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Tellarini, Chiara; Christensen, Toke Haunstrup

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Learning to consume less energy through strategies of sufficiency

By Chiara Tellarini and Toke Haunstrup Christensen, Aalborg University

Energy consumed in households constitutes a large toll on the total of the carbon emissions. For this reason, it is important to limit everyday consumption through strategies of sufficiency, i.e., bringing the global consumption of resources within the carrying capacity of the planetary eco-systems, while at the same time ensuring a fair resource distribution within and between generations (Spangenberg & Lorek 2019). Sufficiency needs to be addressed especially in countries figuring amongst the main carbon emitters (Wilhite 2013). However, this is a difficult task to pursue, as energy-consuming practices are taken-for-granted, often perceived as non-negotiable and as necessary to achieve wellbeing, which is constantly defined and re-defined through the performance of everyday practices. In this abstract, we aim to combine learning and practice theories to improve understandings on how changes to more sustainable – and sufficient – lifestyles can be pursued in people’s everyday lives, without them experiencing sharp losses in wellbeing. We argue that attempts to reduce consumption involve processes of learning: how is learning involved in the development, adoption and performance of less energy-consuming practices?

Based on a literature review and theoretical discussion, we claim that promoting sufficiency implies changes in how people “practice wellbeing” in their everyday lives. We draw on a practice theoretical perspective conceptualising a practice as a “manifold of doings and sayings” organized by heterogeneous elements such as “rules, practical and general understandings, and prescribed or acceptable ends, projects, tasks, and emotions” (Schatzki 2017: 31). Practices and their elements constitute peoples’ daily lives through discourses, actions, beliefs, worldviews, as well as objects and meanings.

Practice theories also help to get insights into how people learn in their everyday life (Schatzki 2017): we approach learning as it occurs through the participation in practices, as a combination of “cognitive and bodily processes” (Lave 1993). This approach offers ideas on how practices can change: in fact, learning can actively engage people in changing the performance of certain practices and so, possibly in changing practices themselves. Shove and Walker (2010: 475) remind us that the practices that are “enduring and relatively stable” persist because “they are consistently and faithfully reproduced, not because they have achieved some kind of closure”. In practices’ reproduction and performance, Wenger (2010: 181) explains that people contribute to the creation of meaning, and practices themselves are an “active negotiation of meaning”: “this meaning-making person is not just a cognitive entity. It is a whole person, with a body, a heart, a brain, relationships, aspirations, all the aspects of human experience, all involved in the negotiation of meaning. [...] Learning is not just acquiring skills and information; it is becoming a certain person – a knower [...]”. Similarly, Schatzki (2017: 28) writes that learning a new practice implies taking over a way of being, which implicates something more than the mere acquisition of knowledge: in fact, “it also encompasses the acquisition of habits, feelings, normative convictions and self-understandings”. In this sense, learning is understood as a process where individuals can change old practices and acquire new ones – involving new knowledge, but also new identities, new ways of (well)being and so new ways of consuming energy.

Achieving sufficiency necessarily implies thorough changes in how we perform our everyday lives, and for that reason, it is important to develop approaches that involve citizens as active participants in creating this transition. Here, a better understanding of the role that learning can play for how we change practices can be decisive for ensuring the transition to “energy light” ways of living without critical losses in wellbeing.

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