

A PRACTICE THEORETICAL APPROACH ON RETAIL FOOD WASTE – ANALYSING WASTE CAUSING PRACTICES IN BREAD AND BAKERY GOODS

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to explore how waste becomes in food retailing by drawing on the practice theoretical approach. While most of the research done on retail food waste concentrates on quantification, this paper seeks to move beyond statistics and trace the origins of the waste. The research illustrates how food waste occurs within the work practices carried out in bread and bakery products section in a hypermarket. It reveals the lack of employee agency in getting rid of waste while highlighting the need to understand waste as a qualitative phenomenon.

The question of food waste reduction is highly relevant (EU 2012; EU Waste Directive 2008/98/EG). Varying on the source, approximately one-third (Gustavsson, Cederberg, Sonesson, van Otterdijk & Meybeck 2011) or even half (Parfitt, Barthel & Macnaughton 2010: 3079) of the food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted each year. This counts to at least 1.3 billion tons of food waste per year (Gustavsson et al. 2011), meaning that a huge amount of resources and edible food is wasted each year.

According to Parfitt and his colleagues (2010: 3079), the greatest potential for food waste reduction in the developed world lies with retailers, food service and consumers. However, the research done on food waste has concentrated more on consumers than on retailing. In addition, the retailing literature has been dominated by quantification approach to food waste (Eriksson, Strid & Hansson 2012 & 2014; Gregson & Crang 2010: 1026).

While Parfitt et al. (2010) and Gustavsson et al. (2011) have calculated international estimations on food waste, also national perspectives have been offered. In Finland it has been estimated that approximately 65-75 million kilos of food is wasted each year by Finnish retail and wholesale business (Silvennoinen, Koivupuro, Katajajuuri, Jalkanen & Reinikainen 2011). Similarly, the estimate for food waste in the retail

sector in Sweden is 83,5 million kilos per year and for Denmark 40-46 million kilos per year (Stenmarck, Hanssen, Silvennoinen & Katajajuuri 2011: 22).

While numbers provide information on waste amounts, they do not offer adequate knowledge on the reasons of the dissipation, and do not give insight on how waste could be prevented. In order to prevent waste we need to explore the processes that cause food waste. Hence the aim of this research is to grow understanding on the practices that cause waste. While previous research on retail waste has concentrated on waste management on supply-chain and company level, the present study adopts a practice based understanding (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005) on waste. The theoretical lens is borrowed from the field of consumption studies, where Evans (2012) and Gregson et al. (2007) have relied on practice theory to understand more profoundly why something becomes waste and how this happens. Here, instead of household practices, the focus is put on the practices carried out in retailing, in grocery stores.

Practice theory distinguishes practice as an entity and as performance. Practice as entity is conceptualized as temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings (Warde 2005) and comprises also working practices. Practice as performance means the performance of actualizing and carrying out the practice. The interest here lies in the work practice as an entity, and how it ends up producing waste.

To specify what constitutes practice, the research relies on Actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005; Law 1992) and the conceptualization of Shove et al. (2012), in its position towards material. In addition to bodily and mental activities, practice is constituted from different elements, human and non-human, meaning and materiality, big and small. The focus is symmetrically on all the elements of the practice. In this study, practice is conceptualized as an assemblage of doings, meanings, and material that are connected in a network.

In the case of retail waste, it is not only the carriers of the retail store practices, the employees, who cause retail waste. Instead, waste is here seen as embedded within and occurring as part of work practices (Warde, 2005). Wasting is hardly a practice in its self, but rather a part or a by product of the work practice. All the elements of the practice, namely doings, meanings and materials, are entangled and collectively (re)produce waste. It is the action net of work practices that causes waste.

The principal implication of practice theory is that the sources of behavioral change lie in the development of practices instead of individuals' attitudes, values and beliefs (Warde 2005: 140). Recognizing how food turns into waste is the key to undo the turn, to 'turn back' and prevent food waste from occurring. After recognizing the waste causing practices it is possible mitigate the amount of waste by thinking through and reorganizing practices.

By investigating practices carried out in the bread and bakery section of the hypermarket the researcher seeks to explore how waste becomes materially, socially, and spatially waste. The results are based on empirical data gathered in the bread and bakery products section in a hypermarket of a Finnish grocery store chain. Shadowing (Czarniawska 2007) and “go-along” (Kusenbach 2003) methods were elected as suitable methodological frameworks to give direction and guidance to the data collection. Emphasis is on observation, and researcher prompted in situ conversations.

The data illustrates how food waste occurs within the work practices carried out in bread and bakery products section in a hypermarket. It reveals the lack of employee agency in cutting down waste levels while highlighting the need to understand waste as a qualitative phenomenon while aiming to cut down waste levels and striving for sustainability.

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