Notes on practice theory

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CHARM investigated the impact of individual and social feedback on behaviour in three studies: the use of web and email feedback to reduce domestic energy consumption; the use of a mobile phone app to increase walking, and the use of a Facebook app to encourage pro-environmental behaviours. The case studies all employed quasi-randomised controlled experiments and complemented the analysis of the behaviour data and surveys with qualitative research. The qualitative research was influenced by theories of practice in the works of Schatzki, Shove, Reckwitz and Warde. For instance, rather than asking our interviewees how they used energy, we asked them about how they washed their clothes. We also used practices as one analytical frame in our analysis of the interviews. This note reflects on the extent to which our research supports the usefulness of taking a practice approach as a research and analytical frame.

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Practice theories treat practices (e.g. washing clothes) rather than individuals or societies as the primary unit of social analysis. Instead of focusing on individual attitudes, behaviours and choices (Shove, 2010)[1] theories of practice understand social change in terms of practices. There is considerable variation among authors, but practices are generally understood as interlinked 'bundles' of actions, meanings, rules, things and skills. For example, the laundry practices 'bundle' would include ways of doing laundry, meanings (such as 'clean'), rules (such as 'separate colours'), things (such as washing machines) and skills (such as recognising that something is dirty). A practice is 'performed' when someone does the practice; the individual who performs the practice is the 'carrier', and the performance helps to perpetuate the practice as a social entity (that is, doing laundry helps to link the different elements so that they form a 'bundle'; if people stopped washing clothes, laundry practices would disappear). Practices are seen as stabilising behaviour, because what people do is influenced by the relevant 'bundle'. For example, the way people wash their clothes is shaped by the meaning of cleanliness and by the design of washing machines. Practice theorists recognise that much of what people do is not deliberately chosen, but is influenced by habit and social ways of doing things. Previous work in sociology has emphasised the role of meanings (e.g. Blumer) and things (e.g. Latour). What is specific to theories of practice is that these are seen as part of practice 'bundles'.

In the *CHARM Home Energy Study*, instead of just asking people how they used energy, we talked to them about how they washed their clothes, how they showered etc. This was useful because people are not very aware of their energy consumption. Discussing our interviewees' practices with them in detail helped us understand the extent to which the assumptions embedded within theories of practice corresponded with ordinary life. There were several interesting findings relating to theories of practice from the energy study. First, we found that it is somewhat misleading to think of individuals as the carriers of practices, because many of the practices we looked at were performed

[1] Shove, E. (2010). 'Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change', *Environment and Planning A* 42(6): 1273-1285

on a household level rather than on an individual basis. Typically, for instance, there is a household way of doing laundry even if different individuals are involved in carrying it out. We found that in household organisation and negotiation, one person often seems to take responsibility for the way in which a specific practice is performed. We call this person the 'domain owner'. For example, one person in the household typically makes the rules related to laundry. However, the allocation of responsibility is not always related to specific practices and can also relate, for instance, to specific parts of the house or to types of activity.

When we explored laundry practice routines we found that these differed markedly between households. This was surprising because theories of practice suggest that practice performances should be rather similar. Personal cleaning practices also varied, but a 'shower once a day' rule was widespread. When explaining or justifying their routines, interviewees rarely referred to what other people did (as one might expect if these routines were shaped by social practices) and talked instead about the way their practices were shaped by their upbringing, experiences or preferences. It is possible that this was because the practices we researched were typically performed within the confines of a home, which would make it more difficult to observe, copy and reproduce what others might be doing. Influenced by theories of practice, we deliberately explored the different elements of practice-bundles, such as meanings, materials, rules and skills. We found that practice 'domain owners' almost invariably had elaborate rules relating to laundry (e.g. the number of times a specific type of garment should be worn before washing). These rules seemed to be quite personal and our participants did not seem to be interested in other peoples' rules. For all participants the key meaning related to laundry was 'clean', but this was not practice-specific for it extended to laundry, personal cleaning, household cleaning etc. Material things (such as washing machines) were relevant to the way people performed practices and were sometimes relevant to more than one practice.

In the *CHARM bActive* interviews we found that one way in which people organise their schedules is in terms of practices[2]. Exercise can be a focal activity as a practice in its own right, or it can occur incidentally within other practices such as socialising or transport. If exercise occurs incidentally (for instance as part of travel), it seems to be more easily displaced when circumstances change (for instance, when an individual acquires a car). Whether an activity is focal or not depends on the perspective of the actor and, consequently, which practice is being performed depends on the way the carrier thinks about what he or she is doing. Most of our interviewees did not consider walking to be a form of exercise or treat it as a practice in its own right. bActive seems to have increased walking by helping users to see that they could increase the amount of walking they did in practices such as travelling, shopping or working and that they therefore did not need to reorganise their schedules to fit in what some respondents called "*proper walks*". Health campaigns have tended to focus on walking as a practice in its own right and have often overlooked the walking that occurs as an incidental activity within other practices.

Theories of practice tend to focus on practices as entities, whereas the CHARM research focused on practices as performances. In the CHARM research we found that a practice frame sometimes corresponds with the way people organise their everyday lives, and this makes a practice frame useful for the research and analysis of social life. We also found that using a practice approach encouraged us to focus on meanings and material things; and this too proved useful in the research.

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[2] Southerton, D. (2006),'Analysing the temporal organisation of daily life: Social constraints, practices and their allocation', *Sociology*, 40 (3): 435-54

Although meanings and things are important in shaping what people do, our research suggests that much of what people do is shaped by factors that are sometimes neglected in practice approaches: personal preferences and negotiations between individuals. There is a need for further research – particularly into the way practices are carried and reproduced and the ways in which people talk about, organise and negotiate practices in their everyday lives.