

# The practices of collective action: Practice theory, sustainability transitions and social change

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## Abstract

Developing theory for understanding social transformation is essential for environmental sustainability, yet mainstream accounts of collective action neglect the dynamics of daily life. Theories of practice have proved generative for the study of sustainable consumption but struggle to accommodate the roles of collective actors, strategic action and purposive collective projects in social change. In response, this paper develops a practice theoretical account of collective action pertinent to processes of large scale social change, with specific focus on transitions towards sustainability. We consider three ideal types of collective—bureaucratic organisations, groupings and latent networks—and, drawing on existing social theoretical resources that are ontologically compatible with a practice account, explore the kinds of practices and arrangements which compose them. Processes concerning strategy, bureaucracy, management, social worlds and collective identity are identified as important combinations of practices and arrangements. We suggest a key contribution of practice theory has been to identify a type of collective action we call dispersed collective activity, and we suggest how this type of activity may give rise to collectives. We conclude by suggesting further development for the realisation of the project's contribution to the analysis of sustainability transitions.

**KEYWORDS**

collective action, consumption, dispersed collective activity, organisations, social movements, sustainability transitions, theories of practice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This contribution is motivated by the struggles of social theories to shed light on large scale socio-technical change, in particular transitions towards sustainability. It draws together insights from theoretical resources around collective action, sustainability transitions, and social practices. The aim is to develop conceptual groundwork for practice theoretical accounts of collective action.

Theories of practice, while in principle applicable to any domain of activity, have offered particular and well known affordances to the study of sustainable consumption (Cohen, Brown, & Vergrart, 2013; Kennedy, Cohen, & Krogman, 2015; Shove & Spurling, 2013; Warde, Welch, & Paddock, 2017). At the same time it has been widely acknowledged by its advocates that: “one key challenge for practice theory is whether it can develop conceptual schemes adequate to mapping and explaining large social phenomena” (Schatzki, 2014 p.10; cf. Coulter, 2001; Schatzki, 2016; Nicolini, 2016; Welch & Warde, 2015). Practice theoretical accounts of socio-technical change (e.g. Shove, 2003; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012) have tended to neglect the role of purposive political projects, social struggles, strategic action and collective agency (Welch & Warde, 2015).

Conversely, work dealing directly with these phenomena, for example transition studies and social movement studies, tends to understand collective actors as fundamental and presupposes their particular form of ‘strategic activity’ to be the primary motor of social change. This bias towards the dominant model of the collective “agentic actor” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; cf. du Gay, 2007), naturalised in modern culture and much actor-based social thought, systematically misattributes effects to formally organised collective actors and obscures other kinds of collective agency. It tends to ignore contingent, non-purposive forms of change, such as the co-evolution of technologies, cultural expectations and meanings, which practice theoretical approaches have been successful at identifying (e.g. Shove, 2003). And finally it ignores recursive relationships between collective action and everyday routines, such as those which reproduce patterns of consumption.

Large scale processes in social scientific studies of sustainability are most commonly debated in the ‘sustainability transitions’ literature (e.g. Geels, 2011; Grin et al., 2010), but this literature commonly quarantines the contributions of practice theory to the domain of ‘lifestyles’ and ‘everyday life’ (e.g. STRN, 2010, p.16–17). Yet there is no a priori reason to restrict application of theories of practice to this domain, as work in organisational studies amply demonstrates (e.g. Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Spee, 2015; Orlikowski, 2002; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2007).

Recently, some advocates of both practice theory and transition studies have sought to pragmatically articulate sustainability transitions and theories of practice approaches together (e.g. Crivits and Paredis, 2013; McMeekin & Southerton, 2012). Yet whilst transition studies does not purport to offer a social ontology, rather heuristics for empirical research, the apparent ontological incompatibility of the two approaches raises some fundamental issues (see Schatzki, 2011).

We argue that a practice theoretical account of social change and sustainability transitions must appreciate the roles of collectives and purposive projects. We propose to do this by

foregrounding social practices in the dynamics of collective activity itself. We problematise the model of the “modern agentic actor” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) by describing the practices and arrangements of collectives resembling this classical model, comparing them with the practices and arrangements of other groupings. Our basic orientation recognises a foundational move of actor-network theory (ANT) around agency (e.g. Latour, 2005). That is, we begin from the proposition that agency is an effect of practices and arrangements (Schatzki, 2002), and that the question of who or what acts is always an empirical question.

In order to achieve these aims within the space permitted the paper necessarily assumes some familiarity with current practice theory. We deploy Schatzki’s (1996, 2002) sense of “practices”, understood as nexuses of activity, and “arrangements”, understood as nexuses of entities (including people). “Arrangement” denotes the same form of relational nexus as ANT’s network (Schatzki, 2002, p203–10). Practices form the context in which arrangements exist, and arrangements form the context through which practices transpire (Schatzki, 2002: 116–117, see also Caldwell, 2012).

The paper addresses questions critically pertinent to sustainability transitions: Through what processes does collective activity give rise to collectives? What kinds of practices and arrangements are involved in these processes? And what other forms of collective activity are pertinent to processes of sociotechnical change?

## 2 | SOCIO-TECHNICAL CHANGE IN THEORIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PRACTICE THEORY

Collective action is a slippery concept in the social sciences, with controversy circulating around whether it is a reasonable or necessary simplification of complex and dynamic interactions, or not. The dominant tendency is to imagine the modern social system, as Meyer and Jepperson (2000, p. 100) put it, “to operate via fully realized and unfettered actors pursuing their goals (if under institutional ‘incentives’ and ‘constraints,’ understood as background conditions)”.

This model of the modern actor (collective and individual) is deliberative, rational and utilitarian (Hindess, 1990; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Whitford, 2002). Theories of practice, by contrast, point to the usefulness of flagging up habitual, routine, non-deliberative, non-voluntaristic activity in analysing social life (Warde, 2014). They disrupt the idea that agency or actors take precedence over the environments of ‘incentives’ and ‘constraints’ in which they operate. Further to this, they also challenge the notion that agency is separable or identifiable outside of activity itself. This displacement of agentic actors by practices and arrangements entails understanding both ‘action’ and ‘collective’ differently. In order to avoid the conceptual baggage of the agentic actor and its intentional action we will use the terms *collective* and *collective activity* (see Section 3).

A key insight of practice theory has been to bring to light activity ignored in accounts premised on causal power principally invested in goal-directed “agentic actors” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Nevertheless, the programmes of many collectives are evidently successfully pursued: the legislation of governments; the pursuit of profit by corporations or the strategic goals of NGOs. Each has specific projects that are fairly visible and explicit and a complex division of labour devoted to their strategic pursuit and attainment. This does not mean success can be attributed solely to the existence and strategic pursuit of projects. We argue, nevertheless, that an explanatory account of sustainability transitions cannot be sensibly made without accommodating collectives into wider dynamics. This is clearly far from a novel assertion, but current

practice theoretical accounts tend to bracket collective activity out of their explanatory accounts, perhaps under the misapprehension that such activity is ontologically incompatible.

Much confusion in contemporary uses of practice theory stems from misunderstanding the relationship between fundamental social ontology and social theory. The current wave of empirical studies that seeks to apply practice theory to substantive explanation draws theoretical inspiration from a *social ontology* of practice. Ontologies provide the basic building blocks from which social theoretical concepts can be constructed – in the case of Schatzki (1996, 2002) and Reckwitz (2002) establishing practices as the locus of the social. They do not, however, exhaust the conceptual development needed by social theory to operationalise them (see Schatzki, 2002: xvi–xvii). Rather, the relationship between fundamental ontology and social theory is one of assembly and construction (Little, 2010). Current sociological uses of practice theory for sustainable consumption and production, whilst productive for the study of end-use consumption, tend to compound rather than resolve the explanatory insufficiency of the fundamental ontology and have generally avoided conceptual or theoretical development beyond it. This discomfort with elaborating social theory beyond the fundamental practice theoretical ontology helps explain the tendency of practice theory approaches to sustainability to avoid the topic of purposive political projects, social struggles, strategic action and collective agency.

Yet the result of the absence of collective activity from current practice theoretical accounts is that the strongest versions of ‘agentless’ practice theory—while aspiring to ontologically abolish the actor—in effect simply quarantine actors outside their accounts of social life or change. This quarantine zone then operates, by default, under the ontology of the classical agentic actor. This move is most obvious where policy recommendations about interventions in practice are made, in which governments or corporations are suddenly cast as agents, whereas the same agents are largely absent from the rest of the analysis (e.g. Shove et al., 2012, Chapter 8).

‘Strong’ practice theoretical accounts, however, usually simply frame actors’ activities as causally inconsequential, while the evolving trajectory of technologies, cultural associations and competences is given explanatory weight. Thus, in a widely cited account, Hand, Shove, and Southerton (2005) offer an explanation for the current ubiquity of daily showering as a practice. Three possible explanatory narratives are suggested—of technological innovation, changing cultural conventions, and of the socio-temporal coordination of everyday practices—each found useful but inadequate in itself. The question is addressed in terms of how material infrastructures, conventions and temporal orders fit together, are stabilised and changed; and the answer is found in the dynamic connections between the elements of the practice. Hand et al. (2005) therefore offer a corrective to conventional actor-based accounts, which might foreground the interests of governments and businesses. They narrate the rise of showering through three accounts of: developments in plumbing, heating and power technologies; cultural shifts in understandings of the self and body; and issues of temporal coordination, which have led to increasing demand for ‘convenience’. The emphasis is on contingency, lock-in, and creeping change. However, the interests and efforts of commercial collectives, such as bathroom appliance or consumer product manufacturers, in promoting those cultural expectations of cleanliness and convenience, are not mentioned. Cultural associations, technological innovation and temporal routines are outcomes of the activity of specific collectives, *as well as* non-purposive, endogenous processes within practice. In strong practice accounts, collectives, and the larger projects that practices form part of, are frequently missing or are conceptually partitioned from the model of social action.

In summary, considering the strategic activity of collectives does not mean jettisoning insights from theories of practice. On the contrary, it offers the latter greater

descriptive and explanatory scope, while the fundamental insights of practice theory debunk simplistic conceptions of collectives that obfuscate the processes of their emergence and naturalise their activity.

Based on the problems outlined above, we next offer two lines of theoretical development relating to Schatzki's (2002) underdeveloped concepts of 'general understandings' and 'teleoaffective regimes', that contribute to a practice theoretical approach to collective action in sustainability transitions. Section 4 then outlines three loosely differentiated modes of collective activity relevant for exploring sustainable transitions: that of *bureaucratic organisations*; of looser networks and *groupings*; and a form of activity that practice theoretical approaches has been innovative in addressing, which we call *collective dispersed activity*. In these sections we also address the kinds of processes through which collectives of various types are formed, and note the continual flux and dynamism of any collective. Section 5 concludes and suggests further avenues to be pursued for the practical realisation of developing practice theoretical accounts of collective action and sustainable transitions.

### 3 | DEVELOPING PRACTICE THEORETICAL CONCEPTS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY

This section develops two concepts drawing on Schatzki (2002, 2010) that offer us additional resources for understanding the practices of collective action (see also Welch & Warde, 2017; Welch, 2017).

Schatzki's earlier formulation of his ontology stops short of the analysis of groups, institutions and systems (1996, p. 168). In *The Site of the Social* (2002), however, Schatzki argues that the "formation of groups and the performances of collective actions are the institution and carrying out of practice nexuses of a particular sort" (2002: 267 [authors' emphasis]), without further characterising these. We suggest that two concepts that Schatzki (2002) introduces – "general understandings" and "teleoaffective regime" (2002, p. 77) have potential for a practice theoretical account of collectives and collective activity. Both however require further conceptual elaboration, which we offer here.

*General understandings* are a category of practice component, introduced in addition to his earlier tri-partite model of "practical understandings", "rules" and "teleoaffective structures" (Schatzki, 1996). In contrast to these latter components which are generally interpreted as being particular to individual practices, general understandings are common to many practices and condition the manner in which practices are carried out, as well as being expressed in their performance (Schatzki, 2002 p.86). The term forms an extremely broad category, including such things as: collective concepts like "nation" or "organisation"; membership categories such as ethnicity or identities (e.g. political, professional, subcultural); culturally structuring concepts such as "public/private"; or diffuse cultural understandings, such as the notion of sustainability itself (Welch & Warde, 2017). General understandings sit across the boundary between the discursive and the non-discursive; they may be components of wider discursive formations that intersect practices, and may exhibit pre-reflexive, tacit or affective aspects. They therefore play a central role in the ideational and affective integration of practices in processes of group formation, identification and reproduction, through identities, values and organising concepts (such as "sustainability" or "profit-making"). Furthermore, general understandings inform the ordering of the teleoaffective structures of practices; that is, helping organise the arrays of ends, orientations, and affective engagements of individual practices.

A second important area we develop here is around teleology. Influential social ontologies of practice theory already emphasise teleology as the prime axis of activity (see especially Schatzki, 2010). For Reckwitz (2002) practices include motivational knowledge alongside other components such as bodily and mental activities, objects, ‘background understanding’ and emotion. For Schatzki, similarly, teleoaffective structures link the doings and sayings of practices through a “range of normativized and hierarchically ordered ends, projects and tasks, to varying degrees allied with normativized emotions and even moods” (2002: 80).

However, many current sociological accounts of practices emphasise the competent performance of practice as (autotelic) end in itself rather than the (heterotelic) end/s towards which the practice is engaged (e.g. Shove et al., 2012). For some kinds of practice, perhaps particularly enthusiast or leisure activities, the emphasis on an internal orientation to competent performance may be appropriate. But there are many forms of activity where the practice is the means to the end, not the end in itself. Commonly, heterotelic ends orient and integrate multiple practices into a wider configuration, as in, for example, the pursuit of profit by companies, the pursuit of strategy by armies, or the pursuit of ideals and instrumental goals by social movements.

The concept of *teleoaffective regime*, discussed only fleetingly by Schatzki (2002), can be developed to carry out the work of heterotelic ends. Teleoaffective regime is a configurational concept denoting articulations of teleology and affectivity that reign across *multiple* practices and conjoin common ends and projects in the teleoaffective structures of those practices. Schatzki describes three teleoaffective regimes using the example of nineteenth century religious group the Shakers: faith in salvation through the Shaker’s lived order as the Kingdom of God on earth; the governing hierarchies through which Shaker life was administered; and commitment to communal property and living (2002, p. 28). The first of these demonstrates how teleoaffective regimes may *specify* culturally widespread understandings (i.e. the kingdom of God) within a particular configuration. The latter two demonstrate how teleoaffective regimes may *institutionalise* general understandings (i.e. divinely ordained authority, communal ownership). The teleoaffective regimes specify and apply general understandings to the Shakers’ practices of everyday life, which also have their own specific purposes, aims and affective orientations. Teleoaffective regimes can therefore be taken as the specification or application of general understandings. We can avoid the reification of such “regimes” by always tying them empirically to the ordering of the teleoaffective structures of specific practices (Welch, 2017). For our purposes here, crucially, teleoaffective regimes embody both the set of relations between these teleoaffective structures of practices and the teleologies of collectives.

The concept of teleoaffective regime may therefore be used to describe the teleological organisation of collectives. The notion of teleoaffective regime also draws attention to how the ends of certain practices (for example practices of organisational strategy) anchor, subordinate or integrate sets of practices, and the dynamics between component practices and larger configurations of practices. We discuss such dynamics of collectives in Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

## 4 | COLLECTIVE ACTION

In this section we identify and contextualise practices of collective action. That is, we identify the practices that constitute different types of collectives and collective activity. We do this by characterising three ideal types of collective critical for sustainable transitions: one, the *bureaucratic organisation*, very familiar to standard models of change, the others, *groupings* and *latent networks* that are largely overlooked – and discuss their basis in practices and arrangements.

Different types of collective shape and orientate their constituent and related practices in particular ways – one cannot be understood without the other. We recommend both the collectives and the processes we identify as characteristic of their activity as conceptual schemata that could be used in further research as practice theoretical resources for thinking about change and transition.

The following sections are organised around two aims: to demonstrate the ontological compatibility of our approach to collectives and collective activity with practice theory; and to demonstrate the value practice approaches offer in accounting for broader kinds of activity in processes of change than those theorised by traditional actor-centric accounts. We offer resources for the analysis of each ideal type of collective based on theoretical developments introduced in the previous section and existing, ontologically compatible theory. We identify some general processes and mechanisms through which collectives are formed, reproduced and form part of sequences of activity. In practice terms, these include activity that is enacted through specific kinds of integrative practice – such as practices of strategy, management, and representation. Other types of mechanism, such as the production of group identity, are better understood in terms of the configuration of multiple practices through teleoaffective regimes.

By way of clarification, none of these three ideal types directly corresponds to the classical understanding of the collective actor: our argument is that the classical notion of collective actorhood is problematic. Nevertheless, we see value in maintaining a concept of *collectives*. This value is analytical (societal transition and social change cannot be examined without acknowledging satisfactorily the activity of collectives), ethical and political (it is necessary for accountability and responsibility) and practical (it is necessary for articulating problems and devising solutions to acknowledge collective entities and their activity) (see Du Gay, 2007).

With caveats, then, we retain basic assumptions that collectives exist and that activity can be attributed to them. We are explicitly drawing attention to the activity of collectives which does not conform to classic models of the actor (e.g. subcultures), and to non-intentional and non-strategic collective activity; *as well as* to those collectives which look very much like agentic actors, and to forms of activity which look like traditional models of collective action. Designating some ideal typical collectives, finally, should not detract from dynamism, overlap and transformation between different types of collective, a matter we debate in section 4.4.

## 4.1 | Bureaucratic organisations

Bureaucratic organisations are the socially legitimated, institutional form of collective that most closely resembles the model of the “agentic actor” (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000), meaning their contribution towards change is familiar and usually overplayed. Bureaucratic organisations develop relatively explicit agendas or goals, strategies through which they will be pursued, and they integrate around these strategies through complex, internal divisions of labour. The literature suggests they are controversial for some adherents to theories of practice (e.g. Shove et al., 2012), so the principal aims of this section are to signal the limitations and contingencies of collectives’ attempts at purposive action, and to break down the organisation into some component practices and arrangements. This involves a selective overview of compatible theoretical resources for analysing organisations, where we would suggest further work should begin. Some of the key processes identified are particular to bureaucratic organisations and others are common to different types of collective and so re-emerge in the discussion of groupings and latent networks below.

The processes we want to highlight as most distinctive for bureaucratic collectives, relatively intuitively, can be identified as pertaining to practices and arrangements of *strategy* and *management*. Centrally these practices relate to processes of scale-making and collective orientation. Practices of strategy and management are central to the reflective and decision-making capacity of the organisation – allowing it to resemble the collective actor. Yet short-cuts to understanding action in the style of the ‘modern agentic actor’ (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) also obscure dynamics which we outline below.

Analysing what top managers do and focusing on their deliberation and planning activity reveals the practices and arrangements of *strategy*. Strategy is sometimes taken on face value as explaining social outcomes, as what “fully realized and unfettered actors” do to get what they want (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p.100), yet a more explicit focus on the practices and arrangements of strategy help develop a more empirical and theoretically nuanced approach. While organisational studies has long been home to insights from theories of practice (e.g. Gherardi, 2000), the literature on “strategy-as-practice” looks directly at this question of how agendas are formed and how their pursuit is planned in organisations (see Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, Vaara & Whittington, 2012 for reviews). We would emphasise the significance of teleoaffective regimes that orient and coordinate practices here. The strategy-as-practice literature distinguishes itself by: offering closer, qualitative attention to strategic activity (‘praxis’) itself; to how this praxis is “enabled and constrained by prevailing organizational and societal practices” (Vaara & Whittington, 2012: 285); by its perspective on strategy as constituted through societal contexts beyond the organization; and by attending to various “practitioners”, both individuals and “aggregate actors” inside and outside the organization (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, see also below). Studies of strategy as practices and arrangements have more work to do, but the literature already shows how theories of practice might accommodate strategy in a way that divests it of its overtones of rational action.

A second set of practices aids the understanding of intra-organisational dynamics important for contextualising and modifying practices and arrangements of *strategy* in particular around the question of scale, that concern practices and arrangements of *bureaucracy* and *management*. *Bureaucracy* links up different parts of organisations in the pursuit of agendas and implementation of plans. Managers make essential simplifications or “summaries” (Collins, 1981) in the course of their work, which effectively translate between scales in enterprises, allowing managers to make sense of the many forms of work being undertaken without requiring knowledge of its specificity. In this sense managers must abstract from the diverse collective practices of the organisation – the micro-sociological detail of working with machinery, the experience of the assembly line, the nature of the collaboration on the shop floor – in such a way to regularly succeed in coordinating them with their own work of attempting to instantiate actorhood. Practices and arrangements of *management* also require, in practice terminology: negotiating among a limited range of general understandings about the particular activity and roles of others who are managed; and practical understandings around how to delegate, lead and strategise over arrangements of technology, commodities, and people; alongside rules and teleoaffective structures around being decisive, innovative, motivated and responsible managers. Teleoaffective regimes, as introduced in section 3, specify and apply general understandings about efficiency and responsibility to practices in a way that supports certain courses of action to managers for reasons established in practices of management and bureaucracy, for example decisions around restructuring, which often increase or decrease economies of scope or scale.

While so far we have emphasised agency in practices and arrangements of *strategy* and the structured way in which organisations are intended to work, through analysis of the

intersections between *bureaucracy* and *management* which allow for delegation and the ‘making’ of scale, there are a broader set of relations: the practices and arrangements which constitute the *social worlds* in which organisations operate. A host of other collectives and constituencies, internal and external to organisations, enable managers to exercise power over determining strategy, and produce organisational and other outcomes. The ‘collective action’ of art worlds depicted by Howard Becker (1982) illustrates the interdependencies among the cooperative activity of artists, manufacturers, audiences, critics and collectors. Bureaucratic actors are only coherent and effective because of their interdependencies with an environment of practices and arrangements that supports their activity. Corporations need state-guaranteed markets which tend to count environmental costs as externalities, where legislation protects the viability and legitimacy of their enterprise, and where other corporate organisations cooperate and compete in a relatively stable, rule-abiding and predictable manner. There are relations of mutual dependency between many human, material and discursive components of the collective—which allow the *strategic* and *management* activity of managers and leaders to appear autonomous. In addition, practices and arrangements which constitute social worlds enable actors to exercise power.

To briefly summarise, bureaucratic organisations, despite resembling traditional conceptions of the ‘agentic actor’, can be seen as distinctive and closely-knit constellations of practices and arrangements which concern strategy, bureaucracy, management and are part of wider social worlds, which are explicable using social theoretical resources from practice theory, compatible theories with a ‘family resemblance’, or a mixture. For advocates of practice theory, there are no necessary claims of supra-practice phenomena that suggest a departure from the fundamental ontology. The general reader meanwhile will see little here of great controversy; yet the point, as seen below, is that bureaucratic organisations and their interactions are only part of any story of change alongside other types of collective and collective activity: groupings and latent networks.

## 4.2 | Groupings

The classical view of the ‘agentic actor’ (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) misses, or misattributes, much activity pertinent to sustainability transitions and other forms of large-scale social changes. *Groupings* are collectives which are not bureaucratic organisations but whose collective activity is relevant for change processes. They include subcultures, non-institutionalised social movements, elective communities and other groups that are not bureaucratic but which hold some collective identity. Lacking formal bureaucracy makes groupings somewhat inscrutable as actors. Yet while they do not by definition engage in management or have any formal bureaucracy, they share characteristics of bureaucratic organisations, holding relationships of interdependency characterised by the practices and arrangements of *social worlds*, and capable in certain circumstances (see section 4) of engaging in practices and arrangements of *strategy* in the pursuit of collective objectives.

Groupings, despite lacking *bureaucracy* and often lacking any interest in developing *strategy* either, produce or co-produce a great deal of significant outcomes in the social world, including musical genres, fashions, language, cultural-political attitudes, Olympic sports, horticultural development, and all manner of political demands. Yet groupings are absent from many prominent accounts of social change (e.g. Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Their activity is ignored, ascribed to particular individuals or practitioners, or the grouping is treated as a *bona fide* actor (and thus erroneously assumed to be a bureaucratic organisation with leaders). In Fligstein and

McAdam's (2012) excellent example of the civil rights movement, they discuss the significance of the mass mobilisation of black church-goers and black university students as key constituencies which joined the collective actor of the movement, the suggestion being that churches or students prior to this were either entities of the same sort – in their terms skilled social actors in strategic action fields, or were part of what they call 'unorganised social space' (5). Our argument is that neither formulation is convincing nor helps us make much sense of their roles and limitations. Examples of groupings which have significance in sustainability transitions might include looser-knit and less institutionalised social movements (e.g. the Camp for Climate Action group, the student movement), downshifters and some 'political consumers', and any group which is close in network terms to environmental movements or other relevant political constituencies. Groupings, then, have some key differences from bureaucratic organisations in terms of their combination of practices and arrangements that should inform analysis.

One set of such differences is the nature of practices and arrangements which hold groupings together and how these combinations affect their activity. Groupings are unlikely to pursue objectives in as sustained and predictable a manner as bureaucratic organisations because they lack professionalised roles ensuring this takes place. Yet in the absence of *bureaucracy*, general understandings and teleoaffective regimes may be particularly important for organising the practices of groupings around what remain loosely shared agendas (teleoaffective regimes are rendered invisible in bureaucratic organisations by their institutionalisation into agendas, goals, targets etc). Teleoaffective regimes may also help explain how different constituencies can align their different commitments, beliefs and values towards shared activity. Maeckelbergh (2009) describes how the various social movements engaged in the alter-globalisation struggles during the early 2000s held different cosmologies around end-directed activity, which meant that the collective action they took part in together had contradicting emphases. Groups she calls 'horizontals' emphasised general understandings such as the prefigurative political importance of how they organised, the diversity of their members and a pluralistic, expressive approach to action, whereas hierarchical leftist groups, who she calls 'verticals', tended to emphasise efficacy as the overriding concern. These conventions and commitments (e.g. that the way in which protest is organised is also important politically, or that political means are justified by ends, etcetera) can be understood as contrasting *general understandings*. In Maeckelbergh's example, factions were themselves composed of many movement organisations and floating activists with experience in particular protest practices (particularly around civil disobedience and direct action) but overlaps in these skills and their meanings also helped produce coherent protest. Coalition was possible insofar as the priorities of groups could be satisfactorily negotiated with shared skills and meanings and an overarching shared agenda – in practice terms a teleoaffective regime that aligned general understandings from each group towards shared plans, activity and desired outcomes. Similar negotiations exist in any significant forum or field, for example the large mobilisations held around the regular United Nations climate change COP conferences. The activity of subcultural groups or enthusiasts would be less instrumental still than these social movements, with teleoaffective regimes loosely held around innovation, authenticity and collective claims to recognition. These examples show the significance of general understandings and teleoaffective regimes in the absence of bureaucracy and management.

Groupings are thus held together with multiple practices and arrangements, many of which are engaged in the production and reproduction of *collective identity* (Melucci, 1996). In practice terminology, collective identity means members of groupings interact together over shared arrangements, practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures and general

understandings. Alberto Melucci (1996), though ignoring material arrangements, influentially depicted collective identity not as a characteristic of groups, but as a continually unfolding process.

*“Collective action... [is] an interactive process through which several individuals or groups define the meaning of their action and the field of opportunities and constraints for such an action...The process by which a collective identity is constructed, maintained, and adapted always has two sides to it: on the one hand, the inner complexity of an actor, its plurality of orientations; on the other, the actor's relationship with the environment.”* (1996: 67).

Melucci's account also emphasises shared (general) understandings of the means and ends of activity (p.70). These understandings may or may not be in tension with those of the rest of society, which generally either grants the collective a different kind of recognition, or denies its identity altogether (p.73–74). Melucci notes there is also emotional investment in collective identity, which he clarifies, is “not because they share the same interests, but because they need that bond in order to make sense of what they are doing” (p. 74). Teleology and affectivity (teleoaffective structures or regimes) are thus combined together in collective identity practices (Schatzki, 2002). Finally, Melucci also emphasises the significance of attributing the effects of a collective identity's action to itself as critical to the formation of a collective agency. This reverses the emphasis on deliberation preceding action in classical accounts of the collective actor. Collective identity overlaps considerably with the practices and arrangements of social worlds, the difference being that we use *social worlds* to refer not to *within-group* relations but to the relations and interactions *between* collectives.

Finally, groupings have characteristics in common with other kinds of collective. Forms of collective identity are also common in bureaucratic organisations (particularly across particular groups of workers in similar occupations/structural positions although rarely across the entire organisation). However the presence of collective identity practices distinguish groupings from the looser ‘latent networks’ of individuals whose practices, aggregated, are also socially significant for large-scale change (see below). Groupings, in turn, are also interdependent through the practices and arrangements of social worlds, similarly to bureaucratic organisations. They have effects both through their collective projects and through the unintended consequences of their activity (e.g. the innovation of practices or technology that can be used beyond the grouping).

### 4.3 | Dispersed collective activity and latent networks

Theories of practice have been generative for understanding the third kind of collective activity, qualitatively different from that of bureaucratic organisations and of groupings, which we refer to as dispersed collective activity. *Dispersed collective activity* refers to the ways in which the socially, spatially and temporally patterned character of practices and arrangements gives rise to aggregate effects, at which point often further collective and collective-making practices develop, leading to groupings or bureaucratic organisations (see section 4.4). The aggregate effects are not usually intended, and the individual practices whose aggregation leads to dispersed collective activity usually have their own specific meanings and motivations, e.g. getting to work, making a living, feeding a family. In other words the aggregated effects of the dispersed collective activity are distinct from the *telo*i (and their associated understandings) of the

constituent practices. Dispersed collective activity has salient environmental implications, such as “peak loads” in energy caused by aggregated activity (which drive the capacity requirements of the energy supply system) and poor air quality due to high levels of commuting practices (see Wilhite & Lutzenhiser, 1999).

Dispersed collective activity takes its socio-environmental significance from the *concentrations of the material, spatial and temporal* in performing practices – dynamics that should not be isolated from their socio-cultural meanings and significance. Peak loads, for example, are caused by temporally concentrated use of similar materially significant goods: the convergence of family schedules around arriving home from schools and workplaces to evening meals and entertainment; while rush hours are about the spatial, material and temporal concentration of workers driving their cars home on the same roads. One could not intervene in either of these environmentally significant issues without appreciating the socio-cultural significance of work, family, leisure time and eating together, which practice perspectives have often helped illustrate. Dispersed collective activity is both the consequence of everyday life (e.g., peaks of energy consumption caused by a conjunction of domestic practices during the evening) and formative of it (e.g., simultaneous travel causes rush hours which in turn help configure eating patterns and family relations), with institutions such as schools and workplaces particularly implicated in the configuration of temporal rhythms. Unacknowledged probably because there can be no claims for collective agency, the dynamics of dispersed collective activity should nevertheless form part of any serious theory of social change.

As well as acknowledging activity, it is also useful to acknowledge the virtual collectives composed by practitioners of dispersed collective activity, which we call *latent networks* (which develops and more explicitly delimits a term coined in Melucci, 1996). Latent networks, effectively infinite in number, refer to people that usually do not explicitly identify one another as co-members in any significant shared enterprise, yet are engaged in practices and arrangements which in aggregate have aggregated outcomes. The latent network is identified by the activity common to its members (which may or may not be reducible to a shared practice).

Latent networks, as noted above, hold particular significance in the context of studies of sustainable consumption, where the actions of millions of ‘consumers’ are, frequently yet controversially, held responsible for and identified as key to resolving, unsustainable patterns of resource consumption. Further useful examples regarding development and rising standards of living, with clear implications for sustainability, are raised by Asef Bayat’s (2010) work on social ‘non-movements’ and help illustrate the concept. Bayat describes how large numbers of rural migrants in Middle Eastern countries *encroach* illegally on urban space when vending goods and claim public land on the outskirts of cities for housing in the pursuit of improving their life chances. Cities change dramatically because of the aggregate effects of this ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’, in essence the temporally, materially and spatially concentrated practices of street vending and squatting land, which occasionally also leads to direct, collective conflicts with authorities, and which in turn may allow concrete gains such as the provision of water and utilities to new neighbourhoods (p. 46–55). It is also possible to show how existing accounts of collective action neglect or misattribute activity to actors, yet rely on some conception of dispersed collective activity. In Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012) case study of the transformation of the US mortgage market between 1969 and 2011, the mortgage market is presented as a field in which private and regulatory actors reconfigure in various ways what appears to be a steady demand for mortgages. Yet this story obscures the dynamics around escalating consumption permitted by the extension and successful marketing of credit which in turn required changing important cultural associations about debt, facilitated by predatory practices of loan and estate

agents. These dynamics are major contributors to the reconfiguration of this field and eventual global financial crisis, but they go almost entirely unremarked upon in the account. This may be because borrowers did what the banks wanted, in this case, but their consumption and borrowing activity is critical to the narrative, and the latent network of precarious homeowners who were evicted in a wave of foreclosures in 2009 and 2010 might have become a collective actor in changing the course of historical events. In Spain, people affected similarly became part of a powerful social movement, the Platform for those Affected by Mortgages (*La Pah*) which prevented tens of thousands of evictions and has led to major shifts in city and regional governance around housing since (see De Weerd & Garcia, 2015). Thus latent networks are also significant because of the possibility that collectives (groupings or bureaucratic organisations) may arise out of their dispersed collective activity. These shifts are precipitated by further mechanisms and sets of practices, for example *representation* or mutual *recognition* of the aggregated effects of practices, processes of formation which we discuss in the following section.

#### 4.4 | Dispersed collective activity and the formation of collectives

This final section discusses the practices and arrangements through which different types of collective are formed.

Dispersed collective activity has direct consequences for sustainability, as much of the practice theoretical literature on sustainable consumption has illustrated (see Welch & Warde, 2015). Yet equally significant for our purposes is the capacity for the latent networks undertaking dispersed collective activity to morph into other types of collective: groupings or even occasionally bureaucratic organisations. Such collectives often arise in relation to specific practices, whether as collectives *representing* practitioners—for example, the emergence of groupings and organisations representing certain types of consumer is commonplace, e.g. groups representing motorists, or vegetarians—or collectives of those *affected* by specific practices, such as citizens protesting the effects of heavy traffic in urban areas.

These shifts between types of collective take place through the development of specific practices and arrangements which enable their formation, which again can be identified for improving understanding of transitions. We identify practices and arrangements around *recognition*, *common opportunities or threats* and *representation*. In the case of latent networks becoming groupings or bureaucratic organisations this often happens precisely through *recognition* of the outcomes of the practices that link them by another collective, which engages them or targets them with claim-making, presenting them with perceived or framed *common opportunities or threats*. Many of these mechanisms are the practices which underpin homophily, the tendency for similar people to associate, which is widely recognised as predisposing people with things in common or who belong to similar positions in social space to act together (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987). Trentmann (2012) presents a useful example. Changing cultural conventions of cleanliness in Victorian England led to the collective contestation of water charges. Previously, water companies had charged households with baths an additional rate to that of standard domestic use. The increase of bathing in domestic settings and normalisation of the practice meant that ‘such premium charges started to look atavistic, a barrier to public morality, cleanliness and a civilised lifestyle’ (p. 542). Cultural change presented a perceived or framed *common opportunity* to bath users, who in Sheffield formed a Bath Defence Association and organised a consumer boycott. Asef Bayat (2010) also explains how subtle processes of communication that entail *recognition* of the collective character of dispersed activity exist among people with common predicaments or vulnerabilities (e.g. women disregarding dress codes, illegal street vendors) sometimes

lead to collective solidarity and action when they come under the perceived *common threat* of a police raid or government crackdown. These examples show how latent networks based on shared practices and arrangements which concentrate the material, spatial or temporal are transformed through combinations of practices and arrangements we have called *recognition* and *common opportunities or threats* into groupings or bureaucratic organisations. Either of these has the capacity to coordinate around goals or projects in ways that augment latent networks' capacity to change outcomes.

*Representation*, finally, is also commonly critical in the formation and reproduction of collectives, in a number of senses. It is commonly, although not exclusively, through processes of representation that collectives enact the deliberative capacity that is taken to be the defining characteristic of collective actors in classical social scientific accounts (see Hindess, 1990). *Representation* therefore plays a critical role in processes whereby collectives achieve the legitimisation as collective actors in the public or political sphere (Bourdieu, 1987). Social movement studies similarly argues that the *representation* of a constituency is often a precondition for allowing them a voice or role in established fields (e.g. Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; McDonald, 2010). There is also, finally, a sense in which the investment of authoritative capacities in representation plays a performative, metonymic, role in the enactment of collective identity internally to the collective (e.g. for a Head of State to speak or act on behalf of a country, or a CEO of a corporation) (Coulter, 2001).

## 5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This contribution aims to develop social theoretical resources for shedding light on large scale socio-technical change, in particular transitions towards sustainability. It describes a set of blind spots between theories of practice and other theories of action. Accounts using theories of practice downplay the projects and purposes towards which practices are oriented, and the significance of this purposive collective action, in part due to insufficient social theoretical development of a relatively sparse social ontology. Practice theory has been particularly good however at acknowledging and accounting for what we have called dispersed collective activity, which has effects that go undocumented by traditional social scientific approaches. Dominant, collective actor-oriented social science downplays such activity, as well as effects that arise from the non-purposive activity of collectives, tending to see society as a matter of interaction among a small number of powerful strategic actors competing over resources. We have argued that this bias towards the agentic (collective) actor (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) obscures alternative kinds of collective activity, systematically misattributes many social outcomes to organised collective actors, and ignores the recursive relationships between collective agency and everyday routines, including those which, crucially for understandings sustainability transitions, perpetuate and reproduce patterns of consumption.

Social change—from creeping incremental shifts and endogenous evolution in conventions and practices, to dramatic social, economic and political conflicts, upheavals and interventions—is poorly understood without an approach which is sensitive to the dynamics of *both* types of approach. Practice theoretical work on socio-technical change needs to acknowledge collective agency and strategic action, without ascribing them a necessarily privileged causal role. Understandings of social change should be receptive to practices of multiple types of collective, keeping open the question of the ontological status of the collective actor (Tilly, 2004; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Allied to the development here of the concepts of general understandings and

teleoaffective regimes (see also Welch, 2017; Welch & Warde, 2017), we have articulated distinctions between ideal types of collective – bureaucratic organisations, groupings, and latent networks – and the practices and arrangements that distinguish them and allow one type of collective to morph into another. Practice accounts should aim to identify these practices and arrangements around the various processes we have discussed that form collectives and enable collective activity of different kinds: *recognition, common opportunities and threats, representation, collective identity, bureaucracy, strategy, social worlds and concentrations of the material, spatial and temporal in performing practices*. We would advocate further analysis that explores social change processes that acknowledge these distinct types of collective and collective activity, and further develops our understanding of the practices and arrangements composing them and their activity.

Finally, we want to stress the importance of the articulation between collective activity and the everyday performances of practices for the further development of the agenda. In order to develop a practice theoretical understanding of sustainability transitions further work is needed to address the recursive relationship between collective agency and the everyday performances of practices which produce patterns of consumption. Only through a proper recognition of the role of collective activity can we understand the sedimentation of social struggles into everyday life, and everyday life as the setting for processes that give rise to social struggles. Empirical examples from social movements studies offer much evidence of how different types of collective arise from daily life and practices: from grievances based in interpersonal interactions, such as women's and civil rights movements, to the networks of non-activists who are mobilised en masse during periods of high intensity struggle. Social movement projects are also often oriented around everyday life (Yates, 2015). Conversely, the outcomes of periods of contentious action become embedded in the daily practices of social institutions and are visible even in the most intimate relations of daily life. Kaufmann (1998) for example, chronicles the negotiation of domestic work between couples and organisation of households in the light of the social changes wrought by feminism and shifting employment patterns. More can be done in weaving together these accounts of change across different scales of activity.

In this paper we have sought primarily to clear the ground and untangle common theoretical confusions concerning the applicability of practice theory to accounts of collective activity, and the potential contribution of practice theory to analyses of large scale socio-technical change. We have both offered some original conceptual development and have sought to highlight and bring into dialogue a range of existing resources ontologically compatible with practice theory. Restrictions of space have not allowed us to elucidate our approach through extended examples, a limitation we recognise. The analytical advantages of this project for understanding sustainability transitions will only be fully demonstrated through empirical research deploying the tools suggested.

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