

Interventions in practice: re-framing policy approaches to consumer behaviour

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Introduction

A Practice Perspective for Sustainability Policy Interventions

This report introduces a novel approach to sustainability policy – a practice perspective. We argue that social practices are a better target of intervention for sustainability policy than ‘behaviour’, ‘choice’ or technical innovation alone. Understanding the dynamics of practices offers us a window into transitions towards sustainability.

We consume resources as part of the practices that make up everyday life—showering, doing the laundry, cooking or driving—what we might call inconspicuous or ordinary consumption. While we may have degrees of choice in how we perform these practices, access to resources (economic, social, cultural), norms of social interaction, as well as infrastructures and institutional organisation constrain our autonomy. Practices are social phenomena—their performance entails the reproduction of cultural meanings, socially learnt skills and common tools, technologies and products. This shift of perspective places practices, not individuals or infrastructures, at the centre stage of analysis. Taking practices as the unit of analysis moves policy beyond false alternatives—beyond individual or social, behaviour or infrastructure. A practice perspective re-frames the question from “How do we change individuals’ behaviours to be more sustainable?” to “How do we shift everyday practices to be more sustainable?” After all, ‘behaviours’ are largely individuals’ performances of social practices.

Problem Framings

The table below sets out six different ways in which the sustainability challenge is and may be framed. Each problem framing has its own logic, suggesting plausible and possible targets for intervention, and excluding other options. This table can be used as a simple tool to identify problem framings in existing policy.

The first three problem framings are common-place within current policy: (1) Innovating Technology (2) Shifting Consumer Choices and, more broadly, (3) Changing Behaviour. These framings co-exist across different policy sectors. Problem framings 4-6 are based on our practice perspective and draw on ideas that will be unfamiliar to most readers. This perspective takes social practices—what people do, and how this is coordinated and organised — as the starting point for analysis. Policy informed by a practice perspective would take social practices as sites of intervention.

Our objective is, firstly, to make current, common problem framings explicit, and to demonstrate their limitations in light of an understanding of social practices. And secondly — the central objective of the report — is to explain this practice perspective, and why it is useful to sustainability policy. These objectives are intended to help policy makers question their assumptions and consider alternative options for analysis and intervention.

Problem framing of the sustainability challenge	Target of intervention
Common framings in current policy interventions	
1. Innovating Technology	Reduce the resource intensity of existing patterns of consumption through technical innovation.
2. Shifting Consumer Choices	Encourage consumers to choose more sustainable options.
3. Changing Behaviour	More broadly, encourage individuals to adopt more sustainable behaviours and discourage them from less sustainable behaviours.
Framings drawing on a practice perspective	
4. Re-crafting Practices	Reduce the resource-intensity of existing practices through changing the components, or elements, which make up those practices. (Practice elements are introduced below.)
5. Substituting Practices	Replace less sustainable practices with more sustainable alternatives. How can new or alternative practices fulfil similar purposes?
6. Changing how Practices Interlock	Social practices interlock with each other—for example: mobility, shopping and eating. How can we harness the complex interactions between practices, so that change ripples through interconnected practices?

Table 1: Six different ways in which the sustainability challenge is framed.

In the body of the main report we offer three case studies—of a review (the King Review for decarbonising road transport), a vision (Food 2030) and a code (the Code for Sustainable Homes). Through these case studies we illustrate the role problem framings 1-3 play and explore how a practice perspective offers different targets for intervention in the same policy realm. Existing policy may involve some of the kinds of intervention suggested in problem framings 4-6, but does not yet exploit the potential of a systematic application of a practice perspective. The table below illustrates the weighting of the six problem framings across the cases. The darker shade represents heavier weighting—note that a practice perspective, to a limited degree, is represented in all three of the cases (whilst not explicitly acknowledged).

In the rest of this Executive Summary we briefly outline the three problem framings that are commonplace within policy and introduce problem framings 4-6. Throughout the report we use numerous examples, often speculative, to illustrate the dynamics of social practice. While the case studies in the report were selected on the basis of representing resource intensive domains—mobility, food and the built environment—this report does not make concrete recommendations for specific sustainability policies in these areas. Rather it has the goal of illustrating the application of a practice perspective to social change. Examples are used therefore for their utility in illustrating the dynamics of social practice—we make no claims that these examples represent more sustainable practices. Such claims can only be supported through empirical research about practices.

	King Review	Food 2030	Code for Sustainable Homes
Innovating Technology	Dark Grey	White	Dark Grey
Shifting Consumer Choices	Medium Grey	Dark Grey	Dark Grey
Changing Behaviour	Medium Grey	Dark Grey	Dark Grey
Re-crafting Practices	Medium Grey	Medium Grey	Medium Grey
Substituting Practices	White	White	Light Grey
Changing How Practices Interlock	White	White	Light Grey

Table 2: Weighting of the six problem framings across the case studies.

Common Framings in Current Sustainability Policy

Innovating Technology for Sustainability: Problem Framing 1

Debate has often focused on de-coupling economic growth from rising levels of material consumption (e.g. Jackson, 2009). The model of change is one of technological innovation — decarbonising road transport, building energy efficient houses, or producing energy efficient white goods — in which our behaviour is largely unchanged. It is a vision of our current way of life made sustainable through technical developments.

All too often the Innovating Technology framing extrapolates from existing patterns of everyday life and offers technical solutions to that imagined future, rather than imagining the future differently. We would argue from a practice perspective this misconstrues the relation between technological and social change. The framing often advocates radical technical change whilst assuming this change will occur in the context of relative social stasis, rather than technological and social change being interwoven through social practices. This idea is explored further in the Introduction of the main report.

Shifting Consumer Choice and Changing Behaviour: Problem Framings 2 and 3

Since the late 1990s, it has been increasingly recognised that the Innovating Technology approach alone will not achieve the speed, scale and depth of transitions required (Anderson and Bows, 2011). Sustainability, it has been increasingly realised, will not be achieved through supply-side innovation alone. There has been a growing focus on the demand side of sustainable consumption (e.g. Sustainable Development Commission, 2006) and the potential of intervening in consumer choices and individuals' behaviour (Dolan et al., 2010).

These problem framings focus on reducing the resource-intensity of consumption through encouraging consumers to make more sustainable choices and, more broadly, for individuals to adopt more sustainable behaviours (see Southerton et al, 2004 for a more detailed discussion). There are three overlapping ideas which inform the models of change in these closely related problem framings, and the kinds of interventions they propose.

The first is that consumers make rational decisions based on price and information about a product's qualities. Interventions might focus on pricing of products and providing information, such as labelling schemes. Commonly the consumer choice problem framing sees the aggregate 'demand' resulting from individual choices in simplistic terms as the cause of change.

The second is that individuals' behaviour and choices are primarily an outcome of attitudes and values. In this model therefore behaviour change is best approached by changing attitudes and values (for a critique, see Shove, 2010). Interventions that reflect this model include providing information in the form of social marketing (Andreasen, 1995; McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). This throws up the problem of the 'value-action gap': the observation that some people's pro-environmental values and attitudes are not matched by their behaviours.

Both framings often exaggerate the autonomy of individual choice. In response to this, but still within the ambit of the two framings, the third idea is that the value-action gap exists because of 'unconscious' habits which complicate rational decisions and the relationship between values and actions (Hobson, 2003). Thaler and Sunstein (2008) suggest that interventions can 'nudge' habits in particular directions (for example, by switching organ donation schemes from automatically being opted out to in).

The authors of this report also recognise the value-action gap, but think there are other ways of explaining it than individual inertia, or the effect of the context of individual choices. Our approach focuses on the social practices through which resources are collectively consumed, and on how these social practices might become targets for intervention.

Introducing a Practice Perspective

In essence we promote the idea that individual behaviours are, primarily, performances of social practices. This is illustrated in the figure below. Rather than being the expression of an individual's values and attitudes, behaviour is the observable expression of social phenomenon (socially shared tastes and meanings, knowledge and skills, and materials and infrastructure). As such 'behaviour' is just the tip of the iceberg, and the effects of intervening in behaviour are limited accordingly. It is the practice entity—the socially embedded underpinning of behaviour—which we argue forms a better target for sustainability policy.

Take for example vegetarianism: 5% of UK adults report being vegetarian or vegan (Office of National Statistics, 2002). However, the fact that the other 95% of UK adults do eat meat is not simply an isolated matter of individual discretion. Most people in the UK have a shared understanding, or cultural convention, that a 'proper meal' contains meat, vegetables and carbohydrates (Mitchell, 1999). Furthermore, different social groups, such as age cohorts and socio-economic groups, predictably favour particular variations of the 'proper meal' (Bennett et al., 2009). These understandings have a social history, which involves the organisation of the food system, domestic technologies, cultural representations and indeed previous policy interventions.

Imagine a hypothetical policy intervention to reduce the frequency with which meat is included in meals. Problem framings 2 and 3 would suggest encouraging individuals to choose to eat less meat, and intervene in values and attitudes around health and sustainability to do so. But what about routine, convention, and the everyday constraints of resources, infrastructures and institutions? What happens when such individuals are a guest to dinner, at a restaurant or catered lunch, or in the army? Encouraging individuals to choose to eat less meat is just the tip of the iceberg (see Figure 1 below).

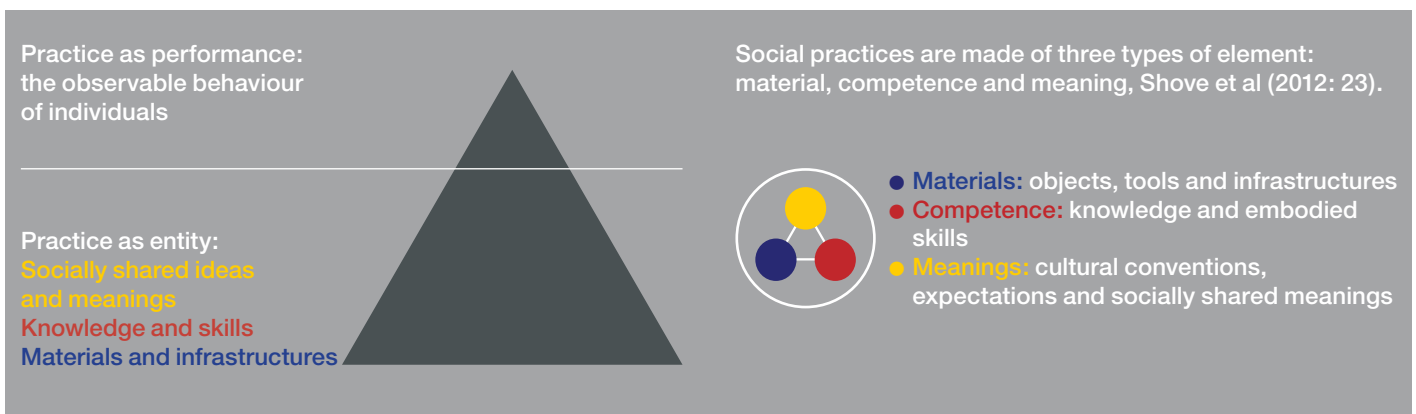


Figure 1: Observable behaviour is just the tip of the iceberg.

Elements of Practice

Social practices are made of different elements. Shove et al (2012: 23) suggest there are three types of element: material, competence and meaning. These are represented by the three coloured circles in Figure 2. Each time a practice is performed these different elements are brought together, and it is not possible to perform a practice unless all the requisite elements are available.

What elements, for example, compose the practice of hosting a dinner party? Firstly, the material components are required: food and drink, obviously, and cutlery, crockery, tables and chairs. As well as these objects and tools we require the domestic infrastructure of the home, most evidently the kitchen, which is shared with many other practices, and the wider infrastructures of energy and water supply on which this in turn depends. What competences are required? Clearly competence in cooking is required, but also, to successfully perform the practice, knowledge of dinner party etiquette. We might achieve distinction in our performance of the practice through specialised knowledge of wine, or perhaps of music. Thus this competence in turns rests upon cultural conventions and expectations. The relative informality of many contemporary dinner parties in the UK, for example, is no less a cultural convention than the complex formality of dinner party etiquette amongst certain social groups and settings.

Socially acceptable individual behaviour—or the successful performance of a social practice—thus rests upon the use of objects, tools and infrastructures, of knowledge and skills and of cultural conventions, expectations, and socially shared tastes and meanings. These are the elements that compose social practices.

Figure 2: The elements of practice

Re-crafting Practices: Problem Framing 4

Our initial practice problem framing seeks to change the elements of existing practices —the materials, competences and meanings that compose them (Shove et al., 2012: 147). Re-crafting Practices is not dissimilar to some current intervention strategies such as the introduction of industry standards for products (which address material elements), or forms of training, such as cookery skills classes, or social marketing and information campaigns, (which commonly address competences and meanings respectively). As such it is close to certain existing forms of behaviour change intervention. However, the Re-crafting Practices framing suggests systematically analysing and intervening in the component elements of practice to make existing practices more sustainable; whether through taking account of all types of practice elements or recognising their specific relationships.

An example of Re-crafting Practice: The New Nordic Diet

The New Nordic Diet is an integrated policy programme that demonstrates Re-crafting Practices, although it is not explicitly framed as such. The programme was developed out of a five year multi-disciplinary research project focused on the promotion of a novel healthy and sustainable cuisine. The programme aimed to develop a healthy, environmentally sustainable diet based on foods originating from the Nordic region (Mithril et al., 2012). The programme enrolled multiple actors, including fashionable restaurants and chefs, high-profile political supporters, legitimating scientists, disseminating media, and actively interpreting audiences, enabling rapid diffusion (Byrkjeflot et al., 2013). It addressed multiple elements of practice simultaneously. Firstly, the material element: food. But also competence (offering cookery courses) and meanings (it was conceived as an identity movement), and actively sought to recruit practitioners to this novel culinary variant through organised dissemination and the enrolling and support of innovative initiatives.

The following figures were adapted from: Shove, E., Pantzar, M., Wattson, M. (2012)
The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday life and how it changes. London: Sage



Figure 3: Re-crafting practices

Substituting Practices: Problem Framing 5

Substituting Practices suggests that policy might focus on discouraging current unsustainable practices and substituting them with existing or new alternatives. This framing moves us beyond thinking about the future by extrapolating from existing practices (e.g. personal mobility is heavily car-based therefore a more sustainable transport system will make driving more sustainable) to thinking about how more sustainable practices (new or old) can fulfil the same needs and wants.

There are two ways in which this might be achieved:

- i. Competition between practices for time, space and resources.** For a practice to exist, it requires spaces where its performance can take place. An example can be found in new-build flats in the UK which often have no bath, simply a shower-room, 'locking-in' trends towards showering (Hand et al., 2005). Practices also require people's time to perform them. Importantly for policy makers, some practices directly compete for performers because they meet the same needs when performed. Commuter cycling and commuter driving compete for many of the same resources, including practitioners' time, finite space on roads, and spending on infrastructure (see Watson, 2012). We examine this example further in Case Study 1 in the main report (see page 25).
- ii. Encourage more sustainable variants of a practice.** Practices have a range of variants, some more mainstream than others. For example, having a meal might involve cooking a vegan meal from scratch, buying a ready meal, or a take-away or eating at a fine dining restaurant. In Case Study 2 (see page 33 in the main report) we examine how variants have particular trajectories: for example, eating out is on the increase and meat-free meals are becoming more mainstream. Such existing trends—which can be revealed by social science research—might be harnessed by policymakers to encourage more sustainable trajectories. In Case Study 3 (see page 40 in the main report) we examine how material infrastructure can encourage more sustainable variants: such as homes with dedicated space for air-drying laundry, but not for tumble dryers. This approach, in some senses, can be seen as a more radical version of re-crafting practices.



Figure 4: Substituting practices

An example of Substituting Practices: Greater Manchester's Cycling Hub scheme

A behaviour change programme encouraging cycling might offer an environmental information campaign, subsidised bikes, cycling skills workshops and public bike storage. A practice based analysis of the same task might recognise that commuter cycling is a particular variant of practice comprised of different elements to leisure cycling, or mountain biking. If cycling is to compete for commuters then it is this variant that should be the focus of policy.

An example of a policy intervention aimed at substituting cycling for other forms of commuting is Transport for Greater Manchester's Cycling Hub scheme (<http://cycling.tfgm.com/>). The city centre Cycling Hub is located conveniently for transfer to rail, tram and bus services and offers commuters dedicated cycle parking spaces, lockers and showers (recognising that an element of commuter cycling is the cultural expectation of cleanliness at work). The Hub also contains a bike shop offering on-site maintenance and servicing, recognising that reliability is an important aspect of commuter cycling, and skills training for this specific variant of the practice, for example providing confidence in urban traffic. Each of these elements encourages new recruits to commuter cycling and defection from driving.

Changing how Practices Interlock: Problem Framing 6

A third way of thinking through a practice perspective is to identify how practices interlock with one another¹. Infrastructure – which influences where activities take place, and institutions – which influence when activities take place, play a vital part in how practices interlock, and are therefore important targets for interventions in this problem framing. Practices interlock in two ways:

- i. Sequences of practices.** Our daily schedules are in-part determined by institutions and organisations: such as school timetables, the working day, and shop opening hours. Such sequences have differing implications for sustainability. For example, as they have co-evolved alongside the driving of private cars, many of these sequences have become dependent on the car. In Case Study 1 (see page 25 in main report) we discuss how focussing on sequences of interlinked practices forms an alternative approach to intervening in unsustainable forms of mobility.
- ii. Synchronisation of practices.** Peak energy loads caused by millions putting the kettle on in the same TV advert break and the morning rush hour are both caused by the synchronised performance of practices (Shove et al., 2009). We know from social and historical research that changes in the temporal patterns of eating (e.g. to three meals a day) accompany shifts in the institutional arrangements of family life, households, and working hours (Southerton, 2009). Certain forms of synchronisation may be more or less unsustainable. In Case Study 2 (see page 33 in the main report) we speculate about how the synchronisation of practices might be changed.

¹ For a discussion of the connections between practices, see Chapter 5 in Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M. (2012) *The dynamics of social practice: everyday life and how it changes*, London: Sage.



Figure 5: Changing how practices interlock

An example of changing how practices interlock: Liverpool Central Library

Though not explicitly designed to change locations of work, the refurbished Liverpool Central Library is a new kind of city centre space, which might bring about this kind of change (<http://www.liverpool.gov.uk/libraries/find-a-library/central-library>). The inclusion within the design of large amounts of desk space, electric points, pc, internet and print facilities, different forms of workspace (meeting rooms, games areas, reading rooms, lounge areas) means that the library potentially provides a place for people to work locally (which might reduce weekly commutes). That is, for new practices of working to develop.

The library (possibly inadvertently) brings to life the idea of ‘community hubs’ in which people can work ‘from home’ in the same venue (see the King’s Cross Hub for an example <http://kingscross.the-hub.net/>). Such hubs not only address some of the social and practical challenges of working from home, such as isolation, or the absence of suitable resources. They also allay concerns about the questionable sustainability benefits of shifting workers from shared offices to individual homes, which could off-set the potential benefits of reduced mobility by increasing overall energy consumption.

The point here is that new kinds of space, like the Library, could potentially enable interlocking practices of working, commuting, eating and socialising to be radically reconfigured.

Conclusion

The three practice perspective problem framings, Re-crafting Practices, Substituting Practices and Changing how Practices Interlock provide a tool to analyse the challenge of sustainability in new ways. The framings provide a means of abstracting from the complexity of everyday life, and of identifying targets for policy intervention.

Identifying problem framings and the underpinning assumptions of intervention reveals how policy reinforces what is 'normal' in everyday life; this can limit the potential for change and unwittingly encourage or lock-in unsustainable practices. Social change is about the new becoming normal—smoke free pubs, wearing seatbelts, putting out the recycling. A practice perspective encourages us to imagine what the 'new normal' of everyday sustainability might look like—and suggests possible trajectories towards it.

A practice perspective suggests modesty on the part of policy as regards influencing social change—acknowledging we have less control over the social environment in which change takes place than we might wish. However, accepting the complexity of transitions towards sustainability does not mean accepting only minor, incremental change is possible.

A practice perspective shows that social change happens all the time. We only need to look across the past few decades to note the extent to which patterns of work, travel and communication have changed in a relatively short amount of time. That this change in social practice is continually taking place suggests optimism about the scale of change that can be achieved. This in no way means assuming positive change will happen—it means guiding the direction of such change, and being sensitive to the inadvertent effects of policy which might lock-in or even encourage resource-intensive ways of life.

Key messages

The report has four key messages:

- | Problem framings have implications for what are viewed as plausible and possible targets of intervention. Understanding the logic of problem framings, and being able to identify them, enables policy makers to see clearly how they constrain or enable options.
- | Policy interventions seeking to promote sustainable consumption should be re-framed from a practice perspective: that is, they should take practices as the units of intervention. This contrasts with intervening in behaviour, consumer choice, or technology alone.
- | Practices are always changing, whether or not there are deliberate interventions designed to steer them in one direction or another. Since such 'trajectories of practice' already exist it makes sense to ask how they might be guided in more sustainable directions. This is a different approach to that of designing one-off interventions to promote more sustainable behaviour and suggests the need for different kinds of evidence.
- | Changing how sets of practices interlock is a powerful form of intervention offered by a practice perspective. This report foregrounds the point that sets of practices are held in place by spatial arrangements within the infrastructure and through the temporal rhythms and routines of institutions. Intervening in sets of interlocking practices therefore requires intervening in the institutions and infrastructures that hold such arrangements in place.

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