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ARTICLE

Consumption and Theories of Practice

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Abstract. This article considers the potential of a revival of interest in theories of practice for the study of consumption. It presents an abridged account of the basic precepts of a theory of practice and extracts some broad principles for its application to the analysis of final consumption. The basic assumption is that consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices and that being a competent practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. Such a view stresses the routine, collective and conventional nature of much consumption but also emphasizes that practices are internally differentiated and dynamic. Distinctive features of the account include its understanding of the way wants emanate from practices, of the processes whereby practices emerge, develop and change, of the consequences of extensive personal involvements in many practices, and of the manner of recruitment to practices. The article concludes with discussion of some theoretical, substantive and methodological implications.

Key words

consumption • practices • social differentiation • theories of practice

INTRODUCTION

There is now a huge corpus of work on consumption, but it still lacks theoretical consolidation. This is most obvious when contemplating the situations of different disciplines, where there is very little common ground (see, for example, the review in Miller, 1995). But the problem is no less great in individual disciplines like sociology, for example, where output seems to me to have been bi-polar, generating either abstract and

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speculative social theory or detailed case studies. Moreover, case studies have been skewed towards favourite, but restricted, topics – fashion, advertising and some forms of popular recreational activity – with particular attention paid to their symbolic meanings and role in the formation of self-identity. These case studies, perhaps encouraged by prominent versions of the abstract theories which say that the consumer has no choice but to choose and will be judged in terms of the symbolic adequacy of that choice (e.g. Bauman, 1988; Giddens, 1991), have very often operated with models of highly autonomous individuals preoccupied with symbolic communication. The article starts from a belief that these approaches give a partial understanding of consumption and that fruitful alternatives will avoid methodological individualist accounts of ‘the consumer’ and will be concerned as much with what people do and feel as what they mean.

My purpose is modest, to show that application of some rudimentary concepts and propositions derived from a rather fragmentary body of theory – for theories of practice are very heterogeneous, as even their most ardent exponents admit (Schatzki et al., 2001) – provides some new insights into how consumption is organized and how it might best be analysed. The next section presents a brief summary of some of the themes associated with theories of practice and notes some potential difficulties in the application of philosophical accounts in empirical analysis. Thereafter, I consider some substantive aspects of processes of consumption and the distinctive features of an approach via a theory of practice. The conclusion looks forward to further developments, theoretical and empirical, resulting from looking through a lens of practices.

AN ABRIDGED ACCOUNT OF A THEORY OF PRACTICE

Reckwitz (2002: 243) detects a renewal of interest in theories of practice. He also finds, however, many varieties: he and Schatzki (1996: 11) list Giddens, Bourdieu, Lyotard and Charles Taylor among the key exponents. Given their differences, no authoritative or synthetic version is available. Hence attempts to isolate features common to all produces a comparatively sparse and abstract list of distinctive characteristics (for attempts see Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001: 1–5). Among the attractions of theories of practice for Schatzki is that they are neither individualist nor holist. Instead they ‘present pluralistic and flexible pictures of the constitution of social life that generally oppose hypostatized unities, root order in local contexts, and/or successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities’ (1996: 12). They are thus consistent with many of the claims of critical contemporary social theories and provide a means to

recognize ontological features of the postmodern without succumbing to epistemological relativism. His basic insight is that 'both social order and individuality . . . result from practices' (1996: 13). For Reckwitz (2002: 245–6) the appeal is that they incorporate an appreciation of cultural phenomena which justifies rejection of analyses based on models of either *homo economicus* or *homo sociologicus*. Acting rationally and following norms presuppose, in addition, understanding and intelligibility which are necessary cultural bases for the existence of practices and which are highlighted through attention to practices.

In lieu of a fully integrated theory of practice I present here a minimal set of concepts and precepts to be drawn upon to explore implications for the analysis of consumption. My abridgement is indebted to Bourdieu (especially 1990[1980]), Schatzki (1996), Giddens (1984), and to a much lesser extent MacIntyre (1985), and is oriented by the very useful overview of Reckwitz (2002). A summary version of the core concepts and key minimal propositions involved in a theory of practice selected partly for their relevance to a sociology of consumption follows.

There is a distinction to be made between practice and practices. This is summed up concisely by Reckwitz (2002: 249):

Practice (Praxis) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to 'theory' and mere thinking). 'Practices' in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A 'practice' (Praktik) is 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.

Sociologists of practice have shown interest in both. Bourdieu, for example, while interested in many of the elements defining Praktik, does not conceive of a practice as a coherent entity and is especially intent on emphasizing the importance of praxis. Yet the notion of practices is particularly instructive for the sociology of consumption.

Schatzki identifies two central notions of practice: practice as a co-ordinated entity and practice as performance. The first notion is of

practice as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. Examples are cooking practices, voting practices, industrial practices, recreational practices, and

correctional practices. To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways. Three major avenues of linkage are involved: (1) through understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) through explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) through what I will call 'teleoaffective' structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods. (Schatzki, 1996: 89)

Important to note here is that practices consist of both doings and sayings, suggesting that analysis must be concerned with both practical activity and its representations. Moreover we are given a helpful depiction of the components which form a 'nexus', the means through which doings and sayings hang together and can be said to be coordinated. For a variety of reasons, including ease of reference, I refer to these three components as (1) understandings, (2) procedures and (3) engagements.

The second sense, practice as performance, refers to the carrying out of practices, the performing of the doings and sayings which 'actualizes and sustains practices in the sense of nexuses' (Schatzki, 1996: 90). The reproduction of the nexus requires regular enactment. As Reckwitz (2002: 249–50) puts it:

a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice. . . . The single individual – as a bodily and mental agent – then acts as the 'carrier' (Träger) of a practice – and, in fact, of many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another. Thus, she or he is not only a carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring. These conventionalized 'mental' activities of understanding, knowing how and desiring are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates, not qualities of the individual.

Practices are thus coordinated entities but also require performance for their existence. A performance presupposes a practice. This is at the core, also, of Giddens's rather better known theory of structuration, according to which the domain of study of the social sciences

. . . is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices

ordered across space and time. Human social activities . . . are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors. (Giddens, 1984: 2)

Schatzki indicates the broad scope of the concept when drawing a distinction between dispersed practices and integrative practices. 'Dispersed practices' (1996: 91–2) appear in many sectors of social life, examples being describing, following rules, explaining and imagining. Their performance primarily requires understanding; an explanation, for instance, entails understanding of how to carry out an appropriate act of 'explaining', an ability to identify explaining when doing it oneself or when someone else does it, and an ability to prompt or respond to an explanation. This is about 'knowing how to' do something, a capacity which presupposes a shared and collective practice involving performance in appropriate contexts and mastery of common understandings, which are the grounds for a particular act being recognizable as explaining.

'Integrative practices' are 'the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life' (Schatzki, 1996: 98). Examples include farming practices, cooking practices and business practices. These include, sometimes in specialized forms, dispersed practices, which are part of the components of saying and doing which allow the understanding of, say, cooking practice, along with the ability to follow the rules governing the practice and its particular 'teleoaffective structure'. These are ones which are generally of more interest to sociologists and particularly for a sociology of consumption.

In summary, in the words of Reckwitz (2002: 250):

A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood. To say that practices are 'social practices' is indeed a tautology: A practice is social, as it is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds.

These elements of a philosophical account of practice cannot be simply transposed into empirical analysis. As general theories of practice they tend to be idealized, abstract and insufficiently attentive to the social processes involved in the creation and reproduction of practices. Understandably so, for their preoccupations are different, metatheoretical rather than

empirical.¹ Philosophical descriptions of practices often seem to presume an unlikely degree of shared understanding and common conventions, a degree of consensus which implies processes of effective uniform transmission of understandings, procedures and engagements. It is almost inconceivable that such conditions be met.² And if they were to be, the often voiced criticism that the concept of practice makes it difficult to account for change would appear to gain additional force.³ But none of this is necessarily the case, as will be argued presently. Sociological applications of the concept may deal equally with persistence and change in the forms of practices and their adherents, with manifest differences in the ways in which individuals and groups engage in the same practice, and with the social conflicts and political alliances involved in the performance and reorganization of practices. Substantive research on consumption might thus exploit some of the potential merits of a theory of practice, including that it is not dependent on presumptions about the primacy of individual choice or action, whether of the rational action type or as expression of personal identity. As Schatzki insists, practice theories are neither individualist nor holist; they portray social organization as something other than individuals making contracts, yet are not dependent on a holistic notion of culture or societal totality. Practice theories comprehend non-instrumentalist notions of conduct, both observing the role of routine on the one hand, and emotion, embodiment and desire on the other.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CONSUMPTION

Given their promise, it is strange that theories of practice have scarcely been applied systematically to the area of consumption.⁴ Two prominent practice theorists – Giddens and Bourdieu – have made contributions, though neither seem adequate. Giddens appeared to lay aside the arguments of *The Constitution of Society* (1984) when discussing lifestyles (1991: 80–7), where he offered a thoroughly voluntaristic analysis of individual action. Bourdieu, I would contend, had he pursued the injunctions of *The Logic of Practice* (1990[1980]), would not have arrived at the account of taste he offered in *Distinction* (1984[1979]). For he did not employ his theory of practice much in *Distinction*, being more concerned with the relationship between habitus and capital. Hence, he oscillates between the two senses of *Praktik* and *Praxis*, appearing to use his concept of field as a weakly explicated substitute for the former.⁵ In what follows I therefore try to emphasize the implications of explicitly and determinedly using practices as a theoretical avenue for analysing consumption. I illustrate my points with reference to the integrative practice of motoring, travelling privately

by automobile, a predominant mode of experience since the mid-20th century (Dant, 2004: 74; Urry, 2004: 26), which entails equipment and skills, and also shared, yet differentiated, understandings, procedures and engagement.

Consumption and practices

Most practices, and probably all integrative practices, require and entail consumption. As currently used the term 'consumption' is a syncretic concept (Abbott, 2001), displaying a chronic ambivalence between two contrasting senses, of purchase and of using-up, both of which are equally inscribed in everyday language and scholarly analysis. Despite the significance of purchasing commodities in furnishing of the conditions of daily life in contemporary western societies, consumption cannot be restricted to, nor defined by, market exchange. While economics is overwhelmingly concerned with the terms of exchange, other social sciences properly pay more attention to the symbolic significance and the use of items. Consumption cannot be reduced to demand, requiring instead its examination as an integral part of most spheres of daily life (see Harvey et al., 2001). With this in mind, I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion.

In this view, consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice.⁶ Appropriation occurs within practices: cars are worn out and petrol is burned in the process of motoring. Items appropriated and the manner of their deployment are governed by the conventions of the practice; touring, commuting and off-road sports are forms of motoring following different scripts for performers and functions for vehicles. The patterns of similarity and difference in possessions and use within and between groups of people, often demonstrated by studies of consumption, may thus be seen as the corollary of the way the practice is organized, rather than as the outcome of personal choice, whether unconstrained or bounded. The conventions and the standards of the practice steer behaviour. This is consistent with Alfred Marshall's claim (see Swann, 2002: 30) that activity generates wants, rather than vice versa. Practices, rather than individual desires, we might say, create wants. For example, the paraphernalia of the hot rod enthusiast – modified vehicles, manuals and magazines, memorabilia, 'records of auto-racing sounds', etc. (Moorhouse, 1991: 82) – are more directly the consequence of engagement in the

practice of a particular motor sport than they are of individual taste or choice. It is the fact of engagement in the practice, rather than any personal decision about a course of conduct, that explains the nature and process of consumption. In addition, we can see that particular items deployed and consumed are intricately intertwined, and often defining, elements of a practice and a conduit for its performances.⁷

The social differentiation of practices and their performance

Social practices do not present uniform planes upon which agents participate in identical ways but are instead internally differentiated on many dimensions. Considered simply, from the point of view of the individual person, the performance of driving will depend on past experience, technical knowledge, learning, opportunities, available resources, previous encouragement by others, etc. (see, for example, O'Connell, 1998: 43ff, on the historical development in Britain of access to cars by gender). From the point of view of a practice as a whole, we can think of a dedicated and specialized domain comprising many different competencies and capabilities. Considering agents' capacities we might differentiate between long-standing participants and novitiates, theorists and technicians, generalists and specialists, conservatives and radicals, visionaries and followers, the highly knowledgeable and the relatively ignorant, and the professional and the amateur. All are differences which may be relevant for different purposes in analysing either the role of participants or the structure of their positions in the practice. Hence we can differentiate on the basis of the potential contribution of agents to the reproduction and development of the practice. As advocates of the 'social worlds' tradition of thought remind us, differentiation within a practice is partly a matter of commitment to it: the analytic distinction between insiders, regulars, tourists and strangers with different levels of investment in any particular world has proved valuable (see Gronow, 2004; Unruh, 1979).⁸

Bourdieu (1984[1979]), also concerned with the internal differentiation of practices, focused by contrast on their social classification, the processes of access and assimilation to them, and the external rewards going to different positions in fields. Attributing extensive causal powers to *habitus*, which is 'converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions' (1984[1979]: 170), his account centres on the effects of general and transposable dispositions rather than on the organization of practices. The distinction between understanding, procedures and engagement was, therefore, blurred because disputes about taste have their dynamics outside the practices in question. For Bourdieu,

the social differentiation of practices arose from class structured classifications and perceptions rather than recruitment to, and activity within, particular practices. But it is because practices are internally differentiated that they are able to generate disputes about taste.

Empirical evidence indicates differences between groups of people with regard to their understandings of a practice, the procedures they adopt and the values to which they aspire. Dispositions towards cars and motoring, for example, vary by group and place. Edensor (2004: 114) observes differences across countries in 'the embodied competencies and conventions of driving' (see also Sheller, 2004: 233ff). The history of motoring in Britain is in part a story of social class differentiation, emerging as an upper class amusement which diffused to sections of the middle class between the two world wars (O'Connell, 1998: 11–32). However, its incorporation into everyday life did not entail uniformity of understanding; consider for instance the role of joyriding (O'Connell, 1998: 102–6). The development of car travel in the USA is sketched by Gartman (2004) as a case of an initially exclusive activity, becoming increasingly popular and plural, and now driven more by sub-cultural or lifestyle variation than by the logic of class (see also O'Dell, 2001). Thus, he argues, motoring retains a capacity to mark social distinctions, but not as a function of social hierarchy. The belated, and still restricted, access of women to the driving of cars, as well as the rationalizations for such exclusion, demonstrates again, and very clearly, that practices are differentiated (Gartman, 2004; O'Connell, 1998: 43–71; Scharff, 1991).

It is worth considering that the three key components of the nexus identified by Schatzki as linking doings and sayings in order to constitute a practice (understandings, procedures and engagements) may vary independently of one another between groups of participants. For it is highly likely that – without flouting the condition that the elements constitute a linked nexus – agents vary in their understandings, skills and goals and that the relationship between these three components also varies. It is probable that people learn each in different ways, suggesting that we might profitably examine in detail how understandings, procedures and values of engagement are each acquired and then adapted to performances.

The trajectory of practices

Practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history. Moreover, that history will be differentiated, for the substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context, for example of household organization,

dominant modes of economic exchange and cultural traditions. 'Why do people do what they do?', and 'how do they do those things in the way that they do?' are perhaps the key sociological questions concerning practices, the answers to which will necessarily be historical and institutional. This is to acknowledge the social construction of practices, the role of collective learning in the construal of competence, and the importance of the exercise of power in the shaping of definitions of justifiable conduct. Consumption has a role in such trajectories, since the modes and contents of appropriation of goods and services are integral elements of a practice. For instance, O'Connell (1998: 123–36) argues that the establishment of motoring as a dominating mode of transport in Britain was a conjunctural effect of the class composition of early owners of cars who, through the motoring organizations that they patronized, had the capacity to exercise political influence over the shape of traffic regulation and infrastructural provision.

The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. The concept of practice inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation. At any given point in time a practice has a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives. Such formal and informal codifications govern conduct within that practice, though often without much reflection or conscious awareness on the part of the bearers. This has the potential for the reproduction of that practice, which indeed transpires much of the time, for practices have some considerable inertia. Thus theories of practice emphasize processes like habituation, routine, practical consciousness, tacit knowledge, tradition, and so forth. Performance in a familiar practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective. As Giddens (1984: 60) appreciates, routines are central, notwithstanding a capacity for reflective monitoring of performance. The dispositions of agents to act within a practice are deeply entrenched *and* embodied; there are emotional and corporeal as well as cognitive bases of behaviour (on car travel see Dant, 2004; Dant and Martin, 2001; Sheller, 2004). Bourdieu's much maligned concept of the *habitus*, through its sense of embodied and structured dispositions, is one notion which grasps the orderliness and predictability of people's actions when faced with apparent free choices, both within a particular practice and across different practices. The patterning of social life is a consequence of the established understandings of what courses of action are not inappropriate. Convention in this sense is central to the whole understanding of what it means to be engaged in a practice.

However, performances in the same practice are not always the same.

Conventions will usually be to some degree contested, with some practitioners typically still attached to prior codes of conduct, while others, perhaps of a new generation, seek to replace current orthodoxies with new prescriptions. Understandings, conventions and aspirations will normally be differentially distributed among and observed by its practitioners, representing a mix of the satisficing and the optimal, or adequate and best practice. However, practices also contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment. For enthusiasts most practices entail pursuit of excellence and a degree of competition, but for others the need to keep up and maintain relative standards of performance leads them to want acceptable, if not always state-of-the-art, equipment, experience and provision. Then, of course, there is the push of capital accumulation wherein economic growth depends in part on persuading people to adopt new things, both raising the volume of consumption but also diffusing new expectations. In addition, practices are not hermetically sealed off from other adjacent and parallel practices, from which lessons are learned, innovations borrowed, procedures copied. The contemporary mass produced car has been much enhanced by technical innovation in motor sports, and the idea of going for a drive at the weekend draws upon conventions of independent holiday travel.

This suggests nuances to accounts of the way that economic production affects consumption, and vice versa. Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalized and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, *qua* consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies. Customers cannot usually be dictated to by producers of goods and services; most innovations fail, more new functions and designs are rejected than adopted. Yet, nor are producers by-standers in the process. Producers attempt to mould practices in line with their commercial interests. Firms learned to introduce rapid changes of styling to encourage customers to change their cars regularly and to discard them long before obsolescence (Gartman, 2002). They also suggest that their own products will enhance performances: we are persuaded that some cars are faster, smoother, safer, or more exciting to drive, all means to enhance or improve our practice. The effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of practices.

The multiplicity of practices

There are many practices in the world, and most people engage in a considerable number of them. That number increases; according to Miller

(1987: 8), the multiplication of enthusiasms and interests is one of the marvels of our era. Pursuit of variety, a current trend identified as cultural omnivorousness (e.g. Peterson and Kern, 1996), results in continual expansion of the set of items conventionally defined as part of a decent and normal life. Increased diversity of engagement has potentially enormous economic consequences; getting people to dabble in everything offers splendid commercial opportunities, particularly when it is the affluent who are the most prone to dabble. This increase is attributable in part to the multiplication and diversification of practices. Explicit examination of the interconnections between changes in practice and demand for commodities reveals a tangled web of forces. Demand will often be generated indirectly, as when new tools or techniques require complementary products for their effective adoption; fast cars beg for motorways, hot rods for drag strips. The suggestion that one might wish to drive a vehicle off normal roads sells sports utility vehicles and also encourages the belief that one might require more than one car, different ones for different purposes. Another process sees the insertion of old or established products into practices which previously had no place for them, as the installation of radios, cassette players and CDs into automobiles incorporated cultural consumption into the practice of motoring (Bull, 2004). This in turn is part of a more general intensification of simultaneous and multiple consumption, an inescapably normal process because people typically engage in several practices at the same time, each with its own required paraphernalia.

Wants are fulfilled only in practice, their satisfaction attributable to effective practical performances. The capacity for a practice to deliver fulfillments of different types is well established (e.g. Warde and Martens, 2000). Studies of motoring point to its multiple meanings and effects, including symbolizing 'personal identity, family relationships and sociability' and 'liberation, empowerment and social inclusion' (Sheller, 2004: 230). They also suggest that several pleasures may be taken at once, conspicuous display, excitement, sociability and opportunity for aesthetic judgement being just as important as getting from A to B (Carrabine and Longhurst, 2002; Miller, 2001). The practice is the conduit and *raison d'être* for the gratifications which arise from its component moments of consumption. Consumption rarely occurs purely for its own sake, but contributes to the delivery of a range of varied rewards.

Observing the multiplicity of practices raises again an important old question, often now thought impolite or impolitic, of whether practices have differential value. Is there still cultural hierarchy? It is hard to escape the conclusion that practices do offer different rewards and that the effects of

consumption, given meaning through performances, can be evaluated systematically. Aversion to cultural snobbery has obscured two general points, first that rewards internal to practices are partly a function of the complexity of the particular practice and, second, that the external rewards to be gained by any individual are a function of the prestige of the practice. The first point is established by the tradition in psychology which shows that if tasks are too simple boredom ensues, if they are too difficult then anxiety is aroused. Best to have activities which fall between, where challenge and competence are in balance, when, according to Czikszentmihalyi (1992), people achieve a highly positive sense of 'flow'. This implies, first, that level of proficiency in a practice is a major determinant of psychic reward. It also follows that some practices can be seen as more complex than others because they offer more levels at which opportunities to experience flow can be found. The greater the range of challenges, the more a practice can deliver internal goods to a larger number of people (see also Benedikt, 1996). The second point acknowledges the arbitrariness of the cultural content of practices – there is no standard by which to establish that one type of music or sport is superior to any other – yet insists that some provide their participants with access to privileged social networks, attribution of cultural honour and, often, economic advantage. This happens as an effect of the operation of the general field of social power wherein dominant groups exclude others from involvement in activities which they represent as especially worthwhile and where expertise is, hence, socially and personally prestigious. It remains the case, as Bourdieu (1984[1979]) demonstrated, that some practices offer greater external social rewards than others.

The individual at the intersection of practices

Reckwitz notes that in theories of practice 'the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents'. He continues,

As carriers of practices, they [agents] are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms: They understand the world and themselves, and use know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice. There is a very precise place for the 'individual' – as distinguished from the agent . . . : As there are diverse social practices and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines. (Reckwitz, 2002: 256)

This view, while minimizing the analytic importance of individuality, does not prohibit the description and characterization of the consumption behaviour of a single individual. An individual's pattern of consumption is the sum of the moments of consumption which occur in the totality of his or her practices. If the individual is merely the intersection point of many practices, and practices are the bedrock of consumption, then a new perspective on consumer behaviour emerges. New explanations of contemporary identities and the role of consumption in identity formation suggest themselves.

Every individual acquires items from different practices. Patterns of consumption – of expenditures, possessions, portfolios of cultural activities – can therefore be explained and accounted for partly by volume of practices and commitment to practices. Sequential and simultaneous engagement in diverse practices, especially when involving people belonging to disparate and heterogeneous social networks, might be a source of the much discussed tendency towards fragmentation of the self.⁹ Much depends on the extent to which networks overlap and whether the norms of different practices are consistent with each other. But, arguably, this is not the dissolution, fracturing or saturating of the self, as is suggested in postmodern accounts. Neither is it simply a form of psychological adaptation to the postmodern world, nor a problem of identity per se, but rather a consequence of the nature of the social organization of practices. An adequate account of the apparently fragmentary personal lifestyles of the contemporary period would be one founded on the outcomes of multiple social engagements and differential locations in a plurality of practices.

One issue that arises is how, for an individual, moments of consumption occurring in different positions map onto one another and how coherent are the patterns resulting from mixing and matching different forms. Certainly the marketing of cars, like many other products, revolves around the suggestion that certain marques or models fit particular personalities or life-styles (e.g. Jain, 2002: 398). Some people probably achieve a degree of coherence. A person of good taste is often represented as someone who can demonstrate consistent aesthetic judgement across a number of cultural practices – even if this is nothing more than the capacity to *discuss* preferences in a particular critical manner (see Holt, 1997). Yet what might be judged as consistent, or going together well, is itself contested and subject to social struggle. Moreover, whether such combinations are cumulative and structured class dispositions, as proposed by Bourdieu, or more contingent effects of practical engagements, is an empirical question.

These considerations are also relevant to a paradox of recognition. As the number of practices grows and many become more varied internally, it becomes increasingly difficult to interpret those signs and symbols supposed to communicate personal identity to others. As Campbell (1995: 115–17) indicated, people may believe that they are conveying a message through their comportment and adornment, yet this may be incomprehensible to a large part of the audience which observes the performance. For instance, it is likely that someone with some investment in motoring or an attachment to a car sub-culture will be able to read vehicles and driving in such a way as to recognize another's position and disposition, but others who are marginal or strangers to the relevant segment of the practice will remain oblivious to the intended meaning. It is thus important to recognize the variability in the extent to which practices are shared and understood among a broad public, for preferences are often learned within a particular sphere of a practice and their justification has localized jurisdiction.

It follows from this – and from the proposition that practices are the principal steering device of consumption because the primary source of desire, knowledge and judgement – that recruitment to a practice becomes a principal explanatory issue. Processes of enrolment into practices will range from introduction to domestic ones during infancy to joining of formal associations for the pursuit of social and recreational activities. Individuals then have personal trajectories within practices and, once enrolled, subsequent immersion in a practice often has the features of a career.¹⁰ Changing positions within practices may be narrated in terms of changing forms of consumption, whether of objects or experiences. Equally important as a topic of investigation is the gradual withdrawal from or the abandoning of a practice, or indeed resistance to being recruited in the first place.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, from the point of view of a theory of practice, consumption occurs within and for the sake of practices. Items consumed are put to use in the course of engaging in particular practices like motoring and being a competent practitioner requires appropriate consumption of goods and services. The practice, so to speak, requires that competent practitioners will avail themselves of the requisite services, possess and command the capability to manipulate the appropriate tools, and devote a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. This is, of course, in addition to exhibiting common understanding, know-how, and commitment to the value of the practice. Such a view is consistent with an approach to

consumption which stresses the routine, ordinary, collective, conventional nature of much consumption. It is also consistent with the view that practices are internally differentiated such that persons in different situations do the same activity differently. The implications for pursuing a sociology of consumption are many, but here I will restrict myself to a few summary and programmatic observations.

Let me first say that within the confines of this article there are several very important matters which I have not been able to address. The argument remains to be made that theories of practice perform better than, or at least as well as, other approaches claiming similar merits, for example theories of culture and sub-culture or the theory of social worlds. Also the account of theories of practice is a schematic composite ignoring the very substantial differences among them. The refinement and closer specification of a particular theory of practice is essential: I believe that a developed version of a Bourdieuan theory would serve best, but that remains to be shown. Nor have I presented a set of procedural rules for determining where the boundaries of a practice lie, what separates one practice from an adjacent practice. What is it that allows one to say that many performances which are not identical are all part of the same practice? The answer to that question would go some way to specifying how new practices emerge, an equally pressing issue. These are, however, mostly problems of the theory of practice, and it has not been the purpose of this article to advance that theory but rather to anticipate how we might analyse consumption differently if we take our orientation from theories of practice.

The approach offers a distinctive perspective, attending less to individual choices and more to the collective development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life. The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture, from personal expression to social competence, from mildly constrained choice to disciplined participation. From this angle the concept of 'the consumer', a figure who has bewitched political and social scientists as well as economists, evaporates. Instead the key focal points become the organization of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined. Persons confront moments of consumption neither as sovereign choosers nor as dupes.

Theories of practice comprehend some of the local, disarticulated and compartmentalized features of the contemporary social world identified in diagnoses of the postmodern condition, but without relinquishing analytic ambition. Consumption is not a unified and coherent activity, nor is it *per se* an integrated practice. Rather it is partitioned through its boundedness

within practices. Social differentiation is portrayed in new ways. Variation in behaviour is not solely a function of stratification by socio-demographic factors, relevant though that remains, nor simply a matter of the differential distribution of attitudes, interpretations and motivations. Contrasting understandings, levels of practical competence, and degrees of involvement generate behavioural variation. The question of hierarchies of practices, previously debated in terms of whether some activities are intrinsically superior to others, becomes an empirical question of which specific internal and external benefits accrue to people in particular positions within identified practices.

Theories of practice also provide a powerful counterpoint to expressive accounts of consumption. Ever since Baudrillard's (1998[1970]) incisive critique of positions which attended only to use-values of goods and services, thus obscuring their sign-value in consumer society, we have become highly aware of the communicative properties of such items, their capacities to convey meanings and transmit messages. Of course consumption is often a form of communication, but as Campbell (1995, 1998) pointed out there are strong reasons for resisting the temptation to view it only in such terms. This is partly because consumption display has limited capacity for communication for, as he argues, consumption as the passing of messages to strangers falls foul of three conflation: an action can be intelligible without it having an agreed meaning; possessing meaning is not the same as constituting a message; and receiving a message does not entail that there was an intention to send that message. But it is also in danger of seriously neglecting the fact that most action is not directed towards communicating with others but towards the fulfilment of self-regarding purposive projects. Hence, much consumption remains governed by considerations of efficiency and effectiveness in relation to the accomplishment of routine purposive tasks, that is to say, the pursuit of use-values. The appeal of theories of practice is that they can accommodate these points comfortably without any divorce from appreciation of the role of meaning and understanding, know-how and judgement. The practice approach does not give 'culture' *more* than its due – the embodied, socially structured institutions which provide the parameters of the domains of action, and the location of social groups in social space, keep the social and the cultural in the frame together.¹¹

Attention to practices also makes good sense of the existence of both internal and extrinsic rewards from conduct. Practices have their own integrity which is the source of internal goods, that is to say internally generated rewards, as is made most clear by MacIntyre (1985: 187–96).

Judgements of performance are made internally with respect to the goals and aspirations of the practice itself, and proficiency and commitment deliver satisfaction and self-esteem. But proficiency may also deliver extrinsic rewards, the almost exclusive preoccupation of Bourdieu (e.g. 1984[1979], 1988[1984], 1996[1989]) in his analyses of fields; those in the most advantageous positions within a field are those who have greatest opportunities to increase their economic, cultural and social capital. Hence the question of which practices people become involved in rises to greater prominence, for practices convey different levels of internal and external rewards. This in turn might lead to further reflection on the effects of consumption on well-being.

Critics of current levels of consumption have often pointed out that above a certain level of material provision further increments of money, goods and services make very little difference to sense of well-being or degree of happiness (e.g. Lane, 2000). The paradox is that people continue to strive for further material gain, yet those who are apparently comparatively unsuccessful exhibit no loss of well-being. The paradox may be partially explained by noticing that it is not so much things in themselves, but rather the place within different practices that is afforded by the possession or control of goods and services which is the basis of contentment, social acceptability and recognition. Bearing in mind the multiplicity of practices available to people, it becomes a little more clear why many people are not fundamentally discontented despite their lack of access to the most expensive or status-enhancing practices. The metaphor of big fish in small ponds perhaps best conveys the sense that each person can derive self-satisfaction and self-esteem from relative measures of social success in at least some of the practices in which they engage. Stock car racing may not have the same aura as vintage car collecting, but it is unlikely that the experience of improving and becoming expert is very much different in the two separate practices. Someone who values the practice of stock car racing, and has the possibility of engaging in it as a competent or excellent practitioner, probably has access to the psychic rewards that psychologists attribute to the process of self-development. In other words, no matter where a practice fits in a hierarchy of prestige, there are internal goods to be derived from it for individual practitioners. So though the external rewards may be different – by meeting a different sort of person at a vintage car rally, or being able to profit economically by re-selling rare or historic vehicles – there are internal rewards irrespective. Invidious comparison does not in any simple manner reduce the benefits acquired from practices conventionally deemed socially inferior.

Finally, a turn to practice alters the importance of the type of research questions to be asked. It becomes more important to ask what types of practice are prevalent, and what range of the available practices do different individuals engage in, as well as what are the typical combinations of practices. It remains as vital as ever to ask how are individuals positioned in the practices in which they are engaged, and especially how homologous are their positions across the range of their practices. But, more than ever before, the question 'what level of commitment is displayed to different practices?' becomes focal, and with it a grasp of how 'careers' within practices take off, develop and end, of how people come to an understanding of what is required by the practice and their role within it. A thorough analysis will also ask how practices develop, considering both their internal dynamics and the external conditions of their existence, especially with regard to changing criteria of effectiveness and excellence. Finally, there is a question, much avoided in theoretical expositions, of how different practices affect one another, for surely understandings, knowledge and orientations transmigrate across boundaries. This range of research questions suggests a parallel need for breadth in method and techniques of interpretation which are equally conditions for the development of a programme of research inspired by theories of practice.

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Notes

1. Thus Schatzki primarily wants an account of action which does not rest on insupportable assumptions about atomistic and sovereign individuals. MacIntyre (1985) wants to find a means to restore recognition of the universal moral dimension to human conduct, which consists among other things in consideration of the public or common good, via recognition of the routine application of standards of excellence to ordinary activities. As he puts it, to call someone 'a good farmer' is to have recourse to commonly held criteria of a good performance in the specific domain of farming.
2. This is the core of one of the most scathing critiques of theories of practice, that of Turner (1994). Turner's main objection is, however, towards imputing causal powers to collective mental constructs, like tradition or conscience collective, and the greater part of the book is making the argument that these are incapable of

being empirically identified except insofar as they are manifest in the habituations and public performances of individuals. Besides his methodological individualist assumption being unconvincing, it is not clear that such mental constructs are characteristic components of all theories of practice. Schatzki, for instance, does not call on such concepts, nor does Giddens. Moreover, Schatzki points out (1996: 106–7), the main thrust of Turner's critique is neutralized when it is realized that practices are not themselves causes.

3. Exceptions among positions sympathetic to theories of practice tend to fall back on technological innovation as a motor of change.
4. Of course, the term practice gets used frequently, particularly in the anthropological literature, but this is mostly done in an ad hoc and descriptive fashion rather than as a thorough and purposeful application of theory.
5. Swartz (1997: 141, fn50) observes that the concept of field came to play an important and systematic role only in Bourdieu's later work, before which, as in *Distinction*, field and practice are conceptually conflated.
6. Consumption might perhaps be considered a dispersed practice, one that occurs often and on many different sites, but is not an integrated practice. People mostly consume without registering or reflecting that that is what they are doing because they are, from their point of view, actually doing things like driving, eating or playing. They only rarely understand their behaviour as 'consuming'; though, the more the notion and discourse of 'the consumer' penetrates, the more often do people speak of themselves as consuming. However, such utterances are usually references to purchasing and shopping. Shopping, by contrast, is an integrated practice, with understandings, know-how and teleo-affective structures. People say they like or hate shopping (and those of the latter disposition often take steps to avoid it). But consumption is inescapable, momentary and occurs often entirely without mind.
7. Some theories of practice, particularly ones drawing from studies of science and technology or actor network theory, emphasize the 'founding presence of nonhumans in human life' (Schatzki et al., 2001: 10) and insist on the determinant role of material objects (e.g. Pickering, 2001). Such versions contribute to understanding the consumption of goods through their functions in constituting practices, potentially enhancing material culture approaches, for instance.
8. A consummate example of the social worlds approach is Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), where he lucidly depicted the coordination of the components of the practice of creating and selling art, a story of intersecting careers and cooperative networks, within which analysis he seamlessly united processes of production and consumption.
9. Gergen (1992) deduced as much. Gergen claimed that a postmodern self had emerged as a consequence of a process of 'social saturation' which, though not formally defined, is claimed to be a result of new communication technologies which 'make it possible to sustain relationships – either directly or indirectly – with an ever-expanding range of other persons' (p. 3). These technologies 'saturate us with the voices of humankind' (p. 6) which furnish us 'with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self' (p. 6) which in turn 'corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships'

- (p. 7). This profound social change 'is essentially one that immerses us ever more deeply in the social world, and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values and life-styles of others' (p. 49). A theory of practice would focus on differential exposure to an interdependence arising not from technological change but from extended social connections arising from engagement in multiple practices.
10. From the point of view of an individual, this career need not be continuous, progressive or successful.
 11. For Reckwitz (2002: 245–6), it is the appreciation of the importance of understanding as a foundation of practice which is the reason for deeming these theories 'culturalist' and thereby superior to the model of *homo economicus* or *homo sociologicus*.

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