

Social practice theory as a more-than-human design perspective

Summary

In this activity, you will be introduced to social practice theory and how to apply this as an analytical lens to understand the dynamic nature of everyday life. Social practice theories represent a particular way of understanding culture, society, everyday life, and material/resource consumption.

Framing social practice as a unit of analysis allows us to recognise the relational configurations of practices that include nonhuman entities, materials and performers of these practices. We further introduce how social practices can be framed as our unit for design.

Learning outcomes

After the teaching activity students should be able to:

- Identify everyday practice elements as configurations of meaning, material and competencies.
- Reflect on the environmental impacts and the roles of nonhuman elements shaped by social practice.
- Identify potential design ideas that may trigger reconfigurations of practice, focusing on a holistic understanding of meaning, material, and competencies.

Outline/Content

- 1st lecture part
 - Social practice theory
 - Elements of practice
 - Practice as a unit of analysis
 - Practice and more-than-human
- 1st exercise
- 2nd lecture part
 - Design as change
 - Practice as a unit of design
 - Design triggers
- 2nd exercise

Key readings

Chapter 1 & 2: Shove, E., Watson, M., & Pantzar, M. (2012). The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes. Sage Publishing.

Kuijer, L., De Jong, A., & Van Eijk, D. (2013). Practices as a unit of design. ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, 20(4), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2493382>

Changes in resource consumption over time

Global freshwater use over the long-run

Our World
in Data

Global freshwater withdrawals for agriculture, industry and domestic uses since 1900, measured in cubic metres (m³) per year.

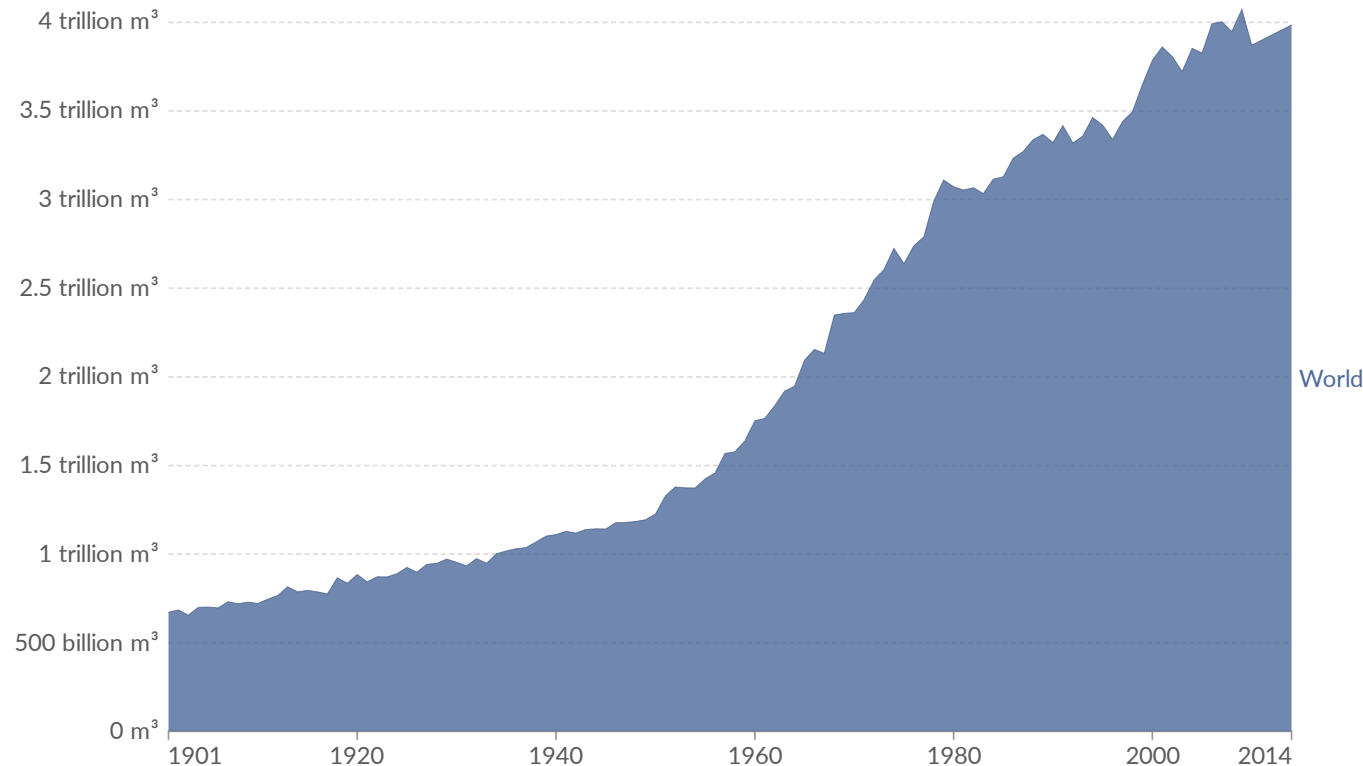


Image and data by
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<https://ourworldindata.org/water-use-stress>

Data source: Global International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGB)

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... How can we understand this change over time and how it shapes resource consumption?

Practice as a unit of analysis

Why social practice theory?

DECENTERING THE HUMAN....

- By embedding non-human elements into the analysis of practices, social practice theory inherently de-centers the human, offering a more holistic understanding of social phenomena.
- This perspective is particularly valuable for addressing complex, environmental, multi-species, and ecological challenges.
- Social practice theory de-centers the human by shifting the focus from individual actors to everyday practices (showering, cleaning, cooking, etc.). This framework inherently incorporates non-human elements, recognising their active role in shaping social practices.

Social Organisation

.... different forms of explaining action, social order, and changes in our society

Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing
(Reckwitz, 2002)

Theory of Social Practices

.... represents a particular way of understanding society and everyday life: a way that takes **practices** as the **fundamental** and **smallest** unit of social analysis

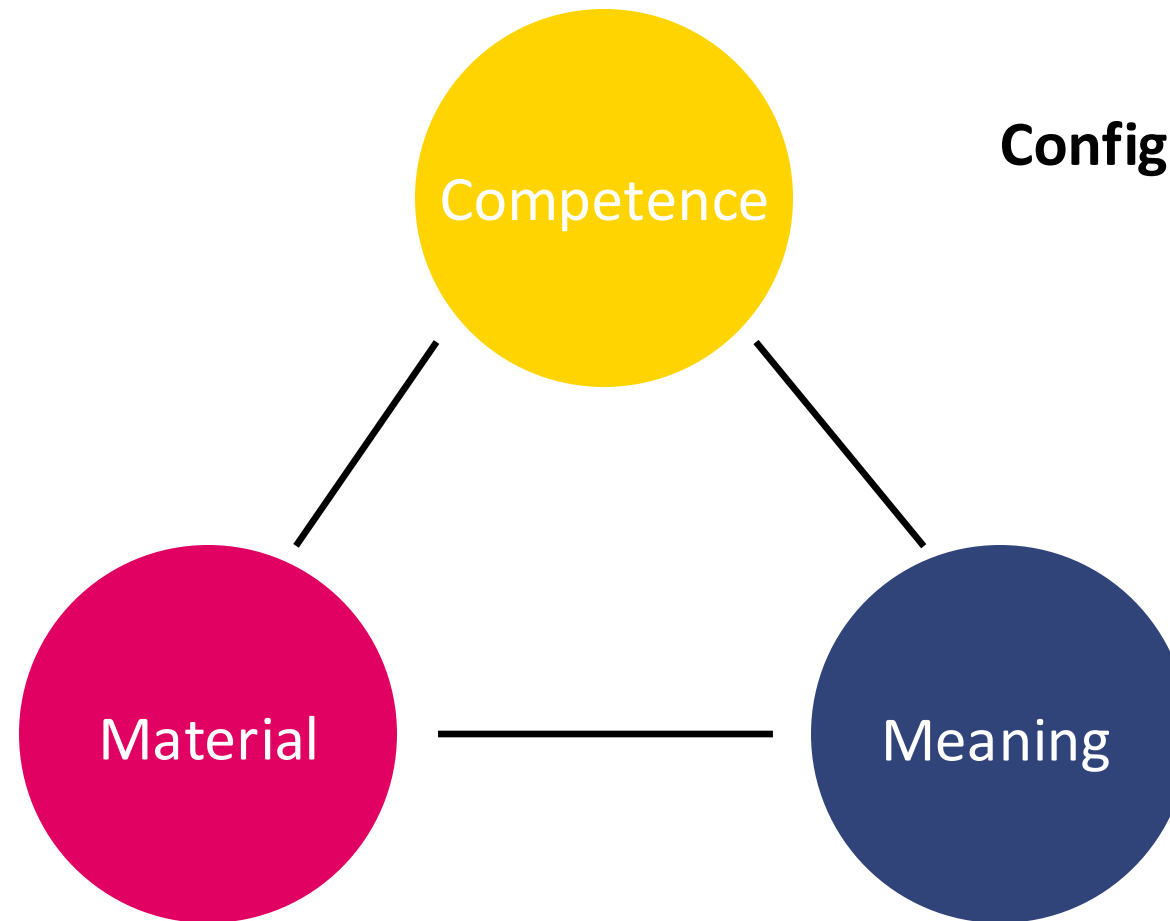
Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development
in Culturalist Theorizing (Reckwitz, 2002)

What is practice?

“a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several **elements**,
interconnected to one other:

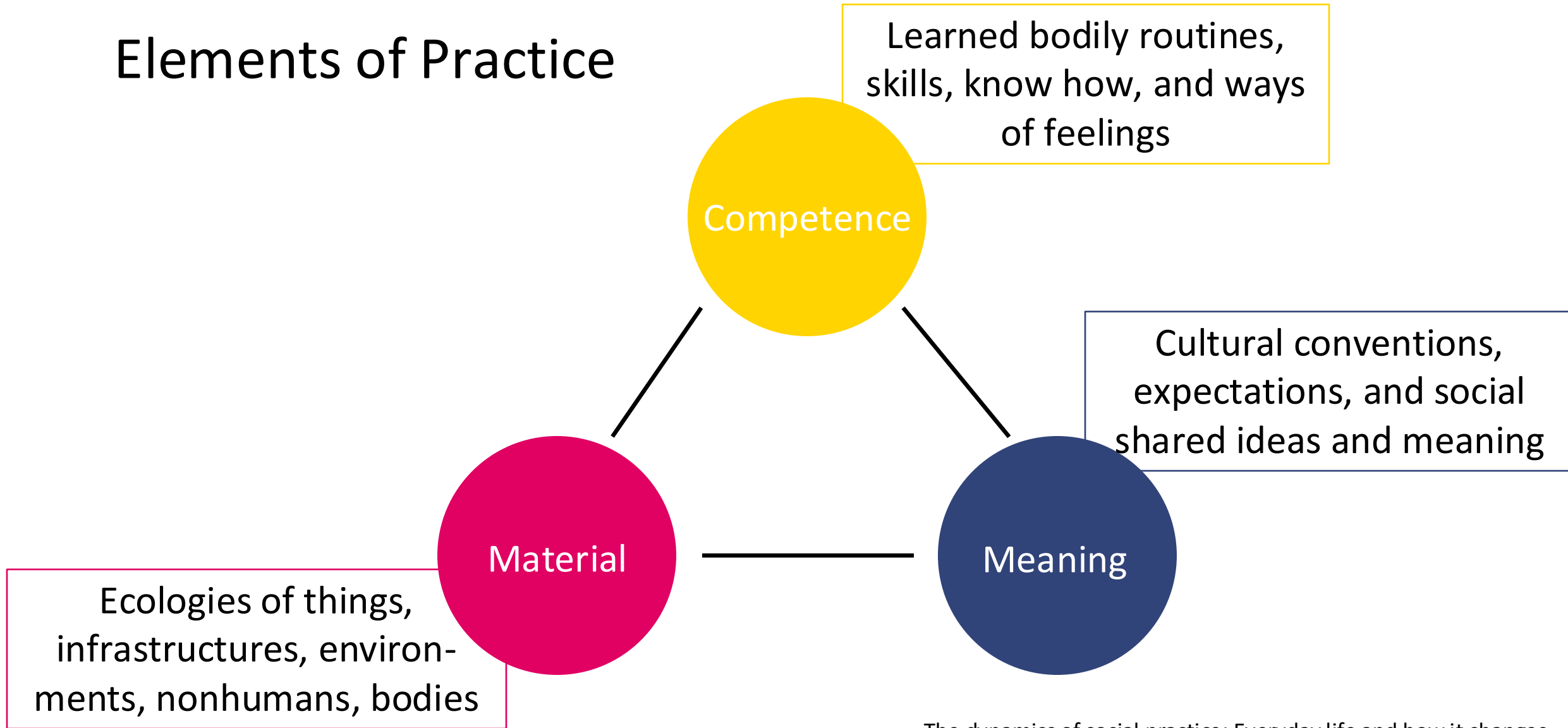
forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”

Elements of Practice



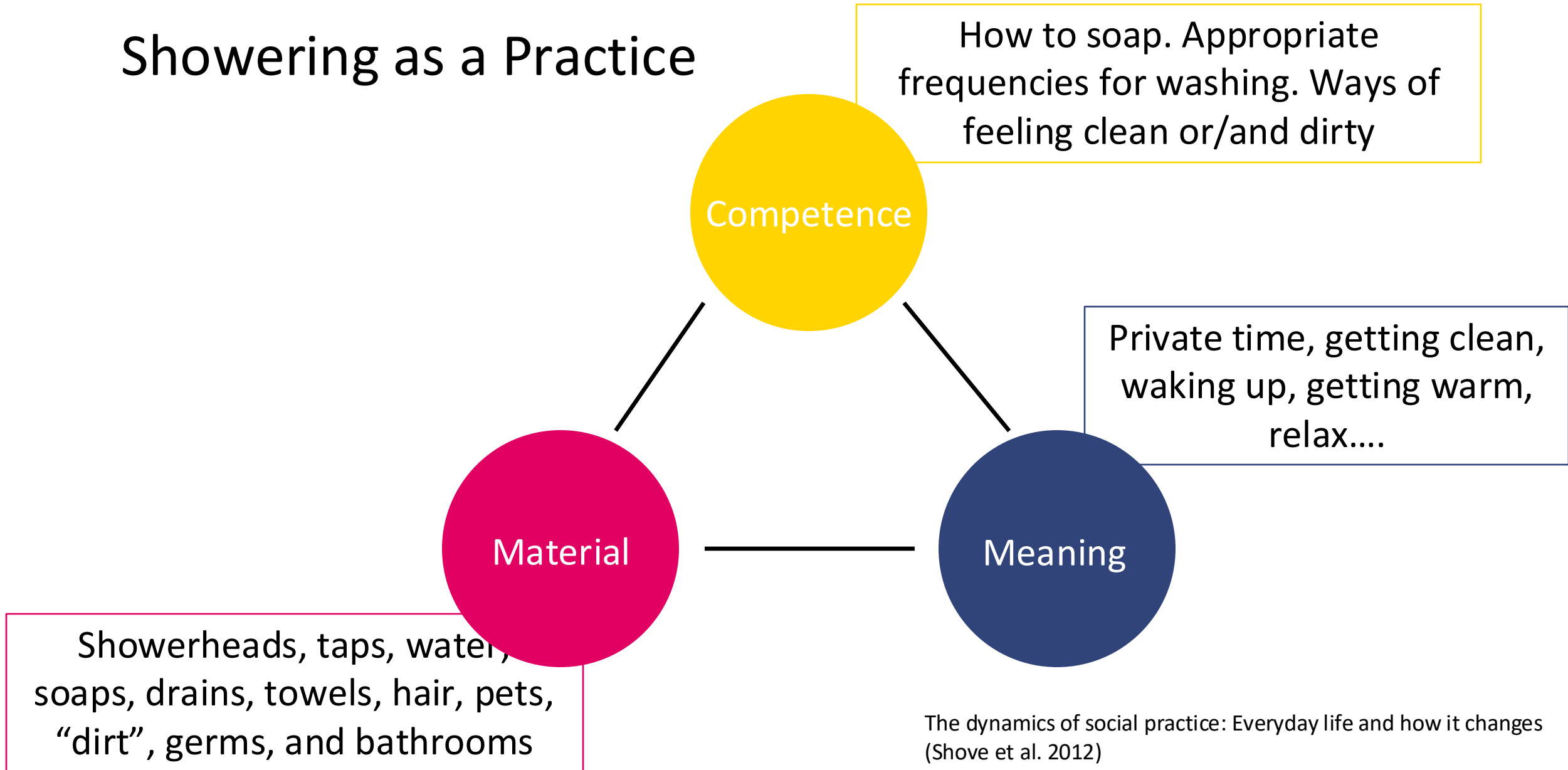
Configurations of elements

Elements of Practice



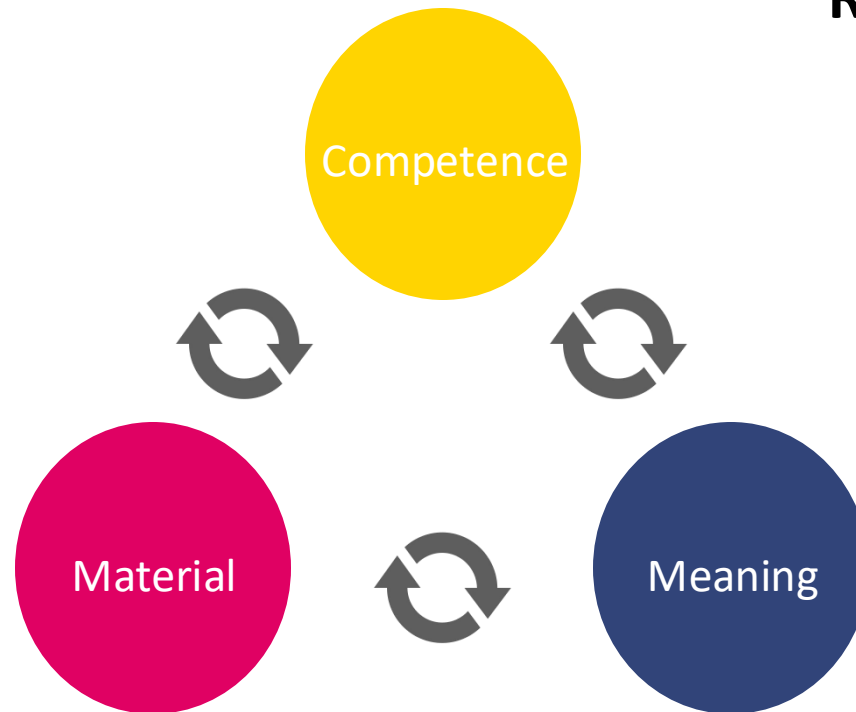
The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes
(Shove et al. 2012)

Showering as a Practice

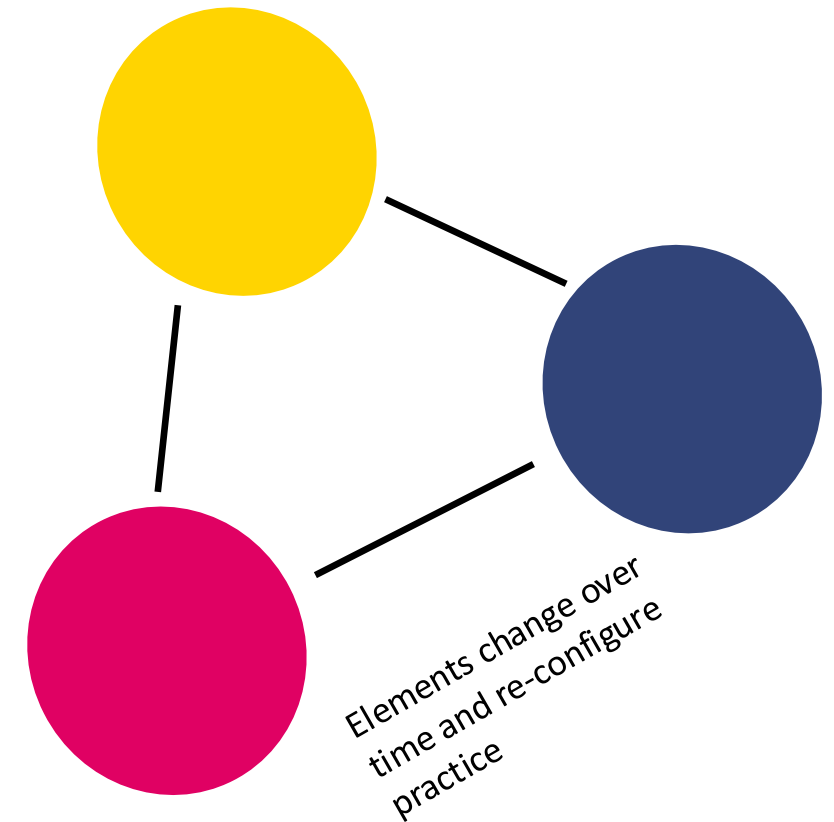
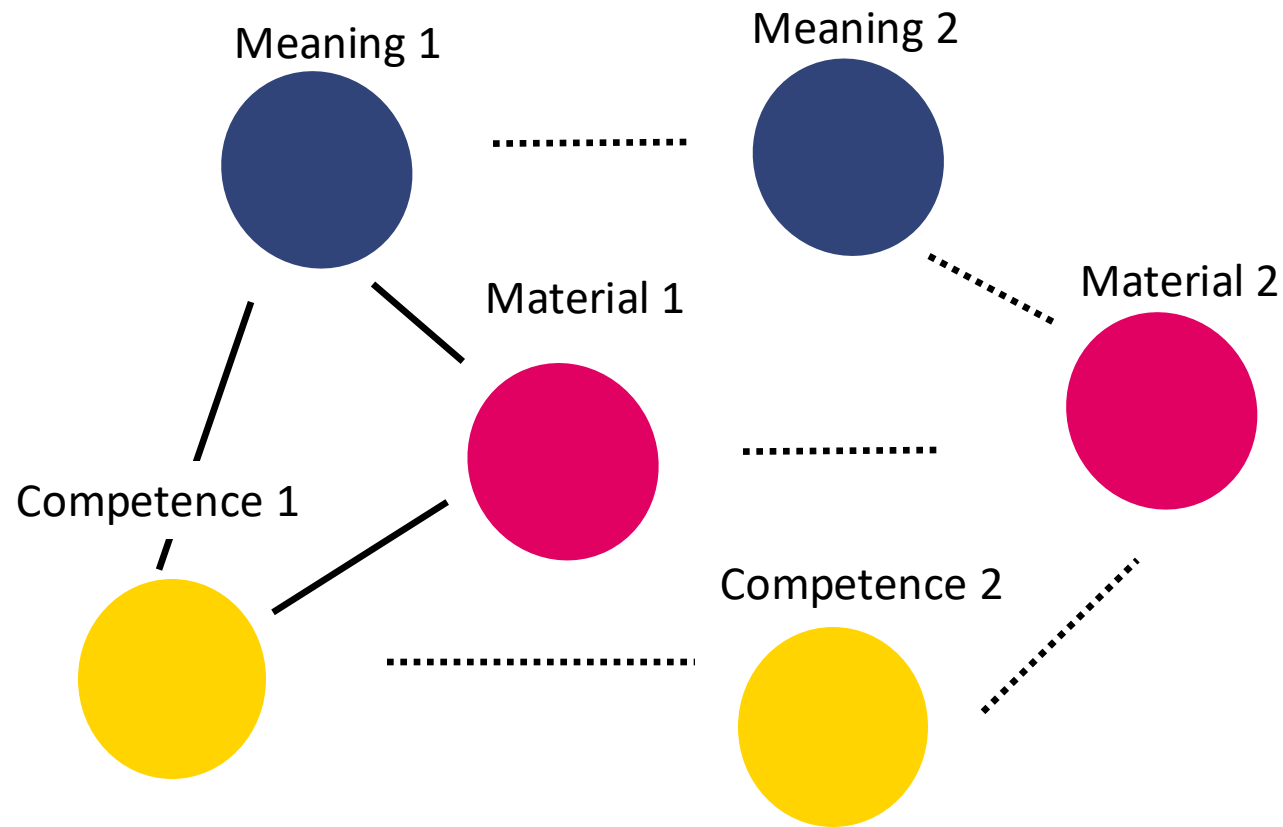


How practices change: Elements shape each other

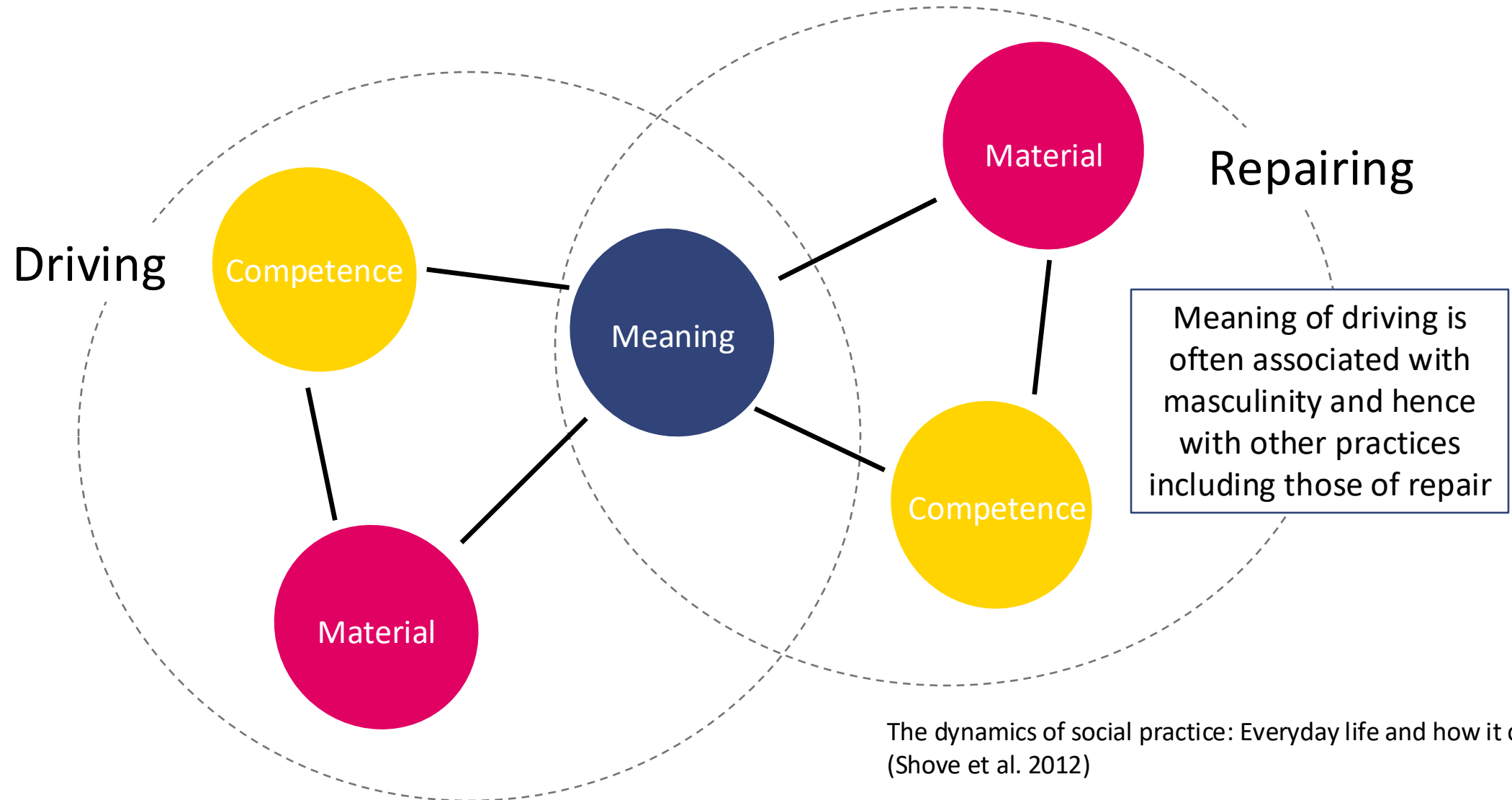
Re-configurations of elements



How practices change: Elements change over time



How practices change: Elements between practices



Practice as a unit of analysis

1. A single individual - as a bodily or mental agent - acts as a carrier or **performer** of a practice
2. This individual is a carrier of **patterns** of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routinised ways of understanding, knowing how, and desiring.
3. **Social** conventionalised "mental" activities of understanding, knowing how, and desiring are necessary elements and **qualities of a practice** in which the single individual participates, and **not qualities of the individual**.

Practice and more-than-human

Material Elements:

Social practice theory includes non-human material elements (e.g., tools, technologies, natural resources) as integral to practices, shaping how routines are performed.

For instance, water availability affects showering practices, entangling natural resources directly with human actions.

Co-performance: Conceptualizing the role of artificial agency in the design of everyday life (Kuijer & Giaccardi, 2018)

Performers and Co-Performers:

More-than-human entities, like animals, machines, and AI, act as performers or co-performers of social practices, participating actively rather than serving as passive backdrops.

In the home, for example, smart thermostats perform the practice of heating, illustrating shared performances between humans and non-humans in shaping routines and consumption outcomes.

Roombas and Roomba Riders



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLt5rBfNucc>

Roombas, the popular robotic vacuum cleaners, have become integral to domestic cleaning practices with their intelligent navigation and automatic dirt detection. As both material elements and performers in cleaning practices, they autonomously sweep up dust, pet hairs, and other “domestic dirt”, making them a desirable “thing” in many households. Beyond their practical function, Roombas have become famous for another role: entertaining pets, especially cats.

Some cats, famously dubbed “Roomba Riders,” sit atop these robots as they roam around, creating a playful mix of technology and pet entertainment. Here, cats and Roombas co-perform an unlikely routine—while Roombas clean floors, the cats “ride” along, adding a quirky, entertaining layer to the technology’s domestic role. This unintended interaction highlights the adaptability of household technologies, merging meanings of cleanliness with enjoyment as they integrate with the home’s living, more-than-human environment.

Robots and Roomba riders: non-human performers in theories of social practice (Strengers 2019).

Roombas and Roomba Riders



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLt5rBfNucc>

However, the sustainable impacts of desirable smart-home technology like Roombas reveal complex, sometimes unsustainable outcomes. While desired because of their eco-friendliness and energy efficiency, these devices often contribute to an overall increase in household energy use due to the convenience and comfort they offer, encouraging, e.g., more frequent use. For instance, Roombas and similar automated devices require consistent charging, depending on usage; pet entertainment may create demand for constant connectivity or further automation in the home, leading to a larger environmental footprint.

Designing the desirable smart home: A study of household experiences and energy consumption impacts (Jensen et al., 2019).

Group Work 1

1: Describe

Choose a practice from your everyday life that you are familiar with.

Describe the chosen practice based on the three elements: materials, meaning, and competencies.

Feel free to draw a picture if it helps you.

2: Reflect

Reflect on the resource consumption associated with this practice.

Reflect on the more-than-human elements and/or performers involved in this practice.

3: Design

Consider what changes would be required in the three elements—materials, meaning, and competencies—to make it both meaningful and sustainable.

Feel free to draw a picture of a future situation where and how this new practice may be performed.

... However, making practice as a unit of analysis does not in itself lead to interaction design ideas or change...

... How can we then design for change?

Practice as a unit of design

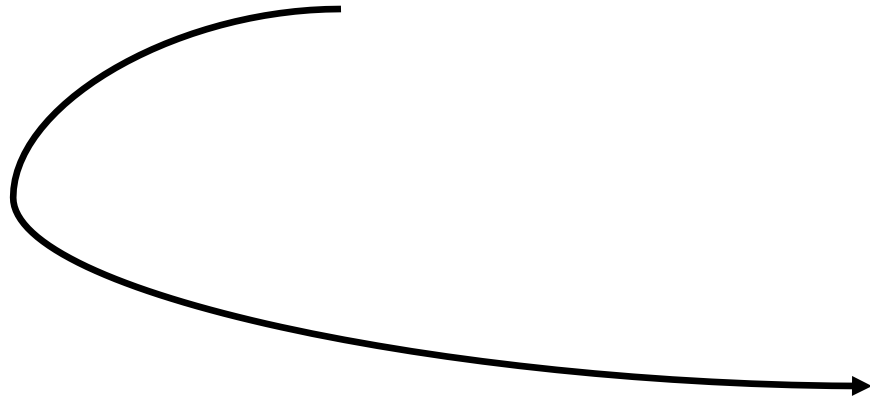
Practice as a unit of design

“In practice-oriented design, the unit of design expands from things to include meanings and competences, but not without consideration of how these fit together.”

Practices as a unit of analysis



Opportunities for meaningful
and desirable change

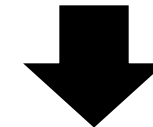


Practices as a unit of design

Suggest a trigger

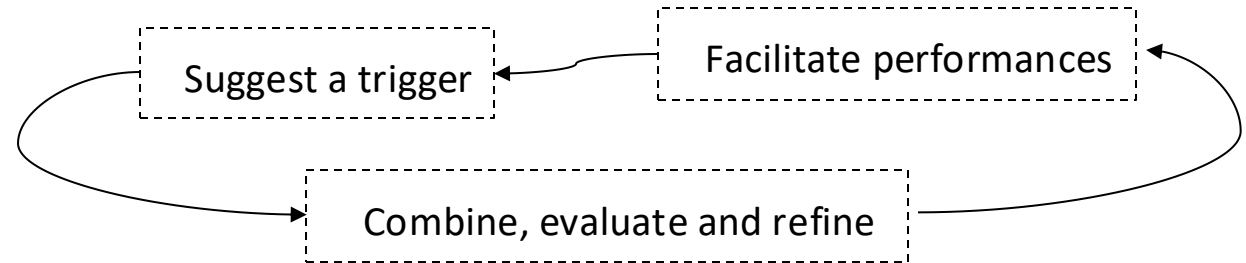
Facilitate performances

Combine, evaluate and refine



Reconfigurations that work

Design as triggers



A design trigger:

- Is not itself “thought to be a ‘sustainable innovation’ or a ‘**solution**’ to achieve reduced” consumption, but seen as triggers for playing out different practice configurations
- Can explore what types of **uses** would emerge and how these may fit in or conflict with **existing** practices
- Can trigger a variety of bodily responses and the **evaluative reflections** they evoke.

An example: laundry as a practice

How do we use renewable energy to do laundry?
What time of day should we wash, then?
How do we change routines?

Competence

Meaning

Material

Digital energy information
Smart plugs
Artificial intelligence

Something we do together
Fun to do laundry
How often do we need to change
clothes now that it's being
washed with "green" energy?

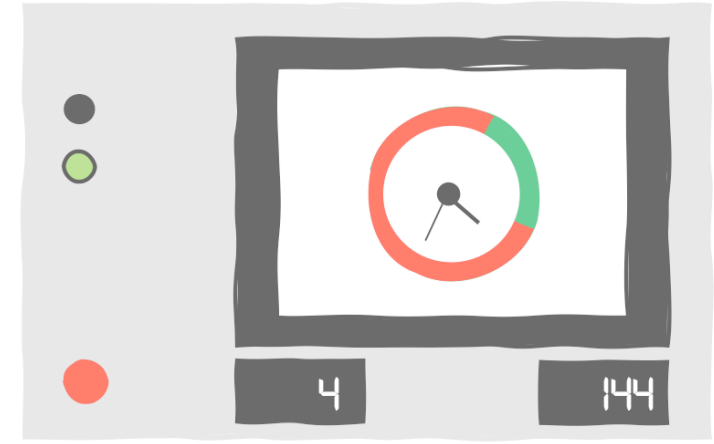


Image by Rikke Hagensby Jensen

Group Work 2

1: Describe

Return to the practice you described earlier.

How can design play a role in triggering more meaningful and sustainable future performances of this practice?

Consider all three elements — materials, meaning, and competencies

Feel free to draw a picture if it helps you.

2: Reflect

Reflect on both sustainable and unsustainable outcomes associated with this future practice.

Reflect on the more-than-human elements and/or performers involved in this practice.

3: Design

Sketch how such a design trigger could materialise in a situated context and how practices in this context could be (co-)performed.

Feel free to draw a picture of a situation where and how this trigger may shape the performance of this practice.

References

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<https://mova.uni.mau.se/>



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