Practising Sustainability Unintentionally; an Ethnography of Allotmenteering

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study takes an ethnographic approach to explore how the ordinary, routine processes and practicalities of doing allotmenteering interrelate and overlap with conceptualisations of environmentally responsible consumption. Using a practice-theoretical lens, our ethnographic findings reveal how, through practising allotmenteering, allotmenteers engage in environmentally responsible and sustainable consumption patterns unintentionality.

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing number of studies that pay close attention to ordinary, routine, inconspicuous and often taken-for-granted forms of consumption (Coupland 2005; Dant 2005; Epp and Price 2010; Molotch and McClain 2008). This sub-field of consumer research demonstrates the importance of routines in consumption practices as well as acknowledging materiality in the performance of everyday life. In doing so, these studies unveil everyday occurrences and experiences of consumption that would otherwise be hidden from view in the light of dominant perspectives that focus on either the individual consumer and their self-interests, desires and motivations (Friedman 1957) or the spectacular and extraordinary aspects of consumption (Baudrillard 1998; Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

An increasing number of studies into ordinary consumption are inspired by the (re-) emergence of theories of practice or what has been described as ‘the practice turn’ in contemporary social theory (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny 2001). Theories of practice represent a body of diverse, yet interrelated theoretical perspectives about social life. The pre-eminent ideas, espoused by Schatzki (1996) and, more recently, Reckwitz (2002) endorse the understanding that social life is composed of a multitude of social practices, which are reproduced and transformed in the performance and flow of everyday life. Each practice comprises of particular doings and sayings, which include different ways of understanding and know-how, material resources and meanings (Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996). This theoretical approach is gaining in popularity in the field of environmentally responsible consumption wherein previous research has focused predominantly on the rationality of individual (and to a lesser extent collective) action or the political and socio-symbolic significance of consumption (Black and Cherrier 2010; Connolly and Prothero 2003; Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998; Lang and Gabriel 2005), since it allows us to bring less visible aspects of ordinary, routine consumption into view. These practice-based studies of ordinary consumption call attention to the ways in which resource-intensive forms of consumption (e.g. showering, heating/cooling the home, laundering, freezing food and driving) are in fact embedded within the workings of everyday life (Shove 2003; Shove and Southerton 2000; Shove and Walker 2010). This is significant because it allows us to recognize how and why environmentally-damaging consumption patterns transpire in the performance of everyday life and consider how we can establish less resource-intensive ways of living.

This research therefore adopts a practice-theoretical approach. Taking the practice of allotmenteering as the focus of this study, this research moves debates about consumption forward by demonstrating how more routine, everyday forms of consumption can help us to advance our understanding of environmentally responsible consumption. Drawing from the work of Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), we employ a conceptual framework composed of three interrelated elements; forms of competence, materials and meaning. Furthermore, we adopt what Shove and her colleagues refer to as an element-based approach, to explore and understand the dynamics of practice, which enables us to consider how the elements that compose a practice at any given time may also be connected to other related practices, which in the context of the present study includes practices of preserving.

The research is based on a ‘multi-sited’ (Marcus 1995) ethnographic approach which, consistent with a practice-theoretical approach, enables us to move away from individualistic understandings of consumers’ behaviour, explore the social, cultural and performative processes of everyday life and appreciate the dynamic, material and embodied nature of practices. Data were collected through various means; participant-observation, casual/informal conversations, photographs and semi-structured interviews. The fieldwork comprised a total of 41 visits over a period of 12 months, wherein one of the authors became involved with two allotment sites spending time observing and participating in the routine activities that shape the practice and engaging in casual conversation with allotmenteers. In order to broaden our understanding of the practice beyond the confines of the allotment, a small number of participants were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take photographs around themes appertaining to; ways of storing and conserving their allotment-grown produce, cooking, meal planning and home composting. Our participants’ photographs then formed the basis of in-depth semi-structured interviews, lasting between one and two hours 45 minutes (Collier and Collier 1986). Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Adopting an ethnographic methodology framed by practice theory, this research focuses on the processes of doing allotmenteering; capturing and emphasising what people do and the ways in which allotmenteers engage and interact with nature. It shows how such a focus provides access to the nuances and complexities of environmentally responsible consumption. In this respect, our findings indicate how through their concerted efforts to work with nature (through creating wildlife areas, crafting wildlife ponds and making and using home-made compost) allotmenteers help to contribute to environmental sustainability in small, but meaningful ways.

The links between the activities of these allotmenteers and the broader context of environmental sustainability are discernible from our etic perspective (Fetterman 2010). However, at the emic level, the allotmenteers do not appear to relate their experiences of working with nature to pertinent environmental issues connected to existing food production-consumption systems. Rather, the ways in which participants work with nature; by nourishing the soils on their allotment with their home-made compost or cultivating beneficial eco-systems by encouraging bees and other forms of wildlife demonstrate the taken-for-granted ways in which allotmenteers care for their allotment. Moreover, participants care for their immediate environment primarily as a means to grow a bountiful crop. Thus, caring for the environment can be interpreted as a personal concern, intimately bound up in the time and effort that allotmenteers invest into the practice of allotmenteering, rather than as a political or ideological concern for the welfare of distant others, the wider environment (in a more universal sense) and future generations. These findings suggest that allotmenteers’ engage in environmentally responsible production and consumption patterns unintentionally in the process of doing allotmenteering. By focusing on the ordinary, routine con-
sumption patterns embedded in the practice of allotmenteering, this research shows how practices can establish and shape more environmentally responsible consumption patterns.

REFERENCES