

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LIFESTYLE GOVERNANCE: A RESEARCH FIELD

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We eat, drink and game for a number of reasons: in order to fill up time, to manage stress, to dampen emotions, to punish ourselves – or just to create space for fun activities in our lives. This is our prerogative as prosperous people in consumer society. Our behaviour is supported by commercial promises, by a seemingly endless availability of products and consumption opportunities, by the attractions of defining and understanding ourselves through acts of consumption. At the same time, these very same societies are involved in a process of negotiating the limits for what are defined as excessive and problematic variants of these behaviours. The core of Pekka's work is situated in the intersection of these circumstances. This is also the research focus of the *University of Helsinki Centre for Research on Addiction, Control and Governance (CEACG)* – a research group that Pekka planned for a long time, but would finally come to found in the year 2011.

Figure 1. below is a simplified illustration the CEACG-research in four overlapping dimensions. These dimensions are basic building blocks for understanding governance of people and behaviour distinguished as matters to be transformed, normalized or prevented by (collective) interventions of some sort. Dimension A. concerns behaviours and people viewed as 'the governed'; B. concerns system structures and institutions in which we operate when we address these matters; C. concerns the modes and formats of control and governance aimed to prevent or change behaviour; and, D. concerns the symbolic articulation of what the problems are all about and how they should be dealt with.

In the CEACG-research, all dimensions of Figure 1. are seen as connected, even if research tasks have typically come to emphasize the different dimensions to different degrees. Comparisons between countries and systems have been of special importance as these offer explanations to different types of setups and relations. Many times, the cross-country comparisons have been decisive for drawing conclusions regarding what the different policy and

governance alternatives offer. In the next I will suggest how these four dimensions can be traced back to previous work by Pekka.

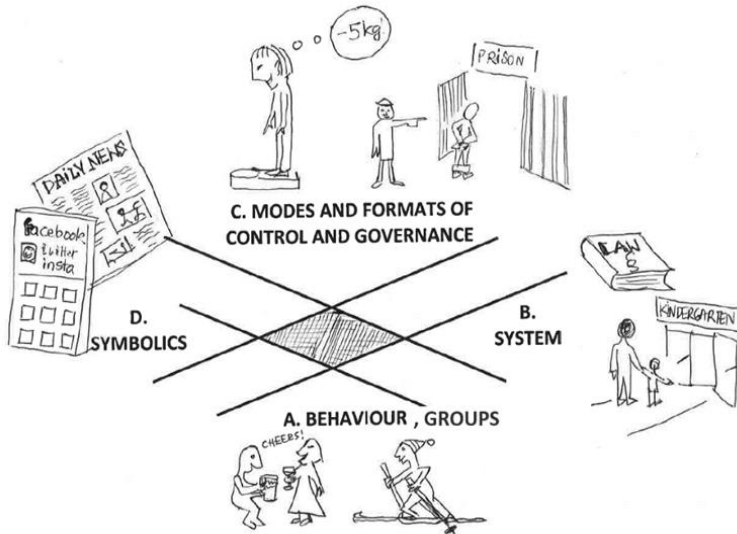


Figure 1. The construction of (A) 'the governed', through (B) frameworks of a system, its (C) modes and formats of governance and control, and all of this as part of a space provided by (D) cultural constructs of realities (Hellman 2015).

HABITS AND ADDICTION

In its simplest everyday sense, the concept of *habit* refers to action that is common practice, custom, convention, mannerism or routine. These are some of the words in the first two lines of the definition provided by the Collins Compact Thesaurus online dictionary. The third line lists synonyms with a more negative ring to them: 'addiction, dependence, fixation, obsession, weakness'. The word 'habit' is interesting precisely because it covers both of these aspects: habit as 'habitual', as repetitive action, as a typical way of doing and being, but also habit as in repetitive behaviours that are often viewed as problematic in one way or another. This latter cluster of significations is often attached to social and health-related potentially problematic behaviour such as drinking,

smoking, eating disorders, drug use and gambling (see e.g. Fraser et al. 2014).

When it comes to the study of dimension A. in Figure 1. (*behaviour, groups*) Pekka's work on pub visitors and middle class drinking practices is an excellent example of how the meaning-making of certain habits and practices works as a definer of a group's position in view of *system, governance, and symbolics* (dimensions B-C-D). (Sulkunen et al 1997; Sulkunen 1992). In these analyses Pekka and colleagues pointed out some ways in which control policy measures were conceptualized and justified in view of orders of competence. The interviewed drinkers would typically perceive some groups as less able and less competent and hence more in need of outside control measures. Certain views on societal order and the drinkers own position in this order were actively channelled in their concepts of competence and freedom related to drinking.

This path of investigations has since been followed up in Pekka's team for example in recent investigations into how smokers of different backgrounds attach significations to their habit and abilities to quit (Katainen 2006; 2011); how teenagers from different countries perceive different types of drinking (Hellman et al. 2013; 2010; Rolando & Katainen 2014), and most recently, how gamers of online massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) view themselves as part of nerd cultures dividing their lives between online and offline whereabouts (Majamäki & Hellman 2015; Hellman et al 2016). In all of these studies, cultural contexts are displayed through the meaning-making of action that challenge rationality or everyday norms and rituals, creating tensions or dilemmas between different values in societies.

Substance use, smoking, food intake, gambling, and other potentially addictive and problematic repetitive practices are interesting behaviours, not the least because they often start out in joyful, pleasurable and stimulating leisure activities but are known to cause problems in their widespread, excessive or compulsive variants. Thus, a shift in signification occurs along the way as the habit intensifies and accumulates -- a shift which Pekka has framed as a shift in semiosis (Rantala & Sulkunen, 2012; Borch 2013)

Habits are thus understood as both voluntary and involuntary, changeable and constant. In the signification of voluntary choices, habits are viewed as preferred among other kinds or modes of activities by autonomous people in consumer society. Seen as versatile the habits automatically also entail ideas of adjustments,

ways of controlling or restraining them. By some sort of decision-making and power exercising outside or inside the concerned individual the behaviour is envisioned as normalized or neutralized in a desirable direction (Jager 2003). At the same time, habits very much confine autonomy: habits control perceptions by limiting what we are exposed to and what we integrate into our ways of thinking. They are destined by cultural and consequential circumstances and based on interaction of experience, human proclivities, and the social and natural environment that are also affected by social processes (Todorova 2014). Some problematic habits are difficult to control as they are strongly conditioned and upheld in cultural grammar and societal rationales.

GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENTALITY

The study of lifestyle-related policies in a welfare state framing presents researchers with many tensions regarding societal prioritisations between different worths and principles. In welfare societies, typically, prosperity is high enough both for the exercise of grand consumption and for the existence of systems and institutions for preventing and dealing with the problems that arise from grand consumption. When it comes to societal *systems* (B) and *modes of control and governance* (C), an important trait in Pekka's work is the ways in which idea world setups underpin systems and modes of governance (Sulkunen 2009). He often returns to tensions between different worths, such as the tension between intimacy and autonomy (e.g. Sulkunen 2009), the paradoxes of the concept of addiction (see Sulkunen 2015) or basic anthropological notions of nature and culture (Sulkunen 2002). In line with Pekka's approach of entangled meaning and structure, a great research interest of his has been how professions and institutions internalize views on addiction problems in different cultures. This has been studied in several country comparisons, such as the Academy-funded Images and Theories of Addiction consortium (IMAGES 2007-2010, see Egerer 2014). Studies in this area – that is the kind of studies that identify value-based tensions between interest parties in a system and flesh out how justifications and institutional culture bring about different emphasis -- are seldom as thoroughly and systematically completed nor as far-reaching in their argumentation as the work conducted and led by Pekka.

For example, in the book ‘Broken Spirits’ (Sulkunen et al 2000), Pekka and colleagues were able to capture the Nordic alcohol policy at a time of great transitions, and show how ideas and power structures were entangled, discerning structural consequences as well as a political zeitgeist that would underpin the changes. More recently, Pekka has returned to a theme that was already discussed thoroughly in the 2006 book on the flipside of “the project society” (Rantala & Sulkunen, 2006), namely the one of how new role divisions between the non-governmental and the state sector has come to change the Nordic welfare state project. This has been a focus for example in both of his latest Academy-funded projects: the Public Sector in Transition (JULKI 2011-2014), and GPE: Gambling Policy in European Welfare States (2014-2018). Moreover, several recent and forthcoming doctoral dissertations stemming from Pekka’s PhD seminar and the CEACG pertain to public task division aspects in addressing and governing vulnerable groups in the welfare state system (e.g. Kouvonon 2013; Kotanen 2012; Perälä 2012; Alanko forthcoming 2016; Rönkä forthcoming).

The crossing of the grey area in the middle of Figure 1. in terms of tying rationales and ideas to social interventions would not be possible without discerning the ways in which governance is integrated in humans, institutions, culture, and, the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed (see Shah et al. 2007). One of the most crucial theoretical links for this purpose has of course been the Foucauldian concept of governmentality.

The governmentality literature has been important in facilitating a conceptual bridge between conceptions of what individuals and populations do in relation to logics of adherent modes of control and governance. Governmentality theories allow for a manifestation of the fact that habits and lifestyles cannot be understood without an understanding of the rationales underpinning their regulation. The accountability of collective action must be formulated within certain understandings of what the problems imply for society.

Traditionally, when patterns of behaviour are tagged as societal problems an orientation back onto the right path is envisioned through the exercise of some sort of pastoral power that guides people’s conduct as members of a population organizing them as a political and civil collective in the same way as a shepherd who cares for his flock (see Foucault 1982). Strategies such as warning texts on packs of cigarettes or alcohol taxes are typically justified

and carried out with a view of a collective responsibility of the health and social well-being of the flock.

A crucial claim in the governmentality literature has been that modes and rationales of pastoral governance are changing (Pekka's thesis has e.g. been the one of a shift to epistolary modes, see Sulkunen 2009). The governmentality research has continued to develop its core theoretical concepts related to lifestyle governance, for example in terms of technologies of self, lifestyle politics, biopolitics, and neuropolitics – all highly topical in a digital and global era (see e.g. Mayer 2015; Rose 2009). In relation to some of these endeavours, Pekka has at times been rather sceptical as he sometimes finds explanatory models 'too neat'. For example, he has pointed out that the critical medicalization literature often makes errors when designating trends: seen in a functional governance perspective, some trends are much more moral than medical to their character.

Due to his well-known sharpness when drawing relationships between conceptual and societal change, Pekka recently became involved as an advisor in a Norwegian project regarding the financialization of social welfare (2012-2013). Here, the liberalisation of people's access to credit was studied as fundamentally changing the ways in which social welfare and risks are produced and distributed. As part of this project, Pekka made a critical observation with great relevance in view of the dominating discourse by social scientists of today. By analysing biographies by well-known Western neoliberalists, and observing their complete lack of an articulated ideology-based goal-orientation, he showed, among other things, that the concept of neoliberalism is impossible to disentangle from policies and institutions in historical situations. If this circumstance was to be properly integrated in work by social scientists of today, it would involve a great deal of more precision and concretizing for example in studies concerning the reorganization and reprioritisation of the welfare state.

THE MEANING-MAKING OF LIFESTYLES

In order to become a target of prevention and policy strategies, habits and behavioural patterns must become widely recognized and tagged as problems. Over the years, Pekka has come to pay a great deal of interest to the ways in which lifestyle-related behaviours are articulated as problems in cultural material.

In the area of cultural signification (*symbolics*, dimension D. in Figure 1), Pekka's work on alcohol in films has been path-breaking, showing how culture upholds and reproduces images of the right and the wrong, the good and the bad, and all nuances in between (Falk & Sulkunen 1983; see also Room, this book). Pekka has continued this path studying articulations of gambling problems in online discussion forums (Rantala & Sulkunen 2012), and addiction phenomena as construed in films (Sulkunen 2007). In line with his Images-theory (Sulkunen 2015, see also Beccaria & Rolando in this book) concerning the importance of the cultural constructs of the problems the CEACG research has produced several studies on media portrayals of addiction (e.g. Hellman 2010, Egerer and Rantala 2015). The connection between idea world setups and the technologies for addressing the problems is also integrated in his research method called the Reception Analytical Group Interview method (RAGI) (see Sulkunen and Egerer 2009). This method employs film clips as stimulation of discussions in focus groups.

Even though Pekka has many times mentioned his ambivalence of the opaque concept of *lifestyles*, this is a concept that holds great relevance for understanding his approach to the study of cultural signification. Lifestyle is 'a style of life', a typical way of being and acting over time. The 'style' may depend on any possible relevant circumstance, but what it means needs to be spelled out. And the ways in which it is spelled out will inevitably attract the interest of a semiotician.

One can perhaps say that in the social sciences the most important meaning-based logic of how 'style' is articulated has thus far been the one of uneven resources attached to status and power in society. Roughly speaking one can see two main social scientific research domains concerned with the focus of inequality dimensions of lifestyles – and Pekka's work does not really fit neatly into any of them. His work is neither situated in an epidemiological paradigm that maps socioeconomic factors correlating with alcohol use, overweight, diabetes, gambling debts, nor is it a neat fit with the dominating sociological traits on consumption and status in the field of lifestyles, consumption, culture and leisure. The European Sociology Association consumption network, in which Pekka originally was a driving force (see also Warde; Scott, in this book), has, over the years, gathered researchers interested in culture and consumption, some of which are following a Bourdieusian taste-distinction-status

manual, but also others, who perform different kind of meaning-based qualitative inquiries into problematic behaviour tied to different types of larger theoretical frameworks (e.g. globalization, risk, consumer society).

Despite of the inclusive nature of the consumption network, Pekka's researcher personae may simply be too dynamic and creative for fitting into existing boxes, or staying in these boxes in long periods. The closest concept that I find that could describe the focus of inquiries concerned with a cultural grammar of lifestyles (Figure 1) is the Foucauldian term of *dispositif* (Foucault, 1980). It refers to a sort of network of institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures, which enhance and maintain the governing ontologies and adherent exercise of power in different matters. In the question of lifestyle politics, the *dispositif* can be seen as tied to master narratives of what contemporary life should contain and bring about (see e.g. Fraser et al. 2014; Mayes 2015). The *dispositif* changes with different emphasis on its different parts in line with changes in attitudes, societal prioritisations and preferential explanations on the concerned matters. One of Pekka's greatest contributions to sociology has been that he has shown how understanding the ways in which societies and cultures articulate the *dispositifs* underpinning lifestyle-related questions will – inevitably -- give insight into the overall conceptual material within which political realities operate.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC SECTOR RESEARCH

Public health and epidemiology – and lately also psy sciences -- are the knowledge resources and frameworks most often applied in policy-making concerning addictions and lifestyles. These have typically exposed associations between certain habits such as smoking, nutrition, alcohol, on the one hand, to health status, levels of mortality, and societal costs of ill health, on the other. Globally speaking, this kind of research can be seen as the mainstream knowledge production underpinning societal action aimed at reducing lifestyle-related burden of disease and encouraging wellbeing among populations (Hellman et al. 2016). It is simply not possible to perform social scientific research in the area of addictions and lifestyles without being familiar with this literature.

As a concept *public health* functions both as a descriptor of a status of health among populations ('the health of the public'), and as a descriptor of an approach ('seeing health issues on the level of populations'). The latter connotation especially embeds the field's aims to deal, prevent and manage diseases, injuries and other health conditions through surveillance and through promotion of healthy behaviours, communities and environments. The institutionalized and publicly funded so called 'sector research' concerning lifestyle problems have in the Nordic countries been a natural part of the welfare project. In Finland, the most famous public research-based public health project has no doubt been the flagship North Karelia Project, which was launched in 1972, in order to reduce the exceptionally high coronary heart disease mortality rates in the North Karelia by adjustments of nutrition, smoking, physical activity, use of alcohol and psychosocial stress.

Around the same time as the launch of the North Karelia project, Pekka started appear in the files of the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies (see Simpura, this book) and would continue as part of the Alko-based research team that moved to the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) in 1996. (later on merged into the National Institute for Health and Welfare, THL). Pekka's own researcher background is thus long and strong in sector research making him a rather rare case in current Finnish academic sociology. At the same time, his own approaches, which draw on semiotics and anthropology, makes him an 'odd bird' in the mainstream public health paradigm. This double 'oddity position' might have contributed to the reflective position of Pekka as a scholar, perhaps supporting him to boldly move between fields and undertake complicated research tasks.

Pekka has a reflexive *modus operandi*, always critically scrutinizing the system of which he is part. When it comes to the field of addiction research, he has remarked on some conceptual somersaults required by statistical approaches to the study of physical or mental health in relation to lifestyles. Due to the signification of health issues as automatically tied to human bodies, public health typically imitates problem aetiology logics from the single unit level (broken leg) to the macro level (amount of persons with broken legs). The social problem ontology is in this tradition in its basic variant therefore the frequency of the problem in a population. Perhaps one of the most interesting developments to which Pekka has returned on several occasions concerns the

penetration of the concepts of dependency and addiction, which traditionally describe an individual's 'disorder of the will' (Berrios & Gili 1995) as diagnoses for mapping prevalence and need of treatment and interventions in populations (see e.g. Room et al. 2015; Taylor et al. 2016)

The new uses of psy-concepts in significations of societal phenomena, such as the addiction concept, has invited social scientists to incorporate a view on societies as organisms plagued with 'social pathologies' (see Furedi 2004). From the point of view of lifestyles that violate social norms and have a negative effect on society the meltdown of a system serves as a justification for controlling and adjusting breakages with normal and normative ways/styles of life. In their extension the social pathologies typically connote some sort of risky transgression such as in the case of illicit drug use, or a moral decay of society caused by pathological debt or overweight. Something is wrong in parts of the organism and it needs to get fixed in order for the entity to work.

Pekka's interest in the addiction concept is a natural continuum to his interest in tensions at the heart of current societies, both from the public health perspective, and from the perspective of a societal organism with a changeable dispositif. Pekka keeps returning to the question of how society can function in line with its responsibilities and aims of accountability, and his interest in this question is spurred by critical reflection of the different epistemologies surrounding the governance of habits and lifestyles.

THE FUTURE

In the above I have tried to flesh out the approaches so typical for Pekka's work. I have traced the CEACG group to a tradition that Pekka represents – a tradition that he has created and also secured for the future. I have suggested some circumstances surrounding his approaches such as the governmentality literature and the continuous critical reflection underpinning his work and his 'researcher personae'. Many, many other traits that may explain the phenomenon of Pekka are left out from my account.

Intellectual mobility is often due to a high level of creativity. Lately, the individualized Finnish perceptions of addiction problems, and the concept of medicalization have puzzled Pekka. Also, last year – seemingly, out of the blue -- he suddenly published a piece on the Kurdish question in the prominent *Telos* journal (Sulkunen 2015). While not all of us are as creative as Pekka, the

ontology and epistemology of the CEACG – created, reproduced and continuously reinvented by Pekka – offers a platform for any curious scholar to become dynamic enough for functioning in their own paradigm, just as Pekka himself. This is a platform steady enough and sensitive enough to integrate new questions in a changing society.

Seen in this light, the future of the CEACG can only be destined to contain great new endeavours.

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