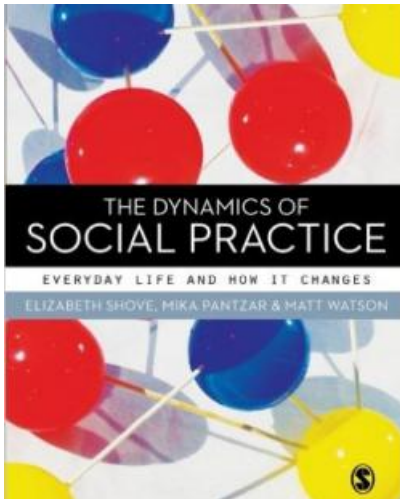


ESSENTIAL READING

11/23/2015



The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and how it Changes - by Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson

By Javier Caletrío (Social Scientist) 23 November 2015

The Dynamics of Social Practice argues that policy interventions addressing the challenges of sustainability must be grounded in an understanding of the dynamics of what people do. It outlines methods of analysing and conceptualizing the dynamics of social practice and argues that this conceptual approach enables a different policy imagination and opens new questions about the allocation of responsibility in processes of social change.

Addressing global environmental change

National and international action plans for tackling climate change tend to define it as the result of the accumulation of millions of individual decisions such as flying or driving petrol engine cars. Accordingly, emphasis is placed on changing behaviour by providing better information and incentives to adopt more environmentally friendly **lifestyles**. Implicit in this framing of climate change is the idea that what people do is a matter of

choice and that choices reflect personal attitudes and values. This understanding of the social and how it changes is in line with intellectual traditions such as the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill implicit in rational choice theories, and has been influential in environmental policy agendas well before the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. Despite the good intentions expressed at this and subsequent events, environmental degradation has only increased while low-carbon lifestyles in Western societies still remain marginal. In a long and ongoing debate about the causes for this inaction and apparent lack of public concern, social scientists have highlighted various reasons, including the pessimism created by media representations of climate change as a global, irreversible reality beyond human control, the perceived power of vested interests such as the oil industry, and the lack of trust in governments, business and key actors supposed to lead a mitigation strategy. Some social scientists have also noted the possibility that part of the problem lies in the theories about the social and social change informing national and international action plans.

A shift from individual behaviour to social practices

The Dynamics of Social Practice forms part of a growing body of research proposing an alternative paradigm in environmental policies that shifts the analytical focus from individual attitudes, behaviours and choices to social practices, as a method for understanding order, stability and change. In contrast with the linear, cause-and-effect type of explanation implicit in behavioural approaches to action and social change, theories of practice highlight notions of process and path-dependency and attend to the multiple and contingent relations between material elements, meanings and practical knowledge that are brought together in the moment of enacting a practice. This approach legitimizes a new empirical object of policy-oriented research and discloses as yet unnoticed sites of policy intervention.

Social Practice Theory

Theories of social practice have emerged from different intellectual traditions, vary with authors and are often aligned with different projects. The approach developed by Shove and her colleagues selectively borrows from authors such as Giddens, Bourdieu, Schatzki and Reckwitz and is aimed at fostering sustainability transitions. It takes practice as its basic unit of analysis and defines it as a routinized type of behaviour. Examples of practice

include driving, cycling, cooking or heating the house, but there is no a priori classification of practices: a practice is anything that practitioners regard as such. All practices exist as recognizable patterns or entities (that is why we can recognize them in the first instance when, for example, we talk about driving), but at the same time practices only exist to the extent that they are routinely performed. This distinction between practice-as-entity and practice-as-performance is central to understanding dynamics of change. Practices-as-entities provide an ideal mould or pattern which individuals consciously or unconsciously replicate with each performance. But each performance leaves space for unfaithful repetitions that introduce novelty. Practice-as-performance implies a space of potential which is conditional and uncertain, an action that is scripted yet open to the unexpected. Every performance carries with it the twin possibilities of either reaffirming the ideal script or undoing its enclosures and approaching alternative paths of change.

This distinction is useful to begin understanding how change occurs, but it still leaves unexplained what a practice involves. Shove and her colleagues argue that the enactment of a practice is a moment of integration involving three different elements: materials (things, technologies), competences (forms of understanding, skills, technique), and meanings (symbolic meanings, aspirations, ideas). In the case of driving this would involve the car with all its parts (materials), the knowledge of how to navigate a car (competences) and the association of the car with ideas of, for example, freedom or masculinity (meanings). Thus, practices exist when elements are actively integrated: 'Through these integrative performances practices are reproduced as provisionally recognizable entities' (p. 82). Similarly, practices are transformed when new combinations of new or existing elements take place, or disappear when links between elements are broken. Therefore, the central topic of analysis is the elements of which a practice is composed, and the historically fluid processes of connection and disconnection between elements and between practices. Some chapters of the book prioritize a focus on links between elements and practices while others focus on the elements as if they had an independent existence. Through this distinction we can describe instances when the same material, meaning or competence can be found in different practices and how these shared elements bridge different practices. The picture that emerges following this reasoning is one of multiple materials, competences and meanings that cohere into identifiable practices during moments of doing but which at the same time bridge

different practices, constituting the threads of an endless and evolving fabric of social relations. It follows from this that 'Understanding the spatial and temporal rhythms of society is in essence a matter of understanding how some practices flourish and others fade; how qualities of frequency duration and sequence emerge; how practices integrate to form bundles and complexes; and how such configurations resonate, amplify or destroy each other' (p.96).

Driving as a social practice

Driving a car is one of the practices used to illustrate this argument. Today, driving is an easily recognizable and apparently static practice and, in retrospect, it is tempting to associate its emergence in the nineteenth century with the 'radical' innovation of the car. A closer examination, however, reveals the many continuities with already existing elements, materials and meanings. Strictly speaking, the only really new element of the early form of driving was the gasoline engine and the knowledge of how to maintain it. All other elements integrated in the practice of driving predate the arrival of the car and are related to rules, skills and material aspects of design in riding horses, cycling and sea-faring. Thus, driving emerged (in symbiosis with other activities) as a relatively consistent but necessarily provisional amalgam of new and already existing elements which has evolved as the elements which constitute it and the relationships between them change. This can be illustrated by how driving a car first emerged as a past-time of wealthy men for whom the fun of driving largely consisted in ending a journey which, given the mechanical fragility of the early cars, required sophisticated maintenance and repair skills. Driving was then associated with risk and adventure and, because of the general scarcity of those skills, few could imagine a future for automobility beyond being an expensive hobby for the few. This barrier to the normalisation of driving disappeared when car manufacturers began to produce more reliable cars demanding fewer skills to keep them in motion. This demonstrates how a change in material elements (a more reliable technology) prompted a change in the competences and meanings of driving (from a risky adventurous activity to an essential part of work and family life) and how, in the process, it changed the practice of driving itself.

Understanding these processes of co-evolution also requires an awareness of how elements constituting the practice of driving can form part of multiple practices simultaneously, acting as bridges between them. For example, the framing of driving in its

early stage as a novel, risky and physically demanding activity connected driving with a masculine culture which was, at the same time, part of other activities such as repairing. Notions of masculinity were bridging the practices of repairing and driving. But these associations were provisional as shown by the changing role of driving for gender identity when driving became more reliable and accessible to many irrespective of their mechanical skills. This making and breaking of links between elements within and between practices 'hints at a much more elaborate picture in which diverse elements circulate within and between many different practices, constituting a form of connective tissue that holds complex social arrangements in place, and potentially pulls them apart. To the extent that this is so, the attaching and detaching of meaning and signification sends ripples across the cultural landscape as a whole.'

Implications for policy interventions

This understanding of the social as a complex reality unfolding through a stream of events is far from the dominant view in policy making that the social is composed of discreet, fixed, independent and clearly identifiable entities related through linear causal relations which can be quantified and managed. Instead of assuming a mechanical view of the world as the outcome of independent variables influencing dependent variables, a social practice perspective highlights notions of emergence and path dependency. This does not mean, however, that a practice perspective precludes policy intervention. A first contribution of a practice approach to policy is to reveal how policy interventions are not external but internal to the dynamics of practice. Policies in many sectors such as education, health, work or transport (often inadvertently) alter the texture and rhythm of daily life by influencing the distribution and circulation of materials, competences and meanings and the ways in which elements and practices relate to each other. This imbrication of policy in the flow of everyday life needs to be acknowledged so as to reveal sites of intervention and responsibility for the creation of conditions that favour more sustainable ways of living.

Theories of social practice and mobilities research

Theories of social practice have gained prominence over the last decade in the field of sustainability, especially regarding indoor energy, water and food consumption, and its popularity is rapidly spreading amongst sustainability transitions scholars within and

beyond the UK and Europe. Albeit not as well developed as research on energy and water, practice-informed research on mobilities is rapidly expanding too and, in the coming years, is set to make significant contributions to the field.

Although this is a book on social theory, readers less familiar with sociology will be surprised by the clarity and accessibility of its argument which is richly illustrated with examples of everyday practices, including cycling and, as noted above, driving. I like its style which avoids material or discussion which are not strictly necessary – hence the rather short length of the book– and the gentle way in which the reader is constantly reminded of the unfolding argument. This economism has worked effectively in making a clear point perhaps at the expense of including other relevant issues. I would have liked to see more explicit discussion of the role of class and power in transitions in practices. Although these issues are implicit along the argument it is only at the end of chapter seven, in a short section of little more than two pages, where they are explicitly mentioned.

This is no doubt an important book and one that should be read by anyone interested in current academic debates about the logic of social change and the potential contribution of social sciences to climate change policies.

About the authors

Elizabeth Shove is Professor of Sociology and Director of the DEMAND centre in Lancaster University. With Matt Watson (Sheffield), Mika Pantzar (Helsinki), Gordon Walker (Lancaster), Alan Warde (Manchester), Tom Hargreaves (East Anglia) and other colleagues in the UK and Europe she has pioneered social practice theories in the field of sustainable development. Her research has focused largely on issues of energy consumption in indoor and outdoor environments.

Mika Pantzar is research Professor at the National Research Centre in Helsinki. He has published extensively on consumption, technology and material culture.

Matt Watson is Lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Sheffield. He has conducted research in the areas of sustainability, governing, technologies and consumption.

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

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Disciplines : [Humanities](#), [Social sciences](#)

Transport mode(s) : [All modes of transport](#)

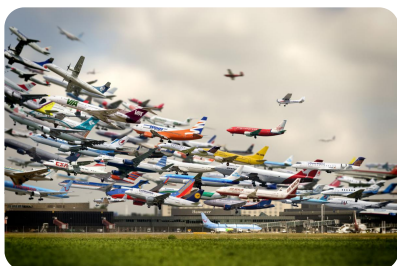


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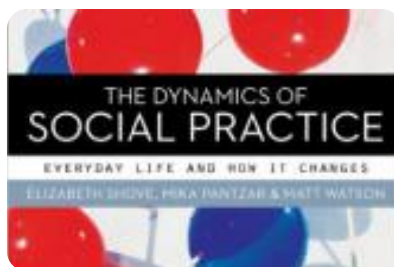
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