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‘Surely I would have preferred to clear it away in the right manner’: When social norms interfere with the practice of waste sorting: A case study



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ABSTRACT

Waste sorting is part of the transition to circular and sustainable economies, and households play an important role. This paper is based on qualitative studies with 12 Danish households and reveals that sorting has become part of everyday life practice. However, in certain situations, which comprise the empirical focus of this analysis, participants set aside their well-established sorting practices. They do so despite their belief that sorting is the proper way to discard waste. Rather than approaching this as a value-action gap in individual behaviour, we turn our attention to the socio-material surroundings and how these condition waste practices. The analysed empirical situations are social gatherings of different kinds. Approaching them as critical incidents, we evince how participants' perception of these situations and especially the associated norms orchestrating social interactions obstruct their normal principles and practices of sorting. This obstruction is depicted as the outcome of a situated negotiation between an 'ethic of sorting' and an 'ethic of care' related to personal relationships. We propose that the latter is likely to conflict with more types of sustainable consumption practices in a wider range of situations. Hence, the paper suggests an avenue for further research on how cultural norms connected to the way we care for our relationships may more generally be breaking the transition of everyday life practices towards more sustainability.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that transitions in production and consumption are necessary to meet the requirements of a low-emission society. On the level of everyday life, this implies a transformation of social practices – the way we perform everyday activities including how we orient towards different opportunities and action available to us. Regarding consumption, we observe a general rise in awareness vis-à-vis more available sustainable options and significant trends reflecting consumer dedication to reducing carbon footprint. Eating vegetarian, travelling by train, and buying second-hand items exemplify such trends and are indicative of a gradual transformation in our everyday practices. The examples also illustrate that the sustainability trend does not necessarily imply that we stop doing what we have always done, but the transition of everyday life practices involves doing things differently, and largely, different meanings are attached to these transformed ways of doing.

In research and on policy levels, notions such as consumer 'choice' and 'agency', 'value', and 'action' are employed as prominent predictors regarding how transformation is brought about. Multiple campaigns have been designed to target a reflective individual, encouraging is to make

the right pro-environmental choice of action. Likewise, many studies are devoted to identifying how environmental values and motivation are supported or impinged. The conceptual framework, theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) has been saliently employed in this body of work, especially when targeting cases in which people do not act according to their values – also known as 'value-action gap' (Chai et al., 2015; Olson, 2012; Power et al., 2017; Southerton, 2013). Theory of planned behaviour approaches are based on psychological constructs and typically refer to intervening factors when explaining why an individual holding pro-environmental beliefs does not act in ways consistent with these (Barr et al., 2001; Barr and Gilg, 2006).

In this article, we focus on waste sorting. More specifically, we focus on a selection of situations in which participants, who otherwise sort and express beliefs that sorting is the right way to discard waste, nevertheless, set sorting aside. Many previous studies of what might, thus, be conceived of as value-inconsistent waste behaviour have employed conceptual frameworks, such as theory of planned behaviour (Barr et al., 2013; Echegaray and Hansstein, 2017; Fan et al., 2019). These studies largely pointed to barriers and hindering factors like inconvenience, the lack of economic incentive, and weak conviction of personal efficacy, to

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explain why people do not sort despite their beliefs that this is the right thing to do. Such understanding of the problem is also reflected at policy level and in the attempts of municipal waste management companies to increase recycling rates (Barr et al., 2013).

In this paper, we employ a different theoretical approach, which decentres conceptualisations of behaviour and action as expressions of conscious convictions, motivation, and volition. Practice theory replaces individual intention and choice with social contexts, including culture and our relationships with others (Evans et al., 2017; Shove, 2010, 2014, 2010; Watson et al., 2020; Welch, 2020; Welch and Southerton, 2019). Both habitual propensities and ad hoc responses to specific situations are entrenched in social practices and encompass shared understandings, norms, and social and material arrangements. Practice theory is becoming a popular framework for studies on food waste (Evans, 2012; Hebrok & Heidenström, 2019; Lanham et al., 2019; Leray et al., 2016; Schanes et al., 2018; Southerton, 2013; Southerton and Yates, 2014), but to our knowledge, no study has employed such approach to studies of waste sorting. Employing this framework we set aside prevailing notions of choice, agency, and beliefs in relation to the unfolding of waste and sorting practices in everyday life. The intent is not to engage in a critical appraisal of theoretical perspectives but pursue alternate understandings. Hence, this paper, presents an empirical analysis, in which we approach the empirical cases in which our participants deflect from their ordinary sorting practice, not as instances of value-inconsistent behaviour, but instead as 'critical incidents' (e.g. Hanson and Brophy, 2012; Viergever, 2019). This implies a turning of attention to the context of the deflection, emphasising its situatedness and asking how we may understand participants' dispositions in connection to the socio-material surroundings and associated ethics and normativities (Gram-Hanssen, 2021). By doing so, what might appear as an occasional abandonment of an otherwise well-established sorting routine, emerges as an indication of inert dynamics that may more generally impede the transformation towards sustainability, of not only waste practices but also more social practices.

2. Theory

Social practice theories emerged in part as a critical response to what has been considered the disregard of materiality by cultural theory and the over-emphasis of rationality and choice by individualist methodologies. Practice theory is not a cohesive methodological framework (Reckwitz, 2002a), and the terminology and understanding of central concepts vary (Reckwitz, 2002b; Schatzki, 2019; Shove et al., 2012). Common agreement, nevertheless, is to put practices at the centre of the social and consequential analysis.

Following the analytical objective of this paper, we rely on approaches that allow us to consider the socio-material surroundings as formative to the situated unfolding of practices. According to Schatzki, practices exist across space and time, yet their local performance is influenced by the context in terms of what they mean and how those sequences of action through which they unfold evolve (Schatzki, 1996, 2002). A practice, he writes, is 'a particular set of doings and sayings expressing a particular array of cross-referencing and interconnected abilities, rules, teleoaffectivities and understandings' (2002, p. 87; Schatzki, 2018). For the following analysis, the concepts of 'general understandings' and 'teleoaffectivity' are of particular interest.

The concept of general understandings responds to the question of how to understand the relationship between culture and the performance of practices (Welch and Warde, 2017). The concept refers to culturally shared notions and presuppositions, which permeate subjective perception expressed through cognitive and emotional dispositions and, thus, how individuals respond to their surroundings (Schatzki, 2002, 2012; Welch and Warde, 2017). Social life is a continuous stream of situations requiring action. General understandings represent ideational categories governing the individual's normative discernment of what a situation is fundamentally about and, accordingly, what a situationally adequate course of action is (Schatzki, 2002, 2010, 2010; Welch and Warde, 2017).

As such, general understandings, imbue the teleoaffectivity of practices, meaning the emotional and cognitive ordering of ends and associated tasks that may or should be pursued in a given situation (Schatzki, 2002). This normative ordering of practices finds expression through individuals' perception of situational oughtness and acceptability and, consequentially, what they will do next (ibid.). Teleoaffectivity, in other words, denotes that which we aim to pursue and the felt engagement of this pursuit.

Individuals' course of action is thus conditioned by socially shared understandings of what is situationally required or the acceptable performance of practice. To be a carrier of practice implies not only being able to fulfil the technical requirements, possessing the know-how, competencies, or skills (Shove et al., 2012). It also means to be affectively and cognitively attuned to situational possibilities or conflictual demands and, hence, able to adjust the course of action appropriately when, for instance, routine dispositions are challenged by socio-material reconfigurations (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Gherardi and Rodeschini, 2016). Not being able to make such adjustments and adapt to social expectations of the situation may elicit disapprobation and degradation and raise issues of the carrier's intelligibility (Alkemeyer et al, 2016; Schatzki, 2016).

Before we proceed to analyse the situations in which our participants seemingly adjust their routine waste practices, we briefly account for the methods with which empirical material was gathered.

3. Methods

The empirical material for this paper was collected using ethnographic methods with 12 Danish households; six households in Copenhagen, five in Vejle, and one in Billund. Households were recruited through network's network. Potential participants received a flyer, introducing the study's object as 'home, everyday life and waste' and the extent of their participation. A short phone interview ensured that the sample was not skewed in terms of participants' relationship to sorting or social demographics (Table 1).¹ Adult participants range from 21 to 82 years of age. They live alone, together as roommates, as single-parent families, dual-parent families, empty nesters, or young couples. Participants' social statuses range from unskilled to highly educated, and their residential statuses differed in terms of owning/leasing, size, and duration of tenure. Apartments varied concerning the state of maintenance or renovation and whether they had an open or closed floorplan.

Visit-based fieldwork was conducted in winter 2019/20. Immersion with each household had an average of five-and-a-half hours, during which the first author participated in an excerpt of everyday life. Different ethnographic methods, including 'going along' (Kusenbach, 2003), ethnographic interviewing (Atkinson et al., 2001), and participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010) were combined: with nine participants, the first author went along on grocery shopping and helped to put groceries away at home. All participants guided an extensive tour of their homes, during which they outlined the activities and routines unfolding in each room. As most of the daily household waste comes from food preparation, taking part in cooking, eating, and the following cleaning was central to the methodology. In these activities, photo documentation, sound recordings, and field notes were collected. Audio was transcribed verbatim and coded in alternation between a deductive approach guided by the themes of the original research interest and new inductively evolving codes and sub-codes. While we refer to particular participants in the analysis, excerpts from conversations are chosen, not for their representativeness of specific households' waste practices, but instead because they bring out general trends permeating the overall sample.

By locating conversations about participants' routines and activities *in situ*, more tangible dimensions of everyday life became the outset for

¹ See table one for overview.

Table 1
Overview of participants' demography.

Pseudonyms	Household	Vejle/ CPH	Owner status	Size of apartment	Number of rooms, including livingroom	Open-plan/ separate kitchen	Level of education/occupation
Buster and Bettina	Mother 29y. Father 30y. two kids 2, 4y.	CPH	Rental Housing	143m ²	4 + scullery	Separate	M: Police officer and F: Ph.d. student biology.
Søren and Susanne	Couple, 67y	CPH	Owning	112m ²	3 + scullery	Open-plan	F: Primary school teacher. M: station hand
Rasmus	33y living alone with tenant	CPH	Owning	100m ²	2	Open-plan	Master degree, partner in several IT companies
Niels	Male, 35y	CPH	Co- operative flat	60m ²	2	Separate	Unskilled work
Hanna and Hilde	Roomates, Females, 21y and 24y	CPH	Owning	72m ²	3	Separate	Students
Karen, Kornelius, Kaisa	Mom, 44y, son 13y, daughter 16y	CPH	Co- operative flat	114m ²	4	Separate	Researcher
Helena	Female, 36y.	Vejle	Rental housing	68m ²	2	Open-plan w screen	Occupational BA
Åse	Female, 82y.	Vejle	Rental housing	106m ²	2	Open-plan	Pharmacist, but housewife for the first 20y after kids were born
Sam and Signe	Female, 27y and male, 31y.	Vejle	Rental housing	62m ²	2	Separate	physiotherapist, student (nursing aid)
Frederikke, Frederik, Ferdinand and Flora	Mother, 32y, Father 33y, son, 11y and daughter, 9y.	Vejle	Rental housing	105m ²	4 + scullery	Separate	F: Unskilled reduced hours job in grocery store. M: Electrician
Lone and Lærke	Mother, 52y and daughter 15y.	Vejle	Rental housing	107m ²	3 + scullery	Separate	Educated as a butcher, working as a sales assistant in grocery store.
Bente, Bea, Barbara, Berta	Mother 44, 3 daughters 13, 17, 20y	Billund	Rental housing	112m ²	5 + pantry	Open-plan	Bio-analytic

elaborating on the subjective aspects of their experience (Anderson, 2004). According to Gullestad, everyday life consists partly of 'the daily organization of tasks and projects' and partly 'experience and lifeworld. The dimension of experience connects everyday life with culture in the broader sense, that is interpreted reality, views and symbols' (Gullestad, 1993, p. 18).² The first dimension may more readily lend itself as an object of observation and descriptive accounts. The second dimension, however, presupposes the participant's construal and the researcher's interpretation. The employed methodology allows us to connect the concrete and particular manifestations of everyday life to the cultural dimensions of social life (Reckwitz, 2002a; Røpke, 2009).

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper does not aim to make a description of participants' waste practices and the circumstances shaping them. Instead, it focuses on a selection of specific situations present in our empirical material. In these situations, participants set aside their normal sorting routine and beliefs that sorting is the proper way to discard waste. These situations can be characterised as 'critical incidents'. The definition of critical incidents is not fixed (e.g. Hanson and Brophy, 2012; Viergever, 2019), but is broadly used to describe events in which normal routines or understandings are challenged, and the situation is additionally emotionally charged. This need not involve outright drama; nevertheless, as normality is destabilised, the liable disharmonious socio-cultural norms (i.e. general understandings) emerge as the normative context in which the negotiations and decision-making between different actions are situated (Chell, 2004; Madrid Akpovo, 2019). The strength of focusing on a selection of critical incidents is that it allows us to explore how mundane activities like disposal and sorting are embedded in a wider context of both social and cultural norms influencing the situated performances of waste practices. Hereby, concrete events expose otherwise intangible dimensions of everyday life impeding transition to more sustainability.

4. Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is presented in two parts. First, we explore the

waste practices of participants, specifically what sorting means to them. Second, we focus on situations in which participants deflect from their practice and principle regarding sorting to identify what informs the unfolding of these conflictual dynamics of social practices.

4.1. Empirical analysis part one: uncovering the ethics of waste sorting

4.1.1. The habit

The purpose of this paper is not to produce a complete record of participants' waste practices and what influences the extent that recyclables are sorted. Nevertheless, a brief introduction to the variations and semblances of their practices is relevant to understand why they abandon their otherwise established practice and principle of sorting in the situations that comprise this study's analytical object. Preparing a meal is an activity generating the vast bulk of household waste in the participants' everyday lives. This is especially true for more recently introduced categories for sorting – plastics, metals, and biowaste. Produce and meats arrive in wrapping, packaging, and containers that become waste when participants use the contents. Fruit and vegetables are often prepared for cooking by removing peels, skins, and shells that become rubbish. During our visits, we observed different routines regarding when and how these kinds of waste are discarded. Some participants immediately discard while others temporarily postpone actual discarding and collect plastics and metals in piles on the kitchen counter or use the kitchen sink as provisory storage for organic waste. Those who use the kitchen table as a temporary collection point typically store their recyclables in other locations besides the kitchen, such as a closet in the entranceway or scullery. Others do not have indoor storage; they take the waste from the counter directly to the outdoor bins. After cooking, serving, and eating the meal, when the tableware and remainders of the food are cleared from the dining setting, a new round of sorting and disposal plays out in similar ways as before dinner. When, in this paper, we refer to waste practices, we point to those activities in which waste is removed or discarded, not the activities through which it is generated.

All participants in the study have afforded space in their home and expended energy installing a system for sorting. Resembling findings from national surveys, participants sort at least some of their waste all of

² Authors' translation.

the time, however, the rules and principles that guide participants' respective sorting, however, are quite diverse and often deviate from official criteria (Miljø-og Fødevarerministeriet, 2018). We observed several participants who were convinced that the recyclables needed cleaning and washing before discarding, whereas others believed that recyclability depends on what was in the containers prior to emptying. Besides the verbalised criteria, we observed a manifold of distinctions through participants' practice, in which objects of the same material were or were not selected for sorting depending, for instance, on their size or the context of use. When inquiring regarding how and on what basis participants made these distinctions, participants were often baffled when realising that the origin of the rules they practised was often unknown to them and even that they had been partly unaware of many of the distinctions orchestrating their practice. The most definite and prevailing explanation we received upon asking why they sorted as they did was "habit!"

We should not interpret this as ignorance or senselessness. On the contrary, the reply manifests that sorting has been welcomed in their waste practice and makes sense to them beyond the immediacy of justifications or explanatory arguments. In the following section, we explore what sorting means to them.

4.2. Ethics of waste sorting

Researcher: What does it mean to you, that you have the opportunity to sort?

Susanne: I think that it feels nice.

Søren: I also think it feels nice.

Researcher: Why does it feel nice?

Søren: It does something good for the environment. That's something somebody else has figured out, and it's nice to take part in. That's how I think.

(Susanne & Søren, 67, Copenhagen)

The statement that it feels good to sort because sorting is the right thing to do could represent an extract from across the conversations with participants about their reasons for choosing to sort their waste. Separating plastics, metals, food scraps, cardboard packaging, and glass from non-recyclable waste is morally superior to conventional disposal. As mentioned, no participant sorts everything that is recyclable all the time. The residuals' bin is, consequently, also used for recyclables. Not only because participants do not know better but also because sometimes they do not pay attention or events move too fast. While sorting is welcomed as a more proper way to discard waste, its performance still requires heightened attention and in this sense extra effort.

In a practice theoretical perspective, sorting could thus be considered a variation of waste practices. Sorting requires more bins and different competencies in terms of abilities to distinguish between materials and knowing how these are prepared for sorting. Moreover, as the quote above evinces, other meanings are attached to sorting (Shove et al., 2012). Besides feeling nice, sorting is good for the environment, Søren adds. The performance of sorting is associated with environmental concerns. However, the immediacy with which participants arrive at the articulation of this connection varies. With some participants, this arrival even involved the interviewer assisting their line of thought.

Researcher: Regarding waste separation, do you associate it with such climate issues ...

Helena: I watched an episode of ...

Researcher: Or with other issues?

Helena: I watched an episode with Puk, who were sailing along the coast of northern Norway, and upon disembarking, as they set foot in this nature landscape, then it appears that it's all plastic underneath -that nature grows on top of the plastics, and to see how much litter there is in such unspoiled nature, I mean how it grows it looks unspoiled, but then it appears that it has been spoiled. I feel that makes a strong impression and makes me think ... I think about how we use plastics. I never litter plastic and I'm left speechless or quite indignant when seeing that things are littered like that. This doesn't imply that I actively venture out to collect litter myself, but ...

[...]

Researcher: Have some of your habits or your consumption changed due to your climate awareness?

Helena: ... hmm, I think that sorting some more definitely relates to the climate.

(Helena, 36, Vejle)

In the conversation with Helena, the association between sorting and environmental concerns was not readily made. This association had been noted during preceding visits with other participants and in national surveys, sorting is repeatedly reported in the top three actions Danes most willingly engage in to contribute to a reduction of carbon footprints (LandbrugFødevarer, 2019; Minter, 2018). With this backdrop, to validate whether Helena really did not make such connection, the interviewer resorted to wording it explicitly. Interestingly, even offering this explicit formulation of the connection, Helena answered with a somewhat lengthy detour beginning with a case of littering before finally arriving back at her sorting. The quote is significantly shortened and what is left out is a passage between the littering case and her view on sorting, in which Helena takes us through her reflections on flying and thoughts on buying a hybrid next time she replaces her car. Even though Helena's answer involves a winding route to the association between sorting and environmental concerns, she keeps to issues related to the environment, and in the end, she does formulate the connection.

This may indicate that specific forms of consumption or social practices are linked in participants' awareness given a perception of how they affect the environment and climate change. Helena's answer weaves through different everyday dispositions and practices, but thematically, she stays on track. Thus, even though the connecting route is meandering, sorting is perceived as a way for her to positively influence the environment. Accordingly, sorting can be construed as a specific variation of waste practices. Sorting shares with disposal the telos of getting rid of the waste, but is imbued with a unique affectivity. It feels good to sort because it is good for the environment. Moreover, as reflected in the following quote, it feels bad having to discard recyclables in the residuals' bin when bins for sorting are not available. This is the case for Lærke when at school:

Lærke: It feels wrong not to put your orange peel in the green bin and, for instance, to put the foil from your sandwich in the black.

Researcher: Try to say a bit more about that - about that feeling.

Lærke: I don't really know ... it's because it makes me feel kind of guilty ...

(Lærke, 15, Vejle)

The concept of teleoaffectivity indicates an engagement, which is materially manifest in participants' homes. As mentioned, they have all designated space in their apartments and made the effort to install a system for sorting. Returning to Helena, in her otherwise tremendously tidy, open-plan home, part of the system comprised a string bag for cardboard and big plastics placed on the floor in front of her freezer. She has her biowaste-bag under the kitchen sink, and doing the dishes, she scraped even the small amount of tuna mousse left on the spoon into the bag.

It may be that the connection between sorting and environmental concerns is not always very prominent in the participants' awareness, but the investment expressed in their practices and material arrangements reflects both conviction and commitment. Even if their explanations are weaving, participants are both emotionally and morally engaged in sorting. We conclude that sorting is a variation of waste practices that is experienced as more ethical in the sense of everyday life normativity. In the following section in which we delve into a selection of situations in which participants deflect their practices and principles of sorting, we refer to this teleoaffective structure as the 'ethic of sorting'.

Conceptualising the ethical aspect of sorting in this way instead of referencing a broader concept of environmental ethics enables us to allow space for our participants' sometimes staggering manner of association, without reducing their engagement to rule or norm following. The experience of the ethic of sorting as an affective addition to the telos of conventional disposal echoes Gay Hawkins description of recycling and other new waste habits as endowed with something extra, a certain kind of virtuousness (Hawkins et al., 2007). Thus, whether participants promptly connect sorting to environment or not, they unambiguously experience sorting as the way they *ought* to discard waste. Hence, we argue that sorting is a variation of waste practices with a distinct ethical dimension – the ethic of sorting.

4.3. Empirical analysis part two: when social norms of proper conduct interfere with sorting

4.3.1. Gesturing appreciation and attentiveness at the expense of sorting

Having guests over involves a reshuffling of the socio-material surroundings. The temporality, materiality, and affectivity of social practices are attuned to the understanding of what hosting implies. Sharing a meal followed by drinks and conversation is central in much Western socialisation. In Northern Europe, more often than restaurants or bars, home is the locus for dining with friends, family, and other acquaintances. Social practices involved in hosting may be the same as on an ordinary night but performed slightly differently. Because of the 'extraordinary' presence of guests, what we cook, how we set the table, eating manners, conversations, clearing the table, cleaning the dishes, and the passage from dinner to the rest of the evening may diverge from ordinary routines. Our participants regularly host friends or family and, usually, sharing a meal is part of this. In this context, they recount how having guests over can challenge the usual routines of sorting waste yielded from cooking and eating.

Researcher: In that situation described earlier, where you just in that situation, something else was more important to you than sorting, what was that?

Susanne: I think ... there's all this jumble over here, and your house is full of guests. It becomes too messy and then I just feel like, "uff, it needs to go!" If someone would do it for me and clean it, then I'd be at peace with that, but in that situation, I just couldn't cope with it, perhaps.

Researcher: Because you'd rather ... ?

Susanne: But, surely, I would've preferred to clear it away in the right manner, but I can't stand if everything looks like a mess when I have guests.

Researcher: But I'm curious about what you got in exchange?

Susanne: I had my peace and got the mess cleared away.

Researcher: You had your peace to do what?

Susanne: To sit down and be social again.

Researcher: I see, so to be with your guests?

Susanne: Even though it's a simple task, you're perfectly able to be putting the dishes in the dishwasher and so on, that's not a problem ...

Researcher: But you feel it engrosses some of your presence and attention, or ... ?

Susanne: Yes, in some way, this is what it does even though you are near. Near, but still a little at a distance. You can hear everything people say, you can actually also interfere, but you anyway just don't do it so easily. That's what I think.

(Susanne, 67, Copenhagen)

Like the rest of the participants, Susanne also believes that sorting is the proper way to discard waste. Nevertheless, the presence of guests in the home makes her deflect from her normal routine. Sorting takes more effort and time than throwing everything into the same bin, and Susanne, like others, has the understanding that packaging and containers must be cleaned before sorting. Sorting, therefore, involves too much expenditure in terms of the presence and attentiveness that she wants to share with her guests. Susanne is not willing to afford this.

She and her husband live in an open-plan apartment. This means that there are no walls cutting off the kitchen area, where Susanne is handling leftovers and dishes, from the dining and sitting areas where guests are entertained. Susanne remarks that she is close enough to hear the conversation around the table or the sitting area and, in principle, she *could* join in, but she does not. Withdrawn from the party, she feels that she is unable to participate fully, why she tries to minimise the time spent in the kitchen area. Although she would have preferred to discard the waste in "the right way", as she puts it, in this situation, she discards sorting because this allows her to return to her guests more quickly.

We understand that for Susanne to leave the mess around is unbearable with guests in her home. Deflecting from her normal sorting routine and moving faster through her cleaning buys her time and 'gives her peace to be social'. Why the waste from cooking and eating disturbs someone's peace, we might learn from another participant, Åse. Åse also lives in an open-plan apartment, and she too expresses messiness as irreconcilable with having guests over. Åse, however, explicitly formulates neatness as an essential obligation to one's guests, a moral obligation even:

Åse: When you have guests, it's not fair to them if they must look at a messy kitchen ... I think the surroundings should be neat and nice ... and you can't hide ... you can't hide the mess, or however you want to phrase the muddle and jumble you leave when you cook.

(Åse, 82, Vejle)

Åse explains that hosting in an open-plan apartment makes it impossible to hide the remnants from cooking, meanwhile leaving them visible to guests is simply not a done thing. Guests deserve a neat and comfortable setting, which she contrasts with the untidiness that her cooking involves. Åse's formulations reveal how the disturbance of peace that untidy surroundings inflict relates to a concern for the guests rather than a personal hypersensitivity towards the mess itself. Across interviews, we found that, normally, participants afford the time and attention required to sort but that the presence of guests reshuffles their priorities. This confirms that the felt urgency of clearing and cleaning, that makes participants dispend sorting, is prompted by considerations tied to the reconfigured socio-material surroundings implied by having guests. Like a nice meal, neat surroundings are perceived as a token of appreciation and a gesture of respect for those who visit. This perception belongs in the realm of general understandings (Schatzki, 2002; Welch and Warde, 2017) and informs the teleoaffective engagement. The impending violation of this general understanding rather than the mess itself is probably what upsets Susanne.

Not all participants care about the tidiness of surroundings as Åse and Susanne do. Niels lives by himself in an apartment with separate kitchen. Contrasting Åse and Susanne's attention to orderliness and cleanliness, Niels does not explicitly express such concerns. Still, having guests over can challenge his normal sorting routine. Preceding the following quote,

Niels described an episode from a dinner with friends. They had some wine, and interestingly, sorting had been an object of discussion, general agreement being that it is a matter of importance. Yet, as they clean up together after the meal, recyclable waste goes into the 'normal' bin.

Researcher: Do you think this is influenced by the situation, I mean, that there was a feeling of festivity? Or is it something that you recognize from your own everyday life that ... ?

Niels: You know, you are in the process of ... your focus is kind of elsewhere ... I think ... at that instance, you'd simply rather take care of your guests than spend time sorting your waste, and if you can't just leave it for the next day when you'll have time, then ... I mean, then you just choose the easiest solution.

(Niels, 35, Copenhagen)

At first, Niels explains that setting aside sorting is the result of a simple lack of attention. Nevertheless, he soon elaborates his explanation using more deliberate terms, which allow us to discern that this slip of attention is not random. Rather, the lack of attentiveness in the process of discarding is an effect of a driven focus on his guests. As such, we observe a privileging of the guests at the expense of sorting, similar to what we observed earlier. Unlike other participants, Niels does not seem to perceive the matter of tidying and cleaning as an important gesture of appreciation. Rather clearing "what cannot be left for the following day" is articulated as a practical intention to reduce the effort required when doing the dishes at a later point. Nonetheless, sorting is set aside for the same prevailing reason: to avoid turning the attention away from guests for longer than necessary.

Hence, we find that the presence of guests in the home involves a reshuffling of socio-material surroundings, which consequently reconfigures participants' normal waste practices. We understand that, in this context of socialising, the time and focus required to sort is perceived as involving an improper derailing of attention from friends and relatives onto waste. The participants' priorities reflect a general understanding of what is proper conduct in the social situations described. Accordingly, their efforts to sustain a focus of attention on their friends and relatives in the course of clearing and cleaning reflects their competence regarding discerning what the situation is about, namely socialising and being present with guests, and aligning their actions with the associated normative standards. Thus, sorting is not randomly set aside but purposively dispensed with to benefit the relationships and to be able to show friends and relatives the appreciation to which they are considered entitled.

In the following section, we maintain the interest in situations, in which the participants' normal relationship with sorting is compromised by social concerns. The situations selected for the subsequent part of the analysis, however, differ from those in the former. In the situations already analysed, participants' actions were oriented towards obtaining something positive – the possibility to be attentive and show appreciation. In the following section, however, actions reflect concerns about avoiding a negative reaction by overstepping general understandings of the proper ways to relate to others.

4.3.2. Avoiding damaging social relationships at the expense of sorting

During conversations with participants, the topic of how other people around them sort also came up. In general, many participants expressed the conviction that their friends and family more or less sort like they do. However, they also discussed instances in which they had observed that others did not sort, typically during a visit to their home. For instance, participants recounted witnessing *in vivo* that people threw everything into the 'normal' bin or being confronted with various recyclables already in there when wanting to discard something themselves. Some participants had also observed that people they are close to and expect to share beliefs with did not have a system for sorting in place. Although frustrated with these observations to varying degrees, participants were

largely reluctant to interfere with or call attention to the lack or wrongful sorting.

In participants' accounts, the reluctance to comment on the observed non-sorting is unambiguously tied to the discomfort or irritation that such comments were expected to cause. In the following quote, Niels explains why he would never dream to confront people with their lack or wrongful sorting:

Researcher: Would you ever point out to your friends [that they don't sort how you think they ought]?

Niels: No, no, no. That's up ... I mean, people are their own ... and I cannot ... You cannot act as the guardian of moral rectitude towards your friends ... people are their own master, and I just have to accept. People are free to do as they please ... that's just how it is.

Researcher: I see. How would you feel if someone interfered in [how you handle your waste]?

Niels: I would feel that was weird. I think it'd be quite difficult for me to handle

Researcher: Yes?

*Niels: ... I don't think that you should decide what other ... I mean, interfere with ... *laughs**

Researcher: I see. How do you think that they'd react if you did it ... ?

Niels: In the same way. I mean, this is exactly the reason I don't do it.

Researcher: Could you elaborate?

Niels: I mean, I'd get ... I would find it weird behaviour, and I'd actually get a bit agitated ... and I think that they feel the same way. Therefore, I would never point to something like that.

Researcher: No?

Niels: ... No, I would never do that.

Researcher: Why do you want to avoid doing something they find agitating?

Niels: Because ... Like, I'd get annoyed if they interfere in my business, I think they too would find it annoying if I interfere in theirs.

(Niels, 35, Copenhagen)

Like many other participants, this account of why Niels abstains from commenting on the waste practices of others refers not to actual experiences but how he imagines he would react in case someone else commented on *his* practices. Two exemplary motives appear in this quote, which recur across different participants' explanations of why they avoid commenting on other's waste practices, even when frustrated. One is the refusal act as the 'guardians of moral rectitude', and the other references the universal right of everyone to do as they think best. The proximity with which these two motives appear in this quote indicates their reciprocal relation. This is what we elaborate on next.

While some participants speak of morality's guardian, others express aversion of being perceived as a 'goody-goody'. The two figures of speech are used interchangeably and as analysis evinces, ideationally, they fulfil the same function. Therefore, we refer to both at once as 'morality's guardian'. The terms represent a relationship of asymmetrical moral character between the person who positions as morality's guardian and the person who is being told s/he is wrong. Performing in this role is then effectively perceived as elevating oneself to a position in which one is morally justified to judge the behaviour of another as bad or even immoral. Such positioning is (evidently) at odds with what participants speak of as the freedom of everyone to decide for themselves how to act. For the participants to tell other people what they think they ought to do with their waste is, effectively, perceived as an impingement of

everyone's universal rights and, consequently, beyond their entitlement. Hence, we observe how participants' assumptions that comments on other's waste practices cause irritation, are not owing to an immanent quality of comments on waste specifically. Rather, the assumptions owe to a general understanding that correcting the behaviour of other adults is inappropriate.

Thus, it appears that morality's guardian, contrasting face value, represents a morally dubious character rather than moral superiority. Still, the recurrence of exactly these ideational terms in participants' accounts is not merely revelatory of their general understanding of how to legitimately relate to the doings of other grownups. It is worth noting how the terms leave participants' relationship to sorting unscathed and thereby confirm what we observed in the previous part of the analysis, that is, that sorting is perceived as the right way to discard waste. Hence, the morally dubious quality referenced by 'morality's guardian' is not equivocal. The dubiousness applies *only* to the manner of relating to other people, implied by commenting on their doings, implicitly passing moral judgement. The standard of conduct, in this case, the ethic of sorting, by which their doings are judged, remains uncompromised as morally superior to conventional disposal. In other words, as participants refrain from commenting on the witnessed instances of lack or wrongful sorting, this reflects a situated negotiation between two enduring standards of conduct: the ethics of sorting and the general understandings of how to relate to others. In the following section, we explore the dynamics of these negotiations.

4.4. Situated negotiations

Every event of gathering with friends and relatives creates a space and time in which our relationships may either be strengthened or damaged, depending on whether we experience the interaction as positive or negative. Schatzki (2016) asserts how the violation of social norms may trigger strong negative reactions, such as disapproval or condemnation. Likewise, before Schatzki, other thinkers have conducted prominent studies of how the consequences of not conforming to norms of proper conduct and appropriate behaviour may harm the relational bond and ultimately lead to social refutation (e.g. Elias (2000); Bourdieu (1984); Butler (1993); Ahmed (2010)).

Grasping the potential consequences of dismissing the general understandings of how to appropriately relate to others, we understand participants' adjustments of their normal waste practice as teleo-affectively oriented as an act of caring for their relationships. The situated suspension of the ethic of sorting accordingly appears as a consequence of the effort to sustain their relationships. The following quote elucidates how the mother's concern with having a good relationship with her grown daughter orients her behaviour and how the course of action in which she abandons her sorting principles results from a situated negotiation that relies on an interpretation of the situation and competencies to act accordingly.

Susanne: But, I feel that there are many occasions, in which you keep your mouth shut, and that is what you should do. Some things it's OK to comment on, but you shouldn't keep doing it, right? I mean, I bet that I've happened to comment about those plastic barrels once, and I think that it becomes a pain in the ass if I keep doing it, and I don't want that.

Researcher: You don't want to be a pain in the ass?

Susanne: I probably already am in so many ways, right?

Søren: No, you prefer to be that person, who ...

Susanne: I would like to be someone with whom you have a good time.

Søren: Yes, and helpful ... without any bickering.

Susanne: Yes.

(Susanne & Søren, 67, Copenhagen)

Observing general understandings is not only a matter of not offending social norms but also demonstrating attunement with the common interpretation of what the situation is about and the competencies to act correspondingly. According to the mother and father who assist her explanations, having a good time without bickering is the objective of the time spent with their grown daughter. During social gatherings, nurturing and cultivating relationships is what is important. To engage with each other, appreciate and grow the relational bond is central to the collective accomplishment of what socialising is about, less so to take care of the environment. Based on participants' reading of the context and the implied teleo-affective structure, the right thing to do is to allow a waste practice that they believe is principally wrong. To insist on sorting would not merely be perceived as 'weird', as Niels put it earlier, but one would appear unattuned to the mutual coordination of the ongoing event and socially unaccountable.

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals that, in social gatherings, participants adjust their waste practices and principles. These adjustments are in response to a conflict between the standards of conduct that are experienced as irreconcilable at the level of practice: the ethic of sorting versus a concern with their personal relationships. In the following discussion, we propose the concept of 'ethics of care' to denote the teleo-affective structure – that is the concern and affective engagement – which orients participants' course of action in the depicted situations.

The concept 'ethics of care' occurs in various studies, amongst which some use it to reference the orientation guiding those acts, through which we seek to cultivate and enhance our relationships with others (see Popke, 2006 for a thorough review). Gherardi and Rodeschini (2016) is one such study where the concept has been put to use and which we learn more strongly against as we employ it ourselves. The authors treat caring, not as a practice in its own right, but rather as an ongoing accomplishment of solicitude and consideration expressed through other practices (2016). Caring may be understood as a teleo-affective orientation based on interconnectedness and interdependence between people rather than as a universal standard. This orientation guides situated negotiations of how to respond to different tasks at hand, in ways that are very similar to the participants' negotiations between behaviour that best benefits their relationships versus acting on their general principle that sorting is always the correct way to discard waste. Gherardi and Rodeschini's concept makes it possible to conceive of situated actions as ethical even when appearing obviously wrong if viewed from a universalist perspective (2016, p. 267). Likewise, we aim to move the discussion from the matter of individual beliefs, actions, and the universalist concept of ethics and instead emphasise the social and local embeddedness of participants' dispositions, the ends pursued, and the affectivity involved.

We use 'ethics of care' to refer to the teleo-affective structure that guides participants' adjustments to their usual sorting practice and the temporary abandonment of the associated ethics. Whether participants dispend their normal waste practice to show appreciation for their guests through attention and orderliness or to avoid positioning themselves as morally superior, their compliance with these general understandings is concerned with nursing and maintaining their social relations. Caring for their relationships is the object of the ongoing accomplishment towards which participants' responses to the socio-material surroundings and the tasks at hand, are oriented. Ethics of care, thus, denotes the teleo-affective structure directing and analytically informing their dispositions and actions in the depicted situations.

Consequently, we argue that, when participants abandon their normal waste practices, this is the result of situated negotiations between the teleo-affectivities conceptualised as the ethics of sorting and ethics of care, which participants experience as irreconcilable on the level of practice in the specific context of socialising. As the phrase 'the guardian of moral rectitude' exposed so wonderfully, the ethic of sorting is left unquestioned, whereas insisting on sorting in the depicted situations is

perceived as ethically questionable and inappropriate. It is the (teleo-affective) nature of social gatherings as this is conceived, which gives weight to the ethics of care in participants' situated negotiations between sorting or showing respect and appreciation to their guests. In other words, the participants' interpretations of the socio-material surroundings and what these are about is what guides the course of action in which disposing of their waste in a way that they principally think is wrong is then experienced as the more sensible and right thing to do.

Other studies prior to ours have engaged with events in which concerns with sustainability are put aside in 'exceptional' circumstances. Farbotko and Head (2013) work on gifting displays how the concern with affirming and extending relations compromises considerations of sustainability in the event of gifting. Their study is likely indicative to a body of disparate works that the conceptual approach proposed in this paper might put in connection. The identification of how teleo-affective concerns are experienced as irreconcilable at the level of practice, avails a means to detect a conflictual dynamic, possibly causing a pattern of deflection across multiple practices. Emphasising the situated negotiation between teleo-affectivities, this approach is a supplement to the more established concept of compartmentalization (e.g. Anciaux, 2019; Bartiaux and Salmón, 2012). This calls for further investigations into the dynamics of incompatible teleo-affective structures and why one comes to direct the course of its unfolding.

6. Conclusion

This article evinces the potentiality of practice theory in studies of waste and recycling. Approaching the analysed instances of participants deflecting their principles and practices of sorting as a value-action gap risks missing both the situatedness of the values and, accordingly, the considerable influence that context has on what appears to the individual as an appropriate, sensible course of action.

This paper first illustrated that participants have well-established sorting routines and unambiguously believe that sorting is *the* proper way to discard waste and expounded how sorting reflects an ethical engagement. We then focused on two different situations of social gatherings in which participants abandon their normal sorting practices. We analysed the general understandings that guide the participants' course of action in these situations and found that they regard collective conceptions of what is proper conduct concerning other adults either in terms of positively gesturing appreciation or in terms of avoiding negative reactions by positioning themselves as morally superior. Arguing that the participants' compliance with these norms should be considered an act of caring for their personal relationships, we proposed 'ethics of care' as a conceptualisation of the teleo-affective orientation of the derived actions. We further discussed the situations analysed as sites where participants experience the ethic of sorting and ethic of care as irreconcilable on the level of practice and argued that the course of action should be considered the outcome of situated negotiations. Explaining the seemingly consistent outcome of these negotiations, we pointed to the participants' normative perception of the context of these situated negotiations, namely social gatherings as events, in which relationships are either reaffirmed and strengthened or damaged and destabilised. This teleo-affective ordering of social gatherings and the associated perception of what is acutely at stake, we argue, is what governs the participants' course of action, making them deflect their normal practice of sorting in these situations.

Moreover, we depicted how more sustainable variations of social practices are currently appearing across a wide range of social practices. We asserted how sorting is one such variation and pointed to other variations, such as vegetarian eating, train travel, and second-hand shopping, as examples of how the local performance of social practices as entity is influenced by environmental ethics. We proposed it be relevant to investigate whether sustainable variations of more social practices are challenged and potentially deflected due to irreconcilable concerns detectable at the level of teleo-affectivities. In the context of

certain events in which the appreciation and celebration of relationships, achievements, or simply life are expressed through food, presents, holidays, and so on, we consider it likely that vegetarian menus, second-hand gifts, and less comfortable travel could be considered inappropriate or even insulting. If these assumptions be substantiated through further research, they could contribute significant insight into how cultural norms that are connected to the way we care for our relationships brakes the transformation of everyday life practices towards increased sustainability. Culture and general understandings are subject to history, and the mere occurrence of sustainable practice variations indicate that change is underway. Climate change, however, calls for a rapid transition, and we need to find ways to push through cultural barriers and constraints to accelerate the dissemination of sustainable practices. It could prove valuable to explore the processes of the entrenchment of ethics in our everyday life practices and how these have historically shifted.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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