Product, competence, project and practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption

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The definitive version of this article is published as **Watson, M.** and Shove, E. (2008). Product, competence, project and practice: DIY and the dynamics of craft consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(1), 69-89. doi:10.1177/1469540507085726 For citation purposes the definitive version should be used where possible.

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Abstract

Studies of ordinary (as distinct from spectacular) forms of consumption have generated new questions and new ways of thinking about mechanisms and processes of change and about the conceptual status of consumer goods. No longer exclusively framed as semiotic resources deployed in the expression and reproduction of identities and social relations, products are increasingly viewed as essential ingredients in the effective accomplishment of everyday life.

In this article we examine the recursive relation between products, projects and practices with reference to DIY and home improvement – an important area of craft consumption and a field in which consumers are actively and creatively engaged in integrating and transforming complex arrays of material goods. Interviews with DIY practitioners and retailers point to a circuit of interdependent relations between the hardware of consumption (tools, materials, etc.); distributions of competence (between humans and non-humans); the emergence of consumer projects and, with them, new patterns of demand. In elaborating on these practical and theoretical linkages we develop an analysis of the material dynamics of craft consumption that bridges between approaches rooted in science studies, material culture and consumption.

Introduction

Studies of consumption have been dominated by a partial framing of the *stuff* involved, typically focusing upon the symbolic and semiotic significance of commodities and their role in constituting individual or group identity, or in otherwise mediating interpersonal relations (McCracken 1988; Featherstone 1990). In recent years, this orientation has been challenged by those who observe that the greater part of consumption is pressingly mundane and routinely embedded in typically inconspicuous socio-technical systems and routines (Gronow and Warde 2001). Rather than focusing on the contexts in which meanings are materialised, as in shopping or in the self-conscious construction of identity through the purchase and display of consumer goods (Lury 1996; Miller 1998), those who write about ordinary consumption are increasingly interested in how the hardware of material culture figures in the doings, as well as in the displays, of social life. This has prompted renewed interest in applying social theories of practice to the analysis of consumption (Shove and Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005).

In reviewing and elaborating on the relevance of practice theoretic approaches, Alan Warde expands on the implications of the view that "consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices" (2005: 131). This view builds on the understanding of a practice, incorporating 'things', articlated by Reckwitz as:

> a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.
>
> (Reckwitz 2002: 249)

The observation that products are actively implicated in the ongoing reproduction of practice is methodologically and theoretically important, particularly if we agree that practices are the fundamental unit of social existence and that, in Schatzki's words, 'both social order and individuality…result from practices' (Schatzki 1996). In common with other cultural theories, theories of practice emphasise the tacit and unconscious levels 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. The distinctive contention of practice theories - that the social is located not in mental qualities, in discourse or interaction, but in the reproduction and enactment of practice (Reckwitz 2002) - opens the way for a more focused investigation of how design, production and consumption are embedded in and constitutive of contemporary routines and habits.

The present article exploits some of this potential by homing in on what we take to be critical relationships between products, forms of competence and consumer practice. Our emphasis on competence deserves some explanation. Familiar if contrasting representations of consumers - as rationally acting heroes, as the dupes of market forces, or as self-conscious manipulators of symbolic resources - fail to capture important qualities of consumption when defined as a consequence of practice. One of these missing elements is competence, by which we mean the skills implied in the use, integration and desiring of items required for the effective accomplishment and performance of daily life.

In this context, Campbell's (2005) recent discussion of the "craft consumer" provides a plausible model and a useful point of reference. For Campbell, craft consumption entails the application of "skill, knowledge, judgement and passion" and results in the production of something "made and designed by the same person" (Campbell 2005: 23, 31). In these respects, craft consumption is very much like craft production of the type valued by thinkers such as Marx, Veblen and Morris, all of whom viewed it as an authentic expression of humanity in contrast to the alienating production processes of industrialisation. The key difference is that Campbell's version of craft consumption is inextricable from mass production. It is so because craft consumers are frequently involved in making connections and producing assemblies and creations that may "consist of several items that are themselves mass-produced retail commodities" (Campbell 2005: 27). Campbell restricts the definition of craft consumption to instances in which demand is generated by consumers engaged in

the skilful process of constructing recognisable assemblages that are more than the sum of their parts and singles out cooking, creating outfits and entire wardrobes of clothing, and DIY, as examples.

Not all consumption fits this description but for the purposes of our argument, the key point is that consumers are viewed as knowledgeable actors whose acquisitions are in some sense an expression of their capabilities and project-oriented ambitions. In such situations, the relation between product(s) (what is consumed) and practice is likely to be important for the formulation and accomplishment of future projects, and hence for future patterns of consumption. By folding concepts of human and non-human hybridity (Latour 1993) into this discussion, we add the further point that materials and consumer goods are themselves active agents in the configuration and distribution of competence and so of practice. Having argued for a more distributed, dynamic and hybrid view of the capacity to *do,* our final move is to elaborate on the role of consumer projects in establishing an orchestrating or organising framework in which practices are integrated and in which new skills and possibilities emerge.

In what follows, we explore relations between product, practice and project through a critical investigation of one area of 'craft' consumption. There are several reasons for choosing to focus on DIY. First, it constitutes a significant but relatively unexplored domain both of consumption and of practice. The market research company, Mintel, defines DIY as "repairs or additions to the home or garden, including installing a new bathroom or kitchen, central heating, putting up shelves, fixing a fence, building a barbecue etc.". Despite periodic ups and downs, spending on DIY/decorating has been growing at a fairly steady rate of around 7-8% per year since the late 1990s (Mintel 2003; 2005). Such activities accounted for around 13% of the time spent on house related activities in 2000 (ONS 2001)[1] and currently generate a market for related products worth around £12 billion per year in the UK. Second, DIY is a field in which the relation between tools, materials and competence is plainly significant. As such it allows us to investigate the characteristics and qualities of specific combinations of skill and consumer goods involved in accomplishing projects like the renovation of a room. Third, the process is typically transformative, both of those who do DIY and of the physical objects and structures on which they work. One round of DIY has implications for what might be tackled next and for the confidence, or otherwise, with which new projects are approached. As a result, practitioners' 'careers' – both individually and collectively – determine related forms and types of production and consumption.

In-depth interviews with a small sample of committed DIY practitioners provided an opportunity to explore these more abstract issues through detailed discussion of past projects, future ambitions and the history and current contents of the household tool box. This qualitative data, together with a tour of the respondent's home and of the changes they had made to it has generated relevant insight into the experience of doing DIY. Our fourteen respondents - seven men and seven women - ranged in age from early twenties to mid seventies. Additional interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations involved in designing and manufacturing DIY tools or in DIY retailing and with a couple of professional painters and decorators. Further information was acquired through observation at DIY stores and documentary analysis of sales materials, instruction manuals and handbooks.

We draw upon these data in briefly reviewing the history of DIY and its development as a legitimate and increasingly normal practice and in showing what the experience and practice of *doing* means for related forms of competence and consumption. Our observation and analysis of DIY provides the basis for a more generic account of the recursive relations between product, practice and project that helps explain the dynamics of this and perhaps other forms of ordinary consumption. Before getting into detail of our argument, we begin by commenting on the history and characteristics of home DIY.

[1] cf., for example, c.60% on cleaning, c.15% on gardening (ONS 2001)

Doing it yourself

Until the development of dedicated DIY stores in the 1970s, people who wanted to decorate, repair or modify their own home had to venture into the specialised world of the traditional builders' merchant (Roush 1999). The very idea of DIY was undoubtedly promoted by companies making and selling tools and materials to amateur rather than professional customers. Although power tools were widely used in the building trade long before, they did not find their way into the domestic market on any scale until the mid-twentieth century. In recent years the range available to the home DIYer has expanded dramatically. At the same time, prices – especially of basic items like the 'entry level' power drill – have dropped spectacularly. Although the general trend remains one in which professional models are adapted for less demanding domestic use, some power tools have been substantially re-designed from the bottom up with the amateur consumer explicitly in mind (see, for example, Black and Decker's multi-functional 'Quattro' or B&Q's ergonomic and zoomorphic 'Sandbug'). Innovations in materials like fibreboard (MDF), in plastic (plumbing) and in fixing technology (especially glues) have since extended the range of tasks the average handyperson is willing and able to take on. New product ranges and methods of retailing have helped establish DIY as something that ordinary people might do, but as we indicate below, sources of consumer competence and confidence are also critical.

Woodwork, sometimes metalwork and more recently, craft, design and technology have figured on UK school curricula – at least for boys – since the nineteenth century. Schools continue to teach children how to handle materials and tools and have equipped at least some of them with the confidence to tackle DIY projects and to use power tools at home. Home improvement and make-over shows on day time and prime time TV further reinforce the idea that properties can be customised and values enhanced and that renovation is both normal and legitimate. Our industry respondents were not convinced that these programmes transmit meaningful knowledge or impart the skills required to do the jobs they represent. Even so, they are impressively effective in inspiring householders and giving them the (possibly misplaced) confidence to embark on relatively ambitious projects.

Besides these more or less institutionalised channels, our own research demonstrates that personal networks of family, friends and neighbours are crucial for individual experiences of DIY and so, cumulatively, for its development as a recognised area of social practice. Being inspired by what the neighbours have done, depending on a friend to provide an extra pair of hands, or being able to phone a knowledgeable parent when things get stuck featured prominently in our respondents' accounts, all of which suggest that DIY would be much less widespread if it really meant doing jobs entirely alone.

These separate influences (manufacturers, retailers, media, family and friends) have arguably combined to make DIY what it is today. Around 62% of the UK adult population now claim to participate in DIY, including decorating – a separate category defined as "internal and external painting, staining or wallpapering" (Mintel 2003; 2005). Their motives for doing so undoubtedly vary, some seeing it as a form of work others as an arena for self-expression and creativity; some being driven by economic considerations, others by notions of quality, care and control. According to Mintel's consumer research (2005) over 25% of UK adults enjoy DIY and 8% go so far as to identify it as a hobby. These figures raise interesting questions about what makes DIY rewarding - is it the process itself, the exercise of existing competence, the challenge of learning new skills or the satisfaction of the result?

Such academic literature as exists focuses almost exclusively on the outcome of DIY projects rather than on the process of doing them. There are, for example, studies of the effects of DIY in mediating and maintaining relationships within the family (Nelson 2004); in enhancing self-esteem (Woodward 2003); and in reconstructing self image and identity (Miller 1995; Woodward 2006). Others deal with the consequences of project-definition for modes of provision (Williams 2004) and in-store purchasing (Van Kenhove et al. 1999). In all of this, it is as if it is the final material effect that is 'consumed' and as if the means of arriving at this effect – through one's own labour or with professional help – is of secondary importance. While research of this kind is, for the most part, more useful in understanding why people engage in home improvement than in why they do it themselves, some do pay attention to the process and the activity itself. For example, Leadbeater and Miller

(2004) claim that participation in gardening, sports and home improvement constitutes a form of everyday resistance to the alienating effects of contemporary society. More specifically, Miller (1997) writes about the therapeutic enterprise of making a council house one's own through physical engagement with it:

> The transformation of kitchens was regarded as a positive move that changed the relationship from one of alienation from 'council things' to one of a sense of belonging within a home *created from one's own labour*.
>
> (Miller 1997: 17, emphasis added)

Taking a different tack, Gelber (1997) argues that the very ambiguity of do-it-yourself as at once leisure and work, and the centrality of the tools and skills required have proved important in positioning DIY as a legitimate arena in which men can respond to the expectation that they should play a more active role in the home in early to mid-twentieth century America. In Britain, most DIY is still done by men, and the activity is still strongly gendered.[2] Notwithstanding such isolated acknowledgement of the reproductive and transformative qualities of *doing* it yourself, existing discussions rarely attend to the social and cultural qualities of the practice as such. What is missing but what a practice-based analysis of increasing rates of DIY undoubtedly requires, is an interpretation that takes due account of the sweat, dust and frustration generated through the active combination of bodies, tools, materials and existing structures, all of which are implicated in repairing, maintaining or improving the home.

In reflecting on their own experiences, our interviewees discussed the challenges and satisfactions of tackling projects around the home, also commenting on the seemingly autotelic nature of DIY. They explained how one project led to another, how plans were disrupted and diverted in the course of 'doing', and how changes to the fabric of the house reconfigured the range and nature of possible future projects. In all of this they emphasised an ongoing and dynamic interaction between themselves and the materials with which they worked. In the hands of a novice, an assortment of plumbing fittings represents just so much metal. For someone skilled in fitting pipes together, these same materials figure as necessary resources for the task ahead.

Though yet to attract substantial academic interest, the ways in which the value and redundancy of objects relates to distributions of competence are important for the DIY industry and for the contours of DIY both as a field of normal practice and an occasion for consumption. As we show in the next section, there are different ways of conceptualising the emergence of competence and confidence, and hence of thinking about the role of materials (products) in shaping the reach and range of what people are and are not willing to do for themselves (practices).

Product and practice

Many forms of 'craft' consumption suppose and at the same time develop the skills of those involved, and as Campbell and others observe, practical know-how and related forms of folk knowledge frequently filter through informal networks of family and friends (Campbell 2005: 36), sometimes also circulating between specialised groups of 'expert' amateurs (Franke and Shah 2003). But what do these processes mean for related patterns of practice and consumer demand?

The manufacturers and retailers with whom we spoke were understandably interested in this topic. From their point of view, it made sense to classify actual and potential consumers in terms of knowledge, motivation and expertise. Expanding on this theme, one of our respondents, Director of Global Industrial Design[3] for a major power tool manufacturer outlined what he presented as a

[2] It is worth noting that DIY retailers and manufacturers are increasingly targeting the female market, partly in recognition of the number who live alone but also of broader female involvement in shopping for and in doing DIY.

[3] Names of companies and of individual respondents have been changed in the text to preserve anonymity.

generically useful analysis of the market. His two by two matrix positions consumers in one of four categories. 'Confident Enthusiasts' combine experience and expertise with continuing enthusiasm for the processes of DIY. In contrast 'Pragmatists' have experience and expertise – indeed they may have been Confident Enthusiasts in their past – but now find little or no reward in doing jobs around the home. Their main concern is to achieve the required result with the minimum of cost and time. In the words of our respondent:

> "this guy here - and he usually is a guy, right - ... he can do all this stuff and he's done it and quite honestly he's sick of it, he's been there, done that, and his motivation is just get the darned thing done fast, spend as little money as possible, get the result as quickly as you can, don't tell me what to buy, I know what to buy... this guy, he's not interested in brands, he doesn't want a drill, he wants a hole."

The third type is the 'Newbie', or 'Assurance Seeker', lacking in experience and confidence but wanting to achieve a desired effect. The archetypical figure here is the young home maker brimming with ideas inspired by TV makeover programmes, but lacking the practical knowledge required to realise his or her ambitions. The fourth type was referred to as the 'Hobbyist' or 'Careful Perfectionist', not necessarily someone with all that much experience but someone driven by the pursuit of traditional craft ideals and concerned as much about the process as the final result.

This typology is important in how the company thinks about the products it designs and sells. 'Assurance Seekers' are a major market segment and their needs are reflected in the development of accessible, often multi-function tools engineered to standards consistent with typically limited patterns of actual usage. With this market in mind, investment in product design focuses on distinguishing features like tactile finishes that have high shelf appeal. Fripperies of this kind are irrelevant for the 'Pragmatist' who goes for tools and products that promise adequate functionality at the cheapest price. By contrast, 'Confident Enthusiasts' and 'Hobbyists' are both more likely to look for quality - either picking a higher end consumer product or an item from the professional range, engineered for long and frequent use.

This classification reflects and reproduces a straightforward view of the relation between product, consumer and practice. The underlying notion is that tools and materials meet pre-existing needs, the details of which reflect the consumer's location within the four-part typology of motivation and skill. This is a scheme in which *competence is unambiguously and conventionally defined as a characteristic of the human subject*. That manufacturers and retailers subscribe to such a view is not at all surprising: it is normal to think of skill this way. Yet, the history of DIY, including the evolution and normalisation of power tools, points to other possible formulations. In particular, it suggests that *competence is perhaps better understood as something that is in effect distributed between practitioners and the tools and materials they use*. From this point of view, product evolution has important consequences for the ever changing threshold between doing and not doing it yourself. In the words of a Mintel report,

> product innovation continues apace, bringing new tasks within reach of the amateur DIY enthusiast and making traditional tasks faster. (Mintel 2003)

The proposition here is that product development enables amateurs to take on jobs which would have been otherwise left undone or contracted out to tradespeople. There are various ways in which this occurs. Power tools evidently make 'lighter' work of physically demanding tasks. Other products have what can be seen as a more profound effect, modifying the relation between process and result. For example, a few decades ago, painting a panel door was a complicated business. For best results paint had to be applied to each section in the right sequence: time and experience were both required to do so without drags or drips. Today, amateur decorators can choose fast-drying non-drip water-based paints that 'know' how to go on to a door. With these technologies in place, even first-time painters can produce an acceptable finish.

If one takes competence to be an essentially human quality, technological developments of this kind represent familiar instances of de-skilling. As if to confirm the point, the professional painters and

decorators with whom we spoke persisted in using traditional gloss paints in part because the final result, still distinctive from the matt finish of water based alternatives, provides a tangible demonstration of their skill. Conversely, one might argue that the entire process of painting is not necessarily any less skilled. The point is, rather, that aspects of the competence needed to paint the door have been redistributed between person and technology, the paint having effectively absorbed capacities previously embodied in the individual wielding the brush.

The implication of this argument is that competence is not only an attribute of the human doing the painting. From this perspective, painting is something achieved only in the doing, only as the diverse elements involved in accomplishing the task are brought together, and only as distributed fragments of knowledge - the knowledge embodied in the human, the formal knowledge from the back of the paint tin and the embedded knowledge in the paint, the brushes and their relation to the door – are actively woven together.

The idea that competence is at once embodied in humans *and* in things relates to a strand of thought aspects of which are exemplified by the concept of the human-non-human 'hybrid' (Latour 1993). "Hybrid" was one of a number of terms (see also 'cyborg' (Haraway 1991); 'collectif' (Callon and Law 1997); 'co-agent' (Michael 2000) coined in science and technology studies during the 1990s with the aim of capturing and characterising alignments, relations, and interminglings between human and non-human actors. The combination of a person and a hand-tool constitutes one of the simplest examples of such a hybrid. Put simply, a human with a tool – whether it is a rock, a hammer or a power drill - is an entity with different capabilities and capacities for engaging with the world, than is a human without a tool (or a tool without a human). It therefore makes sense to see the agent involved in hammering not as a discrete human subject but rather as a hybrid of person and tool. Having taken that step, the idea that competence is distributed across human and nonhuman entities is both plausible and likely.

However, the reality of DIY projects confounds any such simple one-person, one-tool interpretation of hybridity. In DIY, tools are useless except when brought together and combined appropriately with other tools, with materials and with the structure of the house itself. When we focus on the process of doing DIY, the range of this distributed network and the multiple elements of competence at stake are immediately apparent.

The following discussion of an attic conversion illustrates the extent to which *competence is embedded in and distributed between tools and materials and many other sources including people, DIY manuals and the internet*. Will is in his 30s and lives with his partner and their two young children in a Victorian terraced house. Will and his family wanted to turn the attic space into a room for the children, but were initially thwarted by the layout and by the need to move an existing radiator a metre or so to the left. Will had no experience of plumbing and the whole project would have been abandoned had he not learned about Speedfit, a relatively new approach based on plastic push-fit connections. With Speedfit, there is no need to assemble washers, couplings, solder etc. and no need for the specialist knowledge required to fit these elements together with any confidence of success. This is important. In a project of this kind, failure will result in a leak – only detectable when the central heating system is refilled and only curable once the system has been drained down again. Technologies such as the Speedfit system bring jobs like moving a radiator within the reach of those who lack traditional skills. In Will's case, this was a necessary but not sufficient condition for taking the project on.

Before going ahead, Will sought advice from others more experienced than himself and enlisted the help of a neighbour who had previously witnessed a plumber connecting a radiator with also with Speedfit. With the help of this neighbour, the form and function of the plumbing fittings and the drawings that came with them, Will successfully shifted the radiator, a task he identified as the most challenging DIY he had ever attempted.

In this example, competence appears to be scattered across various humans and assorted material artefacts including products and instructions about how to use them. Just as important, and as is also evident in Dant's (2005) discussion of car repair and maintenance, these elements, and with them the competence necessary for achieving the job, only come together in the immediate process of accomplishing projects in real time. In trying to make sense of what goes on in garages, Dant differentiates between embodied knowledge (i.e. embodied human subject) and embedded

knowledge (i.e. embedded in the objects and materials with and on which the subject acts) and the role of 'immutable mobiles' (after Latour 1987), here representing intermediaries such as instruction sheets, manuals, etc. In taking a similar approach, we also conclude that the considerable levels of competence necessary to accomplish DIY tasks are distributed between diverse human and nonhuman entities.

This analysis provides new insights to the dynamics of craft consumption. Specifically it situates technological developments – such as intelligent paints or Speedfit plumbing – not as instruments of de-skilling and dumbing down but as agents that rearrange the distribution of competence within the entire network of entities that must be integrated to accomplish the job in hand. By implication, efforts to understand the dynamics of what people do – for example how the boundary shifts between situations in which people employ a professional or in which they do the work themselves - should therefore focus on the co-evolution of these hybrid entities rather than on the human or non-human elements alone.

Hybridised and distributed knowledge systems are inherently unstable. They are so not only because of the types of re-arranging described above but also because DIY practitioners (along with flat-pack constructors, mechanics, gardeners and others) learn from experience. Some experiences are bad and some are so bad that aspiring practitioners are put off for good. However, others serve to increase competence and confidence and thereby extend the range of possible future projects. Alex, an IT professional in his early 20s, has recently acquired a small, late 20th century house and is deploying and developing his DIY abilities in making relatively superficial modifications. In talking about his own DIY career, Alex distinguished between moments of relatively formal knowledge acquisition - these included lessons at school, being deliberately taught by his dad, carefully reading DIY manuals and searching the internet for advice – and situations in which he drew upon previous experience in figuring out how to approach new tasks and solve unexpected problems as they arose along the way. Alex claimed that his confidence grew through physical engagement with tools and materials and through the practical accomplishment of specific projects. In reflecting on this process he commented, almost in passing, that individual products sometimes led the way. Elaborating on this point, he discussed his desire for an angle grinder and his belief that with such a device in hand, new grinding projects would necessarily emerge. In this example, Alex's account demonstrates the range of actors, both human and nonhuman, which play a role in the distributed achievement of the competence necessary to tackle and realise a DIY job. It also points to a further dynamic over time, in which re-distributions of competence have cumulative, co-evolutionary consequences for the accomplishment of specific tasks and for the formulation of new projects.

Interviews with individuals demonstrate cycles of competence and accomplishment at the level of personal biographies. In combination these have collective effect on the 'career' of DIY as a practice and as a market: as new tools and materials are designed and developed, new projects come into view, in turn 'requiring' new forms of product innovation. The range of goods involved in the vast array of projects that constitute DIY is truly enormous and changing patterns of distributed competence are correspondingly complex. As hinted at above, but not yet discussed in any detail, the relation between specific skills, tools and products is vital for the formulation and effective accomplishment of complete projects. The notion of 'the project' is central to the forms of consumption and practice with which we are concerned and it is to this concept that we now turn.

Practices and Projects

Respondents used the notion of 'a project' frequently and fluidly. Putting up a shelf counted as a project and so did knocking down a wall. In talking about his attic renovation, Will referred to moving the radiator as 'a project', even though this task was but one step in the larger scheme of creating a space in which the children could play. For the most part, people used the term to describe planned, temporally bounded episodes or sequences of activity resulting in an observable outcome. What counted as a project varied widely yet the notion was uniformly important as a way of structuring the otherwise boundless flow of daily life (Zerubavel 1985). Time was set aside for projects, tools and materials were acquired or assembled with the project in mind, and projects were the basic building blocks of individual DIY careers. Used in these ways, the project stands somewhat

outside the streams of practice and the momentary conjunctions of tools and skills that characterise the doing of DIY.

For our purposes, investigation of 'the project' provided an empirically grounded means of investigating complex inter-relations of practices and their constituent elements. While individuals might well figure as the 'carriers' of practices (Reckwitz 2002), projects have a rather different status. For one thing, they are more obviously 'made' by human actors who weave multiple practices together in the course of defining and realising the landmarks around which their DIY lives are built. Even if they take years to achieve, projects constitute 'orchestrating' forces, condensing diverse resources and energies around specific goals. Tools and materials can and often do 'configure' their users and variously generate or demand specific forms of competence but their role in framing projects is typically less direct. As Alex's experience indicates, those who own an angle grinder - or who are confident in using one - are perhaps more likely to formulate projects in which a bit of grinding is involved. Similarly, those who have spare materials to hand often think about how they might be used. This dynamic can be more purposive, as could be likely in the case of the hobbyist; the acquisition of a tool – perhaps a professional quality router or a woodturning lathe – may not be towards an end or accomplishing a project, but rather of prompting oneself to acquire the competence and confidence to use it adequately, indeed to be worthy of it. In other words, tools, materials and associated forms of competence influence the range of what people take to be possible but they rarely drive the entire process of 'project' definition.

It is therefore tempting to think of project definition (and of all the consumption that entails) as the outcome of deliberate human planning and of individual decision-making. However, our respondents suggest that these are not the only dynamics at play and that other terms and concepts are required in understanding how complexes of practice and consumption come together.

Some interviewees (retrospectively) represented the work they had done as the gradual realisation of a 'grand design'. Lisa is in her 30's and shares an early 20th century terraced house with her young daughter. The house was structurally sound when she moved in but decorated to poor standards and with a rather floral character which ran counter to Lisa's modernist aesthetic. In recounting the work she has so far overseen (done largely by professionals, Lisa limiting her contribution to basic preparation and final finishing), she presents a coherent strategy designed to realise a specific vision of how she would like her home to be. This is reflected in the work so far accomplished, most evidently in the striking shapes and contrasts created by an imaginative knocking through from the dining room to the kitchen. Lisa had a definite plan, but the more common pattern was one in which projects unfolded in the course of an ongoing 'conversation' between a changing household - its composition, routines, accumulation of possessions, etc. - and the physical fabric of the home. Most of the DIYers with whom we spoke described an initial flurry of activity on first moving into their current property and for those who move frequently, this is the only kind of DIY they do. However, people who remained at one address for longer routinely attributed subsequent DIY 'projects' to life events like the arrival of a new baby, the departure of grown children, retirement or changed financial circumstances. These were driven not by a grand plan, by fashion or by the desire to materialise a modified self image (Clarke 2001) but by the ordinary exigencies of everyday life.

Whatever the stated reason for embarking upon them, there are other more immediate senses in which DIY projects are emergent. There can be few DIYers who have completed a project of any scale in entirely the way they anticipated, having gone through only the processes envisaged and used only the tools and materials they thought they would need. For any one DIYer, some jobs will go exactly according to plan but as a field of activity, DIY is almost inherently exploratory. It is so because of the sheer complexity of coordinating tools, materials, fixings and human expertise; because of the unpredictability of working in relation to an often intractable or surprising structure (i.e. the existing house), and because of the need to adapt and cope with the contingencies that inevitably arise.

Experience removes some of this uncertainty but for most of our respondents, understanding precisely what a project involved and hence what tools and materials would (ideally) be required, developed through an iterative process of doing, reflecting and adapting. For example, Will's plans for the attic room were influenced by discussion with his partner and the children, by the extent of what he felt he could confidently do himself and by the reality of an exposed roof timber running the

entire length of the room and at a such a height that the children were sure to bang their heads. The final arrangement – in which a small section of the exposed timber formed the entrance to a cosy den and in which the remainder became part of a fixed play house – reflected some of this deliberation. However, the precise shape of the play house, the size and location of its window and the closing mechanism of the door were determined along the way as Will stretched his carpentry skills to the limit in assembling new and existing materials - wood, nails and screws - with the tools he had to hand.

In this case, nothing went significantly awry and there were no nasty surprises. However, new projects often emerge from the very process of DIY. Michael and Jenny had just such an experience when they felt they needed to change an old gas heater:

> The latest project was putting, there were two old gas, like 1950s style gas heaters here and we lived with them for about 3 years until we grew really tired of them. And it really started with that one over there, where one Saturday morning we were griping about it and I just sort of pulled it off the wall and I discovered there was a bit more to it. That [*indicating an open fire place*] was all bricked in where there's now the wood burning stove. I just started knocking a few bricks off, and before you know it the whole thing opened up and then that turned into about a five week project at weekends, doing, I did that all by myself. We've kind of had to babyproof it a bit because we've got a 9 month old, but Jenny did all the tiling.
>
> (Michael)

Just as one move can lead to another when realising a project, so the completion of one project can prompt DIYers to formulate another. A tour of Lisa's house revealed the extent to which the details of her Grand Design had in fact emerged along the way. Having removed the floral wallpaper and painted the downstairs walls a nice clean white, Lisa felt compelled to replace the patterned carpet left by the previous owners. Although acceptable alongside the 'offensive' wallpaper, the carpet in turn became 'offensive' once the walls had been dealt with (a good example of what McCracken (1988) refers to as the 'Diderot' effect). In both scenarios, one thing leads to another with what are often unpredictable consequences. In some cases, stocks of tools and skills build up as DIYers resolve unforeseen difficulties: in others, they lead to disillusionment, failure and defeat. Whatever the outcome, the point is that narratives of DIY and associated careers of consumption are typically carried along by a tide of projects, problems, challenges, outcomes and future ambitions.

As we have already discussed, the relation between tools, materials and embodied competence is important for the process of DIY. It now seems that project formation also has a material dimension. This takes at least two forms: one in which projects are defined with the aim of closing the gap between what the home affords in terms of space, shelving, etc. and the changing demands made of it, and another in which projects – in process or once completed - generate new material conditions and new possibilities or requirements for future DIY.

To summarise, project formulation often contains an element of economic rationality, for example, in the idea of adding value and/or in the logic of doing it yourself; there is some evidence of market manipulation, especially in matters of style and aesthetics, and questions of self-identity are undoubtedly important for those for whom DIY is part of making the house a home. However, our respondents also describe other much more emergent, much more contingent aspects of project formation, many of which have to do with pragmatic processes of engaging with their immediate physical environment and the materials of which it is made.

Product, project and practice

We began this paper with the idea of linking and building on the agenda-setting contributions of Warde (2005), who identifies consumption as an outcome of practice, and Campbell (2005) who highlights the active and creative role of craft consumers. We also began with the suspicion that there was more to be said – in both cases – about the relation between what people consume (the hardware of consumption) and the practices in which they are engaged. Our study of home DIY projects and those who do them has indeed generated new insight into the material bases and dynamics of consumption. In this final section, we elaborate on the theoretical implications of these observations and comment on their relevance for other areas of consumption and practice. In drawing the threads of our analysis together we highlight two related ideas. The first is that in

structuring distributions of competence, objects indirectly structure possibilities of practice and consumption. Second, that the doing of DIY is itself of consequence for individual careers, emergent projects and future patterns of demand and product development, including demand for objects that help define the possibilities of future practice.

Partly because they have focused more on moments of acquisition than on processes of use, theories of consumption have yet to pay sufficient attention to relations *between* consumer goods or *between* objects and associated forms of competence and expertise. In concentrating on this latter feature, and in doing so with respect to DIY, we have explored the possibility that consumer goods - the conceptually invisible *stuff* of consumption – sometimes have an active part to play in the dynamics of doing, desire and demand. Despite coming from different intellectual traditions the notion that objects can create "user experiences" (Kuniavsky 2003); configure specific actions (Woolgar 1990) and engender or sustain programmes of social and institutional order (Latour 1992) have potentially important implications for theories of consumption. In the examples we have considered, products like non-drip paint, power tools, Speedfit plumbing and MDF have tangible consequences for the distribution of competence. As such these items are potentially important in setting and moving the boundary between what amateurs are and are not willing to do for themselves and in permitting and sustaining innovations in practice. Innovations of this kind are in turn of consequence for the development and design of future products, which are in turn relevant for the co-constitution of future practice. In short, the proposition that products and practices co-evolve is critical for understanding the dynamics certainly of craft consumption and, arguably, of other forms as well.

Second, we have made much of the transformative character of DIY. As we have seen, each project and each task of which each project is made is of consequence for the development of competence, skill or disillusionment, and so for the formulation, or otherwise, of new projects. Although often missed in discussions of consumer culture, this temporal aspect is vital in understanding the careers of individual consumers and the trajectories of the practices they collectively reproduce and transform. In describing their own histories and experiences, the DIYers with whom we spoke routinely referred to the projects with which they had been involved. For them, the project - however loosely defined – was the critical conceptual unit around which doing and consuming were organised. In discussing processes of project formulation we noticed that many emerged through and in the course of practical engagement between people and the materials and properties with and on which they worked. Further research would be required to discover whether the cumulative, complicated and emergent relation between what Pred (1981) refers to as 'paths' and punctuating 'projects' is a feature of other practice-oriented patterns of consumption but this is work that could and should be undertaken.

In conclusion, we chose to study DIY because it appeared to have certain distinctive and distinctively interesting features: straddling categories of work and leisure and of production and consumption; being directly about the engagement of people and materials, and being a field in which competence is evidently important. Analysis of this arguably special case has allowed us to identify a chain of relationships through which consumer goods are linked to competence; competence to practice and practice back to the consumption of consumer goods in a potentially unending and co-evolutionary cycle. Not all forms of consumption are so clearly ordered around a material substructure and more is required to discover how these patterns work out in cases other than DIY. In establishing such a possibility, we hope to extend the reach and scope of consumption studies and in the same move demonstrate the relevance of theories of technology and material culture for such enquiry.

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