion become indexes of mobility as a conventional qualisign of personal value (Chu 2010). And in the circulation and effects of commodity branding, qualia become the very objects of manipulation and policing (Agha 2011, Koh 2015, Moore 2003, Nakassis 2012).

Qualia may be elevated as forms of practical knowledge about the world, for example, haptic qualia in pulse-taking practices (Daniel 1983, Farquhar 2012) or sonic qualia in scientific practices (Helmreich 2007, Roosth 2009). In Beijing, the visual qualia of art objects are located within standardizing evaluation practices in the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Chumley 2013). In Paris, magicians manage the secrets of their craft, the objects of amazement, and the effects of illusion

through the subtle and agile manipulation of visual and haptic qualia (Jones 2011). In American academic jazz programs, musical instruments and musical texts are felt, objectified, and manipulated through the multimodal qualia of practice (Wilf 2014)—in the sense of both the pragmatics of genred activity and the answer to the question, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” In these ethnographies, qualia form a cultural basis for the local semiotics of apperception, for how actors indexically presuppose prior knowledge about the world and reinstantiate (and reinforce) that knowledge through further pragmatic effects.

Qualia can serve as sensuous pivot points in practical human activity. In religious practice, other worlds become perceptible through the qualia of encounters with worldly objects, as sensuous contact with the divine is cultivated through genred practice (Klaver & van de Kamp 2011, Meyer 2013, Promey 2014). In Cairo, aural qualia ethically shape sensory attunements to specific idealized qualities among Muslims, incorporating a “constellation of sensory aptitudes and practices” (Hirschkind 2006, p. 21), and oily substances and bodily secretions serve as forms of truth making and divine witnessing among Coptic Christians (Heo 2013). In everyday bodily practices, we find not just a body in motion, but also a body that moves in relation to the qualia of encounters with entities, a “world perceived through the feet” (Ingold 2011, p. 33).

These discussions point back to Nancy Munn’s (1986) ethnography of covert cultural relations among conventional qualisigns in acts of value transformation on Gawa. In her analysis of life on Gawa, multimodal qualia culturally associated with “things out there” and bodily “things in here” emerge at the center of pragmatic action and contribute to broader domains of signification and value:

This [curing] rite exemplifies, on the one hand, the experiential constitution of qualia as relationships between the individual’s body and physical space in a particular context of activity, and suggests how a given activity itself may formulate these relationships; on the other hand, the rite also condenses the symbiosis between value transformations of the body and those of the productive land and the crops. (Munn 1986, p. 89)

Munn’s ethnography provides numerous empirical examples of the way ritual here, as everywhere, dynamically figurates and concentrates relations across sensuous and other domains. Furthermore, she shows how qualia, as pragmatic signals emergent in and by culturally framed practices, provide a crucial pathway into the semiotic analysis of embodiment.

EMBODIED QUALIA AND “THINGS IN HERE”

Our understanding of social action as fundamentally pragmatic, and of pragmatics as unavoidably semiotic, has influenced anthropological analyses of bodily practice—from gesture and paralinguage (Haviland 2004) to whole genres of body-focal behavior (Hanks 1990). However, a residual ideology of language as denotation, constructed on the obviousness of the semantico-referential function and projected onto other cultural media as “symbolic” or “representational,” continues to prompt categorical distinctions, for example, in the invitation “to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes, not as a medium of symbolic meanings” (Asad 1993, p. 75). Such distinctions can be found in the familiar “critique of intellectualistic tendencies to assimilate bodily experience to conceptual and verbal formulations and to regard practices as ‘symbolic’ of something outside themselves” and “endeavor to move away from the unduly abstract semiotic models which have dominated anthropological research in recent years by developing a grounded and common-sense mode of analysis which lays emphasis on patterns of bodily praxis in the immediate social field and material world” (Jackson 1983, p. 327). Such distinctions may be amplified

and then combined methodologically, for example, in understanding “cultural phenomenology [of the body] as a counterweight and complement to interpretive anthropology’s emphasis on sign and symbol” (Csordas 1994, p. 4). And the components of such distinctions often are ranked unevenly within a hierarchy, such as in a “carnal sociology” that views “humans as visceral creatures impelled by socialized drives and desires for which language [reduced here to denotation] provides a second-order means of social construction” (Wacquant 2014, p. 14 n. 10, insertion mine). The pragmatic concept of qualia—practically emergent sensuous indexes regimented across modalities by cultural processes—destabilizes the polarity between “material bodies” and “abstract symbols” that makes possible the distinctions invoked above.

Qualia, as a type of index, are as salient in language and other forms of communicative practice as they are in the forging and management of social relations; they are as salient in the engagement with the “thinginess” of external entities as they are in the incorporation of such entities into proprioceptive experiences of body-focal practice. Ethnographic studies of the human voice as a nexus of phonic and sonic practice provide evidence for this point (Harkness 2014, pp. 10–21). Ethnographically pervasive, the voice obviously is a communicative medium and a channel of sociality, and yet it is also persistently an objectified target of attention, serving as a material “thing” to be heard, manipulated, trained, possessed, and circulated while being embodied and, sometimes, disembodied (Fox 2004, Gade 2004, Weidman 2010). In musical practice specifically, consider Feld’s (1994, p. 119) observation that “timbre, the building blocks of sound quality, and texture, the composite, realized experiential feel of the sound mass in motion, are not mere ornaments but dominate melodic-rhythmic syntax in ‘lift-up-over sounding,’” a key feature of Kaluli sung polyphony that allows songs to “harden” with the sounds of the *gisalo* song voice “that should carry ‘like water rushing over rocks’” (Feld 1982, pp. 174, 268). Qualia are central to the aesthetics and sensuous response to voices, whether “big throats” among the Suyá [Seeger 2004 (1987)] and powerful voices in *isicathamiya* singing (Erlmann 1996); race and song in South Africa (Olwage 2004) and the United States (Eidsheim 2011); “cleanliness” versus “huskiness” of voice as a function of the manipulation and treatment of the singing body in South Korea (Harkness 2014, Park 2003); or the “naturalness” of voice in South Indian classical music (Weidman 2006) and the technological mediation, manipulation, and fidelity of voice around the world (Greene & Porcello 2005, Kunreuther 2014, Sterne 2003). In studies of the religious voice, qualia have been central to understanding how speech and song link body and sound, secular and sacred (Eisenlohr 2009, Engelhardt 2015, Engelke 2007, Haeri 2003, Harkness 2014, Hirschkind 2006).

A robust ethnographic record suggests that qualia across modalities are central to drawing together multiple threads of activity into culturally recognized, enregistered forms of bodily conduct as integral “styles.” In the area of gender, for example, the significance of qualia in the enregisterment of bodily practice in relation to stereotypical values is at its clearest: from Mauss’s [1973 (1934)] classic consideration of the techniques of walking among girls in the United States and France as “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of actions,” to Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological study of a transgender person’s resocialization and “passing” as a woman in the late 1950s, to Young’s (1980) reflections on the gendering of bodily comportment and movement and the qualia of “throwing like a girl.”

Anthropologists have long been interested in the qualia of practice both of the body (Blacking 1977) and “beyond the body proper” (Lock & Farquhar 2007). The semiotic scaling and stratification of qualia in embodied practice is captured in Farquhar’s (2002) study of changing forms of consumption of traditional Chinese medicine alongside developing biomedical models of health and changing ideals of and frameworks for self-pleasure (e.g., through food and sex). It is also found in Farquhar & Zhang’s (2012) study of “nurturing life” in the parks of Beijing, where Beijingers cultivate bodily qualia through forms of athletic practice that result in culturally

conceptualized states of well-being, e.g., calisthenics and dancing that produce a “feeling that this regular bending, swaying, and rubbing is important for staying limber and free from aches and pains” (Farquhar & Zhang 2012, p. 110).

Anthropologists have documented many different ways in which the qualia of painful experiences, as proprioceptive sensations directly linked with the body and bodily activity, become pragmatic points of orientation in culturally stipulated forms of practice, both narrow and broad (DeVecchio Good et al. 1992, Kleinman et al. 1997). Consider, for example, pain as a focus of community memory and activism in Chicago (Ralph 2013) or as a site around which people are socialized on Yap (Throop 2010), pain as something to be cultivated and inflicted through masculine athleticism among boxers in the United States (or pugilism among “fighting scholars” around the world; see Wacquant 2014 and references therein) or transcended by the male wrestler in North India who is said to “wear a necklace of pain’ in order to achieve his goal of somatic self-perfection” (Alter 1992, pp. 221–22), and pain as a point of divergence between Warao curers and patients (Briggs 1994) or as a point of convergence in the coordinated wailing of Inner Maniat women over the death of kin (Seremetakis 1991). Earlier generations of Worora and related peoples in the Northern Kimberley of Australia experienced “out-of-the-ordinary qualitative feelings monitored on the inside—tingling, cramp, throbbing, shooting or dull pain, etc.” as momentary “body amulets” that indexed “something going on in the way of the particular classificatory kinsperson associated with this region [of the body] by the deictic system of kinship gestures” (Silverstein 2013, p. 102). In the few studies mentioned here, the enregistered pragmatics of bodily qualia are indexically linked in practice to ways of communicating, socializing, and selecting among and incorporating external objects into embodied action.

CONCLUSION: QUALIA IN PRACTICE, PRAXIS, AND PRAGMATICS

In considering the sensuous pragmatics of practice, this review has focused on two related intellectual developments in anthropology. The first is the analytical chain shift enacted by the de-centering of the semantico-referential function in the anthropological understanding of language and thence cultural “symbolism” and the resultant emergence of a broader semiotic pragmatics of culture in which language is one, albeit privileged, province. The second is the role of a specific kind of pragmatic signal, sensuous indexes called qualia, in tracing a practical semiotic pathway along this shift, continuous from language and communication, to phaticity and social relations, to encounters with “things out there” in the world, to embodied experiences “in here.”

The term “practice” is unavoidable for any descriptive, let alone theoretical, account in contemporary sociocultural anthropology. And yet the term is so extensionally expansive that it ceases to define much at all. Recently it was claimed that “the word [practice] designates nothing more than the refuse heap of everything that the subject-object pincer has been unable to grasp. If everything of late has become ‘practice,’ it is not because it is a good concept” (Latour 2014, p. 305). Perhaps the denotational bleaching of practice simply has to do with the fact that the word has not been “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (Peirce 1935, section 5.414). At first glance, such discomfort with the term appears to be reminiscent of a previous generation’s discomfort with “structure,” which, in some circles, the notion of practice was supposed to supplant:

“Structure” appears to be just a yielding to a word that has a perfectly good meaning but suddenly becomes fashionably attractive for a decade or so—like “streamlining”—and during its vogue tends to be applied indiscriminately because of the pleasurable connotations of its sound. . . . So what “structure” adds to the meaning of our phrase seems to be nothing, except to provoke a degree of pleasant puzzlement. (Kroeber, quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 314).

In the 1980s, the “practice turn” held the promise of “a study of all forms of human action, but from a particular–political–angle” (Ortner 1984, p. 149). A few decades later, “[r]eification of ‘practice’ as a defining object leaves sociocultural anthropology gravitating toward nominalism, or toward functionalism organized around a tacit universal idea of rational choice or power-seeking” (Stasch 2014, p. 631).

When given methodological grounding through pragmatics—the indexical processes by which action is typified, situated, and meaningful—the notion of practice can continue to serve anthropology as the substance of praxis, which I take in its weak (rather than strong) form to refer to reflexive, goal-directed, and potentially consequential behavior. The *an sich* character of practice relates to the *für sich* character of praxis through the classic Geertzian problematic of studying “other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz 1973, p. 9). This problematic—motivated by the Goffmanian question regarding all social activity: “What is it that’s going on here?” (Goffman 1974, p. 8)—has been approached methodologically in semiotic anthropology through the concept of metapragmatics, the realm of pragmatic (i.e., indexical) processes that seem, dialectically, to frame, stipulate, or regiment pragmatic processes (Silverstein 1976). As certain qualia emerge in practice as salient features of praxis through such group-relative reflections on and of practice, anthropologists are faced with the fact that “[h]owever much the social theorist, ethnographer, historian, or political activist may want to take seriously other people’s self-consciousness, we cannot assume in advance that this self-consciousness will coincide with what we would take to be a convincing account of their actions and the consequences that follow from them” (Keane 2007, p. 4). With conflicting accounts come anthropological theories designed to explain the fact that people in social groups have different understandings of the salient pragmatic features of practice: false consciousness, misrecognition, secondary rationalizations, and so forth, as the literature would have them. But the problem does not stop with disagreement. Faced with a systematic demonstration of the semiotic constraints on or limits to awareness of social action, even as it enters a mode of praxis, anthropologists have also come to consider “how fraught with danger is our [merely] taking at face value any statements by participants about various pragmatically-meaningful action” (Silverstein 1981, p. 20) without considering the semiotic properties of such statements in relation to the semiotic properties of the action being described.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest three areas for further empirical research on the pragmatics of qualia in practice. First, although “anything which focuses the attention is an index” (Peirce 1932, section 2.285), not all indexes focus the attention. An important area for further research is the role of habituated, normative, ordinary qualia that do not normally emerge as foci in praxis but rather sustain everyday practices precisely for their unremarkable status (such qualia are central to theories of habitus, hexis, and the unremarkable—as well as unremarked—everyday). Second, much of what does enter awareness does so in relation to the metapragmatic functionality of language. In addition to studying qualia in linguistic practice and its aesthetic and ethical evaluation, there remains considerable work to be done to study talk about qualia, both in terms of the structural possibilities and constraints of specific languages (see, e.g., Levinson 2000, Lucy 1997 on the lexicalization of color terms) and in terms of genre and register, such as in wine talk or “oinoglossia” (Silverstein 2003), aesthetic commentary in arts training (Chumley 2013), conversations about “styling styles” among computer scientists (Wilf 2013), or modes of talking about sound and voice (Feld et al. 2004). Third, insofar as practices are oriented to and anchored by ritual sites of authorization that demarcate and value social space, more ethnographic research is needed on the way in which qualia across different modalities are brought into ritual alignment as (iconic) indexes of the same quality (e.g., softness, purity, manliness) within ideological frames of evaluation (see the above quote from Munn 1986). An ethnographic approach that considers the pragmatic linkages among all three—awareness, language, and ritual—will have much to

contribute to our comparative anthropological understanding of the “feeling of doing” and the broader cultural organization of sensuous semiosis.

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