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SOCIAL CHANGE PERFORMED THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF ALLOTMENT GARDENING

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Aston University

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Thesis summary

This thesis asks what the practice of allotment gardening can tell us about social change. Through interviews and participant observation, it explores allotment gardening as a food-provisioning practice, and interrogates how it fits with other food-provisioning practices. It also seeks to situate allotment gardening – in which the individual is both producer *and* consumer – within an alternative food network paradigm, and tease out whether this distinction makes a difference to how individuals approach issues of ethical consumption. I draw on Giddens’s structuration theory and contemporary practice theory to identify the elements of allotment gardening as a practice. Subsequently, I use the data collected from my fieldwork to reflect upon the strengths and limitations of practice theory as an analytical approach to social change.

My findings indicate that allotment gardeners did not systematically share the motivations of ethical consumers but that allotment gardening nonetheless achieved some of the aims of ethical consumption. My research also makes a twofold contribution to contemporary practice theory. First, detailed data analysis demonstrates the multi-layered role that social geographic notions of place/space play in the performance of allotment practice; a dimension which could be more fully developed in further research. Second, in support of current thinking that practices must be analysed not in isolation but in combination if we are to account for social change, I argue that a shift in emphasis is necessary to realise the potential of Reckwitz’s notion of the individual as the ‘unique crossing point’ of practices. This involves situating the individual as the determining element within practice, rather than just one element among others. My data further demonstrates how focusing on the individual as a crossing point of social networks reveals the significant impact that relationships have upon practices.

Key words: alternative food networks, practice theory, ethics of consumption

For Graeme

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Vicki Whittaker, Birmingham 2016

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1 Introduction

Starting points

David Silverman comments in *Doing qualitative research* (2013) that ‘Research problems rarely come out of the blue’ (p. 31) and this is certainly true of my research. In my MA dissertation I wrote about the phenomenon of urban backyard chickens and became interested in the idea that off-grid food production might represent an opposition to Big Food (meaning capitalist and industrial methods of food production and distribution, dominated by multinational agribusinesses and supermarket chains).¹ This had led me to the literature of alternative food networks (AFNs) and the idea that ‘ethical’ consumers seek to subvert dominant food provisioning mechanisms by buying local and often organic produce from small farmers and retailers; and yet often inadvertently fall back into the hands of Big Food actors as the latter co-opt the organic (and local) markets.

A trip to a local allotment open day with my children got me thinking: surely this was a site of food production which was genuinely off-grid, and which would be impossible for the market to co-opt? Here was an anachronistic space in which produce was not monetised – meaning that produce that is grown on an allotment is for personal consumption and not resale – and where the producer and consumer were one and the same. That being the case, would allotment gardeners share the same motivations and understandings concerning food production as those who practised ethical consumption? If allotments were a site of resistance to Big Food, did this make them in some sense an alternative food network?

Moreover, I was fascinated by the space of the allotment – it was like the Tardis: vast on the inside, but from the street the everyday activity taking place there was almost invisible. In the course of writing my MA dissertation I’d also begun to think about how – or whether – we identify social change in the everyday. At what point – and how – do aggregated individual acts become visible as social change? If growing your own food on an allotment did represent a movement towards rejecting dominant food provisioning mechanisms, how could I measure that shift?

1 The term ‘Big Food’ is used in analogy to ‘Big Pharma’: see, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/mar/12/big-food-agriculture-brands-health-organic-packaged> [last accessed 28 September 2016].

Theories of practice understand social change (or reproduction) as being enacted in the performance of everyday routine activities, and thus lent themselves readily to my central concerns. If we also accept Giddens's contention when setting out his theory of structuration that individuals are both knowledgeable and intentional concerning their everyday practice – as is my contention in this thesis – then they can choose whether or not to subvert or reproduce the existing order in their performance of that practice, thus contributing to social reproduction or, potentially, change. I will return in much greater detail in Chapter 3 to practice theories more generally (specifically to Giddens's structuration theory and the later theories of practice which draw upon it), and analyse specifically the ways in which individual performances of practice might be said to constitute change. Here, it is sufficient to note that my ontological and epistemological position is that acting differently is in part what allows practices to evolve and social change to occur and that people are able discursively to analyse what it is they do and why.

In my research I therefore chose to adopt Giddens's structuration theory as a meta-theory informing a more empirically oriented practice theoretical approach. This latter contemporary practice theory – propounded notably by Elizabeth Shove in relation to consumption – shares many of the precepts of structuration theory in terms of how social structure is instantiated in practice. It focuses more specifically, however, on the identification and integration of all elements within a practice – including and surpassing the practitioner – which are characterised as meanings, competences, and equipment. By synthesising this empirically-friendly approach with Giddens's more active appropriation of questions of agency in structuration theory (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of this point), I developed a theoretical framework which provided the flexibility to interrogate both individual motivations for, and performances of, a practice – here allotment gardening – and how these conform to or subvert common understandings of that practice.

On this basis, I formulated the following research questions:

- What does the study of allotments add to the conceptual framework of alternative food networks?
- What, if anything, distinguishes the motivations and understandings that practitioners offer for growing food on an allotment, and how do these motivations and understandings fit with their other food provisioning practices?

- What can applying a practice theory framework to allotment gardening tell us about social change? Conversely, what can an analysis of allotment gardening tell us about the robustness of practice theory?

Whilst the proof of the pudding is always in the eating, in advance of conducting my research it seemed to me that exploring these questions potentially made a threefold contribution to sociological knowledge. First, and most significantly, focusing empirically on the building blocks of an everyday practice – and specifically using the practice analytical framework outlined above – would enable a better understanding of how the translation between ‘invisible’ individual actions and ‘visible’ manifestations of change operates.

Second, until comparatively recently, little academic research had been undertaken into allotments as a sociological phenomenon (see below under **Allotments in the 2000s**). Whilst policy framings make particular claims for the benefits of allotments in terms of health and wellbeing, taking an approach which engaged in close analysis of what it was that people actually did on their plot, and their understanding of their own practice, would provide a more nuanced account – and perhaps counterpoint – to such claims.

Finally, by comparing the motivations of AFN consumers and allotment gardeners for looking outside the mainstream for their food provisioning needs my research would contribute to the debate within the AFN literature regarding the extent to which purchasing produce from AFNs represented resistance to conventional food production and retail mechanisms, and the extent to which Big Food was able to co-opt this resistance. I elaborate on this briefly below before turning in the rest of the introduction to contextualising allotments historically, in academic and policy literature, and within the Birmingham context.

Alternative food networks (AFNs) are a tangible manifestation of a change in food provisioning practices and social meanings surrounding food. This shift in consumer behaviour is embodied by the growth in AFNs in the UK – by which I mean box schemes, farmers’ markets, community gardens, and community supported agriculture initiatives – over the last twenty or so years. The literature on alternative food networks (AFNs) has extensively explored the contours of this shift; the argument running broadly that, *inter alia*, environmental questions over food miles and the use of pesticides, concerns over food security and health, social justice issues relating to fair prices for producers, and animal welfare concerns in the treatment of livestock by vast

agri-businesses have led consumers – the wealthier ones at least – to seek to reconnect with their food and prioritise local, fresh, organic food over extensively-packaged produce, flown from abroad and sold via the major supermarket chains. This particular narrative is naturally not without nuance or outright counterargument. Whilst some commentators argue that it is through buying from alternative networks rather than the mainstream that consumers exercise their political will, others have been quick to counter this by claiming that Big Food simply co-opts alternative markets.

Simultaneously, allotment gardening has seen a parallel rise in popularity when measured in terms of waiting lists for plots. AFN literature, however, pays almost no attention to the individual phenomenon of self-provisioning – by which I mean growing or producing one’s own food for personal consumption – despite obvious parallels in terms of commodity (local, organic produce) and meanings (e.g, food security, health). I suggest in Chapter 2 that this is at least in part as a result of the position of the allotment outside of the market economy – meaning that no economic exchange takes place between producer and consumer. Arguably, then, researching food practices with allotment gardeners provides an opportunity to explore consumer motivations and food practices in an arena which the market is theoretically unable to co-opt. Allotments arguably therefore represent ‘laboratory conditions’ in which to test the claims and limitations of alternative food network paradigms concerning the extent of opposition to Big Food.

.*

In the remainder of this introduction, then, I situate allotment gardening, first in terms of the history of its development, and then with reference to both the policy framing of allotments and academic literature. I then translate this broad picture to the specifics of allotment gardening in Birmingham today, looking at current trends in provision of plots and uptake by gardeners. Finally, at the end of this chapter I outline how I explore my research questions throughout my thesis.

Allotments: a brief history

Crouch and Ward’s study of the allotment (1997) remains the essential reference for anyone studying allotments. Their work aside, until comparatively recently – roughly until the turn of this century – academic literature approached the subject of

allotments almost entirely from a historical perspective (see Burchardt, 2002, Burchardt and Cooper, 2010; Archer, 1997; Moselle, 1995), from their rural origins in the nineteenth century to their establishment in the cities in the twentieth century, rather than as a living social phenomenon. I unpack this further below (under **Allotments in the 2000s: views from policymakers and the academic literature**), but first a brief review of demand for and provision of allotments, and the legislation governing them, is instructive for understanding the current context.

Following the enclosure of common agricultural land in the eighteenth century (Moselle, 1995) which created a landless working class, the UK allotment system was initiated as a response to concerns over food security. In 1887, local authorities were made legally liable for providing families with land 'at an affordable rent' on which to grow food (Miller, 2015, pp. 4-5; Crouch and Ward, 1997). The Small Holdings and Allotments Act came into force in 1908, requiring local authorities to provide sufficient allotments to meet demand, and by 1913, there were 600,000 allotments in England and Wales. The advent of the First World War meant that vast amounts of unused urban land were requisitioned to increase food supply, and by 1918 the number of allotments had risen to 1,500,000 (although the requisitioned land was returned after the war). Section 22 of the Allotments Act of 1922 defined allotment gardens as not exceeding forty poles (or under 0.25 of an acre), and specified that they were to be wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of vegetables or fruit crops for consumption by himself or his family (see Hawkes and Acott, 2013, p. 1117); subsequently the Allotments Act of 1925 legislated that land purchased by a local authority for allotments must not be disposed of or used for another purpose without ministerial consent. At the outbreak of the Second World War, 'there were almost 60,000 acres of allotments (about 570,000 individual plots) in urban areas of England and Wales, and 50,000 acres providing some 170,000 plots in rural areas' (House of Commons Library, 2012; although see Ginn, 2012 p. 304, who sounds a note of caution on wartime allotment numbers, suggesting that they may be overestimated).²

Whilst both demand for and availability of allotments was high during and between the world wars, after the Second World War land used for allotments either reverted to its previous use, or was sold for development, mainly for housing and leisure facilities

² See also the NSALG web site for more on the history of allotments: <http://www.nsalg.org.uk/allotment-info/brief-history-of-allotments/> [last accessed 27 September 2016]. Web sites and online resources with no print equivalent are included both in footnotes and in a separate section of the bibliography.

(Crouch & Ward, 1997, pp. 77-8). Despite the 1950 Allotment Act obliging councils governing a population of 10,000 or more to provide plots not exceeding one-eighth of an acre, the enthusiasm for allotments also seemed to have diminished. Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012, p. 339) argue that after the war, and particularly from the 1950s, food was more readily available and cheaper, such that people no longer needed their plots to feed their families; moreover, they had more disposable income to spend on new leisure opportunities. As a result allotment gardening in the UK fell into a decline.

In response the government commissioned a 'Committee of Inquiry into Allotments', also known as the Thorpe Report (MLNR, 1969; authored by Professor Harry Thorpe of the University of Birmingham) to investigate why so many allotment plots lay vacant. One of Thorpe's main recommendations was that the essentially recreational nature of allotment gardening should be recognised, rather than it being considered an activity engaged in out of economic necessity. Little action was taken as a result of the Thorpe report, however, and in 1998 a further report was published, 'The future for allotments', commissioned by the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs (DETR, 1998) to investigate the decline in provision of allotments. Its recommendations included: that more be done to promote the availability of allotments to the general population; that allotment sizes be reduced to make them less forbidding for potential allotment holders; and that the prohibition regarding the sale of allotment produce be relaxed. Acton (2011, pp. 51-2) comments that, '[w]hile this report, like the Thorpe Report forty years previously, had little impact on the movement, the zeitgeist had begun to change and by 2004 the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) saw an increase in its membership and the reappearance of waiting lists', and further speculates that this development was related to media coverage and 'concerns over methods of food production, health and nutritional issues, a desire not to lose any more urban green spaces to further development and the recognition of the need to create a more sustainable environment'.

More recently, and recognising the health and environmental benefits attributed to allotments (see below under **Allotments in the 2000s: views from policymakers and the academic literature**), there have been a number of government publications concerning allotments, including, in March 2010, 'A place to grow'³ published by the

³ Available to download from http://www.local.gov.uk/publications/-/journal_content/56/10180/4045883/PUBLICATION [last accessed 27 September 2016].

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). This document advises local authorities on how to reduce the length of time an individual has to wait before getting an allotment plot. It also contains guidance on better management of existing plots, for example reducing plot sizes and taking action when plots are not being cultivated (House of Commons Library, 2012). In 2010, the national waiting list for allotments stood at 95,000, with 250,000 allotment holders recorded in the 1998 Select committee report 'The future for allotments' (Acton, 2011; see also Wallop, 2009).⁴

In May 2011 the DCLG argued that neighbourhood planning could lead to more allotments. Claiming that 'in the period 1996 to 2006 the number of allotment plots fell by 50,630 [...] Today 59 people are waiting for every 100 plots in contrast to 1996 when there was an average of 4 people waiting for every 100 plots', the press release⁵ announcing the new Localism Bill (subsequently the 2011 Localism Act) went on to say that the Bill would 'allow local people to set out the exact locations of sites that can be used for new allotments and those sites they want protected in the future'.

The allotment is then still very much alive, even though its underlying meaning may have changed from subsistence to leisure. Perhaps remarkably, it is still on the same legal and administrative footing as in 1908, allowing those who wish to grow fruit and vegetables for their own consumption to rent a plot of land on which to do it, at distinctly below-market rates (see below under **The Birmingham context** for 2016-2017 plot rates).

Allotments in the 2000s: views from policymakers and the academic literature

The history of allotments in the UK, then, is one of post-war decline in both availability of plots and interest in allotment gardening, with a resurgence in demand from the 1990s on the back of changing societal values concerning food production, and increased media attention. (See the comments below by Birmingham City Council's

4 For data on allotment waiting lists, see the Allotment Data website created by Farida Vis (University of Sheffield) and Yana Manyukhinaat, specifically the data available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/nov/10/allotments-rents-waiting-list>; see also the report commissioned by the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) at http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk/files/ttwk_nsalg_survey_2011.pdf which concluded that overall waiting lists for allotments remain high [both sites last accessed 28 September 2016]. The picture is more complicated than this suggests, however, and the data below for Birmingham shows that there are vacant plots on allotments in more economically deprived areas.

5 Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-powers-for-the-green-fingered-to-protect-allotments> [last accessed 27 September 2009].

allotments officer concerning the impact of television programmes – such as the BBC’s Big Allotment Challenge – on the uptake of allotments; Wallop (2009) gives a flavour of the type of newspaper coverage allotments have attracted.) The current situation is set out in greater detail in **The Birmingham context** below but, in a nutshell, it involves a changing socio-demographic profile for allotment gardeners; an increased demand for allotments in some areas; devolved management agreements between councils and allotment sites (see Wiltshire and Geoghegan, 2012, p. 346); increased rents, and concomitantly the introduction of smaller plots to both cut waiting lists and encourage less experienced growers who might be put off by a full plot (which is approximately the size of a tennis court). In the current climate of local government deficit reduction, Wiltshire and Geoghegan also suggest that increased provision of, or support of, allotments is more likely to succeed as a result of appeals to sustainability and public health agendas (p. 346). This is precisely the strategy laid out in Birmingham City Council’s 2010 document ‘Allotments’, in which the move to devolved management agreements is described, a process which was ongoing when I undertook my fieldwork in 2013-2014. (See Appendix 1 for further details of the proposed new arrangements.) The impact of such a move was underlined by the Council’s allotments officer, whom I interviewed:

We are looking now at a situation where [...] we don't have a budget to provide the sort of improvements to sites that we might have done even five years ago. We [...] don't have that money. So allotment associations, if they want to improve anything, to a large extent they're going to have to find the money themselves. They're in a better position to because [...] they can apply for grants, we can't.'

In setting out its reasons for implementing a full-cost recovery model for allotments, the BCC ‘Allotments’ document (BCC, 2010) draws on the current dominant framing of allotments by policymakers: ‘the importance of allotments, not only for the production of fresh local food, but also for mental and physical health, social cohesion, biodiversity and wider environmental benefits’ (p. 4); it also includes allotments as one of its tools in the fight against obesity (§1.2.1). This view is echoed by Andrew Stunell, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in March 2012, in response to a question in parliament: ‘The Government recognise that allotments are valuable green spaces and community assets providing people with the opportunity to grow their own produce as part of the long-term promotion of environmental sustainability, health and well-being, community cohesion and social inclusion.’ Similar statements of the

benefits of allotments can be found in The King's Fund document 'Gardens and health'⁶ (particularly concerning positive health and wellbeing effects, especially for the elderly) and the Local Government Association document 'Growing in the community' (LGA, 2009):

'Allotments have a vital role in connecting people to the process of food production, enabling them to grow fresh, cheap food, whilst reducing food miles. They help to improve the environment, support new plant development and preserve rare and unique varieties. At the same time they provide opportunities to be active, meet other people, and share knowledge, information and food.' (LGA, 2009, Foreword [no page number]).

The academic literature published from the early 2000s which addresses allotments reflects this policy framing. For Ravenscroft *et al.*, '[in] temporal terms allotment gardening has shifted, over the last three centuries, from a response to rural poverty to a middle class leisure pursuit to, recently, a localised response to threats of global food scarcity and environmental change' (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2012, p. 13). Contributions by Buckingham (2005) and Kortright and Wakefield (2011) on food security, Wood *et al.* (2015) on health benefits, Acton (2011) on social and recreational benefits, and Domene and Saurí (2007) on contested discourses of sustainable development all fall within this broad framework. Two further articles – Partalidou and Anthopoulou (2015) on the uptake in interest in allotments against the background of economic crisis in Greece, and Farges (2015) on pro-environmental practices on Paris allotments – are especially informative about the multiple meanings research participants attach to their allotment plots over and beyond the researcher's starting point; this would prove to be true of my own research.

Closer to my own project, Wendy Miller has written a wide-ranging and informative PhD thesis (2015) which takes a political ecology approach to assessing whether alternative food networks (AFNs) can be seen as inclusionary or exclusionary, using allotments as a benchmark against which to judge these claims. When the focus of research, as here, is on off-grid food production as constituting a site of resistance to dominant provisioning paradigms, allotments are usually bracketed with community gardens in studies focusing on social cohesion and how local communities may reconnect via food. Representative of this trend – though by no means coming to the same conclusions – are work by Ravenscroft *et al.* (2012), Veen *et al.* (2012) and Dobernig and Stagl (2015). Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012), however, take a very

⁶ King's Fund, Gardens and health: implications for policy and practice, 2016, available online at https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/Gardens_and_health.pdf [last accessed 27 September 2016]

different view of allotments and instead analyse them as driven by individual self-interest, especially when set against the explicitly collective aims on which community gardens are founded (see Nettle, 2016). Whether or not one agrees with Wiltshire and Geoghegan's characterisation of allotments, I think what can be seen from the overall absence of allotments from AFN literature (Miller's PhD thesis being an honourable exception) is that they sit somewhat uneasily within it, perhaps as a result of their hybrid nature (The BCC report (2010, §2.2.1), describes them as follows: 'Allotments are "open space", but not "public open space"'.) I return to this ambiguity in Chapter 2 when I analyse the AFN literature in greater depth.

Before turning to look in greater detail at the backdrop for my research – the context of allotments in Birmingham – it's worth saying a few words about why I too am not looking at community gardens, rather than allotments, as sites of resistance to Big Food. Primarily, my reasons lie in the distinction that Wiltshire and Geoghegan made above – that community gardens are by definition a 'collective' enterprise. This means that participants are both committed to a particular framework of engagement in advance, and their subsequent practice is often the subject of negotiation. Wiltshire and Geoghegan describe community gardening as follows:

'Collective gardening is a social act, undertaken to satisfy the ideological preferences of the participants as the primary beneficiaries, but open to interpretation as meeting greater needs, be they of the community or the environment [...] [M]any recent converts to allotment gardening are likely to share these preferences, and may indeed be more motivated by them than by more self-interested concerns, but their right to garden is not conditional on a shared ethos.'

Even though I might anticipate that an allotment would prove to be a 'community of resistance' in some sense, I wanted to investigate the individual motivations that brought people to allotment gardening, what they understood growing their own food meant, and how these understandings might develop over time, and thus attempt to locate the individual within processes of social change.

The Birmingham context

Birmingham has the highest number of allotments of any local authority in the UK.⁷ In December 2013, there were 7613 plots in total, of which 6260 were tenanted – in other words, 17.8% were vacant. The city-wide picture is more nuanced, however. The table

⁷ See Birmingham City Council's allotments web page available at <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/20090/allotments/173/allotments> [last accessed 27 September 2016].

below shows tenancy rates for a number of wards across the city. Sutton Coldfield, to the north of the city, shows very low vacancy rates (2.3%) across its allotment sites, whereas Hodge Hill has an overall vacancy rate of 42%. The table also illustrates the tenancy rates for those wards (and sites) in which I conducted my research – Harborne (12.6% of plots untenanted), Shard End (42% of plots untenanted), Moseley & Kings Heath (9.6% of plots untenanted), and Handsworth Wood (21.2%).

Table 1. Allotment tenancy rates in selected wards across Birmingham, December 2013

	Total plots	Tenanted plots	Vacant plots	% vacant
SUTTON COLDFIELD				
<i>Total</i>	685	669	16	2.3%
HODGE HILL				
<i>Total</i>	138	80	58	42.0%
SHARD END				
Brownfield Road	53	47	6	11.3%
<i>Total</i>	238	191	47	19.7%
MOSELEY & KINGS HEATH				
Billesley Lane	29	29	0	0.0%
Moor Green	265	229	36	13.6%
Vicarage Road	33	32	1	3.0%
<i>Total</i>	539	487	52	9.6%
HARBORNE**				

Meadow Road (Jubilee)	88	77	11	12.5%
Pereira Road	39	39	0	0.0%
Westfield Road	119	99	20	16.8%
<i>Total</i>	246	215	31	12.6%
HANDSWORTH				
WOOD**				
Camp Lane (Uplands)	107	81	26	24.3%
Friary Road (Uplands)	85	81	4	4.7%
Hermitage Farm (Uplands)	214	176	38	17.8%
<i>Total</i>	723	570	153	21.2%

Table compiled from statistics provided by Birmingham City Council allotments officer in December 2013. Data for sites where I interviewed at least one person are included; other sites are also available in each ward and contribute to the total figures for each ward.

** Uplands is a combined site – i.e. one continuous location, run by one allotment committee – as is Pereira Road and Westfield Road

Although it is not a requirement that allotment gardeners live in the ward where their allotment site is located, in practice the people I interviewed all lived locally to the site. The figures above therefore need to be set within the broader socio-economic context of the relevant wards. (See Appendix 2 for a map illustrating the city's ward boundaries.)

Table 2. Socio-economic indicators for selected wards across Birmingham, taken from 2011 census data

Ward	Population	% population aged 65+	% working-age population (16-64)	% working-age population unemployed	% working-age population with no qualifications*	% working-age population Level NVQ4+ qualifications*	% owner-occupied households
Sutton Vesey**	23,360	19.6	62.9	4.3	9	40	81.1
Hodge Hill	28,026	12.5	58.9	13.5	28	16	60.7
Shard End	26,794	14.8	61.5	14.2	31	11	49.2
Harborne	23,001	14.1	69.3	6.8	10	54	53.9
Moseley & Kings Heath	26,669	11.9	70	8.8	12	49	53.6
Handsworth Wood	27,749	11.4	67.2	11.5	19	26	61.4

All data from '2011 Key Statistics Quick Ward Profile', available online at https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/81/census_2011_key_statistics_quick_ward_profile, last accessed 27 September 2016, except for data in those columns marked *, which are taken from 'Highest Level of Qualification Gained (2011), Birmingham Wards and Constituencies', available online at <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/economicfacts>, last accessed 19 January 2015.

** Sutton Coldfield comprises four wards: here I have included just Sutton Vesey as broadly representative of the socio-economic health of the area as a whole.

Table 3. Wards in Birmingham by ethnicity, 2011 census data

Ward	Population	% population born overseas	% White	% Multiple ethnicity	% Asian/Asian British	% Black/Black British	% Arab/other ethnicity
Sutton Vesey	23,360	8.1	86.5	2.3	8	2.6	0.6
Hodge Hill	28,026	23.5	44.5	4.3	41.1	8.8	1.3
Shard End	26,794	7.6	81.9	6.3	5.6	5.5	0.7
Harborne	23,001	24.2	65.6	4.3	21.4	6.1	2.5
Moseley & Kings Heath	26,669	21.3	61.4	5.2	25.3	5.6	2.5
Handsworth Wood	27,749	39	22.9	4.5	51.5	16.8	4.4

Table 2 provides a snapshot of the age profile, employment status, and levels of education of the population of each ward. Table 3 provides further details of each ward's ethnic make-up. Both Table 2 and Table 3 illustrate the disparities between the wards. The 2014 Local Economic Assessment (LEA) for Birmingham (December 2014), published by (BCC) Birmingham City Council's Economic Research & Policy Economy Directorate makes the following statements concerning the socio-economic and ethnic composition of Birmingham as a whole:

Birmingham has a population of just over one million. The city has a relatively youthful age structure, and a large and diverse BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] population, with 40% of working age residents being from an ethnic minority [...] When compared with the UK and the core cities Birmingham has a relatively low proportion of highly skilled residents and a high proportion of its working age population with no formal qualifications. There are large differences between qualification levels of residents from different parts of the city and between different ethnic groups [...] Birmingham's working age population has relatively low rates of economic activity and employment and high levels of unemployment. Low levels of economic activity & employment and high unemployment tend to be concentrated in the inner city and some deprived outer city estates [...] The city has a high youth unemployment rate and BME unemployment in Birmingham is significantly higher than for the White population [...] There is considerable geographic variation in the ethnic mix across the city, with BME groups most highly concentrated in the inner city area.⁸

The wards in which I am looking at allotments can therefore be characterised as follows: Harborne has a population which is majority White, with a high level of people educated to at least Level NVQ4+ qualifications (the University of Birmingham is located in nearby Edgbaston), and a low level of unemployment. Moseley & Kings

⁸ The full report is available online at <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/birminghameconomy> [last accessed 27 September 2016].

Heath has a broadly similar profile, although is slightly more mixed ethnically. Both have median levels of home ownership within the sample, perhaps as a result of attracting young professionals who rent rather than buy. Handsworth Wood is majority non-White, with a similar percentage of its population of working age as in Harborne or Moseley & Kings Heath, but with a higher unemployment rate. Handsworth's levels of owner-occupied households is higher than either Harborne or Moseley & Kings Heath, but its population has far fewer educational qualifications. The final ward in my sample, Shard End, has the lowest level of education in my sample, and the lowest level of owner-occupied households, as well as the highest level of unemployment.⁹ Ethnically, it is predominantly White.

By way of indicating the broad socio-economic spectrum and ethnic mix across the city I have also included data from the Sutton Coldfield and Hodge Hill wards. Sutton Coldfield, to the north of the city (and represented above by the Sutton Vesey ward) has the highest percentage of people of retirement age and the highest proportion of owner-occupied households. Unemployment is very low and it is the least ethnically mixed ward (86.5% White). Hodge Hill, by contrast, has an ethnically mixed population (with similar proportions of White and Asian constituents), with higher levels of unemployment and lower levels of educational attainment. 'There is a large disparity between different parts of the city in terms of average earnings, with Hodge Hill constituency residents earning the least (£411) and Sutton Coldfield constituency residents the most (£598), with a strong correlation between skill levels and income.'¹⁰

These two wards also represent the high and low points of allotment provision within this sample (Sutton has 685 allotments against Hodge Hill's 138). There is no suggestion that the number of plots available in a ward relates directly to its prosperity (compare the provision for Harborne and Handsworth Wood, for example), but is instead a function of historical circumstances (availability of land, etc.). However, given the factors identified here – the Council's introduction of a full economic costing model and subsequent increase in rents; the lack of demand, broadly speaking, in the poorer areas in the north and east of the city compared with the waiting lists in the more

⁹ On educational levels specifically, the LEA further highlights that: 'There are also large differences between qualification levels of residents from different parts of the city. Some parts of the city have much higher rates of highly skilled residents than others – for example the proportion of the working age population qualified to NVQ level 4+ is over 40% in 5 wards (Harborne, Moseley & Kings Heath, Ladywood, Sutton Four Oaks and Sutton Vesey), but in 4 wards it is under 15%, and in Shard End it is only 11%.'

¹⁰ See footnote 8, above.

prosperous southern wards; and the varied levels of community outreach activities undertaken by allotment committees – there may well in the future be a correlation between availability of allotment land and socio-economic situation. Tregear (2011, p. 422) suggests that ‘proliferation of AFNs is a product, rather than a driver, of socio-economic development in a region’; it seems that successful allotments too reflect the socio-economic performance of the surrounding area.

A new breed of allotment gardeners?

The allotments officer (hereinafter AS) at Birmingham City Council (BCC) argues that the demographic profiles of allotment gardeners have been changing since the mid-1990s, specifically in terms of ethnicity, age, and gender.¹¹

Age

Up until the 1990s, allotment tenancies in Birmingham had been stable for a long time. Initially, according to AS, tenants were long-term allotment gardeners, mostly male, who had occupied their plots for decades and were now approaching retirement. (In my sample, Tom is an example of this: he got his first plot in 1972 and is still on the same site.) From the mid-90s this profile began to change as the plots vacated by the elderly were taken up by a new breed of allotment gardener, and turnover became more rapid:

AS: So inevitably there's a little bit of a downturn in [...] the more elderly age groups and we saw an influx of people, and I think all local authorities probably over the last 5-6 years have seen a trend towards more demand for allotments; it's been all over the telly, it's in the papers, [and] it's, it's really been flogged to death almost, but it did push our occupancy levels up to, well levels that I haven't seen since the early nineties. And most [...] other authorities were saying much the same [...] thing but what was not being um really spoken of was that within that growth of demand there were a lot more short-term tenancies. So people were coming in on this this sort of wave of buoyancy that 'ooh, yes, I want an allotment because I've seen it on the telly'. They['d] come in, find it was a lot harder than it was, they were led to believe, er started to struggle, couldn't cope with the size of plot, um got disheartened, gave up and moved on. So you, you've got a lot of short-term tenancies, a year, two year, maybe three at the outside, then people would move on.¹²

However, even in 2010, it was still the 60-79 age group which represented just under 48% of all allotment tenants, and 69.1% of allotment tenants were male (Stagg and Share, 2011).

¹¹ BCC only collects data concerning the age and gender of its allotment tenants, although it plans to ask for ethnicity data at an unspecified future date.

¹² Interviews were transcribed verbatim: see Chapter 4 under **Validity of my findings** for further details.

Towards the end of the first decade of this century, BCC almost doubled rents in an attempt to move to a full cost-recovery model. (The annual rent for a standard plot is £105 for a full size plot in 2016-2017.) Tenancies fell from their historic high point of around 6500 (although AS anticipated that they will remain around, or just below, the 6000 mark). Anecdotally, my research participants told me that this had meant some people giving up second or third allotment plots, whilst others transferred ownership to a post-retirement age partner in order to benefit from the associated 50% discount on rent. Although the falls in tenancy occurred across the city, some areas were affected more than others:

VW: And when you said that [...] you've seen a dip then in occupancy, presumably that's not standard across all the allotment sites, does it vary by allotment site?

AS: Ummm It's fairly uniform, there are, there are some sites that are sort of better protected against that. Particularly in, the Sutton area, um, hasn't seen quite the, the downfall in in occupancy levels that some of the sites um [...] But certain areas of the city which, which typically are more industrial and therefore [...] tend to be tended by people who are on lower income levels there, there seems to be a greater fall-off in those areas. So you're looking at the north of the city, the sort of Handsworth area, Erdington area. Um, but even the the sort of more well-to-do parts of the city like Harborne, Edgbaston, um, even into sort of Bournville, Moseley, we've we've sort of seen almost unprecedented downturns in occupancy and in demand in those areas. So it's, it's had a knock-on effect right across the the whole city, really.

Ethnicity

The trends described above included many immigrant gardeners who came to Birmingham in the 1950s and 1970s:

AS: A lot of um immigrants coming in through the sort of first wave of African-Caribbean immigration in the late 50s um and the Asian influx in the 70s, a lot of these, these folks had been used to, as I say, sort of farming backgrounds, so you got a lot of, a great influx of of tenants from ethnic backgrounds, particularly in certain areas of the, of the city, Handsworth I've mentioned already.

This trend of immigrant allotment gardeners continued in the intervening years, especially to the north and east of the city, and now includes Eastern European immigrants, especially Polish. However, as with the White population, the generation of life-long gardeners is ageing, and the major problem AS foresees is that there is little generational renewal on the allotments within non-White ethnic groups:

AS: [T]here were quite a few that were predominantly people in the 70 age group. And some of the sites are are probably 80% of their tenants are in that age group. So you've got this sort of time bomb going on that that you know that in the next decade a lot of those people are going to give up for one reason or or another. So you stand the risk of some of these sites becoming unsustainable because they're going to lose the core of of their allotment tenancy. So unless there's an influx of younger people coming in to take those places, those sites are going to be at risk. So you'll be talking really right the way across the north and into the sort of Erdington area. Knowing that a lot of the tenants

are Black and Black and Asian within that you start to look at 'oh, hang on a sec, you're going to lose the ethnicity from that, apart from losing the tenancies you're going to lose that ethnic mix as well. And the one thing that was glaringly obvious, and had been glaringly obvious for for a while, is that, unlike the people that came and took allotments immediately post-war, their children, grandchildren are not taking up allotment gardening. There's not the interest level, it's d- [a] totally different generation obviously. Th- They are not coming, we're not seeing interest in the younger um Asian, Black communities for allotment gardening. We are in in the White communities; there's a lot lot of younger people, a lot more of women coming in in the White communities into allotment gardening. So the picture in terms of the next decade is is rather worrying because we know that we're going to lose a lot of the ethnic mix within the within the city and we don't quite see how that's going to be replaced from within their own communities. It doesn't doesn't seem to be happening. So we may be on on the sort of um edge here of what in ten, twenty years' time we see as as a sea change in in the sort of distribution of ethnicities throughout the city.

AS's comments concerning the lack of enthusiasm amongst second and third generation immigrants for taking on allotment plots is echoed by one of my interviewees, Dean, who commented that the younger generation in the local community saw those who gardened on the allotment as 'cheapskates'.

As the older generation of long-time allotment gardeners dies out, then, who is coming to take their place? There was an increase in the proportion of allotment plottolders aged under 60 between 2001 and 2010, at which point the ratio was 46% under-60 against 54% over-60. However, the statistics in terms of gender are very different: almost two-thirds of women tenants are under 60, whilst only just over a third of male tenants are. In 2010, Handsworth (62.2%), Hodge Hill (63.9%) and Sutton Coldfield (65%) continued to have a predominance of tenants over 60. 'Not surprisingly perhaps, this mirrors the predominance of males within the gender ratios for these areas [...] To an extent, this may correlate to both industrial and ethnic roots albeit that Sutton is more likely a consequence of retirement demographics.' Moseley & Kings Heath and Shard End, on the other hand, had seen growth in the under-60 age group by 2010. 'There has been longstanding evidence of interest amongst younger age groups (and for that matter, women) in the Moseley/Kings Heath area, but it is significant that in areas where demand is high and occupancy has increased over the last 2-3 years, the age ratios have similar levels' (Stagg and Share, 2011, no page numbers).

Gender

In 2010, of 5436 tenants, 1693 (31%) were female. Again, this overall figure masks disparities across the city, with predominantly male tenancies (between 70 and 90%) in the north of the city (Hodge Hill, Handsworth, and Shard End) and higher levels of female tenancy in the south (Moseley & Kings Heath, 41.8%, Harborne 42.1%). As indicated above, this shift broadly maps onto the idea of a north of the city (excepting

Sutton Coldfield) which is more socio-economically deprived and where allotment tenancy is more dominated by older men, and a south of the city which is more prosperous and better educated, and where an increasing number of tenants are female, and younger (the highest numbers of women are in the 40-49 (23.7%) and 60-69 (23.8) age groups). 'Almost two thirds of female tenants are on sites in the south and west of the City with significant numbers in Edgbaston/Harborne and Moseley/Kings Heath' (Stagg and Share, 2011). The only area in the north of the city to see higher proportions of female tenants was the more prosperous Sutton Coldfield, with female tenancies constituting between 30% and 40%.

Renewal of tenancies thus appears primarily to be driven by the influx of women which has occurred since the 1990s.

AS: The actual growth in female tenancies has been fairly astronomical in the last decade. When, when I came into it in the sort of early-mid 90s, it was probably less than 10% of of tenants were female. Er, I can't remember any female site secretaries from those days. You look at the picture now um you're probably, you're probably well over a third of tenants are female. And probably a third of site secretaries are female as well. So the the whole balance, it's gone from being the sort of the old flat-cap, particularly men's activity, it's now being, it's far more, um, balanced between male and female.

*

I have outlined the current Birmingham context in some detail, both to provide an explanatory backdrop for my fieldwork and data, and to highlight some of the trends in allotment practice in Birmingham against which any account of individual instances of change would ultimately need to be measured if I am to claim that it represents a moment in a larger process of change. The socio-economic profiles of Birmingham wards are useful to the extent that take-up of plots across the city, when mapped to the local context, suggests that allotments have an appeal across socio-economic groups, genders, and ethnicities. In one sense this serves to illustrate the theoretical position that I outline in Chapter 3: that individuals are 'the crossing-point' of practices – or perhaps here that practices (here allotment gardening) are the crossing-point of individuals. I am not suggesting, however, that my interviewees can be said to be representative of the wards in which they live (and I comment in more detail about the relationship between my own positionality as a researcher and the backgrounds of my interviewees in Chapter 4 under **Positionality**).

Outline of this thesis

Having outlined the shape of my project above, I now set out how I intend to approach my research questions. The next chapter, Chapter 2, looks in detail at the literature of alternative food networks, assessing its claims and counter-claims, and teasing out their relevance to allotments. It also considers questions of ethical approaches to consumption, both in terms of purchasing decisions (political consumerism) and decisions not to purchase (frugality, or voluntary simplicity). It concludes with a consideration of how the food provisioning choices of the individual producer-consumer might represent change, or at least resistance to dominant provisioning practices.

Chapter 3 evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory and later versions of practice theory in providing a framework for analysing practice as both performance and change, focusing on the role of the individual practitioner. It also considers socio-geographic interpretations of place as a key element within allotment practice.

In Chapter 4, I outline my research design and how it fits with and is informed by both my research questions and my ontological and epistemological standpoint. I then reflect upon how practical considerations inflected my research practice, and how my research design adapted to and was strengthened by these considerations.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I analyse my data from a practice theory perspective. Chapter 5 looks specifically at food provisioning practices and how those of my research participants fit with those of consumers in alternative food networks, specifically box schemes and farmers' markets. Chapter 6 offers a close-textured analysis of all elements which combine in the performance of allotment gardening, including the role of relationships and place; elements which I argue are undertheorised in contemporary practice theory. I focus specifically on how the reconfiguration of elements within and between practices might presage change.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I review how my research has contributed to a better understanding of my research questions. I consider the relationship between allotment gardening, alternative food networks, and ethical approaches to consumption, and the significance of the individual producer-consumer within that relationship. I also assess first, what a practice theory perspective has revealed about processes of change within allotment gardening; and second, what the analysis of allotment gardening can tell us

about the robustness of practice theory, specifically in its capacity to account for the individual as the 'crossing-point' of practice.

2. Alternative food networks

In this chapter I review the claims and contradictions made in the literature for alternative food networks (AFNs) in order to situate allotments within these debates, and to demonstrate what light AFNs may shed on the study of allotments – and vice versa – in relation to food provisioning practices. I focus in particular on how the relationship between producers and consumers and with the market shapes the literature.

I also draw on the literature of ‘ethical consumption’ and of the ‘ethics of consumption’ in order to interrogate the extent to which alternative food networks, including allotments, can be said to represent a locus of resistance to mainstream food provisioning. Finally, I evaluate how an examination of individual practices, which blur the arguably artificial distinctions between producer and consumer, can throw light on the possibilities for cumulative or lifestyle change.

What is an AFN?

In the twenty or so years since the phenomenon was first identified (see Tregear, 2011 p. 419 for more on timeframe; see also Miller, 2015), the umbrella term ‘alternative food network’ has been broadly defined as ‘any set of production–consumption relations which *connects* people through food’. AFNs are both ‘a means of economic exchange and a politically weighted practice’ (Cox *et al.*, 2008, pp. 204, 205, my emphasis) and are usually understood as being an alternative to, and in opposition to, mainstream food production and consumption. The latter is driven by agrobusiness and extensive supermarket retail chains, and characterised by intensive farming practices and large-scale industrial production (Seyfang, 2008). In AFNs, both producers and consumers are perceived as motivated to consume differently by social, economic, and environmental concerns regarding food production. Conventional food systems are seen as environmentally and socially unsustainable in terms of food miles, chemical and pesticide use, social justice abuses (how much producers receive; dangerous or unregulated working conditions; animal cruelty, etc.), with power and wealth concentrated in the hands of agrobusinesses and global retailers. AFNs, on the other hand, focus on ‘[d]irect agricultural markets, predicated on face-to-face ties between producers and consumers’ (Hinrichs, 2000, p. 295). AFNs include (but are far from limited to) farmers’ markets, vegetable box schemes, community supported agriculture initiatives (CSAs, in which consumers pay to become a member of a local farm, entitling them to a share of the produce but also a share in the costs of

production and, sometimes, in the decision-making processes: see Hinrichs, 2000, p. 299), community gardens, and – perhaps – allotments.

This connection between producer and consumer in which foods ‘are identified by, and traceable to a farmer’ (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013, p. 13) constitutes a ‘short food supply chain’ (Sage, 2003, p. 49), one of the defining characteristics of an AFN. The close relationship thus established between producers and consumers is the crux of what makes AFNs an ‘alternative’ to the agro-food industry in which consumers are distanced both physically and conceptually from the source of their food (Eden *et al.*, 2008). As such, AFNs are perceived to act as a challenge – both economic and social – to the existing industrial food landscape. In this perspective a farmers’ market is a potentially oppositional space.

AFNs bring together rural and urban food producers and consumers in a variety of ways. They may, as the example of farmers’ markets demonstrates, consist of rural farmers selling their produce to urban consumers; or they may equally involve urban community gardens selling or donating produce to local foodbanks, schools, hospitals, etc. The idea of bringing food producers and consumers into proximity via a short food supply chain (SFSC) – and therefore the reduction of food miles between the two – is frequently conceptualised in terms of the ‘relocalisation’ (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006, p. 181, Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013, p. 13) of food. However, it may also mean establishing a direct and largely unmediated relationship between producer and consumer, but not necessarily one in which they physically meet (such as via a box scheme) (Watts *et al.*, 2005, p. 32; Renting *et al.*, 2013, pp. 399-400). Sometimes this ‘meeting’ consists of making the producer or place of production visible to the consumer (see Venn *et al.*, 2006, pp. 254-5), such that AFNs also extend to the notion of relations at a distance, for instance in the context of Fairtrade produce. Such ethically motivated unmediated food chains are frequently interpreted as an ‘ethics of care’.

The nuances surrounding SFSC definitions – and AFNs more generally – vary from author to author. Kneafsey *et al.* (2013, p. 14) describe local (often rural) farm-based schemes as ‘traditional’ SFSCs and those which are peri-urban and motivated by social concerns as ‘neo-traditional’. The former are perceived as longer established (p. 15), the latter a newer initiative. Renting *et al.* (2003) – who analyse alternative and short food supply chains as primarily a rural phenomenon – define them within three categories: ‘organic farming, quality production, and direct selling’ (p. 394). Jarosz (2008, p. 232) echoes these distinctions, characterising AFN actors as small-scale farmers, often farming organically, who make their produce available via non-

traditional outlets (food coops, CSA, farmers' markets, etc.). McEachern *et al.*'s definition of what constitutes a farmers' market concurs that it is local (a SCFC) and involves direct contact between producer and consumer (McEachern *et al.*, 2010, p. 399).

Finally, alternative food networks are also part of wider social movements for social justice and food sovereignty, such as Via Campesina, the movement organisation for 'small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice', which lobbies on behalf of 'peasants, [the] landless, women farmers and rural youth'.¹³

Nuances of definition aside, since the mid-nineties AFN initiatives have grown rapidly – the first farmers' market in the UK occurred in Bath in 1997; there are now over 800 (Miller, 2015, p. 1194, citing data from the Royal Agricultural Society of England; see also McEachern *et al.*, 2010, p. 399). Similarly, in 2013 there were in the region of 1000 community gardens in the UK (Miller, 2015, p. 1194). This is also the timeframe over which interest in allotments grew, as evidenced by waiting lists: the 'Allotment waiting lists in England 2013' published by Transition Towns West Kirby, and the NAS shows waiting list numbers nationally increasing from 12,950 in 1996 to 78,827 in 2013. Allotments, however, appear not to be included in standard definitions of SFSCs or AFNs. I discuss the possible reasons for this below.

More broadly, Hinrichs (2000, p. 297, footnote; see also Miller, 2015), identifies what she terms 'local' food systems and related initiatives: foodbanks, gleaning projects, food cooperatives, food policy councils, guerrilla gardening initiatives, and institutional and individual composting. This is evident in Birmingham, for instance, which, in addition to offering community garden spaces such as Martineau Gardens, has recently (2013) established a Food Council; additionally Northfield Ecocentre runs a project to collect unpicked fruit and juice it.¹⁴

I am not seeking to develop a new definition of AFNs in what follows, although the concept is problematic, as I outline below. Broadly speaking, I understand AFNs as comprising the conceptual elements and examples outlined above: in other words politically conscious producers and consumers with environmental, social, and

¹³ <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/organisation-mainmenu-44> [last accessed 29 September 2016]

¹⁴ Martineau Gardens: <http://www.martineau-gardens.org.uk/>; Birmingham Food Council: <http://www.birminghamfoodcouncil.org/>; Northfield Ecocentre: <http://www.northfieldecocentre.com/> [all last accessed 26 September 2016]

economic concerns who seek to establish alternatives to the mainstream food channels in terms of means of production, sales networks, and spaces of reconnection. Nor am I necessarily claiming AFN status for allotments. However, I am aiming to show that studying allotments *alongside* AFNs may help to clarify some of the tensions within the current strands of research (specifically those surrounding the role of the market); and may also shed light on the nature of any resistance to Global Food posed by AFNs and allotments, and whether this resistance can be said to represent social change.

Claims and counter-claims

Tregear (2011, pp. 420-1) distinguishes between three theoretical approaches to AFNs: political economy, rural sociology, and modes of government and network theory perspectives. The first conceptualises AFNs as ‘movements in constant struggle against threatening forces of global capitalism’; the second views AFNs as social constructions of rural community, characterised by microlevel studies of participant meanings, and underpinned by concepts such as care and embeddedness; and the third analyses food systems at the meso-level as ‘clusters of actors operating at the scale of regions or states’. Research within this latter strand tends to focus on debates concerning standardisation – e.g. the labelling of organic goods – and regulatory frameworks.

Whatever the theoretical approach, there is an emphasis on the benefits – or perceived benefits – to producers and consumers alike. The literature argues for and against various social goods, which can be summarised as follows: (1) Through the reconnection of consumers and producers, AFNs are assumed to create a sense of local community and therefore trust. This is frequently referred to in the literature as (social) embeddedness (Sage, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006); (2) They are perceived as instrumental in fostering social justice, by, for example, making fresh fruit and vegetables available in ‘food deserts’ (Lockie, 2009, p. 198; Barnett *et al.*, 2005b; see, also Ravenscroft’s notion of ‘therapeutic communities’ in Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2012, pp. 7-8); and also (3) as economically just for both producer and consumer. It is claimed that they ensure that the farmer or producer receives a ‘fair’ return for their produce (Tregear, 2011, pp. 421-2; Lockie, 2009, p. 194) and – a more contested claim – that they make fresh produce available to lower income groups (Seyfang, 2008, p. 196; McEachern *et al.*, 2010, pp. 399-400 argue that evidence that farmers’ markets are more expensive than the alternatives is contradictory). (4) AFNs are seen as ecologically sustainable (because they reduce food miles – see, for example Seyfang, 2008, pp. 189-92); and, finally, (5) as producing better quality, frequently organic, food (Sage, 2003).

The weight of both participant expectation and theoretical claims for the positive impacts of AFNs sometimes threatens to overwhelm them, and unsurprisingly there are numerous studies which set out to contest some of the claims outlined above. In addition to challenging whether the social goods described above actually do result from AFNs, they are often specifically critical of a series of key terms used to describe such social goods. Three of these key terms are 'reconnection', 'local' (and the often concomitant 'community'), and 'quality'. Such attributes are often cited as being of crucial importance to consumers – a 2012 Eurobarometer survey found that EU respondents rated quality (96%), price (91%), and origin (71%) of food as important (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013, p. 36; elsewhere in the same report these authors also claim (p. 15) that the objectives of EU SFSCs are social, environmental and economic in that order) – but they are also terms which are both vaguely defined – 'portmanteau term[s]' (Dowler *et al.*, 2010, p. 204) – and simultaneously, and often unquestioningly, assumed to be beneficial. I analyse this in further detail below, and then consider how these same claims – and counterclaims – might be made for allotments.

First of all, however, we need to unpack the 'alternative' label itself, not least because 'the concept is defined according to what the phenomenon is not, rather than what it is' (Tregear, 2011, p. 423). If we look back at part of Jarosz's definition of what constitutes an alternative food network – small-scale farmers, often farming organically, who make their produce available via non-traditional outlets – it is abundantly clear from the literature that none of these elements are immune to co-option by agrobusiness and large retailers. For example, Julie Guthman (2003, 2000) has comprehensively demonstrated that the organic market in California is now dominated by large-scale producers; while others have described how the supermarkets have encroached upon both the organic market (Lockie, 2009) and farmers' markets (Seyfang, 2008).

AFNs cannot be said to exist independently of the conventional market, but alongside it (Bos and Owen, 2016, p. 2). This is evident from both producer and consumer perspectives: for the former, alternative sales channels (and production techniques) may merely 'top up' their income streams; although, as Jarosz (2008, pp. 238-9), points out, AFNs rarely supply sufficient financial returns for producers to be solely dependent upon them. Tregear comments that many vendors take part in farmers' markets as a result of the 'pragmatic self-interest' of higher margins and profit (Tregear, 2011, p. 423; see also McEachern *et al.*, p. 400), rather than from a desire for social justice. As far as consumers are concerned, rare is the consumer who fulfils their food provisioning needs entirely from AFNs. David Goodman, whilst concurring that

AFNs provide new farming opportunities and livelihoods, nonetheless reminds us that 'organic foods and AFNs often supplement rather than replace mainstream supermarket provisioning for consumers' (2009, p. 5). Indeed, although sales of organic food increased by an average of 27 per cent per year in the first decade of the 2000s, total organic sales still only represented 1.6% of total UK food sales; most organic food in the UK – 75% – is bought from supermarkets (Goodman, 2009, pp. 13, 15; see also Eden *et al.*, 2008, p. 1046, who contend that purchases from farmers' markets are likely to be 'luxury' top-ups to the main supermarket food shop).

Moreover even those sales channels and production processes considered to be 'alternative' are frequently judged according to market logic. In other words 'these networks and new economic forms are embedded in capitalist societies rather than inhabiting a more benign, parallel universe' (Goodman, 2009, p. 2). This perspective is shared even by members of CSAs, where the mechanisms of economic exchange are less clear cut, in that membership of a CSA implies more than financial investment. DeLind (1999), describes how members of the CSA she co-founded were often unwilling to take part in harvesting or physical labour (p. 6), preferring instead to treat the CSA as just another economic exchange with a provisioning outlet – 'an alternative market arrangement rather than a partial alternative to the market economy' (p. 5). It is difficult, therefore, to make the case wholeheartedly for AFNs as a refusal of capitalism, or a challenge to the existing order, even though this is what may have been intended at the outset.

I will now briefly consider the problematic usages of the terms 'reconnection', 'local', and 'quality' within the AFN literature before turning to a broader consideration of how consumers can be said to exercise their resistance to the neoliberal systems of mainstream food provisioning via 'ethical consumption' and 'the ethics of consumption'.

Reconnection

For Dowler *et al.* (2010, pp. 202-208; see also Bos and Owen, 2016), 'reconnection' means biologically, socially, and morally, and involves different elements within the food chain: 'producers, consumers, markets, knowledges and nature' (p. 204). 'Biologically' describes the process of consumer refamiliarisation with the materiality and viscosity of food production (soil, animal husbandry, etc.). CSA customers, for example, may have the opportunity to visit local farms, take part in harvesting, and see the conditions in which farm animals are raised first hand. Social reconnection refers to

the potential for building trust in the food system and creating stronger ‘thickened’ connections between the actors within it (‘social embeddedness’); whereas ‘moral reconnection’ means the perceived potential for AFNs to transform how individuals consume. In this respect, Dowler *et al.* (2010) discuss the ‘graduation effect’ in which, as people start to consume *and produce* food outside of the mainstream framework (agrobusiness, supermarkets, etc.), they also reconsider other aspects of their lifestyle within an ethical framework, and begin to make different choices (Dowler *et al.*, 2010, p. 210). Thus, reconnection ‘is regarded as a central restorative process in the strengthening and consolidation of place-based, regional food systems’ (Bos and Owen, 2016, p. 3).

Dowler *et al.* (2010, pp. 212-6) and Ravenscroft *et al.* (2012, pp. 6-7) further conceptualise these interlocking dimension as an ‘ethics of care’ – for consumers, producers and the environment, which they discern in the stated motivations of producers and consumers. ‘We identified three key themes in producer and consumer motivations: first, care for local economies, environments and future generations; second, care for health and wholeness; and finally, care about transparency and integrity in food systems, including matters of science and governance’ (p. 212). However, the idea that bringing producers and consumers together automatically creates either a material reconnection with food or strengthened community links is questioned by many commentators, including DeLind (1999) and Lockie (2009).

Local

Kneafsey *et al.* (2013, p. 13) define local food systems as ‘those where the production, processing, trade and consumption of food occur in a defined reduced geographical area (depending on the sources and reflections, of about 20 to 100 km radius)’. Despite the relative specificity of this definition, and the fact that in a 2011 Eurobarometer survey, 90% of those questioned agreed that buying local food was desirable, the same authors go on to describe (p. 35) how the majority of people nonetheless find identifying local food difficult. Approaching this question from the social geographical perspective of space and place, Harris (2010) reminds us that ‘concepts like “place” and “the local” cannot be taken as ontologically given: they must be recognised as social constructions’ (Harris, p. 366). I revisit the concept of place – which represents an important aspect of allotment practice, as both the setting for and one of the elements within that practice – in greater detail in Chapter 3 on the theoretical framework of my research.

Furthermore, several commentators take issue with the notion that 'local' (often uttered in the same breath as 'quality': see Harris, 2010, p. 356) is unquestionably a positive attribute. Born and Purcell describe a 'local trap'; a vision of local food systems which conflates 'local' with the perceived benefits of AFNs, and which thus posits that local/alternative food networks are inherently more socially just, democratic, ecologically sustainable, and produce fresher and better 'quality' food than the mainstream (Born and Purcell, 2006, p. 195). This then ultimately leads to what DuPuis and Goodman have termed 'unreflexive localism' – the automatic valorisation of the local over any other scale – often characterised by protectionism, calls for a return to 'traditional values', and a dominant and sectional elite. 'Localism becomes a counter-hegemony to [the] globalisation thesis, a call to action under the claim that the counter to global power is local power. In other words, if global is domination then in the local we must find freedom' (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, pp. 361, 365-6). Yet as Jarosz (2008, p. 233) points out, there is no reason why local food systems producing organic food may not *also* exploit their workers and use industrial production techniques. A food system does not become alternative by virtue of being local: conventional (agro-industrial) food systems are necessarily physically located somewhere.

Quality

Similarly, notions of food 'quality' are also perceived as being inherent to AFNs where, once again, they are frequently implicitly defined against conventional mainstream food provisioning. The literature suggests that the definition of 'quality' comprises a variety of (fresh, tasty, organic) ingredients. Sonnino and Marsden (2006, p. 185) add 'an identifiable place of origin, traceability, aesthetic attributes, nutritiousness' to the mix. Certainly, the idea that organic and locally produced food 'tastes' better was voiced by some of the allotment plotters whom I interviewed; however there was far from consensus on the matter, nor on what precisely might define 'quality' food. Indeed, in his editorial introducing the 'quality turn' in AFN studies, David Goodman (2003) suggests that 'quality' is actually an umbrella term for *all* qualities perceived as inherent to AFNs, including the concepts of 'reconnection' and the 'local'.

As with all 'quality' products, however, the danger is that they become the preserve of the wealthiest consumers (Kneafsey *et al*, 2013, p. 14), or of those whom Goodman describes as the 'worried well', concerned about the impact of food on their health, and able to claim their consumer rights – e.g. to demand answers concerning whether food is genetically modified, or where it comes from (Lockie, 2009, p. 196). Certainly there is

a debate within the literature as to whether alternative 'quality' – organic, free-range – produce comes at a price. Some argue that the often higher price charged for 'premium' local or organic goods may make them out of reach as a total lifestyle choice and that this is the main reason why most consumers therefore mix and match with supermarket produce, both organic and non-organic. Jarosz (2008, p. 241) identifies 'well-paid young professionals' as the core market for local organic produce. Lockie gives details of significant organic price premiums, but challenges the assertion that only those on high incomes buy organic, claiming that the less wealthy make lifestyle savings elsewhere – e.g. cutting down on waste – in order to pay the premium. Whether or not paying that premium is an effective way to challenge mainstream food provisioning is the subject of the next section.

Ethical approaches to consumption and the market

According to Barnett *et al.* (2005a, pp. 11-24), ethical approaches to consumption can be understood in two ways, both of which are potential strategies for resisting neoliberal capitalism. First is the theory that, in order to resist capitalist commodity production, one must reduce consumption (as those who practice voluntary simplicity seek to do): this approach they term the 'ethics of consumption'. The second theory, 'ethical consumption', views consumption as a 'means through which to express one's moral commitments' (2005a, pp. 11-24 (11); see also Shaw and Newholm, 2002). In what follows, I will use the term 'political consumerism', popularised by Micheletti (2003) – meaning the way in which citizen consumers express moral and political will through their consumption choices (e.g. purchasing Fairtrade products, engaging in brand boycotts or, conversely, corporate social responsibility initiatives) – rather than 'ethical consumption' to avoid confusion between the two terms. I interrogate both these approaches with reference to AFNs and allotments below.

Political consumerism

In brief, political consumerism is the decision to purchase, or not, in order to express a political opinion, when that political consideration weighs more in the decision to purchase than cost or convenience. Micheletti, in her 2003 book *Political Virtue and Shopping*, conceives political consumerism as the most effective means for individuals to intervene in global politics. In her view, the weakening of the nation state, combined with the increasing globalisation of problems, has led to crises in which states are powerless to act individually. Since the market reaches where individual states cannot, and since many of the issues on which individuals want to make their voices heard

relate to the conditions of production and consumption, the market thus becomes both the arena for political action, and the object of that action. This is 'active sub-politics' (p. 29) – bottom-up and rooted in consumer-citizens' everyday concerns.

Certain types of AFNs – box schemes, farmers' markets; in short, any direct economic exchange of money for produce – slot neatly into a framework in which one's moral compass, rather than price or convenience, may dictate individual purchasing decisions. Seyfang's study of box scheme and farmers' market consumers (2008) illustrates this. She identifies a series of reasons cited by participants for engaging in these 'direct-sell' AFNs, in addition to, or in preference to, provisioning at the supermarket. Thus, box scheme customers, in descending order of preference, were motivated to buy from an AFN because they it was (1) better for the environment; (2) cut packaging waste; (3=) supported local farmers/cut food miles; (5) provided organic food which was perceived to be more nutritious/tasted better/and (6) was safer; (7) provided clear information about where food was from and how it had been produced; (8) supported cooperatives; and (9) supported the local economy.

Other writers are more sceptical of Micheletti's position that political consumerism represents political empowerment of the individual. Clarke *et al.* (2007) question the power of individual agency to use the market as a political instrument, wondering whether instead such consumers are 'wittingly or unwittingly reproduc[ing] a marketised discourse of privatised, anonymous choices' (p. 242). Hinton and Redclift (2009) and Seyfang (2005) take this further when they point out that the 'success' of political consumerism is currently measured in terms of the market share of 'green' and 'ethical' goods; as a result Hinton and Redclift argue that '[s]ustainable consumption thus suggests new forms of political compliance, rather than political agency' (p. 9). Not only is the political consumer not able to instrumentalise the market through making ethical consumption choices, but the market is able to turn the tables through, for instance, 'commercialism by the mainstream' (Eden, 2008, p. 1055), where commercially successful AFNs and ethical or fair-trade concerns are swallowed up by multinational conglomerates (Green and Black's chocolate are now part of Kraft, for example).

However successful political consumerism may be as a strategy for consumers to express political will, it can only function as a strategy when there is an economic market. Not all AFNs are based on the economic exchange 'direct-sell model'. Venn *et al.* (2006, pp. 254-5) usefully reconceptualise alternative food networks by dividing them into four categories: 'direct-sell' (supply chains in which the producer, or the

provenance of the produce, is highly visible to the consumer – such as box schemes or farmers’ markets); ‘specialist retailers’, which may sell, for instance, produce from a local region, where the producer is identified to the consumer but may not be visible; ‘producer-consumer partnerships’ (such as CSA initiatives); and finally ‘producers as consumers’ (the example given is community gardens, but allotments clearly fits here too; see also Dowler *et al.*, 2010, p. 207).¹⁵ Before considering further the importance of the relationship to the market in determining capacity to ‘resist’ mainstream food provisioning, or create lifestyle change (see below under **Producers, consumers, and the market**), I look briefly at the second type of relationship between consumers and ethics identified by Barnett *et al.*: the ethics of consumption.

Ethics of consumption

The ‘ethics of consumption’ literature argues that the most sustainable form of consumption is one that is markedly reduced. Expressing one’s ethics through consumption may thus also translate into behaviours which are motivated by a desire *not* to consume – voluntary simplicity, thrift, recycling, waste reduction – and the pleasures this non-consumption affords – termed, variously ‘moral selving’ or ‘alternative hedonism’.

Frugality and voluntary simplicity

As indicated above, those types of alternative food networks which fit, even if reluctantly, into the market economy are perceived as appealing to a particular type of ethical or political consumer: those with more economic resources (Johnston and Szabo, 2011; Goodman, 2009; see Seyfang 2008, p. 196 for a counter-argument). Johnston *et al.* (2011, p. 296) argue that ‘cost is a major barrier to participation in ethical consumption markets’; however they also point out that ‘[w]ealthy people may be more likely to buy ethical products, but it is not clear they will necessarily implement other ethical consumption practices that rely more on time than money’ (p. 297) – such as self-provisioning via an allotment, or making their own compost. Evans (2011) draws a distinction between thrift – ‘preserving the economic resources of a household such that they remain available for further acts of consumption’, or saving now to spend later (see also Miller, 1998, pp. 49-62 for a more detailed discussion of this) – and the arguably more environmentally sustainable strategy of frugality, which involves being ‘moderate or sparing in the use of money, goods and resources, with a

¹⁵ Note, however, that these distinctions are still heavily reliant on market definitions.

particular emphasis on careful consumption and the avoidance of waste' (p. 551). Johnston *et al.* (2011) studied families whose commitment to consuming ethically was not matched by incomes which would have enabled them to purchase 'ethical' (e.g. organic, Fairtrade) foodstuffs, but instead focused on reducing consumption and waste: in other words, 'practices that may be brought on by poverty (for example, minimal consumption) are reframed as ethical practices that benefit the environment' (pp. 307-08).

Evidently, frugality may not be driven by ethical concerns (and frequently it isn't). But neither is it necessarily driven by poverty. Shaw and Newholm (2002) define voluntary simplicity as 'a variously motivated contemporary phenomenon: the foregoing of maximum consumption and, possibly, income' (p. 169). Although voluntary simplifiers may simply be seeking more leisure time rather than to adopt a more ethical lifestyle ('downshifter' according to Shaw and Newholm), many are 'ethical simplifiers' who 'are distinguished from downshifter by their concerns about environmental, social, and animal welfare issues' (pp. 169-70).¹⁶ So an ethical simplifier might, for instance, give up car ownership for environmental reasons. They might also engage in recycling, 'make-do-and-mend activities', or 'domestic production' (p. 171). Despite a shared concern to reduce consumption, Shaw and Newholm found no consensus in their study between interviewees on what constitutes ethical simplification, nor consistency by the same interviewee in applying their principles across all aspects of their lives.

Growing your own food on an allotment – for which the annual rent for a full plot in Birmingham is £105 in 2016-2017 – may be seen as combining elements of 'careful consumption' and 'domestic production', and certainly a number of my research participants (by no means all) felt that they reduced their grocery bill by effectively being self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables during the summer months. (Shaw and Newholm (2002, p. 172) note, however, that growing your own food can only really be thought of as 'voluntary simplicity' if you are 'sufficiently affluent to afford food in the market system'.)

Reduced consumption affords a different set of satisfactions; i.e. one that is symbolic rather than (or as well as) economic. Barnett *et al.* (2005a, p. 24) argue for the

16 Their definition of ethical simplification includes elements of political consumerism – described as 'maintained levels of consumption' – but with an ethical twist (for example buying new energy-efficient appliances). Here I am concentrating only on those elements which Barnett *et al.* (2005a) define as 'the ethics of consumption' which involve reducing consumption (and perhaps buying second-hand appliances).

importance of 'virtue' to the ethical consumer: 'a sense of moral integrity is more fundamental to the well-being of ethical consumers than either a concern for consequences or rules'. One example of this is 'moral selving' in which one overtly displays 'ethical' consumption behaviour to others in order to represent oneself as a particularly virtuous person. So, on the topic studied here, moral selving might take the form of sharing or donating allotment produce (Barnett *et al.*, 2005c, p. 30; see Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008, p. 146 for an example of how food is 'displayed' in friendships). Another representation of ethical satisfaction is Soper's concept of the 'alternative hedonist' (Soper, 2004; 2007) who recognises that consumption is problematic – both for the environment, and often for the impact on the producer of goods and services – and so chooses 'to consume with a view to securing pleasures [for future generations] put at risk by other types of satisfaction'. This might involve, for example, choosing to walk or cycle, rather than drive, or choosing an alternative which is more expensive or less obviously convenient. In fact, Kneafsey *et al.* (2008, ch. 6, p. 139) argue that the importance of conventionally understood consumer 'convenience' and choice are overstated – having everything under one roof in an out-of-town hypermarket is not necessarily a convenient solution for all. Consumer satisfaction may in fact arise from the overlap between personal lifestyle choices and the perceived ethos of the alternative food network.

More broadly, and moving once again beyond the idea of resistance solely within an economic framework, Kozinets *et al.* (2010) describe a number of possible (and overlapping) forms of engagement with anti-consumption – as an individual as part of a lifestyle movement (e.g. vegetarianism; see Haenfler *et al.*, 2012); as part of an activist movement involved in a specific campaign; or as an individual operating at what they term 'an individualistic, micro-emancipatory frame' where resistance is solely concerned with an individual's own self-image (p. 227). The authors are in no doubt that all these manifestations of anti-consumption are acts of refusal of dominant neoliberal ideology; but they are also concerned that privileging the individual as the locus of resistance is unlikely to lead to durable social change:

And what about the potentially paradoxical nature of anti-consumption that is personal and micro-emancipatory? Such acts of anti-consumption may effectively allow individuals to disengage from mainstream cultural arrangements in their effort to resist the cultural hegemony of consumption. But with such hyper-individualism and inward focus on personal resistance, who is left to share in the collective effort at ensuring societal welfare (as opposed to individual welfare)? (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010, p. 230)

Johnston and Szabo (2011) concur. Citing Giddens's fear of the 'demise of public life', they observe that 'individual reflexivity can readily devolve into narcissism' (p. 305);

for them, Micheletti's political consumer is a figure which represents no more than 'a neo-liberal strategy of downloading responsibility to individuals, leaving states less accountable for the public good' (Johnston and Szabo, p. 303; see also Shove, 2010, pp. 1280-3).

Such scepticism is well-founded. However, I would argue that denying the individual the power to subvert global capital has also meant that individual practices of resistance to mainstream food provisioning which fall below the radar of the market economy – allotments being an example of this – and which thus do not easily lend themselves to measurement, are ignored, even though they may constitute social or lifestyle change. It is hard, for example, to measure at a macro-level how much sales of produce fall when people grow their own produce – although at a microlevel it is comparatively easy for individuals to calculate how much money they have saved this way (see Miller, 2013, pp. 56-7, who refers to research done by the London Victoria Insurance company with allotment plotters, suggesting an average of £950 per year saved on food budgets – though one may question this figure given the investment of time and equipment).

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It is clear, then, that AFNs do not have a homogenous relationship to exchange and the market, either economically or emotionally. As Venn *et al.* have indicated, there is a continuum stretching from direct-sell to self-provisioning – from farmers' markets to allotments via CSAs and community gardens. The following section examines the position of allotments – where producers and consumers are one and the same – within this continuum, seeking to shed light on how the market inflects research in this area, and, finally, how fruitful avenues for future AFN research involve shifting the market from its current position of centrality and focusing on individual practices, rather than on producers and consumers and the economic exchange between them.

Allotments and AFNs

How do allotments fit into the AFN paradigm? In many ways they appear to correspond to certain of the characteristics of AFNs as described above – they are perhaps the ultimate embodiment of a local food system which reduces the space between producer and consumer. And, indeed, the rise in the popularity of allotments and the lengthening waiting lists is a phenomenon which has arisen since the mid-1990s

(Miller, 2015, Wallop 2009), coinciding chronologically with the increase in instances of AFNs (see above).

There is evidence – both from my data, and from other literature – that growing one’s own food on allotment shares other characteristics with AFNs. Individual motivations for taking on an allotment may concern the desire for fresh, tasty produce; whereas the subsequent satisfactions allotment gardeners derive often go beyond food alone, and encompass reconnection with the earth and with nature, the acquisition of new (or forgotten) skills, and a sense of achievement (Miller, 2013). Miller proposes that AFNs and allotments share key features of ‘concern for food security, resilience/sustainability, and food sovereignty’ (2013, p. 4). Supporting this view, Buckingham’s 2005 article examines the rise in female allotment holders in London and establishes that a concern for food safety is a motivating factor in taking on an allotment plot. As we have seen, Goodman speculates that those who participate in alternative food networks are the ‘worried well’ concerned about the impact on their diet of the industrially produced food sold in the supermarkets, and that AFNs are for those who can afford to opt out – those who are ‘rich in economic and cultural capital’ (Goodman 2009, p. 2). My data supports this contention to an extent: from my interview with the then allotments officer at Birmingham City Council (see Chapter 1) it would appear that this latter group are over-represented in the busier allotment sites in Birmingham (i.e. those with waiting lists), and none of my respondents gardened with pesticides (excluding the odd slug pellet). Allotment gardening also demonstrates many elements of ethical simplification: both in the potential savings to be made by growing one’s own food, but also in ‘recycling chic’ aesthetic of the allotment uncovered in my data, which prized the reuse of existing materials, and which represented a form of release for some ploholders, freed from the strictures of ‘keeping up appearances’. Returning briefly to the idea of the local as a defence against the global, this defence can also be conceived nostalgically, as a return to simpler, pre-neoliberal economy and agri-business times. Allotments and (some) AFNs represent ‘the production of food outside capitalist systems of exchange’ (Ginn, 2012, p. 295, in reference to Dig For Victory gardens). This might also tie into a discourse of austerity and voluntary simplicity beloved by both right-wing politicians and environmentalists alike. Finally, Ravenscroft *et al.* (2012) stakes a claim to the social embeddedness of allotments, suggesting moreover that allotments have achieved what many CSA initiatives have failed to do and prioritised community over market:

And this is where we begin to see significant difference emerging between, on the one hand, city farms and allotment gardens and, on the other, CSA. For whereas city farms

and allotment gardens have largely retained their cultural connections between people and place, civic agriculture has [...] become identified as local commercial enterprise with the consequent reduction of 'local' to little more than a marketable commodity [p. 10] [...] [T]he catalyst that links localisation and sustainability into a new relationship between the public and the land is an ethic of care that fosters active community connections and engagement. This is reflected in a paradigm shift from consumer to (quasi) producer through which groups of people commit to sharing the risk and responsibility for producing local food from local land for consumption by local people. (p. 12)

How allotments fail to fit the AFN mould

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Ravenscroft's view of allotments is emphatically not shared by Wiltshire and Geoghegan's 2012 work comparing community gardens and allotments. Whereas community is perceived to be created in community gardens via a shared ideology, for allotment holders it is an optional social good: the benefits they derive from the allotment site are seen as individual, not collective (p. 340). As is the case for AFNs, Wiltshire and Geoghegan claim that allotments too are co-opted by the neoliberal spirit of the age, in this case by emphasising the centrality of individual satisfactions: 'the individual allotment garden could be framed as a petty-bourgeois anachronism, a tool (much like Margaret Thatcher's "right to buy") for giving ordinary people a misleading sense of a stake in a property-owning system which otherwise oppresses them' (p. 341). Here they echo the concerns of Kozinets *et al.* concerning hyper-individualism (2010, p. 230, cited above). By contrast, community gardens are perceived as a collective act of ideology, a 'shared ethos' in the service of the greater needs of the community (p. 342; see also Nettle, 2016). This idea that allotments are motivated by individual self-interest points to an apparent area of contradiction with AFNs. Where both AFN producers, but perhaps especially consumers, are driven by a desire for social justice, this does not at first sight appear to be the case for allotment holders. Is the farmers' market, then, a site for resisting neoliberal capitalism, but the allotment plot is not?

Yet there is little consideration of self-provisioning via allotments within the AFN literature, certainly up until relatively recently (see, however, Miller 2013, 2015; Buckingham 2005; Ravenscroft *et al.* 2012, Hawkes and Acott, 2013). There are, I think, two main reasons for their omission. The first, as indicated above, concerns the relationship between producer and consumer: when, as with allotments, they are essentially one and the same, there can be no market exchange between the two (see immediately below under **Producers, consumers, and the market** for more on this). The second relates to the idea of collective resistance to dominant mainstream food-

provisioning models, and the creation of a community dedicated to enacting such resistance. I expand upon both of these distinctions below.

Producers, consumers, and the market

I have claimed above that allotments are almost entirely a non-market economy. It's useful at this point to unpack more fully what I mean by this. An allotment tenant rents his or her plot from a (usually municipal) body. Sale of produce is not permitted: 'Tenants must use Allotment Gardens for their own personal use and must not carry out any business or sell produce from Allotment Gardens' (Birmingham City Council allotment rules, §5.1; see Appendix 3). Whereas box schemes, for example, or sales of organic goods can be measured in market terms, allotments occupy an anachronistic position in that their assets are not monetised – as the 1998 government report makes clear with its recommendations (not adopted) that allotment holders *should* be able to sell produce (DETR, 1998, §32). Thus, when I say 'outside the market economy' I mean that not only is there is no gap in which economic exchange can take place – as the producer and consumer are one and the same – but also that there is, according to allotment law, no opportunity to resell the produce. I am not suggesting that all aspects of allotment gardening are beyond the clutches of capitalism; clearly there is a commodification of gardening tools and supplies for example. (Practices are easily commodified via 'stuff', even when the original impetus is environmentally motivated. Shaw and Newholm (2002, pp. 176-7) give the example of deciding to cycle rather than drive, but investing in lots of expensive cycle gear.)

Being 'outside' the market in this way is, I argue, a key – but not the only – reason for their relative exclusion from the AFN literature until recently. Despite the focus within AFN literature on social goods – including reconnection with the local and community and with food, resistance to the dominant neoliberal agro-food model of provisioning, social justice and health benefits – this is frequently only framed in terms of the perceived (oppositional) relationship to the market economy. Miller (2013, p. 14) supports this contention by suggesting that the non-food benefits (health, exercise, arguably community) recognised for allotments by policymakers (see previous chapter) do not translate to AFN literature because this literature rarely considers non-commercial producers: in other words, the success (or otherwise) of alternative food networks is primarily conceptualised (and measured) only when consumption is via the wallet as well as via the stomach. Perhaps even more significantly, AFN initiatives themselves also find it hard to break out of the market mindset: Hinrichs comments in relation to setting up and running a CSA project that 'it wasn't our lack of farming

know-how that proved most difficult, rather, as I see it now, it was the pervasive market mind set – the tyranny of capital – that overwhelmed us and demoralised organisers and members alike’ (1999, p. 5).

Community and resistance

In contradistinction to community gardens, present-day allotments are not perceived as being socio-politically driven (as a political economy approach to AFNs would demand). This is somewhat ironic in light of the history of allotments described in the previous chapter. As discussed above, Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012) usefully set out what they see as the features which distinguish community gardens from allotments (see especially Table 28.1, p. 342). According to their categorisation, allotment plots are motivated by self-interest, regulated by individual tenancy, and the beneficiaries are the plotholder and his/her family and friends; social participation is otherwise voluntary. Community gardens are motivated by the common good, are gardened collectively, and the community is the beneficiary. Social participation is obligatory.

In this perspective, allotments only become political when they are at risk of dispossession, as was the case for the Manor Farm allotments in East London, landgrabbed in the preparations for the London 2012 Olympics (Leendertz, 2013). Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012, p. 240) term this ‘a capacity for collective action and social solidarity [in resistance to site closures], but in defence of individual, not collective growing’. Bos and Owen (2015, p. 4, 3.1) distinguish between the social justice aims of community food networks (CFNs) and the market presence of short supply food chains: allotments are neither of these things.

I will argue, however, that it is misleading to suggest that allotments are not potentially sites of resistance to global neoliberalism. Seyfang has suggested that it is the intention of the supermarkets to co-opt the ‘local’ market in much the same way as they have co-opted the organic sector, detailing how Asda has increased the number of local products on its shelves in an example of ‘adoption of green niche practices by the mainstream system’ (2008, p. 192). She sees this as potentially spelling the end for AFNs: the supermarkets can meet consumers’ ethical concerns and provide them with the convenience of one-stop shopping, thereby stifling the ‘radical transformative aims of those innovative system-builders’ (2008, 198).¹⁷ Allotments, however, or other types

¹⁷ An alternative view of this is taken by one of my research participants, Dean, who views the supermarkets’ actions as essentially democratising access to organic produce. The stance of this thesis is undeniably that supermarkets thereby essentially stifle the ‘spirit of resistance’ which animated AFN initiatives to ‘reconnect’ with food; however see Harris (2009) who suggests,

of AFN economy in which producers and consumers are one and the same, and production of food is neither commodified nor monetised, are arguably both resistant (and resistance), to this particular type of co-option. 'Other issues are not so easily transferred into the mainstream supply chain: supporting a cooperative, keeping money in the local economy, having face-to-face contact with growers, *increasing one's connection with the source of one's food* and avoidance of big retailers on ethical or ideological ground are all aspects that appear to be the antithesis of the supermarket model.' (Seyfang, 2008, p. 198, emphasis mine).

Conclusions

What, then, does the study of allotments add to the conceptual framework of alternative food networks and can it shed light on existing tensions within the literature, or highlight fruitful new areas of research? Do people seek out an allotment as a challenge to or a rebellion against the dominance of agro-industry and supermarkets? Or if this isn't their initial intention, does it become so? Can taking on an allotment lead to changes in other food-related practices? Or are allotment-holders, as Wiltshire and Geoghegan suggest, merely self-interested? If, as I contend, allotments deserve to be considered within the AFN literature, then does the dual role of both producer and consumer differentiate ploholders' motivations and practices from those of 'conscious' (McEachern *et al*, 2010) or ethical consumers? What difference does it make when you take the market out of the equation? I return to these questions when I analyse my data in Chapter 5 and in my concluding chapter: below I address how the consideration of allotments – or other non-market-based AFNs – can shed light on some of the tensions within AFN literature and point to ways around some of its current impasses. Finally, I look at how change in current food provisioning practices may be measured by a focus on individuals rather than the market.

What do allotments tell us about AFNs?

Miller (2013, p. 2) suggests that allotments can act as a benchmark for claims made about AFNs (p. 2), but are not themselves AFNs, because they are temporally and legally distinct. Although I do not agree with the logic of her exclusion of allotments from AFNs – there seems in principle no reason why a pre-existing phenomenon cannot be appropriated by a later cultural turn, and there are clearly shared discourses

following Gibson-Graham's technique of 'reading for difference' that AFNs should also be interpreted outside the discursive critique of neoliberalism in order not to reproduce and reinforce the latter.

between individual allotment plotters and AFN consumers – I think her point that allotments are useful benchmarks for AFNs is a good one. In particular, allotments hold AFNs to account in defining their terms, specifically the role of the market, and the concept of ‘the local’.

As described above, despite the focus in the AFN literature on the non-market benefits of AFNs (and, indeed, on an interpretation of AFNs as resistance to the market), AFNs which involve any degree of economic exchange (sale of goods) are nonetheless primarily analysed in economic terms. The absence within this literature of allotments – which share many outward concerns and desired outputs with AFNs, yet lack the necessary gap between producer and consumer in which this economic exchange can take place – serves only to underline this emphasis. Yet economic geography more broadly recognises that ‘it is possible to identify spaces of production *within* the market but *outside* the norms of capitalist evaluation’ (Lee, 2000, p. 138) and it can easily be argued that allotments represent non-market transactions (alongside ‘household flows’ or ‘gift giving’) within a diverse economy of the type described by Gibson-Graham (see, for example, Gibson-Graham, 2008, pp. 4-5). Community gardens – which are again non-monetary in nature – are certainly analysed within this framework (see, for example, Cameron and Gordon, 2010). This is an approach which could be extended to those AFNs in which economic exchange is argued to be one element amongst other more socially oriented elements.

As the shortest of short food supply chains, allotments also force us to recognise the fuzziness of concepts such as ‘local’ or ‘embedded’ within AFN literature. Not only does ‘local’ often collocate unthinkingly with ideas of ‘quality’, as described above, but the question of how the local scale is defined varies between different strands of the literature. Local may mean ‘regional’ (e.g. Watts *et al.*, 2005), ‘about 20 to 100km radius’ (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013, p. 13), at the level of the ‘neighbourhood’ or ‘community’ (Hinrichs, 2000), or may simply remain undefined. (See Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013, section 3 for more on the difficulties of defining the local.)

Future directions for AFN research

I have already outlined the problems associated with the label ‘alternative’ above. However, this is not the only term open to interpretation within the AFN designation. Watts *et al.* (2005) make an interesting distinction between alternative *food* networks and alternative food *networks*. They posit that, in terms of resisting the dominance of neoliberal economics, the former, where the emphasis is on the product, is ‘weaker’

because the output – local, often organic, food – can always be co-opted by the mainstream, as discussed above. Building structural networks (of relationships, of distribution, of exchange) to subvert the dominant model, they argue, provides stronger resistance; although once again this operates within the terms of that dominant model and fails to frame the debate in terms other than the market.

The initial idealism of the early AFN literature – in which AFNs were seen to possess transformative potential – has somewhat paled as it becomes clear how much they have been co-opted, leading to a ‘disenchantment with market-based movements’ (Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman, 2012, p. 246). In their recent book, *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, practice, and politics* (2012), they thus emphasise the need to move ‘toward an understanding of the world as *relational and process-based rather than perfectionist* [...] particularly in the infrastructural spaces of everyday social practice and reproduction’ (pp. 6-7, emphasis in original).

Combining this everyday social practice approach with a focus on the ‘mundane motivations’ of the individual, as both producer *and* consumer (Veen *et al.*, 2012; see also Campbell, 2005, for further discussion of the blurring of this distinction with regard to craft consumers) informs the theoretical framework I use in this thesis to analyse how allotment practice might relate to food-provisioning practices or (other) alternative food networks. I share the view of Veen *et al.* that it is important to adopt ‘the concept of “food provisioning practices” to overcome the critique of producer–consumer dichotomy since the concept treats people holistically as people undertaking activities’ (2012, p. 365). Focusing on the individual both usefully elides the arguably misleading distinction between producer and consumer, and also – since the individual is the ‘crossing-point’ of food-related practices – enables us to consider how changes in any one of the practices of growing, shopping, meal planning, cooking, and eating may impact the others.

In their 2012 article, Haenfler *et al.* focus on ‘lifestyle choices as tactics of social change’ and argue that ‘[p]erhaps some citizens are not disengaging from politics but rather engaging in a “newer,” more personalised form of social change. It is the individual’s responsibility to craft a different world (loosely connected to others doing likewise) rather than solely the domain of the state or even traditional social movements’ – although they further argue that individual lifestyle choices may lead to later collective action (p. 16); even if to be part of a collective movement was not the individual’s original intent (see McEachern *et al.*, 2010, who point out that AFN consumers do not necessarily regard themselves as citizen activists). Furthermore, a number of

commentators discuss the cumulative effects of participating in AFNs, with changes in food production and consumption leading to other lifestyle changes. Lockie (2009), for instance, claims that exposure to organic food may lead to adoption of diversified provisioning practices. Dowler *et al.* (2010) describe this 'graduation effect' thus: 'that by purchasing or growing food outside the "mainstream", people found themselves rethinking and refining other consumption practices to match their ethical frameworks' (p. 210). This was rarely within a framework of organised activism but as a set of personal choices. (There is some evidence from my data that an 'allotment career' exists, though it is less clear that this is accompanied by changes in other food or environmental practices.)

Changes in food provisioning may therefore occur cumulatively (when sufficient people change their provisioning habits), or intra-individually, when changes that an individual makes in their practices and behaviour in one area lead to further changes in that same area, or in related areas (so buying organic vegetables might lead to growing organic vegetables, for example). I outline in more detail in the following chapter how a practice theory approach to food provisioning, focusing on the individual as the nexus of practice, informs my research design and the analysis of my data.

3. Theoretical framework

'The basic domain of study of the social sciences [...] 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. Human social activities . . . are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors.' (Giddens, 1984, p. 2)

As indicated in Chapter 1, in exploring my research questions I necessarily draw upon my personal ontological and epistemological positioning and affinities. My interest in allotments and related food practices is not solely motivated by an interest in food practices *per se* but also by a belief that social change has its seeds in individual everyday activity. (This is not to deny the sociological importance of studying visible processes of change effected by protest movements, for example, and which lead to changes in law and institutions, but to argue instead that even these momentous shifts may come about as a cumulative result of individual actions.) Even in the most mundane of everyday practices – and at this point, by 'practices' I simply mean Giddens's 'human social activity' (in other words, praxis rather than practices – see Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249) – individuals have the possibility to act differently, and I believe that acting differently is in part what allows practices to evolve and social change to occur; this is 'the essentially transformational character of all human action, even in its most utterly routinised forms' (Giddens, 1984, p. 117). Furthermore, my position is that individuals are both knowledgeable and intentional concerning their everyday actions – including their capacity to act differently – even if their knowledge is partial and their intentions do not translate into intended outcomes; also that they are able discursively to analyse what it is they do and why.

In exploring individual everyday activities of growing food on an allotment, and related practices of shopping, cooking, and eating, and how these may tell us something about wider social or lifestyle change regarding food provisioning, I have sought to develop a theoretical framework which will enable an account of individual understandings and performances of practices, as well as provide the tools for a granular analysis of the elements which compose everyday practice. Giddens's account of the reproduction of society through practice, combined with his focus on the knowledgeable agent, provides a theoretically elegant solution in structuration theory to explaining how social reproduction and change occurs. It is not, however, an easy framework to apply to empirical investigation of everyday practice, which is the focus of my research. Consequently, I intend to combine this approach with the later practice theory perspective pioneered notably by Elizabeth Shove in relation to work on consumption,

which both brings further insights to a study of everyday practice as a result of its focus on all elements within a practice – material, symbolic, and affective – and provides an analytic framework which is more readily translatable to empirical work. This perspective, as we shall see, draws on Giddens’s work on structuration theory for many of its key tenets, specifically its underpinning by the notion of social practices as the essential domain of sociological exploration, and the repeated performance of practice as instantiating social reproduction. What I shall henceforth term ‘contemporary practice theory’ is constantly evolving, but in certain of its earlier formulations as set out by Warde (2005) and Reckwitz (2002) it posed (and to a certain extent still poses) a number of theoretical inconsistencies with Giddens’s structuration theory, centring in particular on the role of agency within practice. Drawing on structuration theory as the metatheoretical underpinning of my theoretical framework thus enables me to pay closer analytical attention to the integrative role of the individual practitioner in the performance of everyday practice. It also marks a theoretical development in the capacity of contemporary practice theory to account for agency within practice, and the relationship of the practitioner to such agency. I work through the tensions and synergies implicit in synthesising these theoretical perspectives throughout this chapter.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I outline Giddens’s conception of the relationship between practices and social change, as set out in structuration theory. I then look at some of the criticisms of this approach, and specifically the difficulty of translating structuration theory to empirical research, including my own. I then turn to contemporary practice theory to overcome these shortcomings, and set out its pertinent elements, in which I include social geographic notions of place. I trace recent thinking concerning its future development as a theory, specifically how it might account for notions of agency (or power) and change. Finally I seek to establish what a synthesised version of these two theoretical approaches might look like, and suggest ways in which this synthesis will act as a profitable analytical framework for my data.

Structuration theory

The following discussion draws primarily from Giddens’s elaboration of structuration theory in *The Constitution of Society* (1984) and, to a lesser extent on *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991). Below I set out the main tenets of structuration theory and specifically the relationship between individual practice and social change, before turning to some of the criticisms levelled against it. This is not intended to be an in-depth critique of structuration theory, as my primary

concern is with its capacity to provide an explanatory framework for how individual performances of practice may contribute to social change. I do not, for instance, address in any depth Giddens's conceptions of how individuals internalise and draw upon an understanding of 'domination [power], signification [meaning] and legitimation [norms]' within structuration theory, or his ideas of 'time-space distanciation'. Nor do I seek to take into account his later writings. Giddens is notoriously prolific, and has written extensively about subjects including modernity, globalisation, reflexivity and risk – any of which might pose pertinent questions of my research area (concerning agricultural practices and food risk/security, for example) but which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Structuration theory was Giddens's response to both overly individualistic accounts of social life – the rational choice theories of *homo economicus* or methodological individualism in which society is reduced to the sum of individual agents – and equally unsatisfactory over-deterministic *homo sociologicus* structuralist and functionalist approaches, in which individuals' actions are seen as being largely pre-determined (Giddens, 1984, p. 1; Reckwitz, 2002, 245-6). It was also a response to the view that 'culture', however defined, was what linked the two ('Culture ensures that individual actions are coordinated in ways that produce and reproduce social structures'; King, 2005, p. 216).

Instead, structuration theory posits three intertwined strands to social reproduction: system, structuration, and structure. 'System' encompasses what other theorists have called structure (a society's institutions, its laws, its economy, class systems etc.). Structuration is 'the process by which individuals reproduce these systems through their activities' (King, 2005, p. 219). Giddens defines structure – the decisive element in social reproduction – as comprised of rules and resources 'recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems' (1984, p. 377). Sewell elaborates on this: effectively structures are virtual – '[s]tructures are not the patterned social practices that make up social systems, but the principles that pattern these practices' – and only exist when they are 'instantiated in action' (1984, p. 377).

When actors act, they draw upon both rules – which Sewell (1992) and Stones (2005) more helpfully describe as virtual (cultural) schema which are known intuitively – and resources, which the actor controls and which may be either authoritative or allocative ('human and non-human' in Sewell's terms [1992, p. 9]). Sewell argues that Giddens's rules and resources are mutually reinforcing, just as, in acting, agents both reaffirm and

reproduce the social rules on which they draw. Structure thus underpins social practice (King, 2005, p. 220).

The configurations of norms, the conventional significations and the possessions of power that are perceived by agents exist only because of the involvement of agents in producing them and continuing to produce them [...] agents and structures are not kept apart but [are] mutually constitutive of one another (Stones, 2005, p. 21).

Like language, which both defines intelligible utterances and is the medium through which we make them, structure serves to frame action. So, for Giddens, structure (and, argues Stones, agency) is both constituted and reproduced in social practices enacted and embodied at the level of the individual agent. Structure is thus dual: both the medium and outcome of action, 'both constraining and enabling' (Giddens, 1984, p. 25).

At its simplest, then, structuration theory can be summed up as: 'Structures shape people's practices, but it is also practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures' (Sewell, 1992, p. 4; see also Stones, 2005, p. 20 and King, 2005, p. 219).

The individual and social change in structuration theory

Caldwell (2012, p. 293) claims that 'Giddens's theorisation of the agency-structure problematic creates a temporal space to theorise practice that preserves agency and change while allowing for the determining influence of structuration processes'. Giddens's starting point is that agents are knowledgeable and purposeful. To this end, he makes a distinction between the unconscious; discursive consciousness – that which individual actors can reflect upon and discuss; and 'practical consciousness' or 'tacit knowledge' – the unspoken practices which people engage in which allow them to 'go on' and navigate everyday life (Caldwell, 2012, p. 295; Stones, 2005, p. 28).

All human beings continuously monitor the circumstances of their activities as a feature of doing what they do, and such monitoring always has discursive features. In other words, agents are normally able, if asked, to provide discursive interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage (Giddens, 1991, p. 35).

Practical consciousness – 'vital to social practice, but [...] effectively invisible' (King, 2005, p. 219) – is crucial to the smooth running of social life and to shared understandings between actors. Tacit knowledge is usually so taken for granted that it is only remarked upon when there is a failure in its observance; as, for example, in a foreign country, to use another language example; or when an individual suffers from mental illness (Giddens, 1984, pp. 79-81). Practical consciousness is not to be confused with the unconscious, in that it is not unknown or unknowable to the actor: 'the boundaries between practical and discursive consciousness are potentially more fluid

and shifting' (Ritzer, 2004, p. 323). (An understanding that individuals are capable of interrogating their own assumptions and behaviours is crucial to a study such as my own which relies on participants' accounts of their own practice.)

An ability to reflect upon and discuss one's practice is one thing, but how can knowledgeable agents inflect practices such that social (or structural) change eventually results? Giddens argues that their capacity to discursively evaluate their action is mutually constitutive of their ability to choose how to act; and, crucially, how to 'act otherwise': '[t]o be able to "act otherwise" means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs' (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Giddens thus posited that the exercise of power falls within the transformative capacity of human agency – in other words, that we always have the choice to act differently. 'Acting differently' may not always appear possible, of course, and individuals may be constrained in their actions by societal factors (such as sexism). However, '[a]ctors, of course, vary in the extent of their control of social relations and in the scope of their transformative powers, but all members of society exercise some measure of agency in the conduct of their daily lives' (Sewell, 1992, p. 20). This means that in each and every action individuals have the choice between socially legitimate or illegitimate action. The former will ultimately reproduce social structures of power, meaning and norms; the latter will subvert it – and the knowledgeable actor draws on his or her structural knowledge to determine which it is.¹⁸ Hence the importance for social continuity and change not just that agents are able to reflect upon their own practice, but also that they are able to observe others engaged in the same practice so that they have a frame of reference upon which to draw in order to decide whether or not their own behaviour subverts or reproduces established norms. Giddens argues that 'the continuity of everyday life depends, in large measure, on routinised interactions between people who are *co-present* in time and space' (Gregory, in Held and Thompson, p. 188, italics in original).

Individuals, then, are not determined by the constraints of structure but may act to change it. Thus, by drawing on allocative and authoritative resources, 'if enough people, or even a few people who are powerful enough, act in innovative ways, their action may have the consequence of transforming the very structures that gave them

18 See also King (2000, pp. 420-1) for a discussion of legitimacy of action in relation to Bourdieu's idea of the 'virtuosity of social actors and the intersubjective nature of social life'. Although there is a difference between 'legitimacy' and the possibility of acting 'otherwise', however, there is value to situating practices within networks of human relationships, as Bourdieu does, and as contemporary practice theory does less successfully: see below.

the capacity to act' (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). We need to nuance this apparent capacity for individuals to effect change through practice in several ways, however. First, as Sewell indicates, the actions of one individual cannot overturn deeply layered aspects of the system, such as institutions, which are seen as regularised practices that exist over the 'longue durée' (Giddens, 1984, p. 35). Social practice is recursive over time and the reproduction of social life therefore expands beyond the lifespan or geography of the individual agent, even if that agent acts subversively in a step towards that change. Societal change operates in this sense rather like the evolution of a football team in which players change one by one. This leads to 'time-space distancing': 'the stretching of social systems across time-space' (Giddens, 1984, p. 377).

Second, not only may actors' motivations for action be unclear, but even an intentional subversion of practice may also have unintended consequences. According to Giddens, actors not only *can* reflexively monitor their actions, but routinely do so: '[t]he reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens, 1990, pp. 38-9). Being a reflexive agent does not equate to being a rational agent, however. Actors' motivation may be purposeful or routine, straightforward and clear, opaque and complex, conscious or unconscious (Stones, 2005, p. 24). But while day-to-day action may be intentional in this sense, 'many acts have unintended consequences which may become the unacknowledged conditions of further acts' (Thompson, 1989, p. 71; Giddens, 1984, pp. 9-14). Giddens cites racial segregation in cities as an example of the unintended outcome of individual decisions to live closer to people like oneself (Giddens, 1984, p. 10). In other words, social change may occur in some sense despite the agent.

Criticism of structuration theory

There are a number of criticisms of structuration theory. Most focus on its gaps, inconsistencies, and on a lack of specificity; fewer, arguably, fundamentally disagree with its basic premise of the duality of structure. Archer is a notable exception here, in her refusal to accept how Giddens collapses structure – which Archer sees as real and separate – into the individual; in other words she rejects the duality of structure (King, 2005, p. 227). Otherwise, Thompson (1989, pp. 62-3) criticises Giddens's characterisation of structure as 'rules and resources, focusing particularly on the lack of clarity in how rules are defined, specifically in terms of scale and variety (see also Sewell, 1992, pp. 6-8, who argues rules in Giddens's sense are better described as 'schema', since they apply largely to assumptions, rather than 'formally stated

prescriptions'). It is similarly unclear how concepts which are beyond formulation into individual rules, such as capitalism (Thompson, 1989, p. 65), are to be treated, although Sewell (1992, pp. 5-6), would argue that capitalism comes under the heading of a 'social system' which Giddens defines as one of the elements comprising structure. One might also argue that an individual actor never experiences capitalism in its totality, and that on a day-to-day basis it is effectively filtered through a multitude of rules. Sewell (1992, p. 5) agrees with Thompson that Giddens fails to adequately define structure (or, more accurately, that he does define it in several places, but that it is not a robust enough concept to support structuration theory); while Craib (1998, p. 69) argues that Giddens fails adequately to define structure vs action.

There are a number of criticisms concerning Giddens's conceptualisation of the individual and individual action. Thrift (1996, p. 54, quoted in Jack and Kholeif, 2007, p. 212) claims that Giddens's 'over-emphasis on action as individual . . . never fully considers the ghost of networked others that continually informs action'. I think this point – the impact of invisible relationships on practice – is an important one, and I address it both below and in the analysis of my data (specifically Chapter 6). Sewell (1992, p. 7) finds that Giddens places much emphasis on the idea of the individual being knowledgeable without specifying what the content of that knowledge might be. Finally, Thompson (1989, pp. 73-4) feels that in claiming the individual always has the possibility to act differently, Giddens does not sufficiently account for privilege or lack of choice nor, ultimately, power.

Translating structuration theory to empirical research

To these criticisms, and as a result of them, a further charge is added from a number of quarters (Gregson, 1989; O'Reilly, 2012): that structuration theory, despite the seductive elegance of its synthesis of the dual nature of structure and agency, is a metatheory, not intended as (or fit to be) a workable framework for empirical research. This charge is refuted – with reservations, to which I return below – by a number of writers and in relation to a number of disciplines. Bryant and Jary devote a whole chapter (Chapter 2) to uses of structuration theory in their 2001 edited collection *The contemporary Giddens*, and structuration theory has constituted fertile theoretical ground for research in management studies (Pozzebon, 2004; Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005; Lee *et al.*, 2007), accounting studies (Jack and Kholeif, 2007), the sociology of technology (Orlikowski, 1992; Jones and Karsten, 2008), and politics (Cash, 1996).

Rob Stones's 2005 book, *Structuration theory*, is the most in-depth attempt at translating structuration theory into a framework for empirical research. It does this by setting out a 'strong' version of structuration theory which addresses concrete situations. Where Giddens focused on ontology, Stones reintroduces epistemology and methodology into structuration theory:

The broad epistemological approach in Giddens's structuration theory is that knowledge is socially constructed and that all human beings are knowledgeable agents. The knowledge of actions and structure of the context in which they act and the conduct that follows are the subject of research. The purpose of structuration investigations is to elicit that knowledge from actors and from their context (Jack and Kholeif, 2007, p. 211).

Stones developed a quadripartite model of structuration to achieve this (Stones, 1995, pp. 84-115), 'four analytically, separate components' (p. 75) intended to conceptualise the duality of structure for empirical use. These are: (1) external structures as conditions of action; (2) internal structures (the agent's capabilities and what they know); (3) active agency and actions; and (4) outcomes (intended or unintended). This empirical framework is perceived to work well for meso-level empirical research (Jack and Kholeif, 2007, p. 213), lending itself to case studies examining change over a longer period of time: Jack and Kholeif give the example of Jack's 2004 study on the institutionalisation of farm management accounting practices in the UK in the postwar period (Jack and Kholeif, 2007, p. 217), and a number of the studies cited above are concerned with identifying the institutionalisation of practice at some level. Methodologically, there is no one approach associated with structuration theory, and examples of research projects given by both Giddens (in Giddens, 1984) and Stones use interviews, surveys and ethnography (Jack and Kholeif, 2007, pp. 215-6; see further remarks on appropriate methodology in relation to a practice theoretical framework in the following chapter, Chapter 4). Although some elements of the four components outlined above, specifically those related to individual agency and competence, are likely to emerge from my research, it is difficult to see how Stones's framework above could be applied wholesale to a microlevel analysis of everyday individual practice of the type proposed here.

Potentially more useful is Sewell's (1992) interpretation of 'how the ordinary operations of structures can generate transformations', which draws on his discussion of structuration theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice. To do this, he proposes 'five key axioms: the multiplicity of structures, the transposability of schemas, the unpredictability of resource accumulation, the polysemy of resources, and the intersection of structures' in order to trace such change (Sewell, 1992, pp. 16-19). For

allotments this might mean, for example, interrogating how economic understandings intersect with notions of health and sustainability within allotment practice; how growing organic produce might lead to buying organic produce (or vice versa); how related cooking and eating practices may affect what people grow (and vice versa); how the facilities of the allotment site (availability of a shop or community space, proximity of plot to a water supply) may affect the performance of the practice; or how the allotment may function as a space of solitude for one, but as a space of community for another. In the next section I hope to demonstrate how adopting a contemporary practice theory perspective, with an emphasis on identifying all elements within a practice – meanings, competence and materials – at a granular level will both provide responses both to Sewell’s five key axioms, and to his earlier concern that Giddens’s structuration theory did not delve deep enough into what it was that a knowledgeable agent is meant to know.

Thus, despite the arguments made above concerning structuration theory’s potential translation to empirical work, like many other researchers I intend to appropriate structuration theory ‘not as the primary theoretical foundation but as a broad framework or “envelope”’ Pozzebon (2004, p. 254) to inform my analysis of the role of the individual practitioner within the practice of allotment gardening, and the relationship between their performance of this practice and lifestyle or social change.

Contemporary practice theory

A ‘practice theory turn’ gathered momentum from the 1990s, especially in relation to literatures of consumption, and interest in this perspective currently shows no signs of abating.¹⁹ Key theorists of this shift were Schatzki (1996), Reckwitz (2002), Warde (2005) and Elizabeth Shove, the latter and her colleagues advancing the theory in a series of ground-breaking empirical studies analysing consumption from a sociological practice-based perspective (e.g. Hand *et al.*, 2005; Hand and Shove, 2007; Shove *et al.*, 2007; Shove *et al.*, 2009; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Shove and Pantzar, 2005). For Shove, who aims ‘to develop a framework that can inspire empirical investigations’, practices comprise materials (stuff or equipment), meaning (making sense of the activity) and competence (skills and knowledge required to carry out the practice) and these elements are linked (or embodied) by the practitioners in their performance of the practice (Røpke, 2009, p. 2492; Shove *et al.*, 2012).

19 To the extent that Corradi *et al.* (2010) talk about the ‘bandwagon’ of practice-based studies and question the meaningfulness of the term.

Drawing on Giddens, contemporary practice theorists start from the position that '[t]he basic domain of study in the social sciences [...] is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time' (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). This new generation of practice theorists, however, was initially less concerned with the issues of structure and agency which preoccupied Giddens and Bourdieu, focusing instead on identifying the configurations of elements which constitute a practice, including equipment, technology, skills and emotions (e.g. Spaargaren 2011, p. 817). In a key definition, Reckwitz conceptualised practices as 'a routinised way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood'. Practices are not reducible to any of the elements of which they are comprised, namely 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). The routine nature of everyday activities is emphasised, which are 'guided not by intentional action, formal knowledge or theoretical concepts, but by routine practices, know-how, tacit knowledge or informal rules, all of which may be diffuse, indeterminate or unreflective' (Caldwell, 2012, p. 284).

Practices endure and change by being performed or enacted, and this constitutes social reproduction. A distinction is made between the abstract 'practice-as-entity' (a cluster of elements which combine to create a recognised activity, such as knitting or allotment gardening), described by Schatzki as 'a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (quoted in Røpke, 2009, p. 2491), and including understandings, procedures and engagements (see also Warde, 2005, p. 134); and the material and bodily reiteration of that practice ('practice-as-performance'). 'A practice-as-entity has a relatively enduring existence across actual and potential performances, yet its existence depends upon recurrent performance by real-life practitioners' (Shove *et al.*, 2007, p. 13). So, broadly speaking, we recognise the practice-as-entity of allotment gardening as a leisure activity which entails a practitioner renting a plot on an allotment site and travelling to that site in order to grow fruit and vegetables for personal consumption. To do so, s/he will need to call on some knowledge, experience or understanding of how to grow plants, and be equipped to do so (with gardening tools, sheds, seeds, etc.). Whilst no individual performance of this activity will be identical mentally, bodily, or materially (meaning that people will grow different plants, for different reasons, using different techniques, in different

weathers and soils), nonetheless the activity has recognisable parameters (allotment gardening may share elements of blackberry picking or fishing, for example, but would not be mistaken for either of these activities).

Individuals, or practitioners, are seen not only as the carriers but also as the 'unique crossing points' of practices (Reckwitz, 2002, p, 256), as they are the nexus for a variety of practices which may be either 'dispersed' or 'integrative'. Dispersed practices are concerned with 'know-how' or tacit knowledge (Giddens's idea of knowing how to proceed in everyday situations), appear across all aspects of social life, and 'presuppose a shared and collective practice involving performance in appropriate contexts and mastery of common understandings'. (An example of a dispersed practice might be 'giving directions'.) Integrative practices are more complex and composite – such as cooking or allotment gardening – and are 'ones which are generally of more interest to sociologists' (Warde, 2005, p. 135).

The representation of the individual as the crossing-point of practices underlines that – as in structuration theory – the unit of meaning is the practice, not the individual. In contemporary practice theory, however, this has the effect of sidelining Giddens's 'knowledgeable' agent – now one element alongside others within the practice – a displacement which has become difficult to sustain fully in theoretical terms over time, as we shall see. Later practice theory effectively detaches knowledge, emotions and skills from their human 'carrier' to classify them instead as elements of the practice *alongside* the practitioner. As Warde puts it, practice theory 'is not dependent on presumptions about the primacy of individual choice or action, whether of the rational action type or as expression of personal identity' (2005, p. 136). Agents are not the starting point of the analysis, as practices logically and historically precede individuals, implying that practices, so to speak, 'recruit' practitioners. (Røpke, 2009, p. 2493).

So where does this leave the agency necessary for social change to occur? Certainly in some of the earlier formulations of contemporary practice theory this question is somewhat elided. Warde, for example, argues that 'sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. The concept of practice inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation' – thereby corroborating Giddens's fundamental assertion of the duality of structure instantiated through practice – but goes on to suggest that, in any case, reproduction is more likely to occur than innovation, since agents' performance of a practice is 'often neither fully conscious nor reflective' (Warde, 2005, p. 140).

Unlike in structuration theory, then, the analytical focus on the practice as the source of social reproduction has arguably enabled contemporary practice theory to sidestep consideration of questions of structure and agency. For me, certainly, this type of bordering-on-the-flat type of ontology – the individual being one element among many, but not the determining element – is both puzzling and problematic. Whilst accepting – and empirically welcoming – the fact that practices are comprised of elements beyond the individual, it is difficult to see how a practice can recruit new practitioners – as Røpke goes on to acknowledge – without accepting the decisive agency of those practitioners; despite ‘preceding’ individuals historically, practices will die out if practitioners do not choose to adopt them. Indeed, this is key to Giddens’s notions of how practices instantiate structure across time space, and to social change. Moreover, whilst material elements – technology, for example – may be key to the performance of a practice, and undoubtedly have the capacity to constrain or expand the possibilities of that practice, such elements are dependent on their mobilisation by human actors – who, as Giddens reminds us – always have the possibility to ‘act otherwise’. As Sewell suggests (in his analysis of structuration theory’s use of the notion of resources) ‘the activation of material things as resources, the determination of their value and social power, is dependent on the cultural schemas that inform their social use’ (Sewell, 1992, p. 12).

This is not to dispute the importance of such material elements within practices; indeed a renewed emphasis on materiality opens up a wide range of analytical possibilities (in terms of differentiating practices, or tracing their development, for example). It is useful, here, too, to make a distinction between practice theory and Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005). Whereas practice theory seeks to fill the gaps in earlier theories of practice by accounting for the totality of elements within a practice – including technology, equipment, and non-human actors – it does not follow ANT in attributing agency to such elements, any more than it attributes agency to the individual (see Spaargaren, 2011, p. 817; Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 9).

This tension within contemporary practice theory initially led to notions of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ theories of practice. In ‘strong’ theories of practice, according to Røpke, ‘the practitioner becomes the carrier of the practice-related beliefs, emotions, and purposes when performing the practice, but these aspects of meaning are seen as “belonging” to the practice rather than emerging from self-contained individuals’ (Røpke, 2009, p. 2492), with Shove’s work seen as exemplifying this current (e.g. Shove *et al.*, 2008). Conversely, in ‘weak’ theories of practice, such as the work by Spaargaren (Spaargaren

et al., 2013; Spaargaren, 2003), 'the individual focus on self-identity and lifestyle becomes the background for the combination of practices in everyday life' (Røpke, 2009, p. 2493).

The notion of 'lifestyle' – irrelevant to 'strong' theories of practice because of the inevitable spotlight on the individual that it entails – thus has a role to play in weaker theories of practice. For Giddens, '[a] lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity [...] Lifestyles are routinised practices [...] but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity' (Giddens, 1991, p. 81; see also the reference to work by Haenfler *et al.* (2012) in the preceding chapter on alternative food networks). Spaargaren acknowledges that authors working on environmental change within a practice paradigm have tended to steer clear of a focus on the individual and 'the cultural dimension of green lifestyles' (Spaargaren, 2011, p. 818). Elsewhere, Spaargaren aligns himself with Giddens in this respect in his work on carbon-labelling: 'When participants enter the practice, they bring along their individual lifestyles which both help shape and are themselves being (re)shaped during the shared act of reproducing the practice.' (Spaargaren *et al.*, 2013, p. 436) Effectively, Spaargaren is restating what it means for the individual to be the 'crossing-point' of practices. It is my contention that in order to fully account for processes of change within contemporary practice theory it is necessary to reaffirm the determining nature of the individual agent within the performance of the practice, and to embrace the potential that being the crossing-point of practices might represent for social change.

Developments and future directions in practice theory

Over the last two decades, contemporary practice theory has evolved both disciplinarily – its use as an analytical framework within studies of consumption and environmental change is ever-increasing, but it is also used in disciplines such as management studies and education – and theoretically. Certainly there are a number of issues with which practice theory is currently grappling, and potential areas for future research, many of which are summarised in the (Blue *et al.*, 2014) 'Demanding ideas'

collection of working papers.²⁰ In the discussion below I draw specifically on this set of working papers and on *Dynamics of Social Practice* (Shove *et al.*, 2012). I focus in particular on those areas concerned with the issues of structure and agency (also translatable as 'power': see Watson, Blue *et al.*, 2014, p. 13) discussed above, and the role and nature of practitioners within the practice; specifically their capacity to instigate change through repeated or cumulative performance. I then highlight two specific 'gaps' in practice theory – or, if not gaps, then at least dimensions which are undertheorised but of particular relevance to my research questions: the position of the individual as the 'crossing-point' of (social, professional, community) networks (what Thrift referred to above as 'networked others'); and the dimension of place/space.

Agency and power

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, many of the authors contributing manifestos to the 'Demanding ideas' document recognise the need to address issues of power and agency. Addressing the distribution of power is approached from two angles: accounting for power (imbalances), and tackling institutional practices. So Hui remarks (p. 4) that hitherto practice theory has focused on practices in everyday life rather than on, for example, the workings of government, which is a different scale of practices; whereas Watson (pp. 13-15) seeks to identify how power is manifested and accounted for within practices, including an analysis of the practices of power (which he sees as analogous to other practices). Trentmann points out (p. 56) that there is a divergence of opinion as to how what he terms 'additional dimensions' – those currently falling outside the purview of practice theory – are to be approached. Can such dimensions – e.g. architecture, politics, government – be treated as manifestations of practices like any other – in other words are all practices fundamentally equivalent as objects of study – or does this fail to account for imbalances in power? Should these dimensions instead 'be added to practice accounts to give these greater explanatory power'? (p. 56)

The distribution of agency is similarly under the microscope in these working papers. Watson comments (pp. 13-14) that we do not have to deny the agency of material things within practices, but that we must not 'lose the distinctive capacities of the human subject to do the work of integration of the many elements of practice to effect

20 'Demanding ideas: where practice theory might go next'. Available online at <http://www.demand.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Demanding-Ideas-Working-Paper-compilation-ES-for-web.pdf> [Last accessed 26 September 2016].

performance: and it is those capacities that enable the innovations in integration and performance that underlies the changes in practices and so in social order'.

There is evidence to suggest that the 'distinctive capacities of the human subject' are sometimes overlooked in contemporary practice theory accounts of society. First, an apparently minor example: Trentmann notes that practice theory uses 'troubling' verbs – so practices 'recruit' practitioners and 'enrol' understandings. Trentmann sees in this 'a deeper unclarity about the components of practices' (pp. 56-7). Failing to recognise and account for the determining role of the practitioner in integrating performances of practice has also resulted in what Hui argues is a frequent neglect of 'meanings' within the meanings/competences/materials triumvirate. She comments:

In part, this could be due to the fact that they are not always materialised or directly observable, and thus can be difficult to identify or represent [...] They are also complicated to discuss because the distinction between addressing them as elements of practice and sliding into ontologically incompatible framings of norms or values can be difficult to negotiate or defend (p. 6).

By this, I understand that she means that practice theory engages with difficulty with meanings and motivations, since this would place unwelcome emphasis on the individual practitioner.

Finally, and most importantly, shifting the focus away from the individual makes it more difficult to account for processes of change. If, as is generally held within contemporary practice theory, social change occurs as a result of the integration of new elements (meanings/competences/materials), or the reconfiguration of existing elements, into repeated and cumulative individual performances of a practice, then as a result then we need to acknowledge the function of the individual in integrating these new elements, as Watson describes above.

How practices change

Practice theory is now addressing head on the question of social change, particularly – as is key to the assumptions underpinning my own research questions – in terms of how practices fit together and thus generate change. Hargreaves (2011, p. 95) talks of 'the shortcomings of analyses that focus only on single practices and neglect the connections, alliances and conflicts between practices' and Shove claims, pithily, that 'practices change when new elements are introduced or when existing elements are combined in new ways' (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 120). I argue below (drawing frequently on the 'Demanding ideas' document) that a renewed focus on the individual practitioner – who in Shove's formulation is one element of practice amongst others –

provides an entry point for understanding how such 'connections, alliances, and conflicts' between practices are shaped. This focus also draws attention to the undertheorised influence of relationships on practices which I illustrate further in relation to my own data in Chapters 5-7 of this thesis.

Practices may change by incorporating elements from other practices, be that in terms of meaning, competences or materials. Moreover these elements combine in different ways for different practitioners, and these incorporations and combinations occur in everyday performance of practices, such that 'change is omnipresent and continuous in practices' (Kuijer, p. 43, in Blue *et al.*, 2014). So, for instance, an allotment gardener may grow vegetables organically, as a result of which the meaning of organic food for that practitioner changes such that he or she then also purchases organic food.

Practices may also change as a result of being taken up or abandoned by practitioners, often as a result of space/time constraints. For example, time constraints may mean that one is forced to choose between leisure pursuits (see Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 127); two practices cannot always simultaneously occupy the same space – so an outdoor pitch cannot simultaneously be used for football and hockey; one cannot both drive and cycle to work on the same journey. One practice may thus 'replace' another at a collective level: Crouch and Ward, as we have seen, attribute the post-war decline in the practice of allotment-gardening to a rise in income and living standards, allied to an explosion in alternative forms of leisure, which meant that people no longer 'needed' to be able to grow their own food (Crouch and Ward, 1997, pp. 77-8). Watson, in his 2012 article on how one might encourage people to cycle rather than drive, also analyses the replacement of one practice by another. 'The way in which one practice bundles together with others is significant for changes to both the elements of practices and processes of recruitment. [...] A practice can therefore change as neighbouring practices change' (Watson, 2012, p. 491).

Practitioners too may change the nature of their performance of a practice as a result of observing the practice of others. Unlike everyday private activities such as showering (Hand *et al.*, 2005), allotment sites frequently do have rules detailing acceptable and unacceptable practice (see Appendix 3 for those issued by Birmingham City Council), but within these guidelines the practice at a specific site may evolve in a certain direction – to encourage wildlife, for example, by keeping bees, not mowing paths in order to encourage wild flowers, etc. Shove contends that 'practices-as-performances are always localised integrations, but that elements travel and that their circulation is

crucial for the reproduction of practices across space and time' (Shove, in Blue *et al.*, 2014, p. 31). This is relevant both within and between practices.

To be clear: I am not suggesting that any individual performance of practice, no matter how innovative, is sufficient in and of itself to constitute change in a practice-as-entity. But I am suggesting that this moment of innovation – of acting differently – constitutes agency which may ultimately – cumulatively – lead to changes in the practice-as-entity. (See Chapter 7 for further reflection on 'visible' and 'invisible' change.)

Finally in this section considering the future directions of practice theory, I want to highlight two particular dimensions not initially well accounted for by this new practice turn – the fact that individuals are not just the crossing point for practices but also for networks of relationships that in turn have a significant impact on practices; and the space in which a practice takes place. I set out below current thinking within practice theory regarding these two dimensions and, specifically in relationship to space/place, my approach within my own research.

One plausible conclusion from the discussion above is that contemporary practice theory, and the three pillars of meanings/competences/materials on which it rests, is not currently flexible enough theoretically to account for intangible social constructs – power, inequality, capitalism – whose impacts are nonetheless very real. (See Schatzki, in Blue *et al.*, 2014, pp. 10, 12. Hui also gestures towards this when she talks about 'units other than practices (elements, linkages, careers)' (p. 7)). Networks of relationships are one such intangible, but their impact on individual meanings/competences/materials is likewise very real. Many people choose to take up the practice of allotment gardening for reasons which are intimately connected to their relationships rather than to the practice itself, such as the anonymous allotment forum commentator who confessed that, in the absence of an interest in Leyton Orient football club, his taking on an allotment plot was motivated by wanting to have something to talk to his father about.²¹ (See also Hawkes and Acott, 2013, p. 1123 for more on how external relationships physically affect the plot.) Again, this relative absence within practice theory may relate to the displacement of the individual within the practice: as Trentmann remarks 'Most practices have outside as well as inside

21 Grow Your Own Fruit and Veg Magazine online forum, 2010, 'So why did you get an allotment?', available online at http://www.growfruitandveg.co.uk/grapevine/general-chitchat/so-why-did-you-get-allotment_47129.html [last accessed 29 January 2016].

relations – and these outsides pull research away from the practices themselves' (Trentmann, in Blue *et al.*, 2014, p. 57).

Just as personal networks are difficult to slot into the existing typology of practice elements so too is the concept of place (although see Shove *et al.*, 2012, pp. 130-4 for some initial thoughts), but it is difficult to envisage analysing the practice of allotment gardening without taking this dimension into account – as presumably is the case for other practices which are tied to – or in this case reconfigure – a specific location. Before outlining how I intend to synthesise the structuration theory and practice theory perspectives outlined above, such that I obtain a robust and flexible analytical framework with which to interpret my research data, I need therefore to spend some time unpacking the concept of place, taking the insights of social geography as a starting point.

On the surface, allotment gardening appears to have clear spatial and temporal boundaries – people have to travel *to* the allotment, and accomplish specific tasks there, over a given period of time. This would be to mistake the nature of both practices and place however, which are as much bounded by the understandings which individuals have of them, and by the social structures which these individual actors embody, as by the place and space which they occupy on the allotment and in people's schedules. Below, therefore, I outline how I understand and am using the concepts of place/space within this thesis. My analysis owes much to the contribution made by Sarah Pink in combining place and practice in her 2012 book, *Situating everyday life: practices and places*.

Place and practice

In *Place: A Short Introduction* (2004), Tim Cresswell describes how place is portrayed by various theorists as essentially threefold in nature. These threefold distinctions vary and develop over time. Relph characterised the identity of a place, its 'persistent sameness and unity which allows that [place] to be differentiated from others' as comprising 'three components: (1) the place's physical setting; (2) its activities, situations, and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place.' (Relph 1976, p. 45, summarised in Seamon and Sowers, 2008). Agnew's 1987 conception of place as a 'meaningful location' includes *location* (position on a map); *locale* (the 'material setting for social relations', in this case the allotment site) and *sense of place* ('the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place') (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7). Giddens, on

whom Agnew perhaps draws, also talks of a locale as providing the settings of interaction (1984, p. 118). He further specifies that you have to understand both form and function in designating a locale (so a house is both a structure and a dwelling). For Soja (1999), drawing on Henri Lefebvre, there is firstspace, which is the mappable/real; secondspace, the perceived or represented; and thirdspace, which is lived or practised. Broadly, then, place can be summarised as comprising three dimensions – physical location, activities and social connections, and symbolic representation.

Cresswell sums up the distinct academic approaches to place as falling under three main headings: a 'descriptive' approach which sees places as entities – 'the concern here is with the distinctiveness and particularity of places'; a 'social constructionist' approach, which 'is still interested in the particularity of places but only as instances of more general underlying social processes', social forces, power relations and structural conditions; and, finally, a 'phenomenological' approach which 'seeks to define the essence of human existence as one that is necessarily and importantly "in-place"' (2004, p. 51).

This tripartite distinction can be illustrated by the case of allotments. First, allotments and the plots within them are delimited spaces with (permeable) borders which separate practitioners from one another and from non-practitioners, occupying an ambiguous symbolic position between private and public space. (I explore this idea of private/public space, and the concomitant notions of being inside or outside the practice further in Chapter 6; see also Harris (2010) for whom the framing of place is an act of inclusion or exclusion, p. 360). Second, the place of the allotment is integral to the practice itself: allotment gardening can only take place at the allotment, and the fabric of the place (the earth, the vegetation) is physically part of that practice. By virtue of practitioners working alongside each other in this way, their performance of the practice is visible to one another and thereby impacts others' performance, thus constituting one of the drivers for change in the practice. Third, research participants frequently represented the allotment space to me as something outside of their everyday lives – an oasis, or retreat. These three representations of place correspond to the distinctions drawn out above – broadly speaking, a physical space, a lived event, and a symbolic imaginary.

Most theorists make a distinction between 'place' (as 'socially produced space') and 'space' (as the gaps between) – Cresswell suggests that naming a space makes it a place; that '[s]paces have areas and volumes. Places have space between them'

(Cresswell, 2004, pp. 9-12). Doreen Massey, however, refuses this distinction between place and space. Instead she sees both place and space as 'articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (1991, p. 28; see also Massey, 2005). This emphasis on place as also constituting the locus of social relationships – which, as outlined above, are also insufficiently theorised within contemporary practice theory – is also echoed by Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990, pp. 18-19) when he states that 'the physical settings of social activity [are] situated geographically [...] What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature.' (I will demonstrate this contention in Chapter 6 when analysing the role of invisible relations in structuring allotment practice.) Massey refers to this notion as a 'relational politics of place', which 'involves both the inevitable negotiations presented by throwntogetherness and a politics of the terms of openness and closure' (2005, p. 181). For Massey, neither place nor space are bounded, but instead are constantly being remade by intersecting trajectories and flows of human and non-human actors. By their very contingency, this 'throwntogetherness' of human and non-human elements changes and remakes space. (I analyse the trajectories of human and non-human actors across the allotment in these terms in Chapter 6.)

Place, then, like practice, is 'always under construction' (Massey, 2005, p. 9; Cresswell, 2004, p. 37). Cresswell's own definition of place (cited in Pink, 2012, pp. 26-7) runs as follows: 'To think of place as an intersection – a particular configuration of happenings – is to think of place in a constant sense of becoming through practice and practical knowledge. Place is both the context for practice – we act according to more or less stable schemes of perception – and a product of practice – something that only makes sense as it is lived.' 'In these terms places are never established. They only operate through constant and repetitive practice.' (Cresswell, 2004, p.38).

Place is thus a concept which is as performative and multi-layered as practice. As social and cultural geographers in particular have demonstrated, place cannot be reduced to a descriptive locale, and I will argue that, in the same way that the individual agent acts as a crossing-point for a number of practices (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 256), so too the allotment as place is far from static and bounded but is both the locus of intersecting (human and non-human) trajectories and flows, and is constantly being reinvented through practice. This process of constituting practice and place combines contributions from both human actors and non-human entities. The inclusion of material elements within practice theory accounts is also useful to illuminate all

influences upon how and why a practice/place is 'performed' in the way that it is, and how changes can occur in the performance, and hence instantiation, of the practice or place, and ultimately the reproduction of society (see Cresswell, 2004, p. 50).

As I analyse the data from my research, I shall be drawing on these ideas and Pink's further assertion that both are subjectively experienced. '[L]ike practices, places are entities that are constantly changing. Yet, because they are experienced [...] they are always subjectively defined' (Pink, 2012, p. 24) – hence the importance of the 'knowledgeable agent'. I shall also follow Pink and Cresswell in using the term 'place' to encompass the ideas of 'space' put forwarded by Massey – as unbounded and constantly in flux.

*

To conclude: place relates to my discussion of allotments in that it is simultaneously physical, social, and symbolic; it is not static but constantly recreated through the trajectories of practice; and it both includes and excludes. Having described a theory of place which is compatible with my overall theoretical approach – and which, by being applied to my data aims to extend the theoretical reach of practice theory – I now seek to bring all strands of this theoretical approach together in my final section.

A practice theory framework

In this concluding section I aim to synthesise the various elements of my theoretical approach, described above, evaluating its fit with my empirical data, and outlining potential approaches to analysis of the data, before turning in the following chapter to the methodological applications of this approach.

Structuration theory and contemporary practice theory concur that it is in introducing new elements, or subverting existing ones, in the reproduction of a practice that changes in the practice and ultimately in the structure of society occur (Sewell, 1992; Shove *et al.*, 2012). But structuration theory does not provide ready tools to translate this into empirical study of the everyday. Conversely, with its focus on the individual elements of practice – meanings, competences, and materials – contemporary practice theory provides a framework for thinking about how practices operate which is perhaps especially suitable for everyday practices. Practice theory is particularly used in relation to energy use and consumption where it has generated a considerable body of empirical work: see, for example, Hand and Shove (2007) on the use of home freezers; Gram-Hanssen (2010) on standby consumption of energy; Spaargaren (2013)

on carbon labelling of food; and Pink on home laundry (2012). These are research areas close to my own, and provide starting points for my own analysis – for instance Hand and Shove’s work on freezers encourages me to look downstream and upstream of a practice in order to expand the frame of analysis and explanation. Practice theory is also particularly useful for identifying the influence and consequences of other-than-human elements within practices, thereby balancing what Shove has called the ABC approach (Attitudes drive Behaviours which people can Choose) to attempting to reduce energy consumption. In discussing elements which ‘configure the fabric and the texture of daily life’, Shove gives the example of the ‘obesogenic environment’ in which current levels of obesity occur not just because of the actions of individuals but ‘patterns of diet and exercise are socially, institutionally, and infrastructurally configured’ (Shove, 2010, p. 1281).

In this sense then – its granularity and transferability – practice theory provides me with a readily available framework for analysing the everyday. What the theoretical debates outlined above highlight is that it less obviously offers a mechanism for fully considering agency within change. In particular it does not capitalise upon the insights which a closer focus on Giddens’s ‘knowledgeable agent’ could bring to understanding the reconfiguration of elements within a practice, and hence to processes of social change.

In her 2004 article considering the influence of a structurationist view on strategic management research, Marlei Pozzebon talks of structuration theory’s capacity to bridge dichotomy: ‘Giddens’s ideas have been adopted to complement existing perspectives and have thereby transformed these perspectives.’ (Pozzebon, 2004, pp. 267-8). Blending practice theory with elements of structuration theory – in other words, resituating the individual at the centre of the practice – provides me with the flexibility to analyse my data in greater depth. My intention is to combine Giddens’s particular emphasis on the knowledgeability and purposefulness of individuals – their ability to ‘act differently’ even as they reproduce internalised structures, and to reflexively monitor and account for their actions – with the focus in later practice theory on all elements of a practice (including material components, relational networks, and place), and on the individual as the ‘crossing point’ of a number of practices; this combination thus enabling me to explore what it is that knowledgeable agents can tell me about the practice of allotment gardening, and explore how individual innovations in the performance of practice might lead, cumulatively, to changes in the practice of allotment gardening which are redolent of wider social

change (for example, in food provisioning, in resistance to global food production, in shifting attitudes to what constitutes healthy eating).

Finally in this chapter, then, I briefly expand on the kinds of questions which the framework above might enable me to elucidate, before turning in the next chapter to the nuts and bolts of its methodological application.

Implications for studying allotments and food-related practices

The practice theorists I draw on above recognise that it is in the performance of practice that the social order is instantiated. Underpinning my headline research questions is a concern to shed light on the relationship between individual everyday performances of practice and social change. This does not assume that every example of innovation in performance leads to identifiable social change, but – echoing Kujer, above, that ‘change is omnipresent and continuous in practices’ – I suggest that it does mean that agency is demonstrated in every individual performance of practice. Working on the basis of Shove *et al.*'s (2012) contention that it is changes in the elements of practices (meanings, competence, materials) that enable practices to evolve, and on Giddens's assertion that agents knowledgeably and purposefully enact practices, leads me to analyse my data with a focus on individual understandings of practice performances with a view to translating cumulative individual performances into subversion or reinforcement of existing practices-as-entities, and thus social reproduction or change.

In my analysis of my data, I will therefore focus upon a number of questions, some of which I have touched upon above. Of key interest will be manifest differences in how practitioners carry out practices which are revealing of inter- and intra-subject differences in meanings and understandings – as Caldwell (2012, p. 291) points out, not everyone within a practice shares the same ‘common’ understandings (see also Warde, 2005, p. 136). Inter-subject differences may, for example, contrast the accounts of newer ‘recruits’ to the practice with those of old hands (which may correspond to differences in gender, age, and socio-economic background amongst my participants; see Chapters 1 and 3 for more on this); whilst intra-subject differences may consist of contradictions across an individual's logic of other practices, especially when the latter are practices of consumption rather than production – as, for instance, when an allotment gardener grows organic vegetables on her allotment, but does not buy them at the supermarket. As Sewell emphasises, ‘social actors are capable of applying a wide

range of different and even incompatible schemas and have access to heterogeneous arrays of resources' (Sewell, 1992, p. 17).

Such analysis will also interrogate the idea of practice careers – how and why the practice of an individual allotment gardener may change over time (taking on additional plots, changing the types of crops grown etc.). (See also Dowler *et al.*, 2010, p. 210, for discussion of consumption careers.) I will focus in particular on accounts of practitioners' initial adoption of the practice.²² Partly, this is because the introduction of a new practitioner into the practice is a new element, and therefore represents a potential for change; partly because accounts of initiation into a practice often focus on the possible ways of undertaking that practice in comparison with other practitioners; and partly because adopting one practice often involves the displacement, adjustment, or cessation of others. As Hargreaves (2011) indicates above, the study of a practice cannot be undertaken in isolation from other practices.

In the next chapter, I consider how best to translate the theoretical framework outlined above – which focuses on all elements within the practice of allotment gardening, but especially on the understandings of the knowledgeable agent – into a robust and flexible research design.

²² I share Trentmann's unease with the verbs used in contemporary practice theory, specifically here the idea that a practice 'recruits' a practitioner.

4. Research design, methods, and fieldwork

In this chapter I will first describe the theoretical considerations which informed my research design and methods chosen. The second part of the chapter sets out how I translated this research design into fieldwork – accessing and selecting research participants, conducting interviews and participant observation – and how this translation was impacted by practical considerations, by my positionality as a researcher, and by the iterative nature of research itself. I conclude the chapter with a brief description of data collection and analysis, before turning in the next chapter to the data itself, and what it can tell us about my central research questions.

Selecting an appropriate research design

As outlined in the previous chapter, my research project seeks to use the practice of allotment gardening as the vantage point from which to interrogate allotments as both food network (within the research paradigm of alternative food networks) and food practice (within a theoretical perspective which draws on practice theory). I approach my research questions from the epistemological standpoint that individuals are purposeful and knowledgeable agents, whose accounts of their practice are informed by their understanding of it, and, furthermore, that they are able discursively to account for their practices. I thus take an interpretivist approach which uses ‘people, and their interpretations, meanings, and understandings, as the primary data sources’ (Mason, 2002, p. 56).

In keeping with my ontological and epistemological positioning, I decided to undertake in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with individual ploholders, enabling me to explore the ‘individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms, and so on’ (Mason, 2002 p. 56) which participants attributed to their allotments and related food practices of production and consumption. I combined these interviews with participant observation and what is termed below ‘ethnographic hanging around’. I describe both the rationale for these choices and how they were implemented below.

For me, the attraction of qualitative interviews – ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Burgess, quoted in Mason, 2002, p. 62) for generating data is their flexibility and openness, enabling the researcher to probe specific aspects of a topic, and the participant to reveal meanings, motivations and understandings not initially foreseen by the researcher, thus enriching the research project. However, I describe the interviews I undertook as ‘semi-structured’ because, like Mason (2002, pp. 62-4), I

believe that the notion of the ‘unstructured’ interview is a misnomer. Qualitative interviews are necessarily an interaction, in which the researcher co-produces meanings and understandings with the participant; similarly, these meanings and understandings are situational to the specific context in which the discussion is taking place. (I discuss some of the more obvious ways in which I as researcher influenced my research below: see in particular under **Positionality**). It would therefore be misleading to claim that the interviews I undertook were not structured by my research questions. I am approaching allotments from a specific angle – how they fit into patterns of food production and consumption, and how the practice of allotment gardening was performed by my interviewee – and there were therefore themes that I planned in advance to touch upon with my participants – where they shopped for food and why, for example – and which were included in all interviews. That said, I took particular care not to restrict or shut down topics of discussion: see below under **Conducting interviews** for further details of this.

There were also practical reasons for choosing qualitative interviews: this is a research method which has been adopted in studies looking at participant motivations for purchasing food via alternative food networks (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2008, ch. 6), and for involvement in urban farming projects and CSAs (Dobernig and Stagl, 2015; Veen *et al.*, 2012) and using interviews in my research might therefore potentially facilitate any analytical comparisons to be made between individuals as consumers and producers within AFNs.²³

Qualitative interviews are also – perhaps more problematically – a common approach within practice theory accounts of consumption (see, for example, Gram-Hanssen, 2010; Halkier and Jensen, 2011). In order to elucidate both the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, and also to explain in further detail why I also chose to incorporate more ethnographically inspired participant observation into my fieldwork, the next section considers how practice theory may best be translated into research design. Specifically, it considers research methods in relation to place, which, as I have argued in the previous chapter, is a currently undertheorised dimension in many practice theory accounts.

²³ This in the end turned out not to be the case; see Chapter 5.

Practice theory and research methods

Before looking at the specific issues encountered in implementing my research design in my fieldwork, I want first to consider how the implications of adopting a practice theory perspective might translate to research methods. Naturally, the nature of the study will inform the choice of research methods, but as Mason (2002, p. 54) indicates, a researcher's ontological and epistemological position will influence, though should not determine, their data generation methods. All versions of practice theory (see previous chapter for more on this), share an emphasis on the practice as a performance: 'the performative character of social life is foregrounded [sic] and privileged analytically [...] there are different versions of theoretical readings that have in common a focus on how social action is carried out, and on the constituting and conditioning of such microprocesses of acting in social life' (Halkier and Jensen, 2011, p. 103). In 'strong' versions of practice theory the individual – or more accurately the practitioner or 'carrier' of the practice – is seen as constituting only one element of that practice, and thus the research methods of any study carried out using this theoretical framework must be able to take account of the contribution of non-human elements or actors (e.g. equipment, technology) to the performance of the practice. It would appear to follow from this, then, that observation of the practice must form part of any research design, and indeed many studies do incorporate observation techniques, and more ethnographic approaches. By 'ethnographic approaches', I am here adopting Mason's definition that '[e]thnography [...] is an approach [...] based on an epistemology which says that culture can be known through cultural and social settings'. Within this approach the emphasis is on "first-hand experience" of a setting, and on observational methods' (Mason, 2002, p. 55).

Thus Philips, for example, in her study of beekeeping, combines practice theory with a more-than-human theoretical approach in order to build 'understanding of practices and lived experience' (Philips, 2014, p. 152). In her fieldwork she utilises a variety of ethnographic methods, including interviews, participant observation and 'go-alongs' – a term coined by Kusenbach (2003) to describe how researchers accompany research participants in their everyday activities, questioning them along the way. Similarly, Hargreaves uses ethnographic methods (comprising nine months of participant observation and 38 semi-structured interviews) to study a behaviour change initiative – Environment Champions – in a workplace (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 79). He explains this choice of methods as follows:

Social practice theory directs research attention towards the practical accomplishment or 'doing' of everyday practices. Accordingly, it implies the use of methodological techniques capable of observing what actually happens in the performance of practice such as ethnography, rather than relying solely on the results of either questionnaire surveys or interviews as is typically the case within conventional approaches (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 84).

Within these ethnographic approaches, the qualitative interview is frequently encountered and arguably generates the bulk of research data, which may seem surprising in view of the explicit rejection of a central focus on the individual in strong versions of practice theory (see, for example, Halkier and Jensen, 2011, pp. 105, 108). Perhaps partially to sidestep this issue, Halkier and Jensen draw on work by Atkinson and Coffey (2003) on the relationship between participant observation and interviewing to contend that both interviews and observation constitute 'social performance' by research participants at some level, and that therefore observation is no more appropriate a method for analysing practice than interviewing.

Pink, on the other hand, contends that 'research findings that are based solely on participants' verbally *reported* practices cannot facilitate an analysis of their actual practices and of how these are performed, experienced and involve specific ways of knowing *in practice*.' (Pink, 2012, p. 41, emphasis in original). Martens too (2012, §4.15) argues that, in interviews, research participants give accounts of their agency – intentions and meanings – rather than the practicalities of what they do. In her own research (see chapter 4 of *Situating everyday life*), and reminiscent of Kusenbach's approach cited above, Pink therefore describes methods of researching people's domestic practices in which, for example, she videos participants engaged in washing-up, whilst discussing how and why they approach the task in the way that they do. Although observation may identify mismatches between accounts participants give of themselves and what they actually do, Pink's argument does not appear entirely convincing either – as Atkinson and Coffey argue (cited in Halkier and Jensen, 2011) it is equally possible for the research participant to 'perform' for the interviewer visually as well as verbally, and all types of data are susceptible to the researcher's interpretation of what is going on.

Finding methods which can allow us to account for the combination of human and non-human elements in practice theory – part of what makes it attractive as a theoretical framework – is therefore not straightforward, and within studies of practice, the ideal balance between ethnographic observation and interviews is disputed. My own research project focuses specifically on the practice of allotment gardening as both the point of comparison with other food practices, and as a case study for testing the

robustness of practice theory to account for change. To take an entirely ethnographic approach – to select a small number of participants and observe them intensively whilst at the allotment, shopping, cooking and eating – would have been impractical in terms of the amount of time required, and would necessarily have sacrificed a multiplicity of viewpoints. As outlined in the previous chapter, if we accept that change in practices occurs as a result of different combinations of elements and practitioners, then it was important for me to access the practices of a range of individuals in order to find evidence of such different combinations. Shove *et al.* (2002, p. 11) suggest that if we are to trace the trajectories of practices, we cannot concentrate solely on ethnographic observation of faithful performances of a situated practice but need to ‘look beyond specific moments of integration’. It therefore seemed essential for me to develop a ‘hybrid’ research design: one which both incorporated an ethnographic observational element enabling me to account for all elements within the practice of allotment gardening, but which also privileged individual experience and understandings. I therefore chose to combine interviews – which would enable me to explore in-depth the meanings my research participants attributed to their allotment practice, and also to compare these understandings with their reported food practices – with adopting the stance of the observer participant (Walsh, 1998, pp. 229-30) during interviews and at meetings, and at social events.

Before turning to a more detailed description of my fieldwork, I want first to discuss briefly why it was important to take into account the element of place within practice in my research design.

Accounting for place

As discussed in the previous chapter, place is a somewhat neglected element within many practice theory studies. Allotment gardening is a practice clearly identified with a particular place (see Pink, 2012, ch. 2); not only is the plot the place in which the practice occurs – but, more than a swimming pool or a squash court, say – it is also one of the ingredients of the practice, physically changed by its performance. Anderson and other social geographers term this ‘constitutive coingredience’: from this perspective, place contributes to meaning. ‘[P]laces are not passive stages on which actions occur, rather they are the medium that impinge on, structure and facilitate these processes [and] also an outcome of action, producing and being produced through human practice’ (Anderson, 2004, p. 255). In other words, the allotment is both what people change, and what changes people. Anderson further suggests (p. 257) that we should

use semi-structured interviews and participant observation as opportunities to probe how practice and knowledge is inscribed in place through routines.

In an attempt to understand more fully how place contributed to practice, I adopted Pink's approach to her research on community gardens, in other words, '[r]ather than asking people to (re)enact practices, I invited them to discuss and recount practices related to community gardening, while situated in material and sensory contexts that were the outcomes of such practices' (Pink, 2012, p. 43) and sought to interview as many of my participants as possible on their plot. Interviewing on the plot seemed to have a number of advantages: first, it arguably goes some way to redressing any perceived imbalance of power within the relationship between researcher and interviewee; the interviewee was on 'home turf' both literally and metaphorically, since I (the researcher) did not have an allotment plot, and was therefore not an 'expert'. Second, being shown around could act as an icebreaker between researcher and participant, building rapport and making conversation easier.

*

In conclusion, then, three principle factors informed my thinking when seeking to develop a research design which would reflect both a practice theory perspective and my own ontological and epistemological position. First, on the basis that I considered the individual the determining element within a practice, an approach which would allow me to privilege individual understandings and meanings was required; hence the choice of the semi-structured interview format. Second, it was important to validate first person accounts with *in situ* observation of the practice in order to be able to identify the elements within it, and how they combined. Spending time at the allotment was all the more important because my third concern was the need to fully account for place as an element within the practice. The second part of this chapter looks at how this research design translated into fieldwork.

Before considering this, however, I want to say a few words about the suitability of Birmingham as a site for my fieldwork. Not only does it have an active and longstanding history of engagement with allotments – 'guinea' gardens existed in Birmingham as early as 1731 – but it also offers greater provision of plots than any other UK local authority (see Chapter 1 for further details of allotment provision in the city). It thus presented a potentially rich environment in which to undertake my fieldwork for a number of reasons. First, with over 6000 tenanted plots I was likely to be able to locate a sufficient number of research participants. Moreover, Birmingham's

allotment provision is distributed across the city with only a few central wards lacking allotments; I might therefore hope to interview research participants from across socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and with a range of perspectives on allotment gardening. Although not necessarily as straightforward a process as the numbers of allotment gardeners might lead one to believe, recruitment of participants and access to sites was nonetheless facilitated by gatekeepers within a clearly defined municipal structure: namely the Council allotments officer, the Birmingham and District Allotments Confederation, and site committee members from across the city. Finally, and serendipitously, at the point at which I started my fieldwork, the allotment community in Birmingham was engaged in a reorganisation of responsibilities for running the sites (see below), which entailed a number of public and closed meetings that I was able to attend (see Appendix 5 for further details). This shifting of the parameters of allotment gardening in Birmingham also lent itself to a willingness – certainly on the part of the gatekeepers – to answer my questions about allotment practice and how its performance had changed over time in Birmingham.

Fieldwork

Although I have sought above to represent my research design as a logical and holistic process, this is inevitably misleading. In any qualitative research, Mason warns that we should be wary of making ‘a priori strategic and design decisions [...] decisions about design and strategy are ongoing and are grounded in the practice, process and context of the research itself’ (Mason, 2002, p. 24). This was certainly my experience. In the first part of this section, I will therefore look at how my research evolved on the ground. This is a valuable process because it demonstrates several things: how researcher positionality inflects what data can be gathered, and from whom; and how practical considerations which entail a change in approach may actually reveal much about the practice under study.

Accommodating fieldwork challenges

That practical considerations would impact my fieldwork plans was evident from the outset. It rapidly became clear that I would need to have a way of accessing allotments in order to identify and approach my research participants, meaning that on-the-plot participant observation and a more ethnographic stance became a necessity as well as a virtue. This section therefore describes both how I implemented my research design in conducting my fieldwork (how I gained access to my participants, established a

sample, interviewed, and so forth) and how the experience of fieldwork also fed back into my research design as an iterative process.

Gaining access to research participants

Allotments are hidden spaces, both physically and metaphorically. Physically, in that they are rarely signposted²⁴ or visible from the street (see Figure 1), often accessible only via locked gates in a gap between two buildings, then opening out, Tardis-like, once inside; metaphorically, because – as discussed in Chapter 2 on alternative food networks – allotments operate ‘below the radar’, specifically in economic terms.



Figure 1. Entrance to Vicarage Road allotments

They are also hybrid public-private spaces to which access is restricted; sites are usually locked to non-plot holders, and a gatekeeper – someone to open the gates to a researcher – is quite literally required, usually a member of the allotment committee. In this instance, the timing and context of my research was fortuitous in that Birmingham City Council (BCC) was in the process of transferring management of certain aspects of allotment sites to the local committees (see Appendix 1) in consultation with the Birmingham and District Allotments Confederation (BDAC).²⁵ This change in policy meant that a number of exceptional city-wide meetings were being held under the auspices of BDAC involving committee members (generally the

²⁴ According to a number of my interviewees, the lack of signposting is frequently a deliberate ploy to deter vandals.

²⁵ The BDAC website is available at: <http://www.bdacallotments.co.uk/> [last accessed 29 September 2016].

chair, secretary and treasurer) of all BCC sites. Having contacted the chair of BDAC, I was invited to attend one of these meetings, at which the chair kindly offered to present my research project, thus enabling me to interact directly with those committee members who could facilitate access to ploholders for me. As a result I collected contact details for committee members at a number of sites across the city, and made arrangements to meet up with them again to take the project forward.

Recruiting research participants

Recruiting participants and arranging interviews was also less straightforward than anticipated. As a result of the contacts established with allotment committee members at the BDAC meeting, and of contacts made at Big Dig and Birmingham Sustainability Forum meetings (see Appendix 5 for a list of meetings and other events attended in connection with my research), I identified three principle sites – Brownfield Road in Hodge Hill, Uplands in Handsworth, and Pereira Road in Harborne – where committee members were willing to act as gatekeepers to introduce me to their ploholders.

My criteria for recruiting participants were very loose: since food practices concern us all, my only specification was that those that I interviewed should rent and tend an allotment plot in Birmingham. Length of tenancy was immaterial; indeed, interviewing people with different levels of experience might provide some evidence of how practices evolved.²⁶ Given that my study was based on in-depth qualitative interviews, my research objective was not to claim that my findings were representative of all allotment gardeners; however I had hoped to assemble participants who were broadly heterogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, income, and educational level (the latter two characteristics being understood as markers of class). Initially, recruiting participants from these three areas thus seemed potentially to represent a good geographic and socio-economic mix across Birmingham: Handsworth is to the west of the city, majority non-White, with reasonably high levels of owner occupancy, but with overall lower educational attainment and higher unemployment than Harborne; Harborne is located in south-west Birmingham, is majority White, with high levels of educational attainment and employment; Hodge Hill is ethnically mixed with high levels of unemployment and overall low educational attainment. (See Chapter 1 for more precise indicators of the socio-demographic profiles of these areas of the city.) However, the socio-demographic profiles of the people I interviewed proved not to be

²⁶ It might also have been interesting from this point of view to interview those who had abandoned the practice; however the practicalities of assembling such a sample would have been daunting.

as heterogeneous as I had hoped; partly because there is not necessarily a precise correlation between the socio-demographic profile of the ward in which the allotment is situated and the profile of its plottolders; and partly for reasons which I elaborate upon below under **Positionality** and **Gatekeepers**.

At Pereira Road, I first attended a Christmas social at the allotment, and the treasurer subsequently included my details in the newsletter so that people could contact me if they were interested in talking to me. Pereira Road is one of the larger and more tenanted sites in Birmingham (there are 158 plots of which only 20 were unlet at the time), but my exposure was initially limited to a handful of potential participants – either those who were sufficiently ‘active’ in the site, or sufficiently community spirited, to attend the Christmas social, or those who self-selected and actively contacted me to talk to me. At the Christmas social, I took contact details (phone numbers and e-mail addresses) for those who expressed a willingness (sometimes an eagerness) to be interviewed, and followed up with them after the meeting to arrange an interview; if they were subsequently unwilling to commit or did not reply then I did not pursue them.

Similarly, at Uplands, the largest allotment site within Birmingham, I attended a meeting relating to the incorporation of Uplands as a cooperative society and my research was again presented by the committee members to the audience. This meant that those who put themselves forward to be interviewed were actively involved in, or interested in, the running of the site. As at the Pereira Road Christmas social, I approached a number of plottolders to suggest an interview, but did not pursue those who did not respond to follow-up contact.

Positionality

When I consider the range of people approached for interview, and the final composition of my interview sample, I would argue that at both Uplands and Pereira Road my positionality as a researcher influenced who was prepared to be interviewed by me. In their seminal *Ethnography* primer, Hammersley and Atkinson distinguish between “‘face-sheet’ characteristics (gender, age, race and ethnicity, religion) and ‘impression management’ (clothes, the use of props, speech)’ (quoted in Coffey, 1999, p. 4). Notoriously difficult to define, ‘class’ falls somewhere between these two sets of characteristics. I am a White, educated female in my 40s with a non-Birmingham accent – one that is non-specific geographically, but which undoubtedly marks me as middle-class. Whilst clothes can be changed to match the surroundings (in this instance jeans,

with wellies when wet, being most appropriate), ‘face-sheet’ characteristics cannot. I believe that for the plottolders that I met at a site meeting in Uplands in particular, my face-sheet and class characteristics were off-putting for a number of the elderly Afro-Caribbean men that I approached, who, whilst some gave contact details, did not respond to a request for an interview.²⁷ Instead, at both Uplands and Pereira Road sites, it was noticeable that a high proportion of those who agreed to be interviewed had a level of education to degree-level, or beyond, or had family members who had reached this level; had participated in research projects previously; or were (or had been) engaged in the running of the site.²⁸

This is not to suggest that matching interview and research participant characteristics (class, ethnic background, age, sex, etc.) necessarily leads to deeper understanding on the part of the researcher. Mullings sums this up when she says that ‘[t]he “insider/outsider” binary in reality is a boundary that is not only highly unstable but also one that ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space’. In other words, not only is a researched community not internally homogeneous – research participants, including the researcher herself, will not share the same perspectives on all matters – but neither is a single research participant (or researcher) internally consistent; our views on any particular subject are liable to change over time and in different contexts (Mullings, 1999, p. 340; see also Mellor *et al.*, 2014, esp. p. 138). In this case, I do not have an allotment plot, and even if I did my experience of gardening a plot would not resemble those of my interviewees in terms of our trajectories, meanings, skills etc. That being said, who I am – or appear to be – inflected my research in practical ways over and beyond ontological or epistemological considerations.

27 Birmingham City Council does not record the ethnicity of plottolders, nor their (pre-retirement) occupation (as a possible marker of class). From observing the three main sites – Brownfield Road in Hodge Hill, Pereira Road in Harborne, and Uplands in Handsworth, in ascending order of size – and from discussion with committee members at those sites, Brownfield Road can be characterised as almost entirely occupied by White plottolders who are UK citizens (the site secretary confirms this impression; he’d like a greater ethnic mix, as at Uplands in Handsworth but ‘sadly they just don’t apply here’); Pereira Road has a wider national and ethnic mix, but still predominantly White; whereas Uplands has a higher proportion of plottolders from Asian and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. This was evident from the meeting I attended at the latter, and from later site visits.

28 An exception at Uplands was a recent East European immigrant who worked in a low-paid job and whose accommodation status was precarious; however one might argue that, as a recent immigrant, he was not as culturally sensitive to UK class-markers as long-term residents or citizens of the UK.

Gatekeepers

Identifying potential interviewees at the Brownfield Road site did not follow the self-selection pattern described above, as the (very active) site secretary walked me round on my initial visit and introduced me to those who were there²⁹ at the time, thus potentially involving a wider pool of interviewees demographically speaking (although see comments on presumed class and ethnicity in the footnote on the previous page). However this introduces another layer of ethical complexity, in that 'comprehensiveness' was perhaps bought at the cost of a certain amount of gentle pressure from the site secretary, who was enthusiastic about my project and keen that plotters participated. As Walsh (1998, p. 231) indicates, 'even facilitative relations with gatekeepers will structure the research, since the observer is likely to get directed to the gatekeeper's existing networks of friendship, enmity and territory'.³⁰ (See Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p. 67 for an example of when gatekeepers may actually restrict access.)

From Uplands, Pereira Road (and one other site in Harborne), and Brownfield Road, I recruited 17 research participants (including three couples). In order to increase my sample size – and in the hope of reaching data saturation point (see below) – I subsequently recruited plotters across a number of sites (Billesley Lane, Moor Green, Vicarage Road) in Moseley and Kings Heath, an area of the city with an active interest in allotment gardening – i.e. where sites are mostly full and there are waiting lists (see Introduction). These additional participants were either personally known to me (I live in Kings Heath) or snowball contacts.³¹

More generally, in terms of sample selection, it should be noted that all the sites I visited are highly active sites – evidenced by the presence of committee members at the BDAC meetings, the activity of the site in terms of meetings for current plotters and open days for the local community (even when, as at Billesley Lane, waiting lists

29 Brownfield Road is a small site containing 53 plots, 47 of which were occupied and actively worked at the time of my research.

30 However, it was also the case that this approach was not always successful; for example, at one of the sites in Kings Heath – Billesley Lane – a plotter declined to talk to me despite encouragement from another plotter.

31 Kings Heath and Moseley has a comparable socio-economic base to Harborne and allotments are similarly oversubscribed: see Chapter 1 for further details.

were long); and by the full or almost-full nature of all the sites (see the Introduction for full details of tenanted/vacant plots).³²

My final sample population of 22 ploholders thus comprised ploholders across the city, from areas with varied socio-economic profiles (see Chapter 1 for further details of the socio-economic indicators of the wards in which the allotments are located), contained a relatively balanced gender mix (10 women and 12 men), and included participants from White, Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. See Table 4 for a list of participants. (All participants' names are pseudonyms.)

Table 4. List of research participants

Interviewee alias	Interviewee affiliation	Interview location	How many plots
Sasha		Home	Half
William		Pub	One
Sadie		Plot	One
Adam		Plot	Third
Owen		Plot	One
Karen		Plot	One
Tom		Home (near plot)	One
Charles		Home	One
Jean		Plot	Two
Bogdan		Plot	One
Jess and Duncan		Home	Two
Dean		Plot	One
Alison		Home	One
Angela		Plot	Three
Bill		Plot	One
Wendy		Plot	Two
Stan		Plot	One
Barbara and Paul		Plot	One
Alan and Christine		Plot	One
Allotments officer	Birmingham City Council	Council offices	
Chair	BDAC	By phone	

Conducting interviews

Having constituted a sample of research participants, I then proceeded to arrange dates and times for interviews, which, weather permitting, frequently took place on the participant's plot (see below under 'Ethnographic hanging around' and above, under 'Place' for why this is important). Interviews took place between November 2013 and May 2014: the extended fieldwork stage was a consequence of the outdoor nature of

32 There are areas of Birmingham – Hodge Hill for example – where allotment plot vacancies are high (42%). Press reports of allotment waiting lists totalling up to 40 years in parts of the UK, with an estimated 30 applicants for every UK allotment plot (see Jones, 2009), thus present only a partial picture. Further research would be necessary to determine the factors involved in creating waiting lists or vacancies in particular areas, but, as seen in Chapter 1, in Birmingham there is a clear correlation between income and educational levels and the existence or absence of waiting lists.

my research, in that it can be difficult to find anyone out and about on an allotment between November and February (the original slot for my fieldwork). Once again, practical necessities were translated into a virtue of my research design: waiting for the growing season and better weather meant that I was able to engage in the type of ethnographic observation that would enable me to account for the allotment as a place/space.

When planning my research design, I had initially intended to ask plotholders to take a photo of their plot before I met them and send it to me; this could then be used as an 'ice-breaker' to trigger discussion of what their plot represented to them (for other uses of 'photo elicitation', see Ali, 2004, p. 276, Mason, 2002, ch. 6, and Alexander, 2013). However, it rapidly became clear that I would not always have immediate direct access to participants in order to request this in advance; moreover, some of my participants were uncomfortable with using mobile technology or e-mail in order to do this.

All research participants were given a Project Information Form outlining my research in broad terms, and signed a Research Participant Consent Form which authorised me to interview them, record and transcribe the interview, and include data from interviews in my thesis, subject to anonymity and confidentiality being observed. I always reiterated verbally what was explained within the forms, emphasising specifically their right to withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason. (See Appendix 6 for both forms.) Whilst all participants signed the consent forms (and retained a copy of both forms for reference), and nobody subsequently contacted me to withdraw from the project, sometimes the process of meeting participants was rushed, and potentially subject to gatekeeper effects (as described above). In practice, particularly at the Brownfield Road site, this meant the chair of the allotment committee would introduce me to a plotholder, I would explain my research, and if the plotholder was willing the interview took place immediately (subject to signature of consent form). Sometimes the participant saw no need for such paperwork. Whereas introducing my project verbally, and explaining what I would and wouldn't do with their data, was accepted as being within the bounds of normal conversation, the requirement to read and fill in paperwork seemed to change the nature of the encounter from a 'conversation with a purpose' to something more bureaucratic. In calling attention to my status as a researcher in this way, the dynamic of the interaction was disrupted and the ensuing awkwardness sometimes persisted until the conversation got going.

As described above, my interviews – which lasted between 20 minutes and an hour and a half – were semi-structured. I always touched upon food practices (shopping, eating, and cooking) in addition to probing participants’ reasons for getting an allotment and the meanings and understandings they associated with it. However, as far as possible – meaning as long as I was also able to explore the themes of interest to my research – I allowed the interviewee to lead the conversation. I began each interview with the open-ended question ‘Why did you get an allotment initially?’. The participant’s response to this question would then set the course for the conversation. So, for instance, when Angela referred to her garden in her response to my initial question, my follow-up question was to ask about this, and how gardening there was different to gardening on the allotment. Where possible, I tried to frame my follow-up questions (whether on themes introduced by me or by the interviewee) in an open-ended fashion to encourage a descriptive or explanatory response rather than to restrict the interviewee to one-word answers.

I also consciously sought not to lead my interviewees in my questioning. Fielding and Thomas (2008, p. 249), discuss the ways in which interviewees may self-censor or give the answers they think the researcher wants to hear. To guard against this, my description of my research, both verbally and in writing, was deliberately broad and open ended in order not to close down potentially fruitful areas of discussion, or suggest that there was a ‘correct’ attitude to food provisioning. My Project Information Form reads as follows:

‘My PhD thesis examines questions around “alternative” and “ethical” food production and consumption. Specifically, I am interested in the motivations of people who choose to grow some of their own food on an allotment, what their allotments mean to them, and how plottolders approach food provisioning and shopping for food in general.’

I adopted what Braun and Clarke have termed a grounded theory ‘lite’ approach’ to identifying relevant topics within my interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The themes in my topic guide were never intended to be exhaustive, and in addition to the topics I identified in advance, I incorporated new topics (whether or not they related to food practices) into my topic guide as they emerged in my interviews, and explored them in subsequent interviews, seeking to achieve topic saturation. One example of this was the importance of the appearance of the plot, and how the ‘allotment aesthetic’ was differently interpreted by my research participants. (I return to this below under **Validity of my findings.**)

Once again, my expectations concerning what my research participants were likely to say were overturned from the outset. It immediately became clear, for instance, that for some participants the meaning of the plot might have very little to do with food. Just as a researcher in Silverman's 2013 book, *Doing qualitative research*, describes how her interviewees (bereaved spouses of cancer sufferers) did not treat either cancer or bereavement as central topics when discussing end-of-life care, even if those were the terms in which she described her research (Silverman, 2013, p. 20), so too my very first interviewees devoted only a very small portion of their plot to growing vegetables, the remainder being devoted to a large chicken pen. For them, the allotment was not primarily about growing food but about having a space to enjoy which was set apart from the rest of their lives. Partly as a result of this experience, I took particular care to pay attention to negative instances – data which did not pertain to food practices, or did not support my expectations – in my analyses of food practices and broader processes of practice change. Similarly, apparently contradictory practices (both across and within practices) were as important to my research as those accounts which appeared philosophically more internally coherent. For instance, some of my research participants (Sadie and Adam, for example) expressed highly consistent approaches to all aspects of their food production and provisioning practices. They both grew and bought organic produce and, like many of the box scheme participants in Seyfang's 2008 study of consumer motivations, supported social justice and the environment in their purchasing decisions: both limiting airmiles, and using alternatives to supermarkets such as wholefood food co-ops (to buy pulses in bulk, for example) and vegetable box schemes. However, this was far from the case for all participants; others (such as Karen), whilst gardening organically, made food purchasing decisions based primarily on cost and did not always buy organic produce.

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Finally in this section, I want to look at what Pink has termed 'ethnographic hanging around' (Pink, 2012, p. 39). As described above, this more ethnographic approach to fieldwork aimed both to gain a deeper situational understanding of allotment practice, and also to reflect the relationship between place and practice.

'Ethnographic hanging around' and participant observation

Ethnographic fieldwork has been described by McCall and Simmons in *Issues in participant observation* as 'some amount of genuinely social interaction in the field with the subjects of the study, some direct observation of relevant events, some formal and a

great deal of informal interviewing, some systematic counting, some collection of documents and artefacts: and open-endedness in the direction the study takes' (McCall and Simmons, quoted in Gilbert, 2008, p. 270 and Walsh, 1998 p. 228). My research reflects this mix. As described above and in Appendix 5, I attended a number of public meetings (allotment open days, Big Dig meetings relating to growing vegetables in Birmingham, meetings held under the umbrella of the Sustainability Forum regarding the establishment of Birmingham Food Council) and allotment-specific closed meetings (meetings of BDAC, tenants' meetings, social occasions, project meetings). I interviewed both the Council allotments officer and the chair of BDAC at length, both of whom supplied me with context concerning allotments in Birmingham. Finally, in addition to in-depth interviews with plotheolders, I also spent time on all sites taking photos and exploring to develop an understanding of the overall sense of place. The majority of my interviews with plotheolders were conducted on the plot,³³ both moving around it as we talked (identifying particular crops, for example), and – especially with allotment committee members – walking through the site whilst they described it to me and mapped its social geography. Being on the plot allowed me to identify material aspects of practice (tools, the contents of the sheds), and, further, what these material aspects might say about participant meanings: the presence of a summerhouse on a plot rather than a shed, for instance, would indicate that my interviewee likely regarded the allotment as a leisure activity and an alternative space for socialising, a supposition which I could probe in the interview. Similarly, it allowed me to deepen my understanding of the role played by place/space in allotment practice, as participants explained to me why their plot looked the way it did: for example, Adam's plot was overgrown after a few weeks of absence, and Karen pointed to the weeds creeping in from her neighbour's plot. These were two instances which allowed me to flesh out the meaning of weeds within allotment practice: this was a material object which represented 'unacceptable' performance of the practice, understood as such both by Adam (who expressed some guilt for the neglect) and Karen (who described her neighbour's mostly ineffectual attempts to remedy her practice). Finally, it also gave me an opportunity to see how the practice physically shaped the place: Owen continued to dig whilst we talked, transforming the plot to reflect his own desired

³³ Weather permitting, this was my default interview setting. Sometimes, however, I interviewed plotheolders in their homes – the academic timetable meant that at least half of my fieldwork was conducted between November 2013 and February 2014, when the weather discouraged attendance at the allotment. When setting up and conducting interviews I observed the researcher safety advice set out in Paterson *et al.* (1999).

aesthetic (neat and organised). Observing (and to a lesser extent participating) therefore allowed me to become cognizant of elements – meanings, equipment, skills, place – which constitute allotment practice, but not all of which can be reconstructed from interviews alone (see Mason, 2002, p. 85; see also Hawkes and Acott, 2013, p. 1122 for more on the benefits of interviewing on the plot).

Like Mason (2002, p. 92), I am wary of the idea that it is possible to be solely an observer, preferring to describe myself as an 'observer participant'. My presence necessarily impacted – even if only tangentially – the event or setting. For instance, at the BDAC meeting in Bordesley Green and the Uplands allotment members meeting, I attended as an 'observer' but was introduced as a researcher at the beginning of the meeting, and used both as occasions to recruit gatekeepers and participants. Whilst I was never a 'neutral' observer – as Mason points out (2002, p. 92), my presence as a researcher and my research project 'will be *interpreted* and *responded to* in some way' (her emphasis) – neither can I claim to have been a full participant at the events I attended.

However, I also accept that from observer to participant is a spectrum, and the point that the researcher occupies on that spectrum will vary with the event or circumstance. For instance, whilst I took no part in the deliberations at the two meetings above (concerning, respectively, the changes necessary to move from predominantly council management of allotment sites, to allotments managed primarily by site committees; and the specific steps which the Uplands site would take in relation to this move), in my very first interview I potentially influenced my interviewees' practices by recommending specific chicken-related products to them; similarly I described to a committee member at Pereira Road the changes underway to the management structure at Uplands, in which he had expressed an interest. Both these conversations, whilst not strictly part of my interview, and certainly not included in my topic guide, were motivated by a desire to build rapport. As Coffey (1999, p. 36) comments: 'The issue is not necessarily one of conversion, immersion or not, but a recognition that the ethnographic self is the outcome of complex negotiations.' Moreover this ethnographic self develops and changes over time: the issue is also one of awareness (Mason, 1992, p. 94). Both my relationship with my research participants and my 'ethnographic self' were central to my data collection.

Finally in this chapter I want to make some general comments about data collection and processing before turning in the next chapter to what that data can tell us about my central research questions.

Data

The data that I collected came in four principle formats: fieldwork notes from site visits and public and closed meetings (written up as soon as possible after the event), photos, digitally recorded interviews (this constituting the bulk of my data), and limited data from a single thread on an anonymous online forum.³⁴ I discovered this latter data source in the scoping phase of my project when searching online using the search term 'why did you get an allotment?'. Although I could find no similar threads online for comparison, since this particular thread provided a variety of answers to the question that I was asking my own research participants, I retained the data and analysed and coded it in full alongside the transcriptions of my interviews.

Interviews were transcribed using EXMARaLDA software, and in my transcriptions I retained the hesitations and repetitions of speech (as will be observed in the quotations in my data analysis). Similarly, I retained the original spelling and punctuation in quotations taken from the online forum (see below, under **Validity of my findings**).

Maintaining participant confidentiality

My Research Information Form assured participants that 'your identity will be kept anonymous and confidential at all times and you will not be identifiable in the final submitted thesis'. In the writing up of my data I have thus taken the following steps to preserve participant anonymity: all names of interviewees have been changed in the data, and I have not linked research participants to specific sites. I have not sought to anonymise the names and locations of the sites themselves since the socio-economic and demographic context of the surrounding area provides valuable context for my study (see Chapter 1). Where specific biographical details might serve to identify a participant – e.g. nationality – I have changed these details if such a change had no impact on data analysis. (See British Sociological Association (2002) for general guidelines regarding participant confidentiality.)

³⁴ http://www.growfruitandveg.co.uk/grapevine/general-chitchat/so-why-did-you-get-allotment_47129.html [last accessed 29 September 2016].

Thematic analysis and coding

The transcriptions, plus my field notes and the forum data, were then entered into NVivo in order to perform a qualitative thematic analysis.³⁵ In performing this analysis I followed the technique described in Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 86-93), an iterative process in which I coded my data as richly as possible before identifying both prevalent themes, and any tensions within the data (i.e. negative instances). I aimed to take the same 'grounded theory lite' approach to coding that I had done to interviewing, and thus sought maximum granularity in coding my data. This meant reviewing and supplementing existing codes in the light of new themes. After several passes through my data, I ordered it into 181 subcodes, organised under a series of six main themes: meanings, materials, skills, shopping, place, and relationships. The value of this exercise can be seen in the evolution of the theme of 'relationships'. This code began its career as a humble subcode under 'Recruitment to the practice', but rapidly developed its own subcodes as I realised quite how many relationships were involved in recruitment – partners, friends, colleagues, neighbours, other plottolders, etc. Re-analysing my data in the light of this realisation showed that all aspects of a practice were affected by relationships and my interpretation of my data evolved to reflect this.

Validity of my findings

Whilst one may argue that the question of the validity or 'truth' of one's research findings can be disputed for both qualitative and quantitative research methods (see Mason, 2002, p. 187; Seale 2004b), I was aware that in both constructing my research design and reporting on my findings to my reader in essentially narrative fashion, I need to ensure that I could demonstrate that my interpretation of my data was robust. I took a number of steps to achieve this. First, as described above, I took a 'grounded theory' approach to both data generation (by incorporating new lines of enquiry into my topic guide until I reached topic saturation) and to data coding (iteratively reinterpreting my earlier coding of data as new codes or themes emerged). I transcribed my data in verbatim fashion, with hesitations and changes of direction, to go some way to conveying to my reader not just what was said, but how it was said. I looked for patterns in my data – was more than one of my participants making the same point? – but I also paid particular attention to negative instances, questioned

35 The photos I took – with participant permission or, where the plottolder was absent, site committee approval – are now used illustratively within this thesis, rather than being used in the data generation process. To preserve research participant anonymity, no individuals appear in these photos, nor is the allotment site identifiable.

whether they in fact undercut my interpretation, and acknowledged them if I proceeded with my original interpretation. Finally, I achieved a limited amount of data triangulation by comparing the meanings my interviewees gave me for taking on an allotment with those given on the online forum mentioned above in answer to the same question. Taken together, these measures should serve to reinforce the credibility of my reading of my data.

The next two chapters present this reading. Chapter 5 looks at how (or whether) my interviewees' food provisioning practices – both at the allotment and when sourcing and buying food elsewhere – mesh with practices of consumption in alternative food networks. Chapter 6 looks at allotment practice more broadly and the configurations and reconfigurations of the elements of which it is comprised, including place.

5. Data and findings: allotments as a food provisioning practice

In this and the following chapter I analyse my data from a practice-based perspective – first examining here my interviewees’ accounts of allotment gardening as a food provisioning practice alongside other food provisioning practices in order to situate allotment gardening within an alternative food network paradigm. The following chapter then looks more broadly at how a practice theory perspective can account for all elements within allotment practice, including less visible aspects such as social networks (relationships and interactions) and constructions of place.

The present chapter, then, looks at how my respondents’ performance of the practice of allotment gardening fits with – complements or contradicts – their other food provisioning practices, specifically shopping, and how (or whether), taken together, the practices, meanings, and understandings which I find in my data can be said to relate to – complement or contradict – current understandings of alternative food networks. Specifically, do allotment gardeners – who are both food producers and consumers – share motivations and understandings with those who practise ethical consumption? Are any of the perceived benefits claimed for alternative food networks evident in my data? And, if either is the case, can we qualify allotments as alternative food networks?

I defined alternative food networks in Chapter 2 as politically conscious producers and consumers with environmental, social, and economic concerns, who seek to establish alternatives to the mainstream food channels in terms of means of production, sales networks, and spaces of reconnection. Interrogating my data on this basis means looking for evidence concerning the kinds of questions I raised at the end of Chapter 2. These were: Can allotment gardening in any way be described as ‘a politically weighted practice’ (as alternative food networks are)? Do people seek out an allotment as a challenge to the production and distribution stranglehold of Big Food, a rebellion against the dominance of agro-industry and supermarkets? Is a high value put on qualities of freshness and taste, perceived to collocate with local and organic produce? Can taking on an allotment lead to changes in other food-related practices? What difference does it make when you take the market out of the equation? Does the dual role of both producer and consumer differentiate plottolders’ motivations and practices from those of ‘conscious’ or ethical consumers? Does the practice of allotment gardening change people’s connections with food? In reconnecting producers and consumers, do allotments create a sense of local community and therefore trust? Or are

allotment-holders, as Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012) suggest, fundamentally self-interested?

In order to address these questions, I analyse my data in this chapter under the following headings. First I look at the accounts my interviewees gave me of why they had taken on an allotment site in the first place and what this says about their understandings of self-provisioning. Second, I look at their experiences of growing their own food on the allotment before considering the factors that influence their decisions when they shop for food. I seek to link this with the discussion of the conceptual bases of alternative food networks and the motivations of ethical consumers as set out in Chapter 2, using Seyfang's (2008) analysis of the motivations of box scheme participants as a starting point. Finally, I then analyse my data for evidence – for or against – as to whether allotments can be said to demonstrate any of the perceived benefits claimed for AFNs, specifically in terms of community and changing attitudes to food. In conclusion, I assess if and where the evidence from my data allows us to situate allotments on the alternative food network spectrum as described in Chapter 2.

Getting an allotment plot

My research questions explicitly posit the centrality of food (fresh produce) to allotment practice, both in terms of motivations for having a plot and in order to compare self-provisioning to other food provisioning practices. Whilst allotment gardening is certainly *about* food – unless you're highly disorganised or very bad at growing things, fresh produce is an almost inevitable outcome of the practice – I quickly discovered that it wasn't always the sole or central motivating factor for taking on a plot (see also Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2016, pp. 8-9). This became evident in my very first interview, on the plot belonging to a couple who had little enthusiasm for vegetables but were obviously devoted to the chickens (kept as pets) who occupied the lion's share of the space. Only two of my interviewees (Adam, Sadie) immediately identified growing their own vegetables as the primary motivation for having an allotment plot; others, including the couple above, explicitly disavowed this notion from the outset. Duncan commented: 'It was really just for something to do, wasn't it? ['Cause] you know, it's er, it wasn't, to grow healthy food, or to [...], I suppose getting exercise was another thing, but er, it was more something to do rather than anything to do with [food].'

Not only was fresh produce not the only motivation for getting an allotment plot, but sometimes it was not what the plot – or at least the whole plot – was used for: from observing the allotment sites and talking to committee members it became obvious that some plotholders also grew flowers (the case for around a third of my research participants); some grew produce for competition rather than consumption; some kept chickens or bees. The majority of my interviewees cited food as only one among a number of varied initial motivations for taking on an allotment; and a handful, as indicated above, explicitly ruled food out as an initial factor. Other motivations included: exercise; existing friendships and relationships (see Chapter 6 for more on recruitment to the practice via existing relationships); to get out of the house; for relaxation or to relieve stress; to have a project to manage (Bill); and to garden when land is otherwise unavailable or unsuitable (for instance, Bogdan, whose rented accommodation does not have access to a garden, or Jess & Duncan³⁶ whose garden is small and dark), or used for a different, generally ornamental, purpose. Conversely, Paul deemed his garden too dull and enjoyed the more unstructured nature of allotment gardening. (See Hawkes and Acott, 2013, p. 1124 for more on meanings which plotholders ascribed to allotment gardening; see also Miller, 2015, p. 34.)

To sum up, then, in response to my invariable opening question, ‘so why did you get an allotment plot in the first place’, not only did almost all of my interviewees *not* describe allotment gardening as principally about food provisioning, but even those for whom this was the case did not initially frame this as a political practice (and by ‘political practice’ here, I mean in the broad sense of beliefs informing and motivating actions). In other words, nobody immediately responded in terms of social or environmental justice, or characterised having a plot as representing a challenge to agribusiness and supermarket chains.

Over time – and over the course of the interview – these initial reasons for taking on an allotment plot developed into a deeper reflection on its perceived benefits; benefits which again are only partly food related. These included the satisfaction of having grown something oneself, the support network, especially for older allotment holders; the escape from everyday life into an often peaceful and beautiful place; the creation of an aesthetically pleasing space (Dean, Jess & Duncan, Paul); and for allotment committee members, the opportunity to exercise their management skills. I look back

³⁶ Where I use an ampersand between names, this indicates that the individuals in question are – or were – husband and wife, and that I interviewed them together.

at some of these wider meanings below when I assess whether allotments can be said to demonstrate any of the perceived benefits claimed for AFNs. First, I look specifically at my interviewees' experience and understandings of provisioning practices – first the self-provisioning of the allotment; then the considerations that weigh on their decisions as they shop for food. In analysing this data I focus on the connections we might make between allotment practice and the practices of political consumerism (expressing political will through purchasing decisions) or the ethics of consumption (resisting capitalist commodity production, through reducing consumption) (see Chapter 2, **Ethical approaches to consumption and the market**).

Growing one's own food: the shortest of food supply chains

I discuss in Chapter 6 the other uses to which plots were put (to grow flowers, keep livestock, and grow produce for competition or display); in this section I want to focus on the produce that people grew for consumption. All my interviewees – even when the meaning of the plot lay elsewhere for them – did use their plots to grow some fruit and vegetables (even Barbara & Paul, the chicken-keepers, who set aside a small section to grow vegetables – initially runner beans for the chickens, but now they also grow potatoes and other low-maintenance produce for their own consumption).

Unsurprisingly, they all indicated that what they grew was what they (and their partners and families) liked to eat, subject to the limits set by their own skill sets or in terms of the soil and climate. In practice, the most commonly mentioned fruit and vegetables were courgettes, potatoes, beans, peas, onions, strawberries, raspberries, leeks, lettuces, spinach, beetroot, and cabbages. Karen introduced an explicitly economic element into this by adding that she also chose her crops based on how expensive they were to buy (such as asparagus), and looked to be able to freeze whatever she grew. Adam too commented that he preferred vegetables which could be stored efficiently (like pumpkins), and Owen specifically changed the variety of runner bean that he grew for one that preserved its taste and texture better when frozen. More rarely they grew produce for its appearance – Jean planted runner beans and butter beans together so that she would have red and white blooms; Alan grew artichokes because the flowers were so attractive. Occasionally, too, gardeners such as Angela grew unfamiliar vegetables for the challenge involved 'I also like to experiment, much to my husband's irritation at times, I have to say. Um... I mean I've never had kohlrabi, so I thought "Oh, I'll give that a throw. I'll give that a go." Didn't work [smiles].'

The vast majority of produce grown was thus intended for home consumption. What proportion of a household's produce was provisioned in this way depended on the skill

of the gardener at both growing produce and managing the plot's output (and I look at how my interviewees managed gluts as an illustration of the porous boundaries between practices in the next chapter). None of my interviewees achieved total self-sufficiency, especially not in the winter months. Those who managed self-provisioning most effectively – meaning that a higher proportion of the vegetables they consumed were produced on the allotment – tended to be gardeners with either some form of horticultural qualification, or long experience of gardening, or both. I include in this group Sadie, Tom, Charles, Alan & Christine, Bill, Stan, and Owen. Sadie estimated that she and her family do not buy vegetables from the end of June until October, for example; whereas Owen estimated that he produced between 75% and 80% of his household's produce needs, which was a source of great satisfaction to him. The satisfaction of self-provisioning, at whatever level of success, was never clearly articulated in financial terms by my participants – Sadie admitted that she had never done a calculation to work out how much money they had saved by growing their own fruit and vegetables – and even the most successful gardeners did not feel that that their allotment yield necessarily saved them money once seeds, tools, fertiliser etc. had been factored in, especially since, as Karen points out, fruit and vegetables can be cheap to buy. Instead, and perhaps especially by the less-experienced gardeners, it was expressed more as a sense of achievement, of having done something oneself – 'this lovely stuff that's just growing there for free and we did it!', as Sasha put it.

On occasion my interviewees were faced with a glut of a particular item. I address how these were managed in the next chapter; here I want to note just one strategy for dealing with this which is the gifting of excess produce. Sometimes this was done informally – Bogdan and Jess & Duncan talk about making jams and chutneys to give to friends and family; Alan & Christine gave eggs from their allotment chickens to their children. In this respect, there are parallels with the concept of 'moral selving' (Barnett *et al.*, 2005c, p. 30) described in Chapter 2. Sometimes this was a more substantial commitment, reminiscent of tithing: Jean donated produce to be distributed at her church to those in need; whereas Wendy gave produce to be cooked at the Sikh temple. Dean too gave produce to members of the community whom he knew to be struggling. Conversely, allotment gardeners sometimes found themselves on the receiving end of others' generosity – Barbara & Paul were constantly given left-over produce for their chickens, and Angela describes plotholders sharing produce with others when they had a glut.

Self-provisioning, then, plays a part in the overall household strategy of food provisioning. The extent to which it obviates the need for provisioning via more traditional channels (supermarkets) or other outlets depends on the productivity of the allotment. Before turning to an analysis of how self-provisioning via the allotment plot meshes with my participants' other provisioning practices, I want first to mention one negative aspect of growing and eating truly local food.

In focusing on the perceived benefits of local food (freshness, reduced environmental impact in terms of transport costs) we perhaps forget that there is often a mismatch between what can easily be grown in the British climate – beans, potatoes, spinach, courgettes, raspberries, strawberries, beetroot etc. – and what people like to eat. As Charles points out, whereas the British diet has evolved to embrace global cuisine, the British climate has not. Sasha expresses this contradiction when she answers my question about whether she thinks she could ever be self-sufficient in terms of the produce from her allotment: 'No. Because we're in Britain. And you could do it, but we have a wet climate, we don't get enough sun, and you could survive on it but it would be so dull. Really really dull. We'd live on potatoes and cabbage and beans.' As I have already indicated in Chapter 2, the self-provisioning alternative food network, in which producer and consumer are one and the same, is rarely discussed in AFN literature – even the literature on CSAs assumes an economic exchange. It is unsurprising, then, that the local food produced in short food supply chains has been little studied from this perspective: that of restricted choice. 'Local' is instead collocated with concepts of 'freshness' and 'community', as Born and Purcell (2006) remind us. I return to this idea of also wanting to eat produce that is not local, or is flown in because out of season, in the following section on shopping for food.

Shopping and alternative food networks

The following discussion outlines the factors which my interviewees took into account when shopping for food and seeks to link these findings to the discussion of the conceptual bases of alternative food networks in Chapter 2.

A useful starting point is Seyfang's 2008 study of box scheme and farmers' market consumers, in which she identifies a series of reasons cited by participants for engaging in these 'direct-sell' AFNs, in addition to, or in preference to, provisioning at the supermarket. It is impossible to use these as a direct comparison point for several reasons: firstly, Seyfang's study was done with individuals who had already self-identified as ethical consumers or users of alternative food networks (they were

consumers and producers in an organic food cooperative, Eostre Organics), whereas the participants in my research have not self-identified in this way, even if they may individually share some of the concerns that Seyfang lists. Second, Seyfang's hierarchisation is based on a combination of semi-structured interviews with those running Eostre Organics and a survey sent to their customers asking them to rank their priorities. Methodologically, I would therefore be comparing apples with pears. Third, and following on from this, I align myself with Spaargaren in contending that '[e]ven individuals who state that it is their intention to put to work as often and strictly as possible some environmental criteria they embrace as part of the foundational principles of their lifestyle will act against these rules at certain times and under some circumstances at some sectors or segments of their lifestyle' (Spaargaren, 2003, p. 689). In other words, the hierarchisation that Seyfang establishes cannot be held as immutable, or always translated into practice. However, it is useful to consider the categories that she sets out in her ranking of consumer motivations as a checklist for the types of issues my own research participants raised. (The same types of motivations are enumerated in McEachern *et al.*, 2010, pp. 400-1, where the authors analyse stakeholder reasons for engaging in farmers' markets across several studies, including Seyfang's.) In her study, box scheme and farmers' market customers, in descending order of preference, were motivated to buy from an AFN because it was (1) better for the environment; (2) cut packaging waste; (3=) supported local farmers/cut food miles; (5) provided organic food which was perceived to be more nutritious/tasted better/and (6) was safer; (7) provided clear information about where food was from and how it had been produced; (8) supported cooperatives; and (9) supported the local economy. The participants in my research echoed many of these concerns when describing their purchasing decisions, although not all – nobody brought up (7) and (8), for example.

First, it is worth noting that fewer than half of my interviewees shopped in alternative outlets that could immediately be identified as 'ethical' or 'alternative' (see the categorisation of alternative food networks made by Venn *et al.*, 2006, pp. 254-5, described in fuller detail in Chapter 2, **Political consumerism**). Only two participants in my sample (Adam and Sadie) currently bought vegetables via a box scheme, although Sasha had twice done so in the past. Several people shopped at farmers' markets – though only Dean on a more-than-occasional basis – with most citing the expense as a reason not to. Only two of my sample – Sadie and Adam again – bought food from any other form of AFN (wholefood cooperatives in this instance): they were

the only two who might be described as ‘sustainable consumers who display coherent lifestyles’ (Farges, 2015, p. 18). This relatively low take-up of AFNs amongst my interviewees – at least half of whom I would classify (on the basis of observation and information they shared with me) as members of the core affluent middle-class demographic commonly associated with AFNs (Goodman, 2009) – might suggest that for my participants the allotment fulfilled the function of an AFN, supplying them with fresh produce that they knew to be both local and organic.

It should also be noted that all my interviewees, including those whose concerns with economic justice and supporting the local economy were more clearly reflected in their shopping practices (such as Sadie, Adam, or Wendy), did all (except Adam) shop at the supermarket, and that the majority of their deliberations concerning whether to prioritise local, organic, or Fairtrade produce were conducted within this arena. (I return to this below in the conclusion to this section.) Apart from Adam and Wendy, who actively tried to avoid them (see below), supermarkets were largely viewed as broadly neutral – Owen lamented the amount of packaging and William, Charles and Angela felt that the quality of the meat sold in them left much to be desired – but others felt that they offered a guarantee of produce grown to a specific standard (Charles) or were a reliable source of certified organic produce (Dean). On this evidence, my supposition that the practice of allotment gardening might act as resistance to Big Food seemed to have little support in my data.

This is not to suggest, however, that my participants – even those who shopped there – did not take issue with the power and practices of the supermarkets, and agri-business more broadly. Adam and Wendy made a point of buying locally as a reaction to supermarkets’ stranglehold over the market. For Wendy, small local shops are essential to the community, especially for elderly people. For Adam, even when you don’t like the little guy, he has to be better than the ‘economic block’ of the supermarket. Charles was concerned with factory farming practices and with both animals and human health suffering as a result: when he looks at a £1 chicken in the supermarket, he thinks: ‘where has that been, must be rubbish, must be packed full of artificial junk. Don’t trust it.’ His concern for animal welfare when making purchasing decisions was echoed by Karen, who boycotted supermarkets which tested on animals; and by Angela and Alison who both bought free-range products (meat for Angela, eggs for Alison).

The issues most frequently invoked by my interviewees were the intertwined concerns of seasonality and provenance: in other words, is it ever OK to buy produce that is not from the UK? Whilst this might be the issue that came up most, there was no consensus

on how to approach it. Sadie considered that freshness would be compromised by transporting produce long distances, whereas Karen didn't agree and felt she would prioritise freshness over provenance: for her provenance would only be a factor if all other considerations were equal. Duncan felt that one shouldn't buy produce from abroad if it was in season and available in the UK – 'I wouldn't think it's right to buy apples that have been flown round the world' – as did Charles and Angela (who always bought UK apples), and Sasha – 'I'm more likely to buy a local apple than I'm going to buy Fairtrade South African apples'. Duncan & Jess debated where they drew the line on both seasonality and provenance – if grapes were in season in both South Africa and California, what should you buy? (They plumped for South African over Californian on the grounds of distance, but also because they preferred to support a grower perceived to be less well-off.) However, William's diet was partly based on Caribbean food which, as he pointed out, was often grown and imported from the Caribbean. In season also means cheaper, as Sasha and Karen point out. Angela's somewhat inconclusive response is probably representative of the debate as a whole:

at one point I didn't buy South African stuff and y'know that sort of stuff, and I do think carefully how many miles there are particularly lately I suppose because it's all been in the media, but then when you balance certain things up, you look at your UK tomatoes um, a lot of these are done in these huge greenhouses [...] so you think to yourself, 'well, y'know'...

There was no suggestion, however, that people did not buy things which could not be grown in the UK, such as bananas, lemons, mangoes, etc. (See above regarding the mismatch between the British diet and the British climate, and the restrictions of an entirely local diet.) Although stating that she preferred to buy only UK produce, Alison struggled with the restrictions which eating locally and seasonally imposed: 'Because I've found that there's absolutely nothing to eat at this time of year so [...] I've started buying, y'know, things from Spain'. Where people chose to buy produce which could not be grown in the UK, the debate frequently shifted to the issue of Fairtrade, with Jess & Duncan, Tom, and Sasha explicitly declaring that they took this into account in their purchasing decisions. Arguably, this is a compensatory mechanism and one which is at the heart of some of the debates within AFNs concerning an 'ethics of care' for distant others: the consumer's desire for bananas or coffee has to find a way of assuaging the guilt of food miles and the low price often paid to the grower, hence the establishment of the Fairtrade initiative.

Where my respondents diverge perhaps most significantly with consumers in alternative food networks – and between their own food practices – was on the question of organic produce. To a wo/man they gardened without the use of pesticides

– bar the occasional slug pellet – but the majority of them, with the exception of Adam and Sadie, did not consistently buy organic vegetables, if at all. Lockie *et al.* (2002, p. 37) point out that the desire to consume organically, for whatever reason, has to be set against competing discourses regarding the value and health benefits of organic food, and practical considerations of cost and availability, and my data bore out this observation. Reasons for not buying organic varied: for some, it was price. But this was not a determining factor: two respondents in my sample (Dean, Bogdan) who more regularly bought organic produce were in lower-earning income brackets (judging by stated occupations). Conversely, those for whom money was not an object when shopping did not buy organic. For Dean and Bogdan – and for Sasha when she did buy organic produce – they did so because of the taste difference. However other respondents, such as Jess & Duncan, claimed not to notice any difference in taste and argued that no research has shown that organic produce has any health benefits over and above non-organic produce. Yet other respondents argued for buying specific categories of produce organically. Karen bought organic mushrooms, strawberries and lettuce on the grounds that these vegetables absorbed chemicals more easily. As described in Chapter 2, use of the term ‘organic’ – like the use of the terms ‘quality’ or ‘local’ in relation to AFN produce – may gesture towards a somewhat fluid representation of potential benefits. Jess & Duncan, for instance, felt that the produce from their allotment tasted better than produce they bought in the supermarket not because it was organic but because it was ‘fresher’:

Yes, you want it [food from the allotment] to taste better. But it is fresh, and you can taste that difference I think, because you pick it off the bush and you have the bean straight away and they do taste nice. But I don’t think we’ve found any difference between the taste of organic and non-organic food. [Jess]

‘Freshness’ and ‘taste’ were terms frequently used by interviewees in relation to the produce they grew on their plot. Jess & Duncan talked about the pleasure of having grown something themselves, which might not meet supermarket standards of beauty (‘they wouldn’t sell in Waitrose!’), but which was tasty and fresh; for Karen and for Jean’s husband, ‘freshness’ is the quality that is valued above all others in relation to fruit and vegetables. It is perhaps in this use of language to describe their produce that allotment gardeners most straightforwardly resemble the consumers in alternative food networks who use concepts of ‘freshness’ and ‘quality’ to describe the perceived benefits of AFNs (see for example Kirwan, 2006, p. 306), where these qualities are seen as largely dependent on the distance food travels to the plate. It has also been argued (see Goodman, 2009, p. 2) that what is fundamentally at stake here for consumers (in both senses of the word: those who buy and those who eat) is the impact of food on

their individual health. Certainly Charles expresses this when he contemplates the £1 chicken in the supermarket: 'where has that been, must be rubbish, must be packed full of artificial junk. Don't trust it. Don't want to put it into my body.'

What should be clear from the foregoing discussion of allotment gardeners' practices in relation to food provisioning, particularly in relation to buying produce not grown on the allotment, is that there are many elements in the shopping decision matrix – freshness, provenance, seasonality, economic justice, whether produce is organic or not – which are potentially in conflict. The compromises and trade-offs which people make when shopping in the supermarket – partly a function of the choice supermarkets offer – is comprehensively outlined by Sasha, whom it is worth quoting in full:

'[...] actually if we're going to buy good food, you either should buy Fairtrade food or you should buy locally sourced food [...] well Fairtrade means it comes from another part of the planet where people are much poorer and you want to give them as much money so that they can raise their living standards, or you give to locally produced because then you're reducing the air miles and you're supporting your local community. The two don't fit together but it seems much better to try and aim for those two than to go for er um you know European huge farms that are just, you know, it's just another industry and they could be growing tomatoes, or they could be y'know, building widgets [...] think it's always a balance though because if organic was the cheapest you'd go 'oh, I'll buy organic then' but I think it also depends on the produce 'cause obviously you're not going to, y'know, bananas you're going to buy Fairtrade [...] cabbages you might go locally sourced. Um [...] yes, apples, I'm more likely to buy a local apple than I'm going to buy Fairtrade South African apples.'

Where my respondents drew the line was a personal matter, and, as I have shown, there is by no means common ground between them; moreover, as the quote from Sasha above suggests, individual practitioners did not always demonstrate consistency in their shopping practices (see also Shaw and Newholm, 2002, pp. 172-3, and the study by McEachern *et al.*, 2010, on 'conscious consumers' and farmers' markets in which they state that 'some [of their interviewees] felt guilty as they only pursued ethical alternatives for some product categories and not all' (pp. 403, 405)). Insofar as my respondents reflect traditional AFN concerns in their shopping practices – and all except Barbara & Paul did express at least one of the concerns outlined above – these concerns carry varying weight. For Adam and Sadie organic is the most important ingredient in the mix; for Wendy it is the local (retailers and producers). Some respondents (like Sasha, above) explicitly discussed the mental trade-offs they operated whilst shopping: for Jess & Duncan provenance and social justice (as translated by Fairtrade) was important, buying organic food was not. Conversely, for Karen and William, provenance would only become a deciding factor if they were first

satisfied with the potential freshness, taste, and longevity of fresh produce. I attempt to summarise these varying perspectives in Tables 5a and 5b, below.

Table 5a. Shopping preferences of research participants

Interviewee alias	Buys from supermarkets? (Figure in brackets indicates number of different chains patronised)	Attends farmers' market?	Box scheme?	Other outlets?	Buys organic?	Expresses support for local shops (not chains)	Concerned with provenance/seasonality?	Buys fair trade?	Other concerns
Sasha	Yes (1)	Yes, occasionally.	Yes (in past)	Occasionally open air markets or speciality supermarket (Chinese) or delicatessen	Certain items only on basis of taste, but not as general rule on grounds of expense	Greengrocer very occasionally	Yes	Yes	
William	Yes (4)			Yes, wholesalers (Costco)	Yes, consistently across all outlets on environmental grounds and concerns with quality. Price is not a factor.	Yes	No, feels that Caribbean foods have to come from the Caribbean. Prioritises 'quality' and freshness rather than provenance.		
Sadie	Yes (2)	Yes, in past, but not since having allotment.	Yes (Riverford)	Yes, buys rice, flour, sugar and cereal in bulk from wholefood co-op	Yes, consistently across all outlets on environmental grounds. Price is not a factor.	Yes, always prefers to support local shops rather than supermarkets	Yes, tries to buy in season and only from EU		
Adam	Only occasionally; sees supermarkets as 'economic block'.		Yes	Organic food coop and wholesalers			To the extent that he wants to reduce food miles and the length of the supply chain.		
Owen	Yes (2)			Markets			Seasonal produce is cheaper, but prioritises freshness over provenance. Only takes provenance into account if other criteria are equal	Hates packaging	
Karen	Yes (4)				Yes, for products where she thinks chemicals will be easily absorbed (e.g. strawberries)	Occasionally shops at local greengrocer	Yes, tries to avoid anything which has been flown to the UK.	Sometimes for fruit	Does not buy product tested on animals
Tom	Yes (2)					Shops at local butcher. Used to shop at local greengrocer until closed. Laments decline of local shops.		Yes	
Charles	Yes (3)	Occasionally, but finds expensive		Outdoor markets, speciality ethnic shops	No, has faith in farming industry to use pesticides responsibly		Prefers to buy local, but not too bothered if produce is out of season		Welfare of farmed animals, especially chickens

Table 5b. Shopping preferences of research participants

Interviewee alias	Buys from supermarkets? (Figure in brackets indicates number of different chains patronised)	Attends farmers' market? Box scheme?	Other outlets?	Buys organic? Fresh is more important than organic	Expresses support for local shops (not chains)	Concerned with provenance/seasonality?	Buys fair trade?	Other concerns
Jean								
Bogdan	Yes (1)	Occasionally, but inconvenient to get to (has no car)	Greengrocer	Yes	Occasionally	Yes. Try to avoid buying out of season, or flown from too far away (chooses South African grapes over Californian). But recognises that some produce - mangoes for instance - has to come from far away.	Yes	
Jess and Duncan	Yes (2)	Occasionally	Occasionally garage/corner shop. Small open-air market.	No, too expensive, and cannot taste the difference		Was unaware of seasonality until started going to farmers' markets		Concerns for factory farming, specifically dairy cows and chickens (buys free-range eggs). Avoids food waste.
Dean	Yes (1)	Enjoys farmers markets because of opportunities to connect with growers.	Corner shop	As often as possible because he feels you can taste the difference. Trusts supermarket certification.		Prefers to buy UK grown and in season, but will buy from abroad if not grown in the UK.		
Allison	Yes (2)	No, thinks they are too expensive.	Greengrocer	No, only milk				
Angela	Yes, a variety, primarily based on price/value	Occasionally, but sees little point in them as has own butcher and grows own vegetables. Local FM occurs at weekend when she looks after her grandchildren.		Buys organic meat but not vegetables	Buys from local organic butcher and mobile fishmonger			Avoids food waste.
Bill								
Wendy	Occasionally (1)							
Stan								
Barbara and Paul	Yes (3), for pretty much everything		Greengrocer	No. Buys few vegetables (doesn't like them)		Tries to buy as much as she can from local shops. Thinks it's important for the community, especially the elderly, and for local jobs.		
Alan and Christine	Yes (2)			No. Price not an issue, but mostly self-sufficient in vegetables.				

In terms of their choice of venue for food provisioning, however, the vast majority of my research participants returned again and again to the key considerations of proximity, convenience, and price, and this meant supermarkets. Although, the choice of primary supermarket largely depended on proximity, those of my respondents who were retired and had more time to shop revealed themselves to be ‘omni-shoppers’ (William’s term), who visited different supermarkets – and sometimes even different parts of the city – for different items, usually in a quest for the best price. All respondents had at least one – and often a great many more – supermarkets within walking distance, and their first shopping port of call was inevitably to one of these. Dean explains why:

and the supermarkets again ‘cause it’s quick and convenient; you can get everything there and I find, y’know, I was opposed to it originally when they first started taking over but it just fits in the way of life now, ‘cause you’re busier working and you’ve got commitments and you tend to just go to one place to do all your shopping.

Ironically, of course, it is only the supermarkets which create the opportunity for many of the trade-offs described above to take place simultaneously; it is usually only the supermarkets which are powerful and flexible enough to offer several produce options, thus giving rise to the complex sets of meanings (local and seasonal vs Fairtrade vs organic) negotiated above. As Seyfang (2008) sets out, the supermarkets have thus co-opted the ethical and local markets and thereby the ‘alternativeness’ of the organic or Fairtrade option. With that in mind, I want to look briefly at other areas in which the allotment – where the producer and consumer are one and the same and therefore co-option by Big Food is harder – might be expected to deliver on some of the perceived benefits of alternative food networks.

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If we review the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter concerning how allotments might fit into an AFN paradigm, and some of the social goods claimed for AFNs in Chapter 2 (under **Claims and counter-claims**) is there any evidence in my data that these social goods exist for allotments? What difference does it make when you take the market out of the equation – ‘the production of food outside capitalist systems of exchange’ (Ginn, 2012, p. 295). Does this mean that community is prioritised over market? Does allotment gardening create the sense of community that AFN literature claims can be created by a short food supply chain? Dowler *et al.* (2010) believe that social reconnection can bring about greater trust in the food system and create stronger ‘thickened’ connections between the actors within it; whereas ‘moral reconnection’ involves the practice of allotment gardening transforming how

individuals consume. Social reconnection is complicated, of course, when the food chain is so short that there are no other actors in it, but can taking on an allotment plot lead to changes in an individual's other food-related practices via a 'graduation effect' or an 'allotment career'? I look at questions of community and practice careers in turn below.

Community

The evidence for this in my data is partial and tangential at best. First, we need to examine what we mean by 'community' on an allotment; a question which I asked my research participants. William's response was perhaps the most illuminating:

If the objective is for everyone to grow stuff on their allotment, then the answer is yes. If you think of it in terms of politics – all moving together in the same direction in terms of the organisation of the allotments, then no.

What William is pointing to is that allotment gardening is a 'community of practice', 'groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger and Lave, quoted in Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 67) in which allotment gardeners, although they garden alongside one another, are fundamentally engaged in an individual pursuit. There was certainly evidence that pursuing a shared activity – 'like belonging to a club', according to Charles – led to purposeful cooperation: my interviewees talked about bulk-buying seeds, sharing produce, insuring communal sheds, and dispensing experience and advice. Whilst no-one sought tension between practitioners, equally not everyone felt that a sense of community on site was possible, or even desirable. William was sceptical that an allotment might represent a community: pursuing the same activity might form an association 'but I'm not sure that it brings about a miraculous coming-together of minds'.

However, there were those that believed that the allotment represented a site for community action – a social good delivered via the activity of allotment gardening – a view expressed predominantly by those who were, or had been, members of the allotment committees. Brownfield Road is a good example of a site where the allotment secretary and chair have sought to promote the site and support its occupants; they have applied for, and won, equipment grants, they hold open days for the local area, provide horticultural advice to ploholders, and employ offenders carrying out community service to maintain the site. The site secretary felt that the sense of community was real, but often invisible – 'people just don't appreciate how much goes on on an allotment. It isn't just about digging'. He continued:

something that I felt strongly about is that nobody sees the invisible sides of an allotment. What we do in the community [below the surface]. Still a lot of retired people on the allotment even now. And if they hadn't got the allotments they'd be down the doctor's every other day for checkups, or having home-helps in. Because of the gentle exercise and the fresh fruit and the fresh air they carry on a lot longer. That would deteriorate and they'd have to have a lot more medical attention. Two old fellas on site and they're making plans; they're going to build a coldframe. They spend weeks assembling timber, getting wood stain, the screws, nails and the piece of glass. And they do this over a period of time, come down bright and early, have a cup of tea, 'let's go out and build this coldframe'. And it may sound simple, but that's occupied those two men and kept them interested, without having to turn to strangers, or family, or doctors. They've got an interest, every morning got something to do, 'got to go and meet my friend Bill and put this thing up'. And that kind of interest generates. It's prevalent and that's what keeps people going. Nobody sees that.

The chair of Uplands, who also perceived community to exist on her site, viewed the allotments as a 'social network', and an opportunity to provide health information to the many retirement-aged men on site. She thinks that men especially are not always quick to act on medical problems – 'They very often leave it 'til it's too late, and then take their carcass home to their wives' and is therefore spearheading an initiative to put together health packs 'to help them help themselves'.

Whilst these initiatives showed that allotment committees had the potential to offer support to the gardeners on site, this was in no way an effect of the practice of allotment gardening, as the differences between sites demonstrates (community initiatives of the types described above were not in place at Pereira Road in Harborne, for example). Conversely, whilst the activity of allotment gardening may also have positive outcomes for its practitioners – these are the meanings that my interviewees identified initially (exercise, relief of stress, even social connections) – these are not dependent on there being a strong sense of community on site, and these positive outcomes are experienced individually.

Allotment careers

Can allotment gardening then change participants' relationships with food via a 'graduation effect', which Dowler *et al.* (2010) describe thus: 'that by purchasing or growing food outside the "mainstream", people found themselves rethinking and refining other consumption practices to match their ethical frameworks' (p. 210). Again, the evidence from my data is not conclusive. Although there is certainly evidence that an 'allotment career' exists, it is less clear that this is accompanied by changes in other food or environmental practices. Allotment careers, in this instance, usually involve the participant taking on a plot, then increasing the number of plots to two, or even three. Often this person will simultaneously join the committee, thus moving into a position where they can influence the performance of the practice on the

site. Angela and Wendy are good examples of this type of allotment career. Here again, though, it can be argued that the benefits of this allotment career are perhaps only reaped by the individual concerned. Perhaps, after all, Wiltshire and Geoghegan were right to characterise allotments as individual initiatives, motivated by rational self-interest (2012, p. 337), and 'co-opted by the neoliberal spirit of the age, in this case by emphasising the centrality of individual satisfactions' (p. 341)? In situating allotments within the alternative food network paradigm in my conclusion to this chapter, I want to partly refute this accusation.

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Here I want to sketch out a partial response to some of the questions I asked in my introduction to this chapter regarding the relationship between allotments and alternative food networks as analysed in my data. I will elaborate further on these findings – and where I think allotments are situated in relation to AFNs – in the first section of my concluding chapter, Chapter 7. Specifically, I will consider in Chapter 7 the relationship between producers and consumers, and what difference the absence of the market makes.

On the basis of the data collected, at first glance the inclusion of allotments within the AFN paradigm seems somewhat far-fetched. Firstly, allotment gardeners are not always, or only, concerned with food, and where they do have preoccupations with organic, Fairtrade, local or seasonal produce, it is not immediately obvious that collectively they are at all motivated by the idea of establishing an alternative to mainstream food channels. Far from seeking ethical outlets as alternatives to supermarkets, the quasi-totality of my participants not only undertook the bulk of their shopping there, but appear to have accepted that it is on the supermarket shelves that decisions regarding environmental, social, and economic concerns are made: in other words, that supermarkets have effectively co-opted the organic and Fairtrade markets. When they do engage with traditional AFN outlets – box schemes, farmers' markets – they do so in small numbers or occasionally.

And yet, isn't this also to misrepresent the engagement of ethical consumers in alternative food networks? As Goodman (2009, p. 5) has indicated, 'organic foods and AFNs often supplement rather than replace mainstream supermarket provisioning for consumers', and total organic sales still only represented 1.6% of total UK food sales; the bulk of which in the UK – 75% – is bought from supermarkets (pp. 13, 15). The idea

of farmers' markets as a luxury top-up is certainly borne out in my data: Charles comments that he goes to them occasionally and likes the idea of them

but it's really, really expensive. Slightly precious. Like reading the *Saturday Guardian*. Full of foodies. Buy hunk of cheese which you look at and think that the ordinary working man in West Brom could not afford this. Veg is lovely – but don't need that with allotment – but things like cheese and 'little jars of pickle' are too expensive.

There is also no evidence that the behaviour of ethical consumers is consistent: Spaargaren (2003) and Shove (2010) point out that attitudes do not immutably translate into behaviours, and McEachern *et al.*, comment that even 'conscious consumers perceive limits to their ethical behaviours arising from time, convenience, and cost, even though they have an "ethical" orientation towards consumption' (2010, p. 406; see also Farges, 2014, p. 2; Hargreaves, 2011).

Further, I would argue that this also a misunderstanding of the basis of allotment gardening. If few of my participants engage in traditional AFN activity – box schemes, farmers' markets etc. – isn't this because, as Angela points out, they have no need to do so: they have already grown organic local fruit and vegetables for their own consumption. I would argue, therefore, that allotment gardening is fundamentally about the ethics of consumption – about spending less and reducing consumption of resources (also described as frugality; see Evans, 2011) – rather than ethical consumption or political consumerism (making purchasing decisions to express a political choice). Further evidence of the 'frugal' nature of allotments as is described in the following chapter in relation to strategies for managing gluts of produce – meal-planning, freezing, making jams etc. – or the use of recycled materials and the prevalence of composting. It is within the latter paradigm – political consumerism or ethical consumption – that 'traditional' AFNs are studied, because, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is a chain between producer and consumer which enables economic exchange. Perhaps what my attempt to situate allotments within the AFN literature has demonstrated is that we need to find a way to talk about 'the production of food outside capitalist systems of exchange' (Ginn, 2012, p. 295); we need to talk about alternative food networks within the paradigm of ethics of consumption as well as political consumerism. I return to this interpretation of allotments as ethics of consumption rather than ethical consumption, and how we account more generally for resistance to the market from outside of the market, in Chapter 7. First, in Chapter 6, I use the tools of practice theory to develop a detailed account of allotment gardening as a practice, including less analysed elements such as social networks (relationships and interactions) and constructions of place.

6. Data and findings: allotments as practice

In this chapter I apply the 'slimline' version of practice theory outlined in Shove *et al.* (2012, pp. 119-20) to analyse the data I collected on allotment gardening and tease out the elements which combine in its performance. In so doing I pay particular attention to the evolution of the practice, and how instances and traces of change might be identified both within and between practices. Underpinning this analysis is both the notion of the individual as not just the crossing point of practices but as the hub of a network of social relations which impact all stages of a practitioner's career. I also draw out the centrality of place within allotment gardening, as both a material element within the performance of the practice, but also as a constantly changing canvas upon which traces of change can be observed, created and recreated by the trajectories of practice.

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In analysing my data, it rapidly became clear that it would be impossible to talk about the performance of practice without acknowledging the direct and indirect influence of an individual's relationships on that performance (see discussion of coding at the end of Chapter 4). As I have argued in Chapter 3, the role of such networks of relationships is not examined in any great depth in many contemporary practice theoretical accounts, in which the practice is the unit of analysis, with the individual representing only one element within it. Before turning to my findings regarding how the traditional elements identified within practice theory – meanings, skills, and stuff – can illuminate aspects of the practice of allotment gardening, I therefore start by focusing on some of the ways in which relationships informed their performance of the practice for my research participants. I then consider in turn the other elements which make up a practice, changes in allotment practice, and the crucial role played by place.

Relationships and practice

Relationships and interactions with others are not the only elements within a practice, as my analysis below makes clear, but they do directly and indirectly influence all aspects of allotment gardening as a practice, from recruitment, through performance, and finally to processes of change. Let me be clear from the outset that by 'influence', I mean both emotionally – in terms of meanings and understandings – and materially, in terms of physical outputs (produce) and plot appearance, for example. It is therefore

essential to begin this exploration of how relationships influence allotment gardening with a consideration of who these wider 'stakeholders' behind the plots of some of my respondents are, and how they affected allotment practice in myriad ways; including what people grew, how and when they gardened, and what their allotment meant to them.

First, let's look at who influences what is grown, and how closely they are associated with the practice. What plottolders grow is usually the subject of negotiation within their immediate household, and is the most concrete translation of the influence of others on allotment practice. Plottolders in my sample rarely gardened the plot alone, but normally with either an official co-plottolder, a partner, friends or family. Even when they did garden the plot alone – and in my sample this applied only to three respondents (Karen, Owen and Bogdan) – it would be a mistake to assume that their performance of the practice was entirely uninflected by others. Whilst they did not have to negotiate their food provisioning practices on a daily basis with an obvious significant other, both Karen and Bogdan's allotment practice reflected the traces of others: Karen is part of a circle of friends who exchange food and produce (jams etc.), while Bogdan entertains friends in his summerhouse on the allotment during the summer months. Owen's allotment practice is even more clearly marked by his off-site relationships: he acquired his plot from his partner who gave it up at the same time as her twin was forced to give up the neighbouring plot. Owen's household comprises himself, his partner, and a friend, and the vegetables that he grows are what they like to eat.

Members of the household may be physically present on the plot, as co-plottolders, active gardeners, or occasional visitors: Jess jokes, good-naturedly, that her husband Duncan is a 'loose cannon' in choosing what they grow, and buys plants without prior consultation, but concedes that he knows more about gardening than she does. They may also not be present on the plot, but still have a say in what is grown, like William and his wife, Beverley. As a couple they have distinct and separate preferences in terms of vegetables and herbs, and their plot will reflect both, although Beverley is unlikely to spend much time there or garden actively.

Relationships with others may also negatively impact what is grown on the plot: what Dean grows is partly influenced by the things he *didn't* grow in the garden he previously shared with his wife:

Dean: with this allotment it's basically gonna be my space where I could do my ideas. Because obviously I I tend- tended to argue with my ex a lot about what I could grow in

the garden and what I couldn't grow, and she was more into flowers and I started going towards more [organic] food and growing my own salads.

It would thus be a mistake to assume that only those closely associated with the practice had an impact on its performance. Sasha, for instance, describes how what she and her partner grow is influenced by what has been successfully grown in the past; not just by them, but also by her partner's father, who gardens in an entirely different part of the UK. Perhaps the most striking example of an absent other influencing the performance of allotment practice is provided by the case of Barbara & Paul, a retired and divorced couple, whose route to taking on the allotment and subsequent practice on the plot was heavily influenced by family, specifically Paul's now deceased mother; indeed their allotment practice is perhaps the most singular within my sample. Paul's mother lived in one of the houses whose garden gives directly onto the allotments, and she maintained a good relationship with the site, allowing them to use her electricity supply for open days. Barbara's son-in-law had a plot on the site on which he kept chickens, but was finding upkeep too time-consuming, so Barbara gradually took it over. Paul's mother had meanwhile developed Alzheimers, and in an attempt to find an interest for her, Barbara & Paul took on further chickens, including one which Paul's mother chose and visited. After her death, they both continue to come down to the plot every day to feed the chickens, and – weather permitting – to spend a couple of hours there. The plot is dominated by a chicken pen containing half a dozen or more chickens – with plans for an expanded flock – and a small token vegetable bed, since neither – Barbara in particular – is particularly fond of vegetables (although their enthusiasm for growing them is increasing).

People's relationships informed not just what was (or wasn't) grown, but how and when the plot was worked. Several of my respondents, often in early retirement, garden as a couple. Where both partners actively participated in the plot, this might lead to a division of labour, as described by Angela:

'I'm the planter, um he does a lot of the building and the laying-out and the heavy work and the mending and, y'know. He's great. I I don't think I could do it without him, really. Um, but I'm definitely the plumber and the planter. He likes to pick the produce.'

Jess & Duncan split their roles somewhat differently:

J: Duncan does the hard labour. I go and admire it.

D: Jess has an advisory role.

J: I pick the fruit and vegetables. And cook them. That's my role.

[...]

VW: So when you're deciding what to grow on the allotment, do you have a discussion together about what would be good to grow, or does one of you take the lead in that?

[...]

J: [Duncan] goes into any shop like Nasri or something and he sees something and he just buys it, and because he knows a lot more about plants and things, I have to defer to his choice.

D: It's largely, well partly a joint... [laughter]

Where a plot is shared between friends the physical space may be distributed between them and gardened individually, resulting in visible representation of different practices. (I discuss the appearance of the plot and the elements that inform this further below)

Alison: we haven't split it up yet, but I think we, I think that's our plan, that's our vague plan, to split it up to make it more manageable, 'cause it's enormous.

VW: OK, and then, then will you and Natasha [friend] garden different bits of it, or grow...

Alison: I'm not sure, I'm not sure what we'll do. Natasha's got her idea of growing flowers and I want to grow vegetables, um, so I suspect we'll eventually have our own little beds. We've already, we've already sort of demarcated it into little beds

[...]

VW: And do you tend to go down there at the same time?

Alison: No, we don't. 'Cause Natasha works really unsociable hours

As can be seen from the above extract, even active joint plotters do not necessarily garden at the same time. This is also true of Sasha and her partner who tend to go to the allotment 'Singly. 'Cause it's much easier. And we have our specialisms.'

Children and grandchildren too impact how and when people garden. Jess & Duncan describe a neighbouring plotter, recently divorced, who primarily tends his plot at weekends because this is when his daughter spends time with him; moreover having a place to take his daughter and an activity to share with her was, according to Jess & Duncan, the motivation for acquiring the plot. Seven of my interviewees had school-aged children or grandchildren, and they described the influence of these children on their performance of the practice, even if the children did not actually come to the plot. This influence could be seen both in terms of what is grown – Dean described how his sons want to have a separate section of the plot where they can grow fruit, for example – as well as in terms of their (non)-participation. Sadie's kids, for example, prefer to go to the neighbouring park rather than do anything on the plot, but she plans what she plants in part around their preferences; Sasha's son can sometimes not be persuaded out of the car (which is ironic, in view of the fact that one of her stated reasons for getting the plot was so that her kids should understand more about where food came

from); whereas Tom's grandchildren are keen gardeners and would help out on the plot. Children may also affect when a plotholder can garden, and for how long.

Other plotholders may influence either what is grown, or how it is grown. Angela jokingly describes how 'yes, you always get somebody coming round saying "I wouldn't do it like that if I were you" [laughs] well it's true, isn't it? And you'll say "Harry, how do you do so-and-so?" "well actually, I've always done so and so"'.

Finally, there is the material and emotional input of wider friends and family. Dean intends to construct his plot on 'organic' lines, using recycled materials supplied by friends and family. Moreover, in addition to his sons, he has arranged for a number of people to come and work on the site in exchange for produce:

Dean: Um, my ex wants some of the food as well, and the children, so they're gonna take it to their friends as well.

VW: Yeah

Dean: Um, so that that's what I want to encourage [...] This just doesn't belong to me. If you want to come and work on my plot you can. If you want to take salad you can, but just be respectful. [...] Y'know, from me it's gonna be about six people now who actually want to come and work on this plot [...] [Yeah] and it ranges from teachers all, all the way down to unemployed people, so it, it'd be good fun for us all.

The above examples from my data indicate some of the myriad ways that relationships – between plotholders, and between plotholders and families, partners, and friends, may influence and inform allotment practice. Note that, on the basis of my data, I am arguing here for more than just the recognition of 'other people' as an element within the practice: the significance of the impact on practice lies in the nature of the relationship between the practitioner and the other, not simply on that other's presence or absence; so Paul's chickens as a visible reminder of his mother may ensure his continued performance of the practice, for example. I expand on this view of relationships within practice in Chapter 7.

Before turning to the elements more traditionally identified by contemporary practice theory as comprising a practice – meanings, skills and stuff – and demonstrating how taking a practice theory approach to my data serves to illuminate the role played by these elements both in the practice of allotment gardening and in processes of change, I want briefly to consider recruitment to a practice, again largely underpinned by relationships.

Recruitment to a practice

For around half my research participants, the decision to take up allotment gardening coincided with a change in circumstances. Often this was as a result of retirement, which ostensibly freed up time for what – certainly at particular times of the year – can be a demanding and intensive activity. In my sample, those taking up an allotment after retirement included Charles, William, Jean, Owen, and Angela. Karen was also increasing the time she spent on the allotment following voluntary redundancy. Sometimes a change of location – for Sasha and Tom, moving house; for Bogdan and William, moving country – had prompted a desire for an allotment. This is Sasha:

err moved house; smallish garden; thought it would be nice to grow vegetables[...]; good for the kids to know about, and there were some allotments right at the bottom of our road.

Sometimes this change in circumstance was because of a ‘gap’ created by abandoning a previous practice (other than work). Wendy, for instance, had undertaken a punishing diet and exercise regime for the previous two years and was consciously seeking a change of activity; William and his wife had had to give up their holiday home in the Caribbean and their garden there; and Dean was living on his own following a marital separation.

Whatever the combination of circumstances which prompted the desire to take on an allotment plot, choosing the plot was the next step. Unsurprisingly, the convenience of the plot being local to the participant’s home was often cited as a factor in that choice – Sadie wanted her plot to be ‘en route to elsewhere’, such as her children’s school. None of my participants lived more than two miles from their plot. (I will discuss further below the meaning some participants attributed to the idea of the allotment being local.) Proximity in terms of place, however, was often couched in terms of relationships with existing practitioners on the site. For Charles and William, this was friendship with an existing committee member, which initially entailed sampling allotment produce and ‘helping out’ on the plot. Tom too was enrolled by a committee neighbour back in 1972 at the point at which his local allotment site was being extended (indeed, he measured out and dug his own plot). Owen took over his partner’s plot; Barbara & Paul took over Barbara’s son-in-law’s plot; Alison took on a half of a friend’s plot; and Bogdan helped an old lady with her plot and then took it over

when it became too much for her.³⁷ Of 22 plotholders interviewed, only 4 had obtained their plot without knowing anyone already on site.

Relationships with other people – whether present on the plot or not – were for the majority of my research participants the key factor not just in their recruitment to the practice, but in its ongoing performance (see above). These relationships with often-invisible others may be framed in both positive and negative terms – Charles, for instance, although satisfied with his plot and enjoying the social aspects of the allotment, feels tied to his current location by both his just-grown-up children and by his father-in-law, who is in poor health. He and his wife had planned to spend their early retirement travelling, and he confessed that if his father-in-law ‘died next week’ they might well go to Italy for a year and walk away from the allotment, though he would be sorry to see it go. Conversely, Jean’s husband would like to spend more time at the allotment with Jean, but his mother is old and absent-minded and so he spends his spare time with her instead.

I now move on from discussing practitioner relationships *per se* to a consideration of allotment practice from the perspective of the elements outlined by Shove *et al.* (2012) – meanings, competence and materials. This does not mean that I do not believe that relationships do not also articulate with all elements within a practice – indeed it is my contention that they do, and I shall return to this central idea of how an individual’s relationships and interactions with others condition their practice at several points in this analysis.

Elements of practice

Meanings

As we have seen in Chapter 5, food was far from being the only – and sometimes not even the primary – motivation for getting an allotment. Wendy (who was seeking company and a gentler way of exercising) was just one of my participants who took pains to reject this notion, explaining that fresh produce was very much the outcome of – and not the motivation for – getting a plot.

³⁷ Despite the waiting lists described elsewhere for some allotment sites in Birmingham, and the very clear guidelines in the Council’s allotment rules concerning how plots are to be allocated – see Appendix 3, §2.3 – a certain amount of informal exchange of plots between the original named plotholder and a person associated with them appears to go on.

Where fresh produce was cited as a factor in their decision, either my respondents listed it as one factor amongst others – William and Charles made it clear that the social aspect of an allotment was equally if not more important to them – or they referred to it as their primary motivation, but then discussed the allotment largely in other terms. Sadie and Adam are good examples of the latter. Of all my interviewees they were the two whose stated motivations for taking on an allotment plot (to grow organic vegetables), were most aligned with their shopping practices (they were both customers of organic box schemes and bought direct from wholefood coops). Yet most of my interview with Adam was taken up with discussing the ongoing dispute between the Billesley Lane allotments and the neighbouring golf course concerning ownership and use of the site: Adam was explicit that he saw his role on site as the ‘obstinate git’ who knew the history of the dispute and was girding up for the next round in the fight.³⁸ Sadie came back at several points in the interview to the idea that the allotment was a space carved out for the relationship between her and her partner; time on their own away from their children. For her, as for Wendy whose relationship with her now-husband blossomed as a result of helping him out on his plot, the allotment was also a key site within the relationship.

Indeed, as Barbara & Paul’s story above clearly illustrates, rather than being about food, the meanings that people ascribed to their allotments were instead very often associated with their relationships; in other words with what they brought to the allotment, rather than with what they took away. For instance, at several points in the discussion, and in different ways, Jess & Duncan framed their allotment very much in terms of their family, even though their children were grown up and moved away. First, when talking about how their allotment looked – mostly a ‘pleasure garden’ with only a third given over to growing vegetables – they describe it as a place where ‘[g]randchildren, when they come, they can run around, hide behind the beans’ [Jess]. Not only do the couple take pleasure in showing off their plots – ‘and we sort of take our children to the allotment, and they enthuse at what we’ve done. And they enjoy looking at it as well. And the grandchildren do too, which is nice’ [Jess] – but how the produce from the allotment is managed is also inflected by Jess & Duncan’s relationship with their children: they make pickle and jam in part to share with their children, and first froze vegetables so that their family could taste what they had been growing, not

38 See the Save Billesley Lane Allotments Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/SaveBillesleyLaneAllotments/?fref=ts> [last accessed 29 September 2016].

primarily as an economic or waste-prevention measure. The allotment therefore becomes a talking point within their relationship with their children:

Duncan: It gives you something to talk about which is quite good when you're talking to family in different places to have sort of something to start your conversation. They've got something to ask you – 'how's the allotment going?' – we've got something to say.

Jess & Duncan are not alone in using the allotment as a talking point within their relationships. An anonymous contributor to an online forum posted as follows: 'There were several reasons why I went for mine but the main one was so I can have something in common with my Dad because, unlike my brothers, I know nothing about cars and don't care about what happens to Leyton Orient football club.'³⁹ Similarly, Stan recounts that he travelled extensively for work when his children were younger, and the allotment meant that they had an activity they could all do together. In other words, practices may strengthen relationships, just as relationships strengthen practices.

Sometimes, as for Barbara & Paul, whose memories of his mother are bound up with the allotment site, the relationship shaping the meaning of the allotment may also be one of absence. Another contributor to the same forum thread posted the following:

I have always loved gardening and only have a small one at home, only grew a few toms and beans in pots. Watched the programme about allotments [...] a few years ago and thought I want one so put my name down. My late sister laughed at me. After waiting about 12 months or so I got a half plot in September 07, at the time I was my sister's carer as well as looking after my own family and working part time and I thought how the hell will I manage. My oh [partner] bought me a brand new shed an away I went, my sister laughed again but couldn't wait to have some of the produce that hopefully I would manage to grow. One month later my sister died [...] and it became my refuge, somewhere I could go and be on my own, cry if I wanted to without anyone asking questions as I am usually the only one there. I love it so much that this february we took on a second half plot, my sister would say I was off my head lol. I was never able to give her any of the produce but so far I have grown sweet peas to take to her grave, giving her the flowers makes it feel I am giving her something from the plot.

Other positive representations of the allotment were cited as reasons for engaging in the practice: the superior taste of fresh produce; exercise; relaxation; a degree of self-sufficiency (from the more experienced gardeners) and the satisfaction of having grown something oneself (from those less experienced) and knowing that it had been grown organically; the enjoyment of a space which was separate from the rest of your life but somehow also your own and perhaps more 'authentic' than other spaces in everyday life; and as an activity to get out of the house.

39 http://www.growfruitandveg.co.uk/grapevine/general-chitchat/so-why-did-you-get-allotment_47129.html

For some, the allotment imaginary is a nostalgic one. Paul comments that allotments 'stuck in my mind from when I was little, 'cause there'd be like lots of places like this, so something's in my head from when I was little', and several anonymous forum commentators shared memories of going to the allotments with grandparents – 'I spent hours following my Gramps around the garden and his allotment when I was younger and can still taste his peas now' (see also Partalidou and Anthopoulou, 2016, p. 12). (Not all remembrances of childhood allotments were quite as affectionate, however. Sadie commented that she'd hated going to her parent's allotment – just as her children now showed no interest in coming to her own plot.)

Charles, perhaps more than any other of my research participants, illustrates how allotment gardening can be motivated by sociability: not only did he take on his plot as a result of his friendship with other committee members, but his interview is peppered with references to the allotment as a place to socialise – to take beers and sit under a tree, to chat to surrounding ploholders. Conversely, the absence of sociability may also be a structuring factor for some allotment practitioners – another contributor to the same allotment chat forum commented that: 'I also like to get away from people, escape into my own world, I find all my problems seem to fade a bit'; a perspective which one of my research participants, Karen, partially shared. For Karen, who felt that she already had an established circle of friends, the allotment was not a social space, and she actively avoided social events on the site.

Since these were existing ploholders their representations of the allotment were largely positive (had I interviewed practitioners who had abandoned the practice the picture might well have been entirely different). But allotments do have some negative connotations for ploholders, primarily related to commitment pressure and guilt over (perceived or actual) non-performance. Sasha made frequent reference to weeds on her plot – 'erm the guy next to us who's clearly retired um and clearly spends about as much time each day on his allotment as we do possibly each month um has got four plots and they all look beautiful [whereas] whenever we go down and he's there he mutters about our weeds' – and Adam, whose own plot was somewhat overgrown (see below, Figure 2) following an absence of a month or so, talked about the enormous effort required to keep an allotment up to implicitly 'acceptable' standards – it was a 'constant nag – bell ringing on front of ship – weeds never sleep'. The committee chairs of both Uplands and the Jubilee site talked about the increase in rents as a final straw, after a couple of seasons of poor weather, to push the less committed off the site; and Miller (2013, pp. 241-4] describes how theft of allotment produce – in her example,

committed by other plotholders rather than by outsiders – dampened enthusiasm for continuing the practice. Despite the prevalence of reported theft in my own data, however, I found no evidence that this had been sufficient to discourage my interviewees.



Figure 2. 'The weeds never sleep'

Encounters with other plotholders could also sour the allotment experience. These frequently centred on the issue of weeds encroaching on others' plots; sometimes as friction between old-hands and newcomers, as in Alison's experience:

Alison: Um, and then we spoke to another guy there who was having a bonfire and um we said we wanted to get some topsoil delivered and he immediately, his first reaction was 'well, where are you going to put it?' [...] And I said, 'well can't we just put it' – because there's little car-park bits – and I said 'well can't we just put it somewhere near to our allotment?', y'know on the road, and he was really kind of anti- that [...] and I just felt a bit of a negative 'allotment wars' [thing] going on, y'know?

I return to the idea that friction arises as a result of practitioners being at different stages in their allotment careers below. Next, I consider skills as an element of practice.

Skills

In addition to the meanings and understandings that a practitioner brings to a practice, a practice also comprises the skills which are required to perform it. In terms of gardening skills – although, as we shall see, these are not the only skills required on an allotment, especially for those occupying a committee post – some of my interviewees had little experience of growing vegetables (Sasha, Barbara & Paul, Jess & Duncan); some had trained as gardeners or had horticultural qualifications (Charles; Stan); some had considerable past experience, for instance on farms (Tom). These varying skill sets contribute to a variety of performances of the practice, discussed in more detail below. High levels of experience and skill sometimes meant lower levels of time spent engaged in the practice – an efficiency about its performance – which enabled these ‘high-level’ practitioners, if they were otherwise available (i.e retired) or uncommitted to another practice, to engage in other activities on the allotment. So, whereas Sasha, a full-time working mother, agonised about the need to get rid of the weeds and plan planting better in order to maximise her time and effort at the allotment, the secretary at Brownfield road spent his time organising community-based initiatives centred on the allotment on the basis that a well-organised allotment plot ‘shouldn’t take an enormous amount of time [...] An hour or two a week should be sufficient to maintain once you’re on top of it and have got it organised – doesn’t have to be intensive’.

However, in addition to gardening skills, there was scope for practising other skills: two further distinct skill/knowledge sets were described by my interviewees as being in use at the allotment. Two allotment chairs talked of the management skills required to run an allotment site, especially the capacity to resolve disputes effectively. (Charles describes how his newly-retired friend and committee chair maintains his plot – which he does not enjoy gardening – solely so that he can take an active role on the committee and exercise the management skills he acquired during his previous career.) Both Dean and Adam had expertise in land use and local or community politics. Adam uses this knowledge to prepare for the next round in the battle against the golf course; Dean intends to involve the allotment site in community initiatives to reach out to those sections of the local community with whom he has been working (the younger generation; deprived sections of the community).

Materials

A focus on the equipment or material involved in allotment practice usefully brings light to bear on upstream and downstream implications of the practice, and on related practices. By this I mean that growing vegetables involves both input (seeds and plants) and output (produce), and the process is managed using a wide variety of equipment. Various, from my data, equipment included vehicles (cars or bicycles) to transport tools (trowels, forks, etc.). Growing plants require maintenance and structures (water, fertiliser, wigwams, raised beds, polytunnels); on-site practitioners require storage (sheds) and creature comforts (tea-making facilities, summerhouses); allotment committees require event-hosting equipment (tea urns, bouncy castles, electricity generators) in order to recruit future practitioners or generate goodwill in the local community. There is also the occasional use of heavy machinery (rotivators etc.) to dig over badly overgrown plots. Finally, allotment produce requires management – especially when there is a lot of it – entailing equipment for storing or preserving it. I shall look briefly at some of these elements in further detail for a number of reasons: first because practice ‘stuff’ is frequently the subject of rules and regulations, which represent explicit attempts to delineate the boundaries of the practice (a copy of the BCC allotment rules can be found in Appendix 3); second, because allotment equipment is frequently vandalised or stolen (perhaps a ‘contingent practice’, as I speculate in Chapter 7), which forces changes in the performance of the practice; third, because all materials, including the produce itself, extend the boundary of the allotment as both place and practice; and finally, the materials which people choose to use are illustrative of different approaches to the practice, and may therefore be indicative of change.

Transport, tools, and storage

As a result of theft and vandalism on the allotments – respondents frequently reported damage (sometimes even arson) and break-ins – virtually all my interviewees concluded that allotments were not secure and adapted their practice accordingly. This meant, for example, that Karen chose not to have a shed but left small hand-tools only on the allotment; Bogdan, who did not have a car but lived at some distance from the allotment, had constructed a summerhouse containing tools and more, and endured the impact of numerous break-ins (although he moved the more expensive equipment off-site); Jean had a shed but left it unlocked and only left tools of little value on the allotment – like Owen she brought more valuable tools or those with sentimental value from home. Consequently, when needing to transport heavier tools even those who

lived relatively locally to the site frequently made use of the car. For Jess & Duncan, who have two allotment plots, the car doubles as a storage facility:

[We] keep a lot of tools in the back of that [the car]. Partly it's because we need the different tools on both sites [meaning at home and at the allotment], it's partly as an alternative to having a shed, which would give more storage than this box.

For both Tom and Sasha, the necessity and prevalence of car use appeared to clash with what they perceived to be ideal allotment practice. Tom felt that one should live within five to ten minutes of one's plot (he himself lives immediately opposite) and worried that the practice might die out if this were not the case (see also Miller, 2015, 219-20). Although Tom did not elaborate on his reasons for thinking this, both he and Sasha in her comments below appear to be falling into a nostalgic version of Born and Purcell's 'local trap' in which the local scale is automatically assumed to be more desirable (2006, p. 195).

Sasha: What's difficult is that actually if you're taking any spades you have to go by car which is a bit of a oh [sighs] you know, *you want to walk out of your house with a bag over your shoulder, walk to a bit of land, dig up some vegetables, go home and have them for lunch. In a perfect world, that's what you'd want at the weekend [...]* Umm so you, you clamber into your car, you have to unlock the gate, you have to go through, you have to lock the gate, the lanes are fiddly, so it actually takes quite a bit of time to get the car in and out [...] so that's that's [kind of a] downside. [emphasis mine]

Use of the car, then, is a tangible reminder of how the practice of allotment gardening has changed over the decades since Tom first got his plot, and I return to this briefly below in considering how it has also changed the shape of the allotment (see under **Place**).

Growing plants: maintenance and structures

Whereas different methods of growing plants may simply provide opportunities for shared learning, some differences in approaches to the use of equipment may signal a change in the practice or an 'unacceptable' performance of the practice. An obvious example of this is the decision whether or not to use pesticides: in effect, in my sample virtually all my interviewees gardened organically – despite reports that pesticide use was on the increase by gardeners (Appleby, 2014) – although Tom used limited amounts of herbicide to kill nettles, and Sadie and Charles used slug pellets.

Birmingham City Council does not forbid the use of pesticides but lays down rules governing their use; additionally some sites have local rules. At Pereira Road, they can be used, but people must respect their neighbour's organic preferences and not administer them when it's windy. According to Wendy, complaints are few on this issue, indicating that an acceptable accommodation regarding the practice has been reached.

Sometimes an accommodation cannot be reached on the acceptable use of a shared resource such as water. The chair of the Uplands site raised this as an issue. Under the new management arrangements for allotment sites, the site committee, rather than the council, is now responsible for paying water bills. According to two of my interviewees, Uplands has a number of 'commercial growers' (my interviewee's term) on site, which are unacknowledged (and against the council rules), but visible in 'the amount of stuff that they're planting, and the number of plots they've got [...] Some's got seven plots. Can you imagine all of that going into any one kitchen?' Not only do they use a large amount of a now finite resource – the committee is having to consider capping water use in order to limit the bill – but, 'it's difficult to keep a tab on that, because they will come at 2, 3, 4 o' clock in the morning to water their stuff'. In this instance, (unacceptable?) practice divergence – here breaking the explicit rules – is a source of tension.

Creature comforts

Creature comforts on a plot – such as tea-making facilities, or a more elaborate shelter – may be indicative of the meanings the practitioner brings to the plot: that the allotment is perceived as a social space, or a home-from-home, for example. Whilst a number of my participants talked of taking flasks and sandwiches to the plot in order to spend more time there (Angela, Karen, Jess & Duncan for example), or beer and wine to relax and socialise there (Alison, Charles) – Bogdan had gone further and constructed a summerhouse, complete with cooking facilities and – taking creature comforts to a whole new level! – a cat. Similarly, though on a slightly smaller scale, Barbara & Paul had both tea-making facilities and a seating area next to the chickens. For these participants, for whom the meaning of the plot is that it is an alternative living space, this meant extending the practice of allotment gardening to include bringing food in two directions – from home, to eat or cook whilst there, as well as taking produce home from the plot – and more regular attendance in order to feed and spend time with their pets (see also Miller, 2013, p. 182). (In contrast, Owen, who continued to work as I interviewed him, had no visible creature comforts and, by his own admission, had not taken on a plot in order to relax or socialise.)

'Trying to think up different ways of cooking a very small number of items':

managing output

One of the challenges in managing allotment produce arises from the frequent mismatch between the size of the allotment plot – a full-size plot is typically the size of a tennis court – and the needs of those who tend it in terms of fresh produce. This can

be a particular problem for retired people whose children have left home, and within my sample this was certainly the case for Angela and her husband, Jess & Duncan, Jean and her husband, and Alan & Christine. As a single couple they simply could not consume the amount of produce an allotment plot yields, especially given that, unless managed at the planting stage, a crop may easily turn into a glut. This was particularly a problem for the more inexperienced gardeners. Jess & Duncan commented:

J: it's like the first year we had so many courgettes that there was just no way we could consume it; in fact, they were an irritation because every time we went we had to bring back bags of courgettes.

D: yeah, they grow so quickly, you know, you go one day and it's just an ordinary courgette, and you go back three days later and it's a marrow!

J: there's just only so much that you can eat, or want to eat.

It's useful to spend a few moments here considering how allotment gardeners manage their allotment output (produce) – especially when they have to deal with a glut – because as well as highlighting the role of yet more materials (freezers, for example) it provides an illustration of how the boundaries of allotment practice extend beyond the site of the allotment itself and impact surrounding practices such as cooking and shopping. The management of output further serves to demonstrate how allotments can be interpreted as a practice concerned with the ethics of consumption (see Chapter 5) in that the goal is to avoid excess waste.

Gluts can be managed upstream by implementing planting and planning practices to avoid them. For Jess & Duncan, growing flowers was a conscious attempt to cut down on the number of vegetables they grew; a strategy which had the additional benefits of both attracting wildlife and looking pretty. Stan talks about advising new ploholders to plant in stages rather than all at once; Charles advocates planting all year round and finding crops which can overwinter to avoid sowing everything in April and being overwhelmed in August. This is sensible advice, but sometimes the problems my respondents encountered in managing allotment produce concerned not *when* they planted but *what* they planted. As I have discussed above, my interviewees – especially the less experienced – grew not just what they liked, but what they thought they could grow successfully – ‘noddy’ crops, as Adam puts it. This, combined with a mismatch between the contemporary British diet (with its willing embrace of global cuisine) and the ingredients which the British climate and soil can produce leads to a situation in which Sasha, for instance, is faced with a glut of runner beans and is ‘trying to think up different ways of cooking a very small number of items’. Some avoid this trap – either because their preferred diets are more traditional, or because they are able to grow a

wide array of produce. Owen, for example grows only those vegetables which his household enjoy – ‘simple food’ – and then finds ways to cook them – often stir fries. Sadie too also commented that their diet had not changed since getting the allotment; in other words there was a good match between what they grew and what they ate.

Gluts, then, are also managed downstream in the way that the produce is incorporated as an element into other practices such as shopping and cooking, via strategies which included meal-planning, freezing, preserving, gifting, or – in extremis – composting. In the first instance, my interviewees sought to incorporate the produce into their everyday diet. Meal-planning is a first weapon in the armoury against the glut (or simply against food waste). Angela’s cooking practices have evolved since taking on her plot, in that she now cooks far more fresh fruit and vegetables because she produces them on the allotment – ‘I go into the fridge, see what vegetables I’ve got and then decide what I’m going to cook with it’. She freely admits, however, that this is only possible because she is now retired and has the leisure to plan her meals and shop on a daily basis; for others, the transition from plot to plate is not so direct, nor pleasurable. Jess & Duncan recounted how they enjoyed itemising the number of elements in their meals which had originated on their allotment plot, although Jess commented: ‘Nice to eat some of the stuff, though not sure [about] the effort of washing and cleaning and everything else’, and talked of picking slugs off their produce.

Sometimes meal-planning involved using produce which had been preserved earlier, usually frozen. All of my interviewees had at least one freezer (even those who rented their accommodation), sometimes with a second freezer being purchased as a direct consequence of having an allotment (Owen and Sadie are examples of this). Freezers thus become a perhaps unexpected additional item of equipment for allotment practice (but see Hand and Shove, 2007, for more on the dynamic role of the freezer within the household). As described earlier, some even adapted other elements of the practice of allotment gardening to their freezing strategies – Owen chose to grow a new variety of runner bean on the basis that it preserved its taste and texture better when frozen. In addition to freezing, my interviewees stored apples and potatoes in sheds, and carrots in sand, and made jams or chutneys. The latter, as well as fresh produce itself, was also gifted to friends and family, and more widely to community and church groups (see also Miller, 2013, 231-6). As a last resort, there was the compost heap as a compensatory mechanism; what Angela describes as ‘justified’ waste.

In the above analysis of the elements of practice which fall under the headings of materials, skills, and materials, I have endeavoured to identify moments when

elements combine, when performances of the practice could be said to be evolving or diverging, or when the performance of another practice was impacted by that of the allotment. In the next section I want to examine this more systematically, focusing in particular on how change is visible in the very fabric of the allotment site.

Changes in practice

Unsurprisingly, given the multiple understandings of the allotment described above, the meanings and skills which practitioners bring to the plot, and the different uses made of equipment, allotment gardening is subject to divergent performances. Individually and in the short-term, these contradictions may lead to tensions; collectively, and in the longer-term they will either raise questions about the ‘proper’ performance of the practice – or, more positively, indicate that the practice is open to several interpretations and also open to change.

In this section, then, I want to look at some divergent practices within my data, starting with a discussion of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ practice, before looking at

Contradictory performances, and finally **Contradictions between practices**.

Throughout this section on changes in practice I will focus in particular on the appearance of the plot because this is where indications of change are most evident, which leads me to a wider discussion of the importance of the (somewhat neglected) element of place within practice in the final section of this chapter.

‘Acceptable performance’

Not only are individuals the crossing points of a network of relationships which extend beyond the plot, but in coming together on the plot they also create a network around a shared activity, or a community of practice. Corradi’s definition of this is useful for the analysis of my data which follows:

[A] form of self-organisation which corresponds neither to organisational boundaries nor to friendship groups. It is based on sociality among practitioners and on the sharing of practical activities. Sociality is the dimension within which interdependencies arise among people engaged in the same practices. These interdependencies give rise to *processes of legitimate and peripheral participation* whereby newcomers take part in organisational life and are socialised into ways of seeing, doing and speaking. (Corradi *et al.*, 2010, pp. 267-8, my emphasis).

I want to focus in particular on how the idea of legitimate or ‘acceptable practice’ is interpreted on the ground. What constitutes acceptable allotment practice, and who judges its legitimacy?

Allotments in Birmingham (or the vast majority) are regulated by a series of rules set down by the Council (Appendix 3). Additionally, the practice is framed by national bodies (NSALG, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners) and local bodies (BDAC, Birmingham and District Allotments Confederation) who have an advisory rather than statutory role. The BCC rules cover, inter alia, the standard space allocated to the practice, abandoning a practice (through death, non-payment of rent), the non-commercial nature of the practice; conditions for taking it up; behaviour to be respected between practitioners and with regard to non-practitioners (bonfires); prohibited material elements (barbed wire; carpet); conditions for contested practices (e.g. use of pesticides); intersection with other practices (e.g. beekeeping, where reference to further practice guidelines are made in the guise of the British Bee Keeping Association); who is and is not an authorised practitioner (only tenants and their *bona fide* guests are allowed on site); acceptable equipment (no permanent structures) and its use and storage; the appearance of the plot (acceptable positioning of hedges, width of paths etc.); and dispute resolution.

These rules are locally enforced by the on-site allotment committee who play a key role in shaping allotment practice, and how it is performed. First, it is the committee who makes a judgement on whether plotholders are using their plot appropriately (i.e., not allowing it to become overgrown) and thus whether they will be able to renew their lease of the plot.⁴⁰ (In this context Charles – who is not a member of the committee, but is closely associated with it because of his friendships – recalls that his idle perusal of other people’s plots can be a source of concern, if it is mistaken for one of the twice-yearly inspections conducted by the committee.) Second, the committee members drive initiatives and policy – the holding of social or open events, whether to purchase communal equipment, in what circumstances the gates are to be locked, etc. – which all have an impact on how people use and experience the allotment. Finally, the committee is frequently responsible for dispute resolution (which can be time-consuming, as testified by committee members from both Uplands and Brownfield).

It is interesting to note, in passing, that, some of the elements and episodes I have described above – such as the way some of my participants ‘inherited’ their plots, or the existence of a summerhouse structure – or, indeed, a cat – on Bogdan’s plot, clearly contravene Council rules, but did not appear to be ‘contested’ practices within the sites

40 At the time of my research, the Council was in charge of sending out ‘Letters of concern’ to those tenants whose plots were deemed by the site committee not to be tended to acceptable standards.

themselves, suggesting that the boundaries of 'acceptable' practice are not (solely) defined by the local authority.

So what is deemed 'acceptable' by practitioners on the ground? The plottolders I interviewed had clear views of what constituted legitimate allotment practice, the central tenets of which were regular attendance, visible output, and, most importantly, minimising weeds on your own plot and *definitely* not letting them encroach on anybody else's. This was understood by both those who practised 'the rules' and those in danger of transgressing them. This is Alison:

'Um, it feels like if you don't tend your allotment really regularly then people don't like you because of it. And, I mean, the thing is, the issue of the couch grass, unless you dug up the entire er thing you're never going to get rid of couch grass and it just feels like people want to interfere with other people's allotments.

Acceptable performance of the practice is to some extent dependent upon how experienced the practitioner is, the point which they have reached in their 'allotment career' (see Chapter 5; see also Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 70). Novices/newcomers are more likely to 'transgress' than old hands. This was certainly evidence of this in my data: Sasha was still in the first few years of having an allotment and had already received at least one 'Letter of Concern' concerning her plot's level of cultivation; whereas those who had allotment committee positions tended to have productive weed-free plots (and usually more than one of them). Miller observes (2015, p. 266) – and my data backs up this observation – that 'it is generally the tenants that maintain their plots to high standards who are involved in site-level activities and associations', suggesting that even what may at first appear to be a sideways move – i.e. one not directly concerned with the practice of gardening – may actually be dependent on performing the practice to a high standard.

Yet the correlation between career and practice does not always hold, and it is the contradictions which are perhaps the most pertinent in terms of identifying changes in the practice. Sadie, for instance, who maintains her plot to a high standard in the terms set out above, and is vigilant about weeds, will nonetheless allow patches of nettles to remain; despite her focus on having a productive allotment she also seeks to achieve a 'cosier' look to the plot, and eschews the straight lines beloved by the equally productive Tom. (I will talk further about changing practice meanings on the allotment in Chapter 7.) Similarly, not all allotment committee members necessarily have productive plots. Whilst it may be argued that it can be hard to find new committee members since the position is voluntary and time consuming, nonetheless we should also remember that committee members are in a position to enforce or support how

practice across the site develops, and their own practice is likely to inform their decisions.

Contradictory performances

As indicated above, when practitioners approach a practice in different ways – often visible in the equipment which they use ('stuff') – at worst this may lead to tensions.

Alison's experience illustrates this:

Dave [husband] and I went down there a while ago and we were putting cardboard down to try and stop [...] all the couch grass growing. And, um, three women with dogs [...] they came and walked over our allotment and onto the next allotment where this guy was working [...] and um, they were asking us why we were putting cardboard down, and we told them that we thought that would be a good idea to try and stop the couch grass and, and they said we really want to come and dig it, we want to dig it for you. We didn't want them to do that 'cause we wanted to take care of it ourselves. Um, and they were quite off with us and quite abrupt and it kind of left a bad taste in our mouth, y'know.

There are clearly several dimensions to this: this was an uncomfortable encounter with people who were not respecting the rules (both explicitly, in terms of crossing the plot uninvited, but also implicitly in overstepping the boundaries of conversational norms with strangers). However, this is also a dispute over the correct way of performing practice: should you get rid of weeds by digging them out or suppressing them?

Divergences in practice between practitioners may however indicate the evolution of the practice. The differences in how plots are laid out (both within my study and over time) is a useful example here. Other than an assumption – entirely borne out – that overgrown plots would prove a source of annoyance to other ploholders, I had not anticipated that the appearance of the allotment plot would be an issue of considerable importance for most of my interviewees. (See also Crouch and Ward, 1997, ch. 10 for a broad historical overview of the allotment aesthetic.) By appearance, my respondents did not mean merely 'neat' or weed-free (although this latter quality was prized by all, even if not always observed), but often described a specific visual effect – Sadie's 'Derek Jarman aesthetic', Dean's ideas of vertical planting, or Jess & Duncan's 'pleasure garden', for example. It is clear that the dominant visual aesthetic is moving away from Tom's or Charles's more traditional approach to maximising yield which involves planting in straight lines and minimising paths through the plot. Not that such 'mathematical' plots – Adam's term – have disappeared: indeed Duncan describes looking at 'the big productive allotments up at the top, you've got really nice fields of vegetables, so they have allotments like you see in gardening books'. However, allotment plots tended by newer recruits are just as likely to adopt a 'prettier'

arrangement which mixes flowers and vegetables, sometimes (as with Jess & Duncan's plot) with the balance in favour of the former, thus pushing at the boundaries of the practice as established by the Council, which states that allotment plots are 'primarily for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables'. There may be several reasons for this, evidence for some of which can be found in my data. First, there is an emphasis on attracting bees, butterflies, and insects to the plot – several of my respondents talked enthusiastically about this, including Tom – which arguably relates to broader environmental concerns. Second, the dominant understanding of the allotment – as we have seen in the analysis of my respondents' motivations and understandings above – is no longer in terms of food or self-sufficiency, but in terms of leisure and relaxation: the context is no longer one of post-war austerity in which the allotment had substantially to feed the family ('[Gramps] had a third of an acre at home and a ten pole allotment (nine kids to feed!)', as one anonymous contributor to the allotment forum put it).

Contradictions between practices

Continuing the focus on the appearance of the plot, I want finally to use just one example of how practices evolve in contradiction or opposition to other practices: that of gardening on the allotment vs gardening at home. Other examples certainly exist, as, for example, the disparity described in Chapter 5 between the practice of growing organic, favoured by all my participants, compared with the altogether more fragmented approach to buying organic. In both cases – as I will explore further in Chapter 7 – the meaning of the two activities is at odds and this translates to divergent practice.

Allotment gardening is often defined against home gardening. In my data, home gardens were variously described as too small to grow vegetables (William and Owen); dark (Jess & Duncan); 'an outdoor space for people to sit and have dinner' (Sasha), for relaxation (Karen), and more 'ornamental' (Alison and Angela). Both William and Charles commented that, since a garden is attached to a house, one needs to keep up appearances in order to preserve the value of the house. The recycling aesthetic of the allotment prized by Paul does not factor well into house prices:

you make it that easy in the end, y'know, with your decking, your paving and your nice little borders, there's nothing really to do. Only to look at, so it's, it becomes boring, the garden's become boring on the houses.' [...] But you come up here, you can change things round, you can knock an old pallet together, nobody's sort of like looking, looking and thinking 'that looks a bit rough' [...] it's just that relaxed, you can relax in a place like this.

Paul's enthusiasm for the make-do-and-mend approach (a further example of the affinities between allotments and an 'ethics of consumption' paradigm: see the conclusion to Chapter 5) was shared by a number of my respondents, including Alison, Dean, and William, and Alan & Christine described re-using wire from home on their plot.

Sasha also pointed out that the kinds of vegetables grown at the allotment (specifically potatoes) often both require space and are unattractive to look at, which makes them less than ideal for a home garden; Charles agrees: 'Rows of Brussel sprouts are really quite ugly things to look at so it's better if you don't have them in the garden.' However, having, he claims, no eye for colour or design, he finds stressful the effort of trying to make a home garden look pretty, and much prefers the rigid (and ugly) lines of the allotment.

Having both a garden and an allotment therefore forces practitioners to differentiate between how these two complementary practices evolve, on the basis of function or the physical nature of the space: for example, Jean has given up growing vegetables at home now she has the allotment plot and describes how she gardens at the allotment as 'farming'; Jess & Duncan and Adam grow different vegetables at home and at the allotment. (See also Miller, 2013, p. 203.) Owen is the only one in my sample to indicate that gardening at the allotment means that he is unable to spend as much time gardening at home, with the result that, although his plot may be neat, his home garden is not.

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Allotments and place

Having considered above some of the ways in which change and relationships materialise within the plot itself, in this final section of the chapter I want to look more closely at place as an element of practice. As I will argue in my concluding chapter, place – like relationships – is often accorded insufficient importance within the current literature (although see Pink, 2012), and yet it is crucial to the practice of allotment gardening in a number of respects. Alan Warde (2005, p. 146) posed the question (although he didn't answer it) of 'what separates one practice from an adjacent practice? What is it that allows one to say that many performances which are not identical are all part of the same practice?' This is a fascinating question – and not one that I set out to answer in this thesis either, sadly – but in this case part of the answer has to be 'Allotment gardening is recognisably allotment gardening because it happens

at the allotment'; in other words, place can partially delineate the contours of a practice. It also – perhaps especially in the case of allotment gardening – makes practice visible. By looking at a plot you can read many of the choices people have made and the elements that have combined in the performance of the practice – what has been planted, how long the plothead has been on holiday (see Figure 2 showing Adam's plot above), which non-human actors (such as pests) have infiltrated the plot, and so forth.

That place is identified with practice, particularly in the case of allotments, is starkly illustrated when the allotment site itself – or the land use – may be in contention and the practice under threat. As outlined above, the Billesley Lane site has been the subject of a protracted legal battle between Moseley Golf Course (who, unusually in Birmingham where most sites are council owned, own the land occupied by the allotments), Birmingham City Council, and the allotment holders and committee, which saw the site reduced in size by three quarters in 2005 when land was returned to golf club usage. Two of my interviewees discussed the pre-and post-settlement boundaries and the impact on the site; the reduction of plot sizes and redistribution of plots between the existing plotheaders; and the use made of the land reclaimed by the golf course.⁴¹ This is far from being an isolated case of land grab of allotments, the most famous recent incident being the Manor Garden allotments in Hackney Wick which were demolished to make way for the London Olympics.

The physical place is a key component in people's enjoyment of the allotment: it's seen as a space which fosters well-being. Tom talks about feeling as if you were in the countryside, which Karen echoes when she says 'Don't feel in a city – feel in a space elsewhere'. Alison, whose allotment site is on a hill with a view over Birmingham, waxes even more lyrical:

I think it's a wonderful thing to do to be, y'know, connected with the earth and being outside and watching the sun set. I've always loved being outside. Um, and feeling like a speck in the b-, y'know, in the universe. Um, so having an allotment brings you a bit closer to that kind of outs-, being outside, and being natural, y'know.

⁴¹ Initially nothing was done with the reclaimed land, and at the point at which I conducted my interviews in May 2014 the area ran wild and was home to a great deal of wildlife. The golf course has since cleared this area (in September 2015).



Figure 3. An oasis in the city

Frequent reference was made in interviews to both the physical surroundings of the site – perhaps especially because interviews were usually conducted in situ at a participant’s plot – and sometimes to the meanings of these surroundings to the participant. Most often, my interviewees talked about how beautiful their surroundings were, both in terms of physical location (two allotment sites commanded views over Birmingham, one was next to a nature reserve; another adjoined a piece of land which had been allowed to run wild) and as result of practice activity, which left it a green and tended space, an oasis in the city.

The location of an allotment site in terms of soil, aspect, and so forth also naturally affects practice in terms of what can be grown there – for example, Charles compared what could be grown in the sandy soil of Norfolk (where he had previously lived) to what he found easy to grow in Birmingham. More specifically, the position of a plot within the allotment site impacts both what is grown and the appearance of the plot. Sometimes a plothead will move plot. Sadie moved from a plot in a less good position

to one in a better position on the same site: her original plot was under trees which leached both water and sunlight, and close to the hedge at the edge of the allotment site and thus often trampled by foxes and their cubs. Sadie and her partner put their names down for a second plot within the site; when one came up they gave up the first plot. Over time this pattern may well repeat itself – the newcomer takes on the unpromising site and then trades up – leading to a situation where particular plots are untended, or partially so, a visible manifestation of an upwardly mobile trajectory. Similarly, when practitioners are first recruited to the practice they are frequently faced – as Alison was – with the metaphorical and physical abandonment of the prior plotholder’s practice. Sometimes this visible decline in the practice may engulf the whole plot – the chair and secretary of the Brownfield site recount how when they took over the running of it, it was largely overgrown, covered in rubble and the rubbish that people in the neighbouring houses had thrown over, and some plots had been abandoned for 20 years. The visible traces of prior practice may not always be negative – Alan & Christine have a damson tree on their plot left by the previous (late) tenant; and Hawkes and Acott (2013, p. 1125) describe a plotholder who had grown pink shallots for 20 years, from original seed shallots taken from his father’s shed after the latter’s death. In allotment terms, when the practice is ‘successful’ – i.e. popular and performed to ‘acceptable’ standards, its success can be observed visually in the fabric of the site. The Brownfield secretary and chair echo this: ‘we think it’s important when people come in to see that this is a good site, y’know, it’s well organised [...] first impressions and things. Tended lawns’. The reproduction of the practice depends on recruiting new practitioners, and an attractive site is one way to make a favourable impression.

In other words, successful or unsuccessful performances of the practice are visible to the observer in the appearance of the plot, and a spectrum of ‘successful’ practice is easily established because comparison between plots is made easier by their physical proximity. Jean sums this up when she compares her neighbour’s plot unfavourably to her own: her plot normally looks good, but ‘what tends to make it look shabby is plots like next door’. She describes her neighbour as working his plot ‘like a patchwork quilt – little bit here, little bit there’ and because he is not currently working the section next to her plot ‘there is always that bit of negativity on the other side’.

The ever-shifting configurations of plotholders, another important but less materially visible trajectory, continuously (re)creates a sense of place in the negotiated relationships between ‘accidental neighbours’ (Massey, 2005, p. 111) thrown together on an allotment site. Jean talks of being ‘sandwiched’ between unsatisfactory

neighbours, as does Charles: 'one pretending to do something, one disappeared'. The tensions, sympathies and antipathies which blossom as a result condition both how individuals experience the allotment (an uncongenial neighbour can make the experience less welcoming) and, more concretely, the material surroundings of the allotment, as, for instance, when Karen's intervention with her neighbour, who has failed to control weeds which are now invading Karen's plot, led that neighbour to widen the paths separating their plots in order to contain them.

The division of the site into individual plots brings us back to questions of what type of space – 'locale' in Agnew's terms (see Chapter 3) this is perceived to be. One of the questions I asked my interviewees in order to tease out the meanings they attached to their plot was whether they viewed the allotment site as a private or public space. Their responses varied: for Bogdan, his plot was his 'kingdom' and he could do what he liked there. Charles felt that it was a hybrid space: he had put effort into creating and maintaining his particular slice of it and that effort in some sense made it his, provided he continued to pay rent to the council, whom he recognised owned the land. Conversely he felt that the plots either side of him, both of which had been left to run down, did not 'belong' to his neighbours in the same way, since there was nothing of themselves that they had contributed to them. Both Jean and Alison had experienced another plotholder crossing their plot without permission – forbidden by the Council rules, and understood by both women as an invasion of space. Tom answered in terms of the allotment site rather than the plot, indicating its openness to the community in terms of open days and public events; Adam, however, said that he felt that lots of the people on his site saw the allotment as their 'own fiefdom' and talked about the emphasis placed on shutting and locking the gate (see Figures 1 and 4). The shut and locked gates, of course, also serve to separate practitioners from non-practitioners and act as an exclusionary mechanism.



Figure 4. More shut and locked gates

Place and space are not solely defined by boundaries, but by trajectories: those of the ploholders and other human and non-human actors. These trajectories constantly create and recreate the space as they cross the allotment, and intersect (see Chapter 3). The most obvious trajectories criss-crossing the allotment are those of the ploholders themselves, the traces they leave on the site manifest most obviously in the plants they choose to grow and the layout of their plots. However, allotment holders also impact the space of the allotment in terms of how they get to and move across the allotment. Two of the larger allotment sites I visited (Uplands and the Jubilee site) had roads enabling ploholders to drive through the site; at other sites there was only (limited) car-parking space available at the entrance. The formal and informal paths across an allotment both mark existing trajectories and – for example when tarmacked – enable different types of flows around the site.

The trajectories of external human actors (i.e. not ploholders) also intersect with the space of the allotment: those who live in neighbouring houses, whose interactions with the site may be positive or negative (both Sadie and Tom referred to complaints from neighbours following allotment bonfires); visitors who attend the open days run by the allotments to encourage either members or community goodwill; and, finally, the uninvited: vandals and thieves. The latter were a frequent feature of my conversations with allotment holders. Bogdan had experienced a break-in to his shed-cum-summerhouse, while the secretary at Pereira Road had recently been in touch with the

police regarding instances of breaking and entering, and the morning that I interviewed her showed me the traces of where someone had been sleeping rough on the site. The traces left by the rough sleeper did not just mark the site physically; they also impacted the capacity of practitioners to carry on as normal, concerned that intruders were lurking in sheds. Duncan noted that the back gates from some of the houses on a neighbouring road which led directly into the allotment site were a further security concern. As indicated above by Adam, the gates of most allotment sites were thus locked as a security measure; and most sites were not signposted from the outside in a deliberate attempt to deter break-ins. (See Figures 1 and 4.)

It is not only the trajectories of human actors which criss-cross and remake the plot, but also those of non-human actors. (See also Hawkes and Acott, 2013, p. 1129 for a description of the allotment as a 'hybrid' place.) The spreading weeds which feature in virtually every conversation with an allotment holder, along with the animals and pests which occupy or cross an allotment site, remind us that, despite the locked gates, the borders around the 'allotment as place', or around individual plots, are entirely artificial. (Bill talks of untended plots 'blowing seeds and weeds all over the damned place'.) In the course of my interviews I witnessed numerous cats on site (including Bogdan's pet cat), as well as chickens and bees, both of which had been authorised to be kept on the allotment by the council. Bogdan also had frogs in his pond as well as fish. (Until the cat ate them.) Foxes were frequently heard (Tom) and seen (Sadie), and they and the badgers, squirrels, carrot fly, and slugs referred to by other research participants both leave their mark on the site and affect the performance of the practice of allotment gardening. Tom, for instance, no longer grows carrots because of the difficulty of controlling carrot fly, whereas Alan has adjusted his practice – using a taller tub – to combat them.

The allotment as place, then, is far from just a location or boundary. It is both a space which is constructed emotionally and materially by my participants, and is itself constantly recreated by the intersecting trajectories and flows which move through it and by the performance of allotment gardening itself.

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I have sought in this chapter to demonstrate how applying a practice theory perspective to the allotment which focuses on all elements within a practice enables me to bring to light otherwise overlooked components of practice and how they impact

its performance (so, for example, freezers serve to articulate the practices of growing and cooking fresh produce; see Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 113 on connections between practices), and how such elements can contribute to processes of change (for instance, introducing cars to the allotment changed the physical layout of paths and the flows through the site).

However the elements of materials, skills, and meanings cannot alone provide a full account of the practice of allotment gardening unless they are underpinned by understandings of relationships. Acknowledging the place of the individual as the crossing point of relationships as well as practices allows us to bring to light meanings which would not otherwise emerge, or would only partially emerge.

Similarly, a focus on place enables us to observe both the performance of the practice and instances of change. In the same way that the individual is the crossing point of intersecting relationships; the place of the allotment is the locus of intersecting trajectories and flows and is constantly being recreated through practice. I pursue these considerations further in my final chapter.

7. Conclusions

In this thesis I have sought to formulate responses to the following questions: What does the study of allotments add to the conceptual framework of alternative food networks? What, if anything, distinguishes the motivations and understandings that practitioners offer for growing food on an allotment, and how do these motivations and understandings fit with their other food provisioning practices? What can applying a practice theory framework to allotment gardening tell us about social change? Conversely, what can an analysis of allotment gardening tell us about the robustness of practice theory? In this concluding chapter I review the extent to which my research has contributed to a better understanding of these questions.

In order to gather evidence for responses to these questions, I observed and interviewed plottolders on a number of allotment sites across Birmingham, and analysed this data (plus a small amount of data from an online forum) from a practice theory perspective, seeking to identify how the elements within the practice – relationships, meanings, skills, stuff, and place – combined in the performance of the practice and recombined in new configurations in its evolution. In Chapters 5 and 6, I presented the findings from my data concerning the relationship between self-provisioning from an allotment plot and food provisioning more generally; whether allotments could be said to deliver on the social goods claimed for alternative food networks, such as box schemes and farmers' markets; the elements which comprised allotment practice; how recombining those elements could lead to changes in the performance of the practice; and how the performance of the practice was materialised and made visible in the plot itself.

In this final concluding chapter I seek to draw out, first, where allotments fit within alternative food networks and ethical approaches to consumption more broadly and what the study of allotment (and related food) practices tells us about alternative food networks more generally; second, I reflect upon how using a practice theory perspective allows us to identify processes of change within the practice of allotment gardening; and finally I speculate on the robustness and flexibility of practice theory, specifically in relation to its positioning of the individual practitioner.

Allotments: social goods or individual benefits?

In Chapter 2, I argued that there are sufficiently compelling parallels between allotments and AFNs to merit the inclusion of the former within the AFN paradigm.

These parallels included: a shortened (non-existent) distance between producer and consumer; a shared vocabulary to describe fresh produce, with a focus on 'quality' food (here understood as combining notions of taste with local, seasonal, and organic properties); and the simultaneous rise in popularity of both phenomena over the last 20 years.

This view of the allotment and self-provisioning is shared more widely: 'Indeed, scholars and activists have argued that individuals growing their own food can play an essential role in counterbalancing the power of industrialised agro-food businesses as well as advocating environmental sustainability and social justice [...] Narrowing the distance between food consumption and production is also seen as key for a sustainable food system' (Dobernig and Stagl, 2015, p. 453). Other research too supported this inclusion and argued for other shared concerns and social goods (see, for example, Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2012 on reconnecting with the community; Miller, 2015; Buckingham, 2005 on food security). Moreover, as described in Chapter 1, allotments are promoted by policymakers as having a number of benefits (in terms of exercise and healthy food), and as a tool in the fight against obesity. 'By bisecting the triple bottom line of social, economic and environmental concerns in this way, allotments and community garden projects have demonstrated their fit with many components of sustainable development and (Local) Agenda 21' (Hawkes and Acott, 2013, 118).

Others, however, had a different view of allotments. In a persuasively argued contribution, Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012) outlined what they saw as the differences between allotments and community gardens in terms of motivations and social organisation. Their overwhelming conclusion was that allotment gardeners were motivated by individual self-interest, and many of the assertions (p. 340) that they made in support of this conclusion – 'allotments counted for more to individual growers than the value of the food produced'; 'the casual (and optional) conviviality of the allotment site (a community in the loosest sense)'; 'a capacity for collective action and social solidarity [in resistance to site closures], but in defence of individual, not collective growing' – found support in my own data. I talked more about meanings and community in Chapter 5, so will just touch briefly here on their point about 'collective action and social solidarity'. Allotments were initially (and still are) about rights to land use (see Crouch and Ward, 1997, ch. 3). The most overtly political act of resistance in my data was the movement to save Billesley Lane Allotments from the clutches of the golf course – a protest in which the allotment committee sought to mobilise the

surrounding community via petitions, open days, and the like. We might argue, as has been done elsewhere (see BCC, 2010, pp. 8-9), that allotments are seen as a key resource in campaigns to reduce obesity (combining exercise with healthy food) and reduce isolation amongst the elderly. Yet the fact remains that these are individual benefits and it was these that the Billesley Lane campaign sought to preserve: their open days showcased the desirability of allotments, but none of the local community who attended could have secured a plot here – the waiting list for the site runs, by Sasha’s calculations, into decades.

Allotments: an alternative food network?

In an effort to situate allotments within an alternative food network paradigm, I sought to establish whether the same environmental and social concerns that had been shown elsewhere to motivate participants in box schemes and farmers’ markets (Seyfang, 2008; McEachern *et al.*, 2010) also motivated allotment gardeners. Similarly, could the same social goods be claimed for allotments as were claimed for other types of alternative food network? These were framed by Dowler *et al.* (2010) as increased moral, social, and biological reconnection centred on local food (see Chapter 5).

I uncovered little evidence that this was the case. Although individual gardeners expressed concerns which matched those of AFN customers – an ‘ethics of care’ for distant producers expressed via the mechanism of Fairtrade purchases (see Tables 5a and 5b), a preference for local produce and a concern with economic justice for local retailers – these were not values shared systematically by my respondents (see detailed analysis in Chapter 5). The closest parallel was the emphasis which both sets of respondents (the allotment gardeners I interviewed, and box scheme and farmers’ market customers in the studies cited above) placed on fresh, local, organically grown food. As has been argued elsewhere by Goodman (2009), this may be interpreted as the concern of the ‘worried well’ that the food they eat is safe as well as tasty; in other words, this is another potential indication that allotment gardeners are concerned only with individual benefits.

Nor did I find evidence of reconnection or a sense of community centred on the idea of local food, either on site, or within the neighbouring area. First, as highlighted in Chapter 5, allotments were often not even perceived as primarily a food-related practice, making it that much harder to construct a sense of community around food. There were certainly initiatives at both Uplands and Brownfield Road sites to benefit ploholders (by providing health information to ploholders, or individual assistance to

those in need) or to make allotment sites accessible to the public during open days. Uplands also has a history of community-based plots, included one targeted at children (the Youth Organic Environmental initiative) and one gardened by refugees (the Discovery of The Talents initiative). But 'community' initiatives were not common to all sites; neither of the Harborne sites that I visited engaged in any form of outreach. Similarly, positive outcomes of allotment gardening – exercise, stress-relief, healthy fresh vegetables – were experienced individually and were not dependent on the site being perceived as a community (of like-minded individuals), or as set within a wider community. Miller (2013, p. 203) concurs with this view, commenting '[i]t can be suggested then that allotments may be more suited to those who prefer a more individualistic form of leisure compared to the community and social inclusion discussed in literature for AFNs'.

'Ethical consumption' vs 'the ethics of consumption'

That it is individuals who benefit from allotments and not the wider community seems undeniable. However, as I indicated in the conclusion to Chapter 5, to conclude from this that allotments are not therefore an ethical form of consumption (and production) would be too hasty. I contend that the 'ethical' nature of allotments lies not in purchasing ethically (although individual gardeners may do this as well, as is the case of Sadie and Adam in my sample) but in the very fact of growing fresh, organic produce oneself; in there not being a gap between the producer and the consumer. Rather than being a form of 'ethical consumption' (making purchasing decisions to express a political choice) allotment gardening is fundamentally about the 'ethics of consumption' (see Barnett *et al.*, 2005a, pp. 11-24 for more on this); about consuming *differently*: spending less and reducing their consumption of resources. Dobernig and Stagl observe that 'Practices such as seed saving, growing your own vegetables instead of buying at the supermarket, and being an active member of a local food community reflect independence of corporate power and global food supply chains' (2015, p. 455).

My argument, then, is that as a result of three intertwined factors – that allotment gardeners are simultaneously producer and consumer, and, following from this, that allotments are both local and outside the market economy – that allotments are *structurally* an alternative food network, already (in that the practice precedes the practitioner) in opposition to the dominant capitalist foodscape. Allotments are a challenge to Big Food because they represent the material outcome of a different

representation of a foodscape, and a different understanding of the world; an approach which underpins the ethics of consumption more broadly.

But, given my emphasis on individuals as knowledgeable agents, is it possible for my participants to engage in allotment gardening without expressing the meaning of their activity as representing a challenge to capitalist agri-business? I think it is; as we have seen in Chapter 3, Giddens made clear that the actions of knowledgeable agents could have unintended consequences. Perhaps a useful parallel here is cycling. There are many reasons why people cycle – for exercise, for leisure, as a cheaper – and sometimes quicker – alternative to the car or public transport, or because they understand cycling as an environmentally sound behaviour. Cyclists may express some or all of these meanings if asked, but regardless of their motivations cycling as a practice remains a less environmentally damaging method of transport than the alternatives, polluting less and occupying less space (on the road, but also in terms of land use for car parks, etc.). Similarly, allotment gardeners may be motivated by a desire for exercise, or for a leisure activity to fill retirement, but in growing and consuming their own food they also cut down on air miles and the resultant pollution, do not contribute to exploitation of distant others, or to the use of pesticides which are increasingly being shown to be harmful to wildlife. In short, the practice of allotment gardening arguably embodies a more environmentally and socially sustainable way of food provisioning than practices associated with agro-business: long-distance transport of goods entailing high energy use and creating pollution, or squeezing profit margins for producers, for example.

On this basis – allotments as an example of ‘ethics of consumption’ – we can begin to sketch out an opposition between allotments and ‘political consumerism’ type of alternative food networks (box schemes, farmers’ markets, etc.). Existing research suggests (Kirwan, 2006; McEachern *et al.*, 2010; Seyfang, 2008) that ethical consumers enter into these networks motivated by purposeful and structural social and environmental concerns – an ‘ethics of care’ for local economies and distant producers, a desire to reduce the pollution of air miles and the harmful use of pesticides. They seek to achieve this by exercising their political will through their purchasing decisions (Micheletti, 2003) but arguably – and there is a strong body of support within the literature for this view (Clarke *et al.*, 2007; Hinton and Redclift, 2009; Seyfang, 2005; Eden *et al.*, 2008; Guthman, 2003; finally Goodman *et al.*, 2012, who describe a ‘disenchantment with market-based movements’ p. 246) – only succeed in reinforcing the dominant agro-industrial capitalist foodscape, in which a few large players have co-

opted the organic market and imaginaries of the local. In seeking to create an 'alternative' outside the system, they in fact only reinforce the existing system (perhaps another ironic example of Giddens's 'unintended consequences' in action).

The starting point for allotment gardening, on the other hand, is very much within market logic: a financial exchange in which an individual rents a plot of land in order to grow fruit and vegetables for personal use – an exchange which Wiltshire and Geoghegan describe as 'a petty-bourgeois anachronism, a tool (much like Margaret Thatcher's 'right to buy') for giving ordinary people a misleading sense of a stake in a property-owning system which otherwise oppresses them' (2012, p. 341). Allotment gardeners enter the practice for a variety of different reasons, many of which are admittedly self-interested. However the end result of the practice, in food terms, is fresh produce which is both organic and local, and is largely beyond the reach of capitalist exchange.

So what does this mean from a practice theory perspective? It demonstrates that the meanings an allotment gardener brings to the practice may vary between practitioners but, when combined with the other elements in the performance of the practice, the outcome may still be recognisably the same practice-as-entity. Adam is an allotment gardener because growing his own vegetables aligns with his values regarding food and how it is produced; Jess & Duncan are allotment gardeners because they are looking for an activity in their early retirement which will provide them with exercise and a chance to enjoy their surroundings. Yet they both employ substantially the same techniques to produce similar beans. And in growing these beans, whether that was the intention or not, they avoid an instance of interaction (or maybe collusion?) with Big Food.

In the next section I consider further how different configurations of elements within practice-as-performance shape practice-as-entity, and reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of practice theory for accounting for allotment practice, paying particular attention to the role of the individual within practice.

Practices

In this section I look at how applying a practice theory framework to allotments has enabled me to identify processes of change – or elements subject to change – in the performance of allotment gardening, and from there to identify shifts within the practice-as-entity. I look first at changing configurations of elements within practices and then at relationships between food-provisioning practices. I then argue that the

analytical insights which practice theory affords are, however, incomplete without a reconsideration of the position of the individual within practices. Finally I review the contribution that my research has made to our understandings of the parameters of alternative food networks, and to the strengths and weaknesses of practice theory as an analytical framework, and a perspective from which to identify processes of social change more broadly.

Accounting for change using practice theory

Once again, in what follows I am using the slimline version of practice theory outlined in Shove *et al.* (2012, pp. 119-20) to illustrate how the elements within the performance of allotment gardening are constantly combining and recombining to constitute the ever-evolving practice-as-entity. One aspect of this slimline version is the understanding that 'practices change when new elements are introduced or when existing elements are combined in new ways' (p. 120).

In Chapter 6, I presented the elements – meanings, competences, and materials – that emerged from my data as comprising allotment gardening. What I intend to do here is look at some specific examples of the ways in which practice-as-entities change: first via the reconfigurations of these elements; and then second via the overlap – or other connections – with other practices.

Reconfigurations of elements of practice

As we have seen, the elements which comprise the practice of allotment gardening are varied. In my data, this was particularly true of the meanings and motivations which people ascribed to it. A non-exhaustive list would include exercise and physical health; mental wellbeing; local politics (reflecting concerns with land grab and disadvantaged communities); socialising; relationships; managerial activity (on committees); a hub for transmitting community and history; an oasis of tranquillity and beauty; fresh produce; and nostalgia for a bygone age. (These multiple meanings are another reason why it is so difficult to answer Warde's question of how we recognise a practice as being itself and not another (2005, p. 146), and to draw boundaries around a practice.) There were therefore a variety of instances of new configurations of elements within my data, any of which I might be able to point to as a moment within a process of change in the practice. Thus, in no particular order, we might identify a new practitioner (who brings new meanings); new material elements (a new crop); a change in meanings (allotments are no longer about subsistence but leisure); an

evolving practice career (a practitioner assumes a committee role); a change in neighbouring practices (Owen changes the type of beans he grows because the new variety freezes better); or changed resources (people take voluntary redundancy and have more time to devote to their plot).

In isolation, events or moments such as these are not visible or immediately identifiable as representing change. I discuss this idea of visible change – in practice-as-entity rather than practice-as-performance – in greater detail below. First, I look at three examples of identifiable and distinct changes in the practice of allotment gardening: the shift to the allotment as leisure phenomenon, the changing use of pesticide, and evolving perceptions of what ‘organic’ means.

In allotment terms, perceptible changes in practice relate not so much to tools or techniques for growing, which if anything remain largely unchanged – the spades, flasks of tea, wigwams, sheds, compost, and so forth would all be as familiar to a 1950s allotment gardener as they are to the current cohort – as to the meanings of allotment gardening. One of the most significant is the shift from the between-the-wars understanding of the allotment as an economic tool in food provisioning, with the goal being self-sufficiency, to understanding allotment gardening as fundamentally a leisure activity. As Wiltshire and Geoghegan (2012, p. 339) point out, after the war, and particularly from the 1950s, food was more readily available and cheaper, such that people no longer needed their plots for subsistence. Moreover, there were alternative leisure opportunities, and allotment gardening as a practice fell into a decline (see Chapter 1, see also Crouch and Ward, 1997, pp. 77-8). In material terms, since the 1990s (with the resurgence in popularity of allotments, and a new and demographically more diverse set of practitioners) this has translated into the gradual disappearance of the ‘mathematical plots’, consisting of straight rows of crops to maximise space and productivity. Many allotment plots on the sites I visited displayed a more informal appearance, and comprised a mix of produce and flowers, sometimes leaning more towards the latter. (See Figure 5, below.)



Figure 5. Flowers on the plot

What is notable about this change is the length of time it has taken for it to become materially visible. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this, but, arguably, the dominance of the practice by those at the height of their practice career in the 1950s would have influenced the approach adopted by those who came after, and the 'productive' plot was certainly still the preponderant model when Tom, the longest-serving practitioner in my sample, took on his plot in 1972.⁴²

A side note – my interviewees recognised a clear difference between 'informal' and 'overgrown': the meaning of weeds hasn't changed. Although, as we shall see in my next example of identifiable changes in allotment practice, this proves not to be entirely true either. This next example concerns the use of pesticides on the plot, once a common practice to eradicate pests and weeds. As I have already indicated, my interviewees only used pesticides rarely, if at all, and sparingly. This is not because they are forbidden by the Council rules, which only specify that they should 'comply with current legislation regarding their use and storage' (§10.9; see Appendix 3). However, the prevalent discourse is that they are harmful to wildlife – bees and insects

⁴² The allotments officer at Birmingham City Council stated when I interviewed him that what he termed the 'farm' style of allotment tended to make a reappearance when there was an influx of recent immigrants onto particular allotment sites, suggesting that allotments might retain their subsistence meaning for certain groups. Dean also pointed to the plots belonging to (unauthorised but ignored) 'commercial growers' on his site, which were clearly distinguished by their more 'productivist' layout.

in particular (Harvey, 2016) – and their use is frowned upon by most of my respondents. Concomitantly, there is an emphasis from my interviewees on attracting wildlife – birds, bees, and insects in particular – to the allotments, even from those like Tom who have used pesticides in the past. People therefore deliberately leave parts of their plot wilder; Sadie, for instance, allows a patch of nettles to grow, and flowers which might once have been considered weeds (bluebells and foxgloves on Jess & Duncan’s plot) are now positively encouraged to spread.

In the final example from my data, I look at how the meaning attached to ‘organic’ changed for Sasha and consequently inflected her ethical consumption practices. Sasha’s career with organic vegetable box schemes is illuminating when viewed from this perspective. She abandoned her first box scheme because she moved to Birmingham and did not resume the practice in her new home. Changes in circumstance can precipitate not just recruitment to a practice but abandonment of a previous practice, as the availability of opportunities, time, or resources shifts; or simply the meaning of a particular practice, as in this case, was no longer sufficiently resonant to warrant adopting it again. She then did not resume a similar box scheme until the birth of her first child, by which point the meaning she attributed to organic vegetables had evolved from ideas of better taste, and the more ‘authentic’ qualities associated with a lack of uniformity of shape and texture, to an understanding centred on her perception of the body’s ability to deal with pesticides: namely that an adult had no need to buy organic produce because their bodies were sufficiently robust to deal with pesticides as long as produce was washed; babies’ bodies, however, were not. Since her first child had skin allergies she sought to eliminate chemicals from his environment; and subsequently maintained a box scheme for the duration of both her children’s infancy. Her children are now teenagers, and she no longer routinely buys organic vegetables, on the basis that to do so would be too expensive; but when she does purchase organic she once again does so on the basis of perceived taste – ‘organic cucumbers taste nicer than non-organic cucumbers’ – but she buys them from the supermarket. Both meanings and practices are therefore informed by resources and relationships, among other factors.

In the examples above, then, it is predominantly the meanings that the practitioner associates with the practice which have undergone distinct changes, and these new meanings then combine with other elements to produce, over time and repeated performance, an analytically identifiable change. In other practices in which technology, for example, plays a larger role (see Gram-Hanssen, 2010, for an account of

how the 'standby' function in modern electrical appliances was integrated into daily household routines of consumption behaviour, for example), it may be other elements which 'initiate' a change in practice (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 12, suggest that there are 'no technical innovations without innovations in practice'). The examples above thus usefully illustrate that it is in the combination and configuration of elements that both practices-as-entities and thereby social change are instantiated.

Overlapping and competing practices

Hargreaves (2011, p. 95) talks of 'the shortcomings of analyses that focus only on single practices and neglect the connections, alliances and conflicts between practices'. Elements may belong to several practices, as we have seen, for example in the meanings attached to the quality 'organic' when gardening (where it often equates to taste), when shopping (where it's perceived as expensive), and when feeding small children (when it's seen as healthful, or unsullied). What's worth noting is that these different meanings can be held simultaneously by the same practitioner; or the meaning may jump from one practice to another as, for instance, if a practitioner decides to grow organic vegetables rather than buy them because one of the meanings above has become dominant. In the example above, although Sasha did not drop the box scheme and then immediately take up an allotment plot, it might be argued that the meanings she associated with fresh produce translated first into a practice of consumption (the box scheme) and second to a practice of production (the allotment).

It is also instructive to look at how material elements connect practices. In my data, the freezer represented an item of equipment common to all my research participants, some of whom owned more than one freezer. Freezers were used most obviously to store excess fresh produce and manage gluts, but also to avoid food waste (by freezing leftovers); to enable non-seasonal eating; as an aid to meal-planning; to save money on food shopping; and as a way of connecting with distant family (by freezing produce so that the latter could taste it post-harvest). The freezer also in turn influenced the performance of the practice – as described elsewhere, Owen changed the variety of runner bean that he grew for one which would freeze better. My data supports Hand and Shove's (2007) conclusions that freezers have become embedded in a number of practices because they enable a variety of approaches to food storage, preparation, and consumption. Within allotment practice it plays a key role as a 'downstream' strategy for managing output, but it also serves to articulate allotment gardening with the related practice of cooking. Freezers thus have a 'coordinative role' (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 85). (It may also play a synthesising role in relation to the meanings of food: once

frozen, there is no distinction between fresh produce grown oneself, and convenience food purchased at the supermarket: both are now potential ingredients in a meal.)

Practices fit together not just in terms of sharing elements, but in terms of the relationships – of time, space, and causality, for example – between them.

Appreciating the relations between practices – not just interdependent but also competitive relations – is in fact essential to understanding dynamics within practices. Processes of change, whether to the elements of a practice or to the patterns of recruitment and defection of practitioners to it, are rarely entirely endogenous to the practice concerned. Rather they arise because of the shifting relative location of a practice within broader systems of practice (Watson, 2012, p. 491).

I have already indicated above how allotments lost practitioners after the war because the meaning of subsistence became redundant, but also because there were other leisure opportunities available. Sometimes the relationships are less straightforward, however, and practices make unexpected bedfellows. I noted in my data analysis the increased incidence of people driving to the allotment despite living locally, and how this had affected the physical layout of allotment sites, which now incorporated tarmac paths. However, rather than people driving to the allotment just because cars are now a more common form of transport than they were post-war and the infrastructure has developed accordingly, they also drive because they need to transport (and store) tools that they cannot keep at the allotment because of the risk of theft. With a rise in the popularity of the practice of allotment gardening has come a rise in the frequency with which others break into allotments.

Practices also compete for resources. Looking at my interviewees' food shopping practices is instructive in this respect, especially because a number of them were recently retired and the changing resource context – more time (though sometimes less money) – had resulted in a clear change in routine. Before retirement, and especially when children still lived at home, food shopping was often fitted in on the way back from work – Charles talks about 'those ghastly huge shops you do when you've got kids'. Sasha is still in this position and does one big shop a week at the supermarket, plus top-ups. In comparison, the early retirees shop at numerous outlets during multiple weekly shopping trips; they also tend to shop at local supermarkets which they can walk to, rather than at the hypermarkets situated off major roads which they used to visit by car in the past. Having more time available has thus radically transformed the practice of shopping, and sometimes neighbouring food practices. This is Angela:

I used to waste a lot 'cause [...] I used to um buy once a week on a Wednesday night [and] I used to often forget what I'd got in my bloody salad drawer [laughs]and the

number, the number of rotting cucumber that was heaved into my compost bin, and celery, was quite interesting. So we don't get that anymore. [...] Er because I just look. Before, I was so blooming busy it was all 'crikey, so-and-so-so-and-so, we're probably running out of, so I'll get it'. Don't do that now.

Finally, practices also compete for practitioners. "To the extent that time spent in the garden is not time spent in the living room, television viewing really did vie with gardening for cohorts of committed carriers' (Shove *et al.*, 2012, p. 124). This is Charles's experience: he has a boat in Cornwall, but summer is both sailing season and peak harvest time on the allotment, so either he sacrifices one activity, or he spends the summer hurtling between Birmingham and Cornwall – what Giddens refers to as "packing" difficulties in time-space' (Giddens, 1984, p. 174).

In focusing on the configurations of elements within practices, and on the relationships between practices, then, a practice theory perspective thus has the capacity to deconstruct activities and illuminate connections and dependencies between activities such that new dynamics can be identified. In this respect, contemporary practice theory is particularly suited to analysing change in the fabric of everyday activities; activities, like allotment gardening, in which change may be difficult to measure using conventional indicators such as the market. I argue, however, that in all of the above 'connections, alliances and conflicts between practices' it is the role of the practitioner – the crossing-point of practices and the coordinator of all elements in the performance of a practice – which is neglected, and that contemporary practice theory accounts suffer analytically as a result. I expand upon this in the next section, again using examples from my data to illustrate my argument.

Strengths and weaknesses of contemporary practice theory as an analytical framework

In Chapter 3, under **Developments and future directions in practice theory**, I discussed in more detail the analytical challenges facing contemporary practice theory, including specifically how to account for some of the more structural or intangible elements which appear to be outside its purview – time, power, and government, for example. Here I want to address what I felt to be the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary practice theory as an analytical framework for my own research. I start by looking at questions of structure and agency before turning to my central concern: the role of the individual practitioner.

Structure and agency

The challenge facing contemporary practice theory is that sidelining the individual allows it to sidestep questions of agency (or power). Philips has commented that: 'Recent work suggests that practice theory's preoccupation with practice neglects even human agents and, therefore, has lost sight of involved power dynamics [...] in some approaches to understanding practice, dynamic relations and vitalities go unnoticed' (2014, p. 151). As I described in more detail in Chapter 3 (under **Developments and future directions in practice theory**), there is a move to address how practice theory accounts for what we might term 'structural' elements of society – such as government – and to decide whether these can be integrated into a practice theory framework, or whether they must be seen as external to practice.

A comparatively minor example from my own research serves to illustrate this difficulty. Whilst I was conducting my fieldwork, the management of allotment sites in Birmingham was in the process of being transferred from the Council to the allotment site committees (see Appendix 1, see also Wiltshire and Geoghegan, 2012, p. 346). In the immediate timeframe of my research, these debates and changes only impacted the committee members I talked to; however, how would a change of governance manifest itself in individual practice? How, for that matter, should or could I incorporate the existing allotment rules (Appendix 3) within my account of allotment practice? These constituted what Giddens would classify as 'system' – here, effectively, laws. In the event, there were clearly site-specific interpretations of some of these rules (see my earlier comments regarding the informal passing on of plots in apparent contravention of the rules regarding waiting-lists), which transformed some of these 'laws' into what Giddens calls instead 'rules', or virtual (cultural) schema which are understood intuitively. But there seemed no obvious way to integrate them into the slimline version of practice theory I was using.

The position of the individual

First, we need to understand why practice theory shifts the analytical focus from the individual to the practice, and what the advantages of doing this are. These are largely set out in Shove's 2010 paper 'Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change'. In this, her contention is that 'issues of climate change have been framed in terms of an already well-established language of individual behaviour and personal responsibility' (p. 1274) and that policymakers therefore seek to bring about changes in those individual environmental behaviours by applying the ABC framework

(Attitudes, Behaviour, Choice); namely that attitudes and values drive the behaviours that individuals choose to adopt. Everything centres on the individual's capacity to choose to behave differently (or 'act otherwise', in Giddens's terms); thus 'given better information or more appropriate incentives damaging individuals could choose to act more responsibly and could choose to adopt "pro-environmental behaviours"' (p. 1275). Shove points to Blake's 'value-action' gap – which expresses the difference between people's stated environmental values and their everyday actions – as one flaw within the ABC model, and draws attention to other factors, or 'sociotechnical configurations' (p. 1278), which affect the potential for changes in environmental behaviour in everyday life. Amongst these she includes elements such as technology, infrastructure, cultural meanings, systems of provision, and routines. In order to better account for these elements, she concludes, 'one key condition is to shift the focus away from individual choice and to be explicit about the extent to which state and other actors configure the fabric and the texture of daily life' (p. 1281).

There is clear merit to this position. With a focus on different elements, practice theory facilitates a level of granularity in analysis which makes it well suited to deconstructing the performance of everyday activities, thereby pointing up the fallacies of a rational choice approach. My own research provides ample evidence of this, not just in my data (as described above and in previous chapters), but also in my initial hypotheses, in which I worked back from C/B to assume A; in other words that my respondents would grow organic food because what mattered to them were social values connected with concerns about the dominant food provisioning landscape.

I am thus in agreement with Watson when he states (2012, p. 488) that '[f]or theories of practice, what people do is never reducible to attitudes or choices, or indeed to anything simply individual. Rather, doing something is always a performance of a practice.' But there is a difference between accepting that the individual is part of a performance which incorporates other elements – of meanings, materials, and competences – and glossing over the central role – or agency – of the individual in integrating those elements within that performance. Doing so, as I suggested in Chapter 3, has significant consequences for the capacity of contemporary practice theory to account for important aspects of the practices it seeks to describe, as I elaborate below.

The construction of the individual within contemporary practice theory is ambiguous and inconsistent. This is most clearly illustrated in the often elliptical language used in practice theory writing, such as in the otherwise excellent *Dynamics of Social Practice* (Shove *et al.*, 2012). Chapter 4 on recruitment, for example, begins (unusually) with a

statement of the significance of the individual in recruiting others to a practice through ‘communities’, ‘networks’ and ‘interactions’ (p. 66), but then continues in the following terms: ‘This suggests that new and emerging practices exploit connections forged and reproduced by practices that co-exist or that went before’ (p. 67). In Chapter 3, I reported Trentmann’s comments that the verbs in practice theory are ‘troubling’ because they collocate with jarring subjects – ‘practices recruit’, etc. He might also have noted the preponderance of the passive voice in practice theory writing, which I would argue quite often erases the possibility of individual agency within practice. This is from p. 128 of *Dynamics of Social Practice* – ‘social practices consist of elements that are integrated when practices are enacted, and [...] practices emerge, persist, and disappear as connections between defining elements are made and broken’; a passive voice which can only resolve its unanswered questions by reintroducing the practitioner as subject. To accept the individual as subject of the practice-as-performance does not mean accepting that a practice-as-entity is ‘reducible to attitudes or choices’; but not to accept it means that what we can learn about practices from meanings and relationships – and even attitudes and choices – is often ignored.

I have argue then that the individual is one element among others in practice, but remains the decisive element, without which all other elements are meaningless or redundant. None of the accounts of change described above are possible without practitioners to integrate the elements (of which only material elements are external; meanings and competences being intrinsic to the practitioner) within a practice, or to reconfigure those elements in new ways. Specifically in relation to the evolution of allotment gardening as practice-as-entity, practitioner meanings were the elements which changed and triggered reconfiguration of the other elements in the practice; impossible if the practitioner is not the determining element. Nor can practices connect or influence one another in the absence of the individual as the ‘crossing-point of practices’. In my analysis, therefore, I have sought to embrace the full potential of what the individual, as crossing-point, can contribute analytically to the study of change.

Relationships and interactions

First, it allows us to account for the import of relationships within practice. As I set out in my account of allotment gardening, the individual lies not just at the intersection of practices, but is also the hub of a network of social relationships. Not only is no account of recruitment to a practice possible without recognising the importance of these

relationships (as Shove *et al.*, 2012, acknowledge on pp. 66-9), but relationships influence much of the subsequent performance of practice. (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 15 confirms the importance of relationships in her article on people's decisions to migrate to Spain from the UK.) Moreover, it is not sufficient simply to identify 'other people' as an element within the practice, as this ignores the subtleties of the relationship with the practitioner and how this impacts the latter's performance of the practice. We cannot fully comprehend how Jess & Duncan integrate the elements of their performance of allotment gardening unless we understand that relationships with family underpin it: from the design of their plot with bushes and beans for their grandchildren to hide behind; via their use of the freezer to store produce not for their own use but so their children can taste what they have grown; to their 'packaging' of the practice as a perennial topic of conversation in phone calls. Relationships and interactions with others are not just one-way – practices may also strengthen relationships, just as relationships strengthen practices: see Stan's comments in the previous chapter about allotment gardening being a chance for the family to spend time together.

The individual and social change

Throughout this thesis, I have argued for a more nuanced account of the individual as determining element within the performance of practice and 'unique crossing point' of practices, on the basis that analysis of practice and change is impoverished if this is not the case. However there are also analytical pitfalls in focusing too closely on the individual. I set out in the introduction to this thesis that I wanted to explore how individuals contributed to processes of social change, and how we could account for or recognise this. In this, my starting point was the same as Sewell's: 'if enough people, or even a few people who are powerful enough, act in innovative ways, their action may have the consequence of transforming the very structures that gave them the capacity to act' (Sewell, 1992, p. 4); or Watson's: 'My initial contention in respect of this question is that systemic transitions only happen if enough people do enough things differently enough. On one hand this contention is very obvious. But on the other hand, it sounds fantastically reductionist; individualistic and sociologically naïve' (Watson, 2012, p. 488).

I would contend, naturally, that my research is not guilty of sociological naïveté, and that the insights generated through a micro-focused agent-centred approach are valuable precisely in their capacity to uncover the previously underexplored aspects of

practice, such as relationship and place. However, the stumbling-block in my approach lies in then attempting to translate this analysis to the level of social change: a focus on the individual trees is incommensurate with revealing the changes in the social forest. This is the concern underlying my emphasis on 'visible' social change above. A micro-focus on individual performance and meanings can deliver close-textured analysis of the elements within a practice – the building blocks of practice and social change – but struggles to show change itself, even if it can pinpoint individual performances which reconfigure elements of practice. Showing change demands greater analytical distance, meaning that repeated reconfigured performances of the practice are required before change is visible; before the practice-as-entity can be said to have changed. One 'informal' plot amongst a sea of 'mathematical plots' is merely, analytically, an unacceptable performance of the practice.

Watson goes on to say: 'Enough people doing enough things differently enough for transition to happen is not, then, a matter of atomised individuals choosing to do differently. Nor is it accounted for by systemic shifts which occur independently from changes in what people do. Any sociotechnical transition has to be a transition in practices' (2012, p. 489), and I would agree with this position, if by this he means that change is only ever *visible* in instantiated practices-as-entities. I argue that the agency for change to occur happens – invisibly – at the level of individual performances which integrate elements in new configurations. This interpretation is not to reduce the performance to individual attitudes and choices – it recognises both that the individual is one element amongst others in the performance (albeit the determining one), and also the co-constitutive nature of elements within the performance. It is more to return to the Giddensian view that 'human social activities [...] are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors'; it is to foreground discursive consciousness rather than attitudes and choices. In other words, I am arguing that there is scope for a more nuanced debate about the position of the individual in contemporary practice: the choice is not just between an ABC view of agency or the elision of agency, and the sidelining of the practitioner.

This is the problem common to all versions of practice theory: identifying the point at which social change occurs. When we seek to pinpoint social change we are forced to look not at the microlevel of an infinite number of everyday choices, performances, and interactions but at the collective level of 'social structure' – and here I am using the term to encompass what Giddens would call 'systematic' properties of society. We

measure social change in laws, policy, or the market, for example, and the point at which the balance tips – when individual actions aggregate to become collective actions and these cumulative performances change both practices and, thereby, society – can never be precisely identified. However, and this is problematic for both structuration theory and contemporary practice theory, when we assume a level of tacit consciousness – an awareness of the often unspoken rules which allow us to ‘go on’ in everyday life – then we are necessarily accepting that individual agents’ understanding of the organisation of experience, although unquantifiable, is more finely attuned to the point at which the balance tips and social change occurs; to the point at which one reproduces or subverts structure. This is the inescapable tension at the heart of attempts to locate social change in the everyday; a tension which one can only seek to account for, not overcome.

Contributions of this thesis

In summary, then, I outline briefly the aims and findings of this thesis, and the specific contributions it has made to understandings of both alternative food networks and contemporary practice theory.

This thesis asked what the practice of allotment gardening could tell us about social change. Through interviews and participant observation, it explored allotment gardening as a self-provisioning practice, and interrogated how it fitted with other food provisioning practices. I aimed to situate allotment gardening – in which the individual is both producer *and* consumer – within an alternative food network paradigm, and tease out whether this distinction made a difference to how individuals approached the ethics of food provisioning. I also sought to test the robustness of practice theory as a framework for analysing empirical data and translating this into findings which identified processes of social change. Underpinning this was a concern to identify the how the individual might effect social change through everyday practice.

My findings demonstrated that allotment gardeners did not systematically share the motivations of ethical consumers who purchased fresh produce from box schemes, nor did the allotment constitute a community connected through food. Moreover, they did not necessarily view the practice of allotment gardening as a food-related practice. However, I argue that rather than being ethical consumers (expressing political choices through purchasing), allotment gardeners are instead engaged in the ethics of consumption (consuming *differently*: spending less, and reducing their consumption of resources). Whereas ethical consumers sought an alternative to capitalist and

industrialist food production, an alternative which was subsequently co-opted by the very system they sought to challenge, allotment gardeners were motivated by self-interested concern, but ultimately occupied an oppositional space to dominant food supply chains.

Through its testing of the limits of contemporary practice theory, my thesis has made two substantial and transferable contributions to that theory. First, in drawing on elements of structuration theory, specifically the ideas of knowledgeable agents and discursive consciousness, I have developed a theoretical framework which better accounts for the determining role which the practitioner – the crossing-point of both practices and networks of relationships – plays in integrating all elements of practice: the meanings, competences, and equipment of contemporary practice theory. This more practitioner-focused account – one which emphasises individual understandings and performances of practices – marks an advance in the capacity of contemporary practice theory to account for agency within the performance of practice and can readily be translated to studies of practice in other domains.

Second, I have demonstrated the centrality of the multi-layered element of place within allotment practice. This is an element which appears under-theorised in general accounts of practice theory, with the notable exception of Sarah Pink's work (Pink, 2012). Drawing upon this work by Pink, and on social geographers such as Massey and Cresswell, my analysis has represented place as simultaneously the nexus of practice element trajectories; a crucial material element within the practice itself; a boundary delimiting the practice; and an inclusionary/exclusionary mechanism. Perhaps most significantly in light of my discussion of the 'visibility' of change above, place also frequently constituted the material canvas upon which not just individual decisions but social change could be observed. It may be that the centrality of place to my research was a function of the nature of allotments themselves – which are intimately embedded within, and in some respects indistinguishable from – the practice of allotment gardening itself. However, there are clear analogies with other practices (housebuilding, for example) in which material elements are both input and outcome of the practice, as well as being in some senses the measure of the health of that practice, and, again, further exploration of this aspect of practice is to be encouraged.

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Appendix 1. Consultation on future management of allotments in Birmingham (2013)



CONSULTATION ON FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF ALLOTMENTS

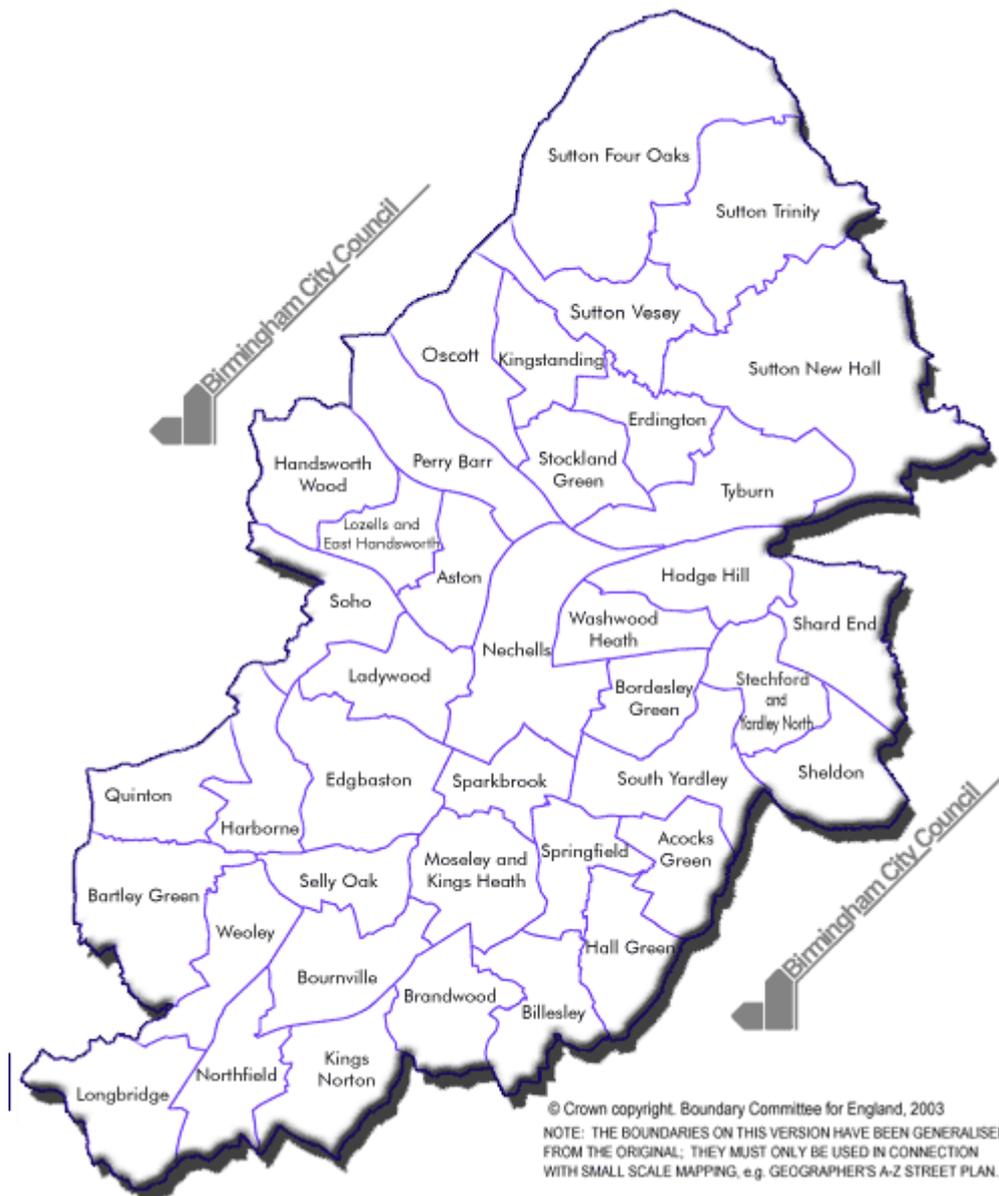
Birmingham City Council is reviewing the management function of the Allotment Service in consultation with the Birmingham and District Allotments Council, Associations and tenants.

Given the severe budgetary pressures that we all face, the Council needs to review how the service will be managed in the future.

Initial discussions with the BDAC have given rise to a number of options which now need to be discussed wider. These include:

- Devolution of budgets to individual sites to enable the Associations to directly manage their budgets, this will include repairs and maintenance, water, cesspit and portaloos servicing. Payments will be made twice per annum, on 1 April and 1 October direct to the Associations for all devolved budgets.
- The Associations will be responsible for applying the Allotment Rules, letting of plots, collection of rent, monitoring of Grounds Maintenance, plot cultivation, and initial resolution of complaints and disputes.
- Issue of Letters of Concern and Letters of Intent will be carried out by Associations. Where Notices of Re-Entry are recommended by the Association, this will be ratified by the BDAC before the final Notice of Re-Entry is issued by the Council, acting as the Landlord.
- Associations will still be required to notify the Council, as the Landlord, of structural or other major changes and funding applications prior to anything being submitted. Events notifications will also still need to be submitted to the Council a minimum of 4 weeks before for the event for approval.
- The BDAC will directly manage the current 'Departmental' sites, until such time as they set up their own Associations. Once Associations have been formed on these sites, they will perform all management functions as outlined above.
- The BDAC will operate in an advisory capacity to help Associations where requested. Should disputes arise between tenants and the Associations, the BDAC will act as the arbiter, and ensure consistency in the application of the Allotment Rules across individual and between different sites.
- The Council will act as Landlord and retain the final power of eviction. All rents collected and tenancy records will continue to be maintained and managed by the Council.
- The Council will continue to provide training in rent collection and completion of Tenancy Agreements.

Appendix 2. Ward boundaries in Birmingham



Appendix 3. Birmingham City Council allotment rules

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL ALLOTMENT RULES

Definition of Terms

“The Council” means Birmingham City Council and includes any committee of the Council or any Officer appointed by the Council under the Allotments Acts 1908 – 1950.

“Allotment Officer” means the duly authorised employee of the Council whose role is to manage the allotment sites.

“Rules” means these rules.

“Allotment Garden” or “Plot” means the area of land used primarily for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables which is let to the tenant.

“Tenant” means a person who holds a tenancy of an Allotment Garden.

“Tenancy” means the letting of an Allotment Garden to a Tenant.

“Site” means the entire area of land owned or leased by the Council comprising allotment gardens, roadways and buildings.

“Association” means an Allotments Association (Society or other such group) which manages a Site on behalf of the Council.

“Tenancy Agreement” means the document in the form approved by the Council, confirming the letting of an Allotment Garden to a Tenant.

“Rent” means the annual rent payable for the Tenancy of an Allotment Garden and all amenities provided with it.

1. Application

- 1.1 These rules are made under Section 28 of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 and apply to all Allotment Gardens including any let before these rules came into force. They come into force on the date they are sealed.

2. Tenancies and Vacant Allotments

- 2.1 All Tenants must complete and sign a Tenancy Agreement. Each Plot will be in the name of one Tenant. Groups or organisations must submit a pre-tenancy application for approval by the Council; such Tenancies will be in the name of one person known as the principal Tenant.
- 2.2 Joint or shared Tenancies are not permitted.
- 2.3 Vacant Allotment Gardens on a Site must be offered by the Council or the Association to applicants on the waiting list for that Site kept by the Council or Association except where the Plot falls vacant because of the Tenant's death where they must be offered to any member of the Tenant's immediate family who wishes to take over the Allotment Garden (and if more than one, the one the Council selects).

3. Assignment

- 3.1 The Tenancy of an Allotment Garden is personal to the Tenant. Tenants may not assign, underlet or part with possession of all or part of their Allotment Gardens (including the chalet or tool locker/or greenhouse).

4. Rent

- 4.1 Rent is due at the commencement of the Tenancy and annually on 1 October thereafter (unless otherwise stated in the Tenancy Agreement). The Council may offer or require discounts to be made on whatever basis the Council decides.
- 4.2 Rent may be increased at any time provided the Council takes reasonable steps to give all Tenants 12

months notice. An accidental failure to

give notice to an individual Tenant will not invalidate that Tenant's Rent increase.

4.3 The Council may increase the Rent without notice where additional amenities are provided on a Site.

5. Cultivation and Use of Allotment Gardens

- 5.1 Tenants must use Allotment Gardens for their own personal use and must not carry out any business or sell produce from Allotment Gardens.
- 5.2 Allotment Gardens must be kept clean, free from weeds, well manured and maintained in a good state of cultivation and fertility.
- 5.3 Where a Tenant fails to maintain a good standard of cultivation, the City Council or Association will serve a "Letter of Concern" giving a specific period for improvement. Failure to improve the Plot may lead to termination of the Tenancy.
- 5.4 If the Plot is left in a poor state of cultivation or requires the removal of materials, property or rubbish, then the vacating Tenant may be required to re-imburse the City Council for reasonable costs.
- 5.5 Allotment Gardens must not be used to grow any crops for which compensation may be payable at the end of the Tenancy.
- 5.6 Tenants must not cut or prune any trees adjoining the Allotment Garden. This does not affect the routine pruning of the Tenant's own trees and hedges on the Allotment Garden.
- 5.7 Tenants must also observe any other rules or regulations which the Council makes at any time in the future.
- 5.8 Tenants must comply with all directions given by an Officer of the Council or any directions properly given by or on behalf of an Association.
- 5.9 Tenants must leave a minimum gap of 2' (0.6m) between the rear of their Plot and any adjoining boundary fence to allow access for maintenance.
- 5.10 From 1 July 2007 smoking is prohibited in any communal building on the Site.
- 5.11 The sale of alcohol is not permitted in any Council building unless it is licensed for such use.
- 5.12 Tenants are not to cause damage to other Tenants' property or crops, nor to the infrastructure of the site e.g. roadways, paths, fences, gates etc.
- 5.13 The Tenant must not deposit any matter in the hedges, ditches or brookcourses situated within the Site. The Tenant is expected to compost all waste plant material except for pernicious weeds (e.g. Japanese Knotweed, plants infected with fungal disease such as Club Root, Downey Mildew or White Rot) which should be burnt, when dry, or taken to an approved disposal facility.

6. Hoses, Bonfires and Other Restrictions

- 6.1 Hoses or sprinklers are not allowed except where required to fill water containers. Hosepipes or siphoning devices are not to be used to remove water from any water trough. Tenants must take every precaution to prevent contamination of water supplies. Water may only be extracted from a water course with the approval of the Council and subject to the appropriate licence.
- 6.2 Bonfires are only permitted during the months of March and November for the burning of diseased plant material. Fires should not be allowed to cause a nuisance to neighbouring residents and under no circumstances should be left unattended. Where local circumstances necessitate, bonfires may not be permitted at any time.
- 6.3 Tenants must not bring or use corrugated or sheeted iron (or similar metal objects) or barbed wire on the Allotment Garden.
- 6.4 Carpet and underlay may not be used on the Site.
- 6.5 Rubbish refuse or decaying matter (except for a reasonable amount of manure or compost required for cultivation) must not be deposited on the Allotment Garden by the Tenant or by anyone else with the Tenant's permission.
- 6.6 Tenants must not remove any mineral, gravel, sand, earth or clay from the Site unless they have written permission to do so from the Council.
- 6.7 Tenants must not cause or allow any nuisance or annoyance to the Tenant of any other Allotment Garden and must comply with Rules 15.1 – 15.3
- 6.8 The Allotment Garden may not be used for any illegal or immoral purpose and the Tenants must observe all relevant legislation or Codes of Practice relating to activities they carry out on the Allotment Garden.
- 6.9 Where the Council's title to a Site requires certain conditions to be observed, all Tenants on that Site must observe those conditions.
- 6.10 Any manure on the Site that has not been dug into or spread on to the Allotment Garden must be covered.
- 6.11 The Tenant shall not park a vehicle anywhere on the Site other than within defined parking areas. No vehicle, trailer, caravan or similar equipment is to be left on the Site overnight.
- 6.12 The Tenant must ensure that tools and other personal equipment are kept safe and secure when not in use. The Council accepts no responsibility for the loss of or damage to such items nor does the Council accept any responsibility for any injury caused by such items.
- 6.13 No weapons (e.g. air rifles) are permitted on the Site.
- 6.14 When using any sprays or fertilizers, the Tenant of an Allotment Garden must;
- a) take all reasonable care to ensure that adjoining hedges, trees and crops are not adversely affected, and must make good or replant as necessary should any damage occur, and

- b) so far as possible select and use chemicals, whether for spraying, seed dressing or for any other purpose whatsoever, that will cause the least harm to members of the public, game birds and other wildlife, other than vermin or pests, and
- c) comply at all times with current regulations.

7. Dogs, Animals and Bees

- 7.1 Any dog (including Guide Dogs) brought onto the Site must be kept on a lead at all times.
- 7.2 Animals or livestock (except hens or rabbits) must not be kept on Allotment Gardens.
- 7.3 Hens or rabbits must not be kept in such a place or in such a manner as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance. Tenants must obtain prior permission from the Allotment Officer and must comply with any husbandry conditions laid down by (and obtainable from) the Council.
- 7.4 Any part of the Allotment Garden used for keeping hens or rabbits must be securely and adequately fenced to the satisfaction of the Allotment Officer. Structures must comply with the Council's specifications.
- 7.5 Beehives are not allowed on the Allotment Garden except with the prior permission of the appropriate Officer of the Council. Tenants must have valid insurance cover preferably through membership or affiliation of the British Bee Keeping Association

8. Unauthorised Persons

- 8.1 Only the Tenant, or a person authorised or accompanied by the Tenant is allowed on the Site. Access is not permitted to any Plot(s) other than that let to the Tenant.
- 8.2 The Council may order any person wrongly allowed onto the Site in breach of these rules to leave immediately.
- 8.3 The Council may take action for breach of their Tenancy Agreement against any Tenant who the Council reasonably believes was responsible for allowing an unauthorised person to be on the Site.

9. Paths

- 9.1 Paths provided by Tenants must be within the boundaries of their own Allotment Gardens and kept reasonably free from weeds.
- 9.2 Paths between two Allotment Gardens must be a minimum of 600mm (2') in width where possible and must be kept reasonably free from weeds up to the nearest half width by each adjoining Tenant.
- 9.3 Paths must be kept clear of obstructions at all times except for paths provided by Tenants only for use on their own Allotment Garden.
- 9.4 The Tenant must not leave any tools or other equipment unattended on common pathways or other such areas of the Site nor in any other way that may cause accident or injury and must ensure that such tools and other equipment are used carefully and with due regard to the safety of others.

10. Sheds, Buildings and Structures

- 10.1 No buildings, walls or permanent structures may be put up on the Allotment Garden by Tenants. Sheds, greenhouses or polytunnels must comply with the Council's specifications and conditions.
- 10.2 Any shed, greenhouses or polytunnel which the Council allows on the Allotment Garden must be maintained in a good state of repair and condition to the satisfaction of the Council and if the Council is not satisfied with the state of repair it may order the Tenant to remove the structure
- 10.3 A Tenant may only have one shed and either a greenhouse or polytunnel. The maximum dimensions of a shed (or greenhouse) are 10' x 8' (3m x 2.4m) and a height of 8'6" (2.6m). Sheds and greenhouses may be erected without the need for prior consent from the Council. Such structures must have guttering connected to a water container (e.g. butt, barrel)
- 10.4 A polytunnel may not be erected without the prior permission of the Council and may not exceed 20' x 10' (6m x 3m).
- 10.5 Structures should be sited at the rear of the Plot or as directed by the Allotment Officer. No permanent footings or bases may be constructed.
- 10.6 Tenants may not plant hedges or erect fencing or other barriers on or around their Plot. Tenants whose Allotment Garden contains, or is bounded by, an existing hedge, fence or gate permitted by the Council are responsible for maintenance. Ditches within the boundary of the Allotment Garden must be properly cleared and maintained
- 10.7 Temporary structures and compost containers must also conform to the Council's approved specifications.
- 10.8 Barbed wire or other similar materials must not be used on the Allotment Garden.
- 10.9 No toxic or hazardous materials or contaminated waste or tyres should be stored or brought onto the Site. Any pesticides must comply with current legislation regarding their use and storage. The storing of materials other than for direct and prompt use on the Plot is prohibited. All such materials must be stored in a safe manner (e.g. glass for cloches) and must not be allowed to become a hazard or nuisance to others.

11. Council Chalets, Greenhouses and Tool Lockers

- 11.1 Where such structures are rented from the Council, Tenants must not move, demolish or alter the chalet or greenhouse but must keep them in good repair at all times and in particular must make good any

defect or repair within one month of the Council giving the Tenant a notice specifying the repair required. Tenants are also responsible for the repair of tool lockers.

- 11.2 In the third year after the Allotment Garden is let to a Tenant and every third year thereafter, the Tenant must apply a coat of wood preservative to the chalet.
- 11.3 The chalet, greenhouse or tool locker must not be used except in connection with the proper cultivation of the Allotment Garden and in particular no trade or business may be carried out from the chalet or greenhouse.
- 11.4 Petrol, oil, fuel, lubricants or other inflammable liquids must not be stored in the chalet, greenhouse or tool locker.
- 11.5 The Council is not to be liable for loss by accident, fire, theft or damage of any tools or contents in the chalet, greenhouse or tool locker and need not replace any chalet or greenhouse which is destroyed or damaged.

12. Notice Board and Advertisements

- 12.1 All Tenants must display a notice showing clearly the number of the Allotment Garden and maintain it in good condition.
- 12.2 Only notices issued by the Council or approved by the Association may be posted on the Site. Tenants may not display any personal or commercial advertising except on notice boards as approved by the Association.

13. Inspection

- 13.1 The Allotment Garden (and any structure on it) may be entered and inspected by an Officer or member of the Council (including members of the Allotments Working Party) or an Officer of the relevant Association at any time and the Tenants must give whatever access they require.

14. Disputes

- 14.1 Disputes between Tenants are to be referred first to the Allotment Association (subject to a right of appeal to the Council). Where necessary the Association may also make its recommendations to the Council. The written decision of the Council will be binding on all the Tenants involved in the dispute. The Council or the relevant Association will inform the Birmingham and District Allotments Council of disputes between Tenants.

15. Harassment

- 15.1 Birmingham City Council has a commitment to eliminating unlawful or unfair discrimination and to achieving an environment free from harassment. This extends to the conduct of allotment Tenants (see Allotment Rule 6.7).
- 15.2 Harassment may be of a specifically racial, sexual or religious nature, but is generally accepted to be any unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct. All Tenants are expected to comply with the Council's policies in respect of harassment and discrimination.
- 15.3 Complaints about harassment are, in the first instance, to be referred to the Site Allotment Association which will investigate the matter and refer its recommendation to the Council. Tenants may seek support from the Birmingham and District Allotments Council or may refer complaints directly to the Council if they prefer. Complaints will be handled sensitively and the Council will endeavour to protect Tenants against victimisation for making or being involved in a complaint. Wherever possible, Tenants should tell the person who is causing the problem that the conduct in question is unwanted and/or offensive and must stop.

16. Termination

- 16.1 The Council may terminate Allotment Garden Tenancies in any of the following ways:-
 - a) twelve months written Notice To Quit expiring at any time between 29 September to 6 April inclusive; or
 - b) three months written Notice To Quit:-
 - i) if the Council requires the Allotment Garden for building, mining or any other industrial purpose, or for roads or sewers necessary in connection with building, mining or an industrial purpose; or
 - ii) where the Council acquired the Allotment Gardens for a purpose other than letting as allotments or has appropriated them to another purpose, or
 - c) one months written Notice To Quit if:-
 - i) Rent is in arrears for 40 days or more (whether formally demanded or not); or
 - ii) the Tenant is in breach of these rules, or
 - iii) the Tenant has become bankrupt or compounded with his or her creditors, or
 - d) automatically on 30 September following the death of the Tenant.
- 16.2 Tenants may terminate Allotment Garden Tenancies by giving the Council one month's written notice.

17. Change of Address and Notices

- 17.1 Tenants must immediately inform both the Council and any relevant Association in writing of changes of address.
- 17.2 Notices to be served by the Council on the Tenant may be:
- a) Left on the Allotment Garden, or
 - b) Sent to the Tenant's address in the Tenancy Agreement (or notified to the Council under these rules) by first or second class post, registered letter, recorded delivery or hand delivered, or
 - c) Served on the Tenant personally.
- 17.3 Notices served under sub-paragraph 2 above will be treated as properly served even if not received.
- 17.4 Notices to be given to the Council should be sent to the Allotments Officer, 115 Reservoir Road, Ladywood, Birmingham, B16 9EE or such other address as the Council notifies in writing to the Tenant.

18. Interpretation and Repeal

- 18.1 The headings of these rules are not to affect their interpretation.
- 18.2 The Allotment Rules made on 12 February 1926 and 1994 (as amended) are repealed.

The Common Seal of
BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
was hereunto affixed to these Allotment Rules in 2010.

Appendix 4. Topic Guide

Questions within this guide are indicative of topics to be broached, and are not to be understood as specifying the exact format in which a question is to be couched.

Quantitative data collected (through conversation/observation)

1. Age, sex, ethnic background
2. Length of time held an allotment
3. (Prior) Work/profession/income?
4. How often do you go to the allotment per month? Roughly what time of day?

Topics

(Allotment committee members):

5. How long have you been involved in running this site?
6. Can you tell me something about the site (how long it's been here, how many plots, vacancies, turnover, ethnic mix of ploholders etc.)
7. (if a long time) What sort of changes have you seen over that time?

(All)

8. Why did you get an allotment initially? Has it met your expectations?
9. Do you have a garden at home? How is gardening there different?
10. What do you grow on your allotment and why?
11. Do you feel part of a wider community on the allotment? In what way?
12. Is your allotment a private or public space?
13. How do you like your allotment to look? Is its appearance important to you?
14. Where do you store your tools?
15. Do you share seeds/produce with other gardeners?

16. What do you do with the produce from your allotment? How do you cope with gluts of produce?
17. Where do you buy (or get) your fruit and vegetables if not from the allotment?
18. Why do you shop here? What factors influence your choices? [Trying to establish whether motivation for food production and consumption is any, or none, of the following: value for money; economic justice (fair price for the farmer; local)/global justice (fair trade); health and well-being (e.g. fresh or organic food)]
19. Who do you talk to about these choices? Who does the food shopping?
20. Is the food you grow (buy) organic?
21. Who does the cooking in your house? Who decides what you eat? (or: tell me about what you've eaten this week/ what will you eat tonight?)

Appendix 5. List of meetings and events attended

Public meetings attended relating to allotments and wider food sustainability issues; allotment open days

- Big Dig, Botanical Gardens, 16 January 2013
- Brownfield Road open day, April 2013
- Sustainability Forum, Feeding the City, 10 September 2012
- Allotment conference, 23 July 2013, Sheffield

Allotment site meetings attended (by invitation)

Bordesley Green BDAC meeting (October 2013)

Pereira Road Christmas social (December 2013)

Uplands meeting to ratify decision for the allotment to become a cooperative (January 2013)

Additional interviews

Clive Birch, chair, Birmingham and District Allotments Council (by telephone, 25 October 2013)

Adrian Stagg, Allotments Officer, Birmingham City Council (18 January 2015)

Appendix 6. Project Information Form and Research Participant Consent Form

PROJECT INFORMATION FORM

My PhD thesis examines questions around 'alternative' and 'ethical' food production and consumption. Specifically, I am interested in the motivations of people who choose to grow some of their own food on an allotment, what their allotments mean to them, and how allotment holders approach food provisioning and shopping for food in general.

I am requesting your permission to interview you about your reasons for getting an allotment and your approach to food more broadly. The interview will probably last around an hour and will be audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Before the interview I may also ask you to take a photo which illustrates what your allotment means to you, which we will discuss during the interview. You do not have to take a photo in order to be interviewed.

There is no obligation to take part in this research project. Should you agree to take part and subsequently reconsider your participation, you may withdraw from the project at any time before I submit my thesis. If you withdraw from the project I will erase my recording and transcription of your interview, and delete any reference to the interview in my thesis. If you have supplied me with a photo I will also delete or return all copies of the photo.

I will store the recording and transcription of your interview on a single password-protected computer, and it will be available only to me and to others involved in my research (e.g. my thesis supervisor). Your identity will be kept anonymous and confidential at all times and you will not be identifiable in the final submitted thesis, or in any publications arising from the thesis.

Copyright in my thesis will belong to Aston University; copyright in subsequent publications will belong either to me or to the publisher. You will retain copyright in any photo(s) that you take, but grant me a non-exclusive license to include such photo(s) in my submitted thesis. Should I wish to include your photo(s) in subsequent publications, I will only do so with your explicit written permission (which will form the basis of a separate agreement on a case-by-case basis).

Please contact me on the e-mail address below if you have any questions about the research. If you are willing to participate, please read the form below carefully and sign it in the space at the bottom, and we can arrange a convenient time and location for me to interview you. Ideally this would be at your allotment, but if this is not convenient I am happy to meet you elsewhere.

Thank you for considering my proposal.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read the description of the research project to be carried out by Vicki Whittaker. I have had the opportunity to discuss it with her and ask any questions.

I understand that I am being asked to take part in an interview about my reasons for getting an allotment and my approach to food more broadly, and that this interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed. As part of the interview I may be asked to take a photo beforehand illustrating what my allotment means to me. I understand that I may still take part in the interview even if I do not wish to take a photo.

I understand that my identity will be kept anonymous and confidential at all times and I will not be identifiable in the final submitted thesis, or in any publications arising from the thesis. Data relating to me will not be made available to anybody except the researcher and others directly involved in her research.

I understand that copyright in Vicki Whittaker's thesis will belong to Aston University; copyright in subsequent publications will belong either to Vicki Whittaker or to the publisher. I will retain copyright in any photo(s) that I take, but I herewith grant Vicki Whittaker a non-exclusive license to include such photo(s) in her submitted thesis. Inclusion of my photo(s) in any subsequent publications arising from her thesis will be subject to my explicit written permission (which will form the basis of a separate agreement on a case-by-case basis).

I agree to take part in the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time up to submission of the final thesis (scheduled for September 2015), for whatever reason, and if I do, I will inform the researcher who will erase the recording and transcription of my interview and remove any data relating to me from the final thesis.

Signature

Print name

E-mail address