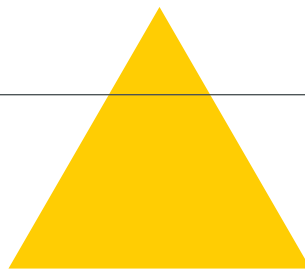


Interventions for Sustainable Practices

The prospects for interventions to stimulate pro-environmental behaviour change have climbed the sustainability policy agenda over the past decade. The SPRG aims to contribute to these debates by considering the significance of taking social practices as a ‘new site’ for policy intervention. Insights are derived from three pillars of the SPRG’s research programme: the policy implications of the SPRG’s empirical research; a historical study of policy interventions and behaviour change in the case of road safety; and two reports—an international review of pro-environmental behaviour change initiatives commissioned by the Scottish Government, and an SPRG report reflecting on how a practice perspective would provide additional opportunities for intervention to those advocated in prominent policies on driving, food and sustainable housing.

Observed behaviour of individuals

Cultural conventions, shared meanings, know-how and embodied understanding, and materials & infrastructures



Individual behaviour is usually the performance of shared social practices

Insights

- | Reviewing 30 international pro-environmental behaviour change initiatives showed that those aiming to change individual decisions through information-based campaigns were less successful than those that simultaneously addressed social and material contexts (targeting social norms and cultural conventions and/or new infrastructures).
- | UK sustainability policy initiatives in the areas of driving (The King Review¹) eating (Food 2030²) and housing (Code for Sustainable Homes³) have a principal focus on either technological fixes or on individual consumer attitudes, choices and behaviours. Adopting a practice approach to these domains provides an alternative framing for policy. The approach develops three ways to extract ‘sites for intervention’ from the complexity of everyday life: 1) the elements that comprise a single practice (e.g. driving) – meanings, materials and skills; 2) competition between potentially substitutable practices (e.g. driving or cycling); 3) the manner in which practices inter-lock (e.g. connections between driving, working and shopping practices).
- | The history of road safety provides insights into the variety of interventions that have contributed to the changing character of driving as a practice. From the mid 1940s, engineering solutions in road construction and vehicle design dominated. Behaviour change policies, such as encouraging the use of seat-belts or deterring drink driving, formed one aspect of a broader approach. In the case of seatbelts, behaviour change initiatives were politically contentious, and only legitimised when debates were reframed in terms of public goods (health budgets), rather than personal choice. Improved road safety should be viewed as the long-term achievement of a sequence of interventions, which have shaped but not determined the evolution of driving as a practice.

1 King J. (2007) The King Review of low-carbon cars. Part I: the potential for CO₂ reduction. HM Treasury.

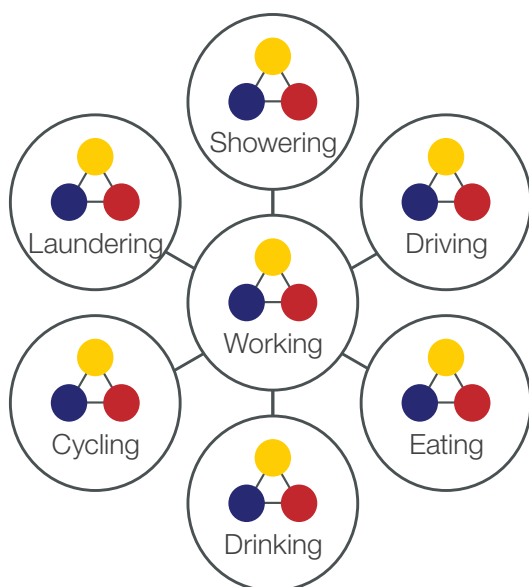
2 Defra. (2010) Food2030. Available at: <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/pdf/food2030strategy.pdf>


3 Department for Communities and Local Government (2010) Code for Sustainable Homes: technical guidance. Available at: www.gov.uk

Significance

- | Focusing on social practices highlights that everyday life is dynamic—in a state of constant flux—and what matters are the rates (fast and slow), scale (international, local, etc.) and direction (more or less sustainable) of change. A practice approach offers different, and instructive, explanations of such processes of change and insights into possible ‘sites’ of policy intervention.
- | The sites developed in our work are: the elements that comprise a single practice (meanings, materials and skills), which might be re-crafted to make existing practices more sustainable; the competition between potentially substitutable practices which might be harnessed by policy to encourage a shift to more sustainable alternatives; and the interconnections of multiple practices, whereby a focal practice might be changed through intervening in those practices with which it interlocks.
- | Social practices are made up of interconnected elements: materials, competence, and meanings.
- | Practice approaches are significant in this respect. They offer novel methodologies for gathering data that can be used to understand the prospects for intervention in specific situations. Such data can be used to consider, monitor and aid reflection about ongoing flows of interventions and how they might accumulate into desirable outcomes.

Social practices interlock with each other



 Social practices are made up of interconnected elements: **materials**, **competence**, and **meanings**

Implications for Policy and Practice

Policy interventions into sustainable consumption should be re-framed through a social practice perspective, which takes shared social practices as the units of analysis and sites of intervention. This contrasts with intervening in behaviour, consumer choice, or technology alone. Such a re-framing would lead to greater recognition that:

- | Systematic and co-ordinated, rather than piecemeal, approaches to intervention are necessary, that take account of the connections within, between and across practices.
- | Interventions are more effective in multiple forms that address the different ‘elements’ of which practices are composed—meanings, materials and skills—and the interconnections between practices.
- | Habitual and contextual factors are of greater significance in shaping everyday consumption than is the deliberate exercising of individual consumer choice.
- | Policies require a dynamic vision of a more sustainable future rather than a vision of the future as a more sustainable version of the present. Interventions should be based on imagining new ‘normal’ configurations of social practices rather than modifications of current normalities.
- | Practices are always changing, whether or not there are deliberate interventions seeking to influence them. Since such ‘trajectories of practice’ already exist it makes sense to ask how they might be guided in more sustainable directions, rather than designing one-off interventions.
- | This suggests a new evidence-base is required, one focused on accounting for varieties of interconnected practices. This will require analysis of ‘systems’ of practices and the ways in which they are provisioned.

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