Revisiting the experience of inconvenience and everyday life practices: the case of waste sorting

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ABSTRACT
The growing waste volume is an acute issue on the circular economy agenda and consumers play a key role by sorting recyclable materials from residual waste. In the literature, the experience of inconvenience is recurrently identified as a main barrier to sorting. Modeling inconvenience as the effort required for sorting, these studies suggest adjustments to communication and material arrangements, making recycling easier. This article offers a reappraisal of the experience of inconvenience and its conditioning. Using ethnographic data, the analysis explores the incongruities between participants’ sayings and doings – their articulated agreement with sorting and reluctance to do so. Waste biographies indicate that instead of overt efforts implied in the performance of sorting, embodied perceptions of normal waste practice govern which performances of sorting are experienced as inconvenient. This pre-reflective structuring of perception is anchored in and maintained by the relation of waste practices to co-occurring practices. Proposing a conceptual distinction, this article suggests that waste practices are performed as “secondary practices” enabling “primary practices,” that orchestrate participants’ dispositions and their immediate discernments of what are dispensable and, thus, inconvenient performances of sorting. This perspective elaborates on the understanding of inconvenience and the transition inertia of everyday practices toward sustainability.

Introduction
Environmental challenges, including the limits to natural resources and the continuously growing amounts of waste, are increasingly acute issues on the public agenda calling for a transition to a circular economy (UNIDO 2017). This transition involves changes in production and consumption modes to ensure resources are channeled back to circular loops, replacing the linear route to incineration or landfills. In 2018, all European member states agreed to ambitious aims for recycling municipal waste (European Commission 2018). The new legislation imposes the obligation that 65% of all municipal waste must be collected for recycling by 2035, which compelled municipal waste-management companies in Denmark to expand existing schemes for collecting and managing recyclables, encompassing seven categories. The new categories introduced countrywide are plastics, metals, and organic waste, augmenting the schemes run by most municipalities for decades for collecting paper, glass, cardboard, and hazardous waste.

Besides municipal waste-management companies, consumers play a key role in sustaining the resource flow by separating materials for recycling from residual waste. Despite the importance of consumers performing their part, most studies have long focused on technical system design and management issues, evaluating the efficiency or environmental effects (Abbott, Nandeibam, and O’Shea 2011; Brouwer et al. 2018; Degli Antoni and Vittucci Marzetti 2019; Gradus et al. 2017; Pluskal et al. 2021). Recently, research has increasingly engaged with the consumer perspective. Behavioral change theories and behavioral economics approaches have dominated attempts to understand consumer experiences and their propensity to adopt and use recycling schemes. Such studies and others have found diverse factors influencing consumer-recycling participation. Recurring factors include conviction regarding the positive effects, the required effort, and the social circumstances, such as norms and personal appearance (Abbott, Nandeibam, and O’Shea 2017, 2013; Bucciol, Montinari, and Piovesan 2019; Gilli, Nicolli, and Farinelli 2018; Lee, Choi, and Koo 2017; Perrin and Barton 2001). These factors appear interchangeably in various combinations with varying weight (Alpízar and Gsottbauer 2015; Bezzina and Dimech 2011;
McCarty and Shrum 1994; Tonglet, Phillips, and Bates 2004). A major and often decisive influence found in many studies is inconvenience. Inconvenience is often modeled as a cost (e.g., the expense of indoor space for several bins, time needed to separate recyclables from residual waste, and transportation to the dumpster site) and negative tactile senses, such as potential repugnance and visceral disgust related to waste sites or handling waste. However, this inconvenience cost may be compensated by personal beliefs, values, and motivation for recycling (Berglund 2006; Blake 1999; Ewing 2001; Heller and Vatn 2017; Nainggolan et al. 2019; Ortiz Salazar, Klein, and Klycheva 2021; Van den Bergh 2008).

The modeling of inconvenience as being widely applied operates on the assumption that experience is derived from the actual efforts required, given specific arrangements and tasks implied in sorting. Accordingly, approaches to increase sorting often target infrastructure, devices, and information that minimize required efforts for the desired behavior. Although the model typically involves a conditional multifactor framework, these studies construe the experience of inconvenience as deducible from a bilateral relationship between the characteristics of material arrangements for recycling vis-à-vis the character of the consumer. The models thus tend to isolate these actions and arrangements, where waste is discarded either by recycling or not, from the ever-changing context of everyday life as it unfolds through a manifold of historically developed and developing interconnected social practices. By employing a practice theoretical perspective, this article aims to contribute to the established literature elucidating how recycling practices are formed over time and in connection with other practices, expounding how the experience is conditioned. The methodological approach decenters such phenomena as mind, belief, and intentionality, while the experience of inconvenience is kept at the center of attention, exploring socio-temporal conditions of how it is expressed in sayings and doings.

While practice theories have conceptualized and empirically explored convenience, inconvenience remains remarkably overlooked. In most studies, convenience is associated with technology or inventions, devices or appliances that replace or reduce efforts implied in accomplishing particular tasks (Hand and Shove 2007; Schatzki 2009; Southerton 2003; Shove and Southerton 2000; Warde 1999). The washing machine, convenience food, and smart-home technologies exemplify inventions that execute tasks that humans originally performed, hereby making the achievement of particular ends easier. Additionally, these appliances allow rescheduling and shifting activity timing, adding the experience of being more in control of one’s own time to the conceptualization of convenience (Shove 2003a; Warde 1999; Warde, Shove, and Southerton 1998). By depicting how new inventions or objects have transformed everyday practices, these studies have drawn attention to their involvement in the redefinition and further maintenance of “normal” styles of performing particular practices and general expectations of comfort and convenience in doing so (Shove 2003a, 2003b). For some scholars, the objects of convenience are also regarded as sedimentations and underpinnings of a cultural discourse informing the general needs and expectations that accomplishing everyday life activities be made more efficient (e.g., Shove 2003b; Strengers and Nicholls 2017). Whether discussing the symbolic or practical aspects of how everyday practices change and normal ways of life are reconfigured, these studies maintain an analytical interest in the relationship between these transformations and particular objects, offering an increase in convenience.

While, in many studies, materiality is given priority as the constitutive element of practices and the associated experience, the following analysis takes a different starting point. Material arrangements are certainly considered but less as prefiguring elements than themselves objects of experience, the social and spatio-temporal conditioning that is the focal interest of the analysis.

Although focusing on inconvenience rather than convenience, this article contributes methodologically and conceptually to an understanding of the conditioning of experiences of convenience. My approach emphasizes the embeddedness of experience in a socio-temporal context in two particular ways. First, I explore how historically transmutable conceptions of normal waste practice govern how experiences of inconvenience are expressed in relation to specific performances of sorting while others are undertaken without further thought. Second, looking at waste practices as they unfold in time-space shared with other practices, I investigate how this context influences the unfolding of waste practices and informs the associated experience. The article seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How is the inconvenience of sorting expressed in the sayings and doings of waste practices, and how does historical context inform this?
- How does the context of other social practices with which waste practices co-occur help us conceive the conditioning of the experience of inconvenience?
Theory

Practice theory emerged in part as a response to the prominence of structural agency in cultural theories and the explanatory emphasis on personal motivation, values, and beliefs of methodological individualism as that which generates action. Practice theory instead points to the nexus of social practices as the epistemological object for those who want to study why we do what we do. Thus, if our ambition is to understand the trajectories of a specific practice, for instance, waste practices, we need to appreciate its internal composition, context, and interconnectedness with other practices and explore how the dynamics of these socio-material configurations affect the emergence, persistence, or disappearance of patterned ways of performing the practice (Nicolini 2009; Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 2010a).

One representation of social practice is as a recursive sequence of day-to-day activities unfolding in a recognizable, although not regular, fashion (Schatzki 2010b). Cooking, cleaning, and accounting exemplify practices. Practices may be visible or cognitive, discursive or physical. Any practice achieves its particular expression from a set of interdependent elements integrated and linked in a specific composition (Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Terminology varies, but Schatzki uses the terms “understandings,” “rules,” and “teleoaffective structures” (Schatzki 1996, 2002, 2009). These elements designate the collectively shared and upheld underpinning of the individual’s ability to discern what is going on, what needs to be done, and how it is done in a correct and proper manner. The concept of teleoaffectivity is of particular relevance to the following analysis. It designates the normative ordering of different ends and the emotional engagement in their pursuit. Hence, it is a way to describe the ordering capacity of practices to orchestrate individual sayings and doings through a preverbal, nonreflective experience of the sense and directionality of the practice (Schatzki 1996, 2002, 2009).

Individuals become carriers of practices through exposure to and participation in their performance. Being a carrier means being able to perform a practice in a recognizable and acceptable way. This entails acquiring technical skills, and the normative understandings of how and what is required to perform the practice correctly. Becoming a carrier implies the embodiment of concrete physical repertoires, dispositions, and perceptions. This socialization process enables the individual to experience and make immediate, preverbal discernments of what needs to be done and what is unnecessary to accomplish a practice (Alkemeyer and Buschmann 2016; Nicolini 2009; Schatzki 2002, 1996; Shove 2003a).

Practices never unfold in isolation or are uninfluenced by context. Besides the material surroundings, the unfolding of practices is immersed in a texture of relationships and associations with other practices. While some practices are connected in “complexes,” given the direct sharing of certain elements, others that merely co-occur in space and time are connected as “bundles” (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). When occurring in a complex, practices comprise and provide resources for each other and are interdependent as they mutually enable accomplishment (Genus and Jensen 2019; Gherardi and Nicolini 2002; Nicolini 2012).

In conclusion, practices are not in themselves stable or coherent phenomena. While ensuring the practices’ occurrence, interconnected practices also hold each other in place as part of their reciprocated configuration. The relative permanence of this connective tissue makes reproduction, durability, and recognizability of practices possible. Changes in the composition of practice elements affect their perpetuation, as do changes in the composition of interconnected practices and other contextual matters, whether are directly or indirectly part of the practices. When aiming to understand how practices achieve durability, we therefore need to attend to the contextual conditions, as these persist in space and time (Kemmis et al. 2014; Nicolini 2009). This article focuses on the socio-temporal conditioning of participants’ entrenched understanding of waste practices and the texture of interconnected practices in which their performances unfold.

Materials and methods

Waste discarding is part of the “normal order of things” in everyday life, and waste service provision in the Danish context is taken for granted. Therefore, articulating how we go about ridding our homes of waste and what the opportunity for doing so means to us can be challenging (Nicolini 2012). Moreover, as waste does not appear in peoples’ homes from nowhere but is a residue of consumption as a “moment” (Warde 2005) in other practices, the question of how to delineate waste practices from bordering practices prevails.

Studying waste practices calls for an exploratory approach, and ethnographic methods that allow for inquiry in the context and course of performing the practices can be a productive approach (Hitchings 2012). In the current study, several methods are combined: participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2010), “going along” (Kusenbach 2003), and ethnographic interviewing (Atkinson et al. 2002; Atkinson 2010).
The collected data include photo documentation, fieldnotes, and sound recordings, which were transcribed verbatim and coded using open-coding principles (Berg 2007). Interactions were carried out in Danish and quotes have been translated into English by the author.

The visits with participants lasted in some cases for up to ten hours. Besides being taken on an extensive house tour, I participated in various activities in the household’s everyday life: I accompanied participants during grocery shopping, packed away groceries, cooked, ate, cleaned up, and took the trash out. By asking “ethnographic questions” (Atkinson et al. 2001; Spradley 1979) during these activities (Kusenbach 2003), I gained insight into participants’ lifeworld (Anderson 2004; Gullesstad 1993) as expressed in both “doings and sayings” (Schatzki 2002). Besides observing how waste practices unfold in households’ everyday life, this methodology availed an analytical uncovering of embodied, collectively shared normative aspects of the practice (Røpke 2009). The methodological design reflects interest in the interconnectedness between practices and the passage of objects into waste, instead of a narrow focus on the bin and what ends up there.

All households participating in this study were recruited through a network’s network. Potential participants were approached with a digital flyer briefly introducing the research as interested in “home, everyday life, and waste,” followed by a telephone call. Their eligibility was estimated in terms of not being overly opinionated regarding waste or sustainability, and in relation to the intended sample variation. Participants all lived in apartments but varied in household composition and residential demographics to prevent that findings indirectly reflect the practice of a specific population. The ages of adult participants extended from 21 to 82, and their social status ranged from unskilled to highly educated. Some lived alone, while others shared an apartment with a roommate, partner, or children. Likewise, participants varied in terms of owning or renting status, its state of renovation and size, whether its floorplan is open or closed, and residents’ tenancy duration.

Two geographical sites in Denmark were selected, Copenhagen and Vejle, including one household from Billund, the neighboring municipality. With one exception, all households in the current study had municipal schemes for sorting plastics, metals, organic waste, paper, cardboard, glass, and batteries, besides residual waste. In the Danish context, the first three mentioned categories of waste have generally been introduced to municipal recycling schemes in more recent years. Glass, paper, and batteries have been collected for recycling for four decades.

In the empirical excerpts employed in the following analysis, participants mention “the Green” and “GreenBin.” These terms refer to devices distributed by the respective municipalities introducing the scheme for organic waste sorting. “The Green” (Vejle) references the green bag for organic waste, which is attached side-by-side with a black bag for residual waste in a two-partitioned rack to be mounted on the inside of a cupboard door. The “GreenBin” (Copenhagen) is designed for flexible mounting and has a stable frame, allowing participants to place it on a flat surface, such as a tabletop or the bottom of a cupboard.

Results
While the purpose of this article is not to define what a waste practice is, some preliminary reflections on how to delineate this practice from other everyday practices are productive to operationalize the term for the following analysis. Quite a few practice theoretical studies have engaged with food waste, but this is not a practice but rather an unintended outcome of other practices, the structuring and dynamics of which are the object of analytical scrutiny in this research (e.g., Evans 2014; Hebrok and Heidenstrom 2019; Leray, Sahakian, and Erkman 2016; Southerton and Yates 2020; Watson and Meah 2012). In this article, the term waste practices refers to the physical and mental activities directly involved in waste discarding in bins or receptacles. Food waste neither is nor has an end, however, the following analysis reveals that discarding, whether in the form of sorting or disposal, has an end.

In her book The Ethics of Waste, Gay Hawkins (2007) depicts how the meaning of waste has changed historically with the transformation of waste practices. She proposes the “ethos of disposability” as a conceptualization of the historically specific framing of waste as an elimination problem, which at the household level meant a concern about protecting and purifying the home and self. In contemporary society, this ethos has gradually been challenged by the appearance of infrastructure for recycling and the problematization of waste as environmentally unsustainable. At this point, sorting as a new variation of waste practices emerged and was associated with virtue and moral obligation (Hawkins 2007).

The description of recycling as a morally elevated manner to discard waste resonates with the concept of the “ethics of sorting,” as developed by Katan and Kirsten Gram-Hanssen (2021). Whereas Hawkins’ “ethics of waste” is a generic concept, “ethics of sorting” distinguishes the teleaffective
structure specific to sorting. We demonstrate how sorting is associated with environmental concerns, and even if this association is often vague, sorting is perceived as the proper and morally superior manner to discard waste. Although the teleaffective component of sorting appears to differ from disposal, sorting is not a separate practice. Hawkins’ historical account of how waste practices have transformed as a process in which more variations have emerged and gradually integrated with conventional variations is grounds for treating sorting and disposal as two expressions of the same practice defined by the common teleology to get rid of the waste. Hence, in the following analysis, waste practices are operationalized as activities in which participants directly interact with bins or waste. Importantly, this implies that those activities through which waste occurs, although sharing elements (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) and intimately connected, are regarded as apart from what is considered waste practices in this article.

The analysis is structured in two sections corresponding to the research questions. In seeking to answer these questions, excerpts from the empirical material on participants’ waste practices are introduced. Although these practices are disparate, selections reflect general trends prevailing across the material. A graphical representation of main findings concludes each section.

Exploring the inconvenience of sorting as expressed in the sayings and doings of waste practices

I visit Rasmus in his functionally furnished 100 square meter (m²) (1076 square feet) apartment in Copenhagen on a wintry day in January. He sublets one room to a tenant, but they practically live separate lives. Rasmus is the participant in the sample who most bluntly articulates his discontent with sorting, expressing it as “an irksome duty.” Rasmus references his engineering background, as he emphasizes his strong appreciation for efficiency, functionality, and informed decision making. His self-presentation echoes homo economicus, a figure often portrayed in studies of household-waste sorting. Rasmus’ collects most of his waste under the kitchen sink. A rack for residuals is mounted inside the cupboard door, and he leaves glass and metal on the cupboard floor. Besides metals, Rasmus has refused to adopt the new categories for sorting except organic waste. The parents have not yet managed to integrate the new categories for sorting except organic waste. The parents have not yet managed to integrate the new categories for sorting except organic waste.

Unlike organic waste, Rasmus admits to producing plastic waste, but does not sort it. Discarding his plastics into residuals, he justifies it to himself by referencing its burnability.

Rasmus: I discard plastics in the waste bin. I assume that what goes in there is burned, and plastics burn well.

Author: So does paper?

Rasmus: It does, but I think paper is easier to recycle.

Author: …So you think that plastics are difficult to recycle?

Rasmus: Yes. I actually think that this is how I think.

Author: And then this is the reason that you assume that it’s better that plastics are burned?

Rasmus: Actually, I think that it’s really a matter of … , as a rule, I prefer to do whatever is easiest for myself. To a far extent, it’s a matter of being lazy and to avoid furnishing my apartment with 27 different bins. As such, I operate from a basic principle that as much as I can possibly legitimize, I throw in the ordinary bin.

As Rasmus declares that plastics burn well, hence he discards it where it is sent to incineration, a wry smile flickers across his face and his polemizing tone of voice is notable. With the tone, Rasmus implicitly communicates his awareness that the proper action would have been to sort the plastics. Nevertheless, his practice is ultimately governed, he states, by his laziness, and he orients toward options involving the least inconvenience. The blatancy of Rasmus’ formulations is unmatched by the other participants. The way he articulates his deliberate neglect of sorting and inclination to do what is easiest for him is differently moderated and more enveloped in the other accounts. Nonetheless, reservations in relation to sorting and the negotiation rhetoric find some expression with all participants.

Unlike Rasmus’ perception of sorting as “an irksome duty,” Bettina unequivocally supports it and broadly utters pro-environmental concerns. Still, in her household, which she shares with her husband, Buster, and their two young children (ages 2 and 4), they have not yet managed to integrate the new categories for sorting except organic waste. The parents explain that managing two young children when leaving home makes the carrying of several bags with recyclables one task too many. Using the garbage chute just outside their door has simply been too attractive compared to carrying bags outside to the dumpsters. The family put the Greenbin into use only when the housing association closed off the shaft. Still, this use remains contingent:

Bettina: When I can tell that we’ll have some [organic waste] the next days, then I bring it [the GreenBin] out. If I can tell that it’ll be a very small bag because we’ll eat out for a couple of days, so
we’ll only have a few scraps and some leftover oatmeal, then I’ll throw it in the normal bin. I’m not sure that sorting is worth neither the trouble nor the bag. These are the considerations that determine whether the GreenBin gets used or not.

The weighing of personal efforts against the benefits of sorting, as expressed in this quote, is typical of many conversations with participants about the waste categories that they either do not sort or only sort sporadically. For Bettina, the benefits of sorting are undoubtedly associated with the environment, but the resource depletion she assumes in connection to the use of a plastic bag augments the counterweight that her efforts make against sorting. For other participants, the association between sorting and environmental concerns is weaker. Nonetheless, reflecting the concept of the ethics of sorting (Katan and Gram-Hanssen 2021), participants immediately and principally perceive sorting as the more proper way to discard waste. When Rasmus explains that he uses the bin for residuals to the greatest extent justifiable, the very need for justification points implicitly to his understanding that sorting would have been better. The main difference between participants like Bettina and those tending toward his apartment to take his paper waste to the dumpster site approximately 400 m [meters] away.

The following quote depicts how participants relate to older categories of recyclables based on a distinction between inconvenience and convenience. In other words, a distinction between the respectively implied inconvenience and convenience.

Before leaving, Rasmus struggles a bit to gather the disorganised heap of papers that he has been collecting on a shelf in one of his cupboards. He manages to clasp it in his arms, and I fathom that this appears way too impractical and unstable for him to make it all the way to the dumpsters without losing at least some.

It is dark and drizzling outside. The walking path is muddy. At the first gust of wind, several papers sweep from Rasmus’ arms. I help him get a hold of them. He is annoyed but walks on. The same thing repeats.

The dumpsters are locked inside a cage that Rasmus must unlock with a key. It is difficult with his arms full. Inside, he circulates among the dumpsters in the dark, looking for the right one. I ask whether he feels like resigning. He confirms, but states that he doesn’t feel like carrying the paper back with him. Then, he finds the container.

Rasmus’s effort to recycle his paper stands out against the backdrop of his statement that, ultimately, laziness and the propensity to do what is easiest steers his practice. Like other participants who similarly point to inconvenience as the reason they either refuse or resign to sorting, efforts to recycle were observed that do not align with the cost-benefit reasoning, communicating a general governing rule of their waste practice. Bettina, who explained her reluctance concerning organic waste by referring to inconvenience involved in separating recyclables from residuals, is negotiated against some implicit inclination to perform the easier option of disposing of everything in the same bin and transporting it to only one dumpster.

As such, it would appear that the entire sample embodies a varied crowd of homines oeconomici. Despite their often weaving and sometimes absent assumptions about the environmental gains of sorting, they explain that they act on the sense that the inconvenience is too extensive for the potential benefits to be worth their effort. The cost-benefit rhetoric seemingly reiterates a rational choice behavior often depicted in prior studies on waste sorting, where inconvenience is reported as the primary obstacle to acting on attitudes and values (e.g., conceptualized as the ethics of sorting). Nevertheless, participants’ waste practices also include doings that appear far from convenient and therefore challenge the contention that conscious decision making and a general inclination to minimize personal effort is fundamentally what governs action, as formulated by Rasmus. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes depicts part of his recycling routine, offering nuance concerning his otherwise principled stance.

Towards the end of my visit, Rasmus and I leave his apartment to take his paper waste to the dumpster approximately 400 m [meters] away.
biographically entrenched understanding that some kinds of waste simply do not belong in the bin for residuals. Contrasting the reflective reasoning and negotiation characterizing participants’ relation to the newer categories of recyclables, sorting as the proper manner to discard more established categories is an embodied normativity, causing moral discomfit when neglected.

Bettina: Even if it’s just a small handful of paper scraps from the kids’ play with scissors, I notice how it angers me if I, for some reason, don’t sort it, maybe because I simply don’t have the strength at that moment.

Author: Where does that feeling come from?
Bettina: I suppose it’s [from] my parents.
Author: Do you remember how long you’ve been sorting?
Bettina: I think my parents always sorted paper, cardboard, and glass, too.
Author: Always?
Bettina: As long as I remember.
Author: When were you born?
Bettina: In the nineties. And you know, back then my father took it with him. They didn’t have a car when I lived at home, so once a week my father loaded glass and cardboard and probably also paper into the bicycle trailer when he was going shopping. He first went to the glass container, which was in front of the supermarket, and the rest of it, I’m not sure, but I suppose he could also drop it off there. Then, going back, he transported all the groceries in the trailer.

The biographical perspective informs the earlier identification that the perceptual and performed division between negotiated and non-negotiable sorting does not correspond to a distinction between inconvenience and convenience. It appears that, disregarding the extent of overt efforts, a deeply rooted and mostly pre-reflective understanding of proper waste practice obtained through the exposure and participation in the practice of others precedes and governs participants’ perceptions of which performances of sorting can even be subject to negotiation. This is not to say that participants’ assessments of effort and negotiations of the same do not influence their practice – it seems they do – but a more primary embodied sense of what needs to be done informs the dispositions of their doings as expressed in the disparity between the sorting acts they readily perform and those experienced as a negotiable inconvenience (Figure 1).

As participants generally agree with the ethics of sorting, why do their waste practices not transform faster? Why do they negotiate referencing inconvenience rather than more readily appropriate more sorting in their practice? The next section informs the response to these questions as these are examined in the subsequent discussion.

**Exploring the inconvenience of sorting in the context of other social practices**

The vast portion of waste for sorting the categories subjected to negotiation is generated during cooking and food consumption. As explained in the methods section, taking part in grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning are central components of this study’s methodology. This part of the analysis centers on a particular observation, which elucidates a dynamic between practices that generally orchestrate participants’ dispositions toward waste. The discussion pertains both to their actual doings and their associated experiences.

When I visit Frederikke, Frederik, and their children (ages 9 and 11) in Vejle we are having lasagna and a salad for dinner. Frederik is the primary cook in the family, but Frederikke and I join him in the kitchen, assisting sporadically. The following account is from an elaborated version of my fieldnotes.

First, Frederik peels two onions and some cloves of garlic into a heap on the kitchen counter. He chops them on the cutting board, and as they go into the casserole, the mince follows; Frederikke steps in to stir. Frederik gets carrots and cabbage from the fridge, and while stirring the casserole, Frederikke explains how they try to make the children eat more vegetables. Frederik peels the carrots onto the heap of onion scraps and grates them before they also go into the casserole. The cabbage is destined in the same direction, but first, he clears the onion

![Figure 1. Flowchart illustrating factors identified as influencing participants’ experience of the inconvenience and negotiability of sorting vis-à-vis different kinds of recyclables.](image-url)
skeins and peels into the Green. Then, placing the cabbage on the cutting board, he cuts a big chunk off the top. He removes the foil from this part and disposes into the Black [bin for residuals] and before proceeding to chop the cabbage, he places the unneeded part he won’t use, where the heap of peels and skins were before.

The rhythm of interchanging tasks in Frederik’s cooking extends to making the salad. He rinses the vegetables, cuts them, clears his work area of residue, rinses, cuts, clears, and so forth. Expanding the analytical focus to include co-occurring practices, such as cooking, elaborates our understanding of how and when participants use their bins, developed in the prior section. Bins are used in the ongoing course of performing a different practice. In practice theoretical parlance, participants’ waste practices unfold as part of a complex of different social practices. This identification of waste practices as part of a cooking practice, in this case, evokes the answer to yet another question: Why do participants use their bins?

The cooking scene demonstrates that whether by sorting or not, participants use their bin/s to rid a space needed to proceed with what is their primary doing. Discarding is not an activity Frederik performs for its own sake. Frederik’s use of his bins is mainly a precondition for accomplishing the end of his cooking: making his family dinner. Thus, Frederik’s teleoffective engagement resides in his cooking practice. It is likely that, even in the moment he drops the waste into the bin, neither the bin nor the waste is the primary object of his attention. More likely, the next step in his cooking is his primary focus. From this perspective, waste practices come into view as a “secondary practice.” Waste practices assist other practices and are performed as a means and a part of accomplishing them.

Although Frederik’s family installed a system for sorting recyclables, including plastics, in the excerpt, he drops the foil from the vegetables into the residuals’ bin. In contrast to the bins for residuals and organic waste, the recycling system is placed against the rear kitchen wall, approximately two meters (6.5 feet) from his work area. When I ask him why he does not use it, he answers much in accord with other participants confronted with similar observations, that he was not thinking about it at that moment and that it (discarding the waste) needed to be quick. Sorting the foil would have required Frederik to consciously reroute his habituated waste practice and move to the other end of the kitchen. Compared to discarding of the foil in the bin for residuals mounted on the inside of the cupboard below the sink next to where he chops the vegetables, sorting imposes an elongated disruption of the “primary practice” but serves it no better.

In this view, we can rephrase our understanding of participants’ experience of inconvenience as a disturbance to the practice they are primarily engaged in, the practice they perceive themselves as performing. This perspective offers an epistemological reappraisal of the experience of inconvenience so often reported as the main barrier to increasing sorting. Instead of attempting an objective estimation of the effort required to use bins and how well their design, placement, and other factors enable waste practices, the focus shifts to how well bins allow waste practices to enable and assist other practices. In this regard, the experience of sorting is not deducible from the requirements of performing this practice on its own but notably the context of the primary practice it enables.

How participants’ experience of inconvenience connects to their perception of what they are doing (i.e., their understanding of the practice in which their engagement and attention is invested and especially what its accomplishment necessitates) exposes an important aspect of its conditioning. In the empirical example above, tasks are distinguishable between those perceived as necessary for accomplishing the end of the primary practice and those that are not. Removing the foil from ingredients and rinsing, chopping, frying, and assembling bolognese and pasta for a lasagna are all necessary tasks to accomplish the family’s dinner. Sorting the foil from residuals, in contrast, is not.

We might distinguish between dispensable and indispensable efforts. While some efforts are considered part of one’s practice, others are perceived as extra – tasks performed in addition to those required for accomplishing the ends of what one perceives oneself as doing. The latter can be subject to negotiation. As evinced above, sorting serves Frederik’s cooking no better than disposal, probably the opposite. The teleaffectivity of sorting is therefore a negotiable concern, which may be undertaken when not experienced as too disruptive to accomplishing the primary practice.

Exploring waste practices in the context of co-occurring practices enables us to grasp how the hierarchical relationship between primary and secondary practices is formative to participants’ experience of inconvenience. We conceive how inconvenience may be concretized as the experience of being unnecessarily disturbed in accomplishing one’s primary doing and how the implicit understandings of what this requires constructs the efforts pertaining to sorting as something extra and dispensable and, therefore, negotiable. The negotiability of some efforts is contrasted by and derived from understandings of what needs to be done, not in terms of abstract principles that are consciously
considered but instead practical concerns governed by embodied understandings of what is proper practice and which efforts can acceptably be ignored (Figure 2).

The next section first unfolds how these insights inform the findings from the analysis. Then both parts of the study are brought together to discuss why the transformation of participants’ waste practices is so indomitable to change despite their general agreement with the ethic of sorting. This part of the discussion results in two recommendations for policy makers and strategic planners endeavoring to increase sorting. How the analytical findings inform these recommendations is illustrated in a summarizing figure (see Figure 3). The section concludes with reflections on how findings might be relevant beyond the case of waste sorting.

Figure 2. Flowchart illustrating the relationship between waste practices and other practices and how this relationship informs how inconvenience is experienced.

Figure 3. Flowchart illustrating how the findings from the analysis inform the recommendations for policy and strategical planning put forth in the discussion.
Conclusion

While the dynamic between waste practices and the practices they assist represents one perspective elucidating how sorting comes to be experienced as inconvenient and negotiable, it also hints at why waste practices do not transform faster. Despite participants’ general agreement with the ethics of sorting and the observation that, compared to old categories, the new categories do not require overtly greater effort, encompassing the latter into practice remains halting.

No practice is inherently static or stable (Nicolini 2009; Shove 2003a; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). The empirical excerpt above already demonstrates this: In Frederik’s cooking, two nontraditional ingredients – cabbage and carrots – appear in the lasagna’s bolognese. These ingredients are part of Frederik’s cooking because the parents aim to feed their children more vegetables. It could seem that the teleoаffective structure of the family’s cooking is informed by general understandings (Schatzki 2002; Welch and Warde 2017) that good parenting involves feeding children healthy food. Thus, while unwrapping, rinsing, and cutting of cabbage and carrots may, in a conventional view, be considered an extra inconvenience that is unnecessary for preparing lasagna, for Frederik, this is simply part of making a proper dinner for his family.

Similar to ideas about health influencing understandings of good parenting, sustainability could be identified as a contemporary discourse influencing still more practices and, thus, enhanced through their performance. Nevertheless, the status of waste practices as secondary – performed in the service of other practices – implies that carriers’ teleoаffective engagement and attention reside elsewhere even in the moment of discarding, and that performance is mainly orchestrated by a different practice’s teleoаffectivity. Recognizing how the secondary status of waste practices implies a functional and hierarchical relationship with the primary practice governing the directionality and telos of participants’ doings expounds how the interconnectedness with other practices keeps waste practices in place.

The power of normative ideations to influence our dispositions depends upon their frequent reproduction through everyday practices (Shove 2003b). Exposure to others performing the practice and one’s own repeated performance hereof is the site where normative conceptions of what needs to be done and is an acceptable manner of doing so are embodied. As shown, the status of waste practices as secondary suggests that sorting is often sidestepped as an extra and, therefore, negotiable task during primary practices. Thus, the processes through which sorting the new categories could have been embodied as a normative standard for proper waste practices remain unrealized, whereas the conventional understandings of what needs to be sorted and what is dispensable are sustained and strengthened. Consequently, sorting the new categories of recyclables is continuously experienced as an extra, negotiable effort, not only for accomplishing primary practices but also for what is immediately perceived as an acceptable waste practice. The standard of normal waste practices is reproduced.

Even though participants express agreement with the ethics of sorting, they perceive their omission of some categories of recyclables from their practice as acceptable. Rasmus explicitly spoke about legitimating, and Bettina’s negotiations serve a similar function of justifying the omission. A deep-seated, normative understanding informs this pre-reflective perception of some efforts of sorting as being negotiable in normal waste practices, embodied through performance. This proposition contributes to our conceptual understanding of inconvenience by highlighting new aspects of this experience’s conditioning. Rather than overt efforts, an embodied distinction between negotiable and non-negotiable performances of sorting presides over which efforts enter participants’ field of perception as inconvenience. In contrast, other efforts, ingrained as obligatory parts of proper waste practice evade being subjected to reflection. While the analysis’ second section provided a perspective indicating how inconvenience is experienced – namely as a disturbance to (versus part of) that which one considers oneself doing – the first section yielded a comprehension of the fundamental conditioning of which performances of sorting are inadvertently regarded as legitimately subject to negotiation. In combination, the sections enable the apprehension that the manifestation of inconvenience in and as experience is conditioned by and refers back to the particular kind of recyclables’ sorting not being established and embodied as an obligatory part of proper waste practice.

Conceiving how observable efforts required by sorting appear less determinative of individual dispositions than the general understandings of normal and, thus, acceptable waste practice, it is relevant to consider whether supporting normalization is superior to increasing convenience as the target of endeavors to increase sorting. It could prove extremely important for policy makers, the sector’s strategic planners and communication designers, to reconsider the traditional focus on in/convenience and seek ways to frame sorting as fundamentally normal, simultaneously avoiding elevating it as something virtuous. Beyond dispute, the analysis has reiterated that normalization processes are obdurate,
even when agreement is expressed among carriers of practice. The relationship between waste practices and the primary practices they enable exposes why participants often do not arrive at the event where new normative standards of practice could otherwise have been embodied through performance. Meanwhile, it also indicates where to intervene to facilitate such performances and thereby the incorporation of more categories of recyclables into the general understanding of normal waste practices.

Even if embodied concepts of proper waste practice precede and govern what categories of recyclables enter carriers’ field of experience as inconvenient and are negotiated as such, negotiations and experiences are real and do influence dispositions that inadvertently sustain normality through reproduction in practice. The finding that the experience of inconvenience pertains less to material arrangements’ enablement of sorting than to how well or poorly these arrangements allow sorting to enable primary practices does not imply that endeavors to improve convenience are entirely irrelevant. Instead, it specifies how they may be relevant and efficient, not the least for supporting normalization.

In Frederik’s home, the rack for recyclables was two meters away from his work area, which elucidates why sorting the foil was spontaneously conceived as an elongated disturbance to his primary practice. The peels and shells, in contrast, he did sort into the Green, mounted with the bin for residuals next to where he peeled and shelled the vegetables. An installment of bins in a spot where they enable sorting to assist primary practices nearly as well as mere disposal (leaving only the extra effort of separating the waste into more than one bin) may be the reduction of inconvenience that makes carriers sort instead of negotiating. As actual engagement in practice through the bodily and mental activities entailed in the practice’s performance is the site or event where conceptions of normality are internalized, every additional act of sorting is crucial to the normalization process. Thus, while maintaining that embodied conceptions of normal practice fundamentally govern carriers’ dispositions, rather than rational calculations of overt efforts, installments that reduce inconvenience in accordance with how the current analysis informs the conditioning of this experience, may be highly relevant.

The remaining paragraphs appraise the relevance of findings to more fields of research. First, the notion of normal practices as fundamentally governing both perception and dispositions prompts us to consider a practice’s socio-temporal context and conditioning whenever we assert barriers as explanatory to what is often termed the value-action gap. Barriers for acting on pro-environmental values are found in various kinds throughout the literature on sustainable consumption (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). While barriers may rightly influence peoples’ propensity to act on values, this article’s findings indicate that only when certain actions are not already part of “normal practice” do barriers effectively influence dispositions. The generalizability of this assertion obviously needs demonstration through application in studies engaged with different kinds of barriers besides inconvenience. However, it may promise important insights prompting a critical interest in the normative conditioning of barriers themselves.

Although the purpose of this article was not to identify qualities of the experience of inconvenience but instead to explore its conditioning, the second part of the analysis offers a provisional formulation; the sense of being unnecessarily disturbed or delayed in accomplishing the ends of one’s doing. This characterization is based on identifying a functional and hierarchical relationship between waste practices as secondary and a co-occurring practice as the primary, and hence derivation of carriers’ teleoaffactive orientation. This basis suggests that the formulation possibly needs adjustment if applied to experiences of doings or arrangements that are part of a primary practice rather than of an assisting practice, paying critical attention to which practice is orchestrating the carrier’s perception of the situation and their dispositions. More evidently, inconvenience may be many things. Besides an elongating detour toward the ends of one’s doings, inconvenience can also be experienced as sensory discomfort, the strain of indispensable efforts, or emotional uneasiness for instance when failing social expectations. The latter is the case in Farbotko and Head’s (2013) study on gifting.

The authors describe events in which concerns with sustainability that usually orient participants’ dispositions are put aside to affirm and express appreciation of social relationships as such gestures are conventionally performed. Instead of offering a sustainable gift or abstaining from gifting, participants gift according to conventions. The study displays situations when the practice of gifting cannot be performed in a manner that is simultaneously sustainable and recognized as appropriate in the particular social context. In practice theoretical terms the situations depict a conflict between teleoaffectivities (e.g., acting sustainably and affirming social relationships) which cannot be reconciled in the same act of gifting and are therefore mutually exclusive. This study is likely indicative of a dynamic breaking the transition to more sustainable
consumption in a broad range of practices but differs from the case of waste sorting: Sorting is not irreconcilable with, but merely involves a detour toward participants’ ends, as given by the primary practice’s teleoaffective structure. Still, findings from this article expand our comprehension of situated negotiations such as those described in the gifting study. Whether the locus of teleoaffective contention is internal to a practice or resides in practices’ interconnectedness, embodied understandings of normal practice are likely what define the space of legitimate negotiations. This insight expounds that if sustainability stays a concern additional to the teleoaffective structure of “normal practices,” its translation into action remains volatile. Thus, this insight both edifies the somewhat staggering proliferation of sustainable variations of practices and underlines the importance of dismantling the understandings of these variations as something extra and more virtuous and instead targets normalization.

Hence, the proposition regarding normalization likely applies regardless of practices’ status as primary or secondary. In contrast, the proposition made regarding an epistemological shift of focus in endeavors to increase convenience is specific to cases of interconnected practices. While it is well-established within practice theories that practices provide and comprise resources for each other, the conceptual distinction between primary and secondary practices is a novel contribution. Distinguishing the primary practice as that which participants perceive themselves as doing and the secondary as being performed in the former’s service—allows us to identify a hierarchical relation between practices without deserting the flat ontology of practice theory. The concepts, hence, nuance our understanding of how practices may be organized in what Elizabeth Shove terms “complexes” (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) expounding why all practices in such a constellation are not equally constitutive to carriers’ dispositions, and the social phenomena that they comprise. Some practices—like waste practices—will typically be secondary, while others will be primary. Nevertheless, the status of a particular practice is not per se static but instead changeable with the complex of practices it is part of and the constituent part it performs. Obviously, these claims are tentative and need substantiation through further research, also demonstrating the conceptual distinction’s explanatory capacities beyond its application in the current study.

Notes
1. One household did not have organic waste collection.
2. Rasmus is a pseudonym. All names of participants appearing in the article are likewise pseudonyms.

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