

## **Report from the Sustainable Practices Research Group Summer School – Rebecca Collins**

I arrived at the Sustainable Practices Research Group Summer School after a string of summer conferences and workshops, most of which, while useful and stimulating in parts, rarely offered the opportunity for much interaction beyond the standard paper-and-a-few-questions format. It's fair to say that, as a result, I was experiencing major conference fatigue. After the three days of the SPRG Summer School I was no less mentally exhausted but, importantly, I had regained a sense of excitement and clarity about my research project and I felt reconnected with the experience of working at the intersection of business, policy and research that had motivated me to pursue my PhD research in the first place. This rejuvenating effect was, in large part, down to the diverse and highly interactive programme and an enthusiastic and engaged group of participants. But there were also some key moments that connected with my personal preoccupations and these have left me with considerable food for thought.

The first of these moments – my (still evolving) response to the papers presented by Alan Warde and Ted Schatzki on the application of practice theory to sustainable modes of living – spoke directly to my personal perceptions of practice theory and related conceptual ideas that have emerged in the course of my project. Alan spoke about the role of internalised values, cultured capacities, repertoires of action, and habit in the formation and perpetuation of practices, highlighting the relatively scant attention paid within practice theory to how practices are learned – what I recently heard described as “the missing concept of socialisation” in practice theory. This is a notable conceptual gap and an idea I am exploring in my PhD research into how adolescents come to participate in particular forms of keeping and ridding of material items within households. In the course of my research my sense has been that a revised and extended notion of habitus might constitute a useful conceptual bridge and, in light of Alan's comments on the potential to bring habitus into dialogue with current practice theories, this is a theoretical line I remain keen to develop. Concluding his paper, Ted described practice theory as a tool for understanding the social world that will necessarily evolve as further understanding allows us to add nuance to existing theorisations. Having pondered for some time as to where the conceptual slant of my research might ‘fit’ or best contribute to debates around sustainability and practice, the potential to address “the missing concept of socialisation” and thus in a small way refine extant understandings of practice has contributed to my feeling a growing sense of validation as I develop my thinking.

The second valuable experience gained in the course of the summer school was the chance to reconnect with the business and policy domains. Prior to graduate study I worked at the intersection of research, business and government and so the third day's activities – focused wholly on sustainability strategies and policies from business and government – provided an opportunity to reflect on how the experiences that motivated me to explore my interest in sustainability in the context of a PhD shaped the nature of my research, as well as how my research has (inadvertently) hardened my perspective on the actions of business and government, as well as the even greater challenge of feeding research into these domains. Having developed my interest in sustainability whilst situated in the research-business-government nexus, I find it hard to shake off my desire to engage in ‘useful’ research. Yet although the speakers from Defra, the Scottish Government and Tesco reported on interesting and, in many respects, encouraging developments in their respective fields, I remain sceptical about the willingness of business and government leaders to act on the findings of the research they fund in ways that could potentially create wide-ranging positive impacts for sustainability.

My final ‘take-away’ from the summer school is perhaps more of a personal development point than anything specifically to do with sustainability and practice, but the exercise that generated it was sufficiently innovative, useful and enjoyable that it deserves a mention. The first interactive project on day one of the summer school asked participants to design a research project on sustainable water use. In groups we were given the task of setting research questions, devising a feasible

methodology and budgeting appropriately. It may have been a simplified version of the research proposal process but, as a PhD student aspiring to a research career, it offered a valuable insight into an aspect of academic work which postgraduates infrequently gain experience of. My first grant application will be a marginally less intimidating prospect as a result. Additionally, the fact that we were given only an hour to produce the proposal also served to demonstrate just what can be achieved in that time. (I attempted to apply the same principle to this short report and I'm sorry to say I failed miserably.)

I arrived at the Sustainable Practices Research Group Summer School rather jaded, distinctly unsure whether practice offered the right theoretical lens for my research and, in turn, whether my research would be capable of contributing anything novel to the field of sustainable practices. It's fair to say that I left it pretty exhausted but feeling a renewed enthusiasm for my research – very helpful at the start of the third year of a PhD! – and with a little more clarity, if not certainty, about what practice and I can do for one another. I very much look forward to the second summer school.

Rebecca Collins

PhD student, Department of Geography, University College London