



Original research article

# Understanding comfort and senses in social practice theory: Insights from a Danish field study



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## ABSTRACT

Thermal comfort is central to energy consumption in housing and one of the main drivers behind worldwide GHG emissions. Research on residential energy consumption has therefore addressed comfort in relation to indoor temperatures. This paper argues that by widening the focus of comfort to include other aspects such as air, light and materials, more sustainable ideas of residential comfort might be developed. The paper takes a practice theoretical perspective but argues that the senses should be better incorporated into the approach to understand different aspects of comfort. The paper investigates how comfort can be understood as sensorial within theories of practice. This implies understanding how the senses are incorporated in embodied and routinised social practices, through which comfort is sensed and interpreted. Comfort is related to a range of everyday practices in the home, and the paper describes how aspects of comfort are perceived differently within different practices. The study is based on qualitative interview data from a Danish field study. However, the findings on how comfort in houses can be understood have a broader relevance as well. It is argued that this nuanced perspective on comfort can contribute to widening the debate and policy on residential energy consumption.

## 1. Introduction

Energy consumption for heating and cooling buildings worldwide is one of the biggest energy end-uses; it is steadily increasing and constitutes between 20 and 40 per cent of all energy consumed in developed countries, and a primary policy approach to deal with this trend has been to increase the energy efficiency of buildings [1]. However, in Denmark, like in many other North European countries, the overall heat consumption in households is rather stable, despite a growing low-energy housing stock and energy-efficient refurbishments [2]. Socio-technical research has pointed to increasing expectations of thermal comfort as one of the possible explanations for why heat consumption has not decreased notably in line with efficiency gains [3–6]. Therefore, future comfort and energy consumption need to be examined by debating the meanings of comfort in order to understand and adopt a more flexible and sustainable concept of comfort [7]. Following this, understandings of comfort need to be scrutinised rather than being “*taken for granted and thereby naturalising meanings and expectations of comfort that are ultimately unsustainable*” [7, p. 33]. One purpose of this paper is to examine such meanings of comfort in order to expand the notions of comfort and in so doing suggest alternative ways of attaining comfort than the dominating focus on thermal

comfort.

Recent socio-technical research has worked on understandings of comfort and has linked these understandings to households’ heating practices as well as other daily practices to keep warm or cool [4,5,8,9,10]. This follows the line of practice theoretical approaches, stating that energy is consumed in the course of accomplishing social practices [11][11, p.47]. Comfort in this approach has hitherto been investigated primarily as thermal comfort, and not in a broader understanding that includes other aspects of comfort such as softness or fresh air. The strong focus on thermal comfort relates to the fact that energy used in buildings is mainly related to maintaining certain indoor temperatures. This article seeks to explore how including other aspects of comfort can contribute to providing new insights into buildings’ energy consumption. This entails a broader focus on how material, social and sensory aspects together constitute comfort in homes. The sensory part of comfort; how comfort is sensed from day to day has not been thoroughly scrutinised in the bulk of socio-technical research on comfort and energy consumption in light of social practices. As stated by Wilhite and Wallenborn [22], to a large extent the body has been absent from theories of practice as well as from energy research. Therefore, this paper scrutinises empirical aspects of sensory understandings of comfort in social practices, entailing a comfort perspective

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that goes beyond thermal comfort. Using theories of practice as a point of departure, the empirical analysis centres on the human dimension of energy consumption, as called for by Sovacool [12], seeking to understand people's energy use through the senses as well as social and material aspects within social practices. The main purpose is thus to investigate how comfort is sensed and perceived in everyday practices through various comfort aspects. In doing this, an additional purpose of the paper becomes to look for and discuss ways of including sensorial aspects into theories of social practices.

## 2. Social practices, comfort and the senses

### 2.1. Practices between the individual and the collective

Within energy consumption research there has been a growing interest in studying everyday practices and understanding energy consumption through a practice theory approach, which implies an understanding of energy consumption as the outcome of routinised practices [11]. The practice theory approach bridges the dualisms between actor and structure, social and material, as practices are regarded as being at the centre of understanding social life: “*The social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organised around shared practical understandings*” [35,200,p. 12]. Everyday practices are considered to be routinised and embodied, which makes a central statement in understanding everyday life and residential energy consumption. Bodies and practices constitute each other in this embodiment of practices, which characterise how human activity is entwined with the human body [35]. Furthermore, everyday practices are materially mediated and rely on shared skills and understandings, or know-how, that are also embodied. Thereby “*the skilled body*” becomes the centre of both mind and activity, and of individual activity and society [35,p. 12]. Practices are both shared as collective entities, for example practices of heating and airing, and performed individually. Schatzki uses the term intelligibility to describe the individual phenomenon of what makes sense to practitioners in performing practices [13,p.110]. This practice as performance is the actual carrying out of a practice, as practices have to be performed in order to be realised, sustained and reproduced [14,15]. McMeekin and Southerton note that practices as performances attend to daily activities on the micro level and how these are produced and reproduced, thereby presenting the individual “*as the intersection of practices*” [16,p. 351]. Reckwitz further states that individuals are carriers of many different practices in routinised ways of understanding, knowing and desiring, both bodily and mentally [17]. Therefore, social practices are both individually performed and collectively shared.

### 2.2. Comfort in practices

Several researchers have approached the concept of comfort within the practice theory framework to understand everyday practices related to energy consumption and comfort [4,5,8,9,18]. Shove brought forward the concept of comfort as a socio-technical issue, by scrutinising how conventions of comfort have co-evolved through history in a dialectic relationship between technological development, policy and legislation, marketing and everyday life [4]. Furthermore, Chappells and Shove [7] stated that comfort is a negotiable socio-cultural construct as it is both an idea and a material reality. Gram-Hanssen [8] used practice theory to investigate differences in how comfort is practiced in the same historical and technical setting, with households representing different socio-material configurations of meanings, know-hows and knowledge. Strengers [5,19] studied how demand-management programmes shape and sustain comfort expectations, norms and practices, in relation to cooling. Thermal comfort practices are here understood as “*the activities householders undertake to heat and cool their bodies and homes*” [19,p. 7313]. Strengers and Maller [20] analysed cooling practices to highlight how public policies on hot weather and

heat waves conflict with householders' everyday experiences and adaptive strategies for adjusting for excessive heat. Hitchings [9] investigated office workers' perception of comfort as habitual actions within the specific context of a working environment, understood as a reproduction of social practices and taken-for-granted ambient comfort. Day and Hitchings [21] wrote about the practices of the elderly to keep warm and showed how practices of keeping warm are shaped by ideas about identity and how certain clothes and objects for keeping warm are inscribed with an old-age identity that elderly people would rather avoid. The above studies focus on comfort as thermal comfort and state that comfort is a socio-technical issue, being both a social idea (norm or convention) and a material reality. The studies also state that comfort practices can be understood as the activities done to obtain comfort and that these activities should be seen as habitual actions reproducing certain social practices which can vary with different ideas of identity and social histories. The studies do not precisely elucidate how the notion of comfort, as either norms or conventions, as activities, or as materiality and technology, can be conceptualised within theories of practice, and aspects of sensations are not profoundly discussed in relation to theories of practice within this literature. Therefore, there is a question of how comfort can be understood as sensed and perceived within social practices and the surrounding material environment. To scrutinise this, a perspective of the body and the senses is needed [22].

### 2.3. The body and the senses

Practices are understood as embodied habits and thus the body is included in theories of practices. However, the perspective of bodily senses has not been thoroughly scrutinised. A sensorial and embodied approach in the social sciences rejects a division between body and mind, behaviour and perception, as also developed in phenomenological and practice theoretical work. Several senses are at play in perceiving and practising a comfortable home environment, especially as “*the senses are skills for embodied action*” [23,p. 1269]. For example, senses like smell and touch are relevant in a study of comfort as well as the sense of thermoception, which allows us to perceive heat and cold [23]. Pink also argues that, although sight has been privileged in the Western discourse, this is not necessarily the case when studying domestic everyday life. Pink shows how metaphors of senses such as touch, smell and hearing represent embodied experiences of home-making practices [24]. Such practices are seen as embodied actions through which individuals engage with the sensory environments of their home, for example by cleaning, cooking, playing music, burning oils or candles and choosing the floor type [24,p.10]. Pink and colleagues partly combine practice theory with a sensory ethnography rooted in phenomenological anthropology from Ingold, thereby moderating the analytical priority of practices, though maintaining a focus on practical activity [25]. The authors also partly criticise practice theory from this approach and argue that practice theory, as it has been unfolded in much sociological research, has a tendency towards abstraction and generalisation and thus tends to forget what people are actually doing and feeling. Watson, however, in a direct comment on this, argues that a uniting feature of theories of practice is an understanding of practices as constituted by and reproduced through practical activity [26]. Watson further argues that, to a high degree, theories of practice and phenomenological anthropology share common roots in the philosophy of e.g. Heidegger and Wittgenstein. We are inspired by the sensory ethnography approach as developed by Pink and colleagues, though we follow the line of Watson in arguing that this approach does not stand in opposition to understandings in theories of practices as developed by Schatzki and others, described in the previous paragraph. Rather, we will argue that the detailed interrogation of bodies and minds in places and spaces, as described by Pink et al., contributes in developing approaches of practice theory that are especially interested in understanding the role of context and individual variation. This implies a stronger focus on the individual in the

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