***Reflections on Trying to Put Social Practices Theory into Practice***
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The make-up of the group

Four out of five of us were academic researchers, and one of us was a sustainability & marketing consultant. We had varying degrees of knowledge of social practices theory, but none of us felt we had any particular expertise. None of us were sociologists by initial training.

What we did/discussed

A potential outline for the two-days had been drafted, but this was quickly abandoned after it was agreed that we would focus on trying to shift eating practices through an intervention that a third sector organisation like an NGO or community organisation could implement. We decided to map the practices associated with eating, using a board and post-it notes (see diagram below), and quickly found that we had to create a mythical 'average family' – with all the caveats this entails -- and focus on the evening meal to facilitate this. Together with some initial thinking about what kind of interventions might lead to eating-related practices with lower carbon emissions (which necessitated us seeking some information about what makes current eating-related practices relatively carbon-intensive), this took us most of the first day.
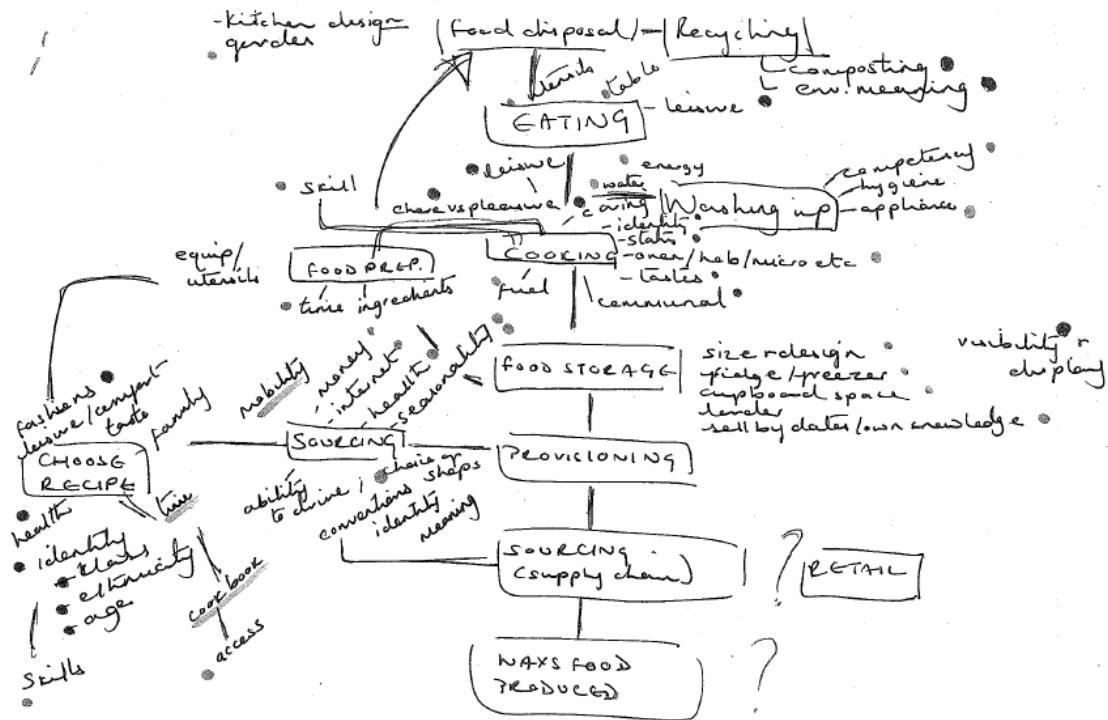
The second day we spent exploring some of the ideas for projects/interventions raised the previous day: the 'ready-to-be-prepared meal'; canteen-style collective, local eating; and kitchen design (in particular, the reinvention of larders). The intervention we chose to develop (though not in any deliberate way) was the first one, with a few of those involved wondering if this might be an idea to float with the Co-op. For a couple in the group, discussions of what the second might involve did not seem to

suggest anything that much different from what is provided currently through restaurants, whilst others suggested that the emphasis on cheapness, communality and localness set it apart; thus the idea to link them to the retail outlets of the 'ready-to-prepare' meals, though it was recognised that this would be more complicated to implement.

The re-design of the kitchen was the least discussed, because – whilst it was not difficult to think what such a kitchen would ideally not have (and there are plenty of examples in 'developing' countries of what this might look like) – we could not think how to encourage take-up of such a kitchen. We did talk about the re-introduction of larders as one possibility, and whether there was scope for re-designing fridges so that the unit itself was in the unheated pantry, and the heating element at the back was detached, and put on the wall outside to act as heating for the kitchen (but no idea if this is technically possible/desirable).

Lastly, we reflected on trying to apply social practices, and how this differed – or not – from behaviour change approaches.

Reflections

Overall, the majority of us felt there was value in attempting to apply social practice perspectives to the process of designing an intervention as it prompted us to look beyond the individual and attitude-behaviour information approaches, though not entirely. Whether this was due to the limits of the theories or the limits of our competence in applying them is up for discussion, but we suspect a bit of both. We felt that psychologically-informed behaviour change & marketing, assessment of environmental impacts of particular lifestyle choices and economic approaches all had a role to play, and indeed also informed the intervention (e.g. use of celebrity chefs and keeping prices of the meals low). Understanding what the carbon implications of different configurations of practice, and how they compare, was also crucial, but is not information that is easily available (if it exists at all), or uncontroversial. The mapping exercise, and the fact that early on we agreed that we saw agency as distributed and attributable to objects, meant that one participant felt that our approach was largely informed by Actor Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies. However, another participant argued that in some reviews of social practice theories, these approaches are subsumed within theories of practice.

What was gratifying was that we did actually come up with a potential new project, with a series of interventions, aimed at cutting domestic carbon emissions (around food-related practices). What we do not know – and in some ways – in spirit with the emergent properties aspects of social practices (but also true of most intervention design) is whether such an intervention would indeed lead to the establishment of new household food-related practices. It might not take off: indeed one participant thought that the product around which we were hoping to build new practices (the 'ready-to-be-prepared' meal) was likely to be something that food companies have already considered and dismissed as unmarketable. However, the point was also raised that a Sainsbury's advertising campaign which showed Jamie Oliver cooking various cheap family recipes suggested that supermarkets were already thinking along these lines, though only in terms of a customer information campaign.

Moreover, we realised even if the project was successful in terms of spreading across the country, changing food-related practices in its wake (a huge assumption!), there is no certainty that this would lead to the expected reduction in carbon emissions from household food-related practices; for instance, it might actually lead households to increase daily car use in pursuit of purchasing 'ready-to-be-prepared' on a daily basis, thus potentially undermining the purpose of the project.

One participant was also concerned about 'scaleability', since there was no evidence of demand for 'ready-to-be-prepared' meals. Moreover, though their introduction in convenient retail outlets would potentially impact on elements of a number of household practices related to food (eating [what], storing [where and how much], shopping [where, when, what], disposing of waste [what]), and with potential upstream effects in terms of food retail infrastructure and retail practices related food sourcing, the intervention only impacted on one area of domestic carbon emissions. One participant wondered if it would be more effective to design a social practices intervention aimed at businesses and their product design and marketing functions i.e. practices upstream from household practices. This highlights questions around whether we focused on the right practice 'scale'.

Other ways of approaching designing a social practices-informed intervention may also have been more effective. One participant wondered whether it would have been better to have analysed changes that have dramatically affected food-related practices, such as the introduction of supermarkets, in order to learn lessons as to what are the key elements. A more consistent approach that acknowledged levels from production to consumption to waste management (rather than seemingly a horizontal map) might also have been useful.

The Benefits of a Social Practices-Informed Approach
- Probably the most important insight a number of us felt we gained is about the way a network is organised not in a random way but in a way which structures and constrains choices, creating path-dependence. So in order to enable other choices to be made, numerous points on the network have to be affected, rather than just the consumer (through the provision of information and attempts to influence their values as in current mainstream approaches).
- The network approach to shifting practices opened up the possibility of de-moralising (at least outwardly) the environmental debate. So rather than just saying 'you should eat this because its better for the planet', a social practices approach has the potential to be much less moralising of individually 'irresponsible' behaviour because it removes individual values (in any explicit sense) from the equation and simply seeks to change practices and behaviour by altering structure, choices and path-dependencies. Thus environmental good can be brought about with no overt recourse to environmental 'values' because with practices we seek to act at the level of what structures path dependency. This is likely to be more appealing, inclusive and effective than an individualised and moralised approach.
- The social practices perspective highlighted the centrality of meaning and the potential link to action, for one participant, and, for another, brought home how problematic changing conventions are, and how legislation notwithstanding, tastes (for example) need to be changed by degrees, in the way that historical analyses suggest have occurred to-date.

The Challenges of a Social Practices-Informed Approach

- We found it hard to separate practices from the (imagined) people doing them. As a result, we quickly found we had to reduce the complexity of the variety of practice conventions that we assumed across different households by creating an 'average' household (without empirical data) and through specifying the meal; as one participant put it, he felt 'the amount of complexity that practices could actually give us was detrimental (if taken too far) to actually coming up with real world interventions in some ways'.

- One participant wondered whether practice theories actually suggest that the very practice of designing deliberate interventions (which tend to assume cause and effect) are almost doomed to failure because of this complexity and the emergent properties underlying them. Perhaps the fact that we felt that social practice theories on their own do not seem to provide the 'teeth' we thought we needed is perhaps partly as a result of this.

- Some of the participants wondered whether social practice-based interventions were likely to be that different from existing interventions uninformed by social practice theories, such as those based on introducing new technologies or marketing different images.

- For a number of the participants, the idea that practice precedes and leads to consumption of goods was central. However, whilst this might be the case right at the beginning of a practice there was also the notion that actually objects tie you into practices: so you continue to use a fridge even when it begins to become redundant, because of the cost of the initial investment. In this sense the monetary has to be brought back in because we invest ourselves (in the form of time and energy represented in the abstract form of money) in objects, as well as using them to facilitate particular practices. This also highlights the difficulty of designing objects (fridges, kitchens) with different affordances, even if the practices are the same.

- For a couple of the participants, the benefit of de-moralising behaviour that social practices seem to offer also risks 'rebound' and 'backfire', because there is no explicit environmental agenda. This may be as problematic as appealing to the section of the population with an interest in behaving 'environmentally'.

- Lastly, we were not able to come up with an intervention that was likely to be able to be delivered by a community or third sector organisation as originally planned; we felt this (and other ideas that we came up with) were more likely to be able to be delivered through the market. It might be interesting to think about whether this is likely to be true of other practice-based projects, and if so why this might be the case, and what implications this has for policy and its implementation.