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ARTICLE

## Consumers, Producers and Practices

Understanding the invention and reinvention of Nordic walking

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*Abstract.* The idea that artifacts are acquired and used in the course of accomplishing social practices has important implications for theories of consumption and innovation. From this point of view, it is not enough to show that goods are symbolically and materially positioned, mediated and filtered through existing cultures and conventions. Twisting the problem around, the further challenge is to explain how practices change and with what consequence for the forms of consumption they entail. In this article, we suggest that new practices like Nordic walking, a form of 'speed walking' with two sticks, arise through the active and ongoing integration of images, artifacts and forms of competence, a process in which both consumers and producers are involved. While it makes sense to see Nordic walking as a situated social practice, such a view makes it difficult to explain its growing popularity in countries as varied as Japan, Norway and the USA. In addressing this issue, we conclude that practices and associated cultures of consumption are always 'homegrown'. Necessary and sometimes novel ingredients (including images and artifacts) may circulate widely, but they are always pieced together in a manner that is informed by previous and related practice. What looks like the diffusion of Nordic walking is therefore better understood as its successive, but necessarily localized, (re)invention. In developing this argument, we explore some of the consequences of conceptualizing consumption and consumer culture as the outcome of meaningful social practice.

### *Key words*

consumption • innovation • practice • walking

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## INTRODUCTION

For all the attention that has been paid to material culture and the social life of things, there is a tendency, from ergonomics through to semiotics, to take a partial view of what is involved in consuming and using things in practice. In writing this article, one aim is to move beyond symbolically oriented theories of consumption and to think again about consumers, producers and the material artifacts with which they deal. While acquisition and ownership are undoubtedly important in signalling all manner of statuses and identities, it is also clear that many products are quite directly implicated in the conduct and reproduction of daily life. In other words, there is a material dimension to practice that deserves and that is now beginning to receive attention in its own right. This pragmatic re-orientation generates further questions about the dynamics of innovation and specifically about the relation between novel products and emerging practices.

These have been addressed from various angles. Moving between the sociology of consumption and science and technology studies, Molotch (2003) has, for instance, written about where 'stuff' comes from and about how designers' narratives, assumptions and expectations are unavoidably embodied in the things they produce. Concentrating more on consumption than on production, others have explored the details of appropriation and domestication (Dant, 1999; Illmonen, 2004; Lehtonen, 2003), showing how objects are accommodated within existing social and technical systems. Such work reminds us of the significance of non-human actors for the consumers with whom they share their lives. In this it goes some way towards redressing what Latour (1992) refers to as the 'missing masses' of social theory.

While we make use of these lines of enquiry, we suggest that the relation between materials and practices remains under-theorized.

To explain why, we first comment on the conceptualization of practice. Writers like Bourdieu (1984, 1992), de Certeau (1984) and Giddens (1984) use the term in various ways but in ways that are alike in emphasizing routines, shared habits, technique and competence. The crucial point is that practices, as recognizable entities, are made by and through their routine reproduction. While this is a convincing and powerful argument, these are thoroughly social theories in the sense that material artifacts, infrastructures and products feature barely at all.

Schatzki offers a somewhat different view. For him, practices consist of 'embodied, materially mediated arrays, and shared meanings' (2001: 3). Taking this to be so, practices presume the existence of requisite elements

including images, forms of competence and in many cases objects as well. Reckwitz takes up this theme: 'Carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way. It might sound trivial to stress that in order to play football we need a ball and goals as indispensable "resources"' (Reckwitz, 2002: 253) . . . but it is not. As Reckwitz goes on to explain, things are centrally and unavoidably implicated in the production and reproduction of practice. In what follows and in keeping with the conclusion of these two authors, we work with the notion that practices involve the active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence.

These observations suggest that analyses of the ways in which things are acquired, appropriated and used routinely fail to capture the extent of what is involved. To continue with Reckwitz's example, footballers are not simply 'using' or appropriating the ball: in kicking it about and in the process of playing, they are actively involved in *reproducing* the game itself. If we are to take these ideas forward we need to conceptualize consumers not as users but as active and creative practitioners and appropriation as but one dimension of the reproduction of practice. These arguments lead us to conclude that there is scope for relating the results and insights of science and technology studies (especially concepts of configuration and appropriation) to a more extensive analysis of how practices evolve.

They also imply that it is important to materialize social theories of practice. Alan Warde moves in this direction with the suggestion that 'practices, which are logically and ontologically prior to action, steer consumption' (Warde, 2004). In what follows, we develop this idea and explore the possibility that new practices engender and entail new forms of production and consumption. Addressing the same issue but from a different angle, we are equally interested in how new practices emerge through and as a result of specific forms of consumer–producer interaction.

With these ideas as a starting point, we explore consumers' and producers' roles in the emergence and development of a new practice. Since we focus not on the objects in question (in this case, pairs of walking sticks), but on the practice of which they are a part, we have no option but to consider the dynamic, yet also interdependent, relation between practitioners and providers. In the course of our discussion, and in particular when thinking about how practices evolve, it becomes clear that *relations* between material objects and associated images and forms of competence are of defining importance. This is of some significance when thinking about the apparent diffusion of practices and the circulation of constituent meanings, competences and products.

Nordic walking, a form of 'speed' walking with two sticks, has a number of qualities that make it an especially appropriate case with which to examine the relation between commodities and practices and the manner in which they evolve. First, the very idea of commodifying and marketing something that people have been doing for 1.6 million years and of positioning it as a *new* form of fun is itself impressive (what will they think of next?!). Second, Nordic walking has a very short history. When Kantaneva and Kasurinen (1999) published the first book on the subject, they had no way of knowing that Nordic walking was about to take the outdoor leisure industry by storm or that it would feature as one of the 'centrepieces' of the 2003 sports trade show ISPO (*ISPO News*, 2003). Third, Nordic walking, also called fitness walking, Viking hiking or exersstriding, has spread from Finland, where 20 percent of the population are now regular Nordic walkers, to Germany and Austria, where there are recognized training programmes and systems of accreditation for walking instructors. In both these countries and in Scotland, doctors have begun to prescribe Nordic walking courses for certain patients and in Germany the health benefits are believed to be so great that 'health insurance pays for people to invest in Nordic walking instruction' (*ISPO News*, 2003). Although slow to develop in the UK, hundreds of thousands of Norwegians have taken up Nordic walking and the practice is developing fast in Japan, the USA and Australia.

Before getting into the details of how Nordic walking was invented, we comment briefly on what is involved in 'doing walking'. This allows us to develop a provisional account of the elements or ingredients of which practices are made. We use this model in structuring subsequent discussion of Nordic walking, first in Finland and then in the UK. The final part of the article then reflects on the rather different processes at stake in the diffusion of consumer goods and the (re)invention of practices like Nordic walking.

### **WALKING: COMPETENCE, IMAGE AND EQUIPMENT**

For any one individual, learning to walk is a critical step in childhood and one that demands considerable social as well as physical control. Having mastered the necessary skills, it is easy to forget that the phenomenon of 'doing walking', whether alone or together, is a concerted, ongoing, situated social achievement. In their ethnomethodological account 'Notes on the Art of Walking', Ryave and Schenkein (1974) remind us of the navigational challenges involved in traversing a pavement whilst avoiding collisions with strangers and keeping pace with our companions. As these authors explain,

the rules and conventions of 'doing walking' are produced and reproduced by the members of the community involved and are consequently sensitive to culture and situation. Crossing London's Waterloo Bridge in the rush hour is not the same kind of accomplishment as that involved in rambling through the countryside on a Sunday afternoon. More exotically, 'doing walking' in Brazil is not the same as 'doing walking' in Japan; as Levine's (1997) cross-national time use studies show, some populations routinely walk much faster than others. Following de Certeau (1984), we could go on to discuss the multiple forms of resistance and discipline involved in walking in the city. Alternatively, we might elaborate on the gendered nature of swaggering, mincing and stepping out. For present purposes and for the time being, it is enough to show that conventions of comportment and coordination constitute and quite literally embody the forms of *competence* and know-how necessary for the doing of walking.

Although very well established as a means of transport, the idea of walking for pleasure has a much shorter history. In Britain, this concept is strongly associated with the institutionalization of 'free' time and with a bundle of ideas about nature, freedom, physical and mental wellbeing, recuperation and exercise. That said, there are multiple genres of recreational walking, ranging from solitary contemplative wandering through to planned hiking tours, each organized around different norms and values (Edensor, 2000). The images associated with these various forms depend, in no small measure, on the types of people they attract and on the ideologies that sustain them. Macnaghten and Urry (1998), for example, describe how 'peripatetic theory' (encompassing the notion that leisurely walking affords unique opportunities for education and recreation through engagement with nature) has moved through society. Initiated by the intellectual classes, such ideas were subsequently 'taken up and transformed by other social classes and social groups' (1998: 203). As these observations suggest, 'doing walking' is also a process through which *images* and ideologies are reproduced.

Walking with sticks occupies a special place within the overall repertoire of contemporary styles. Ever since humans learned to walk on two legs, they have used their free hands to carry clubs, canes and crooks or to support themselves on crutches. Although it has not always been so, walking sticks are currently associated with age and infirmity or with comedy. As discussed below, this presents something of a problem for Nordic walking.

The Nordic version is special in that it requires the use of sticks, but even ordinary forms of walking depend on an array of requisite *equipment*, including boots, shoes, paths, maps and so forth. Following

Latour, Michael (2001) elaborates on the parts that mundane technologies play in mediating material and symbolic relations between bodies and natural environments. He argues that boots (or, more accurately, 'bodies-in-boots') are not innocent parties in this relationship; having material and symbolic qualities of their own, they also exist as hybrid entities in their own right. A similar case could be made with respect to clothing, mountaineering equipment (Johnston and Edwards, 1994; Parsons and Rose, 2003) or even walking sticks. Rather than focusing on the stick's status as an entity that intervenes in and facilitates the 'flow of communication between humans and environment' (Michael, 2001: 117), we are more interested in the dynamic relationship between sticks and the image and performance of the practices they sustain. The interaction between walking sticks and their users is perhaps less complex than that between windsurfers and their boards (Dant, 1999), but it is, as we shall see, central to the practice of Nordic walking.

From this perspective, Nordic walking is an intriguing innovation, for the only really new feature is the way in which already familiar elements (sticks, social and physical skills and the idea of walking for fun) are linked together. The idea of walking for pleasure is already well established, but not with sticks. Similarly, walking sticks have a long history, but not one that is associated with fun. In what follows, we argue that Nordic walking emerges from and through the novel integration of competence, image and equipment. This process is one in which new links (between sticks and enjoyment) are made and old ones (between sticks and infirmity) challenged. More abstractly, we work with the notion that innovations in practice depend upon the active integration of elements, some new, some already well established, that together constitute what we might think of as innovations-in-waiting or proto-practices.

We use this basic idea to structure our review of the development of Nordic walking in Finland, where it first began, and in the UK, where it has yet to become established. Our account is based on interviews with people from organizations that produce and distribute Nordic walking sticks or that promote the sport and on an analysis of advertisements and articles in the trade and popular press, and on the web. In Finland we interviewed a marketing manager, a member of a design agency, a product engineer and a marketing assistant. We also spoke with the head and with the chair of the board of a relevant voluntary organization, with several Nordic walking coaches and with the test manager of a sports laboratory. In England, we talked with people involved in importing Nordic walking sticks and in setting up training courses. We also spoke with companies

selling trekking poles and related equipment and with a number of retailers. More practically, we draw on the experience of participating in a Nordic walking course and on the results and insights of a focus group study (in Finland) of Nordic walking practitioners (Oksanen-Säreälä and Timonen, 2005).

These materials allow us to show how the ingredients of Nordic walking have been pieced together. The resulting analysis leads us to conclude that innovation in practice is not a one-off enterprise, nor is it one over which producers have ultimate control. For a practice to endure and exist as an identifiable if mutable entity, it must be continually reproduced by those who do it. In tracking the recursive dynamics of Nordic walking, we make new links of our own, bridging between theories of consumption, innovation and practice in order to understand how walking, something that most of us have already been doing for years, might be constituted as a new form of fun.

## **NORDIC WALKING IN FINLAND**

In Finland, as elsewhere, walking sticks have long been associated with the frail and the disabled. What is innovative is the idea that fit and healthy people might walk with sticks as a form of recreation. How has this come about?

### **Institutions and explanations**

Each of the three main actors, the Vierumäki Sport Institute (the main function of which is to develop, produce and market nationally and internationally competitive training, exercise and educational services), Suomen Latu (the Central Association for Recreational Sport and Outdoor Activities) and Exel (a manufacturer of sports equipment), has their own version of events.

One explanation, favoured by staff at Vierumäki, has to do with skiing. For many decades now, particularly keen cross-country skiers have walked with pairs of sticks as a means of training during the summer months. While this was 'normal', it was so for only the most devoted practitioners of the sport. From the mid-1990s onwards, the Vierumäki Sport Institute has run courses designed to introduce the concept to a wider population of potential recruits. For those involved, the invention of Nordic walking represents the successful popularization of an activity that was initially the preserve of athletic coaches and an elite group of exceptionally fit skiers.

A second interpretation is that Nordic walking is at least partly the result of a state-sponsored initiative to promote the benefits of outdoor life.



To understand how this might be so, it is necessary to understand something of Finnish history. Suomen Latu was founded in 1938 at a time when the Soviet Union was seen as a continual threat and when Finland had just gained its independence. This was a period in which politicians like Tahko Pihkala believed in organized sport as a means of mobilizing the Finnish people both physically and symbolically. A key figure in Suomen Latu and himself keen on outdoor pursuits, Pihkala sought to make skiing a national pastime. This meant building an entire 'ecosystem' of interconnected elements, including trails and paths to be cared for by local communities and transport systems that allowed city dwellers to get out to the countryside. Time and energy were invested in designing new forms of clothing and in developing specialized equipment such as a skiing rucksack (K.P., 1928). In keeping with this tradition, Suomen Latu has been actively involved in promoting Nordic walking, so much so that some claim that, 'This national craze [Nordic walking] was orchestrated by Suomen Latu, a government-funded fitness organization which six years ago set about training hundreds of volunteer instructors' (Bradberry, 2004).

Others point to the deliberate transfer of technology from one market sector (the disabled) to another (sports and fitness). Having worked with physiotherapeutic professionals in designing better walking sticks for those who 'needed' them, Exel wondered whether ordinary people might also be interested in buying them. Developing this idea, the company sought to persuade people to use sticks not because they were infirm or injured, but to prevent themselves from becoming so. Looking back, staff at Exel highlight the importance of scientific research proving the benefits of walking with sticks and the need to create new markets, given changing weather patterns and a shrinking skiing season.

Despite these differences of emphasis, all three organizations are as one in how they talk about the practice today. For instance, all are in agreement that the main task is to overcome resistance by repositioning (repurposing) the idea of walking with sticks. As our respondents explained, widespread acceptance of Nordic walking requires two crucial steps. First, associations with frailty or with fanatical athletic performance have to be broken. Second, new links, for example with concepts of 'mild nature' and well-being, have to be made. The notion that Nordic walking improves the fitness of ordinary people does both these jobs at once. In the following paragraphs, we review some of the strategies and arguments that have been used in establishing Nordic walking as an ordinary activity for ordinary people.

## Symbolic meanings and images

### a) Health and fitness

Themes of health and wellbeing have been extremely important in the invention of Nordic walking. According to one of our respondents, experts from the Cooper Clinic estimate that exercising with Nordic sticks increases calorie consumption by 20 percent (The Cooper Clinic), a figure that can rise to 40 percent for those using the 'right technique' (*Saturday Evening Post*, 2003). Since Nordic walking involves 100 more muscles than the ordinary version, it is better for the spine and the upper body and prevents damage to the knees. One coach from the Vierumäki Sport Institute describes how this connection was made in practice:

It was about 1997 that a group of sports coaches and trainers started thinking about whether walking trips could be made more meaningful and more efficient from the perspective of the walkers' physical condition. . . . We found that sticks were perfectly suited for this purpose and for improving the fitness of ordinary people. Walking with sticks combined people's interest both in nature and in fitness. . . . In our institute, sports enthusiasts had used sticks for hill walking and summer training for a very long time. Our test manager was among the first to notice the efficiency of these sticks in training. Sticks make people walk faster and use their hands more actively. Therefore more energy is used and muscles develop.

Exel tells a similar story, but framed in terms of science and physiology rather than personal experience:

Why it is so rewarding? Probably because it is physically more challenging than one might think. It is a coordination challenge. It stimulates and rewards. It gives positive feelings. Safety and efficiency are important attributes of stick walking too. There are many studies which show that walking with sticks is much more demanding than ordinary walking.

By underlining these points, advocates redefine ordinary walking. As an advertisement for Swix (a Norwegian walking stick manufacturer) explains, 'Nordic walking can relieve the pressure on weight-bearing joints by up to 30 percent more than regular walking and thus lowers the risk of injury' (Swix, 2004). It is not that walking without sticks does any harm, just that it is nowhere near as good for you as walking with them.

## b) Fun

Taking a different angle, a representative of Suomen Latu underlines Nordic walking's social as well as physical appeal:

I think the great thing about walking with sticks is the fact that it is so easy to start from your own door and there you are: outdoors. I also would like to emphasize the social aspect of walking. When you are walking, you can talk with other people and have a good time.

Exel is also aware of the need to focus on the contexts in which people walk and on their experience of the practice as a whole. As the next observation makes clear, the challenge is to develop the activity, not just the product: 'I am a bit worried that too much emphasis is put into the equipment and market expansion. One must remember that it is the activity that one must be interested in in this business if it is to flourish.' In all of this, the public image of Nordic walking is critical.

## c) An ordinary activity for ordinary people

To begin with, there was something of an imbalance between anticipated benefits for health and wellbeing and the social costs of participation. Although a few people were persuaded to give Nordic walking a go, the majority of the population was concerned about 'looking silly'. As the following respondent from Exel explains, the relationship between the image and the emerging practice is always dynamic. Put simply, the more people who take up Nordic walking, the less strange it becomes:

In the beginning, the image of walking with sticks was really problematic. It was very much a psychological problem. In our marketing we try to normalize the activity by referring to groups of people walking together. In time, the groups became smaller and finally one could walk alone (and not feel silly).

An analysis of all references to Nordic walking in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the main Finnish newspaper, from 1999 to 2003 shows how this image has changed. The first cohorts of 'ordinary' Nordic walkers were jeered at by the press, whose critical tone echoed that adopted a decade earlier when commenting on the first mobile phone users (Pantzar, 2003). To outside observers, Nordic walking looked like yet another pointless craze, an artificial need if ever there was one. One such article was, for example, entitled 'Santa Claus, Please No Sticks for Me!' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 26 November 2000). However, a reader's comment a few weeks later shows just how unsettled the situation

was: 'Santa Claus, Thanks for the Sticks!' (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 30 December 2000). During this early period (2000–01), articles promoting the technique follow a similar format. Having explained that some people feel silly, they go on to describe the benefits of Nordic walking, making much of its widespread endorsement by the medical profession. The message is clear: the proven advantages should be enough to overcome personal vanity and a misplaced concern with appearance.

This strategy worked particularly well for people who were already interested in serious sport and their own physical condition and who understood the potential of walking with sticks. These people became the leaders of what became a movement. As the population of Nordic walkers increased, so new discussions arose. Articles published between 2001 and 2002 focus, for example, on questions of etiquette and on how joggers, ordinary walkers, Nordic walkers and cyclists should behave towards each other. While its identity is not quite fixed, these debates prove that Nordic walking has arrived; it exists as an entity and as a recognizable practice in its own right.

### **Competence and skill**

The notion that one needs training in Nordic walking and that there are skills to be mastered is widely shared by producers and providers. As a result, there are specially designed courses for Nordic walking instructors and a system of accreditation and recognition. People who take part in Nordic walking courses are taught how to hold the sticks and use them to best effect in a variety of conditions, for example when going up and down hill or along the flat. These courses and associated instruction manuals provide advice and guidance on incorporating Nordic walking into an exercise regime designed to enhance fitness and wellbeing. In specifying a 'proper' method that people need to learn, such instructions define other kinds of walking as inappropriately passive. As already mentioned, walking is a complex achievement and one that can be 'framed' and defined in various ways. Oksanen-Särelä and Timonen (2004) distinguish between different types of walking and the specific competences associated with walking as a means of transport, walking for fun and incidental walking. In the context of the present discussion the key point is that Nordic walking is positioned as a new and distinctive form with techniques all of its own.

### **Materials**

Nordic walking is further defined by the materials and the hardware involved. Unlike a conventional walking stick, Nordic versions have a

straight handle and a strap that goes around the hand. Different types of tip are available to suit different ground conditions. To begin with, styling was influenced by the ski sticks from which the walking version evolved: the colours were typically yellow and blue and ergonomically inspired design was important. More urban models in black, silver and yellow have since become popular. Recent moves to define Nordic walking sticks as a new design accessory are particularly important for the positioning of the practice and in this respect it is significant that Marimekko (a company known for fabric and other kinds of design, not for sports equipment) has licensed the production of sticks in a range of patterns and colours.

### **Institutionalizing Nordic walking**

The previous paragraphs describe some of the persons, images, products and places that are important in defining walking with sticks as an appropriate activity for ordinary people. As we have shown, inventing Nordic walking is a matter of integrating images of fitness and wellbeing, the walking sticks themselves, and the knowledge of how to use them so as to create a new practice. In thinking about how and why these elements came together in Finland in the late 1990s, it is important to take note of the institutional context.

Environmental conditions are of increasing interest to theorists seeking to define the social and geographical characteristics of innovation. In writing about how new technologies first take root, Kemp et al. (1998: 184) suggest that protected spaces or niches are important because they help 'build a constituency behind a new technology and set in motion interactive learning processes and institutional adaptations'. Others have described more and less deliberate efforts to enhance creativity through social engineering (Kidder, 1982). In such discussions questions of scale and coherence are often important. For instance, Reay explains the innovative record of Formula One racing with reference to the fact that race teams are comparatively small organizations with a relatively complex base of technical competence. 'Working across skill disciplines, hierarchies and cultures in communities of practice (CoPs) is common to all teams in the sport, and an essential part of their success in identifying and implementing effective solutions' (Reay, 2000: 20). In our case, the existence of a small, well-connected community (the Vierumäki Institute, Exel and Suomen Latu) certainly helps explain how the system builders (Hughes, 1983) of Nordic walking achieved so much in such a short space of time. Just as important, this community had ready access to wider networks of potential practitioners and 'carriers' including ordinary people, sports

enthusiasts and companies developing new equipment for health and fitness. Since the Vierumäki Institute has more than 300,000 visitors per year, from over 50 nationalities, it is a potentially efficient environment in which to test and generate innovative ideas.

We might conclude that the dense networks of the Finnish sports community provided a context in which Nordic walking could be invented, and the ingredients (in terms of already existing images, materials and expertise) with which to do so. But how does this explain its growing popularity in countries as diverse as Japan, the USA and the UK? To put the problem in more general terms, how do new combinations of commodity-and-practice circulate and diffuse?

### **NORDIC WALKING IN THE UK**

In the UK, Nordic walking is in its infancy. As such, it is an especially revealing case through which to show what is involved in the (re)invention of the practice in another context. Again, cultural history is critical; again, image is all important; and, again, the institutional environment matters.

According to Mintel reports, walking and rambling are the most popular participation sports in the whole of Europe. They top the list in the UK, where an estimated 10 percent of the population walk for fun, compared with 3 percent in Germany and 4 percent in France and Spain (Mintel, 2002: 22). It is obviously difficult to determine what counts as walking for fun and this might explain why survey data from the Office for National Statistics shows even higher rates of UK participation – 44.5 percent in 1996 (Roberts, 2004: 33). The UK has a number of organizations dedicated to walking (including the Ramblers' Association, founded in 1905), a national and local network of walking, hiking and rambling clubs, an array of specialist magazines and an enormous infrastructure of public footpaths, popular guidebooks, maps and routes. Yet there is hardly any Nordic walking.

Those involved in trying to promote the practice, principally the distributors of imported sticks, have a number of theories as to why this might be so. One has to do with the lack of a skiing tradition, such as there is in Germany and Austria, both countries in which Nordic walking has 'broken through'. In the UK context, the 'Nordic' reference is something of a liability, being more strongly associated with stereotypes of snowy Scandinavia than with the more diffuse concept of a glowingly healthy outdoor life.

A second relates to the problem of positioning Nordic walking among the forms currently popular in the UK. Over the last few years, the market

for trekking poles, as distinct from Nordic walking sticks, has been developing steadily. These poles, which are generally shorter and tougher than those used for Nordic walking, have tips designed to dig into surfaces rather than push off from them. The technical differences are not so great, but the image is important. Trekking poles are promoted and marketed as equipment for those interested in climbing mountains with heavy rucksacks. Their use makes it easier to go up and down hills and reduces the risk of damage to the knees. Pairs of modern, lightweight telescopic sticks are now to be seen in most of the major outdoor shops, on the Pennines and in the hills of the Lake District. The symbolism and design of the traditional wooden walking stick have already been challenged by trekking poles and by the high-profile mountain athletes and thirty-something hikers who use them. One consequence is that in order to promote Nordic walking, advocates now have to distinguish between walking and trekking; that is, between adrenalin and non-adrenalin sports. They have to persuade people to use pairs of sticks on the flat as well as on the hills and they have to cultivate a rather different, typically older, market.

As in the early days in Finland, there is the further problem of looking extremely silly. Reminded of Monty Python's famous 'ministry of silly walks' sketch, the author of a recent article in the UK magazine *Country Walking* admits to 'feeling fairly ridiculous' when trying Nordic walking for the first time (2004: 34). One of our interviewees summed up the problem in these terms: 'Nordic walking might be okay for Scandinavians who have a mindset that is more open to self-expression and exercise, but, no, I don't think we'll ever see Nordic walking in Hyde Park.'

One route around these difficulties is to redefine walking not (so much) as a form of fun, but as a serious means of promoting and preserving health and wellbeing. If properly handled, professionalized scientific discourses of health have the power to overcome self-conscious silliness – or, at least, that is the hope. Quite other considerations come into play when walking is equated with a trip to the gym or conceptualized as exercise alone. Promotional material from Leki, the main promoter of Nordic walking in the UK, emphasizes this aspect: in the right hands, the stick can double up as a 'complete gym', affording all kinds of 'new' possibilities for stretching, training and physical development.

The focus on health is certainly not unique to the UK, but it appears to be uniquely important in shaping what Nordic walking might become in this country. The *Country Walking* article referred to above is entitled, 'Get Fitter, Lose Weight . . . it's Easy with Nordic Walking'. The text continues: 'If we said you could be healthier without walking any further

or more often than you do now, would you think we were pulling your walking-trouser leg? Read on and discover the easiest way ever to a new you' (2004: 33). Although Leki's UK distributors are trying to promote the sport in many different ways, 'medicalizing' or at least professionalizing the activity is one. As well as encouraging doctors to prescribe Nordic walking, the business of setting up accredited courses run by instructors educated by 'master trainers' from other countries is also underway. As we have seen, themes of health and wellbeing were also important in Finland. There are, however, important differences in how these ideas work out in practice. In Finland, the government (via Suomen Latu) was actively involved in establishing Nordic walking as a means of safeguarding public health. Despite suggestions that Britain should follow Finland's example in the battle against obesity, Bradberry (2004) is not convinced that 'the great British public' will willingly embrace an exercise trend 'foisted on them by health experts'. It is, in any event, difficult to imagine the British government deliberately promoting Nordic walking in the way it has been done in Finland.

While Nordic walking might yet take off in the UK, the resulting practice will be significantly marked by a specific configuration of images, institutions and practitioners. Since there is no equivalent of Suomen Latu and since there are no UK-based manufacturers of Nordic walking sticks, the cast of critical actors is quite unlike that involved in Finland. Although the symbolic ingredients are similar – health, outdoor life, nature – they are not identical, nor do they knit together in quite the same way. It is, therefore, possible that the necessary links will not be made on any scale and that the elements of Nordic walking will never quite cohere.

## EXPORTING AND REINVENTING PRODUCTS, CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

In this section we consider the 'diffusion' of Nordic walking. From an outside perspective, the practice appears to have spread from Finland to other countries including Norway, Austria and Germany. As used in innovation studies, products diffuse as markets expand. In the context of the present discussion, this understanding of diffusion fails to capture the process of creative reinvention on the part of thousands of ordinary people involved in making Nordic walking sticks marketable. As we have tried to show, products alone have no value. They do so only when integrated into practice and allied to requisite forms of competence and meaning. In thinking about the development of Nordic walking it is important to consider the circulation of images, materials and competences within and between different countries, cultures and communities. However, what really matters is the way in which these constitutive elements come together.



The first sticks specifically designed for Nordic walking were made only a few years ago and only then as an afterthought. The story is that Exel and Suomen Latu were preparing a brochure describing the many different exercises that could be performed with the help of an ordinary skiing stick. This prompted an engineer at Exel to come up with the idea of producing a dedicated walking stick specially for the pictures. Few within the company believed this might be the start of a new product line, but when the sticks were first displayed at the ISPO 2000 international trade show in Germany, Exel was nominated for an award in the 'Brand New – New Brand' competition. One interviewee recalls the occasion well. 'It was,' she says, 'so embarrassing to stay behind our stand. Nobody was interested in us.'

In trying to figure out what has happened since, we have made use of the following ideas. First, we have worked with the notion that 'systems development is not the creation of discrete, intrinsically meaningful objects, but the cultural production of new forms of practice' (Suchman et al., 1999: 404). In other words, it is the practice that matters. If the concept and reality of Nordic walking are not in place, there is simply no 'need' for new, specially designed sticks. Second, we have argued that the emergence and demise of practices have to do with forging and failing links between materials, images and skills (i.e. the ingredients of any one practice).

These ideas have allowed us to describe the move from a 'proto-practice' (that is, a practice that has yet to be realized) to an integrated 'entity' known as Nordic walking. In Finland, in the mid-1990s, walking sticks were produced for particularly keen skiers or more commonly for the infirm. They were made of traditional materials to a traditional design and there was no special way in which they should be used. At this point, the practice of Nordic walking barely existed, although most of the necessary ingredients were in place. In tracking the invention of Nordic walking, we have reviewed more or less deliberate efforts to build three critical linkages. For Nordic walking to have the status it does today, new associations have had to be made, first, between image and skill. In walking with sticks, practitioners now prove themselves to be competent and skilful members of a community within which walking (with sticks) and healthy living go hand-in-hand. Second, and in order to get that far, potential practitioners have to master a new technique; materials and skills have to gel. More than that, they have to do so in a way that generates a positive experience and one that people are keen to reproduce. Third, and perhaps most challenging of all, the image of walking with sticks has to be rendered 'normal' rather than ludicrous. There are different ways in which this can come about. For Exel, physical fitness appears to be the key. For Suomen

Latu, public health and positive engagement with the outdoors are the more dominant themes. Either way, it is important to recognize that the image of Nordic walking changes depending upon the types and numbers of people who take it up.

There is no doubt that the success of Nordic walking is in part the outcome of intentional decisions and actions, including the production and publication of books, articles and videos. It is no accident that media coverage has been good or that, as the initiator of the sport, Exel's share of the market for Nordic walking sticks in Central Europe is 'particularly strong' (Helsinki Stock Exchange, 2003). Now that Nordic walking is established as a recognizable activity, Exel has an obvious interest in exporting it to other countries and this is one aim of the International Nordic Walking Association set up by Exel.

### **Exporting walking**

Since Nordic walking sticks are only of value when the practice has taken root, Exel must first export the practice. But is Nordic walking something that can be picked up and adopted in other cultures and contexts? One interviewee, currently responsible for training Nordic walking instructors around the world, is confident that the idea can and will catch on because the health-related benefits are the same for everyone, wherever they live. Companies like Exel and Leki are actively involved in marketing sticks and promoting the conceptual ingredients of Nordic walking (health, well-being, fitness, fun), but, as one of our Exel interviewees acknowledged: 'When the scale increases, we no longer retain control, for instance, of the advertising material used abroad.' This is a familiar problem for any organization trying to sell standardized products in different countries. It is also a problem that appears in a significantly different light if we turn our attention from product to practice.

If we conceptualize walking, including Nordic walking, as a socially situated performance (Goffman, 1976), there is no way in which it can be 'exported'. There are three reasons for this. First, and most important, Nordic walking is, in large part, made by the actions and inactions of potential and actual practitioners. What Nordic walking is and what it might become in Norway, Japan, the UK and the USA depends upon who does it, where, when and with what consequence for the positioning and subsequent trajectory of the activity as a whole. Second, and as the UK experience demonstrates, the *relative* positioning of Nordic as opposed to other kinds of walking is important. In any one country, walking with sticks exists not in isolation, but with reference to an array of already

established, culturally specific concepts of fitness, infirmity, wellbeing, silliness and 'mild' nature. The ways in which these elements are configured are likely to vary from one country to another. Third, the Finnish case suggests that the links and connections required to establish Nordic walking as a practice were pieced together by a distinctively close community of key players (Vierumäki, Exel and Suomen Latu), working with a handful of key ingredients (existing skills, concepts of nature, health, wellbeing, and so on). The dynamics of invention are not necessarily the same as those involved in reinventing a practice that already 'exists' elsewhere, but for Nordic walking to take hold in another context, new links have to be made and old ones broken. This is again something that has to take place case by case.

### **Reinventing walking**

In fact, Nordic walking *is* being taken up in a variety of different countries and contexts. Rather than representing this as a process of diffusion, we argue that it is better understood as a consequence of its successive reinvention. The fact that this is possible and that it is happening at such a rate suggests that many of the necessary elements are already in place. In underlining the health-related benefits, companies like Exel and Leki seek to tie Nordic walking to a set of concerns that are already widely shared. In making these associations and in fuelling the circulation of associated images, like those of 'mild nature', such companies help to create conditions in which potential practitioners might make the links required to (re)create versions of Nordic walking in different cultural and social settings.

The terminology of appropriation does not quite capture what is involved in piecing the necessary elements together. (Re)inventing Nordic walking in the UK is not simply a matter of importing and adapting the idea to suit local conditions. For Nordic walking to take root in this country, manufacturers, potential practitioners, retailers and promoters have to build what amounts to a new 'system'. This argument has a number of general implications. First, it is misleading to conclude that Nordic walking is spreading to other countries. Instead, new variants of Nordic walking are emerging in new contexts.

In Japan, Nordic walking is confined to leisure resorts and is certainly not practiced on the streets. In Germany, Nordic walking is framed as a safe, risk-free method of engaging with 'mild' nature. By contrast, American Nordic walking is about body shape and fitness. These national distinctions are significant for and are to some extent made by producers, retailers and importers. It is however, important to acknowledge that in contrast to sports that are defined by rules and regulations, Nordic walking is a

chameleon-like enterprise. Although we have written about Nordic walking as a practice in its own right, it is clear that it also functions as a conduit for a constellation of related and associated practices and concepts including those of health, beauty, leisure and enjoyment of nature. It is also clear that these combine in significantly different ways and that Nordic walking is itself an integrative medium.

Practitioners in Japan, Australia and Germany are consequently involved in the reproduction of what are, in effect, different practices. However, these practices have a number of ingredients in common and there is no doubt that in doing Nordic walking, practitioners also contribute to the transnational diffusion of Nordic walking not as a practice, but as a concept.

### **Products, concepts and practices**

We seem to be heading towards a somewhat puzzling conclusion. Having made the case that products and practices are closely intertwined, we are now suggesting that commodities (walking sticks), techniques and associated concepts (wellbeing, mild nature) circulate in ways that practices (Nordic walking) do not. On reflection, this is not as bizarre a conclusion as it might at first appear.

To explain why this is so we need to retrace the steps of the argument we have built through our discussion of Nordic walking. Our first move was to suggest that new practices consist of new configurations of existing elements or of new elements in conjunction with those that already exist. From this point of view, innovations in practice are not simply determined by the generation of new products, images or skills. What really matters is the way in which constituent elements fit together. Second, innovations in practice are ongoing. Similar observations have been made by scholars working in science and technology studies, particularly those who argue that 'invention' frequently continues through the process of diffusion (Bijker, 1992, 1997). We want to relate these conclusions to the more general point that practices – new or not – require continual reproduction. If Nordic walking is to exist, people have to do it. More than that, what Nordic walking 'is' and what it becomes depend, in part, on who does it and on when, where and how it is done. It is in this sense that practices are inherently dynamic. Third, we make the point that in all of this, practitioners are at least as important as producers; it is, after all, they who are the 'carriers' of the practice. Companies like Exel and Leki can make Nordic walking sticks, but however hard they try, they simply cannot make Nordic walking happen.

If we accept the first and second points, it is impossible to conceive of the diffusion of practice. Practices like Nordic walking are always 'home-grown', woven together, maybe with new ingredients, but always against the backdrop of previous, related and associated ways of 'doing' – in this case, ways of 'doing walking'. It is nonetheless possible to describe and analyse the circulation of new products and concepts. The Nordic walking stands at the ISPO shows really are part of a process that is important for the diffusion not of Nordic walking as such, but of the requisite skills, concepts and equipment. With these ideas in circulation, the chances of reinventing Nordic walking increase.

This analysis helps make sense of what it is that companies do when promoting products, the value of which supposes the parallel existence of meaningful social practice. In effect, they promote the diffusion of the elements or ingredients of which practices are made. This analysis has the further effect of reminding us that consumers and producers are *both* involved in constituting and reproducing practices, the successful accomplishment of which entails specific forms of consumption. From this point of view, discussions about how consumer goods are appropriated and domesticated do not go quite far enough. What is missing, but what is required, is a more encompassing account of the co-production of practice. To conclude, we have used the case of Nordic walking to explore new ways of thinking about the development of practices and the diffusion of products and technologies associated with them. In the process, we have shown something of how conventions of participation develop and how practices are shaped by actual, potential and previous practitioners as well as by producers. Consistent with our interpretation of practice as a process of integration, we suggest that configurations of image, stuff and skill continue to co-evolve. On both counts, we argue for a more dynamic theory of material and consumer culture and for one that takes due account of the fact that things are used in, for and as part of practice.

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