

Future Practices:

Co-Shaping Everyday Life

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Introduction

Designers are facing increasingly complex and unframed problems. Companies do not ask designers to make a new widget, but rather “should we be designing a new widget, a new widget and service bundle, or something else altogether?” [Weiss 2002]. Consumers and the wider society are at the same time demanding companies to be social responsible and work towards value-based innovation with regard to sustainability, quality of life, social equality, etc. It implies that designers and companies must look beyond their narrowly defined business areas and collaborate with a wider network of companies and organizations to bring about new solutions. The process in which the stakeholders discuss and envision desired futures is the key to successful collaborations [Munnecke 2006].

Designers have a potential to be playing a central role in this process. They are experienced in bringing together multi-disciplinary teams and have both the creative and analytical skills to envision futures and explore the concrete innovation opportunities that entail. However, if designers want to play this part they must escape the limits of static images of products and people and be able to work with the underlying dynamics that shape everyday life. Currently there is no methodology in the designers toolbox that can help them do so. Traditional trend research and technology foresight simply do not deliver a satisfying level of insight into everyday life, so they cannot be backbone for such endeavors. In consequence, the designers role depends on the development of a new powerful and practical framework to conceptualize the dynamics of everyday life.

Fortunately, there is a group of multi-disciplinary researchers that are working on a research project with similar objectives. Consumption and sustainability are their primary concern, but recently they have presented their work under the title “Practice-Oriented Product Design”. The research is based on the sociological discipline “Practice Theory”, which they have integrated with other areas of research to investigate the dynamics of everyday life and how people, products and the wider context shapes and is being shaped by everyday life. Their work has primarily been concerned with the past and present of everyday life, but inspired by their insightful findings and designer friendly approach, I will in this paper develop and present a framework based on practice theory that empowers designers to explore the future dynamics of everyday life.

I begin with an introduction to practice theory and explain how it fundamentally re-frames the innovative landscape. Secondly, I provide an overview of the factors that influence the dynamics of practices and look at how practices are the gateway to understand the wider context and value-based innovation. Finally, I present the framework that potentially can position designers at the center of the innovation process and empower companies to co-shape the future. It consists of a diagram of the central concepts that influence dynamics of everyday life and an operational scenario process that exemplify how a concrete project may be carried out.

Practice Theory

The origin of practice theory goes back to a fundamental sociological discussion of the nature of society. On the one side is the view of the purpose-oriented individual whose action is having recourse to individual purposes and on the other side is the norm-oriented individual whose action is guided by collective norms and values [Reckwitz 2002]. In between the two opposing classical social theories is a third category of social thought; the cultural theory of which practice theory is a subcategory. Practice theory emphasizes the significance of shared understandings in order to grasp both social action and social order.

Essentially, a practice is a sense-making ensemble of activities. It is a proven way of approaching or addressing a situation and something that has been done before, can be successfully passed on to others, and can be reproduced. There are two key aspects of a practice: coordinated entity and the performance. The “shared understanding” is the coordinated entity that links activities in certain ways through understandings, procedures and engagements [Schatzki 1996:89] [Warde 2005:134]. The practice as performance refers to the carrying out of the practice. For a practice to exist they need to be reproduced over and over again. The performance of a practice consists of processes of doing and thinking which are not easily distinguished one from another.

A practice “consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: 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.” [Reckwitz 2002]. These ingredients go into the performance of a practice. From the coordinated entities point of view it is irrelevant whether it is a person or an artifact that enact a specific role, as well as if a specific competence is embedded in an artifact or the person. Consequently, the performing elements are divided along the lines of embodied “actants” and non-embodied “competences”. The “actants” consist of bodies and artifacts that are moved, and the “competences” are knowhow and skills embedded in any of the actants. Implicitly, we are hereby supporting the posthumanistic standpoint that artifacts have agency and that social and technical elements should be analyzed symmetrically.

In the following we will define the constituting elements of a practice as the coordinating “understandings” and the performing elements “competences” and “actants”.

It is important to note that practice is not associated with a specific person, artifact, place or time. Bodily movements, ways of doing and desiring are elements of the practice and temporal unfolding and spatial dispersed nexuses. Just like a practice is the nexus of people and products, so people and products nexuses of several practices.

Practice theory favors the activities of everyday life which is often considered routine, ordinary, collective or conventional. Typical everyday practices are cooking, working, exercising, leisure, bathing, driving and eating. In contrast to recent years hype around brand, image and identity, practice theory concentrates on the more fundamental and practical issues of everyday life.

The purpose of practice theory is not explain every detail of human activity, but grasp the main patterns that have a significant impact on people, markets and society. Practices are relatively tangible objects which account for the great proportion of the total sum of human activity. The practices are therefore defining new relatively stable and lucrative markets. They are also responsible for basic conditions of life and the general effects of our society. They are responsible for the use of global resources and may be more or less sustainable or promote freedom in different ways.

Schatzki praise practice theory for neither being individualist nor holistic. Rather, practice theory “present pluralistic and flexible pictures of the constitution of social life” and “successfully accommodate complexities, differences and particularities” [Schatzki 1996:12].

Re-framing Innovation

Practice theory has profound implications for how we understand innovation and the innovative landscape of designers work domain. Traditionally radical innovation is defined as a product that creates a new market, but with practice as the unit of analysis we will understand radical innovation as a new constellation of understanding, competences and actants. In consequence the main objective for the designer is not primarily to make products, but to configure practices that make sense in peoples everyday lives. Along the same lines Abernathy and Clark (1985) state that radical innovation – in their terms “architectural innovation” – is the transformation of skills, competencies and expectations shared and required by users, consumers and producers.

Though some designers may already be thinking in terms of “doings” or practices, it is for the majority of them a substantial expansion of their normal work domain. They are not used to seeing products and people in motion, let alone applying a symmetrical analysis of products and people. Further complexity arises from the fact that most instances of practices are nexuses of several people and products. So when applying practice as the unit of analysis designers need to look across the full spectrum of people and artifacts, and investigate their mutual relationships. Thereby it opens up for creativity on the level of multiple uses of products and product ecologies.

However, the most disturbing aspect for designers may be that practice thinking opens the black-box of competences and understandings. It challenges designers to work explicitly with their own assumptions and understandings that are normally taken for granted. Herein it compares to the design challenge that international designers face when they work on projects for foreign cultures.

Dynamics of Practices

Studying dynamics of practices is similar to looking at a bustling whirlpool. Each whirl is a practice in reproduction and on its way it enrolls masses of water in its centrifugal force. In this analogy the water is the equivalent of people, artifacts, families, groups, companies, systems, services and other actants that participate in the performance of the practice. These actants flow from one whirl to the other as nexuses of many practices.

Importantly, not all the water is part of a whirl. Events and actions are not always motivated by a shared understanding or reproduced regularly. These processes, that are not part of a practice, are important to understand the emergence of new practices. It is in the random and non-structured processes that innovative flows of actions emerge and new configurations of practices are created. They start - so to say - a whirl, which can grow by enrolling actants in the performance of the practice.

People and products are central players in the processes in which new practices emerge. They are nexuses of many practices and embody a variety of understandings and competences which come into play, whenever needed. They play an active role in more or less deliberate experiments of combining and re-combining constituting elements of practices and diffusing them across the landscape of practices. In terms of consumer research the process in which people integrate artifacts into practices and give them meaning is called “domestication” [Shove 2007] [Kotro 2002].

Other important sources of innovation in practice are new ideas and inventions of all sorts. People and products are the gateway for new fragmented ideas to be integrated into meaningful practices. There is no shortage of new ideas in modern society. Innovation is todays business

mantra and there is a constant stream of new inventions, technologies, desires, materials, business models, values etc.. New ideas are quickly and effortlessly transmitted by internet or other media across cultural and geographical boundaries and embodied by many different people and products. As time goes by people absorb these new ideas, learn skills, develop new lifestyles and combine means and goals in ever changing constellations. Similarly, designers inscribe new meanings, functionalities and forms into products. The co-designing processes in which designers configure users by inscribing meanings into artifacts, and how users on the other hand may interpret these inscriptions flexibly or even anti-program has been pioneered by Akrich (1992).

The overall picture of the emergence of new practice is a complex hybrid of several simultaneous forces that together drive the practice into a negotiated configuration. The processes of “designing” actants and “domesticating” them into new practices are the two main processes in which new practices emerge and innovation in practices occur. Typically the two processes will over time result in a particular inscription which are suited for a particular attribution of meaning to an artifact. In terms of Bijker (1995) this is closure. Hand (2007) points out that it is only the artifact which is apparently stabilized. In her view understandings are continuously negotiated and change radically from person to person.

So far we have focused on the emergence of individual practices, but other practices play a crucial part in the process. They are all part of a wider ecosystem of practices and which is the result continuous experimentation and merger of practices. The ecosystem is characterized by relations of both cooperative and competitive nature that in many ways determine the trajectories of the individual practice. For example are the relationship between “cooking” and “shopping” of symbiotic nature, while “biking” and “driving a car” are mutually exclusive.

Overtime some practices gain momentum and shape other practices around them. They adapt to each other and fall into “sync” which only further the mutual dependency. The interactions join the practices in complexes of practices that depend on each other for continual reproduction. The accumulated flow of material and products are optimized in product service systems and systems of provision that deliver basic amenities such as electricity, water and infrastructure.

Inevitably there will also be practitioners and promoters of practices that share common interest across the ecosystem of practices, and to further their common cause they will create both formal and informal networks and organizations. Potential stakeholders include, beside users and companies, research institutions, finance groups, non-governmental organizations and public authorities [Geels 2005].

The networks and systems that emerge out of the ecosystem of practices are entities with particular interests, expectations and strategies. Through negotiation with other stakeholders they constitute a landscape of technical, social and economic structures that put down rules, regulations, incentives and subsidies to guide the development of ideas, practices and ecosystems of practices. These initiatives may result in a lock-in to specific technical, social and economic regimes.

Though the structures and regimes may seem like self-supporting structures they depend on the continued reproduction of practices. Structures can therefore only resist a certain level of pressure for shorter periods of time before they either must adapt to practices or perish. Geels & Schot (2007) present a full typology of possible system transition paths.

Concept Diagram

The concept diagram in figure 1 gives an overview of the main factors that influence the trajectories of everyday life and practices. The ecosystem of practices occupies the very center and is the point of convergence for all other aspects. The ecosystem consists of practices, elements of practices and complexes of practices. The embodied entities that take part in the performance of practices are found in the second tier. On the lower side are the people and products that are actively involved in the creation of new practices, and on the upper side you will find the networks and systems that are stakeholders in the practices. Finally there are the global factors which are neither constrained by practices or embodied entities, but flow freely across these aspects. The full spectrum of ideas and inventions are represented at the bottom. At the very top you will find structures and regimes which define the whole landscape of technical, social and economical aspects. Both ideas and structures share the same disembodied property as practices, but live in their own niches that are not related to the sense-making logic of practices other than through the mediating people and products.

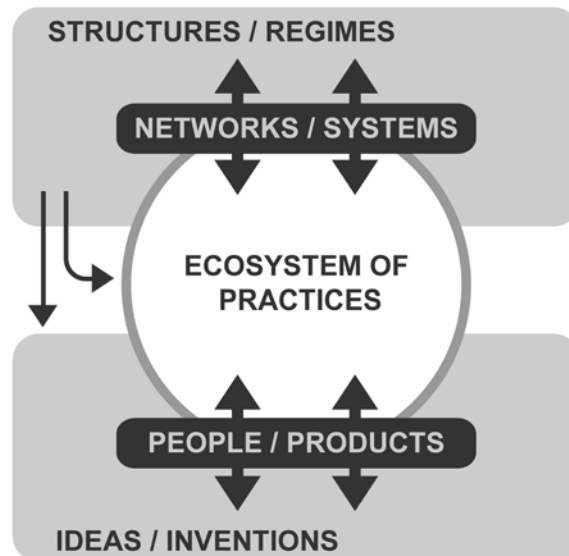


Figure 1: Dynamics of practices.

The novelty of the model is primarily related to the central position of practices and the use of practice as the basic unit of analysis. It is common knowledge to trend spotters that ideas and inventions are relevant to foresee future developments, and they also routinely study people's lifestyles and new products on the markets. The less consumer-oriented and more policy-oriented trend researchers are biased towards the concepts at the upper half of the model. They analyze the dynamics of networks and systems with the aim to predict and initiate regime transitions. Between the two dominant approaches practices adds a sense-making layer in the concept diagram and integrates the different kinds of information into relevant insights about the dynamics of everyday life.

The knowledge model is all-important to guide the search for information and subsequently process the information into relevant insights. It enable designers to see the wider context of their interventions, but also how the wider context limit their options. The result would hopefully be a both visionary and realistic approach to deal with the complex values of people, businesses and society. From a theoretical point of view the model has also several virtues. It looks at the world as a seamless web, without a priori different technical social or economic factors. It also

encompasses the duality of actor and structure across three dimensions: the global factors (ideas/structures), the embodied entities (actants/network-systems) and ecosystem of practices (practices/complexes of practices). Finally, it accommodates explanations of change as well as continuity.

The outcome of this knowledge model depends very much on the capability of the users to uncover the underlying levels and most essential aspects of change and continuity, so that it is possible to confidently investigate future trajectories and intervene expeditiously. It is therefore not merely a question of gathering the information. It must be analyzed and synthesized by a multi-disciplinary team. Visualization techniques can in this context be a most helpful tool to handle the inherent complexity of looking into the future. Ultimately, it may be helpful to search for metaphors and analogies that can intuitively communicate the most fundamental insights to the broader network of stakeholders. Shove (2003) uses for example the metaphor of pinwheel to illustrate the underlying dynamics of bathing practices. However, the field of study will set its own natural limits to the kind of insights that are achievable.

Scenario process

Table 1: A scenario process based on practice theory

PHASE	TASK
ENTER DEEP-DIVE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sense the intent and identify the focal issue. 2. Translate the issue into the language of practices.
PRESENT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Identify the relevant ecosystem of practices and the hierarchy of elements of practice, practices and complexes of practices. 4. Identify the entities that are enrolled in the ecosystem of practices. Divide them into people/products and networks/system. Elaborate on their careers, meanings, expectations and strategies. 5. Identify emerging ideas that are making their way into actants. 6. Identify structures and regimes that govern the ecosystem of practices and emerging ideas. List laws, regulations, incentives and subsidies.
PAST	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Track practices back in time. Preferable twice as long as you wish to look into the future. Record the trajectories and identify specific causes of change and continuity. 8. Evaluate past trajectories and identify underlying dynamics as well as key events and barriers.
FUTURE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Explore possible future trajectories of practices. Extrapolate past dynamics and envision creative new practices. 10. Select a mix of possible, probable and desirable future practices. Flesh out each of them in detail. Identify key points of intervention in the trajectories of the future practices.
EXIT DEEP-DIVE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Search the future practices for gaps of opportunity and develop concrete innovation proposals.

The knowledge model tells us what kind of information to look for and how it influences the dynamics of practices, but it does not give any guidance about the process that will lead to an overview of future innovation opportunities. In the following we will briefly outline such a process.

The first challenge we are facing is to translate the intents, problems, visions that have inspired the assignment into the language practices. We will do so by performing a “deep dive” from the business context where the assignment is formulated in terms of people and products to the level of practices and the domain of understandings, competences and actants. Following the exploration of future trajectories of practices, we will exit the deep-dive and return to the surface where we will translate the findings to concrete future innovation opportunities.

The second challenge is to manage the uncertainty and ambiguity that are intrinsically associated with the exploration of future practices. In reality there is not much choice of a method. The scenario methodology is virtually the only available method to explore possible futures and at the same time balance the analytical and visionary elements into a sensible cocktail of our choice.

The use of the process will most probably provoke unaccounted iterations and shortcuts, but for the sake of clarity I have presented it as a simple list of tasks to perform.

The purpose of the framework is to create a platform for conversations among different stakeholders. The final display of future innovation opportunities is not necessarily the real benefit of the process. The true value of the process is embedded in the ways it make people share and discuss their specific knowledge and build common visions. On a day-to-day basis the framework should function as a navigational tool that provides some guideposts in an otherwise perplexing flow of information. Ideally the framework is regularly updated, so it always represents a “best view” of the business context and provides a backdrop for ad-hoc decision making across the network of stakeholders. In the long view it should enable networks of stakeholders to choose desirable futures and empower them to co-shape future.

Discussion

Practice theory is a powerful and versatile paradigm for design thinking. It fundamentally re-frames the innovative landscape and while most of the design community only talk about “value-based innovation” and “co-shaping the future” then practice thinking can provide a practical framework to make it really happen.

Despite the high ambitions it is a challenging enterprise to introduce the present combination of practice theory and design research. Not so much because of the theoretical or practical implication, but because it touches upon our very conception of the role of designers and what companies should do to be competitive. The majority of companies are locked into top-down strategic process, and do not dare to give designers a real say in the early stages of new business development, - and maybe with a reason, because designers have not had the tools to convincingly do so. Furthermore, companies are only recently taking their social responsibilities seriously and are paralyzed by swift changes in the market place. For many of them a value-based and co-shaping attitude to the world seems like a fairy-tale dream.

The intention with this paper has been to demonstrate that it is not so far away after all. The presented framework exemplifies that it can be done here and now.

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