

## **Nobody was Dirty: Intervening in inconspicuous consumption of laundry routines**

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### **Abstract**

Collective conventions play a significant role in resource consumption, in particular habitual, inconspicuous consumption ingrained in daily practices. To embed pro-environmental default practices in everyday life, an understanding of materiality, people, habits and cultural context is useful. Household rituals, amongst them laundry, consume energy, water and chemicals. Applying a microscope to cleaning routines, thirty-one people in Melbourne were engaged to wear the same pair of jeans for three months without washing them. Transcripts from interviews about their experience were used to draw insights on how individual courses of actions are shaped by collective conventions. Inferences about inconspicuous consumption hidden in routines are that mundane (cleaning) practices consume (laundry) resources, yet remain engrained in daily life. The challenge is intervening to shift collective conventions and facilitate pro-environmental default practices (washing less to save resources). This paper explores some of the opportunities, in intervening into the inconspicuous consumption of laundry routines and shifting collective conventions towards low wash acceptance, with implications for other mundane resource consuming lifestyle practices.

Collective conventions

Routine

Inconspicuous consumption

Interventions

Cleanliness

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### **Inconspicuous consumption: mundane laundry routines conceal the use of water, energy and chemicals**

Resources consumed in the course of performing routine social practices are less visible than the ‘conspicuous consumption’ noted by Veblen, however these everyday, ordinary actions form a major share of resource consumption. Routines help to navigate everyday life by automating decisions and easing debilitating over-involvement in decision-making: “routines establish a secure and liveable everyday life, where we are not compelled to do the overwhelming task of reflecting on every single act”, although Warde stresses that practices are not entirely automated “[p]erformance in a familiar practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective”, and Røpke adds that people are far from passive “slaves” of routine. However, danger lies in the familiarity of routines; it renders consumption of resources less visible, “the ordinary, unspectacular dimensions of daily life... have become, to a great extent, routine, habitual and, therefore, inconspicuous practices of consumption”. The lack of reflexivity in routines poses a barrier for the inclusion of environmental considerations in carrying out daily life. Routines, while easing the navigation of daily life, conceal the consumption of environmentally critical resources. Potential lies in shifting routines to enable recruitment of populations to pro-environmental practices, pending an understanding of how routines are formed, and how they can be appropriated.

Laundry routines provide an instance of inconspicuous consumption, hiding the use of water, energy and chemicals in an otherwise ordinary practice. Laundry routines are a function of habit: “[p]eople wash clothes because they are accustomed to doing so. Routine and a sense of appropriate performance constitutes a further motivation and for those in the way of changing their sheets every two weeks or every six months, such periodicity has a momentum of its own: they simply have to wash” (Shove, 2003a, p.126). Laundry is performed as a matter-of-course, differently by everyone, yet all more or less unthinkingly in everyday life, as noted by columnist John Thwaites “I have never given any thought to simply washing less. Sometimes clothes are thrown in the washer simply because it’s that time of the week”. Interventions that address inconspicuous consumption of resources, hidden in laundry routines provide the potential to reduce environmental impact of garment use, which is particularly significant as washing is the most environmentally intense phase in the life cycle of clothing, from production through to disposal. Current cleanliness conventions operate at a far higher level than those required for hygiene; closing the gap between basic sanitation and cleanliness practices promises significant resource savings, but requires an intervention into accepted ways of doing to engage populations in alternative low washing routines.

Intervening in collective conventions is complicated and unpredictable, but potentially useful in attempting to reverse unsustainable paradigms. There is variety in the scale and approach of interventions, from national public awareness campaigns, to friends sharing ways of doing. Interventions are useful in interrupting undesired conventions, however they are ongoing and volatile, and outcomes are hard to predict. Interventions are like intersecting and overlapping ripples in a wider pond of practices: “[n]ot one moment of intervention, but an ongoing sequence in which adjustments are made as environmental conditions change, these changes being, in part, the outcome of previous interventions”. Planned interventions contend with a variety of factors that shape outcomes: the complexity of human actions and motivations makes it difficult to speculate on the impact of interventions, or distinguish causal factors of desired outcomes. Systems theorists have developed complex models to explain outcomes of interventions, yet the area remains ‘slithery’. All that would-be-influencers can do is cast informed ‘impulses’ and then measure the waves to try and understand the best leverage points to direct the next intervention. As the domain of interventions is further explored, an

understanding of disrupting collective conventions is slowly emerging. Notwithstanding the current lack of understanding and unpredictable nature of interventions, they could be valuable tools in disrupting collective conventions, routines, and their attendant inconspicuous consumption.

I conceptualise collective conventions, routine and inconspicuous consumption as triple tiered. At the top, collective conventions are shared accepted ways of doing, encompassing materiality, skills, images and cultural context, and pervade all aspects of life. Routines are a function of collective convention, the automated carrying-out of accepted ways of doing. Inconspicuous consumption is a function of routines, the resources consumed as a matter of course. These three tiers are inter-active and simultaneous, changing across time and location. I see potential in intervening into collective conventions to change routine and reduce inconspicuous consumption. Understanding collective conventions as determining routines provide sustainability potential: by initiating conventions that generate pro-environmental routines, inconspicuous consumption can be disrupted.

In this paper I share my experience of intervening in laundry practices to save water and energy, and explore some of the implications of disrupting inconspicuous consumption. To interrupt the accepted way of maintaining garments I engaged thirty-one participants to wear the same pair of jeans five days a week for three months without using water, energy or chemicals to wash them. This is a small-scale study, with the modest aim of gaining insight into how a group experiences an intervention into collective conventions. I approached this intervention from the vantage point of practices being less responsive to external pressures, attempting to elicit change from within the study. I set up a legitimating 'special needs situation', participating in a research project, to engage practitioners in creating alternative water, energy and chemical saving practices. While this environment is artificial, it was temporally located in the participants' life, interacting with other elements of everyday living, thus providing insights into intervening in routines that hold true in the real world. By discussing the participants' experience, their self awareness and the way that they were able to reflect on their practice, I conclude that interventions hold potential for interrupting collective conventions, the routines that they permit and the inconspicuous consumption concealed therein, although I stop short of attempting to define the continuum between mindful engagement and shifting collective conventions.

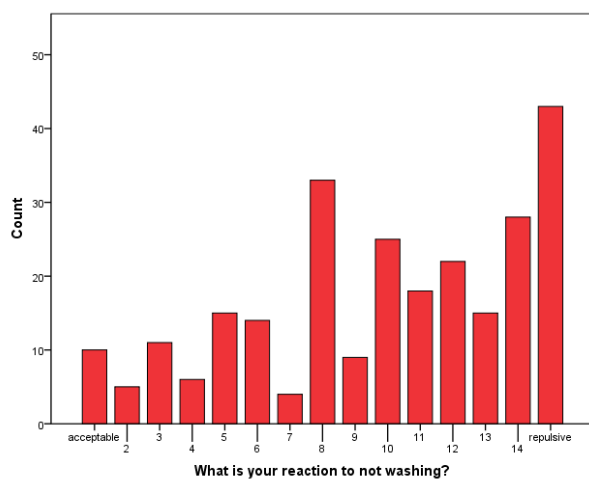
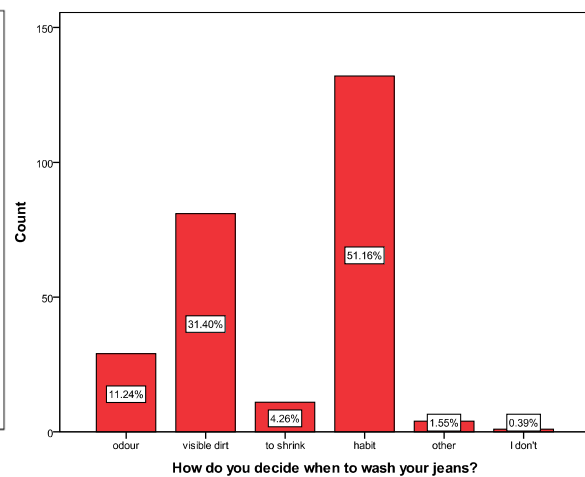
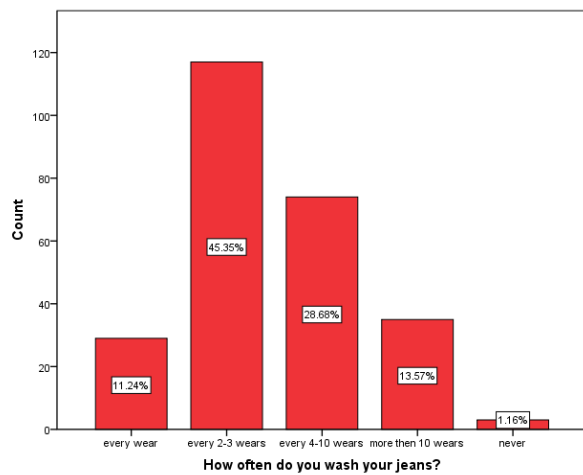
### **Intervening in cleanliness collective conventions**

Washing less to conserve resources a prima vista seems to be extreme ("what will these dirty hippies suggest next?"), however there is already growing concern around escalating laundry routines. Shove explored some of the implications around resources used in pursuing everyday life expectations *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience*, criticising laundry as "consuming copious quantities of energy and water". Rigby further criticises laundering expectations: "Clothes laundry is a commonplace activity in most households in the UK. Wearing unclean clothes is a social taboo. Yet behind this everyday routine there are some major resource, pollution and social problems.". Escalating cleanliness routines use time, water, energy and chemicals, yet offer no obvious increased sanitary wellbeing. A Canadian student, Josh Le, wore the same pair of jeans for over a year without washing them and found that "bacteria growth was virtually the same from the jeans after 15 months with no washing, compared to two weeks after being washed". University of Alberta Professor of textile science, Rachel McQueen, swabbed various areas of Josh Le's jeans, as well as testing water used to wash the jeans. Her analysis demonstrated similar counts of bacteria between fifteen months and eleven days, leading her to conclude that bacteria growth on unwashed clothing reaches a plateau that is not harmful to human health. These researchers all allude to cleanliness being a cultural

Tullia Jack Nobody was dirty: intervening in inconspicuous consumption of laundry routines convention, rather than a physical state. I used this awareness of cleanliness to fuel my intervention into a participant groups' inconspicuous consumption in laundry routines.

My intervention was conducted during my Master of Philosophy research into the use phase of fashion at The University of Melbourne. I enlisted thirty-one people to wear the same pair of jeans for three months without washing them, and I also joined the study. These people were recruited via social media and snowballing, posting a call for applications on different web platforms, and distributing a press release to Melbourne based lifestyle publications. The thirty-one were selected from a pool of seventy-nine applications, so I was able to achieve some variety in ages, sexes and occupations of participants: there were fifteen females, plus myself, and sixteen males. The youngest was eighteen, the oldest fifty-six with median age of thirty-two. The intervention began with the provision of a new pair of jeans at a one-hour briefing session. I set the context for the study, sharing information about the environmental impact of washing and provided some examples of other people who didn't wash their jeans. To intensify and standardize the experience I also set constraints; wearing the jeans at least five days per week for three months without consuming water, energy or chemicals. During the three months there was contact between the participants via a facebook group where they could share occurrences and create community around their shared not washing experience. This also captured their experiential arc of highs and lows during the study period. The aim of the wearing exercise was to enable practices that reduce the resource intensity of garment maintenance; it also, perhaps more interestingly, provided insight into how people experience interventions into collective conventions. An exit interview was completed with the participants at the end of the three months, comments from interviews are interlaced with facebook comments to provide insight into how participants experienced being part of an intervention, and how they constructed their personal narratives and realities about washing less to save water, energy and chemicals.

The success of the intervention was measured against previous empirical research where I surveyed 263 people in Melbourne to find out more about current laundry routines. The collected comments showed a myriad of approaches to laundry. Some people washed frequently and indiscriminately "*I wash everything and anything after wearing it once, even if I only wore it for a couple hours.*" Some washed in a time based routine "*Basically washing everything once a week.*" Others only did laundry when they ran out of clean clothes "*I don't have a routine, once I run out of underwear I do laundry.*" The survey also allowed me to gather data on the (self reported) frequency of washing, motivators for washing, and perception of washing less. Most people washed their jeans after every 2-3 wears, washed because of habit and thought that not washing was 'repulsive'.



Against this baseline of current laundry practice, the participants in my study enacted divergent behaviour. Part of the enabling process for deviating from the collective convention of cleanliness as revealed by my surveys, was legitimising the desired practice through the use of stories about others, like Josh Le, not washing jeans. The participants felt more comfortable when they saw precedents of the desired courses of action, and had a cultural reference to begin the construction of their own narratives around not washing their jeans.

At the conclusion of the study, I interviewed each participant to find out what happened when they did not wash their jeans for three months. Their reflection on their experience, including intangible elements, was surprisingly perceptive; I consider this ability to be a result of their positioning within the research as co-creators of knowledge through the tone of all communication. We discussed their washing practices before the intervention, the physicality of the jeans, what they did during the study and their experience of not-washing the jeans. Reviewing their own experience, participants showed differing levels of self awareness, and this method offered some useful insight into how participants saw their own practices. During the interview it was revealed that the majority of participants (thirty) did not wash the jeans, and did not find the experience challenging. In fact, most communicated their surprise at how easy it was. The interviews demonstrated that the expectation of not washing was more disgusting than the actuality, hinting that there may be a perception barrier that an intervention may need to challenge. The facebook platform elicited a different discourse on jean cleanliness, co-created by the people who were immersed in the alternative practice. There was discussion that

Tullia Jack Nobody was dirty: intervening in inconspicuous consumption of laundry routines challenged the accepted norm that washing is better than not washing: community and continued support can help to establish context for, and fidelity to, practices. This study provided participants space for mindful reflection on ‘doxa, the taken-for-granted rules of common sense, which we never question’ . Participants relished questioning collective conventions: Simon enjoyed “*getting myself out of an irrational habit. I like not doing things because they're a habit, or culturally the right thing*” although not everyone is able to be so reflexive, and engaging entire populations in mindful consideration of practice poses obvious obstacles of scale, aside from being overwhelming at the individual level. The facebook page also revealed a fluctuation in attitude from the participants who felt different obstacles or ‘rough patches’, moments when wearing the jeans was undesirable. By the exit interview respondents unanimously signalled their intention to continue washing their own jeans less, suggesting that elicited practices, in the sense of objects, skills and images , continue beyond the sphere of the intervention jeans and time frame. This may be conceptualised as a disruption of the links between the elements of practice through reflection, ‘washing frequently’ and ‘nice jeans’ may no longer be connected elements (image and material). This observation could also just reflect that participants were trying to give ‘pleasing’ answers. As Jackson alluded earlier, it proved hard to disentangle cause, effect, barrier, driver and narratives around the altered practices. The experience of the participants and their alternative practices and narratives provides fertile, if complex, discussion matter from which to cultivate some concepts of interrupting resource-consuming routines.

The alternative practices that emerged during the intervention raised several interesting insights into the way people experience interventions. Some participants did experiment with alternative strategies to keep their jeans fresh without using “water, energy or chemicals,” however many did not, preferring to keep wearing the jeans without specific cleanliness efforts, developing routines that incorporated wearing the jeans without washing them. Participants displayed an air of pride when describing the way that they wore the jeans, and the different ways that they stored the jeans, an affinity with their alternate routine was obvious.

Morgen “*Every single night without fail I turned them inside out. I have a cupboard with a door that stays open that sits near the window. Every night I'd turn them inside out and hang them over there.*”

Luke “*I hang them up by the belt loop on the back, sometimes inside out if I think it needs it at night. If you fold it up and put it away in the cupboard any smells get worse, but if you air them out they get better.*”

Jeremiah “*I'd just air them out if I could, just let them get some sun, try and do that once per week.*”

Self-determination is a strong element in peoples’ ownership of their actions; by stating the problem, and constraints (not using water, energy or chemicals) my participants were stimulated to develop their own alternative practices, and these practices were more deeply engrained as a result. I have not yet had the time to do a longitudinal study to see how these practices have endured: the relationship between affinity and endurance needs further research. Witnessing the affinity of my participants to their non-washing routines, I infer that in the domain of interventions, alternative practices elicited can have stronger affinity with the practi-

tioner if that person, and their community, develops their own solutions in response to problems or restraints.

### **Understanding collective conventions**

The alternative practices developed lead to further questions around collective cleanliness conventions: participants were invoked to be critically reflective of their practices and discuss what motivated them to wash their garments. *“Social rules, predispositions, common sense and even embodied feelings can all change when they are brought out of the habitus, into the daily world of speech, debate, manipulation, and argument”* . Because of their immersion in the non-washing practices the participants had heightened sensitivity to cultural influences enforcing their existing practices. They were able to provide some reflections on interpreting, applying and repeating what they guessed to be normal levels of cleanliness that caused their previous cleanliness practices to solidify. Participants discussed a variety of cleanliness motivators, which I attempted to categorise into universal themes; some of the obvious ones, habit, convenience, family, and status are easily recognisable. Some less tangible and possibly more interesting motivators of cleanliness practices included community censorship and the self-interpretation of community expectations. These motivators of practice were hard to define and on the periphery of participants’ awareness, but resonated with the participants. Emily *“we don’t have good mechanisms in place for knowing what can and should be washed all the time.”* Gavin *“Every care is taken by the person who is affected [by body odour], to prevent the perpetrator from knowing.”* People rely on unspoken signals to set the standard on cleanliness. Ted *“People at work are usually quite clean.”* Smell is a socially delicate subject not readily discussed, *“As an environmental issue, clothes washing is delicately poised”* . The opaque nature of community expectations leads to hyper-vigilant self-auditing of personal cleanliness. Alexandra was worried about body smells *“It’s just ... that could be a bad smell to somebody.”* Chris *“Even a look and then your imagination runs wild.”* Ted *“I don’t like to feel like I’m standing out.”* Contrary to Wilks’ suggestion above, I suspect collective conventions are deep, unpredictable and very strong, and observed my participants’ struggle to engage fully with concepts on the periphery of consciousness, like community censorship and self-auditing. It was difficult for participants to pinpoint what collective conventions were, what they meant in their own lives or illustrate them with stories from their experience. Moments of contrast did help in eliciting reflection on collective conventions: providing a different example, like historical cleanliness expectations , gave participants a point to compare to their own experience and become more self aware. Even though engaging people to reflect on their own practice is inexact it provides exciting possibilities in understanding laundering conventions. I found that people are generally unmindful of collective conventions in everyday life, yet that collective conventions attract strong adherence. Understanding collective conventions as practice determinants, suggests real potential in reducing inconspicuous consumption by initiating conventions that engender pro-environmental routines. By introducing not washing as an accepted way of doing, significant quantities of resources could be saved.

Although it did not intervene in collective conventions of an entire population, my study intervened in a micro-community of the thirty-one participants. This experience with small-scale

Tullia Jack Nobody was dirty: intervening in inconspicuous consumption of laundry routines interventions revealed some of the limitations and opportunities of using interventions as a practice transition strategy. I found that interventions where constraints are set, rather than desired actions dictated, enable practitioner-developed solutions to problems, and increase affinity with pro-environmental practices. Small-scale interventions can set up environmentally desirable ways of doing, and act as a living example for up-scaling. Interventions can also reveal stimulators of practices, and show some of the areas where influences intersect, for example both habit and status add impetus to cleaning routines. Intervening into laundry routines was time and energy intensive: recruiting people to not wash their jeans required high organisation and consideration, before and during the process. To reach more than thirty people in a similar manner would require high investment of resources: mindful engagement of national populations is unprecedented and implausible for the plethora of inconspicuous consumption in everyday routines. The niche alternative practice elicited in this study is unlikely to attract the mainstream population required for significant environmental benefits. More niches are rejected than adopted. Further limitations of interventions arise from the still emerging understanding of the way that desired practices endure, post-intervention; populations may return to previous practices, or morph into new and unexpected practices. The fluidity of changing practices holds potential in transitioning towards sustainability, contingent on further understanding of the way collective conventions are formed.

### **Concluding remarks**

This intervention showed that collective conventions can be subverted, and alternative practices enabled through mindful engagement of a niche group, and that in so doing, routines and associated inconspicuous consumption can be disrupted. In the uptake of new ways of doing mindful engagement and following collective conventions intersect. A continuum between mindful engagement and altering collective conventions is apparent: interventions, like not washing jeans, recruit early adopters to trial and model new practices, but it is through mainstream awareness, interpretation, application and repetition that these altered practices become accepted ways of doing, the new collective conventions. Providing information through my study, briefing and social media, acted to stimulate and support the desired courses of action engaging practitioners at an individual level. Legitimation granted by the study allowed participants space to consider their laundry routines and social impunity to defy established collective conventions, although I remain unconvinced that we were able to be fully reflexive of all of the causal influences on our laundering practices. Active engagement of a few did change our collective convention of laundry, however it is not yet clear the extent to which changes in niche groups can disseminate to larger populations required for collective conventions to shift. This small-scale intervention into inconspicuous consumption in laundry routines raised interesting considerations around how collective conventions shape practice, what influences collective conventions and begs the question of how to execute an intervention into collective conventions.



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## **References**