

The role of discourses in a transformation of social practices towards sustainability

The case of meat eating related practices

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Social practice theories challenge individual behaviour change policies, but the way much of practice theoretical research is carried out in policy contexts does not necessarily challenge what lies at the basis of many unsustainable practices: often somewhat hidden paradigms, worldviews and values incompatible with a transformation towards sustainability. Discourses, and their boundaries, define what is deemed possible, what the range of issues and their solutions are. By exploring the connections between elements of social practices and discourses - where paradigms, worldviews and values are represented through cognitive frames – this thesis develops, firstly, a conceptual approach to help enable purposive change in unsustainable social practices. This is done in an interdisciplinary manner integrating not just social practice theory literature, but also other literatures, such as social psychology, cognitive linguistics, philosophy, critical discourse analysis and sustainability science itself. Secondly, the thesis takes meat and the current meat system as a central theme. Radical transformation in meat eating related practices is arguably necessary, as explored in the thesis in detail, yet complex psychological, ideological and power related mechanisms currently slow down and inhibit change.

Notable for the practice-discourse framework is that it allows a focus, on the one hand, on existing *strategic ignorance* of conflicting values, emotions and knowledges, and on the other hand, on the potential for *discursive consciousness* of practices, and their related (conflicting) values, emotions and knowledges. The wider, the more varied and in-depth discourses there are, the more difficult strategic ignorance is to maintain. Discursive consciousness can create *discursively open practices* which may be well established and discursively dominant in a society, but nonetheless, increasingly questioned, creating tensions and potential openings to different ways of going about the practices. Especially significant in such discursively open practices can be different and new meanings replacing, or co-occurring alongside old meanings. Discourses disseminate new meanings and potential new ways of doing things to a wider social group or society. Discursive consciousness can be seen as a key concept for purposive change. Further, it may better enable change in the context of *distributed agentive power* residing within the practice-discourse arrangement. A positive feedback loop may emerge between collective individual action creating political change, and political change changing both individual and societal values.

Taking the widened, and interdisciplinary version of a social practice theory approach to meat eating related practices, the thesis examines discourses related to the *new meatways*, firstly flexitarianism,

and secondly, eating cell-based or plant-based meats, or insects. Cognitive frames can work as a focus of practice theoretical analysis especially due to their connections to values, emotions and knowledge on the side of practices. Discourse data can be used to investigate some of the underlying issues to do with controversial practices, or practices that are established, but being questioned. Discourses can reveal much about the values, emotions, knowledge, paradigms, and worldviews linked to social practices, as well as potential coping mechanisms, such as strategic ignorance of related conflicts. The second research goal for the thesis is to answer a more specific question related to the new meatways and discourses around them potentially enabling a purposive transformation. This is done by analysing recent online discourses from the UK-based Guardian newspaper.

The analyzed data suggests that meat eating related practices can be seen as discursively open, especially due to the new meatways offering new solutions, as compared to vegetarianism and veganism. Discourses regarding cell-based or plant-based meat or insects push the boundaries of what meat is, and seeing strong flexitarianism as a realistic meatway helps imagine a solution to finding sufficient future protein for the world. Further, discourses around the new meatways can reveal somewhat hidden frames that have supported existing practices in the last decades. Two conceptual metaphors present in the data nail down well two issues regarding transforming the meat system towards radically less, or no intensive production, with the goal of radically lower negative impacts. The first metaphor, the *hungry beast*, addresses the still very present meat demand paradigm or frame in need of critical reassessment. The new meats (cell-based, plant-based meat and insects) are partially functioning in this frame with the underlining assumption that they are necessary to satisfy the starkly increasing demand for meat. The second metaphor of a *journey* illustrates how sustainable ways of eating protein, including some more conventional meat, can be realized. When framing meat eating and its transformation using this metaphor, different meatways are seen as points on a continuum, where many possible journeys along that continuum can be made. In this way even more radical changes can be facilitated. Finally, compared to the old meatways, the new meatways can better align values related to sustainability with values often being prioritized in daily food related practices, such as providing for family, convenience, tradition, freedom, politeness, and pleasure. The new meatways therefore offer a way to expand the discourse, away from the conventional animal-based meat vs. no meat dichotomy.

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