DEMAND iNG ideas

**Working Paper 12: Lenneke Kuijer, *A call for more practice theory on the future*
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Based on Kuijer (2014)

If asked what DEMAND demands from *the future of practice theory*, I would call for *more practice theory on the future*. From my experiences with social practice theory in a – inherently future-oriented – product design context, I found that practice theory could be enhanced when it comes to the DEMAND objectives of thinking about 'how social practices and related patterns of demand change and how they might be steered'. In my PhD thesis, I've identified a number of potentially promising directions to do so. In this paper I will briefly address three of them:

1. To refine the three ball images-skills-stuff model to a bubble model of groupings of elements and multitudes of links;
2. To use this model to develop conceptual handles for thinking about change in and 'steering' of practices;
3. To explore the (dispersed) practice of improvisation in relation to (radical) change.

Throughout the paper I will use examples from my empirical work on bathing and staying warm at home.

From balls to bubbles

Zooming in on practices as a constellations of elements (as in the 'Shovean' images, skills and stuff model (e.g. Shove and Pantzar 2005)), my thesis introduces an adjustment of the model by visualising the elements as groupings of elements and the links as multitudes of links (Figure 1). I've found this adjustment useful for several reasons.
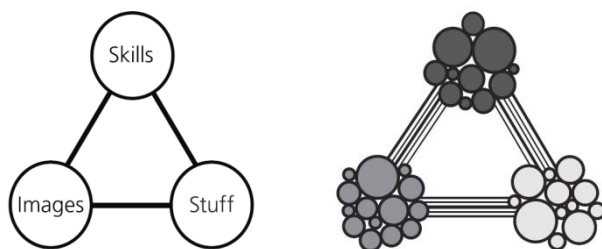

Figure 1: From balls to bubbles (Kuijer 2014)

For one, it helps to clarify the distinction between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance, because, as visualised in Figure 2, the bubbles model makes it possible to represent single performances as partial manifestations of the entity. This highlights that although they are manifestations of the same practice, performances integrate varying sets of elements. All these elements and their links together form the practice-as-entity. Conversely, the entity contains many

other varieties of performances. So for example, although rarely deployed in the same performance, images of refreshment and of getting warm are both part of the practice of showering.
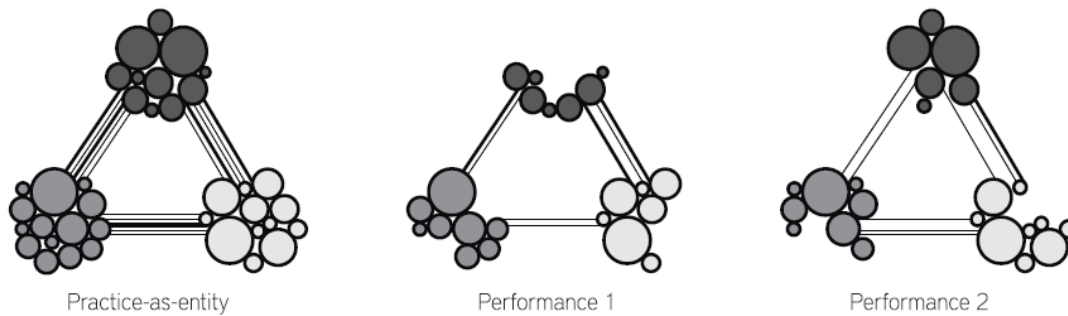

Figure 2: The relation between entity and performance visualised (Kuijer 2014) (note: a practice-as-entity generally 'consists of' more than two performances)

Second, the bubble model helps to conceptualise change from a design perspective. Before explaining this point, there is a need to say a few words about the relation between practice theory, DEMAND and design.

In the definition of Herbert Simon – one of the founders of design theory – design is about 'Devising courses of action to change existing situations into preferred ones' (Simon 1996: 111). Although I expect few DEMAND'ers to directly or comfortably identify with this definition, I would say that the idea of steering practices and related levels of energy demand is present in the centre's objectives. What this implies, in my view, is that DEMAND is at least playing with the designer's hat (or glasses if you like). When positioning design in relation to practice theory, it is important to make a distinction between change and design. Practices(-as-entity) change because of the sum of changes that happen in everyday performance. Change is omnipresent and continuous in practices. This change is not initiated by anyone in particular or directed in any particular direction. Design, however, is about initiating and facilitating change in preferred directions.

The concept of change ('steered' or not) inherently refers to the practice-as-entity. However, since entity and performance are so closely intertwined, they cannot be seen as separate from each other. To develop this argument, I'd like to build on the premise that 'practices change when new elements are introduced or when existing elements are combined in new ways' (Shove et al. 2012: 120). In other words, when aiming to change a practice, one way to go about it is to introduce new elements into them. Something I will refer to as making an intervention. This process can be described in more detail and visualised using the bubbles model.

Because new does not necessarily mean new to the world, but new to the particular practice-as-entity, these 'new' elements and combinations (links) will here be referred to as unfamiliar elements and links. Notably, unfamiliar elements are not necessarily (only) things; they can also be unfamiliar skills and/or images. Moreover, I would argue that what Reckwitz refers to as 'crises of routine'[1] are situations in which performances integrate unfamiliar elements or links into existing configurations of images, skills and stuff. Reckwitz goes on to explain that in these situations, the 'breaking' and

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[1] Schatzki calls them 'contingent events' (2001: 53) and Shove et al. 'disruptive moments' (2007: 31)

'shifting' of structures takes place (Reckwitz 2002: 255). This breaking and shifting of structures is here referred to as reconfiguration. Integrating unfamiliar elements or links into a performance requires (more or less extensive) reconfiguration of elements and links into a new configuration that works and makes sense. In addition to the breaking and shifting of links described by Reckwitz, this process can also involve recruitment of unfamiliar elements, and rejection of existing ones. In practices of staying warm at home for example, the introduction of liquid fuel has rendered elements like coal sheds, coal scuttles, coal dust and skills of making and maintaining a coal fire obsolete, while piping, oil stoves and skills in preventing fires became required to make the practice work. In spite of all these changes, some elements remained part of the practice, such as ideas of cosiness and comfort, chimneys, seasonality and kitchens. In Figure 3, the bubbles model is used to depict this process of reconfiguration graphically.
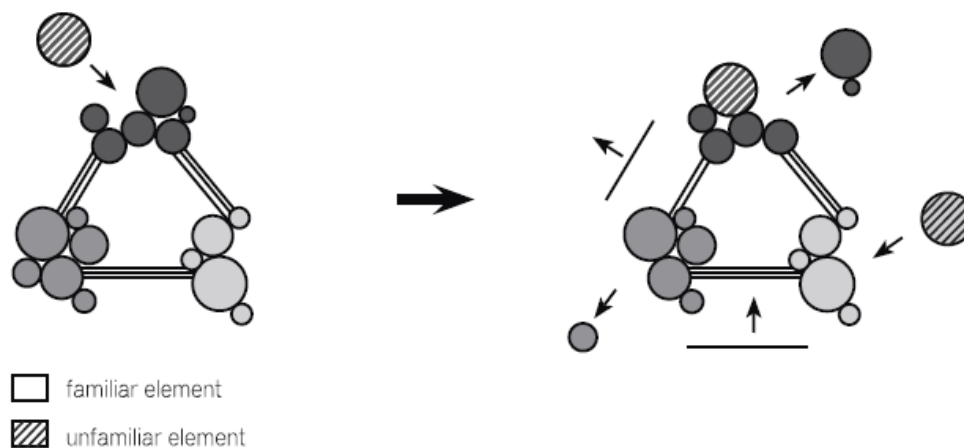

☐ familiar element

▨ unfamiliar element

Figure 3: When an unfamiliar element is integrated into the performance of a familiar practice, reconfiguration happens (Kuijer 2014)

So, to return to the relation between entity and performance when it comes to change, this relation could be specified by saying that change in the practice-as-entity is both a consequence of and a catalyser for reconfigurations of elements that are formed in performances. I would argue, in addition, that there is something particular about these performances involved in change; they are of the type that Warde (2005) refers to as instances of 'adaptation, improvisation or experimentation'. From a design perspective, these instances are of core interest. But before going deeper into them, it is important to note that these forms of performance in themselves do not change the practice-as-entity. Only if a reconfiguration is repeatedly performed by several practitioners, can it become collectively recognized as normal performance and thus as part of the practice-as-entity. This process of moving from exceptional to normal will be elaborated on below.

Repetition and recruitment

Here, I would like to introduce another visualisation of the relation between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance that emphasizes the role of *repetition*. Schatzki explains that the practice-as-entity forms a structure that establishes certain forms of performance to be correct (in certain

situations), and other forms of performance as acceptable (1996: 101)[2]. Along the same lines, Warde explains that 'the patterning of social life is a consequence of the established understanding of what courses of action are not inappropriate' (2005: 140). Consequently, besides establishing whether a performance is correct or acceptable, the practice-as-entity also establishes what types of performance are inappropriate or unacceptable. For example, bathing in a canal is generally not considered an acceptable way of washing the body, and wearing coats indoors not an acceptable way of staying warm at home. Knowing about these categories is part of being a competent practitioner[3]. As mentioned, there is a relation between the number of performances of a certain type and the categorization of this type of performance as correct, acceptable or unacceptable. This relation represents a relation between the practice-as-entity and the practice-as-performance. Figure 4 illustrates how the practice-as-entity is made up of a variety of situated performances[4].
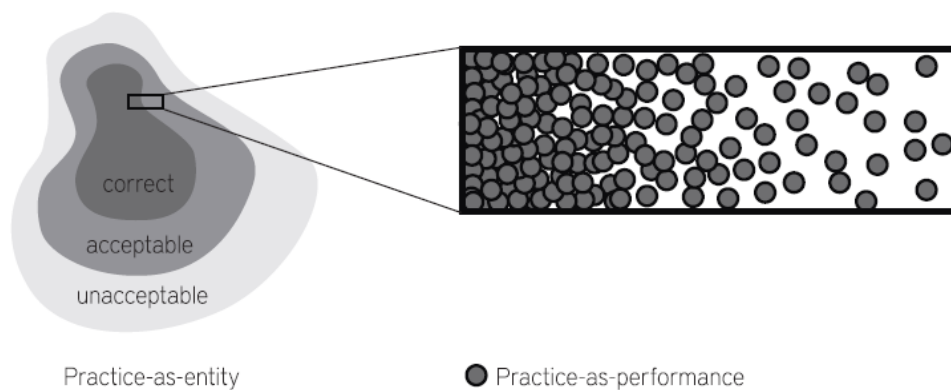

Figure 4: The relation between entity and performance II (Kuijer 2014)

Because practices continuously change, these categories of correct, acceptable and unacceptable are not fixed. What mainstream forms of bathing are, or acceptable indoor temperatures is something that changes over time. In bathing for example, mainstream practice has over the past century shifted from a weekly bath to (close to) daily showering (Hand et al. 2005). The relation

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[2] What Schatzki refers to as 'correct' can also be called mainstream. I regard mainstream as the type of performance most practitioners perform most of the time. For example, in the Netherlands showering is the mainstream form of bathing. Taking a bath is a less common form of bathing, but it is also acceptable.

[3] Notably, these categories of correct, acceptable and unacceptable exist across many different dimensions and vary across sub-groups of carriers. For example, there are correct, acceptable and unacceptable frequencies of washing the body, correct, acceptable and unacceptable indoor temperatures, and so on.

[4] What the figure also visualises is that there is no clear line between the categories; e.g., in some situations, for some people wearing coats indoors can be acceptable, while in others it is not. This does not mean, however that a type of performance only rarely performed is unacceptable per see. As Schatzki explains, there are 'ranges of acceptable doings and sayings broader than the behaviours already performed in the practice' (1996: 102). Therefore, it is possible that people happen upon new ways of proceeding that are found acceptable by other carriers of the practice.

between the practice-as-entity and the practice-as-performance thus conceptualised, highlights that the more a certain form of performance occurs, the more acceptable or mainstream it becomes[5].

Summing up, introducing an unfamiliar element or link into a performance can trigger the forming of a reconfiguration of elements that works and makes sense, which subsequently can recruit more, and more faithful practitioners. If successful, such a repeatedly performed reconfiguration can change what is considered correct and acceptable, and thus the practice-as-entity. Having said this, the next section will return to those particular types of performances in which reconfiguration happens.

Improvisation

Following the terminology of Warde (2005), the process of (per)forming a reconfiguration (i.e. a 'beside normal' performance) can be referred to as instances of 'adaptation, improvisation or experimentation'[6]. Making an intervention can be viewed as the deliberate staging of a crisis situation in order to trigger these instances. To better grapple with the effects of an intervention in practice theoretic terms, I therefore argue that adaptation, improvisation and experimentation, should be explored in greater detail.

Making a first attempt at this renders that adaptation and improvisation are similar; both can be responses to an intervention and both are directed at adjusting a normal configuration to make it work in the situation at hand. Because improvisation implies a more extensive form of change, it seems to be the more interesting of the two in the current context. It can be defined as 'creatively inventing a reconfiguration in the spur of the moment with what is conveniently at hand'. Experimentation is different from the other two in the sense that it does not necessarily imply an intervention in the form of an unfamiliar element. Experimentation can happen in the face of familiar situations. It implies an active search for reconfigurations of existing normal practice from the side of the experimenter. Moreover, it involves a process of planning, performing and evaluating. It can therefore be of interest for DEMAND, but not directly for the form of change here discussed.

When talking about extensive reconfiguration, which is the type of reconfiguration aimed for by DEMAND, improvisation may offer a stepping stone towards this aim. Being a (dispersed) practice, carriers can have varying levels of competence in improvisation. We all know how to improvise because improvising is a routine part of everyday life. However, what is nice about improvisation is that some people are explicitly trained to do it and therefore stuff has been written about the particular skills involved. Seham (2001) summarizes these as 'a mixture of "making do" and "letting go"'. *Making do* refers to skills of 'using bodies, space all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character' (Frost and Yarrow 1990) while 'permitting

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[5] This also implies that the effects of any one performance fade over time and thus that a form of performance that is not practiced moves to the periphery of the structure (i.e., becomes a fossil (Shove and Pantzar 2005))

[6] It has to be noted that since all practices change over time, change is part of normal practice. In fact, Reckwitz, connotes 'crises of routine' as 'everyday crises of routine'. 'Crisis' situations happen so often that adaptation, improvisation and experimentation can be seen as routine parts of daily life. Can they be viewed as dispersed practices (Schatzki 1996: 91)?

everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you' (Spolin 1999). *Letting go* refers to the ability to 'free oneself from socially accepted frames of reference and assumptions of expected behaviour', to 'focus on the process' and 'suspend judgment of the outcome' (Vera and Crossan 2004). These enhanced skills of improvisation could be of particular use to DEMAND, because it is not just change it is aiming for but *radical* change.

Conclusions

Because DEMAND is about radical change and in my view therefore toys with a design orientation, I would argue that DEMAND could benefit from some of the concepts developed in my thesis work on practice-oriented design. As a potentially useful concept in this regard I introduce the 'bubbles' model as an expansion of the 'balls' model of images, skills and stuff. I argue that this model is useful for several reasons: (1) it clarifies the relation between practice-as-performance and practice-as-entity, and (2) it helps to specify the process of reconfiguration. When aiming to steer a practice in desirable directions, one way to go about it is to deliberately create crises of routine by introducing unfamiliar elements or links into performances. Such so-called interventions can trigger instances of improvisation which result in reconfigurations of elements that work and make sense. When capable of recruiting more and more faithful practitioners, such reconfigurations are able to result in change in the practice-as-entity.

Clearly these are just some directions that have been superficially explored so far. Many questions remain to their regard. For example, what are other forms of steering than making interventions in particular practices and how do they relate. The account makes steering practices sound somehow straightforward, which it of course is not. Practices consist of complex configurations of elements that are in turn part of webs of practices that work. Even if an improvised performance itself, in a particular situation works for the performer, it may not be suitable for repeated performance beyond that situation, by the performer or by others. Links can be made that make no sense (beyond the particular situation) or elements can be integrated that are not available elsewhere. In other words, making available unfamiliar elements does not mean that they will be integrated into desirable (i.e. from the point of view of energy demand) reconfigurations, let alone become part of the practice-as-entity. Facilitating reconfiguration through improvisation is a process that takes time and effort and throughout which interventions (in the form of unfamiliar elements or links) can be rejected. Moreover, to change the practice-as-entity, the reconfiguration needs to recruit more and more faithful practitioners, a process through which the reconfigurations itself will necessarily transform. This process may go in undesirable directions.

Acknowledgements

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