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Renewing Theories of Practice and Reappraising the Cultural
Welch, Daniel; Halkier, Bente; Keller, Margit

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Introduction to the Special Issue: Renewing Theories of Practice and Reappraising the Cultural

Daniel Welch
The University of Manchester, UK

Bente Halkier
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Margit Keller
Tartu Ülikool, Estonia

Abstract
This short article introduces the Special Issue ‘Renewing Theories of Practice and Reappraising the Cultural’. We first discuss the ‘practice turn’ in the sociology of consumption. We introduce three lacunae that advocates have identified in contemporary theories of practice that animate the contributions of the Special Issue: around the theorisation of culture, economy and the reflexive individual. We go on to discuss the place of culture in the ‘practice turn’, and its relations to cultural sociology. We then appraise some recent attempts at resolution. Lastly, we summarise the individual contributions to the Special Issue.

Keywords
Consumer culture, consumption, cultural turn, culture, practice theory, practice turn, theories of practice

Introduction
The wave of sociological scholarship following the ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki et al., 2001) has theoretically revitalised a number of the discipline’s sub-fields, most notably the study of consumption (Halkier et al., 2011; Warde, 2014; Warde et al., 2017). These
extensive bodies of work have drawn inspiration from a second generation of practice theorists, particularly Andreas Reckwitz (2002a, 2002b) and Theodore Schatzki (1996, 2002), who themselves built on an eclectic range of earlier work from scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Charles Taylor. With a decade and a half of practice theoretical scholarship since Warde’s seminal ‘Consumption and Theories of Practice’ (2005), arguably it has been in the sociology of consumption that the strengths and weaknesses of theories of practice have been most clearly played out.

The influence of theories of practice in consumption scholarship is particularly evident in the European Sociological Association’s Consumption Research Network (RN05), of which this Special Issue’s Guest Editors and most of its contributors are active members. David Evans’s contribution to the Special Issue was first presented as the keynote address to the Consumption Research Network’s 2018 conference at the University of Copenhagen, and other articles in the Special Issue have been presented at the network’s conferences or draw on research projects showcased at the conferences. The idea for this Special Issue developed out of long-standing conversations within the Consumption Research Network around a number of lacunae inherited from second-generation practice theories. Orthodoxy invites reformation. The Special Issue brings together scholars from Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Taiwan and the UK who are contributing to an emerging body of work which seeks to renew the contribution of theories of practice in light of these lacunae. We hope the relevance of these contributions exceeds the confines of the sub-field of the sociology of consumption, and offers renewal of theories of practice relevant for cognate fields and cultural sociology more generally.

We must assume some prior knowledge on the part of readers of this Introduction of key features of theories of practice and their contribution to consumption scholarship. This Introduction would otherwise be taken up by rehearsing the basic characteristics of practice theories and allow no space for consideration of what their renewal might consist. Individual contributions to the Special Issue parse their necessary theoretical backgrounds. Otherwise, to the uninitiated, we point to appraisals made elsewhere – see Nicolini (2012), Warde (2014) and Warde et al. (2017). Here we simply note that the fundamental contribution of second-generation practice theorists has been to understand social action and order as transpiring through specific nexuses of organised activity (practices), composed of heterogeneous components that can be analytically separated into discrete types. Practices are understood as recognisable, socially shared, nexuses of activity (e.g. driving, cooking, boxing). Their performance entails the integration of complex arrays of embodied, affective, ideational, discursive and material components. One of the most influential schemas of practice components is offered by Schatzki (2002). Schatzki (2002: 86) conceives of practices as being made up of four types of component: ‘practical understandings’ (‘know how’, understanding ‘how to go on’ with an activity); ‘rules’ (explicit directions, instructions, admonishments etc.); ‘teleoaffective structures’ (normatively ordered arrays of ends, orientations, and associated affective engagements); and ‘general understandings’, which are common to multiple practices and condition the manner in which practices are carried out.1 In ‘Consumption and theories of practice’ (2005) Warde adapts Schatzki’s (1996) earlier tripartite schema
of practice components (sans ‘general understandings’) as: ‘understandings’, ‘procedures’ and ‘engagements’. Understanding social activity in this way enables analysis of the complex relations between practices and the effects of those relations. Important relations between practices include those established through: shared spatial and material contexts; temporal relations (sequencing, synchronicity, periodicity etc.); shared general understandings; and shared ends.

There are however a number of conceptual difficulties or lacunae that have been identified in theories of practice since the programmatic contributions of the second-generation theorists. Some of these have been subsequently addressed in some detail. The issue of whether practice theories are adequate for the analysis of large-scale social phenomena has been addressed by Schatzki (2016) and Nicolini (2017). Welch and Yates (2018) have considered sociological practice theory’s difficulty in conceptualising purposive collective action. Warde (2014, 2017) has addressed other outstanding conceptual issues, such as the proper demarcation of practices and the relationship between practices and performances. In this Special Issue our contributors address lacunae and elisions that have received less direct attention.

One set of issues concerns how to think about ‘culture’, and ipso facto, ‘consumer culture’. The ‘practice turn’ in the sociology of consumption distinguished itself as a corrective and an alternative to the ‘cultural turn’ in consumption scholarship – with its emphasis on issues of lifestyle, identity, taste and the symbolic aspects of consumption – and thus to an understanding of consumption-as-culture (Warde, 2014, 2017). An unfortunate consequence has been, as Bente Halkier notes in her contribution to this Special Issue, that a ‘number of concepts and concerns from cultural sociology were thrown out as babies with the bathwater’ (p. 399). The relationship between practice theory and the cultural turn for consumption scholarship is addressed in the contributions of Halkier, Evans and Sahakian, Rau and Wallenborn. We will summarise the contributions in the final section of this Introduction.

Unfortunately there has been a certain bifurcation in consumption scholarship between, on the one hand, the practice-oriented sociology of consumption to be found in the European Sociological Association Consumption Research Network and, on the other, the adherents of Consumer Culture Theory, the inheritors of Cultural Studies and wider cultural sociology. The sociology of consumption thus occupies a specific place within the intellectual history of the relationship between theories of practice and cultural sociology. A reappraisal of the cultural from within theories of practice thus holds out the possibility of renewing engagement with wider intellectual currents in both consumption scholarship and cultural sociology. We address the issue of culture further in the following sections.

Our second lacuna concerns the perennial problem of the relationship between consumption and production, and how to understand the economic more broadly. While there have been persistent calls for the need to more fully address the relationship with production or political economy (Warde, 2014, 2017), little progress has been made. As Warde (2015) noted in a review of developments of the sociology of consumption, acknowledging the partial autonomy of consumption, and ‘separating it out for specialized attention’ (2015: 129), has afforded multiple analytical insights. However, we now urgently need ‘ways to reconnect [consumption] with production and provision, and with
capital and labour’ (2015: 129). Three of the contributions to this Special Issue, from Evans, Wahn and Warde, Paddock and Whillans, offer different responses to these conundrums. Each in different ways addresses exchange and commodification. Evans offers a critical appraisal of the ‘practice turn’s’ failure to locate consumption in the context of wider economic processes, arguing for a corrective by drawing on what he calls ‘material semiotic’ approaches. Wahn articulates a practice theoretical approach to consumption with ontologically compatible resources from economic sociology – the Neo-Polanyian understanding of ‘instituted economic processes’ (Harvey, 2007) and notions of moral economy (Wheeler, 2019) through research on alternative food networks in China. Warde, Paddock and Whillans explore relations of reciprocity and exchange, gift and commodity, through the ‘hosted meal’ of domestic hospitality.

A third lacuna concerns the reflexive individual and their capacity of evaluative engagement with their own practices. The difficulty of generating an account of reflexive competence and critical rationality from within practice theories shares common ground with the challenge of how to conceptualise culture, discussed later. The topic cross-cuts three of the contributions: Halkier, Sahakian and colleagues, and Welch, Mandich and Keller. Practice theories are not theories of everything. This is no less the case when they are presented as social ontologies, such as those offered by Reckwitz (2002a) and Schatzki (2002), which establish practices as the locus of the social. Social ontologies delineate the basic conceptual building blocks through which social phenomena can be understood. But they are neither explanatory theories nor do their concepts exhaust the social theoretical work needed to operationalise them sociologically (see Schatzki, 2002: xvi–xvii). Thus, whether deployed through ontological commitment or analytical choice, theories of practice can be usefully complemented by other social theoretical resources. As Warde puts it, ‘there are many things that a theory of practice cannot do, or cannot do as efficiently as other approaches, and [analysts should] re-engineer connections with other complementary accounts’ (Warde, 2014: 296). The contributions to this Special Issue take up this challenge by engaging in an eclectic range of theoretical resources: theories of material culture, architectural theory, moral economy, neo-Polanyian economic analysis, theories of gift exchange, ‘material semiotic’ approaches, convention theory, and the sociology of the future.

In the following sections we first explore the place of culture in the ‘practice turn’ in a little more depth. Secondly we sketch out some recent developments in theorising culture from within theories of practice, which are drawn on by some of our contributors. We conclude the Introduction by offering brief overviews of the individual contributions.

Consumption, Culture and the Practice Turn

For sociologists of consumption, theories of practice offered a way to approach the inconspicuous, ordinary, routine, habitual, embodied and non-communicative aspects of consumption that the model of consumption-as-culture had ignored or sidelined (e.g. Gronow and Warde, 2001; Shove and Warde, 2002). Scholars of the current phase of sociological practice theory, who have sought to apply the theory to empirical phenomena, have thus
generally minimised appeal to the symbolic and semiotic focus of cultural approaches and ‘to discursive consciousness, deliberation and decision-making when advancing explanations’ (Warde, 2014: 292).

At one level, the shift in focus of the sociology of consumption from attention to the symbolic, discursive, declarative, or ‘explicit’ culture, to the routine, habitual, and material can be seen simply as a reorientation to neglected and novel empirical foci. At another level, however, it reflects practice theories’ ontological orientation to privileging the tacit, dispositional and embodied, or ‘implicit’ culture, as the foundation of social action. This orientation is strongly opposed to the tendency in some strands of cultural sociology to assert ‘cultural autonomy’, that is to say that culture follows its own logics and that explanation for cultural phenomena and change is independent of exogenous conditions, such as social structure or economic factors.

Whether through ontological commitment or analytical choice, the effect of theories of practice has amounted to the same: a tendency to elide, ignore or obscure ‘explicit’ culture. And in sociological consumption scholarship this has amounted to a tendency to eschew the cultural concerns that were central to an earlier generation of sociological engagements with consumption (e.g. Featherstone, 1991). In a piece which serves as a prelude to his contribution to this Special Issue, David Evans recalls wistfully that ‘consumption was once a key reference point for more general sociological debates about the contours of modernity and postmodernity’ (2019: 501). The concern of this earlier generation with the cultural formations underpinning ‘consumer culture’ were not simply with consumption per se, but, as Warde notes, with respect to ‘globalisation, aestheticisation and individualisation, major themes about macro-social change constitutive of consumer culture’ (2017: 44). Today, the imperative to address consumer culture must surely lie in the context of the Anthropocene and its ecological impacts. If the ‘cultural turn commuted consumption from a by-product of capitalist accumulation to a central principle of social order’ (Warde, 2017), perhaps the challenge of a sociology of consumption in the Anthropocene is to shed light on the cultural processes through which consumption as a principle of social order is harnessed by capital accumulation.

Focus on one side of a set of core conceptual oppositions – in our case, practical consciousness, the tacit, habitual and the material over discursive consciousness, deliberation, reflexivity, and the symbolic – will inevitably lead to neglect of the other side. Generational succession, the quest for novel contribution and the diminishing returns of saliency in empirical research associated with any intellectual ‘turn’ will see focus eventually swing back to the other side of the opposition (Abbott, 2001). But the popular scholarly sport of ‘Bringing the Something or Other Back in’ (Abbott, 2001: 16) needs to demonstrate actual heuristic value. Perhaps the difference between a theoretical bandwagon falling out of fashion and cumulative intellectual progress is the capacity to address the heuristic benefits of the far side of the core opposition without abandoning fundamental insights gained on the near side.

**Culture in Practice**

There is an irony in the eliding of ‘explicit’ culture within practice-oriented sociology of consumption, in that the elision belies its foundational statements. It is worth recalling,
therefore, that in one of the foundational papers most cited by practice-oriented consumption scholars, Reckwitz (2002a) characterises practice theories as one of four basic camps of cultural theories. For Reckwitz (2002a) practice theories are defined collectively by their opposition to both utilitarian or rational choice models of social action, and the classical sociological norm-orientated model. Theories of practice are a form of cultural theory for Reckwitz due to the importance accorded the implicit understandings or presuppositions on which practices depend (Reckwitz, 2002a). Social practices are always therefore necessarily cultural practices.

Warde’s (2005) programmatic definition of consumption accommodated both understandings of consumption as, on the one hand, utilitarian and mundane and, on the other, culturally expressive, symbolic and communicative. In Warde’s (2005) account, culture is far from obscured. For consumption reoriented through practice theories, he asserts: ‘The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture’ (Warde, 2005: 146). Warde goes on to clarify:

The practice approach does not give ‘culture’ more than its due – the embodied, socially structured institutions which provide the parameters of the domains of action, and the location of social groups in social space, keep the social and the cultural in the frame together. (Warde, 2005: 147)

However, to date we see only limited evidence of such accommodation in practice theoretical consumption literature, with some exceptions (e.g. Arsel and Bean, 2013; Keller and Halkier, 2014; Schau et al., 2009).9

The issue of the place of culture in practice theoretical accounts is not simply one of empirical focus, however. Rather, the difficulty lies in the privileging of the ‘implicit’ side of the core conceptual opposition in the definition of the cultural itself. In Reckwitz’s (2002b: 211) formulation, for the practice theorist: ‘The “symbolic orders” highlighted by cultural theorists . . . turn out to be forms of practical understanding which organize practices’

Culture does not operate in some separate plane to practices. However, Reckwitz’s (2002b) formulation belies the difficulty of generating an account of ‘explicit’ culture (and of deliberative and reflexive capacity) from a foundation in practical understanding. As Vaisey (2010) argues, what is needed for a theory of culture is not an alternative conception of social action premised on practical understanding (the tacit, habitual, dispositional) but an account that can deal with both ‘implicit’ (the tacit, etc) and ‘explicit’ culture (the symbolic, declarative, reflexive).10

One possible way forward is through Schatzki’s (2002) formulation of practices being composed of both ‘practical understandings’, which are specific to knowing how ‘to go on’ with a particular practice, and ‘general understandings’, which are common to multiple practices. In their respective contributions, Halkier, Wahn and Welch et al. all work with the concept of ‘general understandings’. As Welch and Warde (2017: 194) note, ‘general understandings may be articulated in the “sayings” of various practices and in their discursive form link practices together in ways unachievable through non-discursive performances’. ‘General understandings’ may be relatively specific to sets of practices, for example informing professional practices, but they also denote fundamental concepts, values and categories, and ‘diffuse but culturally significant understandings,
such as notions of convenience, cosmopolitanism or authenticity’ (Welch and Warde, 2017: 183). It is thus that practices constitute the background of intelligibility otherwise described as ‘culture’ (Rouse, 2007).

However ‘explicit’ culture should not simply be equated with ‘general understandings’. Rather, as Welch and Warde (2017) note, general understandings sit across the discursive/non-discursive divide and may display intimately connected, tacit, affective and discursive elements. Welch and Warde (2017) invoke the example of the diffuse and culturally important notion of ‘authenticity’. The general understanding of authenticity is carried in as diverse practices as tourism, food connoisseurship, brand management and artistic production, to name but a few. A genealogy of authenticity traces its movement in and out of the discursive and tacit: ‘from Protestant religiosity to Romantic literary innovation, to a pre-reflexive, background condition of modern identity . . . from a value of the Modernist artistic avant-garde to a commonplace of modern consumer culture . . . and from the ideal of the anti-bourgeois individual to a buzzword of contemporary workplace “employee engagement”’ (Welch and Warde, 2017: 192). Thus the concept of ‘general understandings’ contributes to a model of culture-in-practice.

The commonality between general understandings and multiple practices further invites us to query the ‘viability of the programmatic injunction to treat practices as the fundamental unit of sociological analysis’ (Warde, 2017: 289). While the predisposition of practice theory is to reject the explanatory role of overarching concepts such as ‘consumer culture’ it is questionable whether an account of culture-in-practice can operate without some configurative concept of practice-discourse formations, which enjoin multiple practices. Empirically identifiable practice-discourse formations compose the phenomena that problematically holistic categories such as ‘consumer culture’ mark. A number of theorisations of such formations are existing conceptual currency, such as Foucault’s ‘dispositif’, Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) ‘orders of worth’ or Hajer’s (1995) ‘discourse coalitions’.

Welch (2020) suggests one such concept – ‘teleoaffective formation’ – developed from Schatzki’s (2002) categories, with consumer culture explicitly in mind. Welch (2020) defines a ‘teleoaffective formation’ as:

a configuration across multiple practices, conditioned by a relational nexus of general understandings, that enjoins those practices to common ends and normatively orders the orientations and affective engagements of those practices. (p. 67)

The ‘teleoaffective formations’ that Welch (2020) identifies are configurations of practices across the poles of cultural production and intermediation, on one hand, to everyday consumption, on the other. The concept is offered for more general use to address assemblages of practices that may be analytically useful in other contexts. Wahn puts the concept to use in his contribution to analyse alternative food networks.

**Contributions to the Special Issue**

We turn now to the contributions in this Special Issue. Broadly speaking, three of the articles focus on the economic (Evans; Wahn; Warde, Paddock and Whillans) and three
primarily on the cultural (Halkier; Sahakian, Rau and Wallenborn; Welch, Mandich and Keller). This said, the contributions explicitly assert the entanglement of the economic and the cultural. Three of the contributions, Evans, Halkier and Sahakian, Rau and Wallenborn also explicitly address the relation between ‘the cultural turn’ and sociological practice theory. Each suggests resources for recovery from the ‘conceptual amnesia’ that Evans (2019) diagnoses in strands of current sociology of consumption – most pronounced in the field of sustainable consumption – particularly around material culture, reflexivity and the discursive and symbolic aspects of consumption. Halkier, Welch et al. and Sahakian et al. also share a concern with relations between the tacit and reflexive, or between ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ culture (Strandell, 2019) that are central to practice theoretical understandings of the cultural.

David Evans, in his provocatively entitled piece ‘After practice? Material semiotic approaches to consumption and economy’, addresses the relationship between the practice turn and cultural studies of consumption, and between political economy and cultural analysis. The article builds upon an earlier intervention in which Evans (2019) launched a critique of the unintended consequences of the dominance of practice theories in the sociology of sustainable consumption (see Welch and Warde, 2015). The irony of the practice turn for the study of sustainable consumption, argues Evans (2019: 510), is that it ‘led the sociology of consumption away from a sustained critical engagement with the environmental consequences of consumer culture’ at just the point that it was most needed. Today, the imperative for such critical engagement must surely lie in the context of the Anthropocene and the prospect of catastrophic global heating. In his contribution to the Special Issue, Evans offers his prescription for such a critical engagement.

Evans criticises practice approaches for failing to locate consumption in the context of wider economic processes and argues for a complementarity with what he calls ‘material semiotic approaches’. The difficulties that practice approaches have in accounting for consumption at ‘the intersection of everyday life and political economy’ arise, argues Evans ‘from their partial and very particular treatment of materiality’ (p. 342). An engagement with ‘material semiotic’ approaches, such as theories of ‘market agencements, the social life of things, and ontological politics’ (e.g. Appadurai, 1986; Law and Lien, 2013; McFall, 2009) he suggests, offers the possibility of renewal. These ‘material semiotic’ approaches are, Evans asserts, themselves part of the, broadly conceived, family of practice theories. They share the orientation ‘that “the social” is a relational effect of practices that are composed of heterogeneous components’ (p. 349) with theorists such as Reckwitz (2002a) and Schatzki (2002), but bring to the table an emphasis on relations that are both material and semiotic and a sensitivity to ‘the materiality of markets [and] processes of commodity consumption’ (p. 345). An unintended consequence of practice theoretical approaches to consumption has been to militate away from a focus on processes of commodification, suggests Evans. Against a broader, anthropological sense of the economic, Evans urges a narrower ‘focus on market exchanges, moments of attachment and detachment, and processes of commodity consumption’ (p. 352). Such a programmatic focus would enable concentration on issues of consumer culture and enable a renewal of the tradition of critique in studies of consumption.11 This would be an analytical choice to delimit the definition of ‘consumption’ to a moment in commodity circuits of production,
distribution and exchange, whilst hanging onto the assertion that ‘culture remains central to explanations of consumption and economy’ (p. 352).

Evans acknowledges the work of Kathryn Wheeler and Miriam Glucksmann (Wheeler, 2019; Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015) as providing another approach to reconciling a practice theoretical understanding of consumption with wider economic processes. Wheeler and Glucksmann combine Mark Harvey’s (2007) neo-Polanyian ‘instituted economic processes’ with notions of moral economy.12 I-Liang Wahn draws upon this work in his contribution to the Special Issue: ‘The organization of practices for instituting economic processes: Alternative food networks in Beijing’. He offers a synthesis between neo-Polanyian economic analysis and a practice theoretical approach to consumption, as well as drawing on Welch and Warde’s (2017) work on ‘general understandings’ and Welch’s (2020) ‘teleoaffective formations’, discussed earlier. Wahn draws on empirical research in China on alternative food provisioning organisations that bring together small, environmentally oriented farmers and conscientious consumers in buyers’ clubs and farmers’ markets and ‘analyzes their coordination through the discourse of “good food”’. The network’s general understanding of the qualities of ‘good food institutes specific economic processes and serves as the shared material and discursive elements in the coordination of practices’ (p. 360). Wahn’s contribution resonates with Evans’ call in this issue to situate consumption within wider economic circuits, and offers ‘a practice theoretical account of the intersections of everyday consumption and broader economic processes through articulating the material and the semiotic’ (p. 375).

In ‘Domestic hospitality: As a practice and an alternative economic arrangement’, Alan Warde, Jessica Paddock and Jennifer Whillans examine the connections between the economic, social and cultural aspects of ‘the hosted meal’ – ‘from the formal dinner party to impromptu potluck’ (p. 378). The article is illustrated with results from a large-scale, mixed methods re-study of the practice of eating out in England. Warde et al. address the economic lacuna in theories of practice, conceptualising this ‘peculiar practice’ ‘in terms of production and consumption, modes of provision, gifts and reciprocity, practice and culture’ (p. 378). Warde et al. deploy an expansive, anthropological understanding of the economic, unencumbered by presuppositions of existing formal economic organisation, and address the entanglement of the economic and the cultural. They remind us that ‘there are different modes of provision of material services of which the market is just one’ (p. 380) (see Schmid and Smith, 2020; Warde, 1992). Warde et al. assert that despite ‘their apparent ubiquity, capitalist economic relations do not entirely swamp cooperative and collaborative provision’ (p. 393). This leads Warde et al. to ask us to consider:

whether the institutional arrangement of the hosted meal, an instance of the communal mode of provision, might provide a template for alternatives to capitalist economic relations based on exclusive property rights, alienated labour, market modes of distribution and severe inequalities in the distribution of goods and satisfactions. (p. 381)

Suggesting the British dinner party as a model for non-capitalist economic arrangements may produce a wry response. But we are reminded that this everyday activity of domestic entertainment operates outside of any market logic and ‘is in many ways the antithesis
of commercial commodity exchange’ (p. 393). Warde et al. argue that market relationships are actually marginal to everyday material provision when it is considered in its entirety. Noting the increasing place of prefigurative social experiments amongst social movements (Yates, 2014), Warde et al. suggest that in the ‘hosted meal’ we find ‘an alternative template . . . already in the life-worlds of most people for the integration of economic and social activity, where the economic dimension is thoroughly embedded in interpersonal social considerations of sympathy and care’ (p. 393).

In ‘Social interaction as key to understanding the intertwining of routinised and culturally contested consumption’, Bente Halkier addresses what she regards as one of the babies thrown out with the bathwater of the cultural turn by sociological practice theory: social interaction. The contribution thus pushes back against what Evans (2019) has called the ‘conceptual amnesia’ of elements of the sociology of consumption in the wake of the practice turn. Halkier seeks to recover discourse, cultural representation, reflexivity and the symbolic aspects of consumption for the sociology of consumption. Food consumption, her empirical focus, is a site of intense cultural contestation: ‘practices of provisioning, cooking and eating are both tacit, recursive, mundane activities, and at the same time discursively questioned through multiple, mediatized, cultural repertoires of food’ (p. 399). A focus on social interaction, she argues, enables us to apprehend both the culturally contested and the routinized parts of consumption through a practice theoretical lens. Social interaction enables both routines and cultural contestation. As Halkier demonstrates through empirical examples of multiple research projects on food conduct amongst Danish consumers, social interaction is an important dynamic for the intertwining of the tacit and the reflexive in mundane practices that enjoin consumption. The article demonstrates the ‘hybrid character of routinized and reflexive modes of consumption performances’ (p. 412) and seeks to clarify the concept of cultural contestation through a practice theoretical lens.

In ‘Making “sustainable consumption” matter: The indoor microclimate as contested cultural artefact’, Marlyne Sahakian, Henrike Rau and Grégoire Wallenborn draw on evidence from a research-led change initiative amongst households in Switzerland, or ‘living lab’ – part of the pan-European ENERGISE project. They demonstrate ‘how a cultural reading of consumption that focuses on the meaning and materiality of domestic indoor microclimates can contribute to conceptual developments’ (p. 418) in practice theory. The initiative sought to deliberately ‘materialise’ the ‘indoor microclimate’ as a ‘contested cultural artifact and thus make the otherwise “inconspicuous consumption” of heating (Shove and Warde, 2002) tangible and visible. In doing so the project initiated significant changes in domestic practices conditioned by indoor heating in participating households. Sahakian, Rau and Wallenborn offer an example of the reappraisal of readings of material culture in practice-theoretical approaches to sustainable consumption called for by Evans (2019) as well as a reappraisal of processes of commodification in the sociology of consumption more generally, as Evans calls for in this Special Issue. Sahakian and colleagues offer an innovative response. Conceptualising indoor microclimates as ‘artifact’ draws explicit attention to their social and cultural construction. The ‘living lab’ project sought to create the conditions in which the ‘indoor microclimate’ was ‘appropriated by households, as a form of consumption’ (p. 420). The approach offers an alternative to that of practice-theoretically inspired approaches to energy research which conceive of heating as an ‘energy service’ (Shove and Walker, 2014),
which Sahakian and colleagues argue de-politicizes. For Sahakian et al., indoor microclimate should be considered an artefact of consumption rather than a service, revealing its role as a commodity. Treating the indoor microclimate, rather than energy provisioning, as a commodity reveals a wider set of actors and the power relations between them, from household members, to architects and building owners.

Daniel Welch, Giuliana Mandich and Margit Keller address what they argue is a tendency for understandings of practice drawing on Schatzki’s (2002) notion of ‘teleoaffective structure’ to produce a mono-dimensional view of agents’ projectivity towards the future. They offer their intervention as a practice-theoretical contribution towards the burgeoning ‘cultural sociology of the future’ (Mandich, 2017). The article builds on Mandich’s (2019) previous work in which she develops from Thévenot’s (2001) theory of ‘regimes of engagement’ an account of the different modes of engaging with the future that various forms of agency bring into play in everyday life. Welch, Mandich and Keller offer a close reading of Thévenot’s theory of regimes and Schatzki’s (2017b) ontological critique of it. They argue for a synthesis that holds on to the analytical value of distinct social practices while recognising that practices are more or less enmeshed in distinct regimes of engagement. This synthesis enables a nuanced account of people’s imaginative engagement with the future; the forward-looking dimension of human agency (Mandich, 2017). As with Halkier, they suggest that the ‘sociological operationalisation of practice theory has been weak in addressing the evaluative, reflexive and critical stance that actors are capable of taking towards practice’ (p. 440). Their contribution addresses this lacuna by offering an account of modes of engagement towards the future which bridges the divide between the presuppositions of practical understandings and reflexive, deliberation, critical agency. As such the article contributes to understandings of ‘culture-in-practice’ (Welch and Warde, 2017).

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ORCID iDs

Daniel Welch https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9433-863X
Bente Halkier https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7010-7012
Notes

1. Some definitions of practice, such as Reckwitz’s (2002a), incorporate the material as a component of practice. Schatzki (2002) analytically separates ‘practices’, understood as nexuses of activity, and ‘material arrangements’, understood as nexuses of entities (including people). It is worth noting that for Schatzki ‘material arrangement’ denotes the same form of relational nexus of entities as Actor Network Theory’s ‘network’ (see Schatzki, 2002: 203–210).

2. We follow Vaisey (2010: 2) here with a minimal definition of ‘culture’ as denoting ‘patterns of meaning that are neither biologically universal nor personally idiosyncratic’.

3. This section also serves the purpose of fleshing out some detail of this work requested by reviewers of two of our contributors which the editors felt would overburden the articles in question.


5. This is congruent with the practice-theoretical critique of the causal primacy of values in social action, or the Parsonian normative functionalism that sees shared values as the basis of social order (see Warde, 2017; Welch and Warde, 2017).


7. This has been at least partly due to hesitancy and uncertainty amongst advocates of practice theory around how to deal with discourse (see Halkier, this issue; Keller and Halkier, 2014; Schatzki, 2017a; Welch and Warde, 2017).

8. For Abbott (2001), such oppositions are ultimately irreconcilable.

9. It should be noted that Warde has continued to contribute to central debates on cultural consumption, not least in the pages of this journal (Silva et al., 2009; Warde, 2007; Warde et al., 2011; see also Warde, 2017).

10. The majority of work that has sought to theorise these fundamental relationships between explicit and implicit culture is to be found in American cultural and cognitive sociology (e.g. Lizardo, 2017; Vaisey, 2009). For an overview see Leschzinger (2019). These theorists draw primarily on Bourdieu as a practice-theoretical resource and have not, to our knowledge, engaged with the second-generation practice theorists. An appraisal of these insights for the current phase of, predominantly European, sociological practice theory, has yet to be written.

11. For a discussion of mining the distinct qualities of practice theory to renew social critique in the sociology of consumption see Warde (2017).

12. As well as building on Glucksmann’s (2009) long-term project of analysing the ‘total social organisation of labour’ across market and non-market modes of provision, including the domestic.

13. Evans (2019) offers an extended critique of the unintended consequences of the focus on inconspicuous consumption in the sociology of sustainable consumption.

References


**Author Biographies**

Daniel Welch is Lecturer in Sociology and at the Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester, UK. His research focuses on theories of practice, social theory, consumption and consumer culture, and social futures. Recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Consumer Culture, Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* and *Environment and Planning A*. His current research explores ‘Imagined Futures of Consumption’ in everyday life, expert discourse and economic and political imaginaries.

Bente Halkier is a Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her research focuses on food consumption in everyday life, and her latest research project is on the social dynamics of plant-based eating. She has published in journals such as: the *Journal of Consumer Culture; Food, Culture & Society*; and *Public Understanding of Science*. She is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook on Consumption* (2017).

Margit Keller is Senior Research Fellow in Social Communication and Head of the Institute of Social Studies at the University of Tartu. Her recent work has appeared in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies, Energy Research & Social Science, Environmental Policy & Governance, Marketing Theory* and *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*. She is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook on Consumption* (2017). Her current research explores theories of practice and sustainability transitions theory and applications for ‘Deep Transition’.