Chapter 7: Sustainable consumption

Overview
In this chapter, you will learn about social science approaches to issues of sustainable consumption and the extent to which consumer behaviour is a central component of society-nature relations. You will also learn more about how consumer behaviour is socially structured and why consumption patterns often take on unsustainable forms. It will become clear that consumption is more than the fulfilment of needs and that there are limitations on the extent to which individuals can make free decisions regarding their consumer behaviour and the associated socio-ecological consequences.

Consumption is an integral part of the structure of modern societies and therefore also of everyday life. Accordingly, modern societies are repeatedly referred to as consumer societies (Trentmann 2016), which emphasises the importance of consumptive activities in these societies. The most important characteristic of these consumer societies is the existence of a range of goods that aims to fulfil consumer desires that go far beyond the satisfaction of basic needs, with the result that the majority of the population consumes far more than their basic needs. The rise in real wages and leisure time, the expansion of the credit industry and the widespread implementation of mass production, which reduced the prices of consumer goods, were important drivers of the emergence of consumer societies in the late 19th and 20th centuries, which are characterised by a constantly growing demand for consumer goods (Trentmann 2016). The debate about "sustainable consumption" centres on the question of whether this development can continue. In this context, sociology makes important contributions to a comprehensive understanding of how certain consumption patterns come about and the related consumption of resources and production of emissions. We will outline these contributions below. We will first take a closer look at the concept of (sustainable) consumption, then explain the rational choice perspective, a conceptual approach to consumption that is relevant far beyond sociology. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical perspectives on consumption as a distinctive, symbolic act, and finally we present a practice theories perspective on consumption that has become increasingly prominent over the recent years.

1. What is (sustainable) consumption?

Despite the undisputed great social significance of consumption as a social phenomenon, in general this topic has always been marginalised in sociology as the discipline has tended to focus on the theorisation and empirical analysis of social institutions such as the economy and production, the state and politics, as well as family, education, and culture (Buttel et al. 2002: 20). There is no independent theoretical tradition in sociology focused on consumption (Shove & Warde 2002: 230). Nevertheless, the fact that the way societies and social groups consume has different and sometimes considerable ecological consequences has always been and still is a central part of environmental sociology (Buttel et al. 2002: 19f.). An examination of this topic is essential for a deeper understanding of the relation-

ship between society and nature, not least because of the considerable ecological consequences of consumption.

The term consumption initially appears to require little explanation, as it is also used in everyday language (at least to some extent). In common parlance it usually refers to the purchase and sometimes also to the use of goods and services. In academia the term consumption is often not precisely defined, which results in a somewhat arbitrary use of the term (Evans 2018). The existing attempts to define consumption agree that it is a process that comprises different phases (Campbell 1995b; Warde 2005; Evans 2018). Accordingly, consumption does not consist of a single action, but of a sequence of different actions that take place over time. The starting point of the actual consumption process is the formation of a need or want. This means that the desire for a certain good or service arises among consumers – sometimes deliberately induced by advertising. This emergence of a need is followed by the selection of a corresponding good or service. The focus here is on information-seeking and decision-making activities with regard to the model, design, brand, price, etc., which can be motivated by different needs. When searching for information, however, consumers are usually unable to gain a comprehensive overview of the various product features, as certain characteristics can only be determined on the basis of experience (so-called "experience qualities" such as durability or follow-up costs) or can only be assessed on the basis of expert knowledge (so-called "credence" such as environmental compatibility or the hazardousness of certain ingredients) (Darby & Karni 1973). Once the search for information has been completed with varying degrees of effort and a decision has been made in favour of a particular product, the purchase or procurement phase follows. This phase comprises the various ways in which consumers access the relevant good or service (e.g., buying in a department store, ordering from the internet, borrowing from friends, paying in cash or via credit card, etc.). In the utilisation phase, consumers integrate the relevant good or service into their everyday lives, using and consuming it. The word consumption originates from the Latin verb *consumere* (to consume), which is reflected in the concept of consumption. The final phase of the consumption process is disposal. This phase comprises the various activities involved in disposing of the corresponding good or discontinuing the use of a particular service. With regard to goods, however, this does not necessarily mean that they have to be used up, inedible, damaged, worn out or broken, as a large number of goods are disposed of without this being necessary (Evans 2018).

Figure 9 shows the individual phases of the consumption process in chronological order.
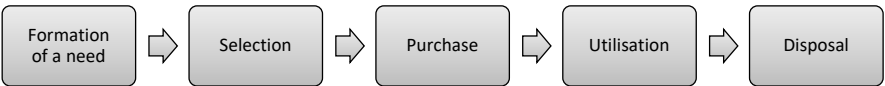

Figure 9: Phases of the consumption process; source: own illustration

It is obvious that the type of goods and services that people consume, as well as the way in which they are consumed and disposed of, have socio-ecological consequences. However, an understanding of the (unintended) consequences of consumption has been slow to emerge. Although the term sustainability – or more precisely the verb "to sustain" – was coined by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in his book on forestry "Sylvicultura oeconomica" as early as 1713 (Grober 2012), it would take over two hundred years for the scientific community and, as a result, the public to take up the term again. In 1972, a study entitled "The Limits to Growth" was published by the Club of Rome, an international association of scientists from a wide range of disciplines. In this study, the authors drew an extremely bleak picture of the future of the Earth based on computer simulations that revealed what would happen if humanity did not begin to live and do business more sustainably. The study attracted a great deal of attention worldwide, not least because of its gloomy forecast for the future. The report "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which was set up by the United Nations in 1983, was particularly influential for the political understanding of the concept of sustainability. The report is also known as the Brundtland Report, because at that time the commission was chaired by then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. It defined the concept of sustainable development as follows: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations 1987: 41). This definition refers to the necessity of fulfilling (intergenerational) needs, which connects sustainable development to the topic of consumption as a means of satisfying needs. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, sustainable development was established as a normative guiding principle of the international community. As a result, political decision-makers became increasingly aware of the need to reorient consumption towards sustainability and this thinking gradually found its way into political and public debates (for a detailed history of the concept of sustainability and the development of the term, see Grober 2012). Current debates about food waste, microplastics in the oceans, fair trade and the degree to which private households contribute to global CO_2 and polluting emissions are just some examples of the many ways in which the socio-ecological consequences of consumption in modern societies are publicly problematised. Based on the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainability, sustainable consumption can be defined as a form of consumption in which goods are acquired, used and disposed of in such a fashion that all humans, now and in the future, are able to satisfy their (basic) needs and that their desire for a good life can be fulfilled (Defila et al. 2012). It should be emphasised here that the socio-ecological effects of certain consumption activities do not necessarily have to correspond with individual intentions. In other words, individual consumption behaviour may well prove to be sustainable, even though this was not explicitly intended. Conversely, however, explicitly ecological intentions often also lead to negative socio-ecological consequences. For example, Stephanie Moser and Silke Kleinhückelkotten show in an empirical study that particularly environmentally conscious people actually have a larger carbon footprint than less environmentally

conscious people (Moser & Kleinhückelkotten 2018). This is mainly due to the fact that environmental awareness correlates positively with education, which in turn correlates positively with income. A higher income opens up more consumption opportunities, which usually has negative environmental consequences. This means that the potentially positive effect of people's intentions to act in an environmentally friendly way is counteracted by a negative effect caused by their income. Therefore, when analysing sustainable consumption, a distinction must be made between an impact-based and an intention-based perspective (Stern 2000). From an impact-based perspective, the investigation of the socio-ecological consequences of consumption patterns takes centre stage, while from an intention-based perspective, the focus of the investigation is on the social, cultural and psychological drivers of consumer behaviour. The combination of both perspectives then results in a comprehensive picture of consumer behaviour and its effects, which are influenced by conscious and unconscious mental dispositions (preferences, values, attitudes, etc.) and mediated by social and socio-technical structures (social situation, infrastructures, policies, institutions, etc.).

If we want to take a more differentiated look at consumer behaviour, we can first make a rough distinction between inconspicuous, everyday and non-everyday consumption. Although this distinction is not completely free of overlaps, it is nevertheless helpful for better understanding the drivers of certain consumer behaviour. The term inconspicuous consumption describes the largely unconscious and unnoticed consumption of resources in connection with certain actions (e.g., water consumption when showering). Everyday consumption refers to repetitive acts of consumption that are firmly anchored in everyday life (e.g., buying butter, watching TV or streaming a series). Finally, the term non-everyday consumption refers to more or less unusual acts of consumption that are not determined by routines (e.g., buying a car or house) (Gronow & Warde 2001; Evans 2018). As already mentioned, some acts of consumption are highly routinised and performed without major cognitive effort, while other acts of consumption involve a high degree of mental involvement. Accordingly, a further distinction can be made between high-involvement and low-involvement products and activities. High-involvement products and activities are characterised by the fact that they are strongly "charged" with personal and social meaning and therefore have greater significance for the definition of oneself (Belk 1995). For example, for most people, a car plays a greater role in the expression of their identity than the towels they own. However, the degree of involvement also depends on situational and individual factors such as personality traits, state of mind, disposable income or previous experiences and can change throughout the phases of the consumption process described above. Similarly, a consumer good and the associated consumption actions may move between the three categories of consumption (inconspicuous, everyday, non-everyday) during the consumption process. For example, the purchase of an electric car is a non-everyday act of consumption, while its use is categorised as everyday consumption and the energy consumption associated with its use is categorised as inconspicuous consumption. In terms of the purchase, an electric car can certainly be described as a high-involvement product, while its use is more likely to be a low-involvement activity characterised

by routines. There are also moments when routinised consumption activities are interrupted, reconsidered and reorganised, such as food consumption after the birth of children or mobility habits after moving house. These triggers for bio-graphically induced reflection and greater involvement in consumption behaviour and decisions are regarded as windows of opportunity in which more sustainable consumption options can be communicated and established (see, for example, Prillwitz et al. 2006; Schäfer et al. 2012).

2. People as rational decision-makers

In environmental policy, there is a prevailing assumption that environmentally friendly behaviour can be influenced by financial incentives. Explanations provided for (non-)sustainable consumption are thereby based on an idea of people as rational decision-makers. Human action is explained in terms of individual cost-benefit calculations, based on the assumption that people make decisions within the limitations of their personal context (available time, available money, perceived options for action, etc.) that they hope will deliver the greatest benefit. This means that people choose the option that promises them the greatest benefit or utility from a range of different options (Liebe & Preisendörfer 2010). Accordingly, environmentally friendly behaviour is not primarily based on environmental awareness but on rational cost-benefit calculations. In sociological variants of rational choice theory, utility is not necessarily defined purely in economic terms, but can also refer to saving time, increasing social recognition, securing one's social identity, etc. This is linked to an emphasis on the subjective perception and definition of what is considered a benefit. In sociological models of rational choice, benefits (and the corresponding probabilities of their occurrence) are therefore usually defined as subjectively perceived or expected utility (Liebe & Preisendörfer 2010). Furthermore, the rule of utility maximisation is partially limited as it is replaced it with the less strict rule of "satisficing" (Simon 1955). The assumption of complete rationality is relaxed in favour of the assumption of bounded rationality (Simon 1979). In other words, in complex decision-making situations people behave with only bounded rationality due to cognitive overload: The complexity of the situation exceeds the mental capabilities of the decision-makers to select the option that actually promises the greatest benefit. In addition, people have a certain level of expectation that regulates their additional search for information and thus the effort required to arrive at a decision that will maximise the benefits. Accordingly, when making decisions, people are often satisfied by choosing an option that is perceived as satisfactory without wanting to find the most beneficial option under any circumstances.

Following on from rational choice theory, Andreas Diekmann and Peter Preisendörfer introduced the low-cost hypothesis as an answer to the question of why environmental awareness is often not reflected in corresponding ecological behaviour (Diekmann & Preisendörfer 2003). According to the low-cost hypothesis, environmental awareness only translates into environmentally friendly behaviour if it is a low-cost situation. A low-cost situation exists when the costs of the less environmentally friendly alternative minus the costs of the environmen-

141

tally friendly alternative are negative, but close to zero, for as many people as possible (Diekmann & Preisendörfer 2003). Accordingly, environmentally friendly behaviour is usually only evident when it entails low costs in terms of money, time, effort or convenience. This may explain why people are more inclined to buy organic food and separate their waste than to do without a car or even just drive less. In perceived high-cost situations, such as not owning a car, subjective cost-benefit calculations such as the expected loss of comfort and flexibility, which in this case represent barriers to action, are more decisive than a person's environmental awareness. This leads to the conclusion that it is not appeals to environmental awareness or measures to increase environmental awareness that are decisive, but rather the reduction of barriers to action and costs in situations perceived as high cost.

The concept of people as decision-makers who are rational (albeit to a limited extent) and seek to maximise their own benefit has been criticised many times (Shove 2010). One of the main objections is that environmentally friendly behaviour cannot be fully understood as a rational choice, as behaviour is also shaped by lifestyles, worldviews, emotions, routines, cultural traditions, needs for distinction, embedding in socio-technical systems and household arrangements, etc. In addition, an empirical argument made against the low-cost hypothesis is that whether or not a person's attitude is translated into action depends on the strength of their attitude. Accordingly, environmentally friendly attitudes can also guide action in high-cost situations if they are so strong that they override cost-benefit calculations. The low-cost hypothesis would therefore be better described as a low-attitude hypothesis (Best & Kneip 2011).

All in all, rational choice theories have always proven useful in environmental research when it comes to analysing clearly defined decision-making situations with transparent cost structures. In contrast to this, the next section focuses on the symbolic dimension of consumption.

3. The symbolic dimension of consumption

Self-presentation and people's need for distinction are important when it comes to consumer behaviour. This is demonstrated in discussions about the symbolic functions fulfilled by consumer goods. Although the fulfilment of these functions can also be interpreted in part as generating utility for the individual, the symbolic functions of consumption go far beyond the assumption that people base their consumption behaviour on rational cost-benefit calculations. Instead, the underlying theories emphasise the socio-cultural shaping of individual actions and the embedding of those actions in contexts of social interaction and therefore do not focus on individual people as decision-makers. Consumer goods fulfil symbolic functions that are socially constructed and therefore not inherent to the goods, but rather have a socio-structural character (Goffman 1951). The symbolic value of goods is attributed to the goods in the context of social interaction processes and is based on a shared horizon of meaning (Slater 2008). This shared horizon of meaning enables people to deduce what symbolic value a consumer good has

for others on the basis of what value it has for them. Similarly, they can use this knowledge to predict what reactions a particular consumer good will most likely trigger in others (Mead 1972 [1934]: 117ff.).

In order for consumer goods to fulfil a symbolic function at all, they must meet two requirements: significance and visibility (Wiswede 2000). Significance describes the collectively shared attribution of meaning (Wiswede 2000: 40). This means that the symbolic meaning of a certain consumer good must be recognised and understood as such by other people. If, for example, the social milieu of a solar system owner does not recognise and understand solar systems as sustainable products, the solar system cannot function as a symbol of sustainability in that milieu. The concept of visibility refers to the visibility of the symbolically charged consumer good. If the good is not visible to others, its symbolic value does not materialise.

The symbolic dimension of consumer goods is related to three central consumption functions (see, for example, Campbell 1995b: 111). These are presented and described in more detail below:

a) Positioning function: The significance of consumer goods for the visualisation and display of social positions and social status was most prominently and elaborately explored by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) and Thorstein Veblen (Veblen 2007 [1899]). According to their findings, one of the functions performed by consumer goods is the drawing of boundaries between different people, social groups or classes. Consumer goods make statements about a person's social position and thus about their status in society. In this context, Thorstein Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption", which describes how people use consumer goods to visualise, assert or even enhance their social position in relation to others (Campbell 1995a: 38). The most obvious example of this is probably the significance of certain cars as status symbols – the owners of such cars sometimes try to use them to express their wealth and success for all to see. While Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption referred to more obvious, direct forms of status representation through consumer goods, Pierre Bourdieu worked out in detail the more subtle, indirect forms of social distinction by showing how consumption practices that are not immediately visible also serve to draw social boundaries. Going to the opera, for example, is not only a means of personal enjoyment, but also a method of symbolic demarcation from other social groups that are not associated with "high culture", and ultimately a subtle expression of one's own categorisation as a person with refined taste that is perceived as superior.

b) Integrative function: Consumer goods not only serve as symbols of demarcation, but also fulfil an integrative function by marking group affiliations and thus materialising and stabilising social orders. In their book "The World of Goods", Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood present a cultural and anthropological interpretation of modern consumer societies (Douglas & Isherwood 1996 [1979]). They oppose the interpretation that consumption primarily serves to demonstrate status and emphasise that consumer goods represent a means of integrating com-

munities: "Within the available time and space the individual uses consumption to say something about himself, his family, his locality, whether in town or country, on vacation or at home. The kind of statements he makes are about the kind of universe he is in, affirmatory or defiant, perhaps competitive, but not necessarily so" (Douglas & Isherwood 1996 [1979]: 45). Thus, in many societies and social groups the excessive consumption of meat symbolises masculinity, which in turn manifests and reproduces the gender relations in a given social order. In the same way, consumer practices such as dinner parties serve to embed people in group contexts and strengthen social relationships. Consumer goods and consumer behaviour thus become a cultural categorisation and information system within the social order and therefore reflect the society in which people want to live, which social order they prefer and which they oppose (Sassatelli 2007: 49).

c) Expressive function: Although the expressive function of consumer goods overlaps with the two functions described above, it can certainly also be distinguished from them. While the other two symbolic consumption functions focus on the manifestation, stabilisation and reproduction of social relationships and thus social order, the expressive function is aimed at the expression and construction of identity. Identity can be understood as the sum of all historically developed personal and social characteristics, in which the image one has of oneself is reflected and which one presents to others (Friese 1998: 40). Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm summarise – with critical intent – the connection between identity and consumption in modern societies as follows: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced" (Marcuse 1992 [1964]: 11) or "I am = what I have and what I consume" (Fromm 2008 [1978]: 27). Zygmunt Bauman in particular has meticulously elaborated on the precise fit between consumer culture and the specific conditions of modernity and emphasises that, under modern conditions, identities are no longer fixed into a certain social position at birth, but must be painstakingly constructed, constantly adapted and maintained (Bauman 2007). Identities thus become projects. For many people, consumer goods such as clothing or furniture play an important role in the successful realisation of these projects. Paradoxically, however, people in modern societies, who are forced by the dynamics of those societies to construct their own identity and present it to the outside world, find themselves confronted with a largely standardised product range thanks to the prevalence of mass production. Andreas Reckwitz also takes up this point in his investigation of the extent to which digital products (profile pictures, playlists, etc.) and services contribute to the "specialness" of individuals and support their strategies for stylising "singularity" (Reckwitz 2020).

Of course, many consumer goods fulfil different symbolic consumption functions at the same time. For example, the purchase of organic food can serve both to distinguish oneself from other social groups perceived as less environmentally aware and health-conscious (positioning function), to show oneself as part of a community of "conscious" people and consumers (integrative function) and

144

to assert one's own identity as an environmentally aware and health-conscious person (expressive function). Most consumer goods also have both symbolic and practical value, albeit to varying degrees. For example, cars are characterised by high symbolic value and also high practical value, while cooking pots have a high practical value but hardly any symbolic value. Ultimately, the value attributed to a good is not based solely on its practical value, but is also derived from its symbolic value. In modern societies, which are characterised by largely saturated markets offering a wide range of products, symbolic value is even becoming more and more important, as consumers can choose from a variety of products that are similar in terms of their practical value (Hirschman 1981: 4). The symbolic value thus becomes a decisive factor for the sale of a consumer good. A current example of this is the growing prevalence of food labelled as "organic". Regardless of how organic their production method actually was, these days such foods promise a symbolic added value compared to other conventionally produced foods. This example also shows how the symbolic value of a consumer good can change due to socio-cultural change: In the 1980s and 1990s organic food was quite uncommon, partly due to its rather negative reputation. Many people regarded organic food as unhygienic and those who consumed it as organic fanatics. Organic food only became attractive to broader consumer segments once health consciousness and environmental awareness began to grow among the population.

4. Practices of everyday consumption

While the theories of rational choice introduced above focus on the individual and their conscious decisions, theories of practice focus on analysing how everyday life is carried out within the framework of social practices. The units of analysis are no longer individuals, but practices such as cooking, shopping, showering, driving, etc. (Reckwitz 2002). There are a variety of definitions for the concept of practice and different views about the elements that ultimately make up a practice (see, for example, Schatzki 1996; Reckwitz 2002; Shove et al. 2012). Generally speaking, practices are "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (Schatzki 2001: 2). In other words, these are human activities that are physically mediated through the use of material objects, draw on a practical consciousness and are largely routinised (Reckwitz 2003: 284). The concept of practical consciousness describes "all the things which actors know tacitly about how to 'go on' in the context of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression" (Giddens 1984: xxiii). Thus, the practice of driving is a physical activity (shifting gears, steering, etc.) for which material objects such as the car itself or roads as infrastructure are necessary and which takes place largely unconsciously by drawing on internalised skills (how to follow road traffic regulations, knowledge of the meaning of traffic signs, etc.). The use of the car for regular journeys, e.g., driving to work or to do the weekly shopping, usually follows routines that are only questioned in crisis situations.

The term "practice theories" is deliberately used here in the plural, as there is no single generally recognised practice theory as such, but rather different approach-

es and theories that exist in parallel, all of which focus on the examination of practices (Reckwitz 2002). Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens 1979, 1984, 1993) and Pierre Bourdieu's habitus concept (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990) are classics in this field. More recently, the practice theories proposed by Elizabeth Shove (Shove 2003; Shove et al. 2012) and Theodore Schatzki (Schatzki 1996; Schatzki 2010) have gained widespread attention in the field of sustainable consumption research. Elizabeth Shove and her colleagues have made specific efforts to analyse issues in the field of sustainable consumption from a practice theory perspective, so their approach will be discussed in more detail below.

Elizabeth Shove and her colleagues assume that practices are made up of competencies, meanings and materialities. The term competence describes the practical knowledge and skills required to carry out a practice. Meaning refers to the shared social understandings associated with the performance of a practice, and material objects refer to the objects, devices, products and biophysical elements (e.g., water, fuel, electricity, etc.) whose use is involved in the performance of a practice (Shove et al. 2012: 22ff.). Furthermore, practices are not isolated units, but usually occur as bundles. This means that practices are linked to each other via their individual elements or sequential order (Shove et al. 2012: 105ff.). For instance, the practices of washing clothes and showering refer to the same meaning of cleanliness and the associated social norms of cleanliness. An example of the sequential linking of practices is the practice of shopping, which is followed by the later practice of cooking. In addition, to carry out practices larger infrastructures are usually required so that the material objects involved can function at all (Shove et al. 2015; Shove 2016). The functionality of bicycles or cars, for example, depends on the existence of a corresponding road infrastructure and also varies with the nature of this infrastructure; electrical devices require electricity, which is generated in power plants and distributed via power grids and power lines.

According to Elizabeth Shove and colleagues, practices change as one or more of their elements (competencies, meanings and materialities) change (Shove et al. 2012). For example, the practice of cooking has changed significantly over the decades due to the spread of the freezer as a material object (Shove & Southerton 2000; Hand & Shove 2007). Freezers contributed to the spread of convenience food, which requires far fewer practical skills to prepare than conventionally cooked food. Food preparation also became less time-consuming and easier to plan, making the freezer a time-saving factor. Parallel to the spread of freezers in households, a new infrastructure for the provision of frozen food also emerged: Refrigerated warehouses, freezers in supermarkets, new forms of food production, etc. became necessary and widespread. Compared to the conventional system of food provision and preparation, however, this entails far greater energy consumption and thus has corresponding ecological consequences.

Another example is the increasing prevalence of air conditioning, which is changing work practices, among other things. In air-conditioned rooms, there is no need to take off one's jacket and tie in hot weather, which ultimately goes hand in hand with a change in the meaning of appropriate clothing in the workplace (Walker

et al. 2014). In this way, certain clothing norms are standardised and stabilised, which in turn makes air conditioning a necessity. This also highlights the interaction between practices, the necessary infrastructures and the corresponding social contexts of meaning.

The strength of a practice theories perspective lies in focusing on how practices emerge over time and change through interactions with other practices, infrastructures, and production and provision systems. Unlike theories of rational choice, the focus is not on the individual as a rational decision-maker, but rather on the socio-material embedding of human activities. With regard to making consumption patterns more sustainable, a theory of practice perspective suggests intervening in the interactions between everyday life, infrastructures, and institutions (Spurling & McMeekin 2016; Cass et al. 2018). This means that the way to reduce car use, for example, would not initially be – as rational choice theories would suggest – interventions in the cost structure of car use (e.g., increasing petrol prices), but a more comprehensive approach aimed at changing infrastructures and legal regulations (→ chap. 9 on infrastructure systems). From a theory of practice perspective, one would ask: To what extent does the way our cities are designed (e.g., policies to ensure car-friendly cities) tend to enable certain practices while complicating and preventing others? It would also be necessary to analyse which social norms, standards and legal regulations stabilise and reproduce unsustainable practices and bundles of practices.

5. Outlook

Apart from the research fields and theoretical approaches described above, there are also a number of other research questions currently being investigated in the corresponding sociological research. In conclusion, we will therefore outline three (primarily empirical) further research topics: the social structuredness of sustainable consumption, "prosuming" and sharing.

In the 1990s and early 2000s there was widespread euphoria that conscious and sustainable consumption could become the driving force behind sustainable development in Western societies. Since then, this sense of euphoria has clearly diminished. The idea of sovereign consumers who are increasingly aware of the negative socio-ecological consequences of their actions and adapt their consumption behaviour accordingly, and the associated research on the motives that drive sustainable consumption, has increasingly given way to a perspective that focuses on the social structuredness of sustainable consumption (→ chap. 4 on environmental attitudes and action). This means that the socio-structural conditions of consumer behaviour, such as class affiliation or socio-economic disadvantage, are receiving more attention. As a result, traditional sociological topics are increasingly becoming the focus of empirical research on sustainable consumption. Examples include the topics of energy poverty as a form of social inequality (Guevara et al. 2023) and sustainable consumption as a strategy for distinguishing oneself socially (Neckel 2018).

The term "prosuming" was coined in the early 1980s by futurist Alvin Toffler (Toffler 1981). He used it to describe a form of consumption in which the roles of consumer and producer overlap. This means that consumers produce the products they consume (at least in part) themselves. For example, the development of solar systems and their spread in private households has led to more and more citizens consuming self-generated energy and thus taking on the role of prosumers in the energy system (Brown et al. 2020). Examining the conditions and implications of this change, which is currently also evident in other sustainability-related areas such as urban gardening and repair cafés (Jaeger-Erben et al. 2021), is another relevant research topic.

For a short time, internet-based sharing platforms and services – such as Uber, Airbnb and various car-sharing services – were discussed by academics and the general public as a way to make consumption more efficient and therefore more environmentally friendly through the sharing of goods and products (e.g., tools, cars, apartments, etc.). In the meantime, however, the dark sides of so-called platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) have come to light, which manifest themselves in exploitative labour conditions and the growing energy consumption of server farms, among other things. An examination of the conditions and socio-ecological advantages and disadvantages of the (digitally mediated) communal use of resources based on temporally limited sharing is therefore another relevant field of research that will become increasingly important in the future (Frenken & Schor 2017).

What students can take away from this chapter:

- Knowledge about what is meant by consumption
- Knowledge about the connection between attitudes and consumer behaviour
- Knowledge about the different social functions of consumption
- An understanding of the practice theories perspective on everyday consumption

---

Recommended reading

Diekmann, A. & P. Preisendörfer, 2003: Green and greenback. The behavioral effects of environmental attitudes in low-cost and high-cost situations. *Basic empirical application of rational choice theory in the field of sociological research on environmental behaviour and corresponding critical appraisal.*

Douglas, M.T. & B. Isherwood, 1996 [1979]: The world of goods. Towards an anthropology of consumption. *A classic but sometimes difficult to read book that analyses the cultural foundations of consumer behaviour and includes a corresponding critique of economic perspectives.*

Evans, D.M., 2018: What is consumption, where has it been going, and does it still matter? *Compact overview of the current state of sociological consumption research.*

Trentmann, F., 2016: Empire of things. How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first. *Comprehensive overview of the conditions and history of the development of consumer society.*

Shove, E., M. Pantzar & M. Watson, 2012: The dynamics of social practice. Everyday life and how it changes. *Fundamental, systematic presentation and application of a theory of practice perspective to questions in the field of sociological environmental research.*

Literature

Bauman, Z., 2007: Consuming life. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Belk, R.W., 1995: Studies in the new consumer behavior. P. 58–95 in: D. Miller (ed.), Acknowledging consumption. A review of new studies. London, New York: Routledge.

Best, H. & T. Kneip, 2011: The impact of attitudes and behavioral costs on environmental behavior: A natural experiment on household waste recycling. Social Science Research, 40: 917–930.

Bourdieu, P., 1977: Outline of a theory of practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P., 1984: Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P., 1990: The logic of practice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brown, D., S. Hall & M.E. Davis, 2020: What is prosumerism for? Exploring the normative dimensions of decentralised energy transitions. Energy Research & Social Science, 66: 101475.

Buttel, F.H., P. Dickens, R.E. Dunlap & A. Gijswijt, 2002: Sociological theory and the environment: An overview and introduction. P. 3–32 in: R.E. Dunlap, F.H. Buttel, P. Dickens & A. Gijswijt (eds.), Sociological theory and the environment. Classical foundations, contemporary insights. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Campbell, C., 1995a: Conspicuous confusion? A critique of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. Sociological Theory, 13: 37–47.

Campbell, C., 1995b: The sociology of consumption. P. 96–126 in: D. Miller (ed.), Acknowledging consumption. A review of new studies. London, New York: Routledge.

Cass, N., T. Schwanen, E. Shove, 2018: Infrastructures, intersections and societal transformations. Technological Forecasting and Social Change, 137: 160–167.

Darby, M.R. & E. Karni, 1973: Free competition and the optimal amount of fraud. Journal of Law and Economics, 16: 67–88.

Defila, R., Di Giulio, A., & Kaufmann-Hayoz, R., 2012: The nature of sustainable consumption and how to achieve it. Results from the focal topic "From Knowledge to Action–New Paths towards Sustainable Consumption". München: oekom.

Diekmann, A. & P. Preisendörfer, 2003: Green and greenback. The behavioral effects of environmental attitudes in low-cost and high-cost situations. Rationality and Society, 15 (4): 441–472.

Douglas, M.T. & B. Isherwood, 1996 [1979]: The world of goods. Towards an anthropology of consumption. London: Routledge.

Evans, D.M., 2018: What is consumption, where has it been going, and does it still matter? The Sociological Review, 65: 1-19.

Frenken, K. & J. Schor, 2017: Putting the sharing economy into perspective. Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions, 23: 3–10.

Friese, S., 1998: Zum Zusammenhang von Selbst, Identität und Konsum. P. 35–53 in: M. Neuner & L.A. Reisch (eds.), Konsumperspektiven. Verhaltensaspekte und Infrastruktur. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.

Fromm, E., 2008 [1978]: To have or to be? London; New York: continuum.

Giddens, A., 1979: Central problems in social theory. Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giddens, A., 1984: The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A., 1993: New rules of sociological method. A positive critique of interpretative sociologies. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Goffman, E., 1951: Symbols of class status. The British Journal of Sociology, 2: 294–304.

Grober, U., 2012: Sustainability: A cultural history. Totnes: Green Books.

Gronow, J. & A. Warde, 2001: Introduction. P. 1–8 in: J. Gronow & A. Warde (eds.), Ordinary consumption. London: Routledge.

Guevara, Z., D. Mendoza-Tinoco & D. Silva, 2023: The theoretical peculiarities of energy poverty research: A systematic literature review. Energy Research & Social Science, 105: 103274.

Hand, M. & E. Shove, 2007: Condensing practices. Ways of living with a freezer. Journal of Consumer Culture, 7: 79–103.

Hirschman, E.C., 1981: Comprehending symbolic consumption: Three theoretical issues. P. 4–6 in: E.C. Hirschman & M.B. Holbrook (eds.), Symbolic consumer behaviour. New York: Association of Consumer Research.

Jaeger-Erben, M., C. Jensen, F. Hofmann & J. Zwiers, 2021: There is no sustainable circular economy without a circular society. Resources, Conservation and Recycling, 168 (2): 105476.

Liebe, U. & P. Preisendörfer, 2010: Rational choice theory and the environment: Variants, applications, and new trends. P. 141-157 in: M. Gross & H. Heinrichs (eds.): Environmental sociology. European perspectives and interdisciplinary challenges. Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer.

Marcuse, H., 1991 [1964]: One-dimensional man. London: Routledge.

Mead, G.H., 1972 [1934]: Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moser, S. & S. Kleinhückelkotten, 2018: Good intents, but low impacts: Diverging importance of motivational and socioeconomic determinants explaining pro-environmental behavior, energy use, and carbon footprint. Environment & Behavior, 50: 626–656.

Neckel, S., 2018: Ökologische Distinktion. Soziale Grenzziehung im Zeichen von Nachhaltigkeit. P. 59–76 in: S. Neckel, N.P. Besedovsky, M. Boddenberg, M. Hasenfratz, S.M. Pritz & T. Wiegand (eds.), Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit. Umrisse eines Forschungsprogramms. Bielefeld: transcript.

Prillwitz, J., S. Harms & M. Lanzendorf, 2006: Impact of life-course events on car ownership. Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board, 1985: 71–77.

Reckwitz, A., 2002: Toward a theory of social practices. A development in culturalist theorizing. European Journal of Social Theory, 5 (2): 243–263.

Reckwitz, A., 2020: Society of singularities. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sassatelli, R., 2007: Consumer culture. History, theory and politics. Los Angeles: Sage.

Schäfer, M., M. Jaeger-Erben & S. Bamberg, 2012: Life events as windows of opportunity for changing towards sustainable consumption patterns? Journal of Consumer Policy, 35: 65–84.

Schatzki, T., 2010: Materiality and social life. Nature and Culture, 5: 123–149.

Schatzki, T.R., 1996: Social practices. A Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schatzki, T.R., 2001: Introduction: Practice theory. P. 1–14 in: T.R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina & E. von Savigny (eds.), The practice turn in contemporary theory. London: Routledge.

Shove, E., 2003: Comfort, cleanliness and convenience. The social organization of normality. Oxford: Berg.

Shove, E., 2010: Beyond the ABC: Climate change policy and theories of social change. Environment and Planning, 42: 1273–1285.

Shove, E., 2016: Infrastructures and practices: networks beyond the city. P. 242–257 in: O. Coutard & J. Rutherford (eds.), Beyond the networked city. Infrastructure reconfigurations and urban change in the North and South. London, New York: Routledge.

Shove, E. & D. Southerton, 2000: Defrosting the freezer: From novelty to convenience. Journal of Material Culture, 5: 301–319.

Shove, E. & A. Warde, 2002: Inconspicuous consumption: The sociology of consumption, Lifestyles, and the Environment. P. 230–251 in: R.E. Dunlap, F.H. Buttel, P. Dickens & A. Gijswijt (eds.), Sociological theory and the environment. Classical foundations, contemporary insights. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Shove, E., M. Pantzar & M. Watson, 2012: The dynamics of social practice. Everyday life and how it changes. Los Angeles: Sage.

Shove, E., M. Watson & N. Spurling, 2015: Conceptualizing connections. Energy demand, infrastructures and social practices. European Journal of Social Theory, 18: 274–287.

Simon, H.A., 1955: A behavioral model of rational choice. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 69: 99-118.

Simon, H.A., 1979: Rational decision making in business organizations. The American Economic Review, 69: 493–513.

Slater, D., 2008: Consumer culture and modernity. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Spurling, N. & A. McMeekin, 2016: Interventions in practices. Sustainable mobility policies in England. P. 78–94 in: Y. Strengers & C. Maller (eds.); Social practices, intervention and sustainability: Beyond behaviour change. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Srnicek, N., 2017: Platform capitalism. Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Stern, P.C., 2000: Toward a coherent theory of environmentally significant behavior. Journal of Social Issues, 56: 407–424.

Toffler, A., 1981: The third wave. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books.

Trentmann, F., 2016: Empire of things. How we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first. New York: HarperCollins.

United Nations, 1987: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future.

Veblen, T., 2007 [1899]: The theory of the leisure class. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walker, G., E. Shove & S. Brown, 2014: How does air conditioning become 'needed'? A case study of routes, rationales and dynamics. Energy Research & Social Science, 4: 1–9.

Warde, A., 2005: Consumption and theories of practice. Journal of Consumer Culture, 5: 131–153.

Wiswede, G., 2000: Konsumsoziologie – Eine vergessene Disziplin. P. 23–94 in: D. Rosenkranz & N.F. Schneider (eds.), Konsum. Soziologische, ökonomische und psychologische Perspektiven. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.