



# Socio-technical transitions and dynamics in everyday consumption practice

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding how social change has intersected with transformations in key resource-intensive domestic consumption practices that comprise part of the fabric and experience of daily living is of central relevance to questions of sustainable development. Despite recent advances in contextual approaches to consumption, little is known about how wider socio-technical transitions have been experienced in the context of lived lives and everyday performances. As a result, sustainable development policies have been largely removed from the lived challenges and experiences people face in their daily lives. This paper explores the value of a human-centred, contextual approach to energy transitions research for revealing the intersections of lives, practices and contexts in energy systems change. Investigating the question of how everyday practices have intersected with processes of social-technical change, it reports on findings from a recent Irish-based qualitative biographic investigation of dynamics in domestic consumption. Analysis reveals that a complex web of contextual processes, including technological change, economic transitions and planning policies, have shaped consumption in the home. Furthermore, social differentiation in the lived experience of socio-technical change along dimensions of gender, social class and geography was observed. The paper concludes with reflections on the international relevance and implications of these findings for sustainable development policy, suggesting sustainable consumption requires a much more fundamental challenge to social contexts than is recognised by dominant approaches. Here it is argued that human-centred, contextual approaches to sustainability transitions that consider social differentiation in complex lived experiences are necessary to design more integrated and resilient energy futures.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Individualising responsibility for sustainability transitions

Rising consumption and the increasing resource intensity of daily living practices are one of the key drivers of local and global environmental change (Wilk, 2002; Davies et al., 2014; Reisch and Thøgersen, 2015). The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen particularly astonishing transformations in how daily life is experienced and lived, from how we get around to the type of food we eat. These changes have been associated with spiralling energy consumption and resource use, putting an ever-increasing demand on non-renewable resources and contributing to the destabilisation of our climate (Jansen, 2003; Rees, 2011; EC, 2011; UNEP, 2012). Following these developments, concerns regarding anthropogenic climate change and rapid resource depletion have become a major focus of research and policy (DECLG, 2012). In recognising the limitations of focusing solely on technocratic solutions, there is now an emerging consensus that attention should not only be on the development of low carbon forms of energy production, but also innovative methods of reducing demand for, and consumption of, resources (cf. Shove and Walker, 2010; Walker, 2013). However, our

knowledge of how and why people develop and maintain particular energy-intensive or sustainable lifestyles remains patchy and inadequate (Greene and Rau, 2018).

In recent decades, sustainable consumption has emerged as a key area of focus within the context of broader sustainable development policy across the developed world (EEA, 2005, 2012). Following this, behavioural change has become the “holy grail” of sustainable development policy” (Jackson, 2005: xi), in which the question of what drives consumption is of central relevance. To this, different disciplinary perspectives offer divergent insights into the nature of human action and how it changes over time. To date, the predominant disciplinary approaches to informing policy on consumption behaviour have comprised social psychological and economic actor-centric approaches (Davies et al., 2014). These disciplines have advanced individualised-rationalistic models of behaviour change that position individuals as largely rational actors and cognitive processes, such as deliberation, attitudes and values, as the central drivers of action (Chatterton, 2016).

In finding ways in which environmental transitions can be achieved through the prevailing neo-liberal framework (Southerton et al., 2004; Jackson, 2006; Pape et al., 2011), the predominant approaches taken

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by some western governments to ‘nudge’ (cf. Leggett, 2014) individuals towards more pro-environmental behaviour have focused largely on market-led initiatives. Information campaigns, green fees and taxes and other market-focused approaches for dealing with the ecological crisis are the preferred modes of conduct in a post-Fordist world (Lorek and Vergragt, 2015). Efforts to promote sustainable consumption emerging from this dominant paradigm have essentially concentrated on the correction of market failures through means that aim to ensure that consumers have access to the greatest amount of information needed in order to enact their consumer sovereignty (Seyfang, 2009). However, a growing body of evidence is showing that policy responses emerging from this ‘information-deficit’ model (cf. Hall et al., 2010; Shove, 2010) have not brought about the necessary transitions in behaviours and practice. As has been extensively stated in sustainable consumption research, a ‘value-action’ gap exists between how people think they ought to act and how they actually behave (Blake, 1999; Davies et al., 2005; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Owens, 2000; Pape et al., 2011; Pelenur and Cruickshank, 2012). However, although the deficit model has been repeatedly shown, in empirical research and through experience, to be flawed, individualistic-rationalistic approaches continue to dominate sustainable consumption policy (Shove, 2010; Davies et al., 2010; Fellner and Spash, 2015).

### 1.2. Contextualising (un)sustainable consumption

In response to critiques of individualistic-rationalistic approaches there has been a recent proliferation of contextualised approaches to (un)sustainable consumption research. Encompassing perspectives and approaches from a range of disciplines, most notably human geography, sociology, anthropology and science and technology studies, this paradigm directs analytical attention to the social, cultural, political and material dimensions of environmental change. In doing so, it highlights a serious limitation of individualistic-rationalistic perspectives as that of failing to appreciate the integral role of social and structural contexts in shaping and delimiting behaviour. Two prominent theoretical perspectives that cut across disciplinary boundaries within this literature are transition theory and social practice theory. Both of these theories offer temporal, situated perspectives for analysing consumption dynamics from multiple, intersecting scales of analysis and thus have been recently appropriated by researchers seeking to shed light on contextual processes and drivers of action.

In advancing a historical and contextual approach to studying patterns of social reproduction and change at system levels, transitions theories, such as the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) (Geels and Schot, 2007; Grin et al., 2010), highlight change as occurring at the intersection of dynamics at multiple scales and including a range of actors (e.g. civil society, market, state). The MLP views social-technical transitions as non-linear processes resulting from the dynamic interplay of developments at three analytical levels: ‘niches (the Locus for radical innovations), socio-technical regimes (the Locus of established practices and associated rules that stabilize existing systems) and an exogenous socio-technical landscape’ (Geels et al., 2011: 26). In identifying the socio-technical arrangements and contexts in which resource-intensive patterns of consumption have evolved, transition theories extend analysis beyond consuming per se to lead towards a more structural appreciation for how consumption is organised. Using concepts such as ‘pathways of dependency’ and technological ‘lock in’, this literature takes a ‘co-evolutionary perspective on changes in ‘socio-technical systems’ based on the inseparability of social and technological change’ (Seyfang et al., 2010: 5). Socio-technical regimes become path dependent as past decisions and developments determine and shape future trajectories of development and the provision of goods and services. Over time, certain paths of development are closed off and the regime becomes locked into a particular trajectory of evolution as complexes of social, institutional and technological elements become gelled together in particular configurations (Grin et al., 2010). Industrial globalisation

over the course of the past several decades has provided the backdrop against which recent transitions in socio-technical regime sets have occurred. These changes have brought about radical transformations in the way everyday life is performed and experienced. However, to date, little research has explored how these wider socio-technical changes have played out at the scale of lived experience and situated consumption. In this respect, cross fertilising transition theories with social practice perspectives offers a potentially fruitful means of exploring the intersection of lives, practices and contexts in socio-technical change.

Within consumption research, there has recently been a paradigmatic shift towards social practice theories as a means to conceptualise and study dynamics of action from a contextually situated vantage point (cf. Warde, 2005; Shove and Spurling, 2013; Welsh and Warde, 2015). Despite the fact that ‘there is no unified practice approach’ (Schatzki et al., 2001: 2), a key proposition uniting social practice theories is that individuals’ performance of distinct sets of everyday practices reproduce social structures (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977; Schatzki, 1996). Social practices theories seek to connect micro and macro approaches to social analysis by highlighting the interconnections between routinised everyday conduct and larger-scale socio-technical developments. This work emphasises that, rather than being driven by deliberative processes, drivers of action are largely located in ‘the site of the social’ (Schatzki, 2002). In this sense, habits and routines can be conceptualised as the reproduction of stable and socially recognisable practices, such as driving or voting. Individuals are recruited to practices through processes of socialization, with understandings of what constitute appropriate conduct shaped by shared, relational understandings of what it means to perform a practice well (Hards, 2012). In an analysis of consumption, a practice-theoretical lens highlights the importance of situating the conduct of individuals within the contexts of the broader socio-historical setting in which it develops and is performed (Greene and Rau, 2018).

With regard to analysing dynamics of change from situated vantage points, the elemental model of practice formulated by Shove et al. (2012) has been adopted in much extant empirical research on consumption. A significant body of this work has explored individuals’ engagement and interaction with elements of practice (meanings, knowhow, materials) concerning their recruitment to or defection from various (un)sustainable modes of practices (cf. Greene and Rau, 2018 for a detailed review). However, to date, very little empirical research has considered how these dynamics play out over longer socio-historical timescales (Greene, 2018). Indeed, many accounts of dynamics in practice over longer socio-historical timescales remain largely theoretical in nature (cf. Shove et al., 2012). The small body of longitudinal practice-theoretical research that does exist focuses predominantly on larger-scale processes to trace shifts in prevailing norms and technologies at an aggregate societal level (e.g. Southerton, 2009; Anderson, 2014, 2016). That said, in recent years a small but growing body of reconstructive, experience-centred biographic practice-theoretical research has emerged. This work is directing attention to the recursive interaction between macro-level development and patterns of resource use in daily life (cf. Henwood et al., 2015; Sattlegger and Rau, 2016; Greene and Rau, 2018). Nonetheless, yet a nascent field of inquiry, currently little is known about how wider socio-technical transitions intersect with dynamics in routinised consumption from a lived experience perspective.

Both transition theories and recent practice-theoretical perspectives offer dynamic and contextual approaches to analysing social reproduction and change in consumption. However, they do so in different ways. While socio-technical transitions literature is predominantly concerned with theorising aggregate trends and multi-level dynamics in systems change, practice-theoretical perspectives direct attention to the recursive interrelation between societal change and routinised everyday conduct. Thus, a combined transition and practice-theoretical lens focuses light on the performative nature of action and its connection with broader structural contexts. To date, little research

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