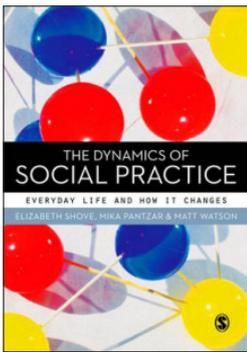


BOOK REVIEWS

The dynamics of social practice: everyday life and how it changes

Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson. Sage, 2012

by Sampsa Hyysalo



Theories of practice have had a renaissance in the new millennium. As some authors claim, this 'practice turn' has occurred as a response to the need for addressing more fully the actual doing and materiality of our everyday lives, rather than just their meanings, interpretations and intentions (Schatzki, 2002). While most of the debates in practice theory and most research drawing on it have occurred within social sciences, the turn to practice has reinstated the relevance

of social analysis for other fields such as design, systems analysis and policies for sustainable consumption. This is in all likelihood due to practice theories' ability to address the socio-material richness of our conduct and communities as well as their capacity to address how complex change processes take place.

The dynamics of social practice: everyday life and how it changes (DSP) by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) is positioned right at the heart of this stronghold of practice theory. It seeks to provide us with fundamentals for understanding how social practices exist, prevail and change. In doing so it lays out at least an interim synthesis of the authors' decades-long development of practice theory. It discusses its bewilderingly wide topic (how everyday life changes) in just 160 pages with admirable clarity, positioning the volume as one of the potential text books for understanding practice, and indeed, how all social phenomena can be understood as practices.

DSP departs from a commonly agreed position. Practices consist of elements that are integrated when practices are enacted. These elements can have relatively independent lives, being enacted and held alive in other practices or, in occasion, lying dormant waiting to become enacted. Practices then, are relatively sustained and routinized ways of enacting a set of elements. This, in turn, entails that they are on the one hand performances that are more or less faithfully carried out in everyday conduct, and on the other hand, that they are entities which make up the life of their carriers, be these human or non-human. In this dual capacity practices emerge, persist, and disappear as links between their defining elements are made and broken.

It is safe to say that most if not all practice theories are comfortable with this entry point, but DSP's account of practices has several distinctive features. The defining elements of practice are reduced to

three: materials (things), competences (skills) and meanings (social and symbolic significance). Taking materiality as a constitutive element of social practice is a step away from the 1970s upsurge of practice theories, most notably those by Giddens and Bourdieu, and one that aligns the authors with 'material constructivist' and 'post-humanist' approaches such as actor network theory, activity theory, and agential realism. Collapsing understanding, practical knowing and know-how into competence shifts the cognitive and experience element of practice into body, rehearsal and routine. The final element of 'meaning' includes cognitive and emotional aspects of practice alongside significance and symbols, as things that can be socially witnessed. There is thus a clear aversion of mental constructs in defining practice, which sets it apart from e.g. pragmatist and neo-Marxists' accounts of practice.

The second distinctive feature of the book is the extension of its theorizing. DSP is clear in seeking to provide an account of all social life understood fundamentally as consisting of practices, not of practices as a minor (or even major) subset of sociality. Moreover, it stresses that it does not see society as consisting of practices as stable entities or fields, but rather in continuous renewal, emergence and breaking apart. The volume locates this relentless change in the intra- and interrelations of practices through three circuits of reproduction; first through changes within defining elements and their relations, then through ways in how practices are bundled together and finally through being part of transformations in large intertwined complexes of practices.

This frame of how the dynamism of practices emerges from the changing interrelations between elements and connections finds its empirical correlate in short illustrative change histories of various practices such as car driving, snowboarding and maintaining thermal comfort. Hence, in contrast to most practice research, DSP does not discuss in intricate detail any one practice, and it does not seek to provide original or convincing empirical correlates to its claims. This is perhaps necessary for the basic scheme to retain its clarity and power of theorizing, and many of the practice change examples build on authors' previous empirical investigations, such as Shove's insightful analyses of air conditioning and hygiene in her earlier *Comfort, cleanliness and convenience* (Shove, 2003). After all, when the aim is to convince people of the usefulness of practice theorizing in understanding the totality of social life – meaning all other forms and moments of sociality and indeed materiality and human agency – stem from social practices, it appears necessary

to draw from a broad range of examples rather than a few potentially idiosyncratic case analyses.

How does DSP then succeed in its grand mission in its short and accessible form? One must hand it to the authors that it does so admirably well. Particularly rewarding are the extensive sets of questions and anchoring to readers' common sense that are provided in each discussed change dynamic along the way. Indeed, DSP is a horn of plenty for great research questions to be further investigated for those who remain unsure of what they should do with their intellectual life.

The dramatic choices made by the authors, however, also leave much to further work on other ways of addressing practice. After the founding elements are settled in, the brevity of expression has perhaps led to keeping things rather 'item-like'. Chapter three discusses in broad strokes how each of the three defining elements has different types of transmission mechanisms, but the account veers towards almost systems-theoretical abstractions in how the change in the three circuits takes place. Empirically, the diverse and purposefully adapted illustrations lead the reader to wonder if the case histories are too purpose-built. Take snowboarding as an example. In several places it is said to be "a blend of surfing, skateboarding and skiing" that needs to continuously enroll new recruits to make up for those who leave for various reasons, something which has also led to a clearly observable branching between the rigors of Olympic competition and free trick making. While all this is correct, it is highly skeletal. One has a hard time imagining this as a convincing account of snowboarding practices and their change. Snowboarding has drawn just as heavily from gymnastics, acrobatics and other jumping sports.

Similarly, one wonders where all the years of creative envisioning, intertwining and trials with boards, slopes, pipes, safety equipment, filming, advertising and other agential work and fortuitous findings disappeared. Characterizing snowboarding as having just two major branches and singular career paths erases from view the dozens of different orientations and equipment sets that are present in different versions of snowboarding practice. The point is this: the change dynamics of practices tend to be both internally and interrelationally rather complex – and accounting plausibly for this complexity and multicausality is a clear stronghold of most practice theories. The overly terse practice change descriptions of DSP conceal this complexity, for good and for ill.

The second signature facet of DSP – whether this is an upside or downside is left to the reader – is its rather social flavor. When practices are defined as including 'things', know-how, significations and other teleoaffective structures and seen to arise from the connections and configurations between these, the 'social', in principle, should be in the same plane of relevancy as the elements one tends to see as predominantly material or mental. However,

the treatment mental and materials get in the book is thin in comparison to one received by issues traditionally regarded as social.

DSP reduces human individuals to (varyingly) competent carriers of practice that adopt, and locally adapt, social meanings of practice in performing it. This reduction leaves out an important aspect of human practicing, namely personal sense. Actors, as in people who act on stage for others, often refer to 'going through the motions', a phenomenon we are familiar with in our other daily less acted out practicings as well, to distinguish between a proper, passionate performance and one without a heart. Sense does not equal meaning, nor does enacting equal performing. Just as importantly, a practice theory without sense renders creativity, art and deviance as mere acts of recombination of elements by a given carrier. This presents a sobering account against the individualist, innate accounts of creativity that shamelessly bestow the wealth of cultural and social resources and dynamics at play simply inside a creative human. Yet going to extremes here risks producing a senseless theory of practice where the joys, frustrations, revelations, endurances and pulsations of practicing are cut out as irrelevant to dynamics of practice. Certainly, the authors could argue that cultural psychology has done enough in these areas, but simply doing away with these aspects appears somewhat strange.

The social tone of writing is amplified by the way DSP treats things. Many of DSP's practice change histories place technology or standardization as a pivot point of change. Yet, nothing is referred to in any detail, and most its things could be called 'things sociological', generic referrals to common technologies that are assumed to be known to the reader. The early car, snowboards, air conditioner units and showering make the story easy to follow. How their details affect the storylines is, however, left both empirically and theoretically hanging. Certainly the authors have done much in this regard in their earlier Science and Technology Studies work, but this makes the lack of attention to material-making in DSP more, not less striking. Would such descriptions and histories really make too tedious a read?

The lack of analysis of the material in DSP is reflected in terms used. The authors insist on practices being configurations, but resort to e.g. explaining that the 'script' of the early car changed, even as they had just remarked how early cars were complex and often improvised technical configurations that required intricate skills and social arrangements to function, such as the chauffeur-mechanic. Such technology is rather unlikely to have had a singular script or even set of scripts for how they were to be practiced.

In the final chapter, the authors outline what practice theory would entail in the framing of the questions of climate policy. It focuses on the critique of the dominating Attitudes, Beliefs, Choices (ABC) background frame of policy making pointing in the face of everyday life that seldom involves clear-cut choices (but is rather run



by routine practicing), notoriously mismatches people's attitudes (that are pro environmental), actions (that continue what they by and large used to be) and beliefs (which are typically well informed of the mismatch).

The practice framing of policy DSP offers would, instead, rather admit that peoples' everyday life is a moving target. It advances a provocative heuristic that one should examine the practices involved, assess where the greatest problems are, such as most unsustainable elements, moments, sites, practices or practice bundles, and then target actions to transform these. The chapter then sides with transition management ideas of offering protection to more desirable forms of practice (e.g. building cycling infrastructure) and exerting pressure on the regime of practice complexes (e.g. congestion charges) to encourage some of the car drivers to defect to bikers. Another example given is Japanese "coolbiz" initiative that combined new purpose built office apparel, elite citizen's example, fashion shows and advertisements with new office building cooling practices, in effect saving hugely on Japanese peak energy consumption through lesser cooling of offices. While all these ideas are well and good, critiquing reasoned choice models such as ABC is in effect an old sociological critique of economic view of man and offering a more social alternative, hence joining DSV in good social theory company.

Could practice theory deliver more? The examples now given resort to "happy face" practice theoretical intervention policies, and one can ask whether the happy face will be enough to curb greenhouse gas emissions. An interesting parallel can be found from policies related to smoking. After decades of piecemeal and relatively unsuccessful policies, often ABC-informed, many Western countries have begun complicating the practice of smoking in earnest by

banning it progressively in public settings, increasing taxes, cutting opportunities to advertise, deploying increasing scientific evidence and court cases as well as making counter-advertisement increasingly gruesome and visible. At least in Scandinavia this is beginning to have a tangible effect. The anti-smoking measures also suggest that tightening the noose around a commonly undesired practice can find high public acceptance and result in a relatively rapid (as in a decade or so) sea change in practicing and practice complexes. What could be the parallel "noose pathways" in curbing private car use? Indoor energy use? Are some aspects of those already in use in some cities? Practice interventions themselves provide very useful inspiration for further interventions. Perhaps this connection, and the material and mental dimensions involved, is the part which the dynamics of social practice should have pursued in less terse fashion. After all, practicing as well as interventions on social practices predate (and outnumber) the theorizing on social practices.

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