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# Growing beyond the niche? How machines link production and networking practices of small rural food businesses

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## ABSTRACT

This paper employs a practice perspective to understand the hanging-together of networking and production practices in small craft-food businesses. Based on a case study from a rural region of Germany, we explore how practices are held together by teleoffective structures and socio-material arrangements, pointing to the role of machines as nodes in networking and production practices. We furthermore demonstrate how the niche-specific mode of these practices facilitates cooperation within the niche but hampers cooperation beyond the niche. Last, the hanging-together of producing and networking practices eventually leads to a niche-specific path for business growth. We add to the blossoming entrepreneurship-as-practice (EaP) literature by delineating how the bundle of entrepreneurial practices of producing, selling, and networking works to constitute a niche business realm, highlighting the agency of matter.

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## 1 Introduction

A central aspect of rural development is the growth of small and microbusinesses. However, the often very innovative, niche businesses in particular have difficulty growing (Bjørkhaug and Turid Kvam 2011) or simply show no inclination to do so (Galloway and Mochrie 2006). Likewise, regional networking, sometimes treated as the panacea to business growth, is oftentimes difficult to achieve. Starting from this very practical issue in rural development, we apply a practice perspective to deeply understand how the niche-specific practices of producing and networking are bundled up in the development of new products and how they eventually combine to create business growth.

We draw on a rich case study on a group of entrepreneurs in the craft-food sector and their attempts at networking beyond the niche. We argue that explanations for the difficulties in regional networking and in the growth of small businesses can be found in the physical and embodied nature of practices, rather than being dealt with abstractly, as it is the nature of these practices (and components) that matters for networking outcomes. Departing from the idea that networking is a group and context-specific social practice that is entangled with other entrepreneurial core practices, such as product/idea and market development, we ask how the small craft-food businesses under focus actually 'do' networking and how this could eventually lead to growth.

Since the beginning of the Practice Turn (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), and more recently, an 'entrepreneurship-as-practice' perspective (EaP) (Champenois, Lefebvre, and Ronteau 2020; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020), has made gains by highlighting the micro-foundations of entrepreneurial everyday activities. Despite the heterogeneity in theoretical underpinnings,

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methodologies applied, and questions asked, the EaP approaches adopt 'entrepreneurial' (Steyaert 2007) as an umbrella term for the complex and open-ended, intrinsically social activities that are connected to founding, running, and growing a business. With regard to networking, the EaP literature has highlighted that there are quite different modes of networking and that types of cooperation and social capital that are valuable in one field cannot easily be translated to another, thus pointing to group-specific modes of cooperation (Keating, Geiger, and McLoughlin 2014; Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2010).

Here, we follow Schatzki's model of praxis as a bundle of practices entangled with material arrangements and tied together through practical understanding (how things are done), general understanding (the value, meaning, or the normal way or place of doing something), and teleo-affective structures (how it feels or what it means to do something) (Schatzki 2016). This philosophical account of the social cannot be transferred to empiric research without further specification (see methods section). However, in drawing attention to the materiality 'entangled' in our everyday lives and its effects on stabilizing, provoking, or changing practices, Schatzki's approach provides a useful and fruitful refinement to our understanding of entrepreneurship. This is the case, because it draws our attention to the *sine qua non* of entrepreneurship, which is the very physical creation of 'something'. The production of 'something', even if it is software or a speech, involves a wide array of produce, equipment, machinery, factories, gadgets, tools, etc., which we usually ignore as being subjected to the entrepreneurial genius. However, the field of food entrepreneurship shows paradigmatically how materiality, such as weather or a broken machine, is at least a co-creator in the entrepreneurial process. In this way, the paper helps to understand why cooperation is so challenging beyond personal inclination and we can add another piece to the reconstruction of entrepreneurial networking mainly dominated by positivistic assumptions.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: The following Section 2 provides an introduction to our practice-theory approach and summarizes the relevant literature on networking from rural studies and EaP. Section 3 presents the material and methods applied, and the background of the research project. Section 4 describes the regional context, the entrepreneurs of this study, and the analyses of networking practices and the subsequent trajectories of business growth. Section 5 summarizes and critically discusses the results and concludes by considering the value of practice theories.

## 2 Small rural food businesses: practices of networking

Business networks are a well-studied phenomenon in entrepreneurship research and especially so within the field of rural entrepreneurship. A recent review on the situation of SMEs in rural areas points to 'collaborative strategies' as a key activity (Beckmann, Garkisch, and Zeyen 2021) with which rural entrepreneurs react to their sometimes challenging local environment. Networks are often found to be intensively close-knit and homogeneous in rural areas (Drakopoulou Dodd, Jack, and Anderson 2002), with the 'embeddedness' being higher in even more remote areas (Bosworth and Atterton 2012). Generally speaking, artisan entrepreneurs of this kind, who are putting to use endogenous resources and creating them by looking at the rural context in a different way (Anderson 2000), have the potential to add to the aesthetic-consumptive function of the rural as a place for leisure, tourism, and recreation, thus fulfilling aspects of the new rural paradigm agenda (Horlings and Marsden 2014). A recurrent theme in rural development is thus the enhancement of networks among small rural businesses to increase innovativeness and growth (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000).

Various studies, often based on rural development programmes, on networking of small food businesses point out, however, that networking is not necessarily achieved everywhere. Warlow and Kasabov (2014) address this aspect by revealing 'significant rural conflicts, cooperation difficulties and failure' (ibid., 266) based on research on food cooperatives in England. Duarte Alonso and Bressan (2016) show that within the sector of food production there is limited within-sector

cooperation, which is likely to create deficits in the regional acquisition and diffusion of knowledge. On the one hand, small rural businesses in remote locations might simply lack relevant others with whom to network (Bjørkhaug and Kvam 2011; Kvam 2010), indicating the importance of ‘critical mass’ strategies in the development of (food) businesses. On the other hand, many micro businesses do not perceive growth as their pivotal strategy (Tregear 2005; Galloway and Mochrie 2006; Bjørkhaug and Turid Kvam 2011). Indeed, how entrepreneurs themselves configure ‘growth’, what they mean by it, and how they like to achieve it, is nebulous.

In sum, the existing literature is mainly concerned with attitudes and individual psychological inclinations as drivers of both (non-)cooperation and of growth in small rural businesses. Networking is perceived as a strategic and goal-oriented behaviour and growth as the inevitable consequence of successful entrepreneurship. Against this background, we propose to look at what actually happens when rural entrepreneurs ‘network’ and develop products.

### **2.1 Networking as a social practice**

Networking interpreted through a practice lens draws our attention to taken for granted and overlooked details of social life, “the nitty-gritty work of entrepreneuring” (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020), and thus reveals the everyday and routine activities, which bundle up to form this core entrepreneurial activity. Instead of a tool for resource acquisition, networks become ‘a socially constructed life world that not only mirrors, but (re-)presents the environment and helps create growth’ (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2010, 2).

Through a practice perspective, we try to understand how activities are embedded in and change in accordance to a certain context, as networking practices depend on the institutional setting of the business and the established practices in the field. While there is agreement that networks are important to access resource, Keating, Geiger, and McLoughlin (2014) demonstrate that it is not so much about *what* resources entrepreneurs acquire *from whom*, but rather more, generally, *how* resourcing practices, as a way of engaging with other people, look like. In consequence, resources do not exist by themselves but rather emerge through the networking practices or, in general, through the practices in which entrepreneurs turn objects, things, connections, etc., into resources (ibid). We focus on the socio-material arrangements, in which the many activities, which build up to networking, are entangled (Schatzki 2016). This way, what people do at a certain place in a given situation with what artefacts and how they feel about it becomes key to understanding entrepreneurial lifeworlds, constituted by practices. Socio-material arrangements such as, for example, production sites or places to meet, relate to, stabilize or challenge practices. Finally, a practice-perspective is about ‘appreciating entrepreneurial phenomena as the enactment and entanglement of multiple practices’ (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020, 247), down to the affectual and precognitive dimensions, which enable and guide supra-individual practices. Thus, we are curious about what it feels like to network or to produce and how this constitutes a practice carried by many entrepreneurs (Reckwitz 2002). Against this background, we focus on the practices of networking and producing of small craft-food businesses within and across their niche. The contrasting modes of networking and producing within the artisan niche and beyond it allow to reconstruct the details of networking along the different dimensions of a practice, such as socio-material arrangements, shared (general and practical) understanding and teleoaffective structures. Most of all, we are interested in how the practices of producing and networking are interlinked and how they eventually build up in a process of business growth.

## **3 Methodology, methods, and material**

This study is based on an applied research project on a funding scheme of, among other things, rural business networks and innovation.<sup>1</sup> During the project, it became apparent that the originally intended networking of small craft-food businesses with the regional food industry

for upscaling appeared to be impossible for various reasons, while networking with equally innovative small craft-food businesses was done easily. These practical difficulties of rural entrepreneurship led to the theory-led analysis of the relations between production practices, practices of networking and the practices of business development and growth.

The case study region is a peripheral rural area (county level) on the eastern shore of Germany. The region has been a crop-producing area for the last 200 years and continues to be characterized by very large farms. The historical structure of the regional agricultural industry influences the local context for the entrepreneurs of this study in two ways. First, there are hardly any relevant local food traditions, nor is there heritage food (Siebert and Laschewski 2010). Second, barely any food-manufacturing (processing) and only a few artisan food businesses, such as butchers or bakers, exist outside of the larger settlements (Land 2005). Besides agriculture, as one of the sunniest regions in Germany, tourism plays an important role in the local economy. While these are conditions that influence the entrepreneurial process 'on the ground', the overall situation in Germany is of relevance as well. The turn to quality in food (Goodman 2003), and connected to it a rising consumer interest in local food and food specialities, is slowly impacting consumer preferences in Germany (Geschmackstage Deutschland Ee.V. and Buxel 2018).

We present a longitudinal case study (2015–2019) with qualitative data analysis. Something as complex as Schatzki's understanding of practices as multi-sited, temporarily dispersed activities constituted by material arrangements and shared knowledge cannot be captured by a single method (Nicolini 2009). Thus, we build our results on a broad range of materials and interpretative approaches.

The collected material consists of a total of 19 primarily narrative interviews, including innovation and business biographies (Butzin and Widmaier 2016) and a group discussion with the artisan entrepreneurs, and expert interviews with the region's administration from tourism and economic development and from regional industry. Importantly, we talked both to the craft-food entrepreneurs and to their envisaged cooperation partners from industry. The biographical interviews are open, narrative accounts of the development trajectory of a product and of the business. These accounts also include episodes of the entrepreneurs' biography and network development. The retrospective method allows one to follow the relevance of events as experienced by the interviewees (Schatzki 2006).

The sample comprises a good mixture of locals and immigrants, men and women. Some have received funding, others have not. The businesses are between 2 and 30 years old. All businesses are the main occupation of the entrepreneur and employ 2–12 employees. Locals became entrepreneurial after the end of the German Democratic Republic. The second group of entrepreneurs were attracted to the area by the local landscape and the overall opportunities that the transition period provided. These immigrants settled in the region after the year 2000. They have professional qualifications and years of experience in a tourism- or culinary-related job. The entrepreneurs were quick to form various local networks, benefitting from the critical mass of like-minded newcomers. Table 1 gives an overview of the products they produce.

The interviews took place on the premises of the entrepreneurs (the places where they work and live) and usually included a demonstration of the actual production of the product and a tour of the premises. Through the infusion of such 'go-along interview' (Kusenbach 2003) elements, further narration about the production process and site was stimulated, and first-hand insight into the actual doing of the production was gained. Participant observations of the market established by the entrepreneurs, and of two network meetings, were also used for interpretation. Secondary material such as reports from the region's administration, local newspapers, and the websites of the businesses complement the picture. All material is in German, and interview quotes are translated by the author.

As stated above, Schatzki's approach to practices is a philosophical but not a theoretical perspective that can be easily translated into a method. Conceptually, we are concerned with the nexus of different practices (producing and networking), and what constitutes them with regard to the

**Table 1.** Interviews.

Product	Time of arrival	Number of interviews
Mustard	Second wave (2010 and later)	1
Oil	Second wave (2010 and later)	1
Fermented vegetables	First wave (around 1990)	3
Legumes-coffee	Second wave (2010 and later)	3
Tinned fish	First wave (around 1990)	2
Organic cheese	First wave (around 1990)	1
Organic vegetables	Second wave (2010 and later)	1
Group discussion entrepreneurs' network		1
Fish industry	-	1
Food-processing industry	-	1
Organic (large-scale) agriculture	-	1
Network manager tourism	-	1
Start-up coach	-	1
Economic development manager from regional administration	-	1

materiality entangled in these practices and the (shared) practical and general understandings and teleoaffective structures guiding or enabling these practices. That is, we want to understand 'producing' and 'networking' in a very detailed way, such as what it feels like and in what manner or mode it is done. The following [table 2](#) and [3](#) give examples of how we apply Schatzki's approach to our findings from the interviews:

The narrative interviews offer rich and open, retrospective stories about 'what happened' during the last years. We looked at episodes that are crucial from the point of view of the interviewees – in this case, the envisaged cooperation with the local food industry to produce new products and the broadening of distribution to the local population. These episodes draw together two core entrepreneurial activities, that is, the creation of a product and the connection with other business-related people including customers. These episodes entail many *Stehgreiferzählungen* (Schütze 1983) or ad-hoc narrations of happenings, pulling together the actions, emotions, and intentions as a 'co-occurrence of the teleological past, present, and future' of the speaker (Schatzki 2006, 1863). These sequences in interviews serve as the best approximation to complex, multi-sited, and temporally dispersed and thus unobservable *doings*, which build up to practices. We use Documentary Method for interpretation, which seeks to reveal the general and practical understanding and teleoaffective structures (mostly atheoretical, incorporated knowledge) that enable and guide these *doings* (Bohnsack, Pfaff, and Weller 2010, 202). For example, we tried to understand how entrepreneurs view their product, such as, for example, feeling pride for a specific product, which values they connect with their work and how they see their entrepreneurial activities in relation to the local society. Practical understanding (or practical knowledge) refers to conducting an activity in the right way and to 'abilities germane to the practical procedures of practices' (Welch and Warde 2017, 186), such as knowing how to sample the produce and the product, in the example in [Table 2](#). Practical understanding is the result of a process of entrepreneurial learning, which entails tacit and

**Table 2.** Dimensions of the practice of 'producing'.

The practice of 'producing' craft-food is constituted of:	Examples:
Activities	Sampling produce, developing a recipe, producing and selling
Practical understanding ( <i>how things are done</i> )	(knowing how to) taste, smell, sample the quality of produce and final product
General understandings ( <i>the value or meaning or just the 'normal' way of how things are done</i> )	Values attached to artisan products such as quality of produce, taste, health & environmental benefits, 'manual' production process
Socio-material arrangements	Machinery and produce used in the production, production sites and selling sites
Teleoaffective structures ( <i>how it feels or what it means to produce craft-food</i> )	Pride & enthusiasm for a certain product; transparency about production process; visible connection between product and entrepreneur

**Table 3.** Dimensions of the practice of ‘networking’.

The practice of ‘networking’ within the niche is constituted of:	Examples:
Activities	identifying relevant others, meeting entrepreneurs at their companies, sharing machinery, doing ‘something’ together
Practical understanding ( <i>how things are done</i> )	Embodied and enacted ways of presenting oneself to others, for example via informal/spontaneous first meetings
General understandings ( <i>the value or meaning or just the ‘normal’ way of how things are done</i> )	Values and ideas of ‘normality’ attached to meeting others, for example to request/offer use of machinery
Socio-material arrangements	Settings/places in which people meet, e.g. at home or in an office
Teleoaffective structures ( <i>how it feels or what it means to meet other craft-food producers</i> )	Joy and excitement to meet (like-minded/similar) others; gain visibility in the area

embodied knowledge and ‘involves embodied interaction with other people as well as sensual-material interplay with the technologies and objects that enable the performance of a practice’. (Thompson and Illes 2021, 584).

General understanding can be reconstructed from the communicative knowledge entailed in these interviews, that is, sections of descriptions and argumentations. For example, we interpreted parts of the interviews in which entrepreneurs argue or explain certain points about networking (see Table 3). The analysis process unfolded over a longer period of time in which we started with content analysis and continuously got deeper into the details of the narrations, linking them to the conceptual building blocks of practices. In line with the interpretative paradigm, our perspective changed from “what” people are doing and saying to understand the details of “how” they are doing it. These analyses are what Nicolini (2009) describes as a way of ‘zooming in’ to the details of practices, while the ‘zooming out’ – that is, the reconstruction of the bundling up of activities with material arrangements to build up multi-sited practices – is achieved by an analysis of context and comparison of the practices that the different entrepreneurs in this study carry (Reckwitz 2002). The comparison of practices – for example, the different ways of dealing with local industry and with other craft-food businesses – and the comparison across cases allow the supra-individual patterns to be identified (Keating, Geiger, and McLoughlin 2014).

Last, various limitations apply to our study: Admittedly, we rely on a rather small case study. The comparative method has proven fruitful in delineating the different modes of the same practice between the niche businesses and the food industry, however our knowledge on practices in industry is very limited because only three of our interviews are with industry and here, no go-along or on-site interviewing was possible. Furthermore, other than many EaP studies, we base our insights primarily on narrative interviews instead of ethnography. We do so because we believe that neither general understanding and teleoaffective structures of practices, nor spatially and temporarily dispersed activities which build a practice can be understood based on observation alone but must be reconstructed from narrations. Nevertheless, this way we run the risk of being caught in the worldview of the narrator as we rely on knowledge, which can be verbalized. Furthermore, the reconstruction of practical understandings – the way of doing things such as networking, meeting others or setting-up a market together – relies on ethnographic methods, and therefore our insights into this dimension of the practice bundle are limited as well.

## 4 Analyses

Practice approaches look into the connected bundles of entrepreneuring practices, that is activities organized by shared understanding and teleoaffective structures, such as the meaning of the work and the value of their products, and entangled with material artefacts such as production sites, machinery, equipment and produce. Here, we argue that shared machines serve as nodes between production practices, in which entrepreneurs are entangled, and stimulate ‘networking’. Shared general understanding and teleoaffective structures guiding craft-food production practices lead to

further, close-knit relationships within the niche (4.1) while both production and networking practices impede cooperation and networking *beyond* the niche with larger food-processing industry and agriculture (4.2). Last, we explore how networking and production practices bundled up to eventually produce business growth among the craft-food businesses (4.3).

Product/ Entrepreneur	Cooperation within the niche	Intended cooperation beyond the niche
Mustard	Mustard is produced at the premise and with the machinery of the oil business, before the vitreous mustard factory is set up	Local agriculture, contract farming of produce
Oil	–	–
Fermented vegetables	–	Local food-industry, processing of produce (failed)
Legumes- coffee	Processes grains for a local farmer; together with a local brewery they produce and sell Snapps; a farm museum cleans legume for them with an old hand-driven machine	Local agriculture, contract farming of produce
Tinned fish	Set up a network of local fishermen which provide the produce	Local food-industry, processing of produce
Organic cheese	Does contract farming for legumes-coffee at the time of writing and will do contract farming for mustard in the nearby future	-
Organic vegetables	Shares knowledge on growing vegetables with Fermented Vegetables business	-
All the craft-food business together run a market, two shops and a network		

#### 4.1 Networking within the niche: Shared understanding of craftsmanship and quality

Based on the biographies of the products and businesses, it becomes evident that most of the networking that entrepreneurs consider important throughout the development of their product or company is driven by a curiosity for each other's craftsmanship and production processes. Indeed, in many cases getting access to specific machinery has been the reason to get in touch with other businesses in the first place. For example, the coffee plant owns a customized roasting machine that can process not only coffee and cocoa but also grains and legumes. This machine is proudly presented on the company's webpage. Other roasters (from German-speaking countries) visit the factory to 'meet' the roasting machine, but likewise other niche businesses from the area stop by to have a look at the machine. Out of one of these encounters a cooperation developed between the coffee company, a brewer, and a farmer. Together they produce a speciality schnapps from a rare type of grain.

It has been pointed out before that 'materials and technologies are highly significant for how practices develop and change over time, not only as "elements" of practices, but in other was as well'. (Morley 2017, 82). Here, the machinery in its very physical entanglement with the practices of production serves furthermore as a node between the production practices of different products. The entrepreneurs as carriers of a niche production practice are then entangled with this product and later on become 'entangled' with other craft-food producers. "Networking" here thus tends to spring from the core activity of producing, instead of being driven through the attendance of formal networking events, for example, as it is common in other branches.

While the first interest in each other's machinery and production processes might be resource-driven, the subsequent mode of networking is informed by a shared understand of the quality of the niche products. The 'quality' of speciality food products is an attribute that can be constructed from various viewpoints (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000; Murdoch, Marsden, and Banks 2000). The craft-food producers in this study base it on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of their product. Likewise, the production process, which is completely controlled by the entrepreneurs from sourcing through to wrapping and selling, is a source of pride to them. Although they are dependent on their business



economically, one can certainly assume that ‘they do what they do for the love of what they do’ (Gherardi, Nicolini, and Strati 2007, 315). The aesthetic value that most people ascribe to their work serves as the teleoaffective dimension of practices, which gives sense to the bundle of activities, such as producing, wrapping, and selling, for example. The entrepreneurs furthermore attribute value to their products, linked to more abstract qualities, such as health or environmental benefits. These shared general understandings that guide their production practices serve the entrepreneurs to set themselves apart from other food producers in the region and to build a strong bond among each other:

*[...] here you find many primary production and raw-material suppliers. But we, the five of us, we do something really different. We do refinement [of products]. This way, with our product we render the region really attractive and interesting.* Organic Cheese\_2 #00:03:57-5#

In consequence, the mode of networking within the niche is characterized by a strong commitment to open-ended cooperation among the entrepreneurs:

*So, we said we have to start something together [...] and then we founded a club [...]. Each of us knew someone else [to bring along] and eventually there were 14 people in our living room and said [let's do something together].* Mustard\_1 #00:41:13#

Furthermore, the craft-food entrepreneurs are eager to share about their production techniques because they believe in the greater goal of their business activities, such as protecting the environment and using sustainable, ecological and/or regional resources. The teleoaffective structure and general understandings that hold the different activities around producing and networking together are expressed in the high degree of openness about the production process and ingredients as documented in the web pages of the niche businesses and in the opening of ‘vitreous factories’ – for example, the organic farm turned into an ‘encounter café’ intended to facilitate communication with the local community:

*I always had the intention of talking to the people about what we are doing here. To take the people along with us. And yes, it was an issue for me not to remain strangers forever here, in our village. [Instead] taking on this task to spread the organic philosophy and to inform about food and such. And there is a lot of curiosity among the local people [...].* Organic Cheese\_1 #00:08:19#

“Networking”, or getting to know about others who produce in a similar way, is facilitated through the openness and transparency about one’s business practices, as expressed in the quote above. It is through the uniqueness of the products that the craft-food entrepreneurs take notice of each other, and it is the quality of the products that reveals shared meaning and values, enhancing cooperation beyond the sharing of machinery. The general understanding informing practices of craft-food production ‘may partake of teleoaffective formations that reign over complexes of practice, [and] sociocultural groups, professions, cultural domains or other slices of praxis [...]’ (Welch and Warde 2017, 194), this way strengthening the links between practices, such as producing and networking.

Entangled in the socio-material arrangement, which makes up their production practices, is the ‘hanging-together’ (Schatzki 2016) of work- and private life of the entrepreneurs. Because most of the artisan entrepreneurs work and live at the same premise, they are almost always around and easily accessible. Other entrepreneurs basically ‘stop by’ and visit each other’s factories spontaneously because they are curious to get to know each other. With industry however, as we will explore further below, the first step of networking is characterized by difficult phone calls with personal assistances before a meeting in person can eventually be arranged.

#### **4.2 Networking and production practices beyond the niche: incompatible practices**

There were several attempts to network beyond the niche as craft-food entrepreneurs wanted to team up with food-processing industry in order to use their machines and to scale up their ‘home-based’ production. Networking beyond the niche proved to be quite difficult right from

the start, as ‘stopping by’ at the manager’s office of the processing firm was not an option. The manager of the firm apparently was unavailable to the craft-food entrepreneurs and a meeting had to be set up via lengthy persuasions of the manager’s assistant. Most profoundly than divergent practical and general understandings of how to set up a proper business meeting, mismatches in production practices and the different functioning of (industrial) machinery hampered cooperation. We exemplify this, based on the experience of a craft-food business that wanted to commission the production of fish delicacies according to her own recipes while providing the produce:

**Interviewer: ‘Am I right that you talked to them [industry] about the recipes?’**

*“... I sent them our recipes. Well, and I agreed to accept [a production] based on their recipes with a few changes, like a different vinegar, three corns of pepper more and a little bit of dried dill; I would accept this for a beginning. But no, no comprehension. I really said to myself, that can’t be true. That [change in recipe] was already too complicated [for them]. No clue why, but somehow you are talking to a wall there. [...] But we have certain understandings of quality and many simply cannot comply with this. Because they [industry] say they need to add preservatives to the product. We say, if the best-before date is less than 6 months that is okay, then the product will simply only last for half a year and not for three years. But it tastes better. And we [will be able to] sell it! [...] So, we went to all of them [the regional fish-producing industry] and said frankly that we want to build up this brand with old-fashioned, high-quality, regional [fish] products [and asked them to join] [...] But there is so little/really there is no understanding [...] it is really hard to find words to describe it. It seems like what is really missing is an entrepreneurial attitude or ... really a little bit of fantasy, really. This is really bothering us recently, because we get the feeling that in the end we will have to do it [putting the fish in a tin] ourselves. Tinned Fish\_1 #00:35:52#*

This quote reveals that the interviewed person cannot fully understand why cooperating with local industry, that is, using their machinery, is so difficult and assumes that industry does not want to participate in the project because they do not have the spirit or fantasy to recognize the value of the speciality food and the potential economic benefit. For the craft-food entrepreneur quoted here, the quality of the product is defined through taste and the origin of the produce. An interview with a potential partner from industry revealed that here, under a production logic geared at price, obtained through standardization and quantity, the main quality characteristic of the product is its longevity. The quote reveals the incompatibility of the different meanings of quality – but likewise it reveals the lack of understanding about the production processes in industry, where small changes to recipes imply massive changes for standardized and fully automated processes. Part of industry’s reluctance to cooperate with the craft-food business stems from the difficulties in recalibrating their machinery to another recipe or the inaptitude of the machines to deal with the very low through- and output volumes in craft-food production. As pointed out above, machinery can be an anchor for different production practices but here it is indeed hampering cooperation beyond the individual’s willingness to do so.

In sum, the mode of producing can be understood as a bundle of activities (e.g. of sourcing and distribution) related to machinery and socio-material arrangements, with a specific purpose and held together by layers of understanding and teleoaffective structures, which give purpose and meaning to what people are doing. All dimensions of the practices of producing and of networking are apparently incompatible between industry and craft-food businesses.

In the same vein, the search for regional raw produce (legumes, mustard) and cooperation with regional agriculture proved challenging. The specificity of agriculture in the region, with very large farms and contract farming (see [Section 3](#)), made it very difficult to acquire produce regionally.

*Then you started looking [for a farmer to grow legumes] and couldn’t find any. So, the project almost failed because you couldn’t find a farmer in an agricultural region”. (Legume\_3) // [In direct response] “Oh no, it is not about finding a farmer, but you cannot find someone [farmer] here with their own land [and thus the competence to decide to grow legumes]. Organic Cheese\_2 #00:33:13#*

Again, dimensions of the bundle of production practices clash between the regionally dominant agriculture and the craft-food business. This applies to the mode of agricultural production activities, such as cultivation planning, crop rotation, harvesting, and weed management, for example. These production modes are guided by understandings, such as the value of economies of scale, the importance of export markets, the quality of the crops produced, etc., which are, however, neither shared nor legitimate within the niche:

*Well, with regards to networking, I think you only attract what you are yourself [you only attract like-minded people] [...] and here [in the region] we only have such idiotic conventional farmers who splash pesticides and kill everything [...] we regularly have conflicts with the farmers' association. Legume-Coffee\_3 #00:01:05#.*

Indeed, the bundle of aligned entrepreneurial practices of producing, networking and selling (see below) which the entrepreneurs carry, reproduces and defines 'the niche', as we perceive this socially constructed market segment. The boundaries of the niche are enacted in everyday entrepreneurial practices, delineated by shared general understandings and through socio-material arrangements and artefacts.

### **4.3 How networking and production practices bundle up and create business growth**

Although the entrepreneurs tried to network and grow beyond the niche, by using, for example, processing machinery from industry, this envisaged development path failed. Cooperation could not be realized, at least not to the extent they hoped for. Instead, the niche-specific mode of the practices of producing and of networking combine into a process that leads to business growth via development of new products and diversification of outlets, such as their own shop, online, or through shops and markets run together by the group. Matthews, Chalmers, and Fraser (2018) show that while 'selling' is a fundamental activity of entrepreneuring which builds on the multi-sited agency of customers, products and entrepreneurs alike, it is oftentimes perceived in the literature to be driven solely by the entrepreneur's capabilities and strategic decisions. From the perspective of the entrepreneurs interviewed here, setting up outlets together is rather happenstance than a strategy. Indeed, the development of places where the craft-food is sold stems from the rather undirected intention and joy to cooperate and 'start something together', as well as their inclination to share their view of the value of their products, as describes above (4.1). By summer 2019, the group of entrepreneurs interviewed ran two collective shops, two cafés attached to the oil and coffee production sites, three vitreous manufacturing sites (mustard, oil and cheese), and a weekly market. Thus, again, the niche mode of selling food via a market or in delicacy shops is another connection between the networking and producing practices of the craft food entrepreneurs, it generates business growth and can be used to delineate the niche itself along its constituent practices. These outlets serve various purposes. While they certainly are a way to sell craft-food products and attract tourists to the hinterlands, they are nevertheless also intended as a way of getting in touch with, and giving back to, the local population. Service infrastructure has diminished in rural areas and in the villages as well. With the establishment of a weekly market, the entrepreneurs see a way of reaching out to the local population through their unique craft-foods. Transparency and pride about their products have been described above (4.1) as the teleoffective structures, which hold the practices of networking and producing together. The activities of 'selling', and creating outlets to this purpose, can be neatly aligned under this framework. With the market (and other outlets), the entrepreneurs create a venue where they and their products can become visible and approachable as an alternative to the agriculture of the region and to industrial food processing and shopping at grocery stores or discounters. Just as the machines are nodes which connect networking and producing, and entrepreneurs with other entrepreneurs, the market in its socio-material arrangement is a node connecting producers and consumers.

*We thought that a market like this needs about three years start-up phase to really pick up. (But) from the first day onwards the local people were so happy and grateful that we had finally put up something good here. So, they accepted it gratefully. We had positive newspaper coverage and much support from the local population. Mustard\_1 #00:29:15-0#*

Through the socio-material arrangement of the market, customers and producers alike become entangled in the practice of consuming food, in a specific mode aligned to the concept of 'quality' inherent to the practices of producing craft-food. As Keating and colleagues put it, 'actors endeavour to put in place those worlds that they feel they can prosper in and these worlds then become the context and source of their subsequent actions' (2014, 6). And indeed, the entrepreneurs literally put this world in place.

Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs created a rather exclusive outlet for their products. When the entrepreneurs took the initiative and lobbied for a market in town, they obtained the mayor's consent to control the access of stalls to the market ground. Now, other vendors are denied access to the market if their products do not meet the high-quality requirements:

*Indeed, we did deny access to the market to some vendors, because we think the product really doesn't fit us. [...] We are professionals, we don't want any hobby[cooks], we don't want the granny with home-made jam in five different types of jars. Mustard\_1 #00:36:12#*

Again, this can be interpreted as a misfit in production practices between niche market quality food and home-made non-professional production of food, expressed in a lack of coherent product design and 'materialized' in unmatched jar sizes. Likewise, the teleoaffective structures, that is, what it feels like to produce craft-foods, is likely to differ from what it feels like to cook jam from the fruits of one's garden. While the entrepreneurs can use their network with other craft businesses to increase their sales at the local area through the setup of the market, again these network practices are incompatible with local 'others' as they exclude both industrial and 'unprofessional' home-made food production and the consumers of these products.

Just as regards the production process that connects craft-food entrepreneurs but is incompatible with industrial production practices, so is the specific mode of selling the artisan foods via their 'own' market a practice in which some can join (tourists, (wealthy) locals) but excludes others both as customers due to their lower income and as producers whose practices of production and aesthetic appreciation (jars of different sizes) do not fit.

## 5 Summary and Discussion

This paper employs a practice perspective (Schatzki 2016) to look deeply into the interlinked activities around the production of craft-food and of networking. We show how first of all, the socio-material arrangements entangled in these practices, such as the machines in use and the production sites where many craft-food entrepreneurs live and work at the same place, create nodes where producing and networking practices hang together. Indeed, getting to know other craft food entrepreneurs in many cases springs from an interest in the machinery of these business. Thus, networking practices spring from production practices and are anchored in products and machinery. Subsequently, various activities that constitute the central entrepreneurial practices of producing and networking within the craft-food niche are held together by shared general understandings and teleoaffective structures, such as pride for the product, the valuation of craftsmanship and an intention to spread the craft-food or organic philosophy for the greater good of society. These shared understandings and teleoaffective structures facilitate networking within the niche beyond the sharing of machinery. Business growth, then, is driven naturally by the hanging-together of networking and producing and selling practices instead of being a well-defined business strategy. While research on networking practices and growth in the oil industry (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2010) has analysed the search for growth opportunities itself as a social practice, in our case study 'growing' rather is what happens to the business when craft-food entrepreneurs together develop new products and outlets for their products. Thus, our results help to acknowledge the variety and heterogeneity in 'entrepreneurship' (Steyaert et al. 2007) and suggest that there are at

least group-specific modes to certain entrepreneurial practices such as producing, networking, and growing. Furthermore, the hanging-together, or the nexus of these practices might look different across types of entrepreneurs.

Our results add to the literature on networking in three regards: most importantly, we explore the 'nitty-gritty' of this entrepreneurial practice (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020), for example, how to set up a first meeting properly. Although these anecdotal accounts might seem trivial, they show us how group-specific modes of the practices of producing and networking, for example, hang-together to hamper or enhance cooperation. Thus, we go beyond positivist or structuralists accounts of networking that focus on 'who with whom' by looking into the 'what and how' people do when they network. Second, we explain in a more nuanced way why (regional) entrepreneurial networking and cooperation is often so difficult to achieve, even when actors are sufficiently willing and interested to do so. Instead of pointing to a lack of spirit, divergent interests, or transaction costs, the focus on mismatching practices offers an explanation with supra-individual appeal. Indeed, one of the advantages of practice approaches is being able to present a meta-position between methodological individualism (cooperation fails because people don't like each other) and structuralism (cooperation fails because they belong to different abstract entities, such as branches or classes), highlighting in a dynamic, more-than-human analysis the many reasons why networking and cooperation is hampered or facilitated. Third, we were able to show that machines are central nodes connecting foremost production practices, and subsequently entrepreneurs as carriers of these practices. In addition to the existing entrepreneurship-as-practice literature, we thus highlight the material dimension entangled in practice bundles, which we believe to be an oftentimes overlooked dimension. This way, we can add to Bourdieuan reconstructions of the entrepreneurial habitus in networking (Anderson, Drakopoulou Dodd, and Jack 2010; Spigel 2013; Keating, Geiger, and McLoughlin 2014). Furthermore, we have been able to illustrate that the difficulties for cooperation that craft-food entrepreneurs encounter in their quest to cooperate with the food industry, are in some part due to the material dimension entangled in different production practices. For example, while it is quite obvious that cooperation between craft-food businesses and industry is hampered by different sizes and throughput of the machinery in use, it is somewhat radical to account for the agency of the machinery within the business growth processes. The role of matter is twofold. First, it points to dynamics and unexpected change by influencing entrepreneurial opportunity seeking. The agency of matter thus renders the entrepreneurial drive to network and genius in 'discovering' opportunities less prominent and less determining. But the material dimension of the social also has a stabilizing quality, impeding regional business cooperation across business sizes due to incompatible sizes of machinery or stabilizing new practices, such as selling and buying on the market. We have to be sensitive to both aspects. Further research should explore the role of the socio-material dimensions entangled in entrepreneurial practices further as the agency of matter could help us to understand other key concepts of entrepreneurship, such as risk-taking or founding a venture, for example, in a better way.

Group specific modes of entrepreneuring practices and comparative analysis are another interesting direction for further research. Contrasting and comparative methods of analysis could give a clearer picture of the differing elements which constitute practices, the way they hang-together or how nodes differ which hold together bundles of practices. This could highlight industry-specific ways of doing business just like shedding more light onto gendered practices in entrepreneuring. Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2004) for example, identify various processes by which gender and entrepreneurship are concomitantly enacted. The analysis of the gender-specific hanging-together of practices from different spheres, such as business life vs. family life would provide a valuable meta-perspective on female entrepreneurship.

A practice-perspective would reveal women as carriers of (a whole load) of ‘domestic’ and ‘business’ practices, which might not hang-together easily. Again, a practice-perspective would provide much needed insights beyond structural discrimination vs. individual behaviour.

Paying more attention to the interpretative analysis of shared general understanding that informs group-specific modes of practices furthermore allows to link ‘discursive formation with that of situated activity’ (Welch and Warde 2017, 195) and that way linking large phenomena, such as sustainability but likewise gender equality, for example, to everyday entrepreneurial practices.

## Notes

1. Other insights from this case study have been published as: Tuitjer and Küpper (2020); Tuitjer (2021).

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