



## Short communication

## Schatzkian practice theory and energy consumption research: Time for some philosophical spring cleaning?

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## ABSTRACT

The version of practice theory developed by Theodore Schatzki is employed increasingly in energy consumption research. This emerged in response to problems Wittgenstein had identified in the core logic of prevailing rule-based, inter-subjectivist social theories of the late 20th century. Since then, however, the use and development of Schatzkian practice theory in energy studies has not been subjected to ongoing, robust philosophical critique. This paper offers some thoughts on how such a critique might proceed. It begins by outlining the roots of Schatzki's version of practice theory in his critique of Giddens and Bourdieu. It then explores three areas where practice theory appears to need more in-depth critique and development: a fuller account of the ontological status of 'practices' and what this implies for research models; more clarity on lines of causality; and the place of socio-economic issues within practices and their descriptions. It concludes that practice theory provides a very insightful framework for heuristic models in energy research but that its usefulness is held back by these yet unresolved difficulties.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is addressed to the growing community of researchers who use practice theory to investigate energy consumption in everyday life. Although the notions of 'practice theory' and 'practices' have varied meanings within social theory, their uses in energy research are based almost entirely on formulations developed by Schatzki [1–4], modified by Reckwitz [5–8] and further developed by Schatzki in later years [9]. These were introduced to energy consumption studies by such pioneering researchers as Warde [10], Shove and Pantzar [11] and Shove [12,13] and have been applied with variations by Gram-Hanssen [14–16], Hargreaves [17], Røpke [18] and many others (including these authors).

After a decade of its use in energy consumption studies, it is interesting to take a critical, philosophically based look at Schatzkian practice theory and ask how good its credentials are as a robust, dependable social theory for use in energy consumption research. To these authors' knowledge no such study has yet been offered, hence this paper makes a first attempt to start such a discussion.

Of course, there are wide variations in formulations of practice theory used in energy consumption studies, a point highlighted by Shove and Walker [19]. This paper does not attempt an exegetical survey of these to explicate the variations. Instead it focuses on the core logic of practice theory as developed by Schatzki and incorporated, at various levels, into these studies. References are made to studies using practice theory in energy consumption research only to illustrate or highlight issues that arise. Because of space limitations, Reckwitz's clarifications and modifications of Schatzki's schema are also mentioned only in passing.

Some may wonder why a philosophical critique of practice theory is necessary or justified, since it seems to work well in energy consumption studies, and surely the usefulness of a conceptual framework is more important than how it accords with externally imposed philosophical standards. However, Schatzkian practice theory only exists because of philosophical critique of earlier social theory. It was Schatzki's penetrating, Wittgensteinian philosophical critiques of Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's theory of habitus that launched practice theory as a viable social theory. It was not produced in order to provide a useful conceptual framework for energy consumption studies. Rather, it was offered as a logically consistent, phenomenologically defensible, intuitively convincing view of the way the social world is. This paper attempts to carry that approach forward a little and suggest further avenues for development.

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Three specific avenues for further discussion are outlined in this paper: the ontology of practices; lines of causality; and socio-economic issues. First, however, the paper offers a brief description of the emergence of Schatzki's version of practice theory in his critique of Giddens and Bourdieu.

## 2. Development of Schatzkian practice theory

### 2.1. Schatzki's critique of intersubjectivity in social theory

Schatzki's practice theory arose out of his and others' Wittgensteinian critiques of the central place of intersubjectivism in social theories of the late 20th century. Intersubjectivism means having shared understandings of the world based on subjectively formed, socially constructed narratives, labels, frameworks and perspectives.

One of the most influential of these theories was Anthony Giddens' 'structuration theory' [20]. Structuration theory can be seen as Giddens' attempt to address key questions that had characterized a great deal of social theorizing since its early inceptions in the work of such theorists as Saint Simon (1760–1865), Comte (1798–1857), Marx (1818–1883), Durkheim (1858–1917), Weber (1864–1920) and others (see Giddens' discussion in [21]). Some of these questions had to do with the mechanisms of how society functioned, such as: how is it that people are able to coordinate with each other so effectively to produce institutions and ways of life that persist over time and space yet also develop and change? Others had to do with inequality and emancipation, such as: why does this social interaction produce and sustain large inequalities of wealth and privilege, even within the same society? [22].

For Giddens, society is held together in time and space by the 'duality' of social structure. On the one hand, coordinated actions and relationships between people happen and persist only because they are continually reproduced by the people who share the same intersubjective understanding of how the social world should be. At the same time, whenever these understandings are reproduced by being acted out, this reinforces them. Therefore, social 'structure' for Giddens is not an abstract, reified domain that exists of its own accord (as it tends to be in Durkheim's social theory). It only exists when being reproduced, in the moments when people act in accordance with their shared understandings. For Giddens this explained the mechanism of how people know how to 'go on' in social settings. It also had a strong emancipatory dimension: it explained how rules of social and economic conduct become entrenched in societies and thereby constrain certain groups while enabling others, in relation to economic and other resources.

Within this framework the reproduction of social structure happens by means of 'practices' – people doing things that fit with their intersubjective understandings of what the world is or should be like. For Giddens, these shared understandings are held in people's memories in the form of 'rules'. These can be formal rules, such as who may occupy which house or belong to which trading bloc, or informal rules such as how to behave when the boss is watching. Such rules can be both authoritative (who can tell who what to do) and allocative (who is allowed which resources).

Critiques of Giddens' approach by Schatzki [1,3,4] and others [23,24] center on his understanding of rule-keeping. To begin with, Wittgenstein [25] had argued that knowing a rule is not the same as acting according to it. To act according to a rule requires an act of will, a decision to follow or not follow the rule. If all our social interactions, in all their complexity and nuancing, are based on recalling sets of candidate rules and deciding which to apply, this would require extremely high levels of conscious cognitive functioning whenever we are socially engaged.

Giddens addressed this problem by drawing on psychoanalysts Freud and Eriksson, proposing that most rule-following happens in the 'unconscious mind', a rationally active domain in which processing and decisions are accomplished without conscious thought [20: 45ff]. Whether or not one accepts the notion of a rational unconscious mind (see critiques in [26,27]), Schatzki [3] used a further insight of Wittgenstein to critique this position decisively: that no amount of rules or instructions can ever fully describe any act a human carries out.

In Wittgenstein's [25] example, a tradesman on a building site calls 'Brick!' to his laborer. The laborer skillfully retrieves a brick and passes it to the tradesman correctly. Only one word of instruction was used, but no matter how many words the tradesman had used, he would not have been able to give full instructions for every nuance of the laborer's movement and judgment. There would always be something more that needed to be said. The practice of getting and passing a brick cannot be fully instructed. Since practices are comprised of interwoven bodily and mental acts, rule-keeping cannot be the way humans guide themselves in their performance of practices. Schatzki's conclusion was that inter-subjectivity is not a tenable basis for explaining how people are able to do everyday practical and socially relevant things.

Bourdieu [28–30], aware of this rule-action dilemma, grounded his understanding of society in the notion of 'habitus', the core of which is habit-like skills based on practical know-how, internalized in the body and mind. People acquire these skills from the people around them, mostly as children, and act them out by habit. For Bourdieu this had both mechanistic and socioeconomic dimensions. On the mechanistic level, it explained how people are able to 'go on' in social situations without having to recall and apply myriads of rules. On the socioeconomic level, it helped explain lack of social mobility. People born and brought up among the economically privileged absorb sets of social and other skills and know-how that they can employ to open doors among other privileged people, while those brought up in poverty lack such skills and are thereby continually held back from socio-economic advancement.

By leaving rule-keeping out of his schema, Bourdieu admitted this left him with a problem: what would move people to act out their habitus, if it is simply a repetition of learnt skillful actions? Bourdieu brought rule-following back into the equation at this point, arguing that human action is motivated, through and through, by rule-based calculations of maximizing economic and social utility.

Schatzki [3: 297] maintained that this creates an inherent contradiction: on the one hand, rule-following cannot explain human action, which must instead be formed of habituated skills. Yet on the other hand, its purposeful nature can only be explained by rule-following. In a further twist, Bourdieu admitted this inherent contradiction but maintained it should be proclaimed boldly, as inherent in the way life is. Schatzki rejected this position on philosophical grounds, arguing it was simply a logical contradiction.

### 2.2. Schatzki's solution

Schatzki [3] adopted Bourdieu's understanding of the habitual, skilled nature of human action, which he called 'practical action', arguing that people are able to perform practical and socially relevant actions because they have developed skills which they can act out habitually. These are not held in an 'unconscious' mind and are not the result of following rule-like instructions, but are forms of life that become embedded in people's mind-body functioning.

Further, Schatzki argued, the motivation to act is not based on rule-following, as in Bourdieu, but occurs on the level of feelings connected to aims, goals or purposes – what Schatzki calls 'teleoaffectivity' (from Greek '*telos*' = end or goal; Latin '*affectus*' = affection,

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