

Please Note: The following working paper was presented at the workshop “Demanding ideas: where theories of practice might go next” held 18-20 June 2014 in Windermere, UK. The purpose of the event was to identify issues and topics that constitute ‘unfinished business’ for people interested in social theories of practice and in the relevance of such ideas for the DEMAND Research Centre. This working paper should not be quoted without first asking the author’s permission.

DemANding ideas

Working Paper 8: Janine Morley, *Interesting topics & directions for practice theories* (j.morley@lancaster.ac.uk), August 2014

What are the most interesting and important topics to pursue within the field of practice theory in the next decade? My response mostly relates to the general challenge of analysing the dynamics of energy demand within a practice theoretical framework. That has been the basis from which I have worked with practice theories, and it is evidently relevant to the DEMAND centre. But I also think there are interesting challenges here, and potentially unique questions for the development of social practice theory.

1. What Materials Do: Material-Practice Relations

The essential characteristic of energy use is that it ‘energises’ material processes in ways that exceed human capacities. Mined, captured and converted forms of energy are useful precisely because they *do* something that people either cannot or do not routinely do. The first key proposition of the DEMAND centre is that “energy is used not for its own sake but as part of accomplishing social practices”¹. Yet the ‘part’ energy plays in social practices is not simple, straightforward or uniform. In so far as social practice theories focus on human activities, I think there is a challenge to develop conceptualisations of the varied relations, including disconnections, between practice and energy use, the social organization of what energy does within society, and how and whether attending to the nature of such material processes helps in understanding the dynamics of practice and of energy demand.

Theories of practice currently conceptualise ‘materials’ in different ways. To Shove et al. (2012) practices are defined by the relationships between materials, competences and meaning, whereas to Schatzki (1996, 2002, 2010) material arrangements are bundled together with practices in practice-arrangement nexuses. In the former, energy might be conceived as a material element of practices. But, if so, I think there the nature of this relationship requires care (energy is not actively integrated in the way that objects are manipulated and ‘used’). Further, there are questions concerning the ‘threshold’ at, or qualities by, which energy and other materials can be considered to be elements of particular practices or as infrastructure to them, or neither of these.

To the latter ontology, energy consumption might be conceptualized as an ‘event’ or ‘activity’ amongst interconnected material entities. But a similar question arises of how processes of energy use relate to social practices. But Schatzki suggests a variety of relationships (causality, prefiguration, constitution, intentionality and intelligibility), which might be helpful. For instance, many arrangements may constitute practices, without being intentionally related to those practices. I would suggest that energy use embedded in practices like cooking and laundry would, for the most part fall into this category. In contrast, space heating may not necessarily constitute the social

¹ <http://www.demand.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/DEMAND-in-four-pages.pdf>

practices that take place in a given space, but it may prefigure them.

Some questions:

- Is it useful to think about 'elements' as those features which are distinctive to particular practices, or which are essential to them? These are not necessarily the same.
- Is it possible and useful to integrate varieties of relationships within an 'elemental' approach, to reflect to the different roles materials can play?
- Are there consequences of adopting one or other approach to materials? Or can 'elements' and 'arrangements' be mixed, perhaps depending upon constituting relationships?

2. What People Do: Types of Practice?

As well as an opportunity for thinking about the varied relationships between material arrangements and practice, the analysis of energy can also focus attention on varieties of practice. Some of 'what people do' is difficult to conceptualise in terms of well-bounded, discrete social practices. This is particularly apparent in relation to the provision of background material conditions, where interactions with heating, ventilation systems, and even clothing can be short, sparse and not always 'about' thermal comfort. If social practices are understood as activities with which people engage in their own right, this implies they are recognised as such by those who participate in them, and require some time and attention to undertake. It is difficult to conceive of getting dressed or adjusting radiators on these terms. Nonetheless, they are socially organised and plausibly form distinctive patterns of doing and saying. So how might a practice theory approach deal with such distributed forms of 'practice' that neither appear to qualify as 'entities' in their own right, nor are part of a practice which does (e.g. thermal comfort)?

Closely connected, is the question of what happens outside of these human activities, when the material arrangements continue to be active: as for example, when clothing continues to keep heat next to the body (or let it escape), as the body itself continues to convert food into energy and heat, and as the central heating system or sun continues warm the air in a room (or stops doing so). In particular, I would suggest that the moments of active 'arranging' of these elements should be understood in relation to these longer periods of 'not doing'. And that during such periods, there is ongoing experience, which is mediated through socially shared understandings and rules concerning appropriate conditions and appropriate responses. In other words, there is an ongoing integration of materials, competence and meaning by which experiences (of thermal conditions, at least) emerge. Could these forms of 'sub-practice' activity-inactivity be analysed in similar ways as well-bounded practices?

Even for practices that are more clearly bounded, might it also be helpful think about different types of practice? Distinctions can be made based on whether the activity involved can be delegated to another person, such as with cooking or laundry, but not with entertainment and eating. Some practices are heavily subject to social injunctions (e.g. cleanliness), others are more subject to the informal institutions and influence of professionals (e.g. cooking), others are obviously tied up with social identity and differentiation (e.g. computing), whilst other still seem to be formed in response to the options provided by pre-existing infrastructure (e.g. heating habits).

Some questions:

- Is it useful to think about 'types' of practice?

- To what extent is it helpful or detracting to explore the social organisation of small, sub-practice activities and ongoing, apparently passive experiences, in social practice terms?

3. Service: Conceptualising Cross-Cutting Connections and Demand

In the case of thermal comfort, I propose that, however else they might be analysed, material arrangements that continue to be significant to experience (and energy demand) outside of observable human activity and the small, sub-practice ‘arrangings’ which affect such experiences are connected on account of a shared outcome: thermal (dis)comfort. I refer to this outcome as ‘service’, drawing on the definition developed by Shove of “composite accomplishments generating and sustaining certain conditions and experiences” (Shove, 2003: 165). In other words, the notion of service is one way of talking about the connections between different social practices, sub-practice activities, and material arrangements.

In fact, in my analysis, there are several ways in which the concept of ‘service’ is useful in practice theory analyses of energy demand, in reference to:

- complex and hybrid forms of organisation / connection across practices and material arrangements
- more specific functions that energy and networks of devices provide
- the inclusion of some of these functions, e.g. apps and software, as changing elements within practices.

In the conceptualisation of energy, and energy *demand* in particular, the inclusion of ‘service’ importantly accommodates the more basic recognition that if we wish to talk about *demand for energy*, we should really talk about *demand for the services* that energy provides, and how this is constituted in the accomplishment everyday practices. This is a subtle but important distinction from how energy *per se* is used. The notion of ‘service’ distinguishing means from ends, both in the case of the more direct services that energy provides (e.g. heating), and the more complex and composite outcomes of which energy is just one of many ‘inputs’ (e.g. thermal comfort). This helps to recognise that similar outcomes can be achieved in different ways. And this is important in analysing change: for example, services, such as thermal comfort, can become analytically distinct from the particular material arrangements (shawls, housecoats, open fires and armchairs) with which they were previously been synonymous. The ‘service’ can be a point of continuity as other elements, materials and competences, change. It can also be a point of commonality, amongst different contemporary means of achieving thermal comfort.

Thus, for the analysis of energy demand, service is an important topic, and it will be interesting to revisit and extend how this can be applied in debates about need and entitlement. It will also be interesting to explore whether and how it can be applied in other areas (for example, connections across eating practices) and in comparison to other cross-cutting forms of organisation (e.g. ‘projects’, following Pred 1981, as used by Røpke and Christensen, 2012).

Some questions:

- Is the idea of service as a cross-cutting or meta-organisation useful within practice theory approaches to topics, other than energy?

4. Dynamics and Different Blends of Human and Material Activities

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This above discussion about the varieties of human and non-human 'activities' may also be reflected in the varieties of ways in which energy demand and practices change. In brief, my investigation of just three different domains of energy demand suggested that where non-human materials arrangements provide generic services, such as heating, standby and internet access, standards may escalate becoming more energy intensive. They may even converge. But where energy consumption relates more closely to how people spend their time, and the specific services integrated in such practices, there may be greater potential for sustained diversification in energy demand. However, whether such a diversification leads to higher or lower consumption is more ambiguous.

At least, this is my hypothesis: it would certainly be interesting to explore in relation to other practices and other forms of demand (energy and otherwise).

5. Variation and Change

The topic of variation within practices is interesting for several reasons. Conceptually it touches on tensions that reside at the heart of practice theories: between commonality and diversity, between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance. Variation has also been implicated in processes of change, and this is what I am particularly interested in.

In the first instance, practices may become more or less diverse as they change. As practices become more diverse, they might even 'split' (in a kind of 'speciation' event). For example, Southerton et al. (2012) contrast diversification and multiplication, based on patterns of participation. When practitioners (continue to) engage in multiple forms of a practice, they suggest, such a practice may have diversified, yet remains singular. If, on the other hand, participants tend to engage in one form of a practice or another, Southerton et al. (2012) suppose that this represents multiple, distinct practices. This seems reasonable but it is perhaps not the only formulation of how practices diverge or split.

In addition, I would argue that diversification within practices can be deeply implicated in more general changes. Concepts of service may change when and if the means by which an outcome is achieved are extended or diversified. For example, it is only when there is an alternative way of providing hot meals, in the form of convenient pre-prepared foods, that there can be any question about what really counts as cooking, thus changing the experience of what it is to cook (well), since different 'choices' have to be made. In sum, the diversification and splitting, convergence and reformation of practices are especially important aspects of how practices change and worthy of more detailed development.

There is another way, too, in which variations have been implicated in changes in practice: that is through the different ways in which groups and individuals perform practices. Firstly, Warde (2005) suggests that different groups of practitioners might make different contributions to the development of a practice. Secondly, practices may change in relation to the inherent variability of performances: "as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment" (Warde, 2005: 141). These are not only translations into performance of the generalised pattern of a practice, but, in principle, also the means by which the practice as an entity is itself transformed. Precisely how, however, is a much under-explored question.

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