

Researching on energy-consumption practices: Adding social interactions and geographical characteristics to the social theories of practice

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Abstract

Social theories of practice are more and more used as conceptual framework in studies on energy consumption. These theories are first summarized in this paper. The main part of the paper draws on several empirical studies using the practice approach and done in several countries by different authors. Depending on the practice(s) studied, it may be useful to add to the conceptual framework some geographical or environmental characteristics as they are locally interpreted (*e.g.* climate for heating and/or ventilating practices). Several empirical studies also show the relevance of including social interactions – within the family, the enterprise, the multi-apartment building, the neighborhood and so forth – into the conceptual framework derived from the social theories of practices, to take into account the rearticulating role of social interactions and the power claims when carrying a practice or a set of practices, and when changing it/them.

Keywords

Social theories of practice – Social interactions – Significant others – Environmental characteristics – Change in energy-related practices

Introduction

Social theories of practice are more and more used as conceptual framework in studies on energy consumption. Halkier *et al.* (2011: 5) note that ‘Possibly the most vigorous application of practice theoretical repertoires citing Warde’s article may be found in the interstices between technologies, utilities, resource consumption and the problematic of sustainability.’ Indeed, much of empirical research drawing on practice theories focus on practices such as daily mobility (Warde 2005), practices regulating thermal comfort at home (Gram-Hanssen 2010a, 2011; Bartiaux 2008; Bartiaux *et al.* 2011), or several ‘green’ practices (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Hargreaves (2011) has also applied social practice theory to study pro-environmental change on a workplace.

The relevance of integrating material structure, products and technical arrangements has been discussed by several authors, as shown below. On the contrary, much less discussion has been devoted to the status of geographical characteristics in these social theories. Maybe even more surprisingly, few practitioners of social theories of practice have underlined the influence of significant others such as friends, colleagues or family members when enrolling in a practice or

changing it. This short paper thus aims at discussing the relevance of introducing geographical or environmental characteristics, and social interactions into the framework of theories of practice.

An overview of social theories of practices

Social practice theories draw on Bourdieu's works on practices and habituses (1972, 1980, 1994) and on Giddens' structuration theory (1984), namely the key role of routines in structuring societies. Practice theory was formulated by Schatzki (1996) and further elaborated by Reckwitz (2002a). In his book entitled "Social Practices", Schatzki (1996) underlines the extent of Wittgenstein influence on this new way of thinking, departing from the usual dichotomies such as holism/individualism, structure/agency, macro/micro, mind/action.

So Schatzki clearly departs from individualist theories that "problematize any construal of social existence as simply interrelations among individuals" and "all give theoretical pride of place to the actions, strategies, mental states, and rationality of individuals, the cooperation, negotiations, and agreements reached among individuals, the rules, norms, and threats governing people's behavior, and the unintentional consequences of behavior that often extend beyond actors' purview." (Schatzki 1996: 1, 4). In so doing, he obscures issues of power and conflict, whose relevance in social sciences has been shown by Foucault and others.

Both Schatzki and Reckwitz underline the collective character of practices. Reckwitz (2002a: 249-50) explains that "[t]he single individual – as a bodily and mental agent – then acts as the 'carrier' (Träger) of a practice – and, in fact, of many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another." Furthermore, "[a]s there are diverse social practices, and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines." (p. 256). For Schatzki (1996: 89), a practice is a coordinated entity, i.e. a "temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" with major "key components of the nexus identified by Schatzki as linking doings and sayings in order to constitute a practice" (Warde, 2005: 139).

The nature and the number of these linking components are discussed (for a synthesis, see Gram-Hanssen 2010b). In addition, several authors have underlined the relevance of integrating material structure, products and technical arrangements in the theories of practices, such as Reckwitz (2002b), Shove and Pantzar (2005), Watson and Shove (2008), Wilhite (2008, 2010), Gram-Hanssen (2010a, 2010b, 2011), Schatzki (2010). They conclude by acknowledging its usefulness and most of them by also illustrating this relevance by sharp empirical analyses. In this line of thought, I will consider here for energy-related practices four linking components like Gram-Hanssen (2010a) and Bartiaux *et al.* (2011): material arrangements, know-how and routines, institutionalized rules and teleo-affective structures.

Warde (2005) outlines the first works and demonstrates their interest for consumption studies and for Shove (2010: 1279) practice theories are irreconcilable with psychological models based on attitudes and behaviors, given "the incommensurability of these contrasting paradigms": theories of practice "emphasise endogenous and emergent dynamics" and view individuals as carriers of practices whereas psychological theories view them as autonomous agents of change and "focus on causal and external drivers" (see also Shove *et al.* 2012: 143–164).

Adding geographical characteristics

For California and Southern India, Wilhite (2008) has shown how the hot climate has been accounted for in traditional building and ventilation techniques. Energy for cooling the dwellings was thus much less needed than during these last decades, with the new construction techniques and standards (large windows, use of concrete etc.). Wilhite has also shown the paradox that global warming is partly fuelled with an ever increasing number of air-conditioning systems.

In a much colder country, Latvia, where winter temperatures can drop to -30° C, Ozoliņa and Garā (2011) show that climate plays a role in motivating apartment owners to decide paying insulation works in the common parts of their multi-apartment building. More exactly, they point at the *feeling* of cold that is less acceptable nowadays given the current definitions of comfort, as illustrated by the following quote of a Latvian man:

“My ex-wife’s mother lived here at that time. Probably, it was cold here, you know [how] the outside walls [are] (...). Probably it was more expensive [then], but now we pay the same as in other buildings that have no heat insulation on the walls. So they agreed and did the works and it became much warmer”.

These examples from Latvia, California and India suggest that the geographical characteristics do not directly sustain and model the practices of building dwellings and controlling their indoor temperatures but have an indirect influence through the interpretations socially given to these environmental characteristics.

Let’s now turn to some sport practices, which require more or less energy consumption for their performance. Nordic walking can be practiced in many different settlements with various geographic characteristics, and has been studied by Shove and Pantzar (2005) with the framework of social theories of practice. Unlike Nordic walking, downhill skiing will be practiced somewhat differently in the Alps or the domed ski resort of Dubai, “the iconic (...) site of excess consumption” (Urry 2010). Here, geographic characteristics such as climate and flat terrain would require special technical infrastructures and material arrangements to make the downhill-skiing practice possible in Dubai despite adverse environmental characteristics.

When it comes to the influence of the environmental characteristics on the teleo-affective structures, French anthropologist Descola (1999, 2005, 2012) has demonstrated that there is neither univocal nor causal relationship. Indeed, two different groups (or tribes, or societies) living in the same geographical environment may have quite different relational modes with humans and non-humans whereas two different groups settled in quite different environments may have the same relational mode. For example, both Jivaros and Tucanos live in the Amazonian forest: the former have a relational mode based on predation, and the latter, on exchange. Our societies are also based on predation although the physical features of our environment are not the same as in Amazonia! Exchange is the relational mode of the Tucanos tribes, living in Amazonia. They have socially built their interdependence and hence the necessity of exchange by specializing the know-hows and routines of each tribe: one makes baskets, another one, bows and arrows, a third one, ropes, and so forth (Descola 1999).

For Descola (2012: 457), “predation is above all a disposition for incorporating otherness, both human and non-human, because this is reputed to be indispensable for a definition of the self: in order truly to be myself, I must take possession of another being and assimilate it. This can be done by means of warfare, hunting, real or metaphorical cannibalism” and so on. In a previous paper, Descola (1999: 128) argues that in Western societies, this predation mode is made acceptable only thanks to a strong division “between humans and non-humans” (Descola, 1999: 128). Elsewhere (Bartiaux 2007: 93), I have hypothesized that this radical separation is echoed by the human-exemption paradigm, according to which our human societies, especially in developed countries, are the only ones to exempt themselves from the constraints that nature opposes to social activities, thanks to culture and technique. Several environment sociologists (Vaillancourt 1996; Macnaghten and Urry 1998) have uncovered this paradigm. Can this human-exemption paradigm, which is also influencing many social scientists (Vaillancourt 1996), explain the absence of environmental characteristics and of their interpretation in the conceptual framework based on social theories of practice?

It is useful in our discussion to examine how Descola (2012: 448) defines ‘relational modes’, that he previously (1999) called ‘world-socialization schemes’: they are “integrating schemas; that is to say they stem from the kind of cognitive, emotional, and sensory-motor structures that channel the production of automatic inferences, orientate practical action, and organize the expression of thought and feelings according to relatively stereotyped patterns. A relational schema becomes dominant in a collective when activated in a whole range of very different circumstances in relations with humans or nonhumans.” This definition is interesting because it underlines a homology between social relations (with humans) and relations with animals, plants that we view as nonhumans. In so doing, Descola adds a relevant dimension – the orientation and the meaning given to social relations – that is more encompassing than Schatzki’s definition of teleoaffective structure: “ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods” (1996: 89). On the other hand, both include an ethical dimension in their definition: for Descola (2012: 457) “exchange, predation and gift are general relational schemas that concern far more than the circulation of goods, since one or other of them may come to structure the *ethos* of a collective in a distinctive fashion.” (His underlining.) Slater (2009) discusses “the ethics of routine”.

Summing up, two points can be made. First, it seems useful to add another component linking doings and sayings in the performance of a practice, namely the interpretation given to the geographical characteristics of the settlement where the practice is performed. Second, this interpretation and the other linking components – material arrangements, know-how and routines, institutionalized rules and the teleo-affective structure – are all oriented by the relational mode enacted in a given society. Keeping in mind this orientation given by Descola to social relations, let’s now turn to the status of social interactions in empirical research on energy consumption, mainly but not only inspired by practice theories.

Adding social interactions

When analyzing practices of different sorts, and especially when describing the recruitment of new practitioners and practice changes, several authors have pointed out at the role played by reference persons such as the building manager in Latvia (Ozoliņa and Garā 2011), the sales

demonstrators seen as cultural intermediaries in Portugal (Truninger 2011), dedicated employees acting as “Environment Champions” in England (Hargreaves 2011). Other researches stress the importance of friends (Vittersø 2003), partners for whom “[m]y normal routines are confronted with your strange habits” (Ehn and Löfgren 2009: 105; Bartiaux 2003; Kaufmann 2009 [2007]) and children (Bartiaux 2009, Garabua-Moussaoui *et al.* 2009) when changing energy-related practices. Last but not least, Giddens’ concept of discursive consciousness (1984) that implies discussions and social comparisons is quite useful when discussing practices changes (see for examples Hobson 2003; Gram-Hanssen *et al.* 2007; Bartiaux, 2008). Much of this empirical research refers to the conceptual framework given by the social theories of practice, but they do not provide an explicit place to social interactions. Maybe the clearest diagnosis is made by Hargreaves (2011: 79) who is “emphasizing a need for it [a practice-based approach] to develop a greater understanding of the role of social interactions and power relations in the grounded performance of practices.”

To overcome this lack, Hargreaves’ ethnographic research on a workplace illuminates, among other points, “the close relationship between practices and the power and social relations that they support and uphold and which, in turn, ensure that those practices are maintained, stabilized and reproduced. These social aspects and (micro)politics of practice are often neglected” (Hargreaves 2011: 93). Furthermore, after the environmental campaign, “[w]hilst the practices themselves had not been fundamentally transformed, these observations suggest that the way practices were approached, understood and experienced by practitioners had changed, and so too had the sorts of interactions and identities that these practices sustained. Crucially, these social dynamics of practice are often underplayed (...) in practice-based accounts” (p. 95). So there is a clear need to integrate this (micro-) politics of practice as well as these social dynamics of practice into social theories of practice.

On her side, to conceptually integrate the social interactions and cultural intermediaries into social theories of practice, Truninger (2011) interestingly proposes to complement these theories with conventions theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 [1991]; Thévenot 2006), namely by introducing the regime of familiarity, where “the practice elements of image-object-competence are linked at a more localized and intimate level” (p. 49). In so doing, this articulation “also gave scale to the analytical operationalization of practices, which may contribute to better grasp macro-micro articulations – from the intimate and personal sphere to the more conventionalized and instituted processes of practices.” (Truninger 2011: 55).

Summing up, these social interactions do not seem to be another linking component between doings and sayings involved in the making of a practice. As shown in these empirical researches, they rather appear as rearticulating the role of the liking components in sustaining – or not – a practice and orienting its enactment. For example, Truninger (2011) shows well how the personalized appropriation and domestication of tools, namely by the use of diminutives, contribute to the enrolment of new practitioners. Hargreaves (2011: 93-94) observes that one of the (unexpected) consequences of a pro-environmental campaign is a ‘conspicuous environmentalism’ shown by the employees in their interactions. So the routines and know-how about photocopying for example have been reinterpreted and otherwise (emphatically) displayed (“I’m double-siding, I definitely am double-siding”). In a research on the influence of school and TV programs on energy-related practices at home, a result was that conver-

sations between parents and children are one of the necessary conditions for changing these practices (Bartiaux 2009). Again, the new know-how given to the children is discussed, filtered and rearticulated during these family conversations before maybe changing a practice. As put by Ilmonen (2001:14), social networks are “impeding structures that narrow down our alternatives for actions”.

Practice change

As Warde (2005: 140) notes, “the principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of change behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves”. Shove *et al.* (2012: 163) conceptualize practice change by “the distribution and the circulation of materials, competences and meanings”, the reconfiguration of “relations between practices”, the reshaping of “the careers of practices and those who carry them” and the “forging and breaking some of the links, relationships, networks and partnerships involved”. Power is not absent from their “Foucauldian” analysis (p.136) namely by the “ordering and management of knowledge”, and changes in circuits of reproduction “skewed and slanted by patterns of inequality” (pp.116-7).

Conclusion

To summarize this exploration, it seems useful to add a fifth component linking doings and sayings in the performance of a practice: the interpretation given to the geographical characteristics of the settlement where the practice is performed. And this interpretation and the other linking components – material arrangements, know-how and routines, institutionalized rules and teleo-affective structures – are all oriented by the relational mode enacted in a given society. In addition, to integrate the (micro-) politics of practice as well as the social dynamics of practice into the practice approach, and to take into account the insights of convention theory, namely the familiarity regime, I have proposed to explicitly acknowledge the role of these social interactions as rearticulating the linking components in sustaining – or not – a practice and orienting its enactment. A visual display of these propositions is given in Figure 1.

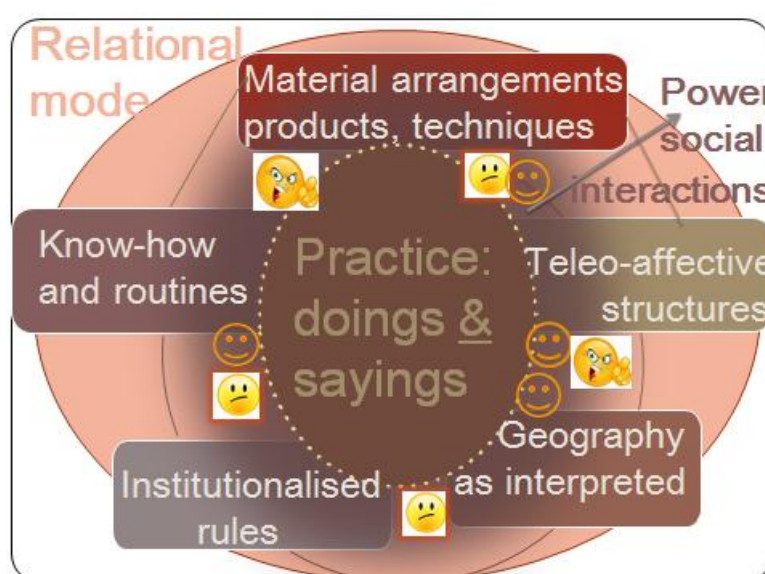


Figure 1. A schematic representation of practice theories, with interpreted geographic characteristics as a new linking component, and with social interactions as rearticulating the linking components.

In this short paper, practices have been mainly approached as nexuses of doings and sayings sustained by linking components, in a rather static way. A dynamic approach is introduced by the too short reference to the last book of Shove *et al.* Therefore, the next step of this exploration would be to study in detail the (changing) roles of social interactions and the relational mode in rearticulating or reorienting linking components and relations between practices when practices are changing. A further step would be to articulate these practices changes with policy actions and instruments.

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