



Original research article

Towards more eclectic understandings of energy demand and change—A tale of sense-making in the messiness of transformative planning



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Planning processes
Bricolage
Theories of practice
Sociology of translation
Energy renovation

ABSTRACT

Progressive planning interventions can be characterized as actively seeking to reconfigure bundles of practices. This represents a different strategy for creating momentum for change (in energy demand) compared to prevailing interventions with emphasis on regulation and information. In this article, we explore theoretical understandings of practices and translations as a means to illustrate how certain engagements with strategic work aimed at reconfiguring bundles of practices enable a different approach to establishing momentum for change through planning interventions.

We illustrate how the strategic work carried out in a particular case of energy renovation seems to have involved: 1) acknowledgment of the need for reconfiguring bundles of practices, 2) actively enrolling different actors in the reconfiguring of bundles of practices, and 3) basing new practice arrangements on the identification of hidden potentials in prevailing practice architectures.

Presented through storytelling, we discuss why an eclectic theoretical interpretation of new forms of planning interventions is important in order to understand and bridge the gap between theoretical insight and planners' or practitioners' performance.

1. Prologue

Addressing growing problems such as climate change and increasing energy demand is to a large extent about realizing that we have to do things differently. It is about facilitating a new order of things. Climate change is a growing global problem, but is also increasingly described as a 'wicked problem' (see, for example, [1]). Wicked problems denote the incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize in the process of solving a problem.

Planners are part of the professional disciplines in society that are taking the lead in terms of addressing climate change, and hence juggling wicked problems. Intervention-oriented forms of strategic (urban) planning are characterized by perilous attempts to redesign and reconfigure, for example, infrastructure networks [2]. Interestingly, it has been observed that planners that engage in this form of transformative work apply what Sehested [3] terms a 'learning' approach, formulating strategies in an iterative way, rather than applying a more conventional, linear, approach [4]. The planners are hereby submerged in the messy character of a kind of 'front-end innovation' in the planning process itself. Making sense of this messy attempt to manage transformative change in relation to climate change and energy demand represents a crucial challenge for the planners, but also for the

researchers and theorists who are struggling to conceptualize the efforts in a theoretical perspective.

In research, theoretical insights help us make sense of and establish 'order' in the messy activities that make up life and the practices people perform. In social sciences, such as those of the sociology of consumption, and science, technology, and society (STS) studies, there is an increasing interest in conceptualizing dynamics of change. Within the field of understanding social dimensions of energy demand, dynamics of activities and practices become important to understand, when addressing how aspects of human life result in various kinds of, for example, climate change (see, for example, [5]).

A gap, however, seems to prevail between the theoretical processes of understanding transformative change and the ongoing strategic work that planners perform. In the analysis of how practices are being transformed over time, theoretical insights often assume a somewhat narrow analysis in order to represent particular aspects of inquiry. This way of simplifying and focusing on particular dynamics allows for theoretical development of understandings of societal transformation. This is in contrast to the more 'eclectic' trial-and-error approach that planners are forced to apply in their transformative work, while juggling wicked problems. Planners often experience – and struggle with – conflicting dynamics and processes, which they cannot necessarily

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handle within the realms of (albeit intentionally) simplified theoretical recommendations.

In reflecting on this gap, Vikkelsø [6] raises a concern that social science has moved away from practical usefulness. She argues that social science produces “sterile abstractions and self-referential conversations” and that these are “staying at the level of description and anecdote telling” [6]. As argued above, this especially represents a challenge in relation to the social sciences that are explicitly concerned with societal processes of transformation, like addressing the pressing issues of energy demand and climate change.

Our mission with this article is to explicate and discuss the seemingly missing links between planning practices and research practices. We characterize the gap emanating as a result from the ‘eclectic’ character of the former, and the lack of such eclecticism in the latter.

We do *not* intend to evaluate the performance of planners or researchers in the process, but simply wish to reflect upon the different ways that the eclectic character of the transformative work is handled by the two different professions. In our reflection, we will attempt to contextualize the eclectic character as a form of ‘bricolage,’ which represents the idea of bringing together different views of the world based on a combination of prevailing knowledge and practical sense, and which is inspired by the work of Lévi-Strauss [7].

Exploring the realms of ‘theoretical alliances,’ we dive into a number of theoretical interpretations of the various dynamics of a particular (empirically explored) planning process, seeking to illustrate the eclectic character of the transformative work. We do this through a process of storytelling. Through storytelling, we emphasize a narrative of tensions that provide a good space for exploring the nuances at play in a change process [8] and which help to better explicate the workings of bricolage and the realms of wicked problems in general. In the following we will further unfold our focus by briefly introducing why we see planners as ‘bricoleurs’ and what we understand by a bricolage of (theoretically inspired) knowledge production, and lastly we go into more detail about the way we employ a format of storytelling to facilitate our mission with this article.

1.1. The bricolage of planning processes and change

We apply the notion of bricolage as a way to approach the eclectic character of processes of planning, because this notion teases out both a ‘technical plane,’ having to do with the ‘concrete’ in the form of results, projects, and the like, and a ‘speculative plane,’ having to do with the abstract in the form of ordering, explaining, and the like [9]. According to Lévi-Strauss, a bricoleur is “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” [9]. The notion of bricolage helps us to grasp that the planners bring different views of the world together based on a combination of prevailing knowledge and practical sense, focusing on developing new *workable* solutions. It is argued that bricoleurs have a specific *modus operandi* [9], including the fact that they make do with what is at hand and focus on rearranging through reorganization or improvisation with existing elements.

In relation to our storytelling, we are interested in understanding these ‘devious means’ that bricoleurs apply, and what this ‘indirect’ approach may consist of in respect to abstract dynamics of ordering. Designers and planners tend to have a ‘special hand’ in altering material arrangements that interlink and influence daily lives, implying that planners play a pivotal role in reproducing existing practices and infrastructures, but also in changing prevailing practices (e.g. [10–12]). According to Shove et al. [12]; policymakers – like planners – seldom recognize how to exploit this ‘special hand,’ since traditional forms of policymaking tend to overlook the dynamics of social practice (and are therefore not bricoleurs). The planners that play a central role in the case study discussed below apply a different understanding of policymaking (as bricoleurs) when addressing matters of climate change, as they seem to more actively engage with understandings and rearrangement of social practices. Their approach reflects a ‘learning’ (or

exploratory) approach, which Sehested [3] identifies as a new form of strategic planning that planners undertake, which reflects the circuitous nature of bricolage. The planners have facilitated considerable restructuring and realignment in the practices. They are, for example, challenging collective patterns that have been anchored in the profession of the craftsmen through their education and work experiences and they are challenging well-established routines for how the network of energy renovation has been settled until now.

1.2. The importance of a bricolage of knowledge production

As our article will show, the ‘ordering’ or navigational nature that the planners reflect in performing as bricoleurs resonates well with various different social scientific understandings. One area of scientific knowledge production that seems to be reflected in the way the planners work, is practice theoretical insights, which often embody an explanatory stance, but which, however, have much to say about points of orientation in terms of where to target what and how when discussing possibilities for transforming social practices (e.g. [10,12]). Another area of knowledge production that we see reflected is that of the sociology of translation, which suggests that in facilitating transformation, ‘practitioners’ (such as planners) may act as translators that can contribute to a reconfiguration of existing actor networks (e.g. [13]).

Introducing social organization as focal for change processes re-evaluates the ontologies upon which policymaking processes are often based [5]. This opens up a discussion about how dynamics of social practices and socio-material interaction may inspire intervention. It is relevant to further explore such dynamics of intervention, because they represent a break with prevailing policies that are critiqued for their lack of efficiency in terms of contributing to more radical processes of transformation [2,14,15].

In this respect, drawing on theoretical inspiration from theories of practice and sociology of translation can help us investigate and exemplify potential dynamics of intervention and change, not only in terms of the work that planners carry out, but also just as much in terms of new ways of forming policies that reflect strategic planning processes that take seriously the socio-materiality of society and societal change.

1.3. The bricolage of storytelling

In this article, we experiment with a format of storytelling as a way to discuss the potential for a more eclectic approach to theory development that might take practical problem-solving processes more explicitly into consideration. In our storytelling, we present a particular case¹ as the basis of developing our points. The chosen case represents an example of a new form of governance forged by municipal planners in a Danish city to promote energy-efficient buildings. The case has been chosen because it is a good representation of a ‘learning’ approach to planning with an eclectic character, where the planners act as bricoleurs. As we will explain in the next section, we have chosen a rather unconventional way of elaborating this case study, involving a fictional discussion amongst planners and researchers.

Depicting a process and analysis through storytelling represents a fairly different format than most academic presentations, but storytelling provides a useful format for unfolding processes of transformation and practical sense-making. Our inspiration was that stories, such as fairy tales, make room for ordinary actors doing ‘extraordinary’ things, as they challenge the daily humdrum. Equally, the balance between the ordinary and the *extra*-ordinary is at the heart of theories of practices as well as of the sociology of translation, albeit in different

¹ As will be explained in Section 2.3, we draw on empirical fieldwork conducted in 2011 in ‘Hopetown’ where one of the authors and a research assistant carried out interviews and observations with a number of actors from the particular planning process we analyze here.

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