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Using practice theory for social change: some reflections and provocations

David Evans, Professorial Fellow, Human Geography, University of Sheffield

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@Geographylives @profdavidevans @SheffSocScience



Introduction

- Practice theories are **multiple**
 - ‘Mainstream’ sociological theory
 - Economic geography
 - ANT
 - Non-representational approaches
- **Particular lines** have been influential in thinking around (pro-environmental) **behavior change**
- Some desultory **reflections** on engagement with policy and delivery bodies



Overview

- What he said + re-stating **Shove's ABC critique**
- Reflections and provocations: **organized around two vehicles**
 - 1) Food waste (WRAP)
 - 2) Behavior change (Scottish Government)
- Summary: **key lessons**
- Looking forward: **practical** and intellectual considerations



Beyond the ABC

‘A’ stands for attitude, ‘B’ for behaviour, and ‘C’ for choice (Shove 2010: 1274)

The ‘dominant paradigms of economics and psychology’ (Shove 2010: 1274)

‘[t]he popularity of the ABC framework is an indication of the extent to which responsibility for responding to climate change is thought to lie with individuals whose behavioural choices will make the difference’ (Shove 2010: 1274)



Food Waste

- A matter of political and cultural fixation since c. 2007
- Framed largely as an ‘**end of pipe**’ issue (Alexander et al. 2013)
- Reducing waste: **a problem and possibility of consumer behavior**
 - Ways of knowing ‘the consumer’ (cf. Miller and Rose 1997)
 - Consumption ‘a field of intervention that can be subjected to corrective actions’ (Rumpala 2011:695)
- A range of stakeholders actively involved in **efforts to foster changes** at the scale of the individual/household



WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme)

2010: seminar at SOAS on food waste research

WRAP personnel quickly recognized the **value of insights from studies informed by theories of practice**

Workshop at WRAP HQ in Banbury (Evans, Meah, Watson in attendance)

Pushing at an open door



WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme)

Previously WRAP had focused somewhat narrowly on changing attitudes towards food waste [...] a persuasive case that broader contextual factors (how people shop and prepare food, how they arrange their social lives) were also of great importance in understanding this issue. This realisation prompted changes to the LFHW campaign as well as WRAP's subsequent research. For instance, in the autumn of 2010 we revised the questions we ask on national surveys to reflect these broader activities and in 2014 we published *Household Food and Drink Waste, A People Focus* – a report underpinned by social practice theory.



- A success story
- But it is not **wholesale adoption** of practice theories
 - The same could be said of much academic research that aligns itself with ‘social practices’
 - Nuances of social theory *versus* **what works**
 - Does it matter?
- Practice theory and public policy
 - Some aspects **intuitively make sense** to policy and delivery bodies
 - Ontological commitments may not (currently) be **politically viable**

Does dilution lose what is distinctive about PT?



- A real appetite from WRAP to **take these ideas further....**
...and **taking new ideas to policy makers and civil servants**
- A request for ‘**more radical**’ approaches to change
 - Ideas of **interlocking practices** (Spurling et al. 2013)
 - Conventions
 - Infrastructures
 - Institutions

People who ‘get it’ *versus* the institutional context in which they must operate

The problem of evidence

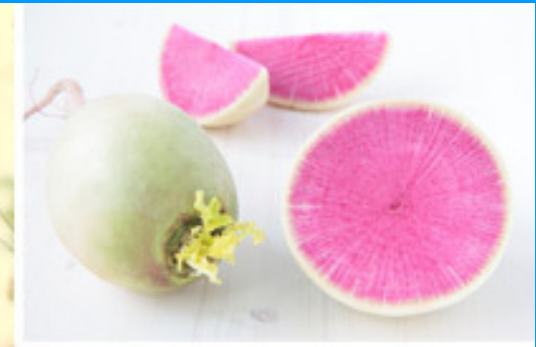
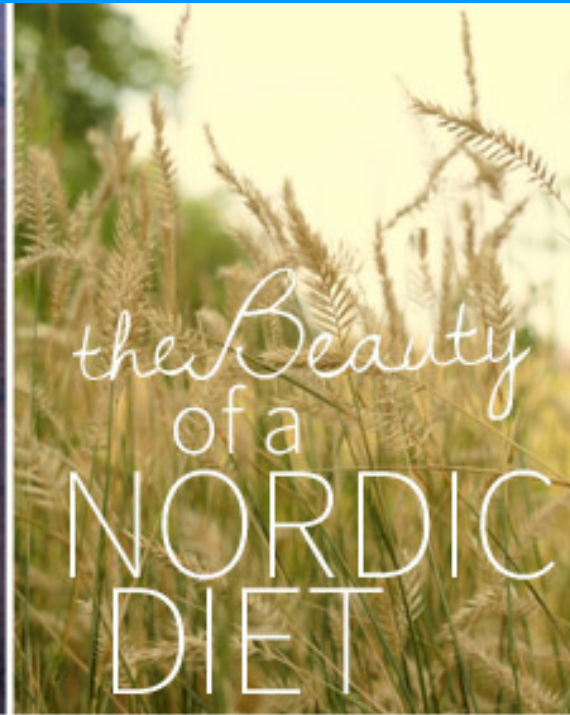


Behavior Change

- Where is the **evidence** that alternative approaches will work?
- Evidence that existing approaches are **sub-optimal**
- Social scientific evidence that **intimates** why existing approaches aren't working
- Problem: hard to find policies **initiated** in accordance with PT
- Re-interpreting conventional approaches through the **lens of PT**(e.g. Hargreaves 2011, Evans et al. 2012)



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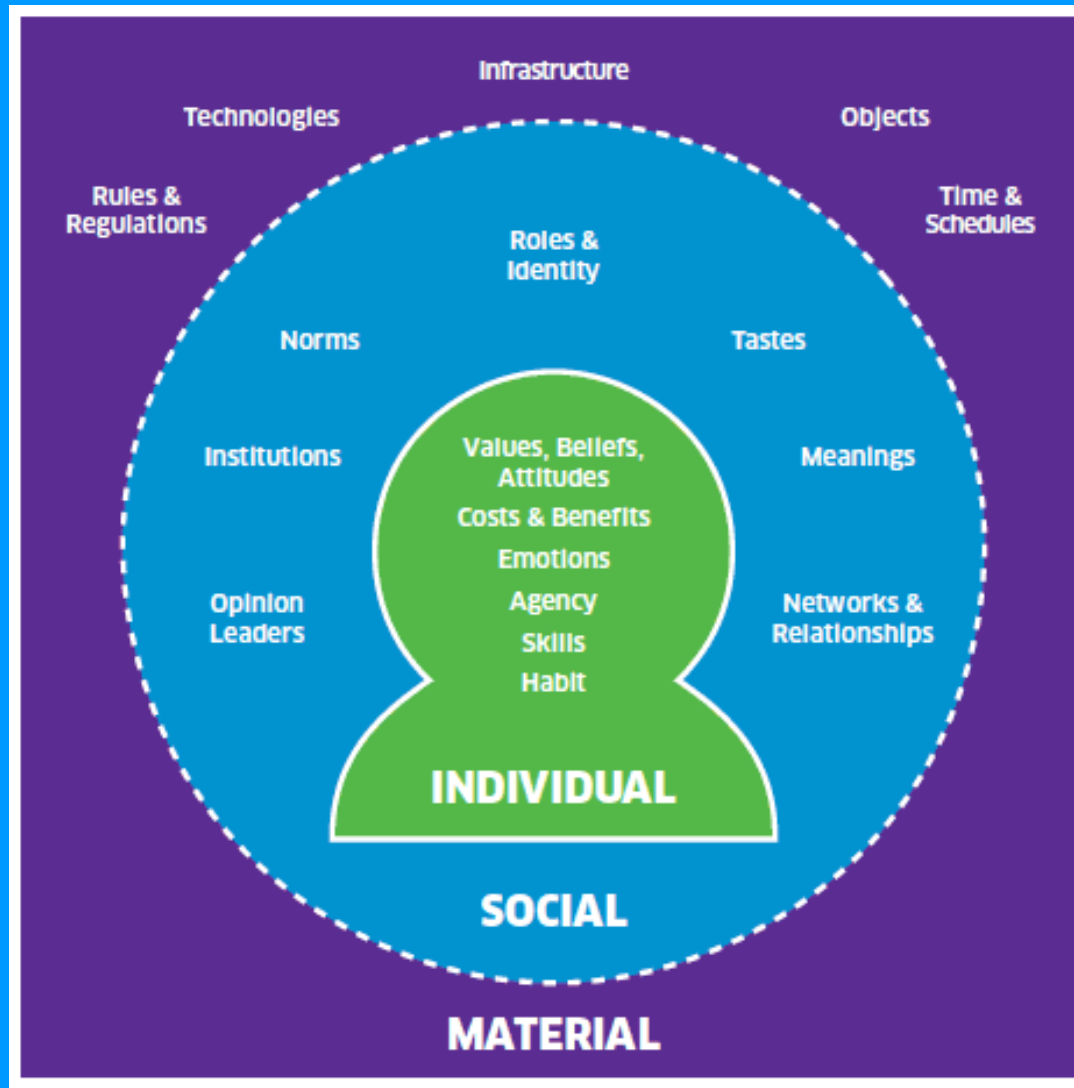
2011: International review of behavior change initiatives

Looking beyond the individual in order to consider the **social and material contexts of behavior**

Insights from **PT** picked up as an **alternative** to conventional behavior change models (ISM)

Developed by/for Scottish Government into a ‘**tool kit**’

Dilution at every step of the way



Source: Darnton and Horne 2013



- Material context: **already known** to policy?
- Taking **social context** ‘a bit more seriously’ = the net contribution of PT? (cf. Jackson 2005)
- Precisely **how is it different** to behavioral economics, nudge etc.
- Dilution:
 - The **individual** remains at the center
 - Curious patterning of empirical and conceptual phenomena
- But (again):
 - Does it matter?
 - The same could be said of much academic research that aligns itself with ‘social practices’



Key points

- Interest in and **openness to new insights** and perspectives
- ‘What works?’ is a **double-edged sword**
- Some aspects of PT resonate with **existing approaches**
- Dilution may be necessary but **it loses what is unique** about PT
- There is something unique and there are **many who ‘get it’** but there are significant ‘barriers’ to uptake



Looking forward

- Incumbent on us to identify **evidence requirements**, and to offer better evidence
- Performances and entities; **quantitative** and qualitative data
- Scalable evidence of **successful interventions** designed with PT in mind (Davies et al. 2014)
- Better understandings of **how policy is done** (again, what he said!)



And finally

- Important to move beyond straw man (sic) arguments when discussing **how practices are governed** (Evans, Welch, Swaffield 2017)
 - Changes over time
 - Variation across substantive domains
 - **Institutional process of responsabilization**
- Governmentality as more than a **stock-critique** of neo-liberalism (Foucault 1978, Barnett et al. 2008)
- PT: modes of instantiation in **patterns of everyday life**
- Recovering/realizing the **critical potential** of PT



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Thank you

d.m.evans@sheffield.ac.uk

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