

The washing basket is critical: coordinating the laundry and the societal rhythms it (re)produces.

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Introduction: why laundry?

Substantively important. Despite increasing efficiency of laundry appliances & behaviour change programmes, overall energy and water consumption from laundry continues to rise (accounting for 12% and 13% respectively of total UK household consumption).

Empirically interesting. A mundane everyday practice. Empirical studies fall into 2 camps primarily focused on: environmental sustainability and domestic divisions of labour. Across these literatures are a tension between apparent standardization of the practice as entity vs varieties of practice performance.

Presents some **theoretical puzzles**: (a) how conceptualise apparent variety of performance alongside patterns of standardization that appear to socially order the practice? (b) what are the key mechanisms (or factors) that act to coordinate the practice? (c) what theoretical benefits come from de-centring the 'use' of domestic technologies at the hands of the principal practitioner?

Methodological approach: defining the practice and activity sequences

- Critical first methodological step is to delineate the boundaries of the object of study.
- Extending Warde's conceptualisation of eating as a compound practice, and following previous research which sought to operationalise this concept methodologically, we define the practice of laundry as a sequence of activities:

Designation of items as not clean – 'dirty' storage – wash – dry – preparation for clean storage – clean storage.

- This is a heuristic device – an ideal-typical sequence that offers a basis for comparison across varieties of performance and identification of the factors affecting its coordination.
- This includes: multiple temporal dimensions (duration, frequency, temporal gaps and flow between activities); material and environment conditions; cultural understandings; relationships between household members.

The data

- Step 1 – 3000 household survey examining the temporal rhythms of laundry. Identified a range of societal rhythms, e.g. majority of loads happen between 7-11am, with tumble dryers running later in the day.
- Step 2 – In order to explain the observed societal rhythms and gain a deeper understanding of coordination at a household level, 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals responsible for undertaking laundry conducted.
- A convenience sample, based on socio-economic characteristics of different localities (affluent and less affluent) and building types (houses, flats).
- 6 women and 2 men, 10 with children; 5 couples without children; and 3 single people (including the two men).
- Interviews lasted between 50 minutes to 1 hour 35 mins, were recorded and transcribed.
- The entry point for interviews were to explore the lived experience of managing household laundry, how people feel, adapt and improvise doing the laundry alongside other ongoing activities of daily life.

Conceptualising Coordination

Three common conceptual interpretations of coordination:

- Dependent and inter-dependent interactions across practitioners
- Dependency and inter-dependency between practices
- the relationship between 'elements' through which practices as entities are formed and held together.

Schatski (2010: 69):

'actions that combine to achieve a result that someone intends be achieved, though the people performing the coordinated actions need not have agreed on the intended result'.

Based on preliminary data analysis, can identify three variant forms of coordination:

- Inter-dependency between activities necessary for practice performances
- Inter-dependency between practices within inter-personal relationships
- Material arrangements and environmental conditioning

Coordinating the performance of laundry practice: The activities of practitioners

- **Employment schedules** produced familiar (or routinized) patterns, with respondents using the washing machine on days when they are not working outside the home, often at the weekends:

“I usually do it on a Saturday and Sunday, and if I’m working at home during the week I’ll put a couple of washes on then as well, but mainly Saturday and Sunday.” (Daisy, mid 30s, married with 2 young children)

- Activity sequences planned to run concurrently with other **domestic practices**, often matching activities of similar duration (e.g. cleaning tasks and cooking).
- Such coordination often presented as a means of freeing-up more time for personal activities, as reported by Elisa (mid 30s, house-share, no children):

“Well it’s always about optimization for me. I want to have spare time, therefore I try to plan my washing machine while I’m doing something else generally. I do it all during the week, so then when I finish I just finish with everything, so for example I put it on while I’m cooking something and then the washing machine will be on and then I will eat something, do the washing up, and then when I’m finished with the washing up I will hang my clothes, so then it’s just done and I can relax and sit on the sofa.”

Matters of personal scheduling:

Narratives of personal scheduling were often associated the productive and efficient use of time, as Darren (early 30s, house share, no children) described:

“I make sure it’s going and then go and do something and then try and come back, sometimes I’ll set an alarm on my phone to come back in like half an hour, because I do sometimes just forget and go out and then I’ll... I just try and be productive, don’t wait and sit and watch it.”

The use of scheduling technologies to manage schedules is familiar. However, such technologies were also used to negotiate infrastructural constraints. Liz (20s, couple, no children) explained her use of timers:

“what I usually do is put it on the morning and it’s got a delay thing on the machine so I just set it so that it will finish just before I get home from work and it just flashes when it’s done... it means that I don’t have to get in, put it in and then wait an hour for it to be done. It’s so that it’s done when I get in and I can just hang it straight up. And we’ve got a combi-boiler so while the washing machine is on you can’t have a shower because it just makes the water freezing and really low pressure. And because we both exercise most nights, we both come in and have a shower, so if the machine was on we wouldn’t be able to have a shower or we’d have to have our showers and then put the machine on. So it’s just convenience really, that it’s done when I get in.”

Managing the flow: laundry barometers

- The critical challenge faced by practitioners was aligning personal schedules with the ‘flow’ of laundry across activity sequences.
- Two barometers for managing this ‘flow’ were common:

Dirty laundry baskets:

“I’ve got two wash baskets and basically see almost what’s on top of them. Then I’ll be thinking ahead what’s the next day, what’s happening the next day, I’ll be asking the kids ‘Have you had PE, is there anything in your bag that needs washing.’” (Jude, mid 40s, married, 3 children)

Clean laundry baskets:

“I tend to try and do it [THE IRONING] on a Monday evening which is a quieter night because I haven’t got children’s activities on. So I’ll come home from work, get fed and then ... generally the ironing pile is quite small (...) I don’t iron underwear or socks or anything like that, so I minimise what I have to iron. I do iron sheets and bedding... the only time I’ve got a really big pile of ironing, is when I’m changing the bedding over.” (Clare, 30s, single mum, 2 children)

Summary

Analyzing the sequence of activities that comprise laundry through the actions of the principle practitioner, reveals a number of factors that coordinate the practice:

- Institutionally timed events such as work schedules and routinized patterns of non-paid work activities (domestic chores).
- Coordination often a matter of generating personal schedules that facilitated the promise of 'personal' time of one form or another.
- Evoked narratives of domestic practice time-efficiency with timing technologies utilized to achieve efficiency.
- Technologies and infrastructures mediate use.
- Critical technologies were baskets, used as barometers to maintain the flow, and avoid build-up, of items through the laundry sequence, thus ensuring that current mechanisms of coordination were not overstretched, and reproducing the performance of the practice in familiar and routinized forms.

Coordinating inter-personal relationships: Negotiating laundry performances across the schedules of others

- As the previous examples of personal scheduling suggest, much coordination is with the schedules of other household members. These include:
 - partners employment schedules (shirts required);
 - children's sporting activities;
 - social occasions for any household member where 'self-presentation' is deemed important.
- The combined practices of household members produced volume and flow. Recall Liz whose exercising with her partner caused a clash of water-using practices:

“Most weeks I’ll do four loads, probably every other day, because I do a lot of exercise and so does my boyfriend so we have a constant cycle of clothes that need washing. More often than not I’ll stick it in the machine in the morning, set it to come on later in the day so it’s done when I get home.”

Shared infrastructure but independent laundry servicing

Those who house-shared faced a particular set of inter-personal coordination issues based on the sharing of an infrastructure but not of the service of doing the laundry. Darren (early 30s, house share, no children) provided a series of examples:

“Yeah, if I know I’ve got some to do and like he’ll get his out and I’ll have to wait until at least a day when he’s started drying his and then put mine on. I could put mine on but it means it’s just going to be wet and I might as well wait until it’s free and then do mine. We kind of work it out, it very rarely happens. It seems to work itself out. He has different days off and stuff to me”

“It doesn’t bother me, I like to keep on top of it. But I kind of get a bit stressed out if my mate’s doing some. Or he comes in and puts his washing on and I’ve got mine to do, it’s like ‘Oh no’, because it’s going to be like two days to dry, what am I going to do with mine. So it’s like a race against time.”

“I make sure I’ve got space to get it drying, because there’s two of us in our flat. So if my flatmate has done his, his might still be drying. So sort his out, then get mine on, make sure the heating is on as it’s then a quicker dry, but yeah.”

Shared infrastructure, shared laundry services (coordinating qualities)

- Couple/ family households faced no such challenges as laundry servicing is shared. But this creates a range of other ‘coordination challenges’ related to ‘qualities’ of outcome.
- These challenges, overwhelmingly, relate to gendered ‘felt’ responsibilities for the welfare and presentation of the household as a whole.

Seeking laundry, making loads:

“And then just because I’m washing his [the baby’s] I’ll tend to go fishing around in our baskets to see what can fill up the load. Especially if there’s something that you want him to wear the next day, for some occasion or if it’s not going to dry in time ... like we’ve got a wedding this weekend so I want him to wear certain outfits and make sure they’re clean, so I might have to fill up a wash.” (Ruth, mid 30s married, one child)

‘Search and sniff’:

“It’s see and smell I suppose, and remembering sometimes. Sometimes I’ll just look at it and think they’ve had that on for a while. Often I’m pulling knickers out of leggings. Underwear is easy to tell and socks. You kind of just know. You can see when they’re been worn. And then lots of things have creases in and sometimes that’s enough to wash it. If it was a skirt or trousers that had too many wear creases in, and I can see that needs a wash to freshen it up and straighten it out again, so that’s the key things. Mainly with tops I’d be going round sniffing them. It sounds so disgusting. (Daisy, mid 30s, married with 2 young children)

*“Sometimes things are just left on the floors and I go now and again to their bedrooms and sift out all the stuff that I think needs washing... [and **decide**] by the look of it, me thinking ‘When did I know they last wore that’, and sometimes just giving it a sniff as well. So that’s how I decide.” (Jude, mid 40s, married, 3 children)*

Negotiating qualities, generating quantities

“Occasionally I’ve said to my daughter “how can you wear that t-shirt three days running?” but it’s her choice, she’s 18. Him, a piece of clothes touches him and it’s in the washing basket, he doesn’t like to wear stuff for two days running, except his onesies, he loves his onesies.” (Betty, mid-40s, married, two children)

“The girls sometimes will try and put their jeans in after they’ve worn them once, and then you can’t do that because jeans can last months. I just put those back in the drawers.” (Daisy, mid 30s, married with 2 young children)

And... managing the presentation of household members

“If I can get away without ironing them, fine, but I wouldn’t let him [husband] go out in a crumpled shirt, because somehow I think that looks bad on me, but that’s because I know I do the washing. It is bizarre, yeah, it is a pride thing, I suppose.” (Betty, mid-40s, married, two children)

Learning competence

“I used to put wet washing on hangers and just hang it on the window but my mum hit the roof, she said that’s a step too far, that’s really chavvy, you can’t do that. (...)They were drying in two hours and I just replaced them, dry in two hours, replaced them, dry in two hours. But my mum said “no, you can’t do that”... My mum’s very ... takes a lot of care about how people think, what people think of the house, of her, of whatever. I don’t really bother but I did understand what she meant because ... I don’t know. I did stop because of what she said. I don’t know. But I don’t suppose it is a good look, is it, if you have all your washing on hangers at the window and all of it on the radiators? It didn’t look good, put it that way. I wasn’t impressed when I walked into my bedroom and just saw washing everywhere, it did get me down a bit, but it worked. But I don’t do that anymore.” (Chantal, mid 20s, couple, two children)

Summary

Examining laundry activities through the lens of the interpersonal relationships embedded in the practice reveals:

- The challenge of aligning multiple personal schedules (the exacerbation of the coordinating laundry within one's own personal schedule)
- Shared infrastructure is very different from shared servicing
- the way it is organized and performed is conditioned by sets of standards, qualities and expectations that are particularly prominent when the service is shared
- Coordinating laundry services within inter-personal relationships demand negotiation and management of the flow, quality and quantity of laundry activities
- Such negotiations reveal cultural conventions and the reproduction of competence that stretch beyond the household.
- Laundry is a practice constituted through inter-personal relationships of different shapes and forms.

Conditioning Laundry:

Environmental and material ordering of the practice

Storage:

“[when I decide to do the washing is]...I typically be when the washing basket’s full, so that will be every week maybe. I don’t know, it’s a bit difficult to say but I’d say pretty much every week. And as a single fella who does his own washing it probably takes about a week to fill up the washing basket. Occasionally I change my bed sheets as well if I need to, maybe every couple of weeks.” (William, mid 30s, solo-living, no children)

Washing

“it’s [the washing machine] the only thing I’ve got that’s insured as well because I understand how important it is when it breaks and I’m absolutely up the creek without a paddle ... I just felt really lost and really like “what am I going to do?” Because my mum’s only got one washing machine, it’s not an industrial-sized one, “what am I going to do?” It was just panic. What if we run out of clothes? Then you start getting “what if I run out of clothes and what if this happens?” It was a complete nightmare.” (Chantal, mid 20s, couple, two children)

Drying

“A big problem for us in this house is drying it... our spare bedroom in the back is basically a drying room most of the time... we’ve got a bureau in there and it’s quite a nice room when it’s not got loads of drying racks in it. I don’t want to constantly have clothes hanging up in it drying, so I thought why don’t we just have it drying downstairs and then that will force us to kind of, once it’s dry, put it away. But it didn’t work at all because we do have a requirement with constantly drying stuff, particularly now [since having a baby] with one or two washes a day. Washing needs to be hung up but I can’t because I need to wait for the rest of it to dry. It takes a lot of space, doesn’t it? And we’ve got concerns over the dampness of the house and allergies and stuff like that.” (Ruth, mid 30s married, one child)

“I’m dreading proper Winter this year, it can take a long time for things to dry, especially cotton and heavier cotton things, so you tend to then run out of space for drying, so you’ve got to learn to plan washing, according to where the drying space is. So we end up with things hanging on the back of doors and that kind of thing – over the bannister, radiators, anywhere that it will fit really.” (Ruth, mid 30s married, one child)

“I really don’t like having my washing hanging around in winter because the windows get full of condensation. I just don’t like not being able to regularly put it outside. I’d love to live somewhere hot, just so that I could do my washing outside.” (Liz, 20s, couple, no children)

Summary

- Unsurprisingly, material infrastructures and equipment are important in coordinating the sequence of laundry.
- They condition sequences and generate routine responses across households, as people invoke similar strategies to get the laundry done within a generic set of infrastructural and environmental constraints that include:
 - access to the washing machine
 - access to space which can be used to dry and store (dirty and clean) clothing.
 - Negotiating weather
- Despite a fairly constant range of materials used across households (apart from amount of space, and notably outside space), people respond to material and environmental conditions in quite different ways.
- Such responses are not arbitrary but related to the principle practitioners schedules and their inter-personal relationships that produced 'laundry flows'.
- Coordinating laundry practices is a matter of managing and negotiating the quantities and qualities of items as they flow through activity sequences.

Ordering laundry

From our interview data, we can identify four critical mechanisms that order the coordination of laundry practices. These are mechanisms that range across households and practice performances, acting to shape and order the range of possible forms of coordination across the activity sequences:

- Social relations – especially domestic divisions of labour, but also inter-generational (our sample does not permit analysis of socio-economic differentiation, ethnicity or age).
- Cultural conventions – just like ‘culture’, conventions do not ‘exist out there’ directing action but provide a stock of cultural meanings that are invoked to frame actions (Swidler 1986, 2003). In this case, conventions were mobilised in the negotiation of the quantities and qualities that flowed through laundry sequences.
- Material and environmental conditions – most notably baskets as barometers and the constraints of shared infrastructures.
- Institutionalized temporal rhythms – paid and unpaid work, and the rhythms of school timetables for those with children, represented critical fixed events that shaped personal schedules and household routines.

Within households, and at the level of practice performance, these four mechanisms are observable as:

- Settled patterns (routines) and flows of activity sequence (and responsibilities)
- Understandings and expectations narrated as cleanliness, comfort, freshness, and the appropriate presentation of household members beyond the home.
- The use of domestic technologies and infrastructures, including timing devices.
- Household schedules, planning and routines.

Concluding remarks

Returning to some of initial questions and puzzles:

- Washing machines do not stand out as being hugely significant. While they do represent something of a mono-culture, the practice of laundering is not.
- Focusing on the ‘use’ of technologies is of limited explanation. Indeed, to explain the practice of laundry and its consumption, the much more mundane technology of storage baskets (the barometers of laundry flows – both in terms of sequence, quality and quantity) is most important. While resource-intensity might be located in washing machines and tumble dryers, these alone are not the ‘causes’ of current ways of doing laundry.
- Gender certainly matters. In this case, it matters because it highlights that inter-personal relationships are particularly significance in shaping practice performances, yet is largely under-conceptualized in the literature not concerned with domestic divisions of labour (or family life).
- Cultural competences (here played out through ‘qualities’) is presented as negotiated in the context of inter-personal relationships rather than a largely external set of conditions that guide practice performance.
- Temporality matters (scheduling, rhythms etc...), but this study emphasizes the importance of flows through and between sequences of activities.
- Demonstrates the interactions between the ordering mechanisms that condition the practice as entity, and the varieties that are played out in practice performances.