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Article:

Disalvo, C., Redström, J. and Watson, M. (2013) *Commentary III: Theories of practice, everyday life and design futures*. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 20 (4). ISSN 1073-0516

<https://doi.org/10.1145/2509404.2509408>

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Commentary III:

Theories of Practice, Everyday Life and Design Futures

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**The definitive version of this commentary is at Watson, M (2013) 'Commentary III: Theories of Practice, Everyday Life and Design Futures', invited peer reviewed commentary on special issue of *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 20, 4, Article 26.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2509404.2509408>**

This collection of articles represents a welcome strand in the steadily widening progress and growing influence of theories of practice. As a human geographer who has worked with sociological and theoretical engagements with practice theories as a means of addressing social change towards sustainability, it is a pleasure to be asked to comment on the intervention it represents. What little more than a decade ago was principally a field of abstract theorization has steadily spilled out, first across diverse areas of the social sciences before, more recently, beginning to have visibility in policy discussions and in the practices of professionals including designers. Amidst this dynamic, the articles collected here together offer a distinctive contribution. Each articulates between theoretical propositions and committed empirical engagement and argument, to consider different aspects of the potential relations between practice theories and the role of design and HCI in engendering future changes in everyday life that can contribute to greater sustainability.

Of course, within this broad-brush portrait of commonality, there is ample room for diversity. Leaving aside the obvious point that sustainability is bewilderingly unfixed as a concept, other key terms in that characterization of the collection are open to interpretation. Perhaps most surprising, as someone outside of the field, is the distance that discussion of HCI can travel from interactions between humans and computers. Of the five articles, only Pink et al. focus their article on a project involving a digital interface, in this case between householders and their home heating system. For other contributions, the link with computers is more tenuous, and perhaps most attenuated for Kuijer et al. and their study of their proposed cleanliness proto-practice of splashing.

Much less surprising is the diversity of approaches to practices, and to practice

theories. As Tomlinson et al. point out, “theories of practice” refers to a diversity of approaches. Quite properly, some of that variation is clear across this collection. All authors here recognize that for practice theories, practice is not synonymous with doing. Rather it is a concept which enables analytical attention to work on from specific moments and sites of action, to comprehend how moments and patterns of doing are orchestrated and reproduced over time and across different spaces. However, the ways in which this potential is translated varies in this collection, as it does elsewhere in the burgeoning field of applications of practice theory. For Bidwell et al., the approach enables close attention to the interleaving of performances of practices. In contrast, for Pink et al. the preoccupation of some practice theory approaches with moving on from accounts of specific situations of practical action cause them to look elsewhere for theoretical and methodological resources. Meanwhile, for Kuijer et al., the attraction of practice theory is its ability to take attention beyond moments of practical action, particularly human-machine interactions, to approach the embedding of those actions in broader dynamics of social order, such as shared temporal rhythms and social norms around personal cleanliness. For both Tomlinson et al. and Wakkary et al., practice theory is presented as informing responses to large scale future societal change.

This diversity of understandings about what practice theory can do, and of approaches to its application, is not a weakness. While in some areas of academia practice theory is starting to feel like part of the orthodoxy, there is as yet no orthodoxy of what practice theory actually is. Nevertheless, there are some points of difference worth exploring further, as their exploration helps to open up aspects of the value and limitations of practice theory for informing design and transition towards sustainability.

For Pink et al., the profound limitations which they identify in theories of practice for approaching the details of lived experience mean turning away from them, to a sensory ethnography approach informed by phenomenological anthropology and understanding of ecologies of place, after Ingold. This is somewhat surprising, on two counts. First, across the range of approaches identified as theories of practice, a unifying feature is an understanding of practices (and thereby both individuality and social structure [Schatzki 1996]) as constituted by and reproduced through practical activity. Second, as a philosophical position, theories of practice share much by way of intellectual heritage, particularly with common roots in the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, via Merleau-Ponty and Charles Taylor [Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Shove et al. 2012]. Indeed, authors in this special issue, not least Bidwell et al., find no difficulty in approaching practices through ethnographic methods.

None of this is to say that Pink et al., are in any way wrong to turn to phenomenological anthropology and sensory ethnography to pursue understanding of changes in everyday life in pursuit of sustainability. As their article amply demonstrates, the approach taken can furnish insights, and inform innovations, which take seriously the injunction that technological innovations intended to shift everyday life towards greater sustainability will best be designed through sophisticated understandings of the situations of their use. Their sensory ethnography approach clearly informs both the interface of the app through which householders can interact with their heating system, and novel proposals like the "heat me" bags. Through insights into the embodied pleasure of warm jumpers and blankets, combined with ethnographic awareness of the affordances of existing infrastructures, the bags could perhaps help overcome the thorny problem of how to get people to enact the obvious advantages to low carbon comfort of

putting a jumper on when it is cold. The regret, then, is not at all of the approach taken here, but rather that the approach is presented in contrast to, and as a corrective for, practice theory approaches. The article could have made a still greater contribution by recognizing that the gaps the approach addresses are within dominant methodological implementations of practice theory, not within the commitments of practice theory itself. This could, for example, have drawn out more fully the importance for practice theories of the arguments made here about the ways in which performances of practices can only emerge within specific relations between people, things, resources and meanings that can be taken to comprise 'place'.

In contrast with Pink et al.'s characterization of practice approaches, Bidwell et al. show something of the potential for exploring the interleaving and coordination of practical action within a practice theory approach. Through a focus on the interleaving of practices which circulate around the solar powered mobile phone charging stations, the article highlights the ways in which performance of practices inevitably must be interleaved and coordinated by people in the accomplishment of their daily lives. In the study of practices around the use of the new charging stations, walking is placed as the central practice through which people integrate performances of other practices in the spaces, times and socialities of their days. The emphasis in the more analytical passages of the article on place and embodiment, not least through the work of Tim Ingold, connects well with the theoretical purposes of Pink et al., through a different lens of practice.

Meanwhile, Tomlinson et al. highlight the limitations of practice theory applications that stay too close to the "here-and-now" of practical action. While acknowledging the critical significance of insights that arise from close attention to the here-and-now of everyday doings through practice theory approaches, they call for such approaches to be articulated with time scales extending well

beyond the present, and to engage with societal level shifts. The authors do not go on to explore how far this is a theoretical shortcoming of practice theory, and how far a limitation of key implementations of the approach. If the value of practice theory is indeed dependent on recognition of practices as entities transcending individual moments of performance [Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Shove et al. 2012] then temporal extension beyond the present is inherent to the approach. As Tomlinson et al. recognize, work informed by practice theory does have a record of following practices over time, though the one example they pick out as the exception in doing this is only one example in a growing field of work premised on the capacity for practice theory to enable the exploration of change over time.

The other two articles in the collection also seek to emphasize the potential of practice theory approaches to inform work on more societal levels of change. For Kuijer et al., practice theory can inform the design of products, systems and services to engender systemic change through presenting practices, rather than artefacts themselves, as the object of design — a proposal with echoes of Shove and colleagues' "practice oriented product design" [Shove et al. 2007]. For Wakkary et al., practice theory similarly has potential for informing interaction design with a view to engendering transformations and innovations in practices.

The ambitions of the three articles, then, connect with the promise of practice theory approaches to enable researchers and theorists, in principle at least, to be able to grasp the specificities of practical action but at the same time to gain understanding of practices which endure over time and are distributed across space. It is the ambition to explore practices over time which is most distinctive about these articles. Tomlinson et al. may base their accusation of presentism on a partial reading of recent work in the practice theory tradition, with a growing range of work exploring the past trajectories of practices. However, theories or

practice have so far had limited application to envisaging, enabling or responding to putative futures. Of course, some future orientation is inherent to any research which is framed within a sustainability agenda, and a rapidly burgeoning body of research explores ways to change current practices, particularly around energy use, towards lower resource intensity, increasingly through articulation with theories of socio-technical change [McMeekin and Southerton 2012; Spaargaren 2011; Watson 2012]. Especially through having provided the basis for compelling accounts of past transitions in practices, and coevolution of technologies, norms, meanings and competencies that are the corollary of those transitions, theories of practice appear to hold an unrealized potential to inform future changes, not least the radical changes required to shift society on to a sustainable footing.

However, realizing this potential is fraught with difficulties. Many of the difficulties arise from the generic difficulties of saying anything at all specific about the future beyond a relatively immediate time horizon. The same properties of practice theory approaches that enable them to provide compelling narratives of past transitions and the configuration of the 'now' help us to understand the difficulties of foreseeing future transitions. A focus on practice enables the exploration of the diversity of relations between coevolving technologies, norms, meanings, skills and more from which changes to practice are an emergent effect, with a nonlinear trajectory. Change in practices are always incremental innovations that typically result from the convergence of current constellations of elements, but which then change the conditions for future performances of the practice. As a result of the iterative, emergent nature of transitions to practices over time, it is difficult to extend analysis of practices far into the future as anything other than informed speculation. It is inevitably incumbent on the analyst to fix boundaries around the range of elements and possibilities of their

integration, in order to say anything of future configurations of practice. As the articles exploring future practices make clear, there are always grounds for critique, but that does not preclude that exploration from being worthwhile.

The embeddedness of practice is tackled by Kuijjer et al. by moving the objects of their research into a lab setting. This inevitably leaves open all sorts of questions about what else would have to change for splashing to displace showering as the default practice of personal cleanliness. As research into the dynamics of showering practice [Hand et al. 2005; Shove 2003] has made clear, showering has its current role as a result of the niche it has created for itself in the material infrastructures, norms and temporal rhythms of everyday life. Kuijjer et al.'s bold reduction of the dimensions of practice into a "laboratory" setting inevitably loses this complexity, but follows the norms of laboratory science in seeking to reduce complexity to illuminate given aspects more deeply. A broader focus, however, could enable changes which are more significant in terms of resource demand. The reduction in hot water use in typical 'splashing' sessions compared to a fast wash in a low flow shower is small and at least partly displaced by the increased need for space heating. Understanding wide variations in the temporality of whole body washing—from around once a year in some times and societies to around once a day in contemporary affluent societies— indicates potential for a much more significant step change in resource use for personal cleanliness. Splashing could possibly make more difference by being less enjoyable and more inconvenient than showering, thereby reducing the frequency of washing, than by its reduction in hot water use per wash.

Tomlinson et al. have the longest time frame, envisaging through a practice approach the requirements for everyday life in a resource-scarce post-collapse world, in articulating a call for the development of collapse informatics.

Understandably, the characteristics of this future world are not closely defined, but it seems odd that the scarcity of resources and the erosion of complex social organization in both economic and political activity do not appear to seriously dent the possibilities for digital communication. In its current expression, digital communication is fundamentally dependent on complex economic organization, and a sophisticated state apparatus to defend property rights and security whether for intellectual property, the globally-distributed and capital-intensive production process of short-lived hardware, and the massive server capacity, cable networks, etc. that enable the web. As Wakkary et al. point out, digital technology is generally resistant to DIY intervention without specialist skills. Of all of the imponderables of a post-collapse society, the possibilities for digital technologies and communications seems significant. A broader framing of the issues here would also help make a more persuasive case for considering technologies for a resource scarce future society, in that the authors arguments for enabling practices that are less resource-dependent could help delay or avert collapse (transition informatics?), as well as ready society to deal with it.

Ultimately, the exploration of future practices, as in these articles, is very unlikely to result in narratives that will be accurate when those futures become present. Rather, their value more clearly lies in provoking reflection and potentially disruption and innovation in current practices, including the practices of design in HCI and elsewhere. This is embraced most fully by Wakkary et al., who argue for the use of 'design fictions' about putative futures as an intervention into contemporary practices, particularly within processes of design and codesign.

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