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New Directions in Consumer Research (Sage, 2015)

Introduction to Volume I – Practices

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This volume provides the reader with an introduction to Theories of Practice and what we identify as the key studies in this domain. It is our belief that theories of practice offer consumer researchers ways to refresh and rethink their approaches, especially if we take seriously Warde's suggestion that: "An individual's pattern of consumption is the sum of the moments of consumption which occur in the totality of his or her practices. If the individual is merely the intersection point of many practices, and practices are the bedrock of consumption, then a new perspective on consumer behaviour emerges. New explanations of contemporary identities and the role of consumption in identity formation suggest themselves." (2005, p. 144).

Theoretical and Philosophical Roots

For the consumer researcher a useful starting point for understanding theories of practice is the work of Alan Warde. Warde seeks to consolidate the theoretical stakes in the practice turn for consumption researchers. To do so he provides a much cited and valued review of the philosophical tradition which underscores the practice approach. As he admits this takes us into heavy social theory, namely the work of Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002). For as he suggests theories of practice are not unified rather they come in a range of hues and varieties

and they position themselves through their questioning and opening up of the methodological assumptions which underpin the ways we theorise and make claims on the nature of social reality. In this way, practice is best understood as a ‘coordinated entity’ and ‘performance’.

Consumption, cannot thus, be reduced to demand, exchange or even its symbolic significance rather we must attend to consumption as ‘a moment’ in almost every practice. In this manner, it is “Practices, rather than individual desires, we might say, create wants.” (2005, p. 137). His example is that of motoring which as he reveals cannot be reduced to the level of the individual or even social class differentiation, rather we must attend to its “incorporation into everyday life”. Motoring is thus best understood through the conventions and enthusiasms which it entails, for it is within these that we can best locate “the seeds of constant change” which underscore practices (see also Swidler, 2001; and Brownlie & Hower, 2011). Which brings us nicely to market making or what he refers to as “the push of capital accumulation”; for as he suggests in a critical passage:

“Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalized and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, qua consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies. Customers cannot usually be dictated to by producers of goods and services; most innovations fail, more new functions and designs are rejected than adopted. Yet, not are producers by-standers in the process. Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests.”

In this manner, it is through changes in styling and performance, that we witness how a market for motoring paraphernalia (be it a new car, the latest bike) gets its dynamic and incessant character. Consumption in effect becomes driven by practices, which is why it is so essential that they become the units of analysis for consumer researchers rather than our constant focus

on decision-making. Decision-making occurs, but it is only a moment, albeit an important one, in the history and trajectory of practices. More so, we should shift our focus from individual choices, or even talk of the figure of ‘the consumer’ perhaps to persons and “the collective development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life.” (2005, p. 146). The consumer as passive dupe or sovereign authority is thus displaced with the figure of the practitioner (a point we shall return to when we discuss the work of Shove and Pantzar, this volume).

Understanding the orbit of practice theory must also begin, as Warde so well demonstrated, through the work of Reckwitz. Reckwitz in ‘Towards a Theory of Social Practices’ reminds us that a turn to practice theories brings in its wake a turn to Social Theory; be this Foucault’s notion of *savoir* knowledge as situated and dependent (1989, p. 183), the structuration of Giddens (1984; 1991), the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967), Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (2010, orig. 1977; see also chapters in Bourdieu, 1990), or Butler’s (1990) turn to performativity in the understanding of gender as performed and enacted. This paper whilst reminding us of the import of social theory to our understanding of practices also reminds us that: “Practice theory does not place the social in mental qualities, nor in discourse, nor in interaction.” (2002, p. 249). In this strong version of practice theory the individual becomes a ‘carrier’ (Träger) of a practice, that is to say: “a carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring. These conventionalized ‘mental’ activities of understanding, knowing how and desiring are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participate not qualities of the individual.” By this reckoning, Reckwitz acknowledges the import of Schatzki when he suggests that practice represents a “nexus of doings and sayings” (2002, p. 250) or as he prefers:

“A practice is thus a routinized ways in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood.” (2002, p. 250).

Another critical ingredient of practice is thus that it becomes the location of the social (see also Latour, 2005) – that is ‘routinized bodily performances’ – which bring us to a view of mental activities as forms of practical knowledge, defined as: “...ways of understanding the world, of desiring something, of knowing how to do something.” that are shared and collective by becoming routinized. Reckwitz thus alerts us to the importance of practice theory for its ability to decentre human agency as overly reflexive, calculated and rational rather our attention and vocabulary, as consumer researchers, should turn towards practical knowledge (see Brownlie and Hewer, 2011), bodily movements (see also Hui 2013; Woermann 2012) and routines (Illmonen, 2001).

Schatzki in ‘Practice mind-ed orders’ provides us with a few useful examples of practices, beyond the example of motoring as used by Warde, here he suggests:

“Practices are nexuses of activity. Examples are cooking practices, rearing practices, political practices, farming practices, negotiation practices, banking practices, and recreational practices. Each, as an organized web of activity exhibits two overall dimensions: activity and organization.” (2001, p. 48).

For Schatzki then, a practice must be understood as a *set of actions*, which are not only patterns of behaviour, but also that folded within practices are *states of one’s life* as expressed as “one’s ongoing involvement in the world” and contained with this orientating are notions of “*desiring, hoping, feeling, believing, expecting, seeing*”. This qualification is an important one, for any understanding of theories of practice, as it reminds us that to fully grasp and explore practices

in their vitality we must attend to such orientations to the world. Practices, by this reckoning, are best understood as an ‘organized manifold’ (2001, p. 53) – “a set of doings and sayings organized by a pool of understandings, a set of rules, and a teleoaffective structure.” (ibid, p. 53) which while appearing static and unchanging is dynamic, changing over time in response to ‘contingent events’ (see also Arsel & Bean, 2013).

The work of Barnes (2001) chimes well with the work of Schau et al (2009) given that the focus is on practice as collective action. It is through this connection that we start to envisage the connections with social networks and communities (see also Shove et al, 2012). For Barnes, practice is best understood as embodied theory that is: “Descriptions of social life as practice are, in the last analysis, as ‘theory laden’ as any other descriptions...[in this regard] ordinary members take a theoretical perspective in orienting to each other’s practice. When one member successfully engages in a practice, what this invariably betokens to others is the possession of a competence or a power...the power to perform.” (2001, p. 20). A comment which echoes through our next collection of papers on movement, materials and competences.

Movement, Materials & Competences

Shove and Pantzar (2005) focus on innovations in practice are ongoing and situated. Through the example of Nordic walking they are able to demonstrate that practices are necessarily localized and (re)invented. Artifacts or as Schatzki might prefer objects are thus indispensable for the accomplishment of practices. ‘Doing walking’ in this sense speaks of rules and conventions but also walking for pleasure or recreation must be understood as having a

relatively recent history which is not typically associated with ‘sticks’; whereas, Nordic walking represents an activity where sticks, the social and physical skills become interlinked. More so, for such a practice to emerge and persist it must as Shove and Pantzar suggest “be continually reproduced by those who do it.” (2005, p. 49). It must also become embodied and institutionalized, associated with notions of wellbeing and healthy living; an enthusiasm that speaks of membership within a community – a conduit for the social - wherein skills and competence can be nurtured and performed. It is perhaps when these ingredients (‘elements’) are in place that we can say that a market has emerged. In this manner, as Shove and Pantzar suggest: “...products alone have no value. They do so only when integrated into practice and allied to requisite forms of competence and meaning.” (2005, p. 57).

The work of Hui (2013; 2012) equally draws our attention to how movement affects consumption within practices. Drawing on the examples of birdwatching and patchwork quilting she clearly articulates how practices bring in their wake notions of traversing space, of travel and enthusiasm. In this manner, performance and practices are always on the move, so that they become best understood as both structured temporally but also mobile and in motion. Such an approach draws our attention to the moments of consumption to better demonstrate that consumption is multi-sited, and to better understand how practices unfold within particular spaces (this also papers in Spaces volume, in particular XXX): or as Hui suggests: “Multiple mobilities, spread out over time, space and modalities, contribute to meaningful leisure projects.” (2013, p. 895). And, for our understanding of practices and people, Hui employs the work of Ingold (2000) to suggest: “...we do not act *upon* practices, or do things *to* them, but move along *with* them.” (2013, p. 903).

For Woermann (2012), the context for best understanding practices as creative and embodied is freeskiing, a lifestyle sport akin to snowboarding. But also and perhaps more importantly how practices are shared amongst dispersed audiences through social media. Using an ethnographic approach he demonstrates how freeskiing becomes "... an aesthetic universe of its own, structured by a notion of 'style' that encompasses bodily movements, clothing, video, music, product design, language and lifestyle." (2012, p. 621). Crucial to this form of worlding are the media practices through which practitioners become akin to novice videographers. Technology, in this instance, speaks of capturing experiences, moments and the ephemeral but also an 'institution' through which the coordination of performance, of know-how, of competence and skills can be better distributed to likeminded others. In this manner, as Woermann argues: "Side by side with the slope, the screen has become a key locus of doing freeskiing, and it is on the screen that freeskiers increasingly determine the quality and meaning of what has happened on the slopes. Social media are scopic media that add a global layer of interaction and sense making." (2012, p. 632). We also witness how through such social media practices and their audiences a market can become reshaped but also vibrant to recruit others (see also Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012).

Taste, Value & Creativity

Practice theories have we have sought to demonstrate in this introduction to the volume have much to offer consumer research, the work of Schau et al (2009) bring this opportunity and possibility to fruition. Here Consumer Culture theory is foregrounded as a perspective which takes seriously the co-creative and collective character of value formation. On the basis of analysis of nine brand communities the authors analyse the practices which are common to these collectives. They thus identify four thematic categories made up of twelve value creating

practices to express the value-creating dynamics at work in these collectives. The four practices being: social networking (welcoming, empathizing, governing); impression management (evangelizing, justifying); community engagement (documenting, badging, milestone, staking) and brand use (grooming, customizing, commoditizing). Practices in this manner operate like apprenticeships, inculcating members over time and through engagement. Practices also endow participants with cultural capital and express insider sharing; but also as Warde (this volume) suggested generate consumption opportunities and express community vitality. In this manner, we are under no illusion that the search for value must begin with practice and practices.

Likewise, Arsel and Bean who acknowledge that a focus on how taste is practiced must also bring in its wake taste as routinized, practical and habitual knowledge as reproduced and accomplished in everyday life. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984), but also Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005), Shove and Pantzar (2006) and (Ilmonen, 2001), this paper clearly indicates how the practice turn has now become translated into the consumer research canon. Through an analysis of the taste regimes which operate amongst middle-class devotees of the Apartment Therapy blog we witness how practices around objects, doings and meanings (as suggested by Reckwitz, 2002 and Schatzki, 2001) underscore how consumers navigate this terrain. In doing so, Arsel and Bean reveal how the AT taste regime operates as, what Schatzki termed, a 'teleoaffective structure' to 'steer' practices of problematization, ritualization and instrumentalization. The focus on ritualization marks the translation into consumer research, where talk of rituals has figured more prominently within the research canon. But the question remains on the extent to which ritualization is equivalent to, or different, from the prior focus we have witnessed on routinisation within the practice of theory approach (see Ilmonen 2001; Schatzki 2001). Indeed, one rarely finds talk of rituals within the Theory of Practice tradition

(although two exceptions are Swidler, 2001, Ilmonen 2001). More so, while the paper suggests that a focus on practical knowledge, as expressed through mass-mediated regimes, takes us beyond social class influence, given the character of the middle-class respondents who talk and the focus on design practices one wonders if this is truly the case. The authors are alert to this operation as in their limitations they reveal that the “AT audience belongs to a very specific social class segment. The people predominantly portrayed on the website are privileged individuals and couples living in America.”

Brownlie and Hewer in ‘Articulating consumers through practices of vernacular creativity’ draw upon practice approaches but attempt to blend these with insights from Bauman (1999) and Miller (1991) on praxis, but perhaps more importantly de Certeau (1984) who perhaps most clearly demonstrates how practices must be understood in terms of the vibrancy and urgencies of everyday life. Here practices are not simply reproduced and maintained but become creative and political in equal measure to better express their urgency and vitality. In this sense the routine character of practices is complemented through an acknowledgement of the extent to which practices are improvised, and must be understood as expressive of our *desiring* for the social, but also as borne of struggle and resistance. Practices by this reckoning are *embodied theory* performed and put to use in the everyday. Or, as de Certeau prefers:

“Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ (whether strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’, maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.” (1984, p. xix).

To reduce such ways of operating to cultural expressivism or an overly agentic agent (as per Warde) would also be misplaced, as surely struggle and contests over whose interests and in which particular contexts must also remind us that a fully-fledged practice theory would embrace such questions rather than bracketing them off.

After Taste, Embodiment and Recruitment

Holttinen (2014) reminds us that consumer behaviour is expressed in mundane situations. Using a critical discourse analysis approach this paper marks another attempt (much like Schau et al, 2009; and Arsel and Bean, 2013) to bring together consumer culture theory and practice theory. Food practices (see also Warde this volume) are a useful context for this discussion given their repetitive and routine character, but also symbolic character which reflects cultural ideals and discourses. In this manner, the paper reveals that Finnish households enact food ideals through mundane consumption. The practice of the weekday dinner thus become a materialization of cultural values ('the good parent') but also becomes a site for the understanding of conflicts, tensions, and the competing demands of work and family. Practices are thus sites of enthusiasm and commitment, predictable and pragmatic but also pleasurable in their character.

The work of Parsons and Cappellini foregrounds practices of mothering within the household. Here the focus is on West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of 'doing gender', wherein gender is a "routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction (ibid, p. 25) to further understanding of practices and better embraces notions of social and cultural changes. In this paper the concept of practices is brought home so to speak through a turn to the ways people juggle competing demands around task management and discourses of doing mothering. Here the focus is on modes of organization and forms of accountability around practices within the

home to flesh out and better reveal practices as sites of tension and contradiction. In this way, notions of entitlement, the pressures of family time and the power struggles which express themselves on the home front can be better captured and understood through the practice turn.

In 'After Taste: Culture, consumption and theories of practice', Warde suggests that the practice alternative takes us beyond cultural accounts and explanations, given that it delivers and is premised as a general theory of action which is not voluntaristic. Herein theories of practice are not centred on individual choice rather attention turns to "routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation." (2014, p. 286). Herein materials and competences are foregrounded over the symbolic; shared understanding becomes more interesting a site for analysis than motivation; and reasoning and *knowing that* is displaced for practical competence and *know-how*. In this way, Theories of Practice offer much to consumer researchers looking to rethink consumption since they take us out of our comfort zones. Exposing shared understanding which predominates and our over-focus on cognitive and decisionistic models of action, which serve only to mask the importance of embodiment and equipment. His example here is the market for body management, where habits and routines are best expressed through the technical affordances of tools and objects. In this manner a whole Sports industry has built up around: "Sports equipment, club and gym memberships, weight-loss clubs, fashion clothing, tattooing, plastic surgery, vitamin supplements and alternative [which] provide markets for goods and services which constitute the practices of body management." (2014, p. 293). An industry tied to notions of looking and *feeling* good, of *desiring* and *hoping* that change can be achieved, and through such change wellbeing and health benefits may be obtained. An industry where embodiment, practice as embodied theory and collective action comes to the fore.

Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), in the final paper of this volume, ask: “How do practice attract recruits and how do they spread through social networks and communities?”. This looks a useful question to build consumer research on practices around, but also to further existing work on communities and collective within consumer research. As they reveal through discussion of the example of punk, new recruits were often drawn into the scene through established networks. Social ties thus become important, but also the language of careers through which *carriers* become increasingly committed – from novice to established to lapsed. Future research on how practices mutate and shift should also foreground defection and transformation to embrace more fully the dynamic character of practices.

Suggestions for Future Research

As this volume demonstrates theories of practice represent a vibrant area of consumer research. A rich seam of work exists that has taken the import of practices seriously. For consumer research we consider that the practice turn will only gather momentum as we become carriers of the ideas and seek to perform new contributions in this critical area of research. Theories of practice as the recent work of Warde (2014) demonstrates that take us beyond notions of taste or voluntaristic theories of action. Theories of practice as the papers in this volume demonstrate take us to new ways of understanding how markets emerge and how they shift and transform. Here commercial designs and imperatives which are best attuned to the shifting and gathering of practices look likely to be the ones that are most likely to succeed. Theories of practice introduce us to a new vocabulary to frame consumption through, here the task is to grasp how

practices, as Shove, Watson and Pantzar (2012) suggest, mutate and shift, how they gain recruits and devotees.

One import of practice theory is significance of shared understanding, in this sense we see linkages from practices to notions of sharing as performed. Practices are performed and materialised in spaces; and the practice approach makes us well aware that change sometimes occurs at the macro and societal level due to the political complexion of practices. It is in this sense that we feel that more research that envisages, and is sensitive to, the linkages between practices, spaces and politics is thus essential to move forward our understanding and introduce new ways of thinking.

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Additional Reading:

This volume is extensive but does not include all useful studies, in this manner at the end we provide a few suggestions for further reading.

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