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# The Social Ordering of an Everyday Practice: The Case of Laundry

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## Abstract

Sociological contributions to debates surrounding sustainable consumption have presented strong critiques of methodological individualism and technological determinism. Drawing from a range of sociological insights from the fields of consumption, everyday life and science and technology studies, these critiques emphasize the recursivity between (a) everyday performances and object use, and (b) how those performances are socially ordered. Empirical studies have, however, been criticized as being descriptive of micro-level phenomena to the exclusion of explanations of processes of reproduction or change. Developing a methodological approach that examines sequences of activities this article explores different forms of coordination (activity, inter-personal and material) that condition the temporal and material flows of laundry practices. Doing so produces an analysis that de-centres technologies and individual performances, allowing for the identification of mechanisms that order the practice of laundry at the personal, household and societal levels. These are: social relations, cultural conventions; domestic materiality; and, institutionalised temporal rhythms. In conclusion, we suggest that addressing such mechanisms offer fruitful avenues for fostering more sustainable consumption, compared to dominant approaches that are founded within 'deficit models' of action.

Keywords: theories of practice; sustainable consumption; everyday life; laundry systems; domestic technologies

## 1. Introduction

Sociological accounts of sustainable consumption have advanced powerful critiques of the orthodox framings of this subject. The sociologies of consumption, everyday life, and science and technology have challenged those framings on the grounds that they: reduce consumption to matters of individual 'choice' (Jackson, 2015; Shove, 2010); they treat patterns of consumption as aggregate purchasing decisions (Southerton and Ulph, 2014); consider technological change as simply a matter of the adoption of 'more efficient' eco-innovations (Mylan 2015; Welch, 2015); and, present everyday lives as inert barriers to be overcome through 'behaviour' change interventions (Southerton 2013; Mylan et al. 2016).

The sociology of consumption, with its theoretical and empirical focus on processes of acquisition, appropriation and appreciation has demonstrated how goods and services are: unevenly distributed in ways that symbolically communicate identities and social difference; provisioned and used in ways that order social relations; and, embedded in changing cultural understandings and expectations of an 'acceptable life' (Warde, 2010). As a much broader and more diverse field of enquiry, sociologies of everyday life have less explicitly considered debates regarding sustainability

or consumption, but have provided important theoretical and empirical inspirations. For example, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective has been influential in explaining everyday performances involving consumption, and Butler's (1990) account of gender and performativity has underpinned understandings of consumption as embodiment. Lefebvre's (1991) critique of everyday life has provided inspiration for accounts of consumption as a site for the reproduction of capitalism, while de Certeau's (1984) analysis of routine practices as expressive and resistant has enduring resonance in contemporary theories of consumption. Finally, science and technology studies have shown how material objects 'script' human action (Akrich, 1992) and act upon societal forms (Latour, 2005), while recognizing that technologies are also socially shaped (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). This body of theory takes materiality (objects, technologies and infrastructures) as their central unit of analysis to demonstrate the interplay between the material and social worlds.

Each of these sociological fields of enquiry broadly shares an ontological position consistent with theories of practice, which are recognized to embrace a very diverse range of theories (Schatzki, 2011). Emerging in the 1970s, theories of practice represent a multi-faceted response to fundamental and pressing problems of social theory like structure and agency, the role of rules in social order, and the scientific status of social theories (Rouse, 2006). With growing interest in ordinary consumption (Gronow and Warde, 2001), materiality (Shove, 2003) and routine forms of action (Southerton, 2013), theories of practices were reformulated to proclaim practices the fundamental unit of social analysis (expressed most clearly in 'social practice theory', see Shove et al. 2012). When operationalised, social practices are generally treated as configurations of recognizable, intelligible and describable elements. While there is no single agreed typology of elements, focus has tended towards some combination of material objects, practical know how, and socially sanctioned objectives. Elements configure how practices are performed and the performance of practices reproduce their elements. This recursivity represents the critical empirical foci for analyzing processes of stability (reproduction of normality) and change (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012).

Like accounts of everyday life as sites and moments of translation and adaptation (see Neal and Mruji, 2015), theories of practice are described as meso-level explanations because they seek to examine the interactions between micro-level phenomena (e.g. the personal, situational, performative) and macro-level processes (e.g. related to institutions, social relations, political economy). Yet, as Gardiner (2000) and Warde (2014) each observe in relation to the sociology of everyday life and social practice theories respectively, there is a tendency within empirical studies toward descriptive accounts of the micro with limited critical analysis of broader social processes. This paper seeks to overcome this tendency by exploring how laundry practices are performed and coordinated at different levels (personal, household and societal), facilitating an analysis of the societal mechanisms that reproduce the practice in its particular forms.

In taking this approach, the paper develops a methodological approach that examines sequencing of interconnected laundry activities within UK homes. Responding to Ingold's (2012) call for analysis of the material flows and formative processes through which objects are used, and building on Rinkinen et al's (2015) observations that the temporal flow of events and activities situate objects and their consumption within everyday experiences, we advance an analytical frame for systematically examining how domestic laundry practices are coordinated. In doing so, we identify three forms of coordination (activity, inter-personal and material) that condition temporal and material flows. This analysis effectively de-centres technologies and individual performances, and facilitates the identification of four mechanisms (social relations, cultural conventions, materialities,

temporal rhythms) that simultaneously order domestic laundry practices at the personal, household and societal levels. In conclusion, we return to debates regarding sustainable consumption by offering a suggestion as to the implications of this study for policy.

## **2. Exploring the practice of laundry**

Laundry is a useful empirical probe for exploring the relationship between practices as performances (as observed at the micro-level) and as socially ordered entities (as observed at a societal level). As an entity, the practice of laundry presents societal patterning through its dominant form of user-owned washing machines and mass manufactured detergents. While Monday is no longer 'wash day' (Southerton, 2009), clear societal rhythms remain with most washing machines running between 7-11am in the morning and tumble dryers used primarily in the afternoon (Yates and Evans, 2016). Yet, alongside these discernible societal patterns exist wide variations in how laundry is performed at the household level, exhibiting a range of context-dependent activities including how items are stored, dried and prepared for wear (Yates and Evans, 2016), which give rise to an equally diverse range of meanings and experiences attributable to these activities (Jack, 2013; Mylan, 2015). This article explores the relationship between these apparently contradictory observations of practice homogeneity at the (macro) societal level and heterogeneity at the (micro) personal and household levels.

The practice of laundry is also apposite for considering debates concerning sustainable consumption and production. As a resource intensive domestic activity (accounting for 12% energy and 13% water use in UK households) laundry has been subject to a range of attempts to render it more sustainable. These have included technological innovation to improve the efficiency of machines, information provision to consumers through energy labeling, and initiatives to encourage consumer behavior change toward using lower temperatures (Mylan, 2017). Despite the reported success of each of these initiatives the overall energy and water consumption from laundry continues to rise (Yates and Evans, 2016)

Beyond the environmental implications of laundry the practice has largely been studied with respect to personal life and domestic divisions of labour. Laundry work remains overwhelming done by women – surveys reveal that in 2012 women perform 'all' or 'most of' the laundry in couple households (Scott and Clery, 2013) – and as such gender differences remain a critical issue. Studies that examine the role of laundry within personal lives reveal how couples deal with the challenge of negotiating tacit understandings of acceptable laundry standards (Kauffman's, 1998), and how doing the laundry requires women to take sensory responsibility for the hygiene and personal presentations of other household members (Pink, 2012). Other studies have highlighted how increased volumes of laundry per person relate to rising standards of cleanliness. Shove (2003) explains these trends as a process of normalization, in which the upward ratcheting of expectations of cleanliness together with the standardization of particular modes of provision (especially around the domestic washing machine) have resulted in resource-intensive patterns of activity becoming a matter of taken-for-granted routine practice. This study both provides further empirical evidence of gendered performances (and inequality) within the contexts of inter-personal relationships and builds on Shove's (2003) conceptualization of 'laundry as a system'.

### **3. Researching laundry as a practice**

As our core research question aims to unpack and explain the relationship between laundry performances (as lived experiences) and their societal ordering we take the coordination of laundry practices as our object of analysis. Coordination is a nebulous term, but inspiration can be found from Ingold's (2012) account of material flows, Hand and Shove's (2008) analysis of the orchestration of domestic object-practice relationships, and Warde's (2013) analysis of how rules and procedures configure cultural understandings of eating practices. Each, in quite different ways, demonstrates that the activities, objects and cultural understandings from which any practice is comprised are inter-connected and mutually dependent (i.e. coordinated). In response we develop a methodology to examine how the constituent activities of laundry practices are coordinated and sequenced. We identify these activities as: designation of unclean items, storage, washing, drying, and preparation of items for use (e.g. ironing). Each activity is performed in relation to different domestic objects and evokes a range of cultural understandings. Taken together, the constituent activities represent the boundaries of laundry practice in this analysis.

Given our empirical focus on variations of practice performances, nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals responsible for undertaking laundry (see Table 1 for details). A convenience sample obtained from three suburban localities (areas with low, average and high value housing when compared with mean regional value) near Manchester (England) was selected, including variations in building type, tenure, and household composition, and ranged in age between early 20s and mid 50s. Respondents were asked to describe how they performed the practice before discussing how they managed, negotiated (with others), and improvised their laundry practice performances. In narrating laundry experiences respondents mobilized a number of cultural conventions in order to make sense of their practice performances. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes to 1 hour 35 minutes, were recorded and fully transcribed.

INSERT Table 1 HERE

Data analysis focused on explaining the coordination of laundry practices across the performances described by our respondents. The ideal-typical sequence described above, derived from initial interview analysis, was used as a heuristic device to enable systematic identification of both 'variations' and mechanisms that led to 'commonalities' (or shared experiences) of practice performance.

#### **4. Coordinating laundry: practitioners, inter-personal relationships and material conditioning**

Initial analysis of interview data revealed three lenses through which respondents' narratives could be interpreted. The first was the strategies adopted by those who did the laundry in order to coordinate the sequence of activities necessary to perform the practice. The second lens explored the inter-personal relationships that were particularly significant in cases where laundry represented a service undertaken on behalf of other people. Here, focus was on the coordination (and negotiation) of laundry activities to accommodate the needs and shared practices embedded in personal relationships. The final lens explored the material conditions that shaped laundry practices. This included the relationships between what is laundered (the linen), laundry technologies, household infrastructures, the spatial arrangements of homes, and the weather. Each lens provided a different angle through which to identify and examine the critical factors that ordered laundry performances.

##### **4.1. Personal strategies of practitioners: managing material and temporal flows**

Our sampling strategy recruited those with principle responsibility for laundry practices, which were all women except for two cases of male only households. In managing laundry activity sequences practitioners narrated two main coordination tasks. The first was scheduling laundry activities in relation to other practices. The second related to a range of objects that acted as 'barometers' which shaped the temporal (duration, tempo and periodicity) and material (laundry items) flows of the practice.

Employment schedules (as institutionally timed events) produced periodic patterns of activity. Practitioners fitted laundry activities around times of paid work during the week (five respondents), at weekends (fourteen respondents), and during evenings (ten respondents), as well as aligning it with doing paid work from home. Daisy (30s, married with two children) provided an example: *'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.'* While employment times affected the periodicity of washing, respondents also described how they coordinated a range of laundry activities so that they could be performed concurrently with other domestic tasks. Marianne (50s, married, two children) explained how:

*'I'll sort of either be writing a shopping list or cleaning or organising other things for the day... as I'm doing that round the house I'll put the loads in and out... The quick loads, the half an hour ones, I can just put them in and out between cleaning and sorting out homework and organising anything else, so that it's all done and dusted for lunchtime on Saturday.'*

Such coordination with other activities often required an alignment of activities of similar durations, such as cooking a meal during a wash-cycle as described by Elisa (30s, house-share, no children):

*'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.'*

The intention of such strategies had a clear focus on managing 'work-life' balance. Despite this, more than half of respondents, and all those with children at home, experienced the activity sequence as a never-ending cycle, a sentiment neatly summarized by Clare (30s, single, two children):

*'You do feel like all you're doing is washing all weekend because it's continual. If it's not in the tumble dryer you've got to get it out and fold it and put it away or put in the pile for ironing, it's a continuous cycle of washing, drying, ironing, putting away.'*

Practitioners' coordinations of activity sequences involved the kinds of personal scheduling and multi-tasking reported in previous studies of the temporal organization of domestic life (Southerton, 2003). Coordinating activity sequences with practices such as work, unpaid work and leisure were presented as necessary strategies for managing personal schedules and creating opportunities to 'free-up' time for other activities, like relaxing on the sofa in Elisa's case or Saturday afternoon for Marianne. Such strategies were often associated with the efficient use of time for activities regarded as mundane, and led to an acute awareness of the importance of timings, as Darren (20s, house share, no children) neatly captured:

*'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.... I just try and be productive, don't wait and sit and watch it.'*

The use of timing devices, a common feature of domestic time management (Southerton, 2003), to control the tempo of activity sequences was a prominent tactic. Liz (20s, couple, no children) provided an example: "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... it means that I don't have to get in, put it in and then wait an hour for it to be done". Timing was not always a matter of washing machine settings. Liz also revealed other technology-practice combinations that required careful temporal coordination:

*'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'*

While technologies offered some capacity to control the timing of activities within the laundry sequence, other practices (such as exercising and showering) coupled with the existing domestic infrastructures represented sets of constraints to be negotiated.

The storage of linen and laundry provided a focus for many practitioners' efforts to control the flow of activities through laundry sequences. Respondents described how equipment or storage infrastructure, such as dirty laundry baskets, sports bags, bedroom chairs, radiators and door frames were sites for anticipating and managing flows of clothing in various conditions of cleanliness. Full laundry baskets, reported as the trigger for washing clothes by 58% of respondents in a recent survey (Yates and Evans, 2016), were particularly prominent barometers for anticipating when laundry should be done:

*'I've got two wash baskets and basically see what's on top of them. Then I'll be thinking ahead... 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, 40s, married, three children)

As in Jude's case, the contents of the basket determined the need to perform the laundry and was used to anticipate and plan future activities. As reference to the 'PE bag' implied, practitioners were acutely aware of potentially dirty laundry lurking around the house, making the basket an intermediating device between the use of linen and initiation of laundry sequences. The rates with which baskets were filled affected the periodicity of each activity as well as the tempo of the movement between stages. Rachel (50s, married, two children) described how the filling of her son's basket influenced movement of linen through the sequence: *'he'll be "my washing basket's full, mum, it needs washing", so I'll think yeah but I need to get that lot dried and put away first'*. Washing baskets played a pivotal role in judgments of which items were ready to wash, acting as a barometer through which practitioners could determine when to 'put a load on', anticipate the required periodicity of washing activities, and the tempo of activity sequences (a point elaborated further in the following section).

In other cases, managing the volume of items and flows of activities was directed at the 'other end' of the sequence – the ironing pile:

*'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)

Routinizing the activity of ironing by designation of set times rendered the 'ironing basket' another barometer of laundry activity sequences, the size of the pile acting to regulate the volume of items that are designated as 'needing' washing.

Analyzing laundry performances through the lens of the practitioners' actions revealed how they coordinated activity sequences with other daily practices (such as paid work), in order to manage the temporal and material flows of the practice. Explicitly gendered with women assuming responsibility for all laundry activities, conventions of temporal efficiency and domestic productivity were widely evoked as justifications for coordination strategies, and various objects and technologies were employed to achieve them. Household infrastructures were presented as constraints to be negotiated, with both dirty and clean laundry storage infrastructures used by all respondents to anticipate and manage temporal and material flows.

#### 4.2. Interpersonal relationships, household schedules and laundry service

The second analytical lens focused on inter-personal relationships both within the household and beyond; with wider family, friends and work colleagues featuring as 'others' who influenced laundry practice. This was experienced in several ways, through the coordination of multiple personal schedules; sharing of household infrastructure; and, competent provisioning of appropriate qualities of laundry service and outcome.

Efforts to manage the laundry sequence almost always involved some accommodation of other people, principally those living in the household. As a highly gendered practice, such considerations



were tightly bound with expectations of domestic care (McKie et al, 2002) and embedded in broader configurations of family practices (see Morgan, 2011). For example, Jude and Rachel's descriptions of their use of baskets and bags as barometers (discussed previously) were located in narratives of care and supporting the activities of family members. More generally, the combined practice 'schedules' of the household were crucial in dictating the rate linen flowed through the sequence of activities, as well as generating the necessity to consider the needs of household members. Recall Liz, who explained the clash between showering and clothes washing that emerged as a result of household exercise routines. The couple's shared schedule led to the following periodicity of washing:

*'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.'*

In most cases, the coordination of personal schedules amounted to the alignment of household members work, schooling and social activities. As a result, doing the laundry took on a greater household significance than simply cleaning clothes, with women needing to anticipate and negotiate the temporal rhythms of other household members, as Mabel (30s, married, no children) illustrated: *'because my husband needs his five shirts for the start of the work week and because we go through so much sportswear that I just think I should, I have to find time to do it.'* In other cases, divisions of labour dictated the coordination of activity sequences: *'Friday night, Saturday morning usually is wash time... so that it's all ready for my husband to iron on his day off on Monday'* (Marianne). Other cases, such as Rachel, coordination involved ensuring not only appropriate, but also preferred items were available for upcoming events:

*'because I've only got a small number of shirts for my son for school, so they've got to go through... if you suddenly think on Sunday I'll make sure that everyone's school and the work stuff is done and then during the week I might be doing stuff for us for weekends, casual stuff... [My son] is very fussy about what he wears and looking right... if he's going somewhere, "can you make sure it's done for Saturday?"'*

The importance of negotiating multiple personal schedules was not constrained to those living as a family but took on a very different form in shared households. House-sharing respondents faced challenges imposed by the constraints of shared infrastructure. Darren provided an example of the challenges described by all three of our house-sharing respondents:

*'if I know I've got some to do and like he'll get his out [of the washing machine] 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... He has different days off and stuff to me... [But if] 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. So it's like a race against time.'*

The crucial difference was that those in shared households negotiated their laundry sequences around the available domestic infrastructure, whereas family households defined their laundry sequences in terms of shared service. This meant that in addition to coordinating laundry activity sequences in relation to the multiple personal schedules of family household members they also engaged in a negotiation of 'qualities' of service. A range of cultural conventions were evoked, cleanliness being most prominent although the qualities of laundering associated with this

convention varied widely. This was most clearly illustrated by the procedure for designating items as 'ready for washing' through a process generically described by respondents as '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've 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.'*

The 'search and sniff' procedure described by Jude featured in 12 respondents accounts of how they managed flows of materials through the laundry sequence and the maintenance of cleanliness on behalf of others. Identification of ready to wash items was achieved with the employment of 'rules of thumb', combining sensory indicators related to 'smell', 'appearance' and 'feel' with recall of frequency and longevity of use. Some items, such as underwear and sportswear, short-circuited this process and were washed overwhelmingly after one wear, which was explained with reference to sweat and proximity to the body.

As we have already seen, designation as 'ready-to-wash' was influenced by factors beyond the item in question, including the contents of the laundry basket. As Rachel explained, entrance to the laundry sequence was not entirely dependent on the condition of laundry items: *'I mean if somebody's only got a little bit [in their washing basket] I'll go and find something else to put in, rather than doing two or three things I'll look around and find something to go in with it'*. 'Making up a load' and including items that would otherwise be deemed not yet ready to wash featured in the accounts of 15 respondents.

Ready-to-wash, and by implication clean enough to wear, depended not on judgments made relative to a consistent standard of cleanliness but on the circumstances in which they are evoked, including where items were found, where they had been, and for how long they had been used. Floors, chairs, ends of beds and tables were places in which items deemed neither dirty nor clean were stored. In 16 cases liminal storage spaces within the home were described where such items were stored. Ruth (30s, couple, baby ) explained:

*'If they're not on the floor and they're on the dresser I take it that means there's something that's only been worn once and can be worn again... my general policy in my head is that I'll put clothes I'm going to wear again... I wouldn't put them in the drawer because they're not completely fresh but I wouldn't put them in the washing bin. I have a shelf in my wardrobe where it's like an in-between, if I can wear it again I put it on the shelf in the wardrobe.'*

The difficulty for Ruth was that her partner failed to grasp her 'general policy' which had become a source of friction.

Establishing shared understandings of laundry competence across all household members extended beyond partners, and took the form of mothers' deliberate attempts to educate children. This was both a practical strategy to reduce material flows of linen and pedagogic attempts to equip children for later life. Younger children, who could not be expected to grasp the nuances involved in the search, sniff and storage techniques, were taught by example. Daisy explained how: *'the girls sometimes will try and put their jeans in after they've worn them once... I just put those back in the drawers'*, while Betty (40s, married, two children) felt the need to continually challenge her eldest

daughter: *'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.'* Practitioners were also aware that the gaze of others could bring into question their laundry competence. The visit of non-household members provoked such concerns, as Chantal (20, single, two children) explained: *'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... I did stop because of what she said'*. Chantal now dries her laundry using radiators (when her mum is not due to visit) and by using her mother's tumble dryer.

Finally, the qualities of presentation of the self and other household members permeated laundry activity sequences. Take, for example, Betty's description of the importance of crease-avoidance: *'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'*. Betty explained the techniques that she, like other respondents, employed to avoid creasing and thus minimizing the need for ironing, which included not leaving loads in washing machines or tumble dryers. Five respondents described seeking non-crease fabrics when purchasing clothes, while others mentioned avoidance of tumble dryers, shaking-out items before drying, lying items flat, hanging out and 'turning' items while drying on radiators. Gemma (30s, partner, no children), managed to avoid ironing altogether by washing small loads in the machine, and for this reason excluded her partners participation in the activity of washing: *'he's often said 'I'll have to do some' and I'll say "no", because I think he overloads the washing machine... so I do it all. But we don't do any ironing.'* While crease avoidance techniques saved the time required for ironing they also placed great emphasis on the tempo of movement through laundry sequences.

Coordination of multiple personal schedules and use of shared household infrastructures affected the performance of each activity of the sequence, which resulted in personal relationships shaping the form that the practice takes in each household. It was, however, in the negotiation of cultural qualities in laundry service that the significance of personal relationship was most striking. Conventions of cleanliness, convenience, freshness and (self) presentation were evoked to negotiate qualities of laundry related to dirt and smell, effective time management (e.g. making-up a load or crease-avoidance), storage of clothes between clean and dirty, and appropriately clean items presentable in public contexts. Such qualities affected all aspects of laundry activity sequences. Conventions, in these accounts of laundry, were repertoires of cultural understandings utilized to explain aspects of activity sequencing and to convey the complex inter-personal negotiations of the qualities of laundry deemed necessary for competent practice performance. Importantly, qualities of service were only prominent in family households where women assumed responsibility for managing and achieving complex forms of coordination while maintaining qualities of outcome derived from cultural conventions.

#### 4.3. Conditioning laundry: material ordering of the practice

As already discussed, specific material arrangements, were used to manage the material and temporal flows of the practice. In addition to dirty laundry and ironing baskets, wardrobes also acted as barometers to regulate the flow of laundry, with low levels of particular items triggering washing. These examples of baskets and wardrobes as barometers of laundry demonstrate how the broader materiality of the home and its contents shape the configuration of the practice.

Given the extent to which the washing machine has been the focal point of laundry related sustainability concerns, it was surprising how little it featured in respondents' narratives. When mentioned it was often in relation to temporality, for example fast cycle settings in contexts of clean-clothes emergencies, as Rachel described: *'the other morning, my son said "I've got no school shirts", I had to put one in, give it a rinse on this quick wash and then get it dried.'* Others included Elisa's selection of machine settings based on her available time: *'depending on how much time I have, I either select the short programme or the eco programme... the quality of the outcome is the same, so it's just a matter of time for me.'* Gemma was one of two respondents who used only one setting, again for reasons of time (convenience): *'I put them on this, which is a daily wash because it's quick, it's only 30 minutes'*. Beyond temporal references washing machines were occasionally discussed in terms of the temperature, which was associated with standards of hygiene: *'if I'm doing sheets or anything like that, or towels, I try and do them on a high temperature... I just feel like it just gets the bacteria out better, so if they start to smell a bit'* (Ruth). The washing machine was only mentioned on three further occasions: a noisy machine; an old machine requiring some improvisation in use; and, Chantal's recollection of machine failure: *'I just felt really lost and really like "what am I going to do?"... It was just panic'*.

Clothes drying was a particular challenge. Methods varied, utilizing different combinations of household infrastructure and spaces including tumble dryers, clotheshorses, outdoor lines, radiators, doorframes, and bathrooms. This reflects survey findings in which only 18% of households reported using a single drying method (Yates and Evans, 2016). Respondents creatively managed the relationship between domestic technologies, space and infrastructure to adjust laundry activity sequences in accordance with the weather and household temporal rhythms. Yet, despite this variety, outdoor drying was the overwhelmingly preferred method: *'If the weather is not rubbish I love hanging my washing outside. It's like I pray for weekends to be sunny so that I can hang my washing out'* (Liz). Associated with cultural qualities of freshness, outdoor drying was viewed as producing the most satisfying end results while avoiding the pitfalls of 'mustiness' and condensation within the home:

*'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)

Although 12 of our 19 respondents had access to a tumble dryer most minimized its use believing it was costly, damaged clothes or produced crumpled linen. Towels and underwear were, however, justified through conventions of comfort: *'towels go in the tumble-dryer so that they're soft, especially because I don't use fabric conditioner, and the underwear and socks'* (Marianne). Jude improvised, part tumble-drying to achieve greater comfort: *'I do like my towels fluffy, and sometimes even if it's a nice day I'll sometimes put on... the lowest [setting] just to give it a bit of a start... and then put them on the line'*.

Domestic materialities, especially technologies, spaces and infrastructures both enabled and constrained laundry practices. Whether through the arrangement of multiple drying methods, with radiators as 'back-up' for outdoor drying lines (Ruth) or showers competing with washing machines for water pressure (Liz), the materiality of the home conditioned the temporal rhythms of laundry activities. At the same time, materialities in the form of various barometers also conditioned the

material flow of items through laundry sequences. Specific technologies, such as the washing machine, were not prominent in respondents' accounts, usually only mentioned as part of broader narratives of convenience, cleanliness and comfort. The interactions between such cultural conventions (and associated qualities of service and outcome), the materialities of the home and schedules of household members acted to condition the temporal flow of laundry activity and flow of laundry items through those sequences.

## **5. The social ordering of laundry**

The methodological approach developed for this analysis deconstructed the practice of laundry into its constituent activities. This allowed for a detailed examination of how those activities were sequenced and coordinated. At the level of laundry practice performances our data revealed great variations and improvisations across participants that related to an equally wide range of context-specific factors: household composition; personal relationships; domestic infrastructures, technologies and space; times of year (and weather); employment status and work arrangements; and so on. Our guiding question, however, is how this apparent diversity of practice performances relates to the broader societal patterning of laundry practice? Our analysis provides some answers in the form of four social mechanisms that ordered our respondents laundry practices: social relations; cultural conventions; materialities of the home; and institutionalised temporal rhythms.

Social relations in the form of gendered divisions of domestic labour had a clear ordering effect on laundry performances across our sample. All women in couple relationships took principal responsibility for the coordination of laundry activity sequences, negotiating the schedules of household members, improvising in relation to the material conditions, and managing its temporal and material flows.

Acting as cultural repertoires, conventions were expressed in terms of qualities of service and outcome. Service qualities often referred to convenience (time) or, in a few cases, domestic economy (e.g. avoiding tumble dryer use). Soft fluffy towels, fresh linen, non-creased clothes and shirts ready for specific events were all examples of qualities of outcome derived from conventions of care and cleanliness. Conventions, as a second ordering mechanism, acted as a stock of cultural ideals mobilized to make sense of acceptable laundry activities, and how they should be coordinated and sequenced.

The third ordering mechanism is the material form of the home. Infrastructures, laundry technologies and domestic spaces conditioned practice performances. Domestic infrastructures not only provision the water and electricity that enabled laundry activities, they also constrained performances and demanded significant coordination efforts from practitioners (as illustrated by improvisations in drying methods). Perhaps more revealing was that the washing machine did not feature prominently in the narratives of our respondents. Rather, washing baskets, ironing piles, wardrobes, chairs and even floors all acted as 'devices' employed to judge the required flow of laundry items through the sequence of activities, barometers for the circulation of laundry items around the home. And, the spatial layout of the home also conditioned the ways in which laundry activities were coordinated and performed. The availability and use of designated indoor drying spaces, the possibility for outdoor drying, the use of radiators, together with space to home

technologies like tumble dryers and devices for laundry storage (e.g. multiple baskets) complete the list of material forms that ordered laundry practices across the households studied.

The final ordering mechanism identified is institutionalised temporal rhythms, which refer to the regulating of laundry activities with respect to their timing, duration, tempo and periodicity. Examples of practice regularities from our data included scheduling laundry activities in relation to paid and unpaid work times, school timetables, and routinized leisure activities (e.g. the gym). The resulting collective temporal patterns of our respondents that comprised weekend and weekday washing with later afternoon drying are a consequence of such instituted temporalities, and consistent with the temporal patterning revealed by survey data (Yates and Evans, 2016). Tempos of laundry activities were also shaped by mis-alignment of personal schedules and laundry routines; often resulting in an acceleration of sequences when such situations emerged. As this suggests, the tempo and duration of laundry activities can be shortened or lengthened, faster or slower, yet they followed similar rhythms of duration and tempo for all of our respondents.

These four social mechanisms are inter-related. It is these inter-relationships that order the practice of laundry. Respondents' accounts of coordinating laundry activities and the personal schedules of household members were examples of the relationship between social relations and institutionalized temporal rhythms. Those rhythms were also ordered through the materiality of the home, especially with respect to barometers such as the laundry basket that regulated the temporal flow of items through the sequence of laundry activities. The material ordering of laundry activities interacted with cultural conventions, as most clearly demonstrated by the association of qualities related to freshness and presentation (crease-avoidance) with preferred modes of drying, and by the relationship between clothes storage spaces and the employment of 'search and sniff' procedures. And, cultural conventions directly relate to the negotiation of institutionalized temporal rhythms through justifications of laundry time-efficiency, and to social relations through conventions of cleanliness and comfort in the delivery of appropriate laundry qualities within personal relationships. Coordinating laundry practice performances was a matter of managing and negotiating the quantities and qualities of items as they flowed through activity sequences, and those processes of negotiation were ordered through social relations, cultural conventions, the materialities of the home and institutionalised temporal rhythms.

## **6. Conclusions**

This article makes three principal contributions to sociological debates about consumption and everyday life. The first relates to methodological and conceptual approaches. We have demonstrated how the identification of constituent activities of a practice enables the systematic exploration of practice performances without reducing that analysis to specific material objects or technologies. This approach moves analysis of consumption beyond descriptions of practice variations and away from object-centred accounts of practice performances. Rather, our analytical approach provides a methodology for deconstructing complex practices in order to identify their constituent activities, and then to systematically compare how those activities are configured across practitioners and societal contexts. As a heuristic device, analysis of activity sequences and their multiple forms of coordination provides a methodological and conceptual framework for identification of the mechanisms that order practice performances.

The second contribution is theoretical. The conceptual approach developed in this analysis presents a framework capable of systematically examining the relationships between variations of everyday experiences and their societal patterning. The analysis reveals how a set of interacting ordering mechanisms play out in various ways in the course of negotiating the performance of everyday practices. Theoretically, this analysis moves beyond the identification of generic 'elements' that configure practices as entities. While social practice theories variously discuss 'cultural understandings' or 'skills and competence', 'materiality' and 'temporality', this analysis provides an account of how, for example, cultural conventions are evoked and actively negotiated in the context of practice performances. The analysis also highlights how social relations, particularly in relation to gender and personal relationships, are critical to the ordering of practices and, therefore, further analysis of how their significance in the ordering of practices is necessary.

The final contribution of this analysis returns to debates surrounding sustainable consumption. Domestic laundry is a good example of dominant policy framings of sustainable consumption, where the solution is identified as more resource-efficient technologies and the changing of individual behaviors through provision of information (Mylan, 2017). Such an approach is implicitly based on a 'deficit' model of human action that assumes consumers lack adequate knowledge or willfully ignore advice (Jackson, 2015). In contrast to this conceptualization our analysis has illustrated the knowledgeable and skillful work of practitioners, who actively manage: sequences of activities in order to negotiate the often competing demands of multiple household schedules; the restrictions of domestic infrastructures; and, the variety of cultural procedures and understandings evoked across a range of situations and people. This account of laundry practice therefore supports Jackson's suggestion of the need to move beyond the deficit model and take an 'asset-based' approach to engaging with consumers, by building on the existing stocks of shared knowledge through which people make sense of their daily lives, as a route to stimulate change. Furthermore, the activity sequence methodology developed in this paper offers a useful framework for systematically identifying the critical coordination 'pinch points' of a practice alongside the particular skills, procedures and understandings that reproduce those pinch points. For instance, laundry baskets and 'search and sniff' procedures (overwhelmingly managed by female household members) represented critical coordination points of laundry activity sequences and therefore novel focal points for sustainable consumption oriented policy.

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Alias	Gender	Age	Housing	Children	Relationship status
Daisy	Female	Late 30s	Owned house	2	Married
Marianne	Female	50s	Owned house	2	Married
Elisa	Female	Mid 30s	Rented – shared house	None	Non live in partner
Clare	Female	40s	Owned Three bed semi	2	Single
Darren	Male	Late 20s	Rented – shared flat	None	Single
Liz	Female	20s	Owned house	None	Co-habiting
Jude	Female	Late 40s	Owned house	3	Married
Rachel	Female	50s	Owned house	2	Married
Mable	Female	30s	Private rented flat	None	Married
Ruth (interviewed with partner)	Female	Mid 30s	Owned house	1 baby	Married
Betty	Female	Mid 40s	Owned house	2	Married
Chantal	Female	20s	Rented house	2	None co-habiting partner
Gemma	Female	30s	Private rented house	None	Live in partner
Beatrice	Female	50s	Owned	Children not home	Single
Cathy	Female	60s	Private rented	Children not home	Married
Fay (interviewed with partner)	Female	Late 20s	Owned house	1 baby	Married
Misaki	Female	40s	Rented flat Lived alone	None	None co-habiting partner
Patricia	Female	50s	Owned house	None	Married
William	Male	30s	Owned flat – shared	None	None co-habiting partner

Table 1: Interviewees

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