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Elucidating a Theory of Practice For Consumer Research

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By addressing current conceptualizations of practice within consumer research, we suggest an alternative theory of practice that embraces subjective, context specific accounts of consumption. This alternative theory allows us reconnect with practitioners and the rewards they experience, consequently we link individuals to the social through the explication of external rewards

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Practice Theory (PT) has the potential to open up our horizons of investigation as consumer researchers in order that we pay attention not only to consumption meanings *per se*, but also to what consumers actually do, and to the centrality of objects to these doings. But, PT is far from a coherent theory (Gram-Hanssen 2011; Halkier and Jensen 2011) and its incorporation into consumer research is not unproblematic (Brownlie and Hewer 2011). There is a difference in the locus of attention across both domains, a difference that must be accounted for if we are to benefit from the potential of PT. We aim here to begin such a process and, in so doing, focus our attention upon some of the central conceptualizations of practice offered thus far within a consumption context.

A key contention of certain variants of PT (see for example, Shove and Pantzar 2005; Shove and Pantzar 2007; Watson and Shove 2008; Shove *et al.* 2012) is that exploring processes of transformation and stability within and between social practices holds the potential for understanding change and, further, influencing public policy. Thus, Shove and Pantzar (2007: 155) focus attention upon the changing configurations of elements (competencies, meanings and products), as practices emerge and reconfigure: 'Rather than holding the practice constant and seeking to understand who does it and why, we are interested in understanding how practices-as-entities are made and reproduced by their carriers'. This contrasts with the typical approach within CCT where much of the focus has been on the consumer as an empowered identity seeker, overlaid with micro-social analysis of consumption communities (Askegaard and Linnet 2001).

A PT designed to track the transformation and stability of practices on a societal level must naturally address the problematic structure/agency divide. Here, the tendency is to favour Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration in which individual actions or the propensity towards practice is influenced by and further influences structures of rules and meanings. In opting for structuration the influence of both structure and agency is acknowledged, conceptualizing them as a duality rather than a dialectic. This foundation enables Shove *et al.* (2012: 11) to shift emphasis away from the individual and individual instances of practice, leaving them unable to 'concentrate exclusively on context specific processes involved in producing localized configurations of practice of knowledge and meaning, materiality and action'. While we sincerely acknowledge these advancements in relation to understanding the emergent nature of practices, we are motivated by alternative aims within consumer research and on this basis we argue for an alternative appreciation of practice within CCT.

Arnould and Thompson (2005: 870) contend that consumer researchers should embrace 'methodological pluralism' whenever it can 'advance the operative theoretical agenda'. Accordingly, our interest in context specific accounts is not born out of voyeuristic tendencies, but rather the belief that theoretical and methodological advances can be made in this vein. In reflecting upon landmark breakthroughs made in consumer research (for example, Holt 1995; Shouten and McAlexander 1995; Murray 2002) through subjective, situated context-specific accounts of consumption, it seems hasty to adopt a PT removed from these foundations. Nonetheless, there continues to be much potential in a practice-informed consumer research which effectively captures the interrelationship between objects, meanings and doings and which embraces subjectivity (Caldwell

2012). In putting forward our account of practice we are informed by Michel de Certeau. According to Highmore (2006: 7): 'with de Certeau we get a method that values the singularity of close attention to the specific, located object'. Our aim is to allow a space for the multiplicities of practice in everyday life. This is achieved by allowing consumers to contribute to the documentation and history of their practices (Highmore 2006). Accordingly, we welcome subjective individual and group accounts. In contrast to structuration theory, de Certeau address the structure/agency divide in terms of *strategies* and *tactics*. *Strategies* are at play when institutions distance themselves from society in order to formulate panoptic procedures, which de Certeau (1984: 48) views as 'a weapon to be used in combating and controlling heterogeneous practices'. Alternatively, *tactics* are deviations from the prescribed strategy intended for the space. Through tactics the environment is subverted as the use of space runs contrarily to its proper purpose as demarcated by strategies. This reconceptualization attempts to provide an avenue through which the stories of practitioners may be represented.

In developing a framework that will be equipped to meet our requirements we draw together the 'circuit of practice' (Magaudda 2011) and the internal and external rewards offered by Warde (2005). This combination allows us to take a step closer to practitioners and the psychological rewards they experience for their engagement. As a consequence, we access the personal motivations of those engaged in practice. Importantly, the addition of external rewards presents an opportunity to situate carriers in relation to like-minded others who engage in similar practices, thus explicating the social nature of practices. As such, our framework allows us to examine specific practices at the individual and social level. Our intention is to investigate the 'centrality of the interaction between humans and objects in shaping social processes and activities, and the implication of this relationship on the role of objects in social life' (Magaudda 2011: 20). Adding internal/external rewards allows us to account for the subjectivity of practitioners within this process. In turn, subjective accounts are analyzed in terms of de Certeau *strategies* and *tactics*. Most importantly, analysis of the individual facilitates an investigation of the group dynamics of practices (Alfred and Jungnickel 2012), thereby acknowledging 'the social organization of consumption' which tends to be overlooked in individualist accounts of consumption (Halkier and Jensen 2011: 106). This empowers practitioners by allowing them a space to voice their understandings of practices, offering a more vibrant history of practice within consumer research.

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