

Intervening in Practice

A Project Concept Note for Applying Practice Theory

Project goals

There are two-related goals for this project:

- to contribute to shifting household food-related practices in order to reduce their impact on climate change;
- more generally, to pilot a practice-informed approach to household sustainability-focused project design and implementation that generates useful learning of how practice theory might be applied and with what effect.

Desired outcomes

The desired outcomes therefore are:

- changes in food practices of participating households that result in:
 - less household food waste
 - less meat and dairy consumption
 - more energy-efficient cooking methods
 - fewer food miles
 - smaller kitchen appliances
- lessons from what worked and what did not work in relation to the above, and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of this particular project in relation to practice theory, and of practice theory as applied in this particular project.

Project description

The project comprises a series of related interventions which seek to change provisioning, eating, cooking and food storage practices. From our discussions, it was felt that this was where the real difference between approaches based on practice and behaviour change theories come to the fore.

The proposed interventions revolve around providing competitively-priced 'ready-to-be-prepared meals' in shops that are easily accessible to people coming home from places of work or education. These 'ready-to-be-prepared meals' would include the recipe and all the ingredients required for making the dish, possibly collected together in a bag or container that could be brought back to the shop for re-use, with a discount on the next meal. The recipe would be for a meal that could be cooked with or without meat, with the meat option reflecting the increased cost of that choice. The meat offered would likely be of less carbon-intensive types (e.g. lamb or chicken), and possibly sourced when near to its end-date in order to encourage quick but fresh consumption at a reasonable price. Bags or containers would be for one, two or four people, so that meals could be bought to cater for other household sizes (3, 5, 6 etc).

Shoppers would have the choice of a limited number of popular recipes, created by well-known chefs that would change on a regular basis to provide variety and to incorporate local seasonal produce. Each recipe would meet the following criteria:

- it can be used to prepare either a vegetarian or meat dish;
- it relies on commonly available vegetables, appropriate to the season;
- the vegetarian version for one person costs no more than £1.50 (at 2009 prices) all in;
- it takes 15 minutes for a reasonably competent cook to prepare the food, and no longer than 30 minutes for a new cook;
- it takes a maximum of 40 minutes to cook the meal;
- preparation and cooking instructions draw on the most energy-efficient methods and the equipment likely to be available in kitchens used by people less interested in cooking;
- all cooking jargon is explained.

Printed on recycled paper, these recipes would be supplemented by youtube and/or i-phone application-type 'how to' films (preferably created by the relevant celebrity chef who provides the information in accessible and enjoyable formats), which would help guide even novice cooks through the cooking process. More competent cooks would not need to engage with this level of instruction.

Ideally a number of celebrity chefs would be recruited to create and endorse the 'ready-to-be-prepared meal' concept in order to appeal to a range of tastes and styles. The aim would be to sell the idea as the modern and convenient way to shop for -- and prepare -- food, not to 'moralise' it.

One approach would be to integrate the concept of ready-to-be-prepared meals into existing food retail outlets in areas with high levels of footfall, for example near schools, businesses, residential areas, town centres or transport nodes, as well as motorway services. However, a more ambitious approach might be to create some form of franchise that combined shop and cafeteria-style facilities (though the style of this would be appropriate to the neighbourhood in which the particular outlet was located) to allow customers to eat the same meal, but prepared on-site. This would cater for those who do not want to cook, as well as allowing for in-person cooking lessons to improve the skills of those who do. Opening an outlet for ready-to-be-prepared meals on school grounds at times when children are being picked up might provide further scope for building practice competence, depending on how such a scheme was developed.

Project rationale

A number of issues related to greenhouse gas emissions arising from food-related practices at household level informed the design of this project. These included:

- high levels of food waste, particularly from fresh produce, that both creates carbon emissions in their production and greenhouse gases in its decomposition;
- the large carbon footprints of imported (particularly air-freighted) and/or non-seasonal produce;
- the carbon-intensity of meat and dairy consumption.

Through an examination of the practices of food provisioning, storage, cooking, eating and food disposal, weekly shopping was identified as a potential cause of high levels of food waste. A lack of forward planning, the relative unpredictability of household movements or food desires, and fixed quantities of certain food stuffs sold in supermarkets mean that provisions purchased are unlikely to be an ideal fit with what is needed/wanted for the week's meals. In other words, people cook 'meals', but often buy 'ingredients' in whatever quantities they are sold, or else ready-prepared food high in packaging.

The idea underlying the proposed project is therefore to change household provisioning practices from buying a range of goods or a ready-made meal to buying the right level of ingredients necessary for a particular recipe. Rather than expecting people to be able to make this change themselves, the intervention makes it easy by ensuring the availability of a retail outlet selling (evening) meals in fixed quantities of ingredients. One of the assumptions is that this would encourage people to pick up their 'meal' on the day of intended use, when they know who will be eating so that the right amount of ingredients would be bought. Moreover, the difference in price between the vegetarian and meat options would, it is expected, disincentivise meat eating. Finally, the meals would be designed to require a minimum of cooking, both for convenience purposes and to reduce energy consumption.

Limitations of outline format

The format of this project outline draws on the relatively standard logical framework approach (and the rational cause-effect assumptions that suffuse it) which often, at least superficially, informs development programme design. Perhaps outlining expected changes in the materiality and conduct of practices, and in the associated meanings and competencies -- as we considered in the design workshop - would have been more true to the social practices approach, together with more explicit acknowledgement of how the dynamism and emergent nature of social practices may effect implementation, its planning and monitoring.