

7 Sharing conventions

Communities of practice and thermal comfort

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Introduction

There is much current interest in harnessing ‘communities’ to make more sustainable societies. We could understand this interest in strategic terms as the purposeful transfer of responsibility for reducing carbon emissions from governments to the public (Seyfang 2008). We could also make a more positive case about the potential for reducing energy demand at the same time as fostering social cohesion (Connors and McDonald 2011). Either way, such discussions generally deploy a concept of ‘community’ defined by geography. The communities referred to consist of people who live near one another, such as those in rural locations who have worked together to adopt renewable energy technologies (Walker *et al.* 2007), or those in cities who are being encouraged to develop similar schemes (Aiken 2012). This framing is attractive, because it chimes with ideas about ‘transition’, which position spatially bounded communities as effective crucibles of sustainable change (Seyfang and Smith 2007) and with romantic beliefs about those living together naturally enjoying a strong sense of connection (Franklin *et al.* 2011). Yet it may not always be those living nearby who influence practices, including those that matter for energy use. Many of us barely know our neighbours and feel much closer to other reference groups. We might therefore benefit from conceptualising these collectives in ways other than those defined by geographic proximity.

This chapter considers how aspects of a ‘communities of practice’ framework might help promote sustainable living. Within this approach, ‘community’ no longer revolves around proximity, but centres instead on participation in identified practices, understood as relatively widespread ways of doing things. It draws particular inspiration from Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and their anthropological interest in the circumstances under which people learn to emulate and in how practices change through interaction between newcomers and old hands. In their account of social practice, Lave and Wenger are particularly alive to the situational processes through which individuals come to undertake tasks in similar ways. As such, the ‘communities’ they discern are both unstable and a matter of practical achievement. Furthermore, and perhaps most important for my discussion, establishing whether such communities exist

or not is taken to be an empirical question. Developing this approach, I suggest that attending to the formation and prevention of practice communities could enrich understanding of mundane energy use. In short, my chapter explores how some groups develop as a ‘community of practice’, whilst others do not, and considers the implications of the processes involved for efforts to encourage less resource intensive modes of living.

I begin with a brief discussion of recent versions of social practice theory as applied to the sustainability challenge, focusing on the degree to which they frame practices as shared, and also on how the ‘communities of practice’ approach might add to this agenda. I then return to two previous research projects and consider whether communities of practice could be identified within the groups involved in these two studies. Though concerned with different contexts, both research projects shared an interest in seasonal climate change, the everyday achievement of thermal comfort, and the management of indoor temperature. The practices under scrutiny were, therefore, those involved in keeping human bodies sufficiently warm or cool. I start with a discussion of how professional office workers responded to the arrival of summer warmth at work and then consider how older people managed winter cold at home. Through this comparative exercise I explore the subtleties of how communities of practice are either consolidated or impeded from developing. The chapter ends by taking stock of the implications of these enquiries, focusing on the potential for sustainability ‘brokering’ and the relevance of attending to two different kinds of ‘insulation’.

How do practice communities form?

Recent work applying social practice theory to sustainability agendas has criticised the policy focus on individualistic conceptions of action (Shove 2010). The argument here is that, because of their focus on individual choice, dominant approaches tinker around the edges of the problem. These critics contend that instead of focusing on individual behaviour we should concentrate on broader questions about how concepts of ‘normal’ (often resource intensive) ways of living evolve, and how these are powered by dynamics that have yet to be understood. This puts the spotlight on how, at given points in time, broader collectives establish and achieve everyday objectives, rather than on how individual traits drive behaviour. For example, Chappells *et al.* (2011), study how gardeners use water outside their homes and how watering practices have changed. Shove similarly examines changing ways of doing laundry and how tumble dryers have come to replace washing lines (Shove 2003). This emphasis on shared conventions – rather than personal attributes – leads to new ideas about how sustainable practices might be fostered.

Though useful in moving away from an assumption of significant personal agency, and from the view that individuals are free to choose more and less sustainable ways of life, this approach can sometimes suggest there are, at given points in time, relatively undifferentiated combinations of understandings,

procedures, and engagements that define and govern appropriate conduct within any given practice (Evans 2011). By concentrating on the emergence or disappearance of practices, accounts like these are at risk of downplaying the significance of diversity and difference. Focusing on broader sweeps of change is valuable in that it underlines the importance of collective arrangements, but such an emphasis also means that less attention has so far been paid to variation in how practices are concurrently reproduced. In this chapter, I suggest that understanding variation in how practices are performed is relevant and necessary if we are to figure out how such variation might be encouraged or impeded to positive environmental ends.

In taking this approach, I make use of Lave and Wenger's discussions of how 'communities of practice' are forged and maintained (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Their particular interest was in processes of 'social learning' and in how practices and skills are shared and reproduced in different settings. The fundamental point, for them, is that learning is not a discrete activity, associated with formalised spaces of teaching or isolated contemplation, but much more a matter of practical activity, as people learn from each other by mutually engaging in tasks (Lave 1993). Partly because their insights are grounded in a series of ethnographic studies, their characterisation of this process is particularly alive to the details of lived experience and the context dependent mechanisms through which communities of practice form. It is this idea that I want to take forward.

Wenger tells us that practices are defined by 'boundaries' (Wenger 1998: 121), such that those inside the practice community have a relatively clear sense of what constitutes a proper performance, and that this is not shared by those outside the boundary. Understood in this way, the shared nature of social practices becomes a matter of empirical investigation. Identifying processes of boundary maintenance and disruption are useful tools for this task. Rather than reifying generic processes of 'transmission' (Turner 1994), Wenger argues that we should focus on the situated creation and maintenance of practice community boundaries. Though the promotion of less energy intensive modes of existence was far from their concerns, I suggest that the concepts of practice community formation and boundary making, of the kind that Lave and Wenger extract from their studies of organisations and apprenticeship, could be used to identify new ways of encouraging sustainability.

Practices are, by definition, social, in the sense that they are shared and recognised by others. Indeed, this is one of the core reasons why the concept has proved attractive, since it helps guard against the temptation to drift back towards accounts of social life that place undue emphasis on individual autonomy (Reckwitz 2002). However, we should not assume practices are always performed in the same way. As stated, in this chapter I want to focus on variety and on how communities of practice take shape. In this sense, I am interested in the obstacles and experiences associated with practice 'recruitment' (Reckwitz 2002: 250), and with how processes of recruitment and defection influence the formation (and dissolution) of communities, whose members perform specific practices in relatively similar ways.

I now revisit two previous research projects, both focusing on methods of achieving thermal comfort and on whether strategies varied across the seasons. There are various ways in which humans keep themselves sufficiently warm or cool. These include bodily adaptation, clothing selection, and ambient temperature control. Some of these methods are much more energy intensive than others. In focusing on this topic I am interested in three related questions. First, under what conditions do people achieve thermal comfort in similar ways. Second, what are the most significant factors impeding or encouraging the emergence of similar strategies and practices. Third, does a discussion of how such practices are shared and how they vary reveal what is relevant for those interested in promoting sustainability?

Held inside a strengthening community of practice: forgetting about summer clothes in city offices

The first study that I discuss involved in-depth interviews with professional office workers in the financial heart of London. The research was, in part, designed to discover whether these people responded to summer in the same way: in short, did they form a community of practice in this respect? This is a distinctive group in being quite removed from the outdoor environment. Since these workers spend long periods of time inside climatically controlled offices, it was possible that they might be relatively oblivious to outdoor temperature change. This could show itself in a lack of seasonal fluctuation in clothing and an increasing reliance on air conditioning. Serial interviews with lawyers allowed me to discover whether this was so (see Hitchings 2011 for more detail). I now use this material to consider the extent to which members of this group shared methods of managing thermal comfort, to show how these varied with the seasons, and to identify what held this particular community of practice in place.

A common discussion topic related to the social ‘arrival’ of summer and whether respondents amended their habitual modes of dress, and weekday routines, in response to seasonal warmth outdoors. In many cases, they did not. When asked about the preceding summer, respondents were often forced to think on their feet. It was not unusual for interviewees to have little physical contact with the outdoor climate. This was generally seen to be both normal and acceptable. When I asked whether a respondent was experiencing a ‘good summer’, proxy indicators were often enlisted in formulating a response to a question that few had really considered before. For example, one respondent had been working hard towards the goal of securing a partnership at her firm. Techniques for coping with the weather were consequently low on her list of concerns. In passing, she noticed an unusually big dry-cleaning bill as a result of some recent rains, which had muddled the path that began her commute; but that was all. Other preoccupations pushed seasonally specific practices off the agenda. This was true of other respondents too, and, for most, this was not something that was experienced as being particularly problematic.

In thinking about how this community of practice formed, the tendency to disregard summer appeared to be amplified by various on-site services fostering indoor sociability. For example, the company canteen offered a meeting and eating space more convenient than other less proximate alternatives. Meeting colleagues or friends during breaks was commonly done in indoor environments, even during the summer. The presumption was that others might find it awkward (or unpleasant) to go outdoors, and that it was safer to arrange to meet in climatically controlled indoor spaces. In other words, it was better to suggest an appropriately cool location than run the risk of making peers uncomfortable. Respondents made exceptions when meeting with close friends, and when they were sure that their companion would be willing to cope, but even then, going out was often something of an event. Convention and a concern to conform to (presumed) expectations, resulted in an identifiable pattern of seasonally unchanging practice. The continued reproduction of such 'non-seasonal' arrangements meant that there was no need to dress differently in the summer, but, as we are about to see, some liked the idea of doing so.

On closer inspection, there was some variation in the clothing worn in these city centre offices. When we spoke of summer clothing at work, employees in support functions (such as secretaries) were often described as being the most likely to wear summer outfits. Since these individuals occupied similar indoor climatic conditions to those enjoyed by my respondents, this variation was not due to the existence of different ambient temperatures. Rather, my interviewees attributed this difference of approach to the fact that support workers were not expected to look as 'professional', since they had less need to impress clients. Others suggested that support staff had more time to think about these things. These stratified patterns of dress were then reflected back in the lawyers' views. For some, seasonally *unchanging* dress was becoming a mark of distinction. In other words, not adjusting to the seasons was taken to show that you were too busy, ambitious and preoccupied with work to notice the weather. In this way, being seen to respond to the arrival of warmer weather might suggest that you were less than fully focused at work and, by implication, less than fully committed. As such, the observed differences of practice between support staff and lawyers drew my professional respondents deeper into a seasonally unchanging community of practice.

Consistency within this group was as much a consequence of how the above dynamics combined as of any external pressure or compulsion. Vague senses of what bosses expected in terms of dress contributed to some respondents wearing the same sorts of outfits all year round. Some thought it better to stick with the usual uniform than risk the rarely spoken disapproval of superiors. Yet, many more said that there was little to worry about on that score, so long as they were not excessive and so long as a professional appearance was maintained, particularly in meetings. In other words, the lawyers with whom I spoke probably could have dressed and acted slightly differently during the summer. Indeed, when an individual did take such an approach, other respondents viewed this as a pleasing distraction, some also feeling that such seasonal changes were 'natural' and

appropriate. However, despite all this, a community of shared and seasonally unchanging practice was in some ways strengthening, sustained by social cues, preoccupations with working life and career, ideas about how free time should be spent, and beliefs about the value of appearing busy.

Returning to the communities of practice literature, Wenger writes about ‘brokering’ (1998: 109). In his terms, brokering represents a means of introducing new ideas and variants, whilst remaining sensitive to the community and the importance that repeated performance of practice has for its continued existence. Brokering is commonly done by newer recruits who have yet to be fully absorbed into the practice, or those who must straddle the community boundary such as line managers tasked with implementing the suggestions of superiors. In theory, there may be scope for some sustainability ‘brokering’ before the community of practice – in this case one defined by reliance on energy intensive air conditioning, and which does not adapt to summer – solidifies further. One practical recommendation, arising from my research, was to suggest emailing employees at the start of summer, to remind them that they could wear lighter clothing during this period. This was already being done in some of the offices I studied, and was universally welcomed by my respondents.

Of course, we might imagine that communities of shared practice are readily established in office settings where members of staff have many opportunities to observe and emulate the practices of others. Yet it is worth remembering that the respondents I interviewed were drawn from different organisations. Clients and colleagues from other firms were generally ushered into formal meeting spaces, and these formal ‘public’ meetings were characterised by conventions of their own. In contrast, the normal desk, and the ordinary working environment, was a relatively private place. In these settings, clothing habits were as much about how people invested time and energy as about norms of public presentation. In other words, the picture was more complicated, and practice communities were less straightforwardly determined by repeated exposure to the actions of others. It is with this thought in mind that I turn to my second case.

Held outside a possible community of practice: unaware of how others manage winter cold at home

The second research project examined the ways in which a small sample of older people managed to keep warm during the winter. In the context of the present discussion, I was interested in whether these respondents’ strategies were similar and whether they also constituted a community of practice. Whilst some older people find it difficult to get through the winter without hardship, others may have more profligate habits of ‘wasteful’ home heating. At both of these extremes, there are good reasons to encourage older people to adopt less energy intensive and less expensive methods of keeping warm. With these issues in mind, a second interview-based study was designed to discover whether variations in income, home ownership and housing type were associated with differences in how older people kept warm in winter (for more on this, see Hitchings

and Day 2011). The study showed that there were, indeed, diverse ways of keeping warm at home – perhaps not surprising given the structured diversity in the sample. However, this diversity was not simply attributable to differences of circumstance, for instance in terms of wealth or housing. As we discovered, other dynamics were at work, meaning that our respondents did not form a ‘community’ of practitioners defined by shared strategies of winter warmth.

On being asked about what they thought older people did to stay warm at home, respondents were often eager to distance themselves from the idea that there might be a common generational response. The ‘elderly’ community was certainly not one with which our respondents readily identified in this regard. This was largely the product of a persistently negative media stereotype, in which older people were viewed as being passive and incapable of managing or coping with seasonal cold. This representation is consistent with images deployed by charities seeking support and by broadcasters seeking headlines. It is certainly true that some older people do face problems in the winter. However, one indirect consequence of the media stereotype of the elderly was that respondents were at pains to dissociate their own actions from those imagined or expected of others of their generation. The generational peers they saw in the media clearly could not cope, and this was quite unlike them. Rather, what individual respondents did to keep warm at home was routinely defended as the most ‘sensible’ strategy, given their personal circumstances. Accordingly, respondents often talked about ‘doing what is right for me’ – a formulation which emphasises the distance between their own responses and those they imagined might be typical of their generation.

It was rare for respondents to talk about home heating with friends and neighbours. This was thought to be a sensitive topic, particularly amongst those of a similar age. As described, raising this subject might imply that you considered the person with whom you were talking to be incapable in this respect. Our interviewees were well aware of the various declines associated with aging and felt that others would be similarly sensitive. Rather more cheerful topics, associated with family news or holiday plans, were generally taken to be safer options when talking with other older people. In this context, it was difficult to develop any collective understanding of thermal comfort practices. Consequently, there was much speculation about who did what and why. When we discussed the winter behaviours of others, the conversation frequently turned to gossip as we raked over the various reasons why others of a similar age might, or might not, have adopted certain strategies. The key point here is that knowledge was limited. Even very good friends knew little about how each achieved thermal comfort at home during the winter.

This lack of knowing was reinforced by the fact that it was considered socially important to provide a warm home when others visited and impolite to talk about being cold when visiting others. The majority of our respondents were well aware of the pleasures and benefits of a warmer ambient environment as they aged and, reflecting this shared convention, many made the house warmer in preparation for guests, and especially for guests of a similar age. There was

general agreement that a host would feel ashamed if visitors kept their coats on. In addition, several respondents felt that they should wear smarter, often less insulating, clothes when others came to visit. Certainly, they did not use daytime blankets when hosting guests, though several respondents did so when at home alone. This was a distinctly private arrangement, not one to be shared or widely discussed for fear of reproducing the stigmatised stereotype mentioned above.

Social etiquette also meant that when visiting others, respondents would be unlikely to ask their hosts to turn the heating up. To do so would seem to be impolite, if not insulting. Some wore thicker items of clothing when visiting others, in order to avoid this problem, or would try to stay in warmer parts of the host's home, such as the kitchen. Again the point is that these social imperatives prevented people from knowing, in detail, about other ways of keeping warm. Since hosts provided atypical conditions for visitors and since respondents were reluctant to mention their own preferences when visiting friends, routine strategies remained private. In sum, our interviewees neither identified greatly with their generational peers, nor knew about how others of a similar age were coping with winter at home.

In this second case, variations in practice were largely invisible: hidden from those involved. There were good reasons for this invisibility, and for the lack of any recognisable community of shared practice. First, as we have seen, respondents were keen to distance themselves from the idea of having practices in common because of their age. Second, respondents were reluctant to discuss strategies of keeping warm with friends of a similar age because of the social pitfalls associated with this potentially sensitive topic. Third, they could not observe each others' practices: when hosting guests, thermostats were often raised, different clothing was worn, and blankets were put away. Likewise, when visiting others, personal preferences went unmentioned. The development of a community of practice – with respect to the management of indoor climates during winter – was impeded by all of these considerations.

Notwithstanding the diverse situations in which these older respondents lived, rather more discussion and dialogue might have helped members of this group learn from one another about effective and sustainable ways to manage the winter cold. In this context, a 'community of practice' might facilitate a more positive sense of connection and commonality and might help diffuse less resource intensive, and less expensive, alternatives to some of the current winter warmth strategies described to us in the project. Based on this understanding, one project recommendation was to find ways of helping older people to talk more freely about this otherwise delicate topic. Once again, it seemed that some form of sustainability brokering could be beneficial.

Of course, we might have guessed it would be particularly difficult to establish a shared community of domestic practice, because homes are private spaces to which others have limited access and which also take a variety of physical forms. However, this study suggested that limited sharing of knowledge and practice was due to much more than architectural difference or frequency of exposure to 'normal' or real indoor conditions within other peoples' homes. As

such, this second example underlines the need for detailed analysis of the subtleties of practice community formation: it is not a matter of simply presuming that certain factors will be more significant than others. In this case, the formation of a community of practice, ordered around similar modes of achieving thermal comfort at home, was impeded by various social conventions in addition to differences of wealth, tenure, and housing type. Avoiding the stigma of being 'old' and managing related aspects of social nicety appeared to be critical considerations, and both were important in preventing the development of a shared practice.

Two kinds of insulation

In this chapter, I have taken a comparatively unusual approach to the discussion and analysis of sustainable communities. Rather than defining these in terms of neighbourhood or geographical proximity – 'communities of place' – I have identified 'communities of practice' that might be targeted and engaged in pursuit of a more sustainable society. I then considered how social networks and conventions, along with more formal organisational arrangements, structure the knowledge people have of each others' practices, and the extent to which this knowledge is shared. My method was to identify specific features of two social settings that encouraged and/or discouraged the formation of communities of 'thermal practitioners', by which I mean communities united by the way in which they relate to indoor environments, and by their approach to keeping warm or cool.

This led me to suggest that deliberate intervention, in the form of sustainability 'brokering', might be useful as a means of encouraging the emergence of new communities, organised around variants of thermal practice, which are less energy intensive to maintain. By paying close attention to the specific dynamics involved, both projects generated ideas about how this might be done. In the first case, the proposition was to actively promote the idea of wearing lighter clothes in summer. Intervention of this kind might be effective in that changing into a summer outfit is already socially acceptable: respondents were not against the idea – it was just not something they thought about. In this situation, where a 'community' is already formed, it might be possible to redefine the practice that is shared. For example, the community that is currently defined by an expectation of mechanical cooling and a disregard for the seasons might come to share new conventions, including those of seasonal adaptation. In the second case, the rather different challenge was that of helping to bring a community of shared practice into being. Here, the practical suggestion was to develop and promote situations in which older people might share ideas and talk together about effective and efficient methods of keeping warm during the winter months. Our research indicated that respondents were eager to know about, and potentially learn from, their generational peers.

The two studies generated rather specific ideas about what might be done to influence practice community dynamics in each context. Are there other more

broadly relevant conclusions to take from this exercise? In conclusion I focus on two. Both are about insulation, albeit of different kinds.

The first kind of ‘insulation’ is physical. Most discussions of energy demand focus on the details of home heating or air conditioning and the resources and technologies required to control and maintain ambient conditions. If we concentrate, instead, on the practices involved in keeping warm or cool indoors, it becomes obvious that this is only part of the story. What people wear, and how concepts of appropriate clothing vary from one social situation to the next, is also crucial. This is not a topic that figures prominently in energy research, but it is one that clearly deserves more attention. In this respect, a ‘communities of practice’ approach could help in understanding how conventions and practices that matter for thermal comfort circulate between people.

Asking about when people put blankets away, what they mean by casual and formal dress, and what they wear in different contexts might seem trivial, even banal. However, these questions are important if we are to understand how more (and less) resource intensive practices circulate, and how understanding of such processes might be channelled to positive environmental ends. As these two small studies have demonstrated, there is considerable and persistent variation in how thermal comfort is achieved and in the cultural and physical contexts through which related practices are, and are not, shared. Attending to the community dynamics involved could help identify sensitive methods of encouraging lower carbon variants to flourish and others to decline.

The second kind of insulation is social. When used in this way, the term refers to the possibility that people might be insulated from the knowledge or sense that other strategies might be possible. In effect, social networks insulate people in different ways. This is normal and not especially problematic. After all, insulation of this kind allows people to go on with daily life without thinking about whether they are doing the right thing and without being troubled by the sense that there are other possible options. At the same time, patterns of social insulation may be decidedly unhelpful for those hoping to disrupt current practices in pursuit of environmental ends. This argues for better understanding of how people are held together inside communities of practice, and of how such communities do and do not form. My examples suggest that the processes involved are more complex than one might at first expect, and that it is important to examine detailed differences (and similarities) in how practices are reproduced and shared. Finally, I have suggested that knowing more about how communities of ordinary practice develop can be of immediate practical value for those seeking to dislodge resource intensive arrangements and promote new communities, ordered around more sustainable ways of living.

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