

Sustainability Social Practices Policy

A brief introduction
and overview to the
Sustainable Practices
Research Group

Social Practices and Sustainable Consumption

Climate change raises a critical challenge for contemporary societies, one that requires reduction of the resource-intensity of everyday ways of life, and its patterns and trajectories of consumption. The SPRG has developed a distinctive perspective for exploring consumption, one that starts from the premise that patterns of consumption are a consequence of the social organisation of practices.

This simple observation reframes the ways we analyse and understand consumption in two ways. First, it brings to the fore that resources are consumed in order to facilitate social practices. Second, it places practices and their social organisation at the heart of analysis – as opposed to focusing primarily on commodities, services, or the discretionary attitudes of sovereign consumers.

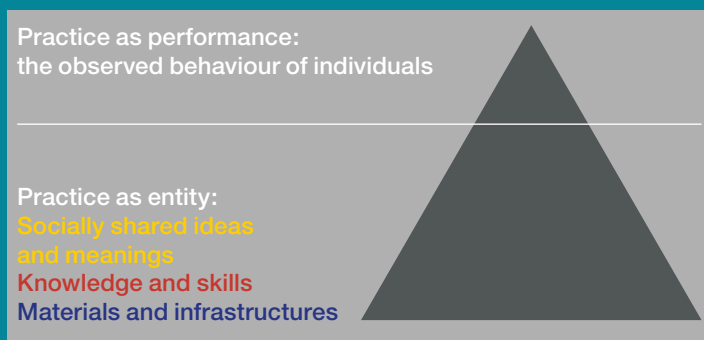


Fig. 1 Individual behaviour is just the tip of the iceberg: the observable performance of socially shared practices

Practices can be understood as 'blocks of activities' that people share. That practices are shared highlights that most practices require the co-participation of others to be performed satisfactorily (e.g. meals, sports). For the SPRG, the more important inference of 'shared' is that social practices are recognisable entities because sufficiently large numbers of people perform them either at the same time (e.g. rush hour commuting) or in broadly similar ways (e.g. the laundry). It is through shared social practices that patterns and trajectories of consumption are formed and rendered meaningful and, as a consequence, are faithfully and routinely reproduced by people in their day-to-day lives.

Distinguishing between practices as performances and entities is important. Recognising practices as entities highlights the critical point that all practices have a history, are socially patterned (across different cultural groups), and have trajectories of change. Put a different way, the SPRG's research shows that 'normal' ways of performing social practices are dynamic, evolving and contingent.

The social organisation of shared practices involves various elements. These make blocks of activities recognisable as practices, even to those people who do not necessarily perform those practices. One does not need to drive a car to recognise that driving exists as a practice and understand what material resources, skills and procedures (knowing

how to read road signs and operate a car) and meanings ('convenience' or 'personal freedom') are involved in its performance.

We can identify three generic elements that represent the basic conditions for the existence of any social practice:

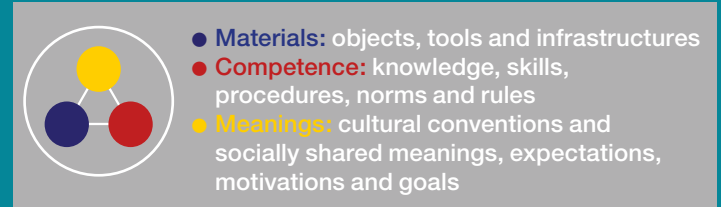


Fig. 2 Social practices are made up of different kinds of elements: materials, competence and meaning.

Introducing the idea of generic elements opens up a third sense in which we can describe social practices as shared: many practices share elements. For example, transport infrastructures do not only affect the practice of driving but also practices of shopping, cycling, holidaying; competencies are transferable across different practices, for instance sporting techniques or knowledge of how to use digital technologies; and meanings, such as those related to conventions of cleanliness, are shared across body and clothes washing practices. That many practices share elements highlights the potential for change in one element to shift a whole suite of inter-connected social practices.

Technological efficiencies are one aspect of reducing the resource-intensity of consumption. The social practice perspective, however, highlights that technology is only one element of social practices. To realise the sustainability gains offered by efficient technologies often requires changes to other elements of the practice. Equally, changes in individuals' behaviour are necessary. However, the social practice perspective foregrounds how individual behaviour is embedded in socio-economic, cultural and material contexts. It is these contexts, rather than individual choices, that primarily determine the trajectories of social practices: whether more people perform certain practices, or their frequency and duration, or whether more or less resource-intensive versions of practices are adopted.

It is these conundrums that lead the SPRG to its four guiding research questions:

- | How and why do practices emerge, spread and become normal?
- | How and why do practices persist, change and disappear?
- | How and why do practices vary across space and between social groups?
- | How can more sustainable practices be encouraged?

The SPRG does not attempt to find universal answers to the problems it identifies or produce a unified model of change that can be applied across whole categories of practice. Rather, we seek to identify the critical, and context-specific, processes that result in resource-intensive patterns of everyday consumption.

How and why do practices emerge, spread and become normal?

The 'Keeping Cool' project reveals the processes through which 'keeping cool' has increasingly come to be a normal expectation in a variety of indoor environments—including hospitals, offices and hotels—by analysing multiple practices, such as nursing, IT design, office work and hospitality management. The 'need' for air conditioning in many cases was not to keep people cool. Rather, keeping office and hospital technologies cool were amongst many practice-specific justifications of the 'need' for air conditioning. Keeping cool is being engineered into our built environment in a way that is standardising indoor climates and, in doing so, is coming to shape a wide range of social practices as increasingly energy-intensive.

The SPRG also explored the creation of new environmental standards for UK homes. By 2016 new homes will have to be 'zero carbon'—as specified by a standard calculating their net carbon emissions. The 'Zero Carbon Living' project revealed how processes of standardisation can constrain changes in practice. The project shows that the standard 'zero carbon' has become defined as certification of efficiency measures at one moment in time. This 'moment' takes today's 'normal' ways of living as its benchmark, but fails to consider that social practices are dynamic and, therefore, to imagine what future 'normal' social practices might be possible. This static understanding of everyday life is likely to reproduce current practices, rather than embracing the critical point that achieving low carbon living must be approached as an on-going achievement.

The 'Keeping Cool' and 'Zero Carbon Living' projects reveal processes through which cultural expectations and standards emerge and shape social practices. The finding that social practices are always dynamic and that what matters is understanding and explaining different rates and scales of change is an important insight from the SPRG's research.

How and why do practices persist, change and disappear?

This second question addresses those practices, often described as habitual behaviours, which appear stable and obstinate. 'Habit' is a rather generic term used to capture quite different aspects of human action – principally referring to acquired dispositions (and tastes), the following of particular procedures, and the performance of actions

in specific sequences or frequencies. The SPRG's work on habits shows that far from being the foibles of individuals' behaviour, habits and routines are the consequence of the social organisation of practices.

This finding is illustrated by the 'Changing Eating Habits' project, which compared contexts in which eating practices change in France, England and Scotland. Moments of transition within one's life, such as living with a new partner or moving into a different culinary culture, have an immediate impact on eating habits. However, while moments of transition for individuals could be identified, these shifts were most strongly shaped by broader cultural conventions, including patterns of sociability and the social norms associated with the host culinary culture (e.g. contrasting French and British lunch practices). Where shifts in the eating habits of individuals were detected, these were strongly shaped by adjustments to prevailing cultural conventions. Habits and routines of eating are more generally a matter of collective cultural conventions.

The 'Changing Eating Habits' project also considered the importance of cultural contexts for understanding changes in shopping habits and practices. In France, establishing a locally sourced, independent food retailer proved successful in changing some habits in ways supporting more sustainable eating patterns, because it complemented established food shopping practices. A similar scheme in Scotland did not have such an effect. This can be explained by the more radical change in shopping practices required in the highly commercialised context of Scottish food retailing, dominated by large supermarkets. This example reveals the power of cultural contexts in producing critical variations in the organisation of social practices.

How and why do practices vary over space and between social groups?

The SPRG project on 'Drinking Water' investigated how practices of water drinking have come to take on their particular form over time in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Comparing bottled water drinking in the UK, Germany, Italy, India, Mexico and Taiwan revealed the diverse interactions between natural, socio-economic and political systems in shaping the practice. Culturally specific social practices are shaped and directed through institutional legacies that include how resources are provisioned, regulated, and with respect to rights over access.

The stark contrast between those countries which have clean tap-water provision and those that do not, only partially explains the very different patterns of bottled water drinking found across the countries studied. Italy, for example, consumes over five times the amount of bottled water per person than the UK.

This is because of a lack of trust in the institutions that regulate public water provision—in Italy much bottled water consumption appears to substitute for tap water. In Germany there is high trust in tap water, but high consumption of carbonated bottled water as an alternative to soft drinks. Such variations in the practice directly effect understandings of what counts as more or less sustainable consumption. For instance, in the UK bottled water has been the focus of criticism on grounds of sustainability. In Delhi, however, bottled water often provides basic water provision, while in Mexico City tap water is incredibly energy-intensive.

Practices also vary across social groups. The ‘Patterns of Water’ project developed an innovative quantitative methodology for analysing how water-using practices vary. By analysing how people perform a range of practices, this project used cluster analysis techniques to identify groupings of water-practitioners. Clustering around different ways of performing the same practice – whether showering, doing the laundry or gardening – provides a unique method for segmenting consumers according to what they do, not just the amounts of water that they consume or what their attitudes and values are. Taking such an approach reveals what practices and which social groupings of ‘practitioners’ can most effectively be targeted to either reduce the water consumption embedded in practices or avert particular social groups from developing water-intensive practices.

How can more sustainable practices be encouraged?

Social practices are changing all the time. Many of these changes depend on more resource consumption that greater technological efficiencies alone are unlikely to mitigate. This brings us face to face with the really big issues about how society changes. What new practices are emerging? Which practices are in decline? And what do these trends mean for consumption in total?

The practice perspective developed through the SPRG’s empirical research re-frames how we think about consumption and behaviour, moving analysis away from the discretionary preferences, choices and lifestyle attitudes of individual consumers and firmly towards a focus on what people do (social practices) and how that doing is socially organised.

The ‘Interventions for Sustainability’ project summary briefing outlines the implications for policy that emerge from an application of social practice thinking. More generally, our research shows that a practice perspective helps dissect the complexity of everyday life, and does so by providing insights into the many ways in which practices are connected. It is these connections between practices that offer the greatest potential sites for encouraging more sustainable practices.

The following diagram illustrates three principal forms of connection between practices – or elements of practices

– that policy might target to (a) encourage wholesale shifts in ways of performing everyday life, together with the (b) scale and extent of potential change, and (c) what the key challenges for policy are.

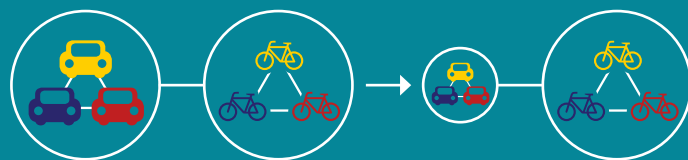
Recrafting practices



Reduce the resource intensity of existing practices through changing the elements that make up those practices.

- (a) The interdependence between practice elements (materials, skills, meanings)
- (b) The scale and spread of the practice stays stable
- (c) How can policy makers intervene in practice elements?

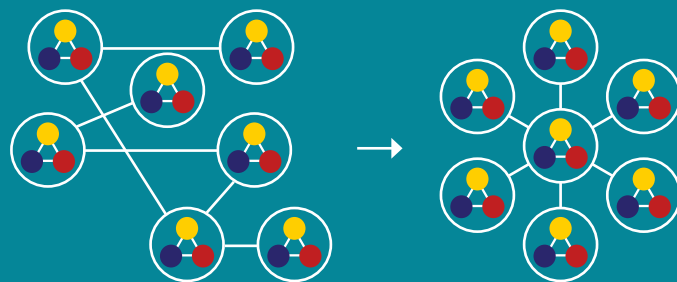
Substituting practices



Replace less sustainable practices with more sustainable alternatives.

- (a) The interactions between substitutable practices
- (b) One practice shrinks and another grows
- (c) What substitutable practices exist and how might policy engender competition between them?

Changing how practices interlock



Harness the complex interactions between practices – e.g. eating, mobility, habitation – to shift practice trajectories

- (a) How practices interlock with one another
- (b) The shape and scale of multiple practices change at once
- (c) How can policy intervene in interlocking practices? What are the limitations?

The SPRG’s research reveals that to meet the critical challenge of reducing the resource-intensity of everyday lives will require systematic and concerted attention to all three forms of connection. The SPRG’s practice perspective provides the tools to address the most complex of these forms of connection—changing how social practice interlock—offering opportunities for significant change.

The SPRG consists of seven research projects:

Changing eating habits – an international comparison

Alan Warde & Isabelle Darmon (The University of Manchester).

**Consumers, markets and institutions –
the case of bottled water**

Mark Harvey & Adrian Evans (Essex University).

Keeping cool – expectations and infrastructures

Elizabeth Shove, Gordon Walker & Sam Brown
(Lancaster University).

**Patterns of water – difference and change in
domestic consumption**

Ben Anderson (Southampton University), Alison Browne
(The University of Manchester), Will Medd & Martin Pullinger
(Lancaster University).

Living in zero carbon homes – an international comparison

Simon Guy, Andy Karvonen, Graeme Sheriff (The University
of Manchester) & Gordon Walker (Lancaster University).

Theoretical integration and application

Andrew McMeekin, Nicola Spurling & Dale Southerton
(The University of Manchester).

Engagement, interaction and influence

Sarah Parry, Fraser Stewart (The University of Edinburgh)
& Joseph Murphy (University of Glasgow).

And four Fellowships:

**Intermediaries and the meso-level restructuring
of new practices**

Simon Marvin (Durham University) & Mike Hodson
(Salford University).

On the margins of consumerism

Lucie Middlemiss (University of Leeds).

Sustainable communities, social enterprise and local food

Julie Newton & Alex Franklin (Cardiff University).

Practices in discounting future benefits and food choice

George Hutchinson (Queens University Belfast), Susan Chilton
(Newcastle University) & Morten Lau (Durham University).

**For further details please visit www.sprg.ac.uk
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