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# Rethinking embodied knowledge and household consumption

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### ABSTRACT

Mainstream theories on household energy consumption are characterized by reductionist assumptions about consumers and the socio-material contexts of choice. Much of the social science attention on consumption has focused on mental states, meaning, cognition, and rational choice. In mainstream theory, body is collapsed into mind and the demand for goods is both disembodied and decontextualized from social and material worlds. These reductions hinder the development of a robust theory of consumption and new thinking in energy savings policy. In this paper we bring the body back to consumption. We argue that people's exposure to practices, both in the form of personal and culturally mediated experience, embodies knowledge (and meanings) and this in turn affects the ways we perform energy-consuming acts. We draw on work on body, habitus and perception by anthropologists Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Pierre Warnier, and philosopher Bergson, as well as more recent perspectives framed under the heading of social practice theory.

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## 1. Introduction: the plasticity of bodies

Despite a quarter century of critique, a theory of household consumption based on rational choice and methodological individualism has stripped consumption from its grounding in historical processes and has ignored the capacity of the material world, including human bodies to affect consumption. In mainstream theorizing about energy consumption, body is collapsed into mind and the demand for goods is both disembodied and decontextualized from social and material worlds. Yet, bodies are repositories of a unique and explicit form for knowledge about the world and this knowledge affects the ways we consume. Concrete experiences, involving both body and perceptions are always brought to bear in learning and adapting ourselves to new environments. The escalation of energy consumption can be interpreted as a transformation of bodies. The modern body is increasingly re-equipped and re-shaped through new perceptions of comfort.

The co-evolution of bodies and the material world thus affects the ontology of energy consumption as well as providing an interesting approach to conceptualizing changing consumption practices. Further, a theory of body is highly relevant for a policy domain interested in reducing the energy intensity of everyday

practices. The body perspective opens policy for new forms for experimentation beyond the usual market experiments in which consumers are presented with new products and either select or reject them. Our intention in this chapter is to attempt to reposition the body in the theorizing of energy consumption and to infer how this could create new, fertile ground for policies directed at reducing energy consumption. Along with other papers in this inaugural issue that discuss various elements of household energy consumption [1–4], our ambition is to contribute to the development of a pragmatic theory of energy consumption relevant for both academics and policy makers.

In developing a theory of body and consumption, we draw on work on body and habitus by anthropologists Marcel Mauss [5], Jean-Pierre Warnier [6,7] and Pierre Bourdieu [8,9]; work on perception and memory by Bergson [10]; as well as our own previous work on the body-consumption relationship [11–13]. Reflections will be made on the relative strength of embodied knowledge in actions such as transportation, cleaning, preparing (and eating) food and achieving thermal comfort. We will relate the embodying of knowledge to repetition, social complexity, as well as to the geography of the space in which the action takes place and the numbers and kinds of material objects involved in the practice.

We will aim at avoiding the mind/body duality introduced by Descartes, who proposed that all thought is disembodied and logical. We will argue that the habits of language intellectually design our bodies as well-defined entities, yet the boundaries between thought and reflex, body and mind are malleable and overlapping.

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We do not consider the body as a natural and fixed entity, or a passive slate on which the social is recorded [e.g. 14,15]. Rather, the body is a methodological and conceptual tool that extends the grammar of social practices. We will take on the task of enriching these insights on bodies in order to make links between disciplinary approaches rather than juxtaposing them. We propose that bodies are at the intersection of the cultural and natural, the human and non-human, the individual and collective. In this chapter, we aim to begin an exploration of these intersections.

Bodies are part of the material world and continuously exchange energy with their environment. Like the bodies of all living beings, human bodies have to reproduce themselves everyday through the finding of a favorable environment, the acquisition of food, the creation of comfort and eventually by the physical act of procreation. Anthropology and philosophy provide ways of seeing and conceiving bodies (the plural is important) within practices. In order to avoid reduction to a particular discipline or knowledge tradition, however, we will theorize the body in its articulation with all of the other dimensions of human practices, including materiality, embodied knowledge and habits. Bodies are thus inserted into practices without subtracting any of the other relevant entities. A human being results from other bodies, and is formed with and through a body. Bodies have to reproduce themselves regularly to be preserved, but humans have developed many ways to conserve themselves. Anthropology shows how bodies are variably shaped through time and space [12] and phenomenology has shown how diversely we are in the world through our affections and perceptions. We suggest that this diversity of bodies can be understood through the mutual fashioning of practices and bodies. Practices require skilled bodies, and bodies are shaped by practices [16].

We explain this diversity of bodies-in-action in the next section by developing the characteristic of bodies as both sites of habits and of processes. On one hand, the constitution of habits is elucidated by the reproduction and embodiment of situations. On the other hand, embodiment is described as the passage of perceptions into memories. In order to account for embodiment, which is a process of accommodation, we need a theory of perception—a profound exercise that will be only sketched out in this paper. In the following section, we examine how bodies co-evolve with a changing material world. We develop the point that bodies can be described as inertial and resistant to change, or as possibilities for new forms for experimentation. We explore this ambivalence in the section “bodies as policy subjects” in order to emphasize the experimental aspects. We conclude that we know little about the limits of the plasticity of the human body or, in the words of Spinoza, “no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body” [17: *Ethics*, III, prop. 2].

## 2. Bodies as active entities in practices

Bodies are constitutive of practices in two distinguishable but overlapping ways, first as entities that interact with other objects in a practice and second as the sites of actions or activities. Thus, a body is a spatiotemporal entity that can to some extent be identified by coordinates (we will see later that bodily boundaries are sometimes unclear). Second, a body is a place where activity and events occur. Considered as a delimited entity, the body can be passive or active. Bodies participate in actions and are a constitutive part of the practices which in turn constitute social life. Bodies are a necessary component of a practice, or to put it another way, there is no such thing as a practice without at least one body. Bodies have experiential histories and are not only physical, material entities but are also vessels for experiential knowledge. This knowledge is brought to bear in practices.

Bodies are also sites in which actions or events occur. The malleability of bodies appears clearly in the diverse capacities and shapes which they can take on. For instance, sleeping can be seen variously as an action, an activity and a practice. As Mauss observed, there are many different ways of sleeping, linked to conventions and to the configuration of the material accompaniments and surroundings [5]. Sleeping, sitting or walking is not more ‘natural’ than eating or talking. Simple practices such as these have complex geographies and histories, and are “culturally” shaped by the use of objects and infrastructures. Boltanski shows that the usages of the body vary with social class [18]. Foucault analyses how bodies are fashioned within disciplinary practices [19]. He regards practices as the processes by which bodily properties crucial to social life are formed. Thus on the one hand, bodies are constitutive of practices, but on the other they are constituted through practices. Seen this way, bodies are not limited to the physiological body, but can be considered as extended through objects and materialities. This conceptual maneuver provides a new perspective on experimentation that is interesting for the theory and policies of energy consumption and energy savings. We develop this point below.

### 2.1. Bodies as sites of habits

When bodies are considered as spatiotemporal entities with relatively well-defined boundaries, they engage in social life through practices. Bodies are part of the material world. Bodies interact with other entities that are more or less predictable. This interaction is affected by the cultural and individual histories of the body, through which knowledge is embodied and made agentive, as well as places where knowledge is deposited through the repetition of actions. Even though some of the bodily actions associated with the accomplishment of household tasks have been simplified through the increasing use of complex technologies, bodies are still involved in producing services such as clean clothes, meals, indoor comfort and so on, even if it is at the level of minimalist action such as pushing a button on a household electrical appliance. In the activities of a modern household, many actions (and knowledge) have been surrendered to technological systems which begin in the home but extend outward through infrastructures and technologies of provision. Nonetheless, in any activity, from speaking, to writing, to sharing a meal or playing sports, our bodies are always present to our actions. This is also true of actions usually associated with cognition, such as taking an exam or playing a game of chess; therefore, we can say that bodies are constitutive of human practices.

In order to understand practices, we need to look at bodies, their interaction with other bodies and with things. If bodies are reduced to the visible or observable human part of a practice, we stray into behaviorism. By this we mean that behavior is made synonymous with visible action: it can be said to be the uppermost layer of a practice. But many processes and elements are not visible (meanings, competences, embodied knowledge). Further, the body is only one agent among many in the performance of a practice. The capacity to enact practices (agency) is the result of the coordination of different agents, both human and non-human. In other words, agency in practices is distributed among the entities that are enacted in a practice [11,20], of which the body is a crucial entity. Any action involving a body has to be analyzed within the assemblage of elements that contributes to the performance of a practice.

Not all forms for practices are economically rational or even instrumental. Humans engage regularly in inexplicable behaviors, mysterious purchases, odd uses of objects and baffling forms for waste. There are countless examples of this from the energy consumption literature. But we can make better sense of an action

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