

practice theory for social change

**practice theory
is not for social change
in itself**

it has no internal normative content

practice theory for understanding social change

well demonstrated as enabling distinctive insight into change

transition only happens if
enough people do
enough things differently
enough
transition therefore has to be a
transition in *practices*

(Watson, 2012, 488 & 489)

how useful can practice theory be for effecting social change?

lessons from using it to tackle energy demand

Matt Watson

Geography, University of Sheffield

mattwatson.blog | [@mattwtsn](https://twitter.com/mattwtsn)

1. Outline of a practice theory and how it understands change
2. Understanding past and present changes in household energy demand
3. What does practice theory offer for informing future change?



demand.ac.uk



Reshaping the domestic nexus

engaging policy understandings of kitchen practices and how they change



nexusathome.wordpress.com

1. Outline of a practice theory and how it understands change
2. Understanding past and present changes in household energy demand
3. What does practice theory offer for informing future change, like reduction in energy demand?

Practice theories

Emphasize tacit and unconscious forms of knowledge and experience through which shared ways of understanding and being in the world are established, through which purposes emerge as desirable, and norms as legitimate

Practices are the fundamental unit of social existence

‘both social order and individuality...result from practices’ (Schatzki 1996)

Practice is not simply 'what people do':

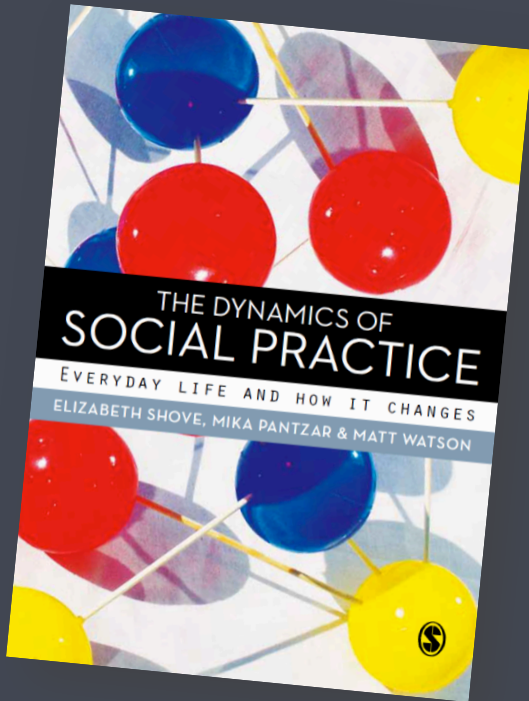
- Practice as a coordinated entity

Something enduring across moments of doing; can be represented

- Practice as a performance

Processes of doing through which practice-as-entity is sustained, reproduced and potentially changed

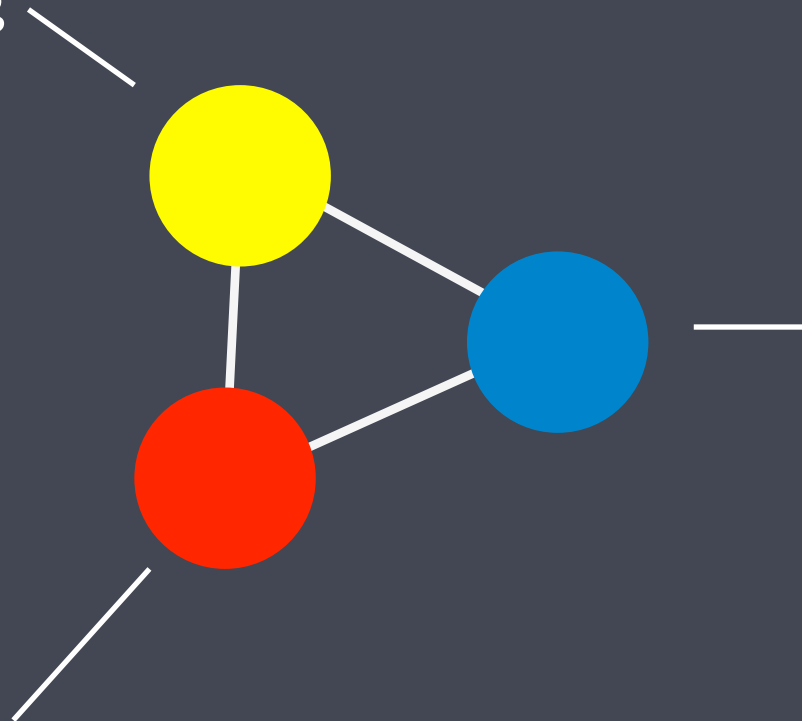
Conceptualising cooking as a practice



Meanings
of cooking

Materials
of cooking

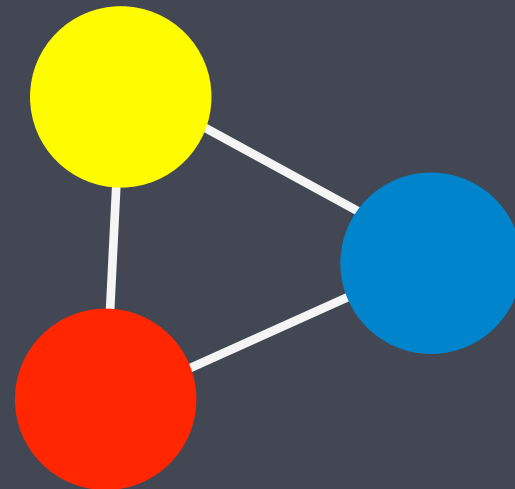
Competences
of cooking



Dynamics of practice

Performances of a practice are always potentially unique:

- Practitioners actively integrate the elements of practice into an effective configuration
- Incremental innovations in successive performances shape the trajectory of the practice



Mechanisms of change

1. Changes to the *elements* of practices
2. Changes to the population of '*carriers*' of practices – processes of 'recruitment' to and 'defection' from a practice
3. Changes to *how practices inter-relate* – bundles and complexes of practices

Energy and practices

Energy **is not** used by householders.

Energy **is** used by technologies

which provide services

which are means for performances of practice
by householders.

So...

Understanding energy demand means understanding the dynamics of practice.



Photo: Angela Meah



Cooking ***bundles*** with other practices

In time

rhythms of household (and societal) routines of work, rest and play – flow of practices

In space

practices happening in the kitchen – eating, cleaning, stocking, homeworking, conversing, etc

Different interventions

1. By comprehending diversity of elements converging within practice, reveals broader range of points of intervention
2. By understanding bundling of practices, reveals possibility of intervening in one practice to effect change in another



Cooking part of **complexes** of practices

In cooking, extended systems of provision – energy, water, food – are worked together

Systems of provision extend across locales over space – distribution, production, regulation, policy as well as consumption

Systems are themselves comprised of practices throughout the locales constituting them

Implications

- State, civil society or commercial institutions are sites of practice as much as are households
- Practices of institutions are part of the same complexes as those practices they seek to change
- Significant change in framing of problems and solutions and the means of pursuing those solutions demands change in the practices of those institutions.

Reshaping the domestic nexus

engaging policy understandings of kitchen practices and how they change



What does it take to get evidence and ideas from practice theory research into the practices of policy making?

Marshalling evidence and ideas around
focus issues identified with partners:



{ reducing food
waste
in relation to food safety }



HOME FOOD PRACTICES

{ waste fats oils and
grease disposal }



{ energy demand,
flexibility and change }



how useful can practice theory be for effecting social change?

Practice theory:

- provides means for distinctive insights into (past, present) processes of change

- is good for explaining why change can be slow and is usually unpredictable

- can help to identify alternative means of intervention

- shows change in any one practice demands change in other practices

how useful can practice theory be for effecting social change?

Concluding contentions:

In seeking to effect change in one practice, it may be that practices elsewhere in the 'complex' need to change first

Cannot approach social change without contending with practices in relation to *institutions* and to *power*