



Sociology of consumption and a theory of practice

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The order of play

Developments in the sociology of
consumption

Elaboration of a theory of practice

An application of the theory to eating out

Sociologies of Consumption: developments

- 1 Identifying consumption**
- 2 From moral disapprobation to the celebration of consumption**
- 3 Some limitations of the cultural turn**
- 4 Normalisation and technologies in everyday life**
- 5 Consumption and appropriation**
- 6 The promise of practice**
- 7 Conditions of access to consumption**
- 8 Recollecting collective consumption**
- 9 The absence of politics**
- 10 Production and consumption**
- 11 Alternatives to choice**
- 12 New Approaches**
- 13 Achievements of last 15 years?**

Consumption

- (1) the appropriation of
- (2) a good, service, performance, information or ambience which is
- (3) a product of work and over which
- (4) the consumer has some measure of control.

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2 Expunging guilt, or ten benefits of consumption

- 1 it fosters meaningful work
- 2 it promotes the aesthetic attitude
- 3 it facilitates social rebellion
- 4 it is enjoyable and pleasurable
- 5 it nurtures possessive individualism
- 6 it supports socially meaningful practices
- 7 it supplies intellectual stimulation
- 8 it provides refreshing entertainment
- 9 it sustains comfort
- 10 you can always get what you want

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3 Some limitations of the cultural turn

- Consumption is not only a code for communication (of identity)
- Showing mass consumption has positive features not mean it has no negative ones
- Exaggerates importance of conspicuous rather than ordinary consumption

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4 Normalisation and technologies in everyday life

- Activities spread and become normalised, increasing consumption (eg cars)
- Some are more or less invisible – hidden in technological systems: water electricity and standards of comfort
- Dependence on things as extensions of human capacities (and how things affect their owners, eg the freezer)

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7 Conditions of access

Modes of provision:

- Market
- State
- Household
- Communal provision

- Mutual exchange: gifts

Sociologies of Consumption: developments

**8 Recollecting collective consumption: role
of public goods**

9 The absence of politics

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9 The absence of politics: some critical issues

- 1) Waste
- 2) Privatism
- 3) Disregard for work of producers
- 4) Global inequality
- 5) Sustainability
- 6) Class and gender differences
- 7) Disappointment of affluence

Sociologies of Consumption: developments

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- New theoretical approaches within economic and cultural sociology
- Comparative institutional analysis
- Intermediaries and intermediation

11 Alternatives to choice

Developing critique of individual choice

Sociological alternatives include:

- domestic and communal consumption
- what people do with things and services
- the many other forms of action that are involved (wertrational, affective, traditional, etc.) and that the single product is not what is at stake, but some would say, a lifestyle, a pattern of items or an array
- consumers undermine predictions of demand, get involved in co-production, improvise, and use things in unanticipated ways (the much quoted example of the telephone)

12 New Approaches

(1) An institutional turn?

(2) Network analysis

(3) Communities of practice and moments of consumption

(4) Ordinary consumption

13 Achievements of the last 15 years?

- balanced critique of markets
- reversal of the condescension expressed towards popular culture
- detailed knowledge of everyday practices
- awareness of environmental issues
- rediscovery of the social
- more appreciation of the link between inequality and cultural consumption
- critique of consumption as communication.
- the limits of a purely cognitivist approach

2) Theory of practice

‘Consumption and the theory of practice’,
Journal of Consumer Culture, 5(2) (2005)
131-54.

Abstract

- an abridged account of basic precepts of a theory of practice
- extracts some broad principles for application to final consumption
- consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices
- 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
- emphasise routine, collective and conventional nature of much (ordinary) consumption but also emphasizes that practices are internally differentiated and dynamic
- distinctive features of the account include understanding: how wants emanate from practices; of processes whereby practices emerge, develop and change; of consequences of extensive personal involvements in many practices; and manner of recruitment to practices.

Contents

- 2) An abridged account of a theory of practice
practice as a coordinated entity and practice as performance.
- 3) Implications for the analysis of consumption
- 4) Conclusions

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.

Reckwitz A (2002) Toward a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing, European Journal of Social Theory, 5(2), 249

A practice is a coordinated entity and performance

3 Theories of practice

Schatzki (1996: 89), practice as a coordinated entity:

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.

Practice as performance: Reckwitz (2002: 249-50):

‘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.’

Two sides of practice

- *Schatzki: practice as a coordinated entity and practice as performance.*
- Practices consist of both doing and sayings, both practical activity and its representations.
- Distinguish dispersed practices and integrative practices.

‘Integrative practices’ are ‘the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life’ (1996: 98). Examples include farming practices, cooking practices and business practices.

Summary

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. (Reckwitz, 2002: 250)

- practice theories are neither individualist nor holist (hence, consumer is neither sovereign nor dupe);
- they comprehend non-instrumentalist notions of conduct, both observing the role of routine on the one hand, and emotion, embodiment and desire on the other.

3) Implications for analysis of consumption

- ***consumption and practices***
- ***social differentiation of practices and their performance***
- ***the trajectory of practices***
- ***the multiplicity of practices***
- ***the individual at the intersection of practices***

consumption and practices

- Most practices, and probably all integrative practices, require and entail consumption.
- Consumption cannot be reduced to demand
- Consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice.
- Appropriation occurs within practices:
- Conventions and the standards of the practice steer behaviour.
- Engagement in the practice, rather than any personal decision about a course of conduct, that explains the nature and process of consumption. *Practices create wants* (eg hot rods).

social differentiation of practices and their performance

- from the point of view (eg driving) of the individual person, performance will depend on past experience, technical knowledge, learning, opportunities, available resources, previous encouragement by others, etc. (note: social worlds: insiders, regulars, tourists and strangers)
- from the point of view of a practice as a whole, we see a dedicated and specialised domain comprising many different competencies and capabilities (eg class, gender, nation).

the trajectory of practices

- Practices have a trajectory or path of development, a history, eg O'Connell (1998) on motoring.
- Routines and embodied responses.
- Sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves.
- The patterning of social life is a consequence of the established understandings of what courses of action are not inappropriate: convention is central to engagement in a practice.
- Conventions will usually be contested.
- Because practices have their own distinct, institutionalised and collectively regulated conventions, they partly insulate people, *qua* consumers, from the blandishments of producers and promotional agencies.

the multiplicity of practices

- There are many practices, increasingly more, in the world, and most people engage in a considerable number of them. Diversity of engagement.
- 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 equipment.
- Wants are fulfilled only in practice, their satisfaction attributable to effective practical performances. Consumption rarely occurs purely for its own sake.
- Practices have differential value. Rewards internal to practices are (1) partly a function of the complexity of the particular practice and (2) partly of the external rewards to be gained by any individual are a function of the prestige of the practice.

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.’

- ‘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.’ (2002: 256)

the individual at the intersection of practices

- An individual's pattern of consumption is the sum of the moments of consumption that occur in the totality of his or her practices = an explanation of the fragmented self (Gergen, 1992)?
- Personal trajectories through practices as the essence of biography

Summary

- Consumption occurs within and for the sake of practices.
- Items consumed are put to use in the course of engaging in particular practices
- 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.
- An approach to consumption which stresses the routine, ordinary, collective, conventional nature of much consumption.
- Consistent with the view that practices are internally differentiated such that persons in different situations do the same activity differently.

Conclusions

- ‘the consumer’ evaporates and instead the key focal points become the organisation of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined.
- a powerful counterpoint to expressivist accounts of consumption.
- 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.
- Invidious comparison does not in any simple manner reduce the benefits acquired from practices conventionally deemed socially inferior.
- Alters the importance of the type of research questions to be asked.

An implication: changing behaviour

Four strategies for changing behaviour are commonly pursued.

Strategies for change?

lever for change

collective regulation

personal education

homo economicus
(rational action)

financial incentives

information

homo sociologicus
(normative action)

prohibition

conversion

mode of individual action

All have a part to play but not resoundingly successful because based on weak understanding of consumption and its dynamics.

Application of theory of practice

‘La normalita del mangiare fuori’, (‘The normality of eating out’), Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia (special issue on ‘Sociology of Food’, editor R Sassatelli), 45(4), (2004), 493-518.

Food: from production to consumption

- the metaphor of the chain
- links and ends: after the final exchange?
- demand and consumption
- consumption, production and the features of goods

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understanding, knowing how and desiring are
necessary elements and qualities of a practice in
which the single individual participates, not qualities of
the individual.

Sources of data

- Two studies:
with Lydia Martens, *Eating Out: social differentiation, consumption and pleasure*
- 35 semi-structured interviews with inhabitants of Preston in the North West
- and a survey of 1001 individuals living in three cities – London, Bristol and Preston in 1995.

Sources of data (cont)

with Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal,
Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project

focus groups in summer 2003

discussion about a broad spectrum of cultural activity and taste among 25 groups with particular socio-economic, demographic and identity characteristics in common.

Applying a theory of practice to eating out

shared set of understandings:

- occurring away from home,
- involving none of own labour,
- requiring payment,
- being a social occasion,
- itself relatively special,
- involving eating a meal rather than a snack.

‘teleo-affective agreement’ - of
purposes and reasons:

- a change,
- a treat,
- an opportunity to socialise,
- a celebration
- a social obligation
- (but not liking food or being hungry).

Satisfaction expressed with last meal on commercial premises (percentages by row). How did you enjoy ..?

	liked a lot	liked a little	neither	dislike a little	dislike a lot
company	89	6	3	-	0
conversation	80	14	4	-	-
food	80	13	3	2	1
atmosphere	72	18	6	2	1
value	67	17	6	5	2
service	65	22	6	4	2
décor	56	24	15	2	1
overall occasion	81	14	3	2	-

Four types of gratification

- Sensual: quality and quantity of food
- Economic: value for money
- Contemplative: aesthetic features of food and the occasion
- Social: enjoyable and sociable time

The role of choice?

Many people claimed to have had no say in whether or not to eat out. Only 45 per cent of respondents claimed to have been involved in the decision about whether to eat out on the last occasion that they had taken a main meal away from home. Moreover, one need not be consulted about where to eat: the question, 'did you have any say in the decision to eat there?', elicited a negative reply in 20 per cent of instances.

(in Murcott 1998)

Social differentiation

Lyn 'We haven't got money for restaurants. I haven't been to one for years.'

Chez 'None of us have.'

Spud 'Anyway you'd have to get all ponced up. I couldn't be arsed. I'd rather go to the chippy.'

An unskilled working class group from South Wales[14, 1904ff]

A group of the self-employed, London.

Convenor: 'What about cuisines; is there any type of food you prefer?'

AM: Japanese

FP yes, Japanese.

LC: organic – any cuisine, but organic, then it tastes, otherwise what's the point?

YP: I eat anything really – I don't like Chinese food, I've gone off of it, but really anything. I don't like German food, or Polish – all that stodge. I like Mediterranean food....

YP: but sometimes you want to eat out where everything is done in a special way, just right – something that you couldn't do at home.

LC: I'd rather have friends round and eat with them. A chef to come round – I'd like that, to have food you can't cook, but at home, it's relaxed.

6 Discussion

- affordability continues to differentiate
- diffusion of the normality of eating out
- experience both normal and special
- a set of social conventions governing performance widely held
- social context matters
- normalisation transpired without extensive aestheticisation.

Conclusion

- Experience is not solely economic or aesthetic
- Shared understandings, conventions and justifications (differentiated)
- Commodification moderated by social logic of institutionalised practice
- Eating out as a transposable skill
- Order produced by meeting of provision and practical knowledge of customers

Some conclusions

- Theory of practice as a distinctive approach to avoid individualistic and voluntaristic accounts of consumption
- Implies new methods of research into consumption
- Explains why changing people's behaviour is difficult