

Thought Piece by Charlotte Louise Jensen,

Original contribution to the SCI workshop: Beyond Practices: Sustainable Consumption and Socio-Technical Systems.

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Dynamics of Practice and the role of Translations

In this piece, I am proposing to look towards Callon's sociology of translations (1986) in order to understand and explore specific moments of change in practice when discussion matters of – and opportunities for – sustainable consumption. Although theories of practice and sociology of translation are suggesting distinguishably different analytical constructs (Practices versus actor-networks), both analytical frameworks suggest that relations are not just 'there' but are in fact maintained, reproduced and contested. More importantly, they have distinguishably different, but not mutually exclusive ways of explaining how and why relations are formed, maintained and disrupted. By drawing on both, I am hopefully contributing to the discussion of how to empirically address matters of (un)sustainable consumption, by more specifically addressing processes of recruitment and defection, whilst staying true to the useful assumption that consumption is ultimately a result of the reproduction of a cohort of practices. I will in the following seek to carefully develop my case for discussion.

The onto-epistemology of theories of practice is really useful for describing and explaining dynamics of everyday life and society, and thereby what we would need to consider before we even start asking how – and whether – we can change these dynamics. When discussing consumption, whether it is water, food, energy or something else, it makes sense to talk about practices, and how we consume as a result of carrying out an array of practices. Consuming water does not make sense. Showering does. And so on.

Despite its usefulness in terms of exploring (sustainable) consumption patterns, the existing array of practice theories have left my curious in terms of explaining 1) *variations/innovation in performance of practice* and 2) *recruitment to practice*, in more detail. Before going on to elaborate this, I need to give a little more insight to why these are the areas that I am specifically interested in exploring further.

During my phd research, I explored what role lighting plays in various (Danish) household related practices, and I looked at different residential settings in order to see if I could find any exemplary versions of the performance of these practices, through the performance of which *energy efficient light was made*. This type of investigation of course assumes the premise that good and efficient lighting does not exist as something detached from people or from performance of practices that involve the use of light, but as a result of these dynamics and the maintenance of them. I did find that for some people, in some situations, energy efficient light bulbs could facilitate appropriate light for carrying out various practices, such as cooking and dining, where as for others, energy efficient light bulbs were rejected as even remotely appropriate. It is not unheard of, that cultural and geographical differences are resulting in different performances of practices. We know that there is a difference in *commonality*: how elements are circulated across cultures and countries – and *local variation*: how elements are integrated (Shove et al, 2012). We know that people in India shower differently than people in the Netherlands (Kuijjer and Jung, 2011). But

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how and why do Danish people (within the same geographical area and the same culture) alter practices so that elements of practice become enrolled in practice in a new way that appears meaningful?

With this empirical example in mind as point of departure, I ask how precisely associations – or links – are made, that allows new elements of practice to integrate, and thus re-configure practice? And how does these new (versions of) practices then recruit people?

We know that re-configurations are made all the time, because we are able to historically unravel practices that have changed a lot through time and space, such as driving and showering. However, I am curious about *whom and what* have been involved in changing e.g driving to be that of leisure to be that of getting from A to be. I assume/accept the premise that '*who and what*' should be found in the changing configurations of elements of practice. That meaning, competence and material, and their relationships that are formed through processes of doing, are all to be considered. I also acknowledge that questions about what and how may not be of primary interest to the philosophy of theories of practice, but this kind of questions certainly makes sense when discussing dynamics of (and potentials for) sustainable consumption (as supported eg. in Sahakian and Wilhite, 2013)

Shove et al (2012) argues that elements can sometimes bridge between different practices with the result that changes born through one kind of integration of elements can have consequences for others. They further point out that understanding the changing materiality of doing is important. Finally they emphasize that the potential for e.g know-how to accumulate, circulate and travel between practices consequently depends on the degree to which diverse practices correspond. The degree of which practices corresponds is then be linked to/changed by the changing materiality of doing (being able to competently do something), which at the same time has to be meaningful. New associations are to be made. Making new associations between elements, mean that old ones have to be broken. Shove et al (2012) gives a perfect example of Nordic Walking: *"For Nordic Walking to take hold, walking with 'sticks' had to be disassociated from meanings of frailty and somehow connected to concepts of vitality and well-being. This required a process of de- and re-classification: old connotations had to be shaken off and new connections made. In an effort to make this happen, manufactures and others with an interest in establishing the practice sought to position it with reference to two established narratives, one of personal health, the other of fresh air, nature and outdoor life"* .

Acknowledging that various dynamics are at play in order to enroll new elements in practice is important. However, I am struggling with figuring out how this approach is made applicable. Instead of keeping to identifying that change has happened, how can I identify *what kind of change has happened, and how and why it happened?* Shove et al (2012) proposes a number of ways to address moments and processes of recruitment, which is probably one of the most agency-laden notions in theories of practice. They argue that following the careers of carriers and their developing commitment will help us get a sense of how some practices become more deeply anchored and embedded in society while others disappear. Recruitment can then be treated in different ways; in terms of 1) first encounters 2) expected participation (culturally 'inflicted' practices) and 3) forced adoption/forced refraining from adoption (i.e law) (Shove et

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al, 2012). In other words, modes of recruitment take different forms as practices become established. First encounters are interesting, as it is in this process that sustainable practices can be ‘made available for adoption’ in a meaningful and hopefully democratic way.

As Shove et al (2012) describes it, first encounters often happened when people are part of particular networks and communities – which emphasizes that social ties (that are themselves outcomes of existing or past practices) are important for the formation and diffusion of new ways of doing. But practices that survive for more than a generation need to attract other carriers to replace those who defect or perish.

Without going too much into detail about how this happens, Shove et al (2012) elaborates that practices that survives and stay maintained, recruit people not only through a social network, but also through the material arrangements (E.g showering is maintained both due to social expectations about cleanliness, but also the more and more embedded design of bathrooms and easy access to water through established water infrastructures.).

So, in sum, *channels of recruitment change* as the careers of individuals (as carriers), practices, infrastructures and institutionalizations develop. The *situations of recruitment* can be explored as processes of situated learning (Shove et al, 2012, p. 70); In some situations, experienced practitioners define career paths, by innovating on rules and competences, because they know how to do the practice so well, and then others follow these adjustments/innovations. In other situations, it is the newcomers that bring in new ways of doing. And when no ‘lead users’ can be detected, and no one seem to be altering the practice on purpose in spite of it changing? Shove et al (2012) proposes that it happens by subtle but cumulative differences in the elements of which the practice is formed.

How can this more specifically be empirically framed in terms of (prompting) sustainable consumption and change? What happens when, and how (and why?). This is something that seems called for by others as well, such as Sahkian and Wilhite (2013), Warde (2014), Warde and Welch (2015), who are all suggesting to look towards particular agency-laden parts of theories of practices, such as distributed agency (Sahkian and Wilhite, 2014), or perhaps to other strands of socio-technical theory, where notions such as collective agency (Welch and Warde 2015) could be further explored further in relation to dynamics of everyday life practices. Additionally, Nicolini (2012) points to exploring the field of STS further in order to “..[A]nalytically (and empirically?) tracing the work that goes into making associations come about, and observing the effect produced by the ensuing socio-technical arrangement”, which may help in the process of exploring how and why certain associations – or links – come about.

I propose looking to Callons (1986) sociology of translation, as this may give us a beneficial analytical way of tracing the work that goes into making associations come about.

I am very aware that drawing on STS notions such as the sociology of translations, presupposes a somewhat different ontological starting point – namely that of the actor, whereas the ontological starting point of theories of practice is that of practice. But I see some similarities as well, that may be useful for empirical work on investigating (options for) sustainable consumption. For Sociology of Translation, the relations

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between particular actors are of relevance, and the focus is on how these relations are *made*. For theories of practice concerned with unravelling consumption patterns, emphasis is to a large extent on the *enacting/making* of practice, and the situatedness of consumption in/through practice. As STS and particularly ANT insists on not giving priority to the social, in order to emphasise materiality's agency, (social) orientation is downplayed in much STS related empirical work. However, Latour argues that actors do have a certain orientation that enables them to do what they do as part of a larger chain of actants, which can be explained as programmes or sub-programmes. Simplistically put, actors make/engage in translations *because of something* then, and that something is socio-material. Practices are socio-material.

It may therefore, *empirically*, make sense to trace the work that goes into maintaining or changing certain careers of people, practices, infrastructures and institutionalizations, by treating various moments of these careers as particular moments of translations, when discussing (sustainable) consumption dynamics?

If I am to look at what my 'exemplary residents' did in terms of *making* energy efficient light, both in terms of innovation and recruitment processes and in terms of translations processes, something interesting happens: For one, I see a lot of resemblance to the dynamics that Shove et al (2012) proposes when investigating the practice of Nordic Walking. My 'exemplary residents' live in a community where narratives about environmental sustainability are strong. Sharing these narratives helped them engaged in changing the existing material infrastructures that normally supports incandescent (inefficient) light – a lot of the residents altered lamps to fit compact fluorescent lights and they shared knowledge about how to do it – and in general how to make the colder energy efficient light 'appropriate'. What does not resonate in this case, however, is the manufactures seeking to position light in a way that seems to make sense for Danish residents. But that is another story. Their way of explicitly dealing with the making of energy efficient light, as part of enrolling energy efficient light bulbs and lamps in various practices, such as dining, cleaning and cooking, is interesting to regard as a process of translation in and between practices. The residents that have lived in the community for a while are certainly competent carriers of more sustainable versions of (Danish) recognizable practices, and they teach newcomers how to do these versions of practices, by demonstrating and sharing configurations that works. In terms of making energy efficient light, a number of the residents demonstrate various types of light to other residents, through a little showcase, and residents are allowed to borrow different kinds of light bulbs to see how and if they can fit in their homes and organization of everyday life practices such as (particularly) dining¹. So far, these dynamics are not particularly different than those suggested by Shove et al (2012), particularly if we include and understanding of situated learning. But I do believe that the process of demonstrations, doing in new ways and sharing can be exemplified even further, with a higher level of (intentional) agency attached to these processes. It may make sense to unravel the process of e.g demonstration as a process of translation.

¹ In Denmark, we illuminate our homes with a lot of lamps in the corners of our houses and in the windows, to create a sense of coziness (*hygge*) – Danish people in general expect certain ways of illuminating the dining-situation – and a lot of the new light sources clashes with this particular understanding of 'hygge'.

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Callon (1986) explains processes of translations as a process of four different steps; problematization, interessement, enrollment and mobilization. When investigating what happens in exemplarily different performances of practices (and potentially for better understanding what happens in ‘first encounters’, I think it may make sense to explore the process of translation. Arguably, the above example (and point of departure) is only valid, because the existing way of doing things (that is, existing, common Danish ways of cooking and dining and the role of lighting in these practices) are – to some extent – contested, because the ‘exemplary residents’ are fairly explicitly questioning levels of consumption that is an outcome of the reproduction of these practices. Existing, otherwise fairly uncontested, links between elements of practice are thus being problematized. In order to frame something as a translation process, there is a need for a controversy. Practice dynamics therefore need to be contested in some way. However, keeping Spurling et al’s (2013) framings for deliberate interventions in practice in mind, I propose the following, intentionally simplified and probably provocative, comparison between (deliberate) changes in practices, as proposed by Shove et al (2012) and Spurling et al (2013) and Callon’s (1986) sociology of translation:

Problematization may be what prompts contestation about levels and configurations of consumption in practice(s). If this premise is accepted, this also prompts (policy) guidance for how consumption should be contested – as an outcome of practices that is needed to be understood, and not as an outcome of individual making choices. The *interessement* process is that of legitimizing a proposed solution. In respect to the notion of practices, this then means demonstrating new ways of doing, or, in other words, demonstrating alternative configurations that work. Perhaps this is comparable to that of re-crafting practice, as proposed by Spurling et al (2013). *Enrolment* then only happens if the interessement process is successful. If a process of enrolment is identifiable for a given empirical example, it can help us identifying 1) what kind of problemframing that made sense for a potential reconfiguring elements of practice (are we cleaning ourselves by showering or by splashing, are we getting around by car or by bike?), and 2) it will enable us to explore who and what have been involved. *Mobilization* can then maybe describe the specific (actor-driven) dynamics of displacement that have been successful and this has resulted in the transformation of a given practice. This may very well be comparable to the framings of re-crafting, substituting and changing interlocking as proposed by Spurling et al (2013), and is not far from the identification of distributed agency as empirically identified by Sahakian and Wilhite (2013).

From this it seems that the analytical underpinnings of different moments of translations may give us an (albeit more actor focused) way of understanding different moments of practice innovation and recruitment, that goes beyond that of learning. It gives us a way of understanding some of the very strategic processes that goes into changing practices, by for example changing other practices.²

² I would argue that this way of empirically approaching aspects of consumption dynamics and change goes even if the empirically identified process does not seem to have an evidently strategic character (no lead users or frontrunners). In any case, performing practice requires a lot of (embodied) strategy in order to carry it out successfully. Treating strategy as an inherent (and highly dependent) part of performing practices may be beneficial for policy endeavors.

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I pose the following questions/observations for further discussion:

- Are the premises that I presuppose in my argumentation even valid?
- Will this only be valid in the cases practices encounters detectable problems – form a controversy? If this is the case, will it then be potentially relevant for the empirical application that I have presupposed, namely that of investigating sustainable consumption, where practices are discussed in terms of their environmental/sustainability impact?
- Actors come from somewhere (whether it is defined object worlds, social worlds, practices,), and they define problems according to the practices they carry. This seems valid, both as part of the sociology of translation, and from a practice theoretical perspective. This seems particularly valid, however, when empirically investigating professional practices, or in cases where particularly environmentally oriented people alter everyday practices accordingly to meet those concerns. Will it still/also be valid in terms of investigating dynamics of everyday mundane practices? A person can be a ‘doctor’ and then problematize accordingly. But can a person ever be identified as a ‘showering person’ in a meaningful way?
- Translation makes it possible to describe the active part that material/technology plays in recruiting people and other materials – perhaps more than what theories of practice would in itself?
- It seems that sociology of translation lends a hand in terms of making practice theory more applicable in terms of exploring potentials for/dynamics of change, where as the philosophy of theories of practice lends a hand in terms of explaining the normativity behind what kind of translations that are made (and which are not)?

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