

Lectiones praecursoriae

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A practice approach to experimental governance: Experiences from the intersection of everyday life and local experimentation

Lectio praecursoria

University of Helsinki, 16.6.2017

“It is a social contact. I get to see people – it makes food tastier. When I eat at home, alone, I sometimes don’t even have an appetite, and I think ‘is this worth it?’”

This was said to me by an old lady who I met when I was having lunch, at a school canteen in Jyväskylä, in November 2015. The “leftover lunch” service had first been tested there two years earlier, as means to minimise food waste in local schools. Since then, the service has been made permanent in schools in Jyväskylä and the food waste, the original problem that the service tried to solve, has basically disappeared (Laakso 2017a). The leftover lunch service quickly spread to more than 30 municipalities around Finland, but it was not as successful everywhere. In Helsinki, for instance, the service was tested for a short time in 2014, but the experiment ended soon. What made the service so successful especially in Jyväskylä?

“It was mentally demanding at first. You get into the bus and you are not by yourself; you are in public. The day kind of starts earlier. It starts from when you walk to the bus stop, when you are by the road. Your own car was a private space”.

This, in turn, is a quote from an interview with a participant in the project, in which households aimed at cutting their environmental impact for four weeks (Laakso & Lettenmeier 2016). She was supposed to use the bus instead of a car for commuting, as public transport is a significantly more environmentally friendly option compared to private driving. Together with a number of other trials, the participants were supposed to act as examples of what a sustainable lifestyle could resemble, inspire other people, and provide insights for local policy making on barriers to changing consumption patterns. The participants applied to participate in the project and were eager to change their behaviour. Why, then, were some of these simple changes so difficult?

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Experimentation has leapt onto the Finnish political agenda within the past couple of years and “experiment” has become a trendy word in the political discourse, as well as in research on sustainability transitions. Social, or real-life, experimentation has been identified as a novel way to promote sustainability. Cities and municipalities have adopted experimentation, and the “culture of experimentation”, as a way to engage citizens, renew governance processes, mainstream local innovations and to bring science closer to policy making (Berg et al. 2014; Bulkeley & Castán Broto 2013). There are examples of networks of municipalities both nationally and internationally, from Carbon Neutral Municipalities¹ and Finnish Sustainable Cities² in Finland, to Transition Towns in the UK³, and a global network of C40 cities⁴, to name some. These networks want to show leadership in finding solutions to urgent environmental problems, such as climate change and the overuse of natural resources.

Social experimentation means testing new ideas, technologies and services in collaboration with municipal authorities, researchers, companies and local people. Experiments are often restricted in terms of time, space or people, and the attractiveness lies in the openness, reflexivity and opportunity for learning by doing. The central aim of experiments is to contribute to sustainability transitions – in other words, the aim is to scale up the outcomes and to solve societal challenges (van den Bosch 2010).

In Finland, many positive examples of experimentation already exist. In Jyväskylä, the Towards Resource Wisdom project⁵ was conducted between 2013 and 2015. To a high degree, the project was based on experimentation, and it managed to bring sustainability issues to governance processes. Environmental indicators were more tightly linked to the City Strategy, the sustainability roadmap provided concrete steps towards goals to be achieved by 2050, and improvements have been made in many municipal services. The number of passengers using public transport, for instance, increased by more than 10% in a year, due to the lessons learned from the experiments (Laakso 2017b).

The other side of experimentation is that we cannot know the outcomes beforehand: how do people respond to free public transport trials, and does anyone come for a leftover lunch? How are new services and technologies embedded in the lives of residents, how are the outcomes diffused within and between communities of local people, and how are the lessons learnt adopted in other contexts? Why do some experiments take off, and why do others remain just experiments?

Sustainability experiments are often evaluated on the basis of their environmental performance: how much are the greenhouse gas emissions or the use of natural resources reduced during the experiments. But if we do not pay attention to the people whose everyday lives the experiments intervene in, how can we know if these reductions are not only short-term, or if there are no rebound effects, because the environmental gains in one consumption area lead to increased consumption on some other area.

My dissertation explores these questions and aims to bridge the gap between experimental governance and everyday life. In the three case studies conducted on the Towards Resource Wisdom project in Jyväskylä, I focused on the outcomes of experiments from the perspective of practices and social dynamics maintaining these practices. How are new technologies, services and lifestyles tested and adopted, and how are old practices challenged and abandoned? And, more specifically, what does this mean from the viewpoint of experimentation and experimental governance?

Practice theory steers one’s attention to practices. Our mundane routines – how we eat, travel to work and keep our homes warm – are not just a result of our attitudes or values, but expressions of social phenomena (see Schatzki 2002; Shove 2003; Warde 2005). Having lunch, for example, is a personal act, but this individual performance is nevertheless connected to wider cultural and social norms, standards, and systems of provision. Despite each of us having – or not having – lunch in our own way, we all know what it means, and we might have a daily routine involving a certain time, place and company for eating. Through this daily performance, we maintain the collective practice as an entity.

These mundane practices constitute a fabric of our everyday life. The practice of driving a car, for instance, is formed of elements such as infrastructure and technologies, meanings related to convenience or independence, and forms of competence in following traffic rules. By shared elements, the everyday practices of commuting, shopping, working and cooking form an interconnected system in which changes in one practice also change surrounding practices. Giving up the practice of driving

1 Hiilineutraalit kunnat, <http://www.hinku-foorumi.fi/fi-FI> [accessed 27.8.2017].

2 Elinvoimaa resurssiviisaudesta, <http://www.fisunetwork.fi/fi-FI> [accessed 27.8.2017].

3 Transition Network, <https://transitionnetwork.org/> [accessed 27.8.2017].

4 C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, <http://www.c40.org/> [accessed 27.8.2017].

5 Resurssiviisauksen Jyväskylässä, <http://www.jyvaskyla.fi/resurssiviisauksen/mita/kohti> [accessed 27.8.2017].

changes the ways we do grocery shopping, and we might end up working from home more – which increases our household energy use through many practices.

Practices as entities change slowly: they have a development path, and we all take part in reproducing these practices. They are also maintained by institutions, socio-technical systems and cultural conventions. However, practices do change – private driving has been the main mode of mobility for only relatively few decades, and meat used to be included only in special dinners. People constantly perform practices in different ways and change the ways they do things. The challenge is to steer collective practices onto new, more sustainable pathways, and to accelerate this shift, as we cannot afford to wait for decades.

What is important is that everyday practices are always social. This is not only in the way that we all know what it means to have lunch or that we use Facebook to keep in touch with our friends, but also in the way that the practices are always performed in relation to others. Norms and expectations in the community are not easily challenged and being different from others is often avoided. Instead of focusing on changing individual skills, motivations and behaviours, experiments and interventions should acknowledge the social dynamics and interplay behind each performance, and the normalities that these performances reproduce and maintain.

To get back to the lady having a leftover lunch at the school, her experiences are one key to understanding the emergence and diffusion of new practices. For her, as well as the other diners I interviewed in one of my case studies, a leftover lunch provided a substitute for the practice they had not been able to perform: that of eating together. For lonely people, the lunch provided a healthy meal that they couldn't otherwise afford, or did not have the competence to cook by themselves. The school canteen provided a space for meeting other people, and the lunch event was a reason to leave home every day. As the service was important for them, they told their neighbours about it, and this made the leftover lunch what it is today: a social meal for people in the neighbourhood that also helps to address the problem of food waste.

When it comes to experiences from testing bus use or other more sustainable means of transport, the starting point for experimentation was rather different. The scattered infrastructures, rhythms of the day, and expectations related to car ownership and use have made the car the most convenient option in many places to fulfil daily mobility needs. It is difficult to intervene in the complex of practices formed around the car, and despite efforts to promote public transport the car is still often perceived as a necessity. Trials, such as giving up cars for free travel cards to buses that I analysed in one of my case studies (Laakso 2017c), have a number of outcomes depending on the surrounding practices and communities of practice, despite participants' equal willingness to steer their mobility towards a more sustainable path.

A practice approach to change attempts, by means of experimentation, opens up the dynamics of individual performances and the wider entities of which these performances are part of. This is an important avenue for understanding how changes in practices might emerge, diffuse and stabilise. Although testing new technologies or services might be exciting and fun, engaging in sustainable everyday practices, such as using a bus instead of a car, might not be as straightforward. The practice needs to take root within the community to become stabilised, and the efforts of individual frontrunners alone might not be enough. This is something worth considering, as we need to change our routines collectively and give up unsustainable practices to mitigate climate change and overuse of natural resources.

Practice theory aims to find a mid-point between individualist and structuralist approaches. This does not mean, however, that the role of individuals or structures is neglected. As my case studies have shown, participants are by no means only passive targets of change initiatives, but are active partakers, and they can have a significant role on the outcomes of experiments. They take the experiment and modify it to accommodate it better in the system of practices that comprise their everyday lives. A trial aiming to make bus use more attractive might end up increasing walking and cycling instead, and experiments with a strong environmental focus (such as minimising food waste) might become a daily social event for diners. It is also important to acknowledge that practices are performed within the prevailing system: if the public transportation is insufficient, no monetary incentive, environmental motivation or new skills are enough to establish a routine of bus use.

The notion of practices as constellations of elements helps us to think about consumption as a whole, instead of targeting only separate elements. Our food practices or everyday mobility are not only

about the materials, such as food, vehicles and spaces for eating, or being competent in knowing how to prepare meals or use the bus. The results from the case studies showed that meanings and emotions are crucial in the process of change. However, these elements of practices are often underestimated in experimentation. This may lead to only partial understanding of the impacts of experiments and their potential to trigger changes.

The field of experimental governance is becoming more and more diverse: the experiments are not only about introducing technical innovations such as rooftop solar panels and their joint procurement, or financial incentives for buying electric cars. Experiments also cover a variety of social innovations and new ways to promote existing services.

In Turku and Tampere, The Finnish National Railway Company is experimenting with a Door-to-Door service that enables all local public transport to be used with one ticket⁶. In Ikaalinen, elderly people living by themselves get visits from a cook, who prepares a dinner and provides some company over a meal⁷, and in Helsinki, students live with ageing people in exchange for housing⁸. In Vantaa, the Sustainable Meal concept aims to promote sales of more environmentally friendly meals at events and in restaurants, and in Jyväskylä, schools promote sustainable eating by serving local food and organising leftover lunches. The public transport authority has conducted tens of trials to work out how to make bus use more attractive to users, and housing companies promote community spirit in apartment houses by involving residents in decision making. Climate families⁹ and Future households¹⁰ have demonstrated sustainable lifestyles in Jyväskylä, Joensuu and Lempäälä, among other places.

These are only a few examples of the experiments that aim to promote sustainability at the local level and happen outside the traditional channels and top-down regulation, but in co-operation with municipal authorities, organisations and residents.

As the number and variety of experiments is growing, there is also a growing need for analysis of the outcomes of experimentation. Providing practical frameworks for design and evaluation is also important, because not all people conducting experiments have the expertise that is required. Organisers and other stakeholders should consider what they are trying to achieve by conducting an experiment, how it will contribute to sustainability aims, and what expectations different groups of people will have towards the experiment.

Our study on climate governance experiments shows that not all experimental processes follow the same steps, and that they can still contribute to transitions (Laakso et al. 2017). Each experiment can be valuable as such, whether the aim is to gain more knowledge, change behaviour, develop the ways municipal services are organised, or to create a model that can be replicated easily in other contexts. Figuring out what the goals of an experiment are, and what it is to be used for will help in setting the conditions for success. Vague aims like “contributing to carbon neutrality” are easier to achieve if some concrete steps in terms of environmental performance and other means are stated on the way.

In addition, there can often be different expectations for the desired outcomes. The municipal authorities may be aiming to develop local governance processes; funders are keen to know the mainstream potential of new products and services; and other stakeholders are interested to learn for future initiatives. For the participants, scaling up or disseminating the lessons learned, or even achieving the maximal reductions in carbon footprints, might not be the main aim of the experimentation. For the participants, the issues of testing new, exciting options, finding solutions to everyday challenges, and having new experiences, might be of most importance. Acknowledging these different positions might lead to more fruitful learning among all actors.

“We never ended up using the buses or car sharing during the project. But actually, we started to plan a co-housing project here in Jyväskylä, with shared cars and spaces and so on. I realised that we need a community to do sustainable things, and I decided to establish one.”

6 Matkusta mutkattomasti ovelta ovelle, <https://www.vr.fi/cs/vr.fi/matkusta-ovelta-ovelle> [accessed 27.8.2017].

7 Pikkukunnan kokkikokeilu tuo ruuan tuoksun vanhuksen kotiin ja haastaa jätiteittitöt – Tampereella tarvittaisiin sata kokkia, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-9617192> [accessed 27.8.2017].

8 Ei vain Hollannissa – Helsingissäkin vanukset ja asunnottomat nuoret saman katon alle, <http://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/art-200002817383.html> [accessed 27.8.2017].

9 Ilmastoperheet: vähähiilisen arjen edelläkävijät esimerkkinä muille asukkaille, <http://www.ilmankos.fi/ilmastoperheet> [accessed 27.8.2017].

10 Tulevaisuuden kotitalous, <https://www.sitra.fi/hankkeet/tulevaisuuden-kotitalous/#ajankohtaista> [accessed 27.8.2017].

Experiments are not an all-powerful solution to mitigate climate change or other environmental problems, but they can be a new tool in the search for means to trigger the movement of practices onto a more sustainable path. At their best, experiments can address multiple issues simultaneously, as in the case of the leftover lunch service. Or, as in the case of public transport experiments, they may not end up as expected, but nevertheless contribute to improvements in mobility in the region. Or they can demonstrate sustainable lifestyles, foster familiarity of environmental issues, and provide the seeds for change for the future, as the previous quote from a participant illustrated, when I interviewed her six months after the end of the experiment (Laakso, *forthcoming*).

This dissertation has brought to fore the participants' perspective, by focusing on their experiences at the intersection of everyday practices and the experiments intervening them.

To conclude, everyday life is a complex system of practices that are being constantly negotiated in relation to the social context, material requirements, and experimentation that brings a new kind of deliberation and environmental awareness into the performances of practices. Even if sustainability transitions require fundamental systemic changes, studying performances can open up the contextual factors and micro-politics that have relevance, especially in the aims relating to local climate governance. A practice approach provides a theoretical toolkit with which to analyse the elements each practice consists of, the links between practices and the path dependencies that these organisations maintain. These dynamics can help to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the outcomes of experiments.

Dissertation available online at: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/185419>, summary in Finnish at: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/sglaakso/milta-kokeilukulttuuri-nayttaa-arjen-kaytantojen-nakokulmasta/>

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