

Doing it yourself? Products, competence and meaning in the practices of DIY

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Abstract

DIY is an analytically complex phenomenon. It can simultaneously figure as leisure and work, and as consumption (of materials and tools) and production (of changes to the home). Analysis of the technology and practice of DIY allows us to engage with significant, but relatively unexplored themes that are nonetheless important for theorising consumption. This paper focuses on three such themes.

First, consideration of motivations to undertake DIY projects highlights the extent to which consumption practices emerge from and are conditioned not only by cultural expectations, identity, aspirations and the market, but also by the material and practical contexts of everyday life. Secondly, exploration of the array of tools and materials brought together to realise DIY projects presents specific challenges for understanding how consumer goods come to count as useful. Thirdly, we explore the role of competence in accomplishing a DIY project, highlighting how competences are distributed between user and products, how developments in this area shape the realm of DIY consumption, bringing new projects within the reach of amateurs and making traditional tasks easier and faster. We conclude by reflecting on the significance of our DIY analysis for theories of 'ordinary' consumption.

Introduction

This paper emerges from preliminary analysis of data collected in the course of empirical work on 'Do-It-Yourself' (DIY) – the accomplishment of home maintenance and improvement by householders without professional help. This empirical work has involved a series of open interviews, primarily with DIY 'practitioners' but also with representatives of DIY-related industries, which together form one case study in a broader research project.¹ Reflecting its preliminary character, the arguments are exploratory and certainly open to much refinement, if not contestation. Nevertheless, together they highlight the theoretical potential that comes from engagement with DIY; and in so doing draw attention to the existing under-theorisation of the complex relationality through which objects shape and are shaped by everyday life. In so doing, we open one route to reflecting on what it means to add material and stuff, in the context of everyday practices, to theories of consumption.

For the purposes of their market research, Mintel defined DIY as "repairs or additions to the home or garden, including installing a new bathroom or kitchen, central heating, putting up shelves, fixing a fence, building a barbecue etc.", which was treated together with the separate category of 'decorating' - "internal and external painting, staining or wallpapering" (Mintel 2005). DIY represents a substantial and steadily growing cultural phenomenon in the UK, with attendant growth in the market which serves it. Around 62% of the UK adult population claim to participate in DIY (Mintel 2003; 2005), and it is estimated to have accounted for around 13% of the time spent on house related activities in 2000 (ONS 2001).² The market, currently worth around £12 billion per year in the UK, has been growing at a steady rate of around 7-8% per year since the late 1990s (Mintel 2003; 2005). DIY sits in complex position in relation to some of the central categories through which social science cuts up the world. As the booming trade figures indicate, doing DIY certainly involves consumption. At the same time, through materially transforming domestic space, and often seeking to enhance property value, DIY can be seen also as production. For many, DIY is a form of leisure, at least some of the time, whilst for others it is work. However, DIY has received little attention from academic social science.

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² cf., for example, c.60% on cleaning, c.15% on gardening (ONS 2001)

Filling gaps – literature on DIY and the work of consumption

A search of academic bibliographic databases does little to help basic understanding of what specifically counts as DIY. 'DIY' crops up in references repeatedly in relation to fields such as law, health and IT maintenance, or in relation to anti-corporate counter culture. These metaphoric applications of the term do serve to highlight the basic characteristic of DIY which makes it an interesting empirical site for testing theories of consumption. Across different fields of activity the term is used to refer to people providing for themselves services which they could otherwise (be expected) to pay a professional to do. However, as reflected in dictionary definitions, the term conventionally refers specifically to accomplishing home maintenance or modification tasks without the paid services of a professional, and it is this field of activity which is the focus of this paper. Across history and cultures, people of course have maintained and modified their own homes, but the term 'DIY', and the possibility of bounding a field of activity as a referent for that term, is historically and culturally specific. Whilst the phrase Do-It-Yourself has been found cropping up as early as 1912 in a US advertisement, and reaching common currency in the 1950s (Gebler 1997), the unproblematic relation of the phrase to a definite group of activities, and certainly its shortening to 'DIY' seems particular to the UK in the late 20th century. For example, although lifelong and second generation 'DIYers', a couple from the United States, respondents for this project, had never heard the term before leaving the US.³ The near invisibility of 'DIY' in bibliographic databases reflects not just this linguistic specificity, but a broader relative neglect of this field of activity by the social sciences, despite its scale as a social phenomenon. This is not to say that the neglect is complete. The following paragraphs review the existing literature, before drawing out three key themes on which we focus.

A number of statisticians have paid attention to DIY and home maintenance and improvement behaviours, based on rational choice modelled analysis of large data sets such as the American Housing Survey (Pollakowski 1988; Bogdon 1996; Baker and Kaul 2002) and the Scottish House Condition Survey (Littlewood and Munro 1996). These analyses provide useful background on generic correlates of decisions to undertake home improvements and whether or not to employ someone to do it. For example, Pollakowski (1988) finds a complex relation between income and the likelihood of a household undertaking DIY, but a strong correlation with age, and that renovations are most likely to be undertaken by a recent mover (Bogdon 1996). Bogdon (1996) finds household composition a major determinant of the likelihood of a household taking on DIY, with multiple adult households most likely to undertake it, single parent families the least likely, as well as finding that people are more likely to take on a contractor where projects are of larger scale, complexity or risk. Baker and Kaul (2002) highlights the significant relationship of changes to household composition with the likelihood of home remodelling.

Such studies, dependent on statistical analysis of secondary mostly quantitative data across huge samples, certainly indicate broad trends and conditions. However, they do not take us far in understanding DIY as a field of practice embedded in everyday life. Motivations for undertaking DIY which fit poorly into such analyses, such as the enjoyment gained from undertaking it, or the fear of hiring a bad tradesperson, find little more than passing mention. Neither do

³ The Compact Oxford English Dictionary and the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary identify 'DIY' as British/UK.

significant themes such as the role of DIY in divisions of household labour. But here too, the neglect of DIY and related issues by social science does not extend to complete absence. Munro and Leather (2000) explore homeowner's accounts of why they take on specific home maintenance and improvement tasks, framed in the problem of the declining condition of the British housing stock despite increasing home ownership. They do not address the decision over whether change is effected through DIY or by employing a contractor - the mode of provision of the change. But they highlight that those tasks which improve the home as a consumption good – providing comfort, relaxation and a context for social interaction – are prioritized substantially above those which enhance the property as an investment. Woodward (2003), also without addressing modes of provision, explores the basis of decisions over home decoration and presentation in affluent suburbs of Brisbane, Australia, finding contrasting discursive strategies, one prioritizing comfort and practicality, the other the pursuit of aesthetic coherence and distinction, which he relates to the complex role of home and its relation to the definition of self. With a similar focus on the pursuit of aesthetic ideals in the home as a project of self-identity, Clarke (2001) specifically addresses changes affected through DIY projects, arguing that the making of the home constitutes a process of attempting to reconcile who people are with their image of who and what they would like to be. From very different perspectives, the field of retail studies has produced analysis of DIY situational purchase decisions (Van Kenhove et al. 1999) and motivations, whilst Williams (2004) critically explores a narrowly defined debate about the balance of economic necessity and consumer agency in the decision to do-it-yourself. DIY has also cropped up in analysis of household divisions of labour, such as Nelson's (2004) exploration of 'how men matter' in the family economy; and in analysis of the consequences of American ideals of suburbia (Miller 1995).

So across a number of fields, progress has been made in comprehending the cultural location of DIY. Across the diverse approaches briefly outlined here, there is nevertheless an unsurprising dominant theme, with an overwhelming focus on the role of the *effects* achieved through DIY in mediating and maintaining relationships between people, whether it is in family relations within the household (Nelson 2004), construction and maintenance of self-identity and self-esteem (Clarke 2001; Woodward 2003), or broader constructions of space and identity (Miller 1995); or the effects of an already decided project on the mode of provision (Williams 2004) or on in store purchase decisions (Van Kenhove et al. 1999). But to us, the literature so far addressing DIY misses much of what is centrally fascinating about the phenomenon. What is noticeably missing from each of these accounts is the *doing* of DIY, the works, sweat, dust and frustration of mixing up bodies and their limitations with a diverse array of tools with which to transform a collection of materials to form the effect of a material change to the home, the product of labour. It is the *work*, of coordination of tools, materials, competence, confidence, body and the fabric of the home that places DIY at such a complex location in relation to the conventional boundaries of social scientific analysis, the boundaries between leisure and work, consumption and production, and ultimately between human and nonhuman.

Miller (1997) just begins to touch on the *process* of DIY as itself transformative:

The transformation of kitchens was regarded as a positive move that changed the relationship from one of alienation from 'council things' to one of a sense of belonging within a home *created from one's own labour*. (Miller 1997: 17, emphasis added)

But historian Steven Gebler gets closer to these central themes than do sociologists and anthropologists observing contemporary DIY, in his analysis of

the emergence and embedding do-it-yourself in models of masculine domesticity in the US through early to mid 20th century. Gebler (1997) highlights the role of tools, skill and the very ambiguity of do-it-yourself as at once leisure and work, as central themes through which the activities, tools and spatialisation of DIY enabled the negotiation of coherent masculinity into the increasing cultural requirement for men to play an active role in the home from the end of the 19th century.

The general neglect of the doing of DIY, of the tools, materials and competence to tackle tasks, rather than the symbolic meaning of the effects sought, reflects broader characteristics of dominant approaches to the study of consumption. As it has rapidly developed over the last two decades, consumption studies has explored many dimensions of the relations between consumption and contemporary society, from the construction and maintenance of boundaries of social class to the bricolage of postmodern personal identities, consumer culture to consumer citizenship. Strangely neglected is the actual *work* of consumption – how consumer products are brought into relation with one another and the existing fabric of the home, and the established norms and practices of everyday life.

Below, we therefore explore a series of analytical issues emerging from consideration of DIY, which cast light on central aspects of the work of consumption. First, we explore motivations for undertaking DIY projects highlighting the extent to which consumption practices emerge from and are conditioned not only by cultural expectations, identity, aspirations and the market, but also by the changing material and practical contexts of everyday life. Secondly, exploration of the array of tools and materials brought together to realise DIY projects presents specific challenges for understanding how consumer goods come to count as useful, revealing usefulness as an effect of the relations between things and with people which exist in the doing of practices like DIY. Thirdly, we explore the role of competence in accomplishing a DIY project. We highlight how key innovations in DIY products have served to re-distribute the skill demanded to accomplish a task, typically from the user to the product, bringing new projects within the reach of amateurs and making tasks easier and faster. We conclude by reflecting on the significance of our DIY analysis for theories of 'ordinary' consumption.

Why DIY?

Given the limited engagement of academic social science with DIY, one of the main existing sources of intelligence on the field is the market research of Mintel (e.g. Mintel 2005). Finding that over a quarter of adults claim to enjoy DIY, with 8% identifying DIY as a hobby, the report puzzles over why people prefer to spend time on the labours of DIY rather than more obvious leisure pursuits, highlighting that it exists as a leisure activity even for those able to afford to employ someone else to do the work (Mintel 2005). Motivations for undertaking DIY are indeed diverse. Common wisdom on the side of industry and retail is that the growth the DIY market has seen since the late 1990s has been the result of a buoyant housing market combined with the rise of television home makeover and property development shows.

"Well the big thing with the DIY market is that it all came at once, the TV programmes, massive house price movement so people are moving house at the same time, so there was a massive boom."

(respondent, B&Q stock manager)

Property investment concerns and the influence of TV interior shows have certainly emerged as influences on DIYers spoken to in the process of our research.⁴ It is striking how these two motivations resonate with conventional but conflicting framings of the consumer, as either hero or dupe (Slater 1997). Seeking to maximise the market value of one's property through improvements measured against investment return is a classic example of the rational utility maximisation which defines the model of consumer at the heart of neo-classical economics:

"the sphere of consumption itself takes on some of the characteristics of commercial life: working out how to maximise retirement income, treating one's home as a business investment and so on." (Keat and Abercrombie 1991; quoted in Slater 1997: 38)

Conversely, pursuit of aspirations formed and disseminated by the mass media and served and fuelled by massive retail corporations rings of the manipulated, passive subject of market forces that characterised models of the consumer implied by the critical approaches to mass consumption which dominated social scientific engagement with consumption through much of the twentieth century. However, motivations for DIY can also be identified with a third model of the consumer emerging from postmodern approaches to consumption, as manipulator of the symbolic resources afforded by commodities, under which DIY can be a means to realising effects which convey individuality and self-identity (Woodward 2003).

Each of these models of the consumer, with their corresponding explanation of why someone would undertake DIY, are deeply partial. Indeed, the relation of such models to DIY is problematic. In DIY, just what is being consumed? For each of the three models outlined, the emphasis is on the effect being achieved, whether it is to improve the market value of the property, to meet media inspired aspirations of interior decoration or express individuality. Such effects are essentially independent of the mode of provision through which they are realised – given the means, the householder could equally employ tradesmen as do it themselves. If then it is the material effect which is ultimately being 'consumed', DIY is revealed as part of the process of production. The question of why people DIY necessarily then has to go beyond established models of the consumer.

A range of accounts exist to fill the explanatory gap of why people DIY. Williams (2004) identifies a traditional assumption in retail studies to be that DIY is a rational response to an inability to pay for external labour, essentially fitting the model of rational consumer. However, as is repeatedly highlighted (Bogdon 1996; Williams 2004; Mintel 2005) inability to pay under-determines the decision to DIY. Our interviews have however highlighted the complexity at stake here, with some respondents who clearly have the means to employ a contractor, but feel unable to afford to employ someone to achieve the distinctive and innovative solutions to which they aspire and which they can achieve themselves.

⁴ Data collection has involved open interviews with 11 DIYers (6 male, 5 female, including range of household compositions and ages from early 20s to 70s). Interviews typically involved tours of respondents' homes to look at completed, in progress and aspirational projects and tasks, as well as rummaging through tool boxes etc. Interviews have also been conducted with representatives of design, industry and retail. Interviews have been complemented with observation trips around DIY stores and documentary analysis of sales and instructional materials.

Respondents K and J, a young couple renovating a small flat in central London exemplify this, with their innovative designs and solutions more than in their talk:

MW So when did you start doing DIY?

K When we realised we couldn't afford anything that we really liked. And also, the stuff that you do pay more for its not something that we like anyway.

However, even taking into account that inability to pay for improvement work varies with the nature of the householder's aspirations as well as ability to pay, household economics is not a sufficient explanation of why people DIY. Another key negative drive to DIY is fear of the difficulties of finding a tradesperson to do the work, or of getting a botch job or ripped off, have also emerged in our research, whether as reluctant DIYers taking on whatever they feel capable to do to minimise engagement with tradespeople through to the self-confidence, as expressed by respondent M, that "no-one can do a better job than me".

Such accounts can begin to explain decisions to DIY. Still missing though is any significant consideration of the processes and constituents of DIY itself in motivating someone to undertake it. Falling between the cracks of analytical dualisms of consumption and production, work and leisure, appreciation of many basic attributes of DIY are neglected. There is no space for the pleasures, challenges, satisfaction and frustrations of tackling DIY tasks and projects is missed, or the pleasure of interaction with tools and materials. Neither is there room to reflect on the seemingly autotelic nature of DIY as a single project itself entails unforeseen pre-requisites; and in turn presents new projects as changes to the fabric of the house make new possibilities appear.

Grand Design or muddling through?

The focus of existing analysis on the effects sought and achieved misses the very processes through which DIY projects emerge. Some DIYers can, retrospectively at least, articulate the history of the work within their home as the realisation of a grand design. However DIY projects often emerge from the ongoing conversation between a changing household - its composition, routines, accumulation of possessions, etc - and the fabric of the property. For example, respondent W, who lives in an early 20thC terraced house with his partner and two young children showed us an attic space he had done up as the children's bedroom. The overall project reflected how the changing needs of the children as they got older, and so able to be in a room more removed from their parents, could be fitted into the specificities of the house. The emergent character of projects becomes especially apparent with longer periods of residence, where the DIY history has continued beyond the initial flurry of work typical when first moving in to a property, where the birth of babies or the departure of grown children, changing financial situations, can provoke new projects, to make the home fit, not simply with the self-image of the occupants (Clarke 2001), but also with the practical exigencies of their everyday life. At times a DIY project might only be finally formed and realised as a result of a point event, such as the imminent arrival of guests, perhaps highlighting the need for order that some new shelving would enable.

However, it is not only at the level of planning a project that the emergent character of DIY practice is apparent. There can be few DIYers who have finished a project of any significance having gone through only the processes envisaged, using only the tools and materials planned, or perhaps even achieving quite the final effect anticipated from the start. Of course, for any one DIYer, some jobs will go exactly according to plan, but DIY is almost inherently exploratory, the complexity of coordination, between tools, materials, fixings and, often most

intractable and surprising, the existing fabric of the house, that contingencies will have to be dealt with along the way. Returning to W's attic bedroom, the specifics of the job, with implications for the tools, materials and competencies required, were themselves largely emergent from the iterative process of doing, reflecting and re-planning. Particularly prominent in the project was coping with an exposed roof timber running the length of the room at an ideal height for young children to bang their head. In consultation with both his partner and the children, the structure and layout of the room emerged through experimentation and reflection, resulting in only a small section of the timber being exposed, as an entrance to a cosy den space, another section of the timber being part of the structure of a fixed play house. The final shape of the play house, the size and location of its window, the closing mechanism of the door, were all formed along the way as W more or less stretched his carpentry competence to bring into some sort of coherent relation the bits of wood, nails and screws with the tools he had.

DIY work and projects can also emerge from the very process of DIY. Working to realise one planned effect, once commenced, so often reveals jobs that need to be completed before aspects of the planned project can be undertaken. But also, once completed, the realised effect can prompt new work. First this can take the form of matching. For respondent A, painting the downstairs walls meant that the old carpets in her new home had to be hastily taken up, as the clean plain walls made the carpets intolerable, despite previously being relatively inoffensive, at least in comparison to the floral wallpaper she had removed before painting. Secondly, the very unpredictability of what a DIY task will involve, and the inherently exploratory nature of an amateur tackling a range of jobs, means that DIY practitioners are frequently developing skills and confidence, and perhaps also extending their range of tools and stocks of materials, through taking on projects. Consequently, the process of realising a DIY project can change the conditions of possibility for the DIYer, by developing the DIYer's competence and confidence in the very process of changing the fabric of the house in ways which can enable new possible projects to emerge.

The consumption entailed in DIY cannot, then, be fully accounted for under models of the consumer as rational economic agent; nor passive dupe of the market; nor careful manipulator of symbols. It is plainly obvious that screws and rawlplugs, drill bits and wood glue are generally bought not for their inherent investment potential, as a result of cunning marketing nor for their semiotic potential; but rather as a means, in combination with much else, to accomplish a planned job of maintenance or transformation. However, perhaps more profoundly, it is clear that the job itself, the project of which it is part, cannot be adequately explained by these conventional models of the consumer. Of course conventional economic rationality can play a substantial part in particular project formulations; evidence can easily be found of market manipulation; and matters of self-identity and social distinction are certainly served by the effects realised by many projects. But ultimately many DIY projects, in their processes, the effects achieved, and even in their initial conceptualisation as a desirable and achievable, are emergent from the shifting relationship between households and their home, as the changing composition, routines, priorities, possessions, capabilities and competencies of the household have to be fitted into the basically intractable structure of a house.

DIY as 'craft consumption'

Considering how DIY projects, and the consumption they entail, are formed substantially in the doing does begin to bring the work of DIY more into focus. However, whilst at a more detailed and processural level, the discussion so far has still focussed on the effects of the work. Still missing is consideration of the work itself, not in its final material effects, but in its very processes. A recent

article by Campbell (2005) offers some light on embracing issues such as these in theorising consumption. Campbell offers the model of the 'craft' consumer as an alternative to the rational hero, passive dupe and postmodern symbolic manipulator. Craft consumption explicitly entails production, of a product 'made and designed by the same person', involving the application of 'skill, knowledge, judgement and passion' (Campbell 2005: 23). These characteristics are of course coherent with traditional notions of craft production, valorised by thinkers such as Marx, Veblen and Morris as authentic production expressive of humanity, standing in opposition to the alienating production processes of industrialisation. However, Campbell's craft consumption has a deliberately ambivalent relation to mass production, with the 'product' referring "to a creation that may itself consist of several items that are themselves mass-produced retail commodities" (Campbell 2005: 27). Campbell implies that craft consumption has boundaries that are problematic, with the mode of consumption depending on some measure of self-confidence, reflectivity, cultural capital and an essentially bourgeois desire for self-expression. As briefly considered in the conclusion, appreciation of practical knowledge and skill with which commodities are brought into relation with one another by the consumer may have more general applicability. However, for the time being we broadly accord with Campbell in identifying DIY as a field of consumption which inherently entails production, through the consumer's application of skill, knowledge and labour to creatively bring together and transform 'raw materials' including retail commodities to realise a 'product'.

Such a framing begins to make accessible what makes DIY something people end up doing with their weekends even if the effect pursued is not something they see as necessary, or could be achieved affordably by a paid professional; and even if the DIYer couldn't exactly say that they enjoy it. Amongst the accounts of DIY we have collected, some have situated their DIYing in an ethic of self-sufficiency inherited from their parents; in a desire to demonstrate to themselves and others basic capability; in the pleasure that comes from solving practical problems; in the recreational properties of physical labour transforming materials; in the satisfaction of competently using the right tool for the job, or a skill mastered, or a job done. Such 'craft' motivations are echoed in Gebler's (1997) historical analysis, which indicates that the arts and crafts movement of the late 19th century had a direct influence on redefining do-it-yourself in the US from a largely unwanted responsibility being increasing thrust on male householders to a desirable pass-time for a man, enabling release from alienated paid work through being a part-time craftsman.

In his exposition of craft consumption, Campbell (2005) highlights that it is an 'ensemble activity' (33) something which is immediately apparent when one reflects on DIY. Even some of the most basic and common DIY tasks, such as erecting a shelf, entails bringing together a substantial range of tools and materials, in proper relation to each other and to the existing fabric of the house. Once again, DIY challenges dominant approaches in consumption studies, which have typically focused on products in isolation. The next section explores the dependence of DIY consumption on contextually appropriate and skilled assembly of components and its implications for understanding the value and usefulness of commodities.

Assembling and situating: the tools and materials of DIY

To believe that the acquisition and ownership of consumer products represents the manipulation of the symbolic qualities of artefacts or the maintenance of social status is to reveal you have not had a rummage through someone's tool store. Admittedly, DIY retail spaces increasingly aim to provide inspiration and aspiration, with for example some new B&Q Warehouse outlets now having

showroom space of kitchens and bathrooms which alone cover an area as large as an entire DIY stores of a few years ago. However, a close look around the aisles still reveals that the majority of product lines carried are deeply mundane. The majority of purchases for DIY are pragmatic, driven by the exigencies of the overall project planned or underway. Screws, rawlplugs, fillers, abrasives, surface preparation products, electric cable, tap washers – whether in a store or in the mess of a tool box, most of the commodities visible are entirely useless unless brought together in appropriate relation with other artefacts in an active process of assembly.

DIY stores are increasingly good at helping the consumer, or researcher, understand in what relations particular commodities might become useful. A basic problem in DIY retail is that the majority of products have multiple potential uses, so it is impractical to display products together to form the ensemble needed to realise a project. The thousands of lines covered rather have to be organised according to a recognisable taxonomy, with an aisle of fixings, aisles of paint and so on, to give the shopper a chance of locating what they are looking for. However, whilst initial warehouse stores prioritised stacking high and selling cheap, they increasingly seek to situate products in relation to each other. At the most basic level there is a growing number of ready made kits of parts for common projects, such as putting up a shelf, including materials, fixings and instructions in a single pack. Alternatively, products properly from different parts of the store are brought together in a dedicated area of shelf to prompt purchase of the proper collection of parts for common projects. Information boards and free 'how to' leaflets highlight lists of 'what you need' together with an outline of the practical steps involved in affecting a particular project. Finally, DIY outlets are responding to long standing criticism by increasing the expertise and availability of staff, not least to be able to advise on the constituent parts of a project. In providing such information, DIY stores are also making available, to some extent, other essential components of a DIY project, seeking to instil on consumers some of the basic competence and confidence to take it on. Retail spaces themselves therefore reveal the practical *relationality* of the usefulness of the products they sell – that to be useful, most products have to be situated in proper relation, to other products, the materials and structures of the home, the competencies and capacities of the DIYer and so on.

However, more evocative of the contextuality of usefulness, and therefore the dynamism and fragility of it, is a DIYer's storage boxes or cupboards. Our research has seen a wide range of tool and material collections. At one extreme was respondent A's small toolbox with only the most generic tools, including screwdrivers, a claw hammer and a lump hammer, pliers and paint brushes, her only distinctive power tool a wallpaper remover. At the other extreme, seeing respondent B's tool collection involved touring 5 different spaces in her substantial town house, encompassing a number of tool boxes of hand tools complemented with just about every power tool a DIYer could want. Our tour finished in her cellar, where, thanks to the luxury of space, she is able to keep all of the tools and accessories she inherited from her father, some of which she could not confidently identify.

The contrast between these two collections highlights central aspects of usefulness. There can be few households that do not have a similar collection of tools to A, with hammers and screwdrivers both basic requisites of the most basic household maintenance. In the hammer and the screwdriver there are already distinctions in what constitutes usefulness. A hammer is useful because of its relative lack of dependence on specific technical complements - it can be used to

hit just about anything, and there will always be things which need hitting.⁵ Hammers share with most other common constituents of a household's toolbox, such as power drills, fixings such as nails and screws, filler, bits of spare wood an essential 'openness' to multiple uses, or a role in a wide range of potential projects. In contrast, screwdrivers have considerable technical dependency, each size and head pattern of screwdriver only being useful for its intended purpose with the appropriate screw, but screws of a limited range of sizes and designs are ubiquitous features of households, and screwdrivers are a cheap and easy to use means of tightening or loosening them. Consequently the screwdriver is thoroughly embedded *through* its technical dependency.

B's cellar collection shows how such dependency can lead to the demise of a tool's usefulness. In many a shed, cellar or attic there are tools which have no further function, tools with a specific relation to a technology no longer in use; or dependent on the existence of supply chains for necessary consumable, or service provision such as specific sharpening services. At the level of socio-technical systems, they are moribund, essentially useless. We could imagine that the flat blade screwdriver could similarly suffer from its technological dependency if, for some reason, slot headed screws ceased to be used, finally displaced by posidrive or allen sockets. However, a large flat bladed screwdriver, whilst technically dependent in its primary purpose, is a candidate for the most mis-used tool. An large screwdriver in A's toolbox had been used most to stand in for a bolster chisel while stripping tiles from a wall (with a claw hammer instead of a lump hammer, and swimming goggles in place of safety glasses). Such a screwdriver is almost as 'open' as a hammer, ensuring that it will remain useful even should slot headed screws somehow disappear.

While some tools have a general uselessness due to the degradation of the relationships which made them useful at a general socio-technical level, tools also pass into uselessness at the spatial level of households and the temporal scale of projects. K and J are undertaking extensive renovations, but have a limited range of carefully chosen tools. Their flat is very small, they have the benefit of a network of contacts undertaking similar scale renovations from whom they can borrow some tools; and it is likely that they will at some point leave the UK, so they are reluctant to accumulate bulky possessions. However, amongst their limited range of high quality power tools is a Bosch reciprocating saw. The saw was in frequent use, along with a wrecking bar, in the initial destructive phase of renovation, which included taking out a partition wall. However in the present, longer, stage of considered reconstruction, the relatively rough working and finger-threatening operation of the saw means it has not been used for a long time, and it does not make it to the short list of invaluable tools that K and J would take if they return home. Similarly A's wallpaper stripper, which she still sees as the tool with which she identifies most, currently sits idle, its floral wallpaper removal in this house completed.

The usefulness of tools is therefore deeply contextual, dependent on its location in relation to large scale socio-technical systems, down to small scale issues of appropriate assembly within the household, or the cycles of DIY projects undertaken according to phases of destruction and construction in renovation. Some iconic tools, such as a power drill or Leatherman-style multi tool, can undoubtedly play a useful role for their owner simply in their possession, and perhaps display, offering an image of capability to self and others even without

⁵ Of course, the bewildering diversity of hammers – pin, ball pein, claw, brick, club, lump, sledge, brick, scotch hammers, mallets, mells, etc – shows that there are considerable specificities for many hammers; but the ubiquitous claw hammer is nevertheless outstandingly versatile.

anything but the most occasional use. As such tools can be situated comfortably within accounts of commodities as symbolic resources. However for most DIY tools, it is ultimately in the *practice* of DIY that usefulness or its absence lies, dependent on the DIYer's ability to realise a potential use of a tool through the integrative work of *doing*. Consumption here is a matter of skilled and transformative work, ultimately dependent on the competence of the DIYer.

Competence

Recent years have seen a number of attempts to bring competence into understandings of consumption in the context of everyday life. Campbell (2005) stresses that skill, knowledge and judgement need to be brought to the processes of craft consumption. In bringing practice theories (Schatzki 2001; Reckwitz 2002) to bear on consideration of consumption, Warde (Warde 2005) touches on the significance of competence in enabling action and reproducing practices. Leadbeater and Miller (2004) place the satisfaction of acquiring skill and knowledge as one of the central attractions of 'pro-am' pastimes including serious DIY.

Our research on DIY raised questions on the location, or distribution, of competence in consumption related practices. Conventionally seen as a property of the human subject, the history of the co-evolution of DIY products and DIY practice indicates that competence is rather distributed between human DIYer and the tools and materials with which they engage to undertake DIY production. This is illustrated by the extent to which product innovation for DIY has been substantially about enabling amateurs to take on work which would otherwise have gone undone or contracted out to tradespeople:

product innovation continues apace, bringing new tasks within reach of the amateur DIY enthusiast and making traditional tasks faster. (Mintel 2003)

For example, a few decades ago, painting a panel door required that the painter knows the appropriate order in which to paint it and how to apply the paint without drags or drips. Today, the DIYer can choose fast drying non drip water based paints that 'know' how to go on to a door with an acceptable finish without requiring the same skill in the painter. With a framing of competence as a property of the human subject, this can be seen simply as a process of deskilling, and one actively resisted by professional painters and decorators who continue to use traditional gloss paints apparently in part because the final result, still distinctive from the more matt water based paints, demonstrates their skill. However, if competence is reframed as a distributed property, defined in relation to the task in hand, this can be seen not simply as de-skilling but as a redistribution of competence enabling a wider range of people to take on the task of painting a door.

The same process was exemplified in a detailed way in the case of plumbing. Respondent W had little experience of plumbing when he started the project of turning the attic room into a room for the children. However the plan of the room meant that a radiator needed moving. This presented itself as a job he might take on himself largely as a result of hearing of speedfit plumbing, a relatively new approach to plumbing based on plastic push-fit connections, removing the need for the plumber to assemble washers, couplings, solder etc in what is a critically skilled process, where failure can result in a leak. In a central heating system locating such a failure is likely to happen only after refilling the system, at which point the whole system has to be drained down and the leak, hopefully,

addressed. Speedfit promises to remove the need for the essential skills of traditional plumbing and offers the novice more confidence in making the joint. The speedfit plumbing was a necessary but not sufficient contribution to W taking on moving the radiator himself. He sought out the experience of others and finally got a neighbour to help him, who had seen a plumber connecting a radiator with speedfit. With the help of his neighbour, the form and function of the plumbing fittings, and the instructions that came with them, W managed to successfully negotiate a way through the process of shifting the radiator, a job he identified as the most challenging he has taken on. The competence to do so was therefore distributed between humans, products and documents, becoming adequate to realise the project only in the process of doing it. Dant (2005) differentiated embodied knowledge (in embodied human subject) and embedded knowledge (in the objects and materials with and on which the subject acts) and the role of 'immutable mobiles' (after Latour 1987, here representing intermediaries such as instruction sheets, manuals, etc) in making up the distributed knowledge necessary for the realisation of a practical task, such as assembling flat pack furniture or replacing a car's pump belt.

It is just such processes of negotiating through such tasks that enables a DIYer to develop their confidence and competence to take on new tasks. Respondent T exemplified this well. Like many he could identify relatively formal knowledge acquisition – such as school CDT (craft, design and technology) lessons; being deliberately shown how to do things by his dad; or by referring to DIY manuals, or internet forums. However, he drew parallels between how he gains new skills in DIY with how he takes on new tasks in his work as an IT technician, based on being able to reflect on and synthesise from existing knowledge, experience and skills to work out how to approach new tasks, and have the confidence to do so. It is clear that competence and confidence is developed by DIYers significantly through pushing back boundaries based on active synthesis of existing experience and knowledge through practical engagement with their tools, the materials and the specific materiality of their house to tackle new tasks.

Consequently, DIY gives us pause to reflect on the character and location of competence in consumption related practices. Rather than being seen as a property of individual human subjects, it lies in the dynamic relations between embodied human, tools and materials.

Lessons for theorising ordinary consumption?

This paper has offered a preliminary exploration of some of the central themes emerging from initial analysis of data from interviews and observations on DIY. Each of these interrelated themes has potentially significant implications for the theorisation of ordinary consumption.

First, we argued that DIY related consumption cannot be adequately accounted for by models of the consumer as hero, dupe or postmodern manipulator of symbolic resources. Evidence can be found to support each of these models in consideration of DIY consumption. However, it is clear that fuller understanding of DIY consumption requires: a) recognition that DIY projects emerge substantially from the negotiation of the changing patterns and routines of everyday life into the physical structures of the house; b) that the doing and completion of DIY projects causes other projects to arise, whether from changing the apparent possibilities afforded by the house or by developing the capabilities of the DIYer; c) that the very process and work of DIY can itself become a consumption good,

the realisation of which requires the acquisition, assembly and transformation of retail commodities.

Second, we observed the contextuality of the usefulness of DIY commodities, by focusing on how a tool can become useless, whether through the degradation at a socio-technical level of the technical and practical relations that maintained its usefulness; or through processes at the household level of changing priorities and the shifting requirements of DIY work as careers and overall renovations progress. Ultimately, usefulness is realised in the integrative activities of DIY practices.

Third we approached the location and distribution of competence in consumption related practices by considering the re-distribution of competence between people and products in relation to the completion of DIY tasks, and the still wider distribution of competence between a number of people, tools, materials and intermediaries such as instructions, in DIYers negotiation through new tasks. Competence consequently can be seen as a distributed quality, only congealing to the necessary capability to execute a project in the process of *doing*.

Clearly, we have much work still to do in analysis of our data and the development and articulation of our arguments before we can hope to make any definitive statements about the lessons we have for theories of consumption! But we can highlight two related paths we will be pursuing.

First, focus on the productive processes of actually *doing* DIY, rather than on the meaning of its final material effects, draws attention to the neglected *work* of consumption. Framings of consumption as essentially the passive flipside to production have of course long been contested, with theorists such as Miller highlighting the active role of consumers in reshaping products. However, such analyses have focused overwhelmingly on the symbolic work of maintaining or re-shaping self-image, status and social distinction. Generally absent is recognition of the quotidian work of integrating and transforming products, not only symbolically but practically and physically. Campbell (2005) draws attention to just such concerns in his discussion of craft consumption with fields of consumption where these processes of assembly and transformation are perhaps most obvious, including cooking and the construction and maintenance of a collection of clothes, along with DIY. However, Campbell seeks to draw boundaries around what can count as craft consumption based on the character of ensemble activity taking place. In so doing he may limit the extent to which the emphases in his analysis, on the integrative and transformative work involved in consumption, cannot be generalised well beyond restricted fields of activity where this is obvious, such as DIY, to recognise the practical, skilled, integrative work involved in most, if not all, fields of consumption.

Second, and following from the first, a common refrain emerging from the issues we have explored is an emphasis on the *doing* of DIY. This resonates with a small but growing interest to bring theories of practice to bear on the analysis of consumption in the context of everyday life (Shove and Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005). Projects, needs, usefulness and competence have each been identified in different ways as emerging only from, or taking shape only in, the actual practices which comprise DIY, the processes of negotiating embodied skills and knowledge together with tools, materials and the fabric of the house. The distinctive character of DIY makes it a uniquely revealing field of social action in which to explore and test the possibilities of theories of practice to account for the role of integrative and transformative work, and the active practical role of objects and materials, in understanding consumption.

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