

Agencing practices: a historical exploration of shopping bags

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the dynamic process of agencing through a practice-based historical analysis of shopping bags. This paper draws upon practice-based studies regarding consumption and markets and is based on an archive study of a Swedish packaging magazine from 1935-2013. The paper analyses the transformation of shopping bags from their introduction in shopping to the current situation of them being taken for granted, but at the same time, contested. The paper shows how shopping bags over time have been included in and contributed to the shaping of different practices and have been, in turn, transformed by these practices. The case of shopping bags suggests that agencing is a process in which capacity to act is acquired by continuous arranging of elements in different practices, as well as adjustments of these elements in relation to each other.

Keywords: Actor-network theory, Practice Theory, Retailing, Shopping

Introduction

The notion of *agencements* has been introduced as an important tool for analysis of the setup and configuration of economic actors in markets (Callon 2005). Applications have included studies of financial markets (Hardie and MacKenzie 2007), advertising (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013), and food consumption (D'Antone and Spencer 2015). Although the term was proposed to capture both the action of assembling agential configurations and the resulting entities, the dynamic character of this process has not yet been sufficiently investigated (Cochoy and Trompette 2013). To this end, this paper proposes a situated approach to *agencements* on the level of mundane practices in everyday markets.

Two research streams that build on the notion of *agencements* and its roots in actor-network theory have paid particular attention to practices in mundane markets. One stream of research has developed out of studies of consumption practices (e.g. Shove and Pantzar 2005) and the other from studies of market practices (e.g. Araujo, Finch, and Kjellberg 2010). Although these two streams of research are clearly overlapping, there have so far been few attempts at combining them (for exceptions, see Brembeck, Cochoy, and Moisander 2015). To contribute to the understanding of the process of *agencing*, this paper attempts to connect these streams through the exploration of one of the most mundane objects in consumption and markets: the shopping bag.

The shopping bag is an object used for multiple purposes (Prendergast, Ng, and Leung 2001) and whose extensive presence is paradoxical. Many would agree that shopping

bags are part of unsustainable practices, but cities over the world continue to be full of them. According to Hawkins (2010), shopping bags have become a "matter of concern" (cf. Latour 2005; see also Reijonen and Tryggstad 2012; Geiger et al. 2014). Hawkins (2009:43) again:

... bags have changed, they've become contested matter, a site of controversy over their uses and impacts. As scientists discover marine life choking on bags and environmental activists document their endless afterlife in landfill, they have been transformed from innocuous disposable container to dangerous threat to the environment.

This illustrates a recent agencing process involving the shopping bag, transforming it from something "innocuous" to a "dangerous threat". This paper goes back to the introduction of shopping bags and traces how the shopping bag have been involved in processes of agencing throughout its career. The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the dynamic process of agencing through a practice-based historical analysis of shopping bags. This analysis shows how shopping bags have, over time, been included in and contributed to the shaping of different practices and, in turn, have been transformed by these practices. The case of shopping bags demonstrates how agencing is a process in which agency is acquired and sustained by the continuous *arranging* of the elements of practices, accompanied by continuous *adjusting* of these elements in relation to other elements of the practices in which they are included.

The next section reviews previous literature concerning agencements and practice-based approaches. The section thereafter presents the methods employed. After that, a history of

shopping bags is presented. This is followed by a discussion of what may be learned about agencing from the account of shopping bags. Finally, conclusions about the process of agencing and some implications for future research on consumption and markets are presented.

A practice-based approach to agencing

Callon (2005, 2007) borrowed the term "agencement" from Deleuze and Guattari (1998) to analyze the configuration of agents. According to Callon, the notion of agencements "conveys the idea of a combination of heterogeneous elements that have been carefully adjusted to one another" (2007:319). In his formulation, agencements "are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration" (Callon 2007:320). The notion of agencement further suggests "that actors should not be seen as having fixed natures or fixed characteristics" (MacKenzie 2009:22); instead, their "nature" or "characteristics" are outcomes that depend on the elements and the relationship among the elements with which they are engaged. Although the term "agencement" was introduced to capture both the process of assembling the configuration and the resulting entity, Cochoy and Trompette (2013; see also Cochoy 2014) suggest that the process aspect has not yet been sufficiently covered, and propose a move from agencement to agencing to capture how specific agencements are arranged and achieve capacity to act. This paper seeks to do so by drawing on the practice-based literature on mundane consumption and markets.

Practice-based approaches have become increasingly common in the social sciences (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001), including studies of consumption (e.g.

Shove and Pantzar 2005; Warde 2005; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012; Brembeck, Cochoy, and Moisander 2015), markets, and marketing (e.g. Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007a; Araujo 2007; Araujo, Finch, and Kjellberg 2010; Zwick and Cayla 2011). The scope in practice-based approaches "is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time" (Giddens 1984:2). A practice can be defined as "a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other" (Reckwitz 2002:249).

Practice-based approaches to the study of consumption have provided new conceptual resources and directed attention to ordinary, everyday consumption. They have put relatively less emphasis on the acquisition of goods in favor of their use (Shove et al. 2007)¹. Such studies have, among other things, investigated geocaching (Boulaire and Cova 2013), cultural ideals (Holttinen 2014), cleaning (Martens and Scott 2005), consuming bodies (Valtonen 2013), and mobility (Hansson 2015). Studies of mundane consumption practices have emphasized that these are often integrated with other practices (Halkier, Katz-Gerro, and Martens 2011), highly routinized (Reckwitz 2002), tactical rather than strategic (de Certeau 1984), and objective and embodied (Korkman 2006).

Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) address the dynamics of everyday social practices, such as how such practices merge, what elements they are made of, and how they are reproduced. They suggest that practices are constituted by a combination of elements, and "emerge, persist, and disappear as links between their defining elements are made and broken" (ibid. 21). Elements can also be "crossing points" that connect practices to other practices (Reckwitz 2002; Gram-Hanssen 2011). While practices are dynamic, elements

are often more durable:

... practices are always in the process of formation, re-formation and deformation. By contrast, elements are comparatively stable and are, as such, capable of circulating between places and enduring over time (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012:44).

Thus, in the practice-based literature on consumption, objects such as the shopping bag are considered as material components of practices (e.g. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). As such, they are integrated with competences, meanings, and other materials, and can also be included in multiple practices. Thus, objects as well as humans are "carriers of practice" (cf. Reckwitz 2002:256; Ingram, Shove, and Watson 2007:14).² As Shove et al. (2007: 13) argue, objects are not passive means to carry out practices, but "active co-constitutive elements of the practice itself." This view of objects as part of and co-constitutive of practices is well-aligned with the notion of agencements, and given the attention paid to mundane objects and the dynamics of practices, the practice approach to consumption can be useful in further developing our understanding of agencing.

Another stream of practice-based research has developed in studies of markets and marketing (e.g. Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007a; Araujo, Kjellberg, and Spencer 2008; Kjellberg 2008; Araujo, Finch, and Kjellberg 2010; Zwick and Cayla 2011). Here, market agents are viewed as "hybrid collectives whose capacities to act depend on how they are being constituted," and the approach emphasizes that "[m]arket objects and devices are central in this and are both shaped by and shape market practices (situated performances of interlinked activities)" (Geiger, Kjellberg, and Spencer 2012:6). This stream of

research has put relatively more emphasis on the exchange of goods rather than their use (but see, e.g., Mallard 2012). Studies have problematized notions of market practitioners such as marketers and consumers (e.g. du Gay 2004; Andersson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg 2008; Hagberg and Kjellberg 2010; Cova and Cova 2012). Empirically, these studies have explored the plurality of mundane markets such as retailing (Cochoy 2007), subsistence markets (Lindeman 2012), consumer credit (Deville 2014), and self-tracking (Pantzar and Ruckenstein 2015). Other contributions have explored the various mundane "market-things" that equip actors, such as consumers, in particular ways (e.g. Cochoy 2007, 2010). The markets-as-practice literature has also attended to how objects are shaped by and shape market practices. For instance, Finch and Geiger (2010) distinguish market objects from marketing objects, with the former referring to "goods of exchange, of buying and selling" and the latter to "products of making and using" (p. 245; see also Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002).

Combining both of these practice-based research streams with the notion of agencements, this paper aims to further develop our understanding of the process of agencing. However, the approach used in this paper will differ slightly from these practice-based studies. Instead of taking a particular practice as the starting point and analyzing how it includes different types of elements, the paper traces how a particular object has been integrated in different practices, contributed to their transformation, and been transformed by them. By keeping an object rather than a practice in focus, the object's capacity to integrate, combine, and connect these practices in everyday practical situations comes to the fore. The next section will discuss how the tracing of this object was performed.

Methodology

This paper is based on an archive study of a trade magazine (cf. Cochoy 2009, 2010). The study is part of an on-going project on consumer logistics and mundane technologies for moving things from the point of purchase to the point of consumption. The data consist of material published by a Swedish packaging trade magazine from 1935 to 2013. The name of the magazine has changed over the years, from *Svensk Emballage och Förpackningstidskrift* (1935-1961) to *Svensk emballagetidskrift* (1962-1969) and *Nordemballage* (1970-2013).

Using a single source in the form of one specific trade magazine can, of course, be criticized. But as Cochoy (2013) argues, using a single source offers the ability to account for changes from a specific point of view. It prevents the researcher from using the bird's eye view, which no actor has at the time the events are unfolding. Thus, the method used in this paper can be considered a form of "peephole" method. It gives a very narrow view of the events, but allows you to maintain that view for a long time.

One advantage of this particular magazine is that shopping bags were of greater importance for it than for trade magazines in general. Thus, although shopping bags have now and then become a focus of other magazines and other forms of media, this particular Swedish magazine has continuously, but not exclusively, focused on shopping bags over the years, regardless of how much interest they have attracted elsewhere. The decision to focus on this particular Swedish magazine was made for several reasons. First, although shopping bags are used all over the world, it is important to start in a particular time and place to be able to trace the particular transformations as they unfold, and to be more locally sensitive. Second, it was possible to access the full collection of

the magazine during the whole period of interest. In addition, although the magazine was clearly national at its start, it has, like many other industry magazines over time, become more and more international in its coverage (though still published in Swedish), which is still reflected in the name of the magazine.

A question that arises when examining a complete archive collection is what to search for. For practical reasons, it is hard to approach the archive with complete openness to what may emerge. However, there are drawbacks to approaching the archive with a very specific theme or category in mind, such as "plastic shopping bags," because such categories do not just suddenly appear in their final form. For this study, the themes used for the inclusion of articles could be described as various "things" and "activities" related to the transport of items, such as groceries, whether performed by the consumers themselves, retailers, or some third party, as well as other types of usages of these things.

Printed copies of the collection have been reviewed manually and scrolled page by page. All article pages related to the theme of the study were selected and photographed for further analysis. All photographs have been assigned a number and documented in a register with the volume, issue, and page on which they are found, together with a short description. The total number of selected pages was 1,050. In a second round of analysis, these pages were reviewed and analyzed chronologically and thematically, forming the basis of the narrative presented next.

A story of shopping bags

How has the use of shopping bags evolved from the 1930s until today? Based on the analysis of the archive material, discussed above, the sections below present six practices

into which shopping bags have been integrated, which have contributed to the bags' transformation, and to whose transformation shopping bags have contributed. The narrative starts with the introduction of bags into shopping practice, connected to the emergence of self-service, and continues through the practices of carrying, transporting, advertising, disposing of, and selling, and ends with an epilogue on the contemporary use of shopping bags.

Shopping

Although there is a long pre-history of bags in retailing (1946(10):152), the starting point here is in the 1930s. A 1939 article (1939(7):128-130) presented paper bags of different sizes and designs that could be used for different purposes in retailing. However, at the time in Swedish retail stores, paper bags were mainly used in a similar way as cornets or paper for wrapping and packaging single goods at the point of purchase. For smaller quantities, the goods were then put in the customer's (or a representative's) own basket or bag, and for larger quantities they were commonly delivered to customers' homes by a representative of the store.³

Although it took another decade before the first self-service stores appeared in Sweden, there were already important changes taking place. The most notable change at the time was the increasing use of pre-packaged goods. Many magazine articles discussed the superiority of producer-packaged goods compared to in-store, retailer packaging. The costs for wrapping was an important share of the total costs for the retailer, as illustrated in the cartoon below, where the consumer wants more wrapping than the retailer believed he could afford.

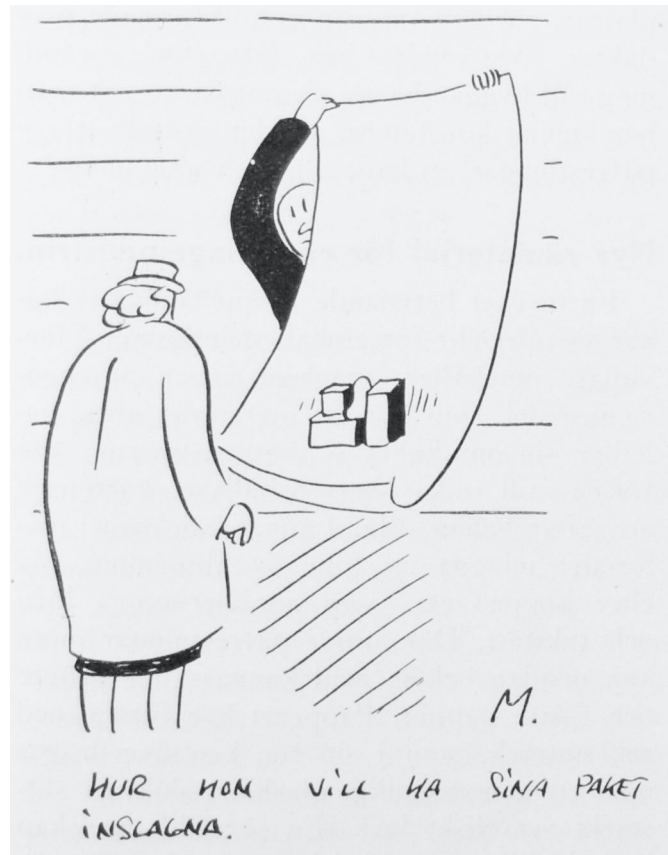


Figure 1 “How does she want her packages wrapped” (1945(2):25).

The increased proliferation of pre-packaged goods implied that the procedure of wrapping goods in the store was increasingly replaced by the wrapping of packaged products. Through these changes the paper bags were transformed from containers for packing single goods to containers for carrying many different (packaged) goods. However, as the transformation to self-service and the accompanying use of pre-packaged goods accelerated, the practices of wrapping with paper and using paper bags developed in completely different directions. The former declined steadily, while the

latter became the object of remarkable innovations and widespread use.

In 1949, the first article about self-service appeared in the magazine (1949(1):14-15), discussing the opening of the first co-operative self-service stores in the country. In addition to the pre-packaged goods, self-service was also accompanied by other important changes in shopping, such as shopping carts and baskets that enabled consumers to move around in the store. This change towards letting consumers do more *in* the store also implied an ability to carry the goods *from* the store.

Carrying

One important enabler of carrying goods was the attachment of handles. For example, breweries introduced multi-packs and crates, which not only facilitated carrying relatively heavy items, but also made it possible to buy (and sell) more of the product at the same time: "A 'home carrying package' allows the consumer to buy more of the product than he has imagined being able to carry home" (1955(4):52-54). Paper bags with handles were used as one form of multi-pack for beverages (1956(12):167), but increasingly also as a carrier for any type of product, not previously chosen by the manufacturer or the retailer. Thus, bags gradually moved from containing and carrying specific products to becoming a more generic form of container used for different products. The magazine described the shopping bags as having not only an impact on the actual carrying, but also on the shopping: "The shopping bag fosters impulse purchases by allowing the customer not to think in advance about what type of carrying equipment he or she has to bring for the newly purchased products" (1963(12):9).

Early paper shopping bags broke easily, resulting in elaborations with thicker paper and

new materials. At the time, it was common for consumers to use double bags to avoid breaking. The strength of the handles was the key issue: "... the handles have shown to be the weak point" (1966(12):18). One of the efforts to improve the handles was to increase their size to avoid uneven load and to be more convenient for the carrier. This also allowed you to carry bags on your arm instead of in your hand. Other efforts included fiber reinforcement in the handles and the mixing of different materials, such as in the "S-bag," a paper shopping bag with plastic handles.



Figure 2 Shopping bag with longer handles, which allow for carrying on the arm instead of the hand (1966(12):19).

Entire bags made of plastic (polythene) first appeared in a 1954 article: "a shopping bag of polythene shows the goods all the way" (1954(10):1168-1169). In 1963, an article described what would later become an important shopping bag innovation — the plastic

shopping bag formed in one piece (including handles), promoted under the name "Teno":

Guided by the tests we have made, we dare to claim that the bag is both smooth and strong. It also has the advantages that it is light and not affected by rain or moisture. A disadvantage with the plastic bags is that they cannot be filled the same way as a paper bag, because due to their pliancy they cannot be set up in the same way (1963(12):10,21).



Figure 3 The Teno Plastic shopping bag (1963(12):10). The novelty was that the handle was punched from the shopping bag instead of being attached to it.

The paper bag and the plastic bag have remained the two major types of shopping bags in Swedish retailing. However, there have been numerous adaptations and adjustments to them, not least in relation to other modes of transportation beyond walking.

Transporting

The early development of the shopping bag in Sweden was related to transportation from the store. At the end of the 1960s, most Swedish consumers walked to the store, while a minority used bikes, mopeds, or cars (1969(9):80). However, the increasing use of other means of transportation encouraged new developments of the shopping bag and was an important aspect of how it was promoted in the magazine. The following advertisement illustrates the use of bags in various forms of transportation:



Figure 4 Nissafors Shopping bags. (1965(11):8).

The adaption to different forms of transportation called for changes in the handles, materials, and sizes of the bags. For example, one advertisement for the S-bag showed how the handles enabled use with a bike or baby stroller (1970(10):183). Primarily, however, it was the increasing use of cars that called for adjustments. The size of shopping bags increased, inspired by the American "collection bags" (large bags without

handles) and because transportation to and from the store was increasingly done by car (1961(5):144).



Figure 5 The magazine wrote in 1961 that in Sweden, like the US, some of the shopping was done by car, and therefore, larger shopping bags (“collection bags”) were becoming popular (1961(5):144).

Bags without handles were not adopted to any large extent in Sweden, since walking and carrying bags in your hands was the dominant mode of transportation at the time. However, the trend towards larger bags was strong. In 1965, an article linked changes in shopping bags to wider changes in the distribution of goods:

The trend towards larger and larger stores, changing purchasing behavior

toward larger purchases being made for the whole week rather than many smaller purchases, and increased shopping by car are some of the factors that have had an impact on the use of shopping bags (1965(5):18).

While most bags used to hold around 12 liters, there had been a general change towards larger sizes, so that the average bag now held about 14 liters. The magazine expected further volume increases: two major retailers had introduced shopping bags containing 18.5 liters, and a hypermarket chain was introducing 28 liter bags (1965(5):18). The thickness of the paper had also been increased along with the size, with the goal that "the tendency among store staff to hand out double bags and customers' demand for it can be reduced" (1965(5):18).

In 1966, the magazine wrote about a "large shopping bag breakthrough" in the Christmas trade (1966(1):9), describing the new bag as "a sack with handles." These bags had extra-thick paper and string-type handles and were sold for 50 öre (1966(1):9). They were not supposed to replace ordinary bags, which were still free for customers, but were introduced as a complement. One explanation for the breakthrough was that it had become more common for the stores to charge for home delivery and that these bags were provided as an alternative (1966(1):9). The magazine specifically noted that many of these large bags had a neutral text printed on them, such as "Merry Christmas," rather than the more common practice of advertising the name of the store.

Advertising

Thus, an important aspect of the shopping bag was its role in advertising. Even the early, small shopping bags often had the name of the retailer printed on them, as demonstrated

in a 1946 article calling the bag "a representative of the store"(1946(12):180). As the shopping bags grew, so did the opportunities for advertising:

The shopping bag as advertising medium is so far unsurpassed at least cost-wise. The large surfaces, as a rule of good glossy paper quality, are well suited for different types of advertising. As the shopping bag is always carried on display, its carrier becomes something of a walking advertising sign, who in the streets and transports, stores, cafés, etc., advertises for a certain store or branded product. As the shopping bags are often saved and reused for various purposes, their value as advertising media does not end with the trip from the store to the home (1963(12):9).

The shopping bags were said to "offer excellent opportunities to catch attention both inside and outside the store, on streets and squares, trams and buses" (1963(5):19). At the same time, however, this aspect of the shopping bag could also be a concern for consumers:

...[S]ome customers claim that they don't want to carry shopping bags with advertising in public... Those who represent this view as a rule come from a circle with higher purchasing habits and therefore conduct their purchases in, for example, delicatessens. However, even these stores have started to use exclusively designed shopping bags with elegant printed advertising. The shopping bags from an exclusive store often become a form of symbol of social prestige, which the carrier carries in public with pride. (1963(12):9).

The advertising conditions of the Teno bag were described when it was introduced: "...

can be fitted with advertising in four colors" (1963(12):10,21). In addition to advertising during transit from the store, the bags could continue to advertise as they were used for other purposes. An advertisement for the Teno plastic bag said: "The Teno bags have great advertising value. They are used over and over again and are ideal for camping, school books, swimming gear, etc." (1969(9):63).

However, one of the ways in which the bags were used would mean that their career in advertising was over: "The Teno bags are also excellent as garbage bags, fit normal wire baskets, can stand wet waste, and can be tied together... Keep nature clean with the help of the Teno bag, as it can stand wet waste" (1969(9):63). Thus, despite its negative effect on advertising, the use of shopping bags for disposing of waste was an important argument in promoting the bag. However, the question of disposal would also concern the shopping bags themselves.

Disposing

In 1969, one article commented on the large volume of bags consumed every year:

One of the reasons for the great popularity of the bags is that they have double use. First, you use them to carry the goods home, and then you use them for kitchen waste (1969(9):12).

The main environmental problem discussed in the 1960s and 1970s was littering, and the increased use of packages was seen as the main cause (1962(3):9). Here, shopping bags were considered helpful for disposing of waste. In 1969, a special "motorist bag" for handling waste was introduced and handed out to people travelling by car or boat. The campaign was supported by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the

Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. The motorist bag was described as a success, with 2 million bags handed out. In 1970, the campaign was repeated. Some major retail chains also participated, with the print "Keep Sweden clean!" on their shopping bags (1970(7-8):47).



Figure 6 The motorist bag. The text reads, “Keep nature clean. Keep Sweden clean. Thanks for your help” (1969(7-8):63).

Gradually, the use of shopping bags for disposing of other things led to questions about the disposal of shopping bags themselves, particularly plastic ones. Efforts were made to find alternative materials that enabled self-destruction, although it was estimated that it would take time before such bags could be launched. If they were, they should not be promoted because people could "think that all packages are destroyed in nature and start

to spread them anyhow" (1973(5):66). In subsequent years, various options like reuse, combustion, and decomposition were discussed. In this connection, one representative of a shopping bag producer said:

Today, we see shopping bags everywhere ... in grocery retailing ... as garbage bags ... and unfortunately ... also in nature However, the question is if you should attack a product because of people being so irresponsible that they throw it away in nature (1973(6):26).

The debate about waste concerned plastic and paper bags alike. A 1975 law on mandatory paper collection was supposed to be implemented in full in 1980 (1980(12):56). A symbol was printed on the paper bags as an exhortation to hand them in or use them for collecting newspapers for recycling, "to reduce the amount of waste and save the natural assets in the country" (1980(12):57). The characteristics of paper and plastic bags regarding their ability to be used for disposal of other products were recurrent topics in the magazine (e.g. 1988(11): 46-47).

The debate about the shopping bags as waste and contributing to litter intensified in the face of shortages in the early 1970s, which particularly affected plastic bags and led to increased costs for retailers. This prompted campaigns to influence consumers to use fewer bags (1974(6):50-52) as well as extensive discussions about charging for the bags, a topic that would recur over the years to come.

Selling

Although there were exceptions, such as the large shopping bags for Christmas shopping mentioned above, shopping bags were generally provided free of charge. During the

1970s, it became increasingly common among Swedish grocery retailers to charge for shopping bags. A common price was 25 öre for paper shopping bags and 15 öre for plastic bags (1974(6):50). That retailers started to charge for the bags also led to questions about their role as advertising media:

It is hardly realistic to believe that consumers want to pay in order to carry around advertisements... Customers in today's self-service stores perform a certain amount of work during their purchases – picking and packing, which perhaps should be worth one or a few shopping bags. (1974(6):51).

Some consumers insisted that the advertising on the shopping bags be removed when charges for the bags were introduced (1974(10):43). In 1975, the article "The shopping bags for free again?" revealed that shopping bags, which used to be free to customers, were now charged for:

Unfortunately we have to state that as long as the shopping bags were free of charge, there was a great and unnecessary waste, which now has practically been eliminated. Most stores in the country now charge for their shopping bags ... When this procedure became more general, the consumption of bags was reduced by 40-60 percent. In particular, this hit the paper shopping bag. It is less usable to put garbage in and is also a bit clumsier to carry to the store if you want to use it repeatedly (1975(12):22).

Charging for bags led to complaints from the Environment and Health Administration in Stockholm, which had "discovered that the packaging of garbage in the households had become so bad that it puts in danger the health of sanitation workers ... due to people

having become less generous with shopping bags once they were being charged for" (1975(12):24). Despite these criticisms, it became increasingly common in Swedish stores to charge for shopping bags, particularly in grocery retailing. While charging for bags was seen as one way of reducing their number, discussions have increasingly come to focus on banning their use. According to a 2007 article, there were no plans to prohibit bags in Sweden, and there seemed to be no plans among retailers to stop selling them either, "because it's about a lot of money... with the shopping bag, the retail business has an excellent compensation for low margins on other types of products" (2007(9):22).

Epilogue

Today, shopping bags are widely used, and while they seem indispensable, there are more discussions about their negative impacts. There are reports from different parts of the world about ocean littering and the amounts of plastic floating around (2012(5):5), as well as reports about plastic shopping bags causing floods during monsoon seasons (2013(6):68-69). There have been many reports from all over the world on measures against the use of plastic bags in particular, such as legislation in countries like Italy (1985(3):51), Japan (2005(7-8):6), and China (2008(1):13); new taxations in Ireland (2005(7-8):45); campaigns by organizations such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes in the UK (2006(7-8):42-43); city-based initiatives like in Brighton (2007(12):5), New York (2008(1):13), and Los Angeles (2008(6):5); retailer initiatives by Sainsbury, Tesco (2006(12):40), Asda, and Marks and Spencers (2007(11):47) in the UK; and shopping center initiatives like Strömpilen in Umeå, Sweden (2008(4):10). The concern for the disposal of the shopping bags and their role in the disposal of other things has induced two main types of changes of bags since the 1970s. The first has been to

change bags to encourage their reuse and prevent littering, for example, to give them a more appealing look (1971(3):19) or to change or introduce materials such as textiles (2010(4):5). The other type of change has been to use materials that facilitate recycling, such as recyclable polypropene, (2007(7-8):16), bioplastic from sugarcane (2011(1):17) and biomaterial based on corn starch (2007(9):22). However, some of the new materials have led to complaints from waste management companies, as they cause problems in the current handling of waste (2009(3):39). In addition to the recurrent discussions about reuse and recycling, there are also discussions about prohibition.

However, shopping bags are still widely used for shopping, carrying, transportation, and disposal, as well as for retail advertising and sales. This warrants some reflection on when shopping bags were introduced along with changes in shopping that took place in the middle of the 20th century. Later, some aspects of these changes have been raised again in relation to an increased presence of online shopping. The magazine reported on some of the early attempts in Sweden to sell groceries online, and discussed the need for new types of containers for their transport (1998(5):17,19). A number of companies sold groceries online, and shopping bags were used even for online sales: "Regardless of whether the customer visits the store physically or shops online, the goods are brought home in shopping bags. None of the companies have found any suitable transport package" (1998(5):17). Although some retailers had tried carton boxes and boxes made of plastic, these were not used as a replacement for shopping bags, but to contain the shopping bags (i.e. providing a package for the shopping bags similar to what the shopping bags provided for the packaged products). In the more recent wave of Swedish online grocery retailing, the role of shopping bags seems unthreatened and even further

reinforced. The concept of the "grocery shopping bag" with ready-made meals and recipes has been a major concept, and grocery retailers that offer full assortments of groceries online also use shopping bags for delivering goods to the consumer's homes. Thus, although shopping bags were part of the transformation of shopping in a way that implied the fading of home deliveries, they have been so significant in contemporary society that they also seem to be part of a returning practice they once helped to replace.

Discussion: Shopping bags, practices, and agencing

The account of the evolution of shopping bags is a story of both continuity and significant transformations. What may be learned from this account about the process of agencing? As suggested by Cochoy and Trompette (2013) and Cochoy (2014), and based on Callon's (2007) notion of agencements, a move toward agencing can be formulated as a move from "arrangements endowed with the capacity to acting" (Callon 2007:320) to how this capacity is acquired and how *arranging* is done. This arranging consisted of linking the shopping bags with other elements in multiple practices and through this process the bags also contributed to shape these practices. As the notion of agencements implies, the capacity to act does not reside in the individual (object or subject), but is made possible through its inclusion in different practices and its associations with other elements. Shopping bags must become associated with other elements, such as packages to contain or humans to carry, in order for them to collectively perform. The bags have enabled different forms of agency by being combined with other elements in different practices. However, in their integration in different practices, the shopping bags did not remain stable but changed continuously. The evolution of shopping bags and their uses shows that the arranging was accompanied with continuous *adjustment* of the elements,

i.e., that the elements became "adjusted to one another" (Callon 2007:319). By being included in different practices, the shopping bags have been, in turn, transformed by these practices (e.g. sizes, materials and design). Thus, the process of agencing is about continuously arranging elements and adjusting them to each other. This has allowed shopping bags to move into and between practices, to become multi-purpose objects (Prendergast, Ng, and Leung 2001) with "capacity for differentially distributed agency" (Hawkins, 2009) and to endure over time.

Arranging elements and practices

Practices are constituted by combinations of elements and "emerge, persist, and disappear as links between their defining elements are made and broken" (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012:21). The account shows that shopping bags have been included in, and thus contributed to, the shaping of multiple practices. The shopping bag was included in these practices by being linked with other elements that jointly constitute these practices. For example, the shopping bag, its human carrier, and the things carried become "carriers" (Reckwitz 2002; Ingram, Shove, and Watson 2007) of the practice of carrying, also in a literal sense. However, the links between shopping bags and other elements of practices can be considered temporary and relatively weak, neither entirely mandatory nor entirely voluntary. While individual arrangements are transitory, they are maintained by being repeated. Individual shopping bags are relatively exchangeable with other objects in each practice: e.g., personal bags for carrying, leaflets for advertising, or garbage cans for handling waste. However, these objects that constitute alternatives in individual practices are faced with the multi-practice inclusion of shopping bags. For example, if one considers leaflets for carrying, garbage cans for advertising, or personal bags for handling

waste, it becomes clear that although they are alternatives in individual practices, they are not interchangeable. This suggests that the relatively weak links between shopping bags and other elements of the practices in which they are involved, enable their inclusion in many different types of practices, which in turn has allowed them to persist.

Shopping bags have contributed to transform the practices in which they have been included by reducing, reinforcing, or transforming other elements of these practices. They contributed to transform the practices of shopping from manual service to self-service together with shopping carts, baskets, etc. They contributed to the transformation of shopping in a way that reduced and removed other elements, such as wrapping paper, private baskets, and home delivery. Shopping bags enabled the carrying of many different things at once instead of requiring specific carrying equipment for each item. This also meant changes in the practice of shopping, as it enabled the customer to make purchases without having to consider ahead of time how much could be carried. Shopping bags contributed to the further realization of the self-service consumer (cf. du Gay 2004; Cochoy 2009), enhance their carrying capacity, and move shopping towards "impulse purchases" rather than planned purchases. Shopping bags also contributed to changes in the practice of advertising in the sense of increasing the mobility of the store's advertisements as well as their reach and durability beyond the actual shopping trip. In addition to being representatives of the store, the bags also contributed to transform their carriers in the sense of what the bags represent as well as transforming them into advertising media. Shopping bags were integrated into the disposal of different types of goods and packages of these goods. Thus they also became important in the disposal of the goods that they had accompanied from their purchase in the store, through their

carrying and transportation to the point where they were transformed into waste.

As shopping bags have been adjusted to one practice, they have impacted other practices, as well. The inclusion of the plastic bag for carrying (easier to carry and not affected by rain) was considered in relation to shopping (cannot be filled the same way), which shows that the shopping bag became a "crossing point" (Reckwitz 2002; Gram-Hanssen 2011) and adapted to different practices. The adaptations to various forms of transportation, e.g., increasing the size of the bag enabled consumers to shop larger quantities, promoted the use of cars for transportation and discouraged manual carrying. Whether retailers should start charging for the bags was considered in relation to their use for advertising, and also whether or not the consumers should be entitled to receive them without charge for the type of work they performed during shopping (cf. Cova and Cova 2012), and whether this would affect the disposal of other products. There have also been partial adjustments in relation to different practices. One example is the "collection bags" (large bags without handles) that were part of the movement towards larger sized bags. However, in Sweden, the handles were never abandoned, in part because carrying was more common than transporting the bags by car.

Adjusting shopping bags

Just as objects contribute to shape practices in different ways, objects are also shaped by these practices (Geiger, Kjellberg, and Spencer 2012:6). According to Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012:44), while practices are dynamic, objects [as elements] are usually "comparatively stable and are, as such, capable of circulating between places and enduring over time." Certainly, the shopping bag is an object that has proven capable of circulating and enduring over time. However, this mobility and endurance cannot be

explained by their relative stability as objects, but rather through their mutability and multiplicity (cf. de Laet and Mol 2000; Law and Mol 2001).

The mutability and multiplicity of shopping bags is an outcome of the practices in which they have been included and how they have been transformed by this inclusion. Bags are mutable in the sense of being adaptable to different practices (filled, carried, printed, folded etc.) but also in the sense of being transformed over time. From the smaller bags used for packing single goods, via attachment of handles, changes in size, and new forms of designs, colors and materials, shopping bags have changed considerably over time, and this mutability can be considered an important aspect of their endurance and mobility. However, this mutability has not led to one particular version of the shopping bag replacing all other versions, but to a co-existing multiplicity. Although it may seem obvious, it is worth mentioning that the shopping bag is not *an* object in the sense of one particular thing, but rather multiple objects, both in the sense of the billions of individual bags that are used around the world and in the sense of the multiple variations in terms of materials, designs, colors, size, and looks.

The transformation of shopping contributed to the transformation from the smaller bag for single goods to large bags capable of containing multiple products. As part of this transformation, the bags changed from a form of packaging for goods into a container for already-packaged goods. In carrying, they were transformed through the attachment of handles, the strengthening of materials to bear more weight, and new materials such as plastic, which could protect against rain. These developments furthered the shift from containers for specific items to a more generic container for different types of items. The bags also changed by being integrated into different forms of transportation: adjustment

of handles to be used with a bike or baby stroller, or larger sizes to be used with cars. Advertising transformed the bags in terms of materials, design, and appearance, and also transformed them by turning them from generic into increasingly differentiated objects, e.g., with store logos. For retailers, shopping bags were turned into something to promote rather than use with thrift. The disposal of bags, and their role in the disposal of other items, also triggered new types of materials that promote reuse or recycling. That retailers started to charge for bags contributed to changes in the balance between different materials due to price differences between paper bags and plastic bags.

For retailers, charging for bags meant – to use the analogy of the well-known 4P framework of marketing (McCarthy 1960) – that shopping bags had completed a full circle of the 4Ps. They were introduced to package individual *products*, were further developed as a component of *place* by enabling the distribution of goods, were included in the *promotion* of the store as advertising media, and were eventually given a *price*, and thus became *products* themselves. For consumers, in addition to their role as "*market-things*" (e.g. Cochoy 2007), i.e. mediators in the acquisition of goods, and *marketing objects* (Finch and Geiger 2010; see also Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002), i.e. products that are consumed in the sense of being used, they also developed into *market objects* (Finch and Geiger 2010; see also Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002), i.e. exchangeable goods with a relatively stabilized set of characteristics.

Conclusions

The starting point for this paper was that the dynamic aspects of agencements (Callon 2007) have not been sufficiently explored. In order to understand more about these

aspects, i.e. the processes of agencing (Cochoy and Trompette 2013), this paper proposed a situated approach on the level of mundane objects and practices in everyday markets. This was done by combining the notion of agencements with practice-based approaches to consumption and markets in the study of the history of a mundane object and its transformation: the shopping bag. The data was based on archive material from a Swedish packaging trade magazine.

The resulting account has highlighted several aspects of the process in which agency is acquired and sustained through the continuous arranging of elements in practices. This arranging is a constant process with uncertain outcomes and local differences not controlled by a single source, but the result of multiple efforts and adaptations. The arranging of elements in these practices was accompanied by continuous adjusting of the elements in relation to other elements of the practices in which they were included. Shopping bags have over time been included in and contributed to the shaping of different practices: shopping, carrying, transporting, advertising, disposing, and selling. The arranging consisted of linking shopping bags with other elements in specific practices, and reducing, reinforcing, and transforming other elements of these practices as well as coordinating across different practices. Shopping bags have been, in turn transformed by these practices, which has further reinforced their mutability (ability to change) and multiplicity (co-existence of different versions) – important features of their endurance. To capture the process of agencing, continuous arrangements of elements in multiple practices, as well as adjustments of these elements, should be taken into account.

This paper has demonstrated an approach of tracing a particular object, its transformation over time, and its integration into multiple practices, at the intersection of consumption

and markets. In addition to furthering our understanding of the agencing process, this approach complements the more common focus on specific practices as the starting point for analysing the elements that constitute them (cf. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). This seems particularly appealing given the contemporary proliferation of objects, especially digital ones, which become entwined in our everyday lives, as market objects bought and sold, as marketing objects used in multiple ways, and as mediators in different types of exchange (e.g., Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002; Cochoy 2007; Finch and Geiger 2010). It is important for studies of consumption and markets to pay attention to the agencing of objects as they become part of different practices, both affecting and being affected by them (Geiger, Kjellberg, and Spencer 2012).

It should be clear by now, that the transformation of the shopping bag from "innocuous" to "dangerous threat" noted by Hawkins (2009) was not a singular event, but the result of their successful entry into and rearrangement of multiple practices at the intersection of markets and consumption. In short, it was the result of a process of agencing. The multiplicity of practices involved in this process, suggests a need for increased traffic between different research traditions that study market and consumption practices.

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1 But see, for example., Gregson, Crewe, and Brooks 2002; Fuentes 2014b.

2 In the practice-based literature there are differences in how objects are considered in relation to practice (see e.g. Fuentes 2014a). For example, while Schatzki (2010) separates the material arrangement from practice (in order to explore their relationship and how these are tied as nexuses), other practice-based scholars (e.g. Reckwitz 2002; Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012) treat the material arrangement as part of the practice (although analytical separations can be made).

3 For more about the changes in the stores see, for example du Gay (2004), Cochoy (2009) or Kjellberg and Helgesson (2007b) and particularly how it affected consumer logistics, see Hagberg and Normark (in press).