



# THEORIES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE IN PRACTICE



<http://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES/No09398/1>



## Impact Objectives

- Articulate the 'social practices' that civil society organisations develop and support in their communities
- Work within and across academic and local community contexts to co-produce ways of describing such practices
- Design and develop data practices that take account of strength- and asset-based approaches

# Theories of social practice in practice

*Drs Sara Bragg, Mary Darking, Ceri Davies (from the University of Brighton) and Catherine Will (from the University of Sussex) talk about their involvement with a collaborative seminar series in which academics and voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups worked in partnership to explore how theories of social practice might be applied to VCS work*

### Can you briefly outline what 'practice theory' is and what value it delivers?

We use the term to refer to a diverse body of academic work that takes social practices as the unit of analysis, rather than (for instance) individuals and their attitudes, behaviours and choices. It directs us towards a concern with the everyday, with 'what we do' in situ, emphasising the complexity of our daily lives, how these are resourced and the infrastructures that shape them. There is no single theory or view of practice, but generally these approaches pay close attention to 'doings', 'sayings', 'relatings' and the material elements of social practices, such as bodies, technologies, tools and spaces. Many working in the field use a tripartite framework drawing attention to materials, meanings and competences and the relations between them. This highlights how what people and organisations do is shaped by routines, tools and embedded social norms as well as by conscious choices and values.

### Is this a new way of thinking about the voluntary and community sector?

Social practice theory has been hailed as cutting edge in relation to climate change and sustainability policy; it is also used in organisational studies, public health and education by those seeking new ways to understand and analyse these fields. But it has not been related so much to civil society organisations - or in their preferred

terminology, the voluntary and community sector. We hoped it would bring new perspectives on the VCS while also enabling us to extend the academic debate in different directions.

### What approaches have you developed?

We were able to develop the approach in new directions, particularly towards notions of hidden or marginalised care practices, of brokering practices in a complex ecosystem of partnership working and the commissioning of services, and of 'data burden' in practices of evaluating VCS work. Our cases, perhaps more than those in some existing scholarship, meant we had to attend to inequalities in this context, given that VCS organisations are reliant on volunteering, and see increasing demand for services while they are subject to short-term funding and indeed funding cuts.

### How were you able to foster collaboration with other academics and community groups and get so many different people engaged?

The series emerged from a reading group across the universities of Brighton and Sussex. Several academics, from different disciplines, had found theories of social practice offered promising new ways of thinking. The approach de-centres individuals and their behaviours, attitudes and values, and instead stresses embedded social patterns. It also acknowledges the material dimensions of

social life – the 'stuff' around us – which we all found appealing in different ways. Some of us already had connections with local voluntary and community organisations, so could see how we might link our perspectives to their interests; and we were all committed to developing research alongside community groups. We therefore recognised the opportunity to engage with community partners to explore ideas from theories of social practice with them. This was an exciting way to theorise on, about and in practice and in real time, on real issues, generating insights and discussions which could be put to use straight away in different contexts. We were very grateful to have Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding which enabled us to offer bursaries for the involvement of VCS partners. A small but highly symbolic token.

### Can you provide an example of how a partner has been able to use the outcomes from this research?

VCS partner Mothers Uncovered drew on the framework to analyse its practices. They identified a number of interesting points, such as: the varied 'meanings' of motherhood to those attending their groups; the 'competences' of facilitating peer support; and the essential role of 'materials' like the rooms, facilities and food where meetings took place. They used these reflections in trying to plan future interventions.

# Adapting theory through dialogues

*The New Practices for New Publics seminar series proved a constructive collaboration to explore how theories of social practice might specifically benefit voluntary and community sector groups*

Social practices shape our day to day lives. While we may not think about why the practices we do or don't perform impact the world in which we participate, they are nonetheless highly significant and are therefore the subject of much study. Traditionally, the approach to this type of research looked at either the very micro picture or the macro: researchers might focus on only one potential driver of a practice, such as the individual and their specific motivations, or on social norms at the level of a population.

In the last decade or so theories of social practice have emerged as a new way to analyse social practices, the reasons they are adopted, and how they evolve. They look at multiple factors surrounding any given practice in an attempt to capture the interactions between meanings (norms, rules or ideologies); skills and competences of participants; and finally things, the infrastructure and materials that are used for the practice. This framework provides a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of why people engage in certain practices and not others; which then allows policy makers to make different kinds of interventions - in their efforts to reduce energy use for example. The value of this approach has been embraced by a team of researchers from the universities of Brighton, Sussex and Sheffield. For this group, theories of social practice also have the potential to improve how civil society organisations understand, reflect on and value their achievements in social and

health care, youth work and educational services. 'This is particularly crucial at a time of rapid change for the voluntary and community sector, which is under pressure to deliver more for less, to develop new ways of working, to save money and to respond to reconfigurations of local government work', explains project lead Dr Sara Bragg.

### MUTUAL BENEFITS

The seminar series aimed to engage in dialogue about whether 'academic' theories of social practice would be meaningful to VCS partners in helping them think about and articulate the work that they do, its value, and the context in which they operate. Equally however the team were keen to know how theories of social practice might be advanced by drawing on different examples and sectors. Existing relationships provided some insight into what those issues were for local partners, many of which were also mirrored nationally. By critically engaging with these needs as well as their own research interests, the team could then co-design the seminars and select speakers in ways that would be more relevant to non-academics.

'We found much common ground,' explains Bragg. For instance, VCS groups appreciated how social practice theories helped articulate and bring value to the practices of relationship-building and caring that they saw as key to their work. Academics too were enabled to identify the effort involved in developing trusting, mutual partnerships

with local communities, which went far beyond conventional 'public engagement' strategies and underpinned the success of the process. In both cases, there was a sense that such work remains undervalued and unacknowledged, for instance within university 'impact agendas' that prioritise international and national rather than local impact.

### CHALLENGES AND SURPRISES

From the very beginning this project was about collaboration and both sides of the partnership saw the potential. Some benefits however were obvious while some emerged later. 'For example, care practices were perhaps most easily identified as important and as having figured in academic work, and VCS groups shared a sense that their caring practices were invisible and unappreciated,' observes team member Dr Catherine Will. 'Practice theory's emphasis on the material – the 'stuff' of VCS practice, such as cups of tea and rooms in which to meet – drew attention to the work and resources that come together in 'care' and enabled them to name and attend to it in new ways.'

Team member Dr Mary Darking notes how 'our image of the 'practice iceberg' resonated with our partners.' The iceberg has been used in writing about theories of social practice to draw attention to the many aspects of practices that are overlooked by conventional analysis. For VCS partners, it spoke to the notion that much of what they did, particularly in terms of care, peer





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support, learning and relationship-building – was not recognised by either funders or evaluation processes, was potentially invisible to those outside the sector, and therefore marginalised. Alison Marino, Sector Support Manager at key partner Community Works, described this as revelatory: ‘Finally, a concept and a model through which, all of a sudden, there was a space to talk about the practices and the care and the things I couldn’t put words to – and start to describe that value.’

#### DELIVERING INSIGHTS

According to Dr Ceri Davies, from the Community University Partnership Programme, this is where scholarship can help. ‘Academic work can help draw attention to practices as well as identify the process by which such marginalisation occurs and may be challenged,’ providing actionable insights for VCS groups.

Will proposed the image of a kaleidoscope as an adaptation of the tripartite model of the meanings, competences and materials of practices. The kaleidoscope conveys a sense of a complex of practices that continually shift – are renewed and rearticulated with each other – in response to changes outside the organisation, hence better recognising ‘the worlds of rapidly-changing policy priorities and funding inhabited by VCS groups’.

Challenges of time and adapting to the languages of different fields are always present when creating such a tight collaboration but a real emphasis was put on communication and ensuring that there was continued shared value throughout. ‘Though we recognised that ‘care’ is a contentious concept, our approach highlighted the spatial and material contexts of caring practices rather than something that creates inequalities between providers

and recipients,’ says Will. She notes that talk of care is potentially sensitive in relation to disability where the disability movement historically sought to challenge the term, and in mental health where the VCS may differentiate themselves from formal healthcare providers and offer peer to peer learning and support. These more ‘academic’ approaches needed to be balanced with the practical needs of the VCS community.

For Darking there were also some pleasant surprises. ‘Issues that emerged more strongly than in our proposal included measurement and evaluation or valuation practices in VCS fundraising and reporting requirements.’ These issues could be analysed through the resources offered by the tools and approaches of social practice theories, while the seminar series provided a platform and legitimacy for the VCS in drawing attention to the problematic consequences of these data practices for their work.

Towards the end of the project a number of the New Practices for New Publics seminar participants undertook a ‘book sprint’; a collaborative process of rapidly writing, editing and publishing an eBook. This book, which is now available online, condenses and captures the themes, lessons and valuable knowledge that emerged during the series. The team also presented findings at the 2018 annual Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Partnership symposium.

A new generation of scholars are now involved and efforts are in place to support and encourage them with completing their PhD and postdoctoral research. New collaborations between academic partners have also been formed as a result of the series and the experience is shaping the future practices of the researchers and VCS groups.

## Project Insights

### FUNDING

Economic and Social Research Council ES No09398/1

### PROJECT TEAM

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- Kate Weiner (University of Sheffield)
- Catherine Will (University of Sussex)

### KEY COMMUNITY COLLABORATORS

- The Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) has been creating sustainable partnerships between local communities and the University of Brighton since 2003. It develops ideas into projects, provides start-up funding and supports networks and communities of practice to develop.
- Community Works gives voluntary and community organisations the support and platform they need to make a difference to local lives and issues. It connects them with local businesses and the public sector. ([www.bhcommunityworks.org.uk](http://www.bhcommunityworks.org.uk))
- Hangleton & Knoll Youth Project is a locally-based community development initiative providing services for young people aged 13-25 ([www.hkproject.org.uk/youthwork](http://www.hkproject.org.uk/youthwork))
- Mothers Uncovered offers peer support for mothers ([www.mothersuncovered.com](http://www.mothersuncovered.com))
- New Cross Learning is a volunteer-run people’s library, writing, IT and arts centre in New Cross, London (<https://newlearning.org>)
- Real Junk Food’s motto is ‘feed bellies not bins’. It uses surplus food (that would otherwise be wasted) to feed those who need it, in its ‘pay as you feel’ cafes ([www.realjunkfoodbrighton.co.uk](http://www.realjunkfoodbrighton.co.uk))
- Sussex Peer Support Network is an umbrella organisation for individuals and groups offering peer support (<http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/sussexpeersupportnetwork/>)

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