University College Cork
Department of Sociology/Engineering

SOCIAL PRACTICE, CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENERGY TRANSITION

Submitted to: Dr. Ger Mullally
By: Clare Watson
Student No: 115221313
Date: 20th January 2016

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to explore the theory of social practice and how it relates to the issues of climate change and the energy transition from fossil fuels to low carbon alternatives.

In the process, I try to answer the question:

Is social practice theory the 'silver bullet' that climate and energy campaigners have been looking for?

I have broken the paper up into four sections. In the Introduction, I include some background information on why we know, and have known for a long time, that climate change is a problem.

In Section 1, I briefly examine a number of conventional approaches aimed at changing people's behaviour around climate change and energy use.

In Section 2, I explore the theory of social practice, with particular reference to the work of Elizabeth Shove (2010; 2012; 2012; 2013: 2014).

In Section 3, I look at a number of real life examples of where the theory of social practice can, itself, be put into practice.

In Section 4, I list a number of critiques of social practice theory, which highlight problems and shortcomings that require further deliberation.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I answer my initial question by noting that social policy theory is useful and credible, and it certainly helps to elucidate how actions are determined and carried out. The manner in which it takes the pressure off the individual as the arbiter of change is to be welcomed. However, in my mind, a lot of questions still remain to be answered around how performances and practices can be changed to meet short term climate targets.

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that climate change is a global threat which, if left unchecked, will have huge consequences for both the way we live and the world in which we expect to live it.

Meeting the climate challenge will substantially alter the consumerist lifestyle endemic in western countries and so coveted by everyone else. In short, if there is to be any effective reduction in carbon emissions or the use of natural resources, 'new forms of living, working and playing' will have to take effect (Shove 2012: 415).

When asked about how to *make* people care about climate change or how to *make* them do something about it, most people will suggest the provision of more education, more information on what to do, or more facts about how bad it will get if we don't act now.

However, climate change is not a new phenomenon. Charles Keeling began measuring the level of Co2 in the atmosphere, at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, as far back as 1958. The Keeling Curve[1] has been logging the ongoing changes ever since.

The first World Climate Conference, sponsored by the World Meterological Organisation, was held in Geneva in February 1979[2]. In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established under the auspices of the United Nations, bringing together thousands of scientists from around the world to review and assess 'the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information produced worldwide relevant to the understanding of climate change'[3].

In 2006, former US vice president, Al Gore launched his impressive climate change documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth'[4], in an effort to spread the message. It was a box office success around the world. In the same year, the economist, Nicholas Stern, produced a voluminous report for the British Government, called The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change[5]. It made a very convincing argument as to why, if for no other reason than to save money, it would be prudent to act sooner rather than too late.

In 2014, the IPCC stated that '*there is a clear message from science: To avoid dangerous interference with the climate system, we need to move away from business as usual*.'[6] The year before at the Davos World Economic Forum, Christine Lagarde, Head of the International Monetary Fund, had put it more succinctly - '*Unless we take action on climate change, future generations will be roasted, toasted, fried and grilled.*'[7]

So, information about climate change, its potential impacts, and what to do about it has been available now for years, yet we are still struggling to respond effectively. Our hypothetical advisors who want people to be educated, could well say that they need to be told again, in a different way, over and over.

If only it were so simple........

1. Conventional Behaviour Change Approaches

Social practice theorists believe that dominant behaviour change approaches tinker on the edge of the problem because they focus on the individual and on individual choice (Hitchings, in Shove et al, 2014: 104).

Shove et al (2012; 2-3) dispute the traditional and widely held belief that people act out of self-interest, or that new social arrangements arise out of millions of individual decisions about how best to act. They argue that this belief makes assumptions about human agency and choice, and reflects common sense theories about why people do what they do. It also aligns with the idea that behaviour is determined by a person's beliefs and values, and that lifestyles are expressions of personal choice*.*

---

[1] https://scripps.ucsd.edu/programs/keelingcurve/
[2] https://www.wmo.int/pages/themes/climate/international_wcc.php
[3] http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml
[4] http://an-inconvenient-truth.com/
[5] http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http:/www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sternreview_index.htm
[6] http://www.un.org/climatechange/blog/2014/04/ipcc-greenhouse-gas-emissions-accelerate-despite-reduction-efforts-many-pathways-to-substantial-emissions-reductions-are-available/
[7]http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2013/01/top-ten-quotes-of-the-day-from-davos/

Shove claims that the problem of climate change should no longer be framed around individual behaviour, and climate change policy can no longer be dominated by 'efforts to nudge behaviour, modify attitudes and encourage individuals to make better, greener choices.' (Shove, 2012: 415)

Focusing on individual behaviour marginalises and often excludes other veins of thought, especially those around theories of social practice and transition. In Shove's opinion, social theories of practice, and those of behaviour are '*like chalk and cheese*'. People feature in practice theory as 'carriers', and in behaviours as 'autonomous agents of choice and change'. (Shove, 2010: 1279)

Shove (2010) refers, in particular, to what is called the ABC of climate change policy, which presumes that people are responsible for their own actions and so can be targeted individually in order to engender the required behaviour change. A stands for **Attitude**, B for **Behaviour**, and C for individual **Choice**.

Under the ABC approach, citizens are defined as consumers, and governments as enablers, whose role is to ensure that people make climate friendly decisions for themselves. It is believed that attitudes define a person's values, and thus motivate individual behaviour. Therefore, if you encourage new values, new choices will be made and new behaviour will follow.
But in reality, values don't always translate into action – we may believe one thing and do another.

According to Shove, concentrating on moments when attitude makes a difference is to lose sight of the bigger picture. For instance, in our car dependent world, people don't drive around because they want to, or because they don't care about pollution, but because, as a member of such a society, they shoulder an unavoidable burden of mobility.

Likewise, we expect children to go to the 'right' school, according to a set of social criteria, regardless of how far away it is, which often creates the need for a car. Building codes maintain the idea that 22°C is the 'right' temperature for a room. Cycling is encouraged by governments, but cycling involves equipment, such as bikes, lycra and bike-friendly roads, as well as competence and confidence. None of this has anything to do with attitudes.

By placing the responsibility on the individual, the ABC approach deflects attention away from institutions and the part they play in defining which actions are easier and more likely than others. It also ignores the influence of social obligations, norms and conventions.

It is argued that, when it comes to changing behaviour, social practices come to the fore and people often occupy secondary roles as the 'carriers of practice' (Reckwitz 2002). To fully understand social change we need to examine how practices emerge, evolve, and fragment. We need to look at who are the carriers and why they are carrying. (Shove, 2010: 1279)
'Practices are not simply points of passage between human subjects and social structure. Rather, practice is positioned centre stage' (Shove et al, 2012:5)

2. Social Practice Theory

A practice is 'a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood' (Reckwitz, 2002: 250).

The concept of social practice emerged towards the end of the twentieth century from within Europe and is now circulating more widely amongst scholars from different disciplines, including social science, sociology, philosophy, economics and geography. It is thought that the theories that emerged were a response to a number of fundamental problems of social theory at the point of the

passing of economism and Marxism in the 1970s (Alan Warde, 2014; 284). A diverse range of theoretical positions were posited by, among others, Pierre Bourdieu (1972-1997), Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) and Michel Foucault (1960s-70s).

The turn to practices from these diverse authors seems to be tied to an interest in the 'everyday' and 'life-world'. The authors in question are influenced by the interpretative or cultural turn in social theory (Reckwitz, 2002:244).

However, there is 'no one theory of practice and no such thing as a practice approach' (Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 3)

Although notions of practice figured in different strands of social science through the 1980s and 1990s, they gained fresh theoretical impetus towards the close of the twentieth century, primarily through the work of philosopher Theodore Schatzki and cultural sociologist, Andreas Reckwitz.

Practices are 'organized nexuses of activity' (Schatzki et al, 2001; p. 56), such as cooking practices, political practices, farming practices, negotiation practices, banking practices, and recreational practices. Each, as an organized web of activity, involves activity and organization. Each practice is a set of actions. For instance, farming practices comprise such actions as building fences, harvesting grain, herding sheep, judging weather, and paying for supplies. The actions that compose a practice are 'either bodily doings and sayings or actions that these doings and sayings constitute.' Therefore, bodily doings, such as hammering, might result in the action of building a house, or the bodily doing of handing over money might pay for groceries, or writing words might result in the composition of a poem.

Reckwitz takes these ideas further by proposing that a practice is a 'routinized type of behaviour' which consists of interdependencies between diverse elements including 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge'. Practices, such as ways of cooking, consuming, working, taking care of oneself or others, form a *block* which then depends on the existence and interconnectedness of specific *elements.* A practice also represents a *pattern* of many single and often unique actions.

The individual person acts as the *carrier* of a practice, or of many different practices which need not be linked to each other. He or she is not only a carrier of patterns of physical behaviour, but also of certain routinized ways of 'understanding, knowing how and desiring'. These 'mental' activities are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates. They are not qualities of the individual. (Reckwitz, 2002:249-50)

Moreover, the practice as a nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki) is not only clear to the person or the people who carry it out, it is also understandable to contemporary observers.

Elizabeth Shove describes practices as 'what individuals do' to 'reflect the pursuit of shared goals (comfort, mobility) within a particular socio-technical setting.' They are recognisable *entities*, existing across time and space, which depend on the integration of *elements,* and are then enacted by reliable *carriers.* Thus, these p*ractices-as-entities* are carried, maintained, and transformed by groups of practitioners (Shove, 2012: 417)

Take, for example, the practice of skateboarding (Shove et al, 2012: 7). It consists of a complex mix of skateboards, skate parks and street spaces, alongside the skills and know-how required to ride the board and to use the space available to turn stunts; the rules and norms that define the practice of

skateboarding; its meanings to practitioners and to outsiders. As such skateboarding exists as a recognisable combination of *elements*, thus appearing as an *entity* which can be spoken about and more importantly drawn upon as a set of resources when *'doing'* skateboarding.

Practices exist as *performances* through which the *pattern* of activity is carried out, reproduced and transformed. Practices are always in the process of formation, re-formation and de-formation. (Shove et al, 2012: 44). Skateboarding only exists and continues because of endlessly recurring enactments and performances, each reproducing the interdependencies of which the practice is comprised. Skateboarding riders, with their shared understandings, skills and know how, are the *carriers or hosts* of the skateboarding practice. It is important to focus, not on the people who do the enacting, but on the practice they reproduce and transform (Shove, 2012: 418)

Practices are defined by interdependent linkages between materials, competences and meanings Materials include objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the human body itself.
- Competences refer to the expertise or knowledge required to carry out the performance.
- Meaning is a term the authors use to represent the 'social and symbolic significance of participation at any one moment'. They can change and develop or be super-ceded by other meanings. Elements of meaning can be mediated through the press and social media.

Social practices, like driving, depend on specific combinations of materials, meanings and competence. The car, the road and other traffic, the know-how required to stay alive, and the meaning and purpose of driving are intimately related, comprising what Reckwitz calls a 'block' of interconnected elements. (Shove et al, 2012: 24)

Just as elements are linked together to form recognisable practices, so practices link, one to another, to form *bundles* and *complexes*. Bundles are loosely connected patterns based on the co-location and co-existence of practices. Complexes represent stickier and more integrated combinations, some of which depend so much on each other that they become new entities in their own right. (Shove et al, 2012: 81).

The popular practice of Nordic Walking could not have taken off if walking with 'sticks' continued to be associated with old age and infirmity. The meaning had to be turned around to denote vitality and well-being. So, manufacturers of Nordic walking gear, and others associated with the practice made it their business to promote the narratives of personal health and well-being, fresh air, the outdoors and nature. If you are a Nordic walker, you are the kind of person who cares about these things. The notion of frailty is firmly displaced. (Shove et al, 2012: 54-5)

Practice research has largely focused on activities dependent upon the use of energy, water and scarce raw materials, like showering, clothes-washing, space heating and cooling, and waste disposal, and on the topic of eating, and recreational pastimes and hobbies (Warde, 2014 : 287)

3. Social Practice Theory in Policy and Real Life

'Theories of practice have as yet untapped potential for understanding change. Realizing their potential depends on developing a means of systematically exploring processes of transformation and stability within social practices and between them.'
(Shove et al, 2012; 1)

While still evolving, practice theories have begun to influence how consumption and the exploitation of natural resources are viewed, particularly in relation to climate change and energy use.

However, as we have seen, public policies, including those designed to promote sustainability and reduce greenhouse emissions, still tend to focus on the individual as the instigator of change. But, if people are seen instead as the carriers of practice, the challenge of promoting less resource-intensive ways of life becomes 'a matter of reconfiguring the practices of which society is made' (Shove et al,2012: 137).

A social practice theory perspective illustrates 'that transitions processes will extend deeply into the inconspicuous and normally unquestioned habits and routines of everyday life, and will demand the active involvement, rather than passive co-optation, of all sectors of society' (Seyfang et al, 2010:14).

Theodore Schatzki (in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 44) suggests that efforts to engender an effective response to climate change could include the following:

- Working to change the overall ends that are acceptable or prescribed in practices, and which govern what participants do
- Funding research into and producing energy-saving materials and devices for integration into existing practice bundles
- Piloting the use of these alternative material arrangements and exploring how existing practices react to, appropriate, and combine with them
- Researching and publicising exemplars of lives and bundles that are already sustainable

In Irish policy circles, there is currently a strong interest in fostering community engagement, particularly around energy use, as it is well recognised that people learn from and support each other by mutually engaging in tasks. Pledges have been made to increase the level of support for community energy groups (see DCENR White Paper, 2015: 40-45).

Such groups are generally defined by place or geographic proximity, with people living close to each other. Yet it may not always be those living nearby who influence practices. When formulating policies around community engagement it would be prudent to also consider the 'communities of practice' approach, which does not revolve around proximity, but instead focuses on participation in identifiable shared practices (Hitchings, in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 103).

Social Practice Theory, Clothing and Energy Use
Despite the current emphasis on energy conservation and energy efficiency, the standard uniform for professional people across the world is the 'business suit' – jacket (waistcoat is gone), trousers, shirt and tie for men; jacket or light cardigan, slacks, or skirt/dress, and draughty tights for women. Conferences and meetings to do with energy and climate change are full of delegates in such impractical attire. In thinking about how to cut back on space heating in the winter and cooling in the summer, we would do well to include what people wear in the mix.

Russell Hitchings (in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 106-108) describes research he carried out with office workers in the heart of London, in part, to find out if people responded to summer in the same way – did they form a community of practice in this respect? Along the way, he discovered that most of the professional employees - predominantly lawyers - wore the same clothing regardless of the season. Working inside climatically controlled offices meant that they didn't need to know what the weather was like outside, or to dress accordingly.

It emerged that, for some, seasonally unchanging dress was becoming a mark of distinction, which showed that you were too busy, ambitious and preoccupied with work to notice the weather. Some worried that deviating from the usual uniform would upset their superiors, while others felt it would

be 'nice', and more 'natural' to dress in summer clothes, but they didn't do so. Summer clothes were for casual wear outside of the office.

In essence, a community of shared and seasonally unchanging practice had emerged, which was reflecting and strengthening the emphasis on working life and career, on ideas about how spare time should be spent, and beliefs about the value of appearing busy and looking professional during work hours.

Interestingly, it was acceptable for support staff to change their clothes at will, as they had more time to think about things and were not expected to impress clients!

Bearing in mind energy conservation, Hitchings suggests a practical recommendation, arising from his research, would be to suggest emailing employees at the start of the summer, to remind them that they could wear lighter clothing during this period.

In 2005, the Japanese government took this approach a step further by launching an initiative called Cool Biz, [8]designed to ensure that government buildings could cut back on air conditioning in the summer and on heating in the winter (Warm Biz). They set out to change the meaning of normal office attire (Shove, 2012: 421). This involved the then prime minister and members of the Cabinet being seen to wear loose fitting and short-sleeved clothes in formal settings. Businesses and the clothing industry also got involved in promoting specially designed clothing under the Cool Biz brand name.

Since then, an annual Cool Biz fashion show kick starts the summer season.

Hitchings (in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 108-10) describes another piece of research he carried out, this time to examine how a small sample of elderly people managed to keep warm during the winter, and whether, by doing so, they constituted a community of practice. His conclusion was that the development of a practice community around indoor heating for this age category, was impeded by three factors. Firstly, the respondents were keen to distance themselves from the idea of having practices in common because of their age - they did not want to appear as if they were old and needy or to reflect media stereotyping of the elderly. Secondly, they were reluctant to discuss strategies of keeping warm with friends of a similar ag, because of the social expectations associated with this potentially sensitive topic. And finally, the respondents could not even observe each others' practices, as, when hosting guests, thermostats were often raised, less insulating 'smarter' clothing worn, and blankets put away. A host would feel ashamed if visitors kept their coats on. Likewise when visiting others, it was considered impolite to talk about being cold, or to ask for the heating to be turned up.

Once again, Hitchings suggested that some sort of 'sustainability brokering' could be beneficial , and a project recommendation was to find ways of helping older people to talk more freely about this otherwise delicate subject.

Social Practice Theory and The Paperless Office
Environmental debate has suggested that moving towards Alvin Toffler's paperless, or at least a less paper intensive, office is an important step on the road to sustainability.

However, Yli-Kauhaluoma et al propose that such a debate often misses the point that new ways of working need to take old ways into account, and the role of paper is central to these old ways. They say that paperless advocates also often fail to understand the 'entire and changing infrastructures of

---

[8] http://www.bbc.com/news/business-13620900

competence, desires, emotions and technologies that support and live with existing practice constellations' (in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 69).

The authors suggest that administrative practices have largely been shaped by the materials around which they have developed. Therefore it is impossible to understand change brought about by office computerisation if current paper-related practices are not fully understood. Change does not happen in a linear fashion.

Their ethnographic study in the administrative department of the former Helsinki School of Economics showed that paper use practices continued apace despite digitilisation, and that these elements of work practice had become 'fossilised' in ritual behaviour.

According to their findings:
- most of the offices visited were more or less full of paper
- paper was the most common form of information exchange
- administrators printed out pieces of paper and used these as 'boundary objects' in problem-solving situations – when they needed, for example, to ask or to present somebody with something
- piles of paper induced a sense of urgency – providing a tangible representation of a 'build up' that needs clearing
- paper was used as 'sketching' material, to aid conceptual designing, and the process of thinking and communication
- people would hang onto documents *just in case*. It was difficult to throw paper documents away because some may contain information that *will* be important in the future.

'Like an exasperated gardener, we snip triumphantly at the exposed plant, forgetting how extensive established roots can be.'
Paul Duguid (1996)[9]

They argue that the administrators' reluctance to change is not simply a matter of irrational resistance. Rather, it is likely to be based on the failure of concepts and technologies to meet important needs and contextual requirements that are themselves rooted in past and present systems of practice. The 'success and eventual institutionalisation of future (digital) practices depends on there being sufficient continuity between old paper-based practices and whatever new office practices might emerge' (Yli-Kauhaluoma et al in Shove & Spurling (eds), 2013, 2014: 81).

Social Practice, Transition and the Transition Town Movement
Climate change is challenging, precisely because the prospect of any effective response depends on changing social practices. Transitions are required not only in how contemporary standards of living are resourced, but also in the bundles and complexes of our daily practices. (Shove et al, 2012: 140).

One attempt at transitioning towards a climate friendly and low carbon society is exemplified by the Transition Towns movement, which emerged in Kinsale, Co. Cork in 2005 and has since grown to become a global movement (www.transitiontowns.org). Transition initiatives are set up and run as grass-roots organisations based in villages, towns and even cities. There is a strong emphasis on the development of new practices as well as the rediscovery of old ones through re-skilling.

The movement proposes a '12-step' action plan that includes forming a core group, raising awareness through film screenings and public meetings, creating Energy Descent Plans, visioning a

---

[9] As quoted by Yli-Kauhaluoma et al

sustainable future without fossil fuels, using Open Space and other participatory techniques, linking with other local organisations, and encouraging innovative initiatives such as local currency, and permaculture design.

However, while Transition Towns has been very successful in spawning groups across the UK, it has been less effective here in Ireland, and even in the UK it is having difficulty in scaling up (groups regularly report a difficulty in expanding beyond a core of committed green activists) and in translating the message into effective actions within the wider community. Key aspects of the low-carbon lifestyle have not been widely adopted. (Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009).

There are many reasons for this. The movement largely attracts people with environmental beliefs and it suffers from an inability to expand much beyond the usual middle class, educated participants, who have the time and privilege to engage in social and environmental activism. It strives to change the macro-economic and political structures of global capitalism 'from below' through re-localisation, but the movement may have to engage in more conventional 'top down' political activity if it is to have any chance of achieving its ambitious goals (Alloun & Alexander, 2014)

Seyfang, Haxeltine et al (2010: 12-13) maintain that , while shared long-term post-oil visioning is a key element within the movement, there is often a lack of tangible and achievable goals for people to engage with externally. This alienates potential supporters and means that volunteers can become frustrated as the group is seen as largely a talking shop, without much action on the ground. While the movement is internally well networked, there is less evidence of effective external networking with key stakeholders in society, which may include organisations not favoured by deep green environmentalists. A key aspect of the Transition Towns approach is second-order learning, which involves experimenting internally with low energy ways of living, and then spreading the word, and encouraging others on the outside to do likewise. As demonstrated earlier in this paper, this cognitive approach has limited effect in changing behaviour.

It is the authors' contention that much of the current activity that occurs within the Transition movement rests on a narrow view of social change. They suggest that Transition members should link with the broad range of actors that influence current practices. For example, efforts to increase home cooking will need to intersect with current cooking practices, which are shaped by media representations, home appliance manufacturers and retailers, and so on.

A practice-based understanding would seek a detailed analysis of both the practices that the Transition Towns movement proposes, and those they want to replace. If the movement wants to change existing bundles of practice, it should look at what holds these existing practices together. This would involve an appreciation of the local performances of whole bundles of practice across a range of social contexts (households, workplaces, schools, public spaces etc), and an understanding of how these bundles integrate and reproduce.

4. Problems and Limits Associated with the Theory of Social Practice

Alan Warde (2014; 290-297) identified a number of problems associated with social practice theories.

Social practice theorists have been more successful at re-describing and analysing the minute details of how commodities are used in the performances of daily practices, than they have been in clarifying the institutional or systemic conditions underlying the existence of these practices.

It is not always clear how boundaries of a practice are identified in order to justify treating it as more than just a random personal activity, and as one driven by collective formation and monitoring. Warde suggests that criteria for recognising a practice could include whether it has an instruction manual or certain acknowledged standards agreed by participants, or whether it would be eligible for a time-use survey, i.e. the people involved know they are doing it, and can report how much time it takes, or whether specialised equipment is connected to the activity.

Practice theories, while clearly dismissing the model of individual choice and independent decision-making, accept that actions involve repetition, but they are challenged by the idea of actions driven by habits which occur 'in conditions of often mindless distraction'. Approximately 45% of our everyday behaviours are habitually repeated in the same location on a daily basis (Neal et al, 2006) Habits are learned, not instinctive. Many psychologists would agree that habitual behaviour is not consciously driven but is rather a product of temporal, social, spatial and contextual cues (Whitmarsh et al, 2011). Habits are incredibly hard to shift (Duhigg, 2012).

Many activities rely on technical tools, machines and material commodities. For instance, in order to stay fit, you might join a fitness gym, use personal training equipment; buy lycra clothing and specialist shoes. Theories of practice tend to focus on the determinant role of equipment – objects, tools, material goods and infrastructures, on the role they play in helping to sustain the repetitive actions and their ability to displace established skills and knowledge. However, the power of objects may be overplayed, to the detriment of other factors like mental processes, senses and emotions, practical procedures, improvised use of equipment, and the limitations of the wider world and its social arrangements. It might be better to see equipment as facilitating habits and actions.

Theories of social practice still seem to focus on individual behaviour, albeit as performances rather than voluntary, deliberative personal choices. Yet, they pay less heed to the creation of norms, standards and institutions which produce shared understandings and common procedures. Some normative 'rules' can emerge collectively from within the shared activity, but most come from the outside, either from governmental dictat, organised lobby groups, or from corporations and the use of technology itself.

Another criticism refers to how social practice theory focuses on the emergence or disappearance of practices but is at risk of downplaying the significance of diversity and difference. Practices are by definition social in the sense that they are shared and recognised by others but we should not assume that they are always performed in the same way.Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the variation in how practices are concurrently reproduced within different contexts if we are to figure out how such variation might be encouraged or impeded. (Hitchens, in Shove et al, 2014: 105)

In response to Elizabeth Shove's critique of the behavioural ABC approach to climate policy, Lorraine Whitmarsh and her colleagues (2011) wrote a response which proposed that Shove's analysis was generally dismissive of non-sociological approaches to social or behavioural change and that, in particular, it portrayed psychological models of behaviour in an overly simplistic manner. They felt this was regrettable as it went against the grain of bringing different disciplines together in an effort to address issues of sustainability. Shove's claim that behavioural approaches and social practice theory are like 'chalk and cheese' was particularly jarring, as it could be seen as a slight against interdisciplinarity.

Whitmarsh et al agree with Shove when she highlights how environmental policy tends to emphasise individual responsibility for social change, whereby deflecting attention away from the responsibility our institutions and state agencies should arguably shoulder. However, they do not wish for the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction towards a situation where individuals are excluded

from societal decision making and the enactment of social change. They say that individuals do have, and should have, some self control over their own behaviour. Therefore, when discussing transformation and transitions, it is important that individuals have some active participation in deliberating what the `new system' might look like.

Charles Wilson and Tim Chatterton (2011: 2781-2787) also joined the debate and acknowledged how the diverse theories around climate friendly behaviours offer a range of insights for behaviour change policy makers. In their view, it is perfectly possible for the different models to co-exist, even if they are contradictory, precisely because they represent different things, they define different problems and answer different questions.

The authors give the example of how social psychology models which highlight ease and convenience and provide opportunities for social comparison, are useful for promoting kerbside recycling (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999). The same models are not as applicable when focusing on the household-consumption patterns which generate the rubbish in the first place. Likewise, the "nudge" approach can be successful in tweaking people's response to form filling, and decisions around organ donation or whether or not to drop litter or reuse hotel towels (Thaler& Sunstein; Cialdidni, 1984, 2007) but may not be so effective in combating repetitive multi-faceted activities.

'The pragmatic challenge for policy makers concerned with behaviour change is to identify which insights are offered by which models about which emissions-related behaviour in which context'
(Wilson & Chatterton; 2011:2783)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavoured to explain from where the theory of social practice has emerged, what it involves, and how aspects of it are, or could be applied, to efforts to affect change on the ground. I have also outlined some of the problems and areas of contention which exist around the theory and its application to real life situations.

On a personal note, this paper has been, for me, a starting point for further exploration. The research involved has developed my understanding of social practice theory and its importance in the climate change and energy debate. However, at a first reading, the theory can appear overly complicated and unwieldy, which may be problematic if it is to be widely disseminated and understood outside of academic circles. I am also inclined to suggest that it has yet to be fully tried and tested, and it would be interesting to more fully explore how its practical application could work, bearing in mind the time pressure of short term climate change targets.

I also agree with Wilson & Chatterton(2011), that social practice shouldn't be seen as posing solutions in direct opposition to other approaches, such as nudging, social marketing, segmentation and framing. No approach will work on its own. Rather I would hope that they are complementary.

So, in answer to my own question, posed at the beginning of the paper - **Is social practice theory the 'silver bullet' that climate and energy campaigners have been looking for**?
No, social practice theory is not the panacea to all our ills. But it certainly offers an interesting and constructive approach, which deserves its place in any policy response.

Bibliography

Alloun, E, Alexander, S, 2014, *The Transition Movement: Questions of diversity, power and affluence*

Cialdini, R, 1984, 2007, *Influence – the psychology of persuasion*: Harper

Duhigg, C, 2012, *The Power of Habit-Why we do what we do and how to change*; William Heinemann

Haxeltine, A, & Seyfang, G, 2009, *Theory and Practice of 'Transition' and 'Resilience' in the UK's Transition Movement:* Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research: Working Paper 134

Halpern, D, 2015, *Inside the Nudge Unit – how small changes can make a big difference:* W H Allen

Hitchings, R, 2013 *Sharing Conventions: communities of practice and thermal comfort:* 103-114: in Shove, E, Spurling, N (eds), 2013, 2014, *Sustainable Practices – social theory and climate change:* Routledge

McKenzie-Mohr, D, & Smith, W, 1999, *Fostering Sustainable Behaviour- an introduction to community-based social marketing*: New Society Publishers

Neal, D, Wood, W, & Quinn, J, 2006, *Habits – a Repeat Performance*: Current Directions in Psychological Science 15: 198-202

Reckwitz, A, 2002, *Toward a Theory of Social Practices A Development in Culturalist Theorizing*: European Journal of Social Theory 5(2): 243–263

Schatzki, T, Cetina, K, & von Savigny, E (eds), 2001, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory:* Routledge

Seyfang, G, Haxeltine, A, Hargreaves, T, Longhurst, N, 2010, *Energy and communities in transition – towards a new research agenda on agency and civil society in sustainability transitions:* CSERGE Working Paper EDM 10-13

Shove, E, 2010, *Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change:* Environment and Planning A, volume 42: 1273-1285

Shove, E, Walker, G, 2010, *Governing transitions in the sustainability of everyday life:* Research Policy: 471-476

Shove, E, Pantzar, M & Watson, M, 2012 *The Dynamics of Social Practice – everyday life and how it changes:* Sage Publications

Shove, E, 2012, *Putting practice into policy: reconfiguring questions of consumption and climate change:* Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences: 415-429

Shove, E, Spurling, N (eds), 2013, 2014, *Sustainable Practices – social theory and climate change:* Routledge

Thaler, R, & Sunstein, C, 2008, *Nudge- Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*: Caravan Books

Warde, A, 2014, *After Taste: Culture, consumption and theories of practice*: Journal of Consumer Culture: Vol. 14(3): 279–303

Whitmarsh, L, O'Neill, S, & Lorenzoni , I, 2011, *Commentary: Climate change or social change? Debate within, amongst, and beyond disciplines:* Environment and Planning A: Vol 43: 258 - 261

Wilson, C, & Chatterton, T, 2011, *Commentary: Multiple models to inform climate change policy: a pragmatic response to the `beyond the ABC' debate:* Environment and Planning A: Vol 43: 2781 – 2787

Yli-Kauhaluoma, S, Pantzar, M, & Toyoki, S, 2013, *Mundane Materials at Work – Paper in Practice*: 69-86 in Shove, E, Spurling, N (eds), 2013, 2014, *Sustainable Practices – social theory and climate change:* Routledge