Unpacking convergence/divergence: comparing elements, practices and conjunctions of middle-class households in Bangkok and Hanoi

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Introduction

Energy demand and accompanying greenhouse gas emissions are growing in many parts of the world, in particular in non-OECD countries. While there are still big gaps in energy demand and emissions across countries, some of these are closing rapidly. For example, certain non-OECD metropolitan areas, such as Bangkok, already have comparable levels of emissions to metropolitan areas in Europe or the US (Kennedy et al., 2009). Residential energy demand in Thailand and Vietnam – the topic and countries discussed in this paper – is also showing a (slowly) converging trend with the UK (see Figure 1).

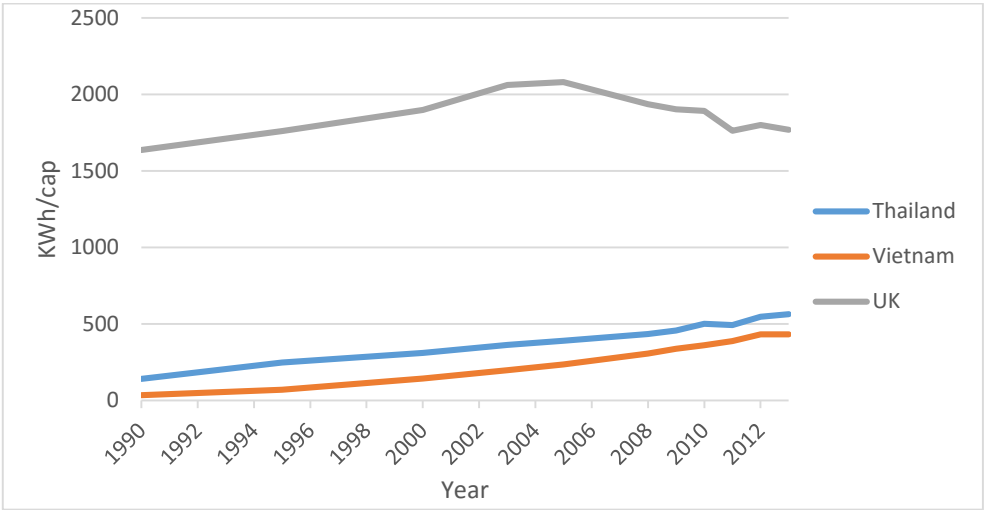

Figure 1. Development of electricity use in the residential sector per capita in Thailand, Vietnam and the UK. Based on IEA (2014)

This convergence in levels of consumption and demand has been widely discussed in social science literature, often in reference to the term globalisation (Dicken, 2011). There are three ideal-type positions in this debate: (1) the world as a whole is become more 'flat' and homogeneous, (2) the world is, was and will remain heterogeneous, due to differences in culture, geography and history, or (3) globalisation should be understood as mix between the two positions, e.g. as 'glocalisation' (Swyngedouw, 1997). This latter position would imply that there are areas of convergence and divergence and that there is a dialectical relation between the 'global' and the 'local'.

While this last position seems most plausible and supported by empirical observation, it still raises a lot of questions about the nature and quality of change, convergence and divergence. What are the

areas of convergence and divergence? What is it exactly that is converging or diverging? When we are talking about energy for example, is it energy systems, culture, objects, ideas, behaviour? Within these, what is different and what remains similar? How can we do research into the nature of convergence/divergence?

One potential entry point into these issues is to look at the nature of comparative research across social science disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology. The traditional approach in anthropology has been to focus on individual villages as unique representatives of a certain culture. Comparison would be limited or implicit.[1] On the contrary, sociology has traditionally had a stronger focus on comparison, for example of different classes, regions and countries. In this paper, we focus on theories of practice as straddling between these two disciplines. Employing a 'flat ontology', theories of practice are in a good position to draw connections between people, objects, infrastructures, and other things without making a priori assumptions about how things are related and whether they are similar or 'unique' (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 1996; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). At the same time, the lack of a notion of 'hierarchy' makes the idea of comparison also more complex. Indeed, what is/are the possible unit(s) of comparison within practice theory?

This paper aims to make a start to answer this question by zooming in on comparison in practice theory as underdeveloped aspect. It does so by outlining a possible way of comparison which distinguishes between different 'units' for comparing the dynamics of demand and discuss the methodological implications of this approach. Ultimately, the goal is to explore the possibilities of comparing energy-related practices in (very) different contexts, without lapsing into narratives about homogenisation – the world is flat, the end of history, Eurocentrism – or narratives about difference and uniqueness – strong relativism. Moreover, we believe that understanding the nature of convergence and divergence using practice theory helps to see where interventions can be made (in the global circulation of elements), e.g. focusing on infrastructure, meanings, and policy.

Empirically, we draw on recent empirical fieldwork conducted in Bangkok (Thailand) and Hanoi (Vietnam) in February-March 2016. The fieldwork consisted of 30 household interviews – 25 in Bangkok, 5 in Hanoi – with the 'urban middle class' on the use of electronically powered appliances, such as kitchenware, air-conditioners, and washing machines. We focused on the urban middle class as a rapidly growing group of people who spent at least 1/3 of their disposable income on goods and services other than basic food/shelter (Economist, 2009). This group makes up an increasing share of population and is responsible for an increasing share of energy demand in both countries. We asked interviewees about their everyday practices in the home and their use of (electric) appliances now and in their past. During the interview, a timeline with historical appliances in different houses the respondents had lived in was drawn. The interviewees also showed us around their house and their electronic appliances, which we then discussed and photographed. This paper draws on some preliminary findings and insights from this fieldwork, taking the kitchen as the key example.

Comparison in theories of practice

Despite the seeming lack of interest in comparison in theories of practice, a few recent theoretical endeavours help to think about comparison. One of them is the analogy of 'zooming in/out' by Nicolini (2012). Another one is to distinguish between bundles and plenum of practices (e.g. Schatzki (2010). In this paper, however, we draw mainly on the work and concepts developed by Shove et al. (2012) in *The Dynamics of Social Practice*. In this work, the authors distinguish between elements and practices,

[1] Arguably, this has changed with the increasing important of multi-site ethnography, recognising the importance of connections between places, people and things (Marcus, 1995; Tsing, 2005)

which we consider to be two possible 'units' of comparison. In their theorisation, practices are argued to be made up of different elements, which can roughly be divided in materials, meanings and competences.

In this article, we introduce the concept of *conjunctions* as another 'unit'. We use this to analyse how practices and elements hang together within a certain time/space. As such, we conceptualise conjunctions as interconnections not only within practices, but rather between practices and their elements.[2] Practically, this means that we can start to analyse certain spaces in the household as containers or sites of one or more conjunctions, in which various elements and practices intersect. Before we explore the value of conjunctions for comparison and understanding convergence and divergence, we first turn to the idea of comparing individual elements and comparing practices separately.

Comparing elements

In this part of the paper, we explore whether the division between different units – elements and practices – also means that we can compare them across different sites, countries and cultures. When considering energy use for example, we could try to start by isolating one of the elements and compare across different cases and contexts. For example, we can focus on the material elements – such as fridges – involved in energy-related practices (keeping things cool). Indeed, in our research we see that a clear difference between the numbers and types of fridges that people are using. For example, middle class households in Thailand sometimes have two fridges, where in the past they often had none, or just a small one. Moreover, we could draw on statistics about the number of fridges in the UK, Thailand and Vietnam, for example.

Another type of comparison that looks at individual elements would be to compare the meanings associated with the practice of keeping things cool. When asked, most people say that they have a fridge to keep their food fresh (or for other purpose, see Figure 2). However, some bought their first fridge because they saw that other people also had a fridge. One elderly man remembered that they bought their first refrigerator not so much to keep their food fresh, but they liked the idea of being modern and having cold drinks, like their neighbours and people on television. Similarly, one could look at the skills involved. Before using fridges, people would have all kinds of different ways to have access to fresh food, for example daily shopping, storing food in special food cabinets, or use fermentation processes. The fridge has changed some of these skills and made some redundant.

Figure 2. Fridge for storing cosmetics in Thailand.

[2] For a more extensive introduction to conjunctions, please see the DEMAND conference paper by Rinkinen and Smits 'Conceptualising conjunctions: Understanding change in energy related practices in urban Southeast Asia' (workshop 3 – change).

The benefits of this type of comparison, focusing on individual elements, are relatively straightforward. One can look in isolation at one or more elements constituting practices and make some comparison across time and space. However, there are also a number of shortcomings to this approach. One of them is that there is tendency to focus on tangible (material) elements over intangible ones, such as the focus on devices, objects and infrastructure. Another, more fundamental, problem is that this type of comparison is fundamentally reductionist, while practice theorists stress that practices cannot simply be reduced to their elements.

Comparing practices

Another way of comparison – to give insights in process of convergence and divergence – would be to compare across practices themselves. One way to compare practices is to differentiate between how much time practitioners devote to each practice. For example, Warde, Cheng, Olsen, and Southerton (2007) compare eating practices across five countries using time-use data. While such studies make important observations on the temporal profiles of practices, they often fail to grasp other elements and more nuanced spatial and material dimensions of practice.

The distinction between practices-as-entities and practices-as-performances is useful to consider the idea of comparing practices (Schatzki, 1996). The position of practice-as-entities suggests that practices such as sleeping, eating, cooking, travelling, are happening all over the world, which should – in principle – make it possible to compare them. The other position, practices-as-performances, suggests that practices are always locally situated and time and place-bound. This would make all practices unique and therefore – strictly speaking – also impossible to compare. After all, no practice can be the same twice, just like the Heraclitus' saying that you cannot step into the same river twice.

Taken to their extreme, these two positions are not very useful in empirical studies on comparison. If we see all practices as unique, it would be impossible to make any meaningful comparison. On the other hand, it seems that generic categories of practices – like shopping, gaming, (Figure 3) – will not take us much further either, in particular when we are interested in processes of convergence and divergence. In this article, we recognise that any type of comparison would need to conceptualise practices in between the two positions outlined above, possibly acknowledging both practices as entities as well as performance. In order to do so, we first make some observations, drawing on the idea of elements of practices again.

Figure 3. Gaming in Thailand.

The first observation is that when studying similar practices (across households, countries, etc.), there is a huge variety in the type of stuff, meanings and skills involved. In other words, the 'same' doing or saying can involve a wide variety of elements. For example, eating out is something that most people in Finland or the Netherlands (the authors' countries) would consider something special, infrequent and (often) more expensive. In Vietnam, however, most of the interviewees would either eat or buy their daily breakfast from one of their nearby shops, for pragmatic reasons (quick and cheap). This makes us aware that we should be sensitive to these differences, in particular when we compare across very different contexts.

Another observation is that the involvement of similar elements does not necessarily imply similar practices. Drawing on the example of the fridge again, it can be used for keeping food cool, but also for storing medicines and cosmetics in hot and humid countries like Thailand and Vietnam. Similarly, ideas about good and safe food feed into widely different practices. In Vietnam, concerns about food safety were often mentioned in the interviews, feeding into a variety of food practices, such as knowing the right street vendors and going to (more expensive) supermarkets (cf. Wertheim-Heck, 2015).

The above observations point to the possibilities, but also the potential problems of comparing practices. Most importantly for this paper, comparing practices provide limited insights in the processes of convergence and divergence. In order to overcome some of these limitations, we need to come up with an approach that helps us analyse elements and practices in time and space.

Comparing conjunctions

As mentioned, the idea of conjunctions emphasises how practices and elements hang together in time and space. We might think about the kitchen as a conjunction, in which different practices come together, such as cooking, eating, relaxing, and entertaining. These practices depend on a number of objects and other elements, for example cupboards, stoves, and appliances. As the above paragraphs show, it is difficult to disentangle these elements and practices. What they share, however, is that they are all are enacted within the same space, i.e. the kitchen. That said, the notion of conjunction implies that the performances in the kitchen are also necessarily connected to other practices that extend to other spaces in and outside the house, e.g. shopping for food, going to work.

Figure 4. Kitchen in Vietnam, in private house

The advantages of focusing on conjunctions is that it makes it possible to see patterns across different households. For example, certain appliances virtually always go together in Thai and Vietnamese middle class households, such as the rice cooker, the fridge and the stove (often gas, sometimes electric or induction). Keeping cool during cooking is usually done with a fan, with air conditioners more commonly found in bedrooms and sometimes living rooms. Most of the food is stored in the fridge or freezer nowadays in order to be able to buy things in advance and prevent them from spoiling or attracting insects. Traditional Thai or Vietnamese kitchens are built at the back of the house, often partly outside. This means that the smell of food does not enter the house and can leave quickly, which is useful when frying of garlic, chilies and other spices. These observations suggest that while appliances may be 'global' (such as a microwave), their role in the conjunction is more specific for the Thai or Vietnamese context.

Building on these patterns of elements and practices, conjunctions also allow us to analyse how this hanging together is related to different types of change. One of these changes is that people have generally become wealthier and have gained access to more and different appliances. This is true for most households in the two countries, but even more so for middle class households. Moreover, food is more widely available from different types of outlets and increasingly less seasonal dependent. These general trends affect the conjunctions in the kitchen (and often other spaces in the house too). More appliances means less time spent on cooking; increasing amounts of types of food and outlets leads to bigger fridges with multiple doors (for different temperatures); and busy lives and longer working hours means more meals eaten outside and more use of the microwave. These are just some examples of how these changes affect (parts of) the kitchen conjunctions in Vietnam and Thailand.

Another type of change is related to the change in housing situation. Middle class people in Bangkok and Hanoi are increasingly switching from the 'traditional' Thai and Vietnamese private houses in favour of condominium living and 'modern' private houses on housing estates (also known as 'gated communities'). This is partly because developers are playing a stronger role and are building more of these houses now, and also because land is extremely expensive in both cities (Interview with developer in Bangkok, 26-02-2016). This usually has important consequences for conjunctions in the household. Focusing on the kitchen again, condos often have kitchens (semi-)attached to the living room, and there are very limited possibilities to cook outside (although one couple managed to put a barbecue on their very small balcony). Therefore, these kitchens need extractor hoods to prevent smells from spreading through the house. Moreover, many of our interviewees reported change in their shopping practices after moving to live in a condominium. A typical example would be to go to a big supermarket every week, combined with picking up some fresh food on the way back from work a few times per week. More than one interviewee never cooked at home during the week, only in the weekends. Living in a condo therefore has an important influence on the types of appliances used, but also on the frequency and type of cooking and food shopping practices. Taking a conjunctions-perspective helps us to start connecting these changes and compare them across our field sites and other places.

Figure 5. Kitchen in Vietnamese condominium

Discussion and conclusion

This paper started off with the observation that energy demand seems to be converging, i.e. the gaps between richer and poorer countries are getting smaller, but that we do not know much about the mechanisms of convergence (or divergence, for that matter). This paper employs practice theoretical perspective to unpack different possible types of comparison, drawing on the distinction between elements, practices, and conjunctions. Drawing on some initial findings from household interviews in the Bangkok and Hanoi, we argue that while it is possible to compare different elements or practices, this poses some shortcomings. Therefore, we introduced the idea of conjunctions, emphasising how elements and practices hang together in time and space.

One of the implications of comparing conjunctions is that it becomes possible to see how elements and practices are co-dependent and co-evolving. While there is an enormous variety in the way people live, we can nonetheless distinguish some key trends. First, in all of the interviews, we can see an increasing dependence on energy-related practices. People are accumulating increasing numbers of appliances, including bigger fridges, second TVs, new kitchen appliances, etc. These appliances become part of the conjunctions in different spaces of the house, such as the kitchen, living room, bed room, etc. Second, these conjunctions are shaping and shaped by other practices beyond the household, such as transportation, shopping and working. The daily rhythms and practices and appliances lock households into new patterns of energy consumption and dependence, often higher than what it was before. Third, the change towards more 'modern' housing styles, such as private houses in gated communities and condos (apartments), is a very important factor shaping conjunctions and energy-related practices.

While the jury is out on how to conceptualise conjunctions and whether the idea of conjunctions can be more widely used, we have shown that thinking more carefully how things hang together and intersect helps us to think through some of our empirical data and start comparing across sites and countries. Throughout the paper, we have made some first analyses and comparisons, showing interesting differences and similarities within and between Thailand, Vietnam and – for the moment mainly implicitly – other countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands. More than simply an academic exercise, we can also identify some implications for policy. For example, the new conjunctions created

by the rapid construction of condominiums and housing estates, have strong repercussions for a range of practices influencing infrastructure, food systems, patterns of energy demand, water usage, and so on. Therefore, the construction of these projects extends far beyond the realm of planning authorities and private sector investors into the realm of socio-economic development at large. Government actors would do well to consider the impacts on daily life as a result of city planning.

There are also many open questions resulting from this paper, some of which we will try to answer in the subsequent analyses and publications of our DEMAND linkage project (with Wageningen University) on 'Convergence and divergence in energy-related practices: Understanding demand in the Global South'. One of the questions is, for example, how business and policy makers are involved in shaping household energy conjunctions. Walking around in Hanoi and Bangkok, one is struck by the amount of billboards advertising air conditioners, images of modern kitchens in magazines (there is one IKEA in Thailand since 2011 and plans for more, including expansion to Vietnam), flashy displays in shopping centres, and the like. How these appliances, images and ideas find their way into household conjunctions is something we would like to engage with. Meanwhile, governments in both countries are making efforts to promote energy labels and standards for appliances. More than a question about how effective these are (especially if all the fridges are 5-stars, as is the case in Thailand), the question is how these efforts are related to this creeping energy dependency in many conjunctions in Thailand, Vietnam and other emerging economies.

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