

Sustainable Consumption research: Where should we go from here?

Anders Rhiger Hansen, Tullia Jack, Senja Laakso and Nicklas Neuman (alphabetical)

Paper for the discussion session 'Citizenship and consumption in the climate emergency - the role of everyday life in social change' at ESA midterm RN5. This follows the first workshop, held online 2-3 April 2020, in a series of workshops on 'Sustainable consumption, everyday life and social change' for early career researchers in the Nordic region (blogs.helsinki.fi/nonesco/).

Introduction: Consumption in the era of climate emergency

As the international community is working toward seventeen goals for “sustainable development”, the scientific community is faced with a paradox: directing attention toward the realization of these goals while simultaneously scrutinizing them. This problem is at the core of this discussion paper, with a focus on sustainable consumption.

The products and services people buy, use and dispose of have a direct, or indirect, negative impact on the environment (Jackson, 2014) – most consumption is currently unsustainable. Humanity is exceeding “planetary boundaries” (Rockström et al., 2009), politicians declare a [climate emergency](#) and the “[climate clocks](#)” show that we have only seven years left to prevent catastrophic levels of climate change, while millions of people are still unable to fulfil even the most basic needs (Gough, 2017). Realigning patterns of consumption in more sustainable directions is increasingly high on the agenda in politics, research and civil society. However, despite the popularity of the concept, what sustainable consumption actually means and entails is still ambiguous (Evans, 2019).

In this short piece, we pose three interlinked continuums: acquisition vs appropriation; collective vs individual; and consuming less vs consuming differently. We hope that by discussing them with other sociologists of consumption, we can get a better understanding of where we have been, where we are going and where we should go.

Continuums in sustainable consumption research

(1) **Acquisition versus appropriation**: Economic consumption, purchasing goods and services, or the economic ‘demand-side’ considers the resources needed to produce and deliver a product to the point of sale, as well as access of consumers to these products and services. Resource consumption using material resources in everyday life considers rather the habitual practices leading to use of resources. These spheres entail very different material and social resources. Production and consumption do not always have strong and direct interactions, while satisfying similar needs often have varying production processes and thus ecological footprints (e.g. using fossil fuels or renewable energy to achieve thermal comfort in homes). Interactions “*should be studied as an empirical matter and analysed in terms of the architecture of the configuration in different systems (electricity, agro-food, mobility)*” (McMeekin et al., 2019: 2).

(2) **Individual behaviour** (e.g. choices, preferences and attitudes) versus **collective practices** (e.g. social conventions and expectations). This distinction stems particularly from the theories of social practice, criticizing efforts to nudge individual behaviour, modify preferences and encourage individuals to make sustainable choices (e.g. Keller et al., 2016). Focusing on individuals contra collectives steers the attention from particular rational choices to patterns of practice. It is indeed difficult for individuals to step outside conventional systems of

consumption, or even to perceive the 'conventional' nature of self-evident and 'normal' customs (Heiskanen et al., 2010). This continuum in the Nordic context also considers collective purchasing (e.g. public services), a hitherto underexplored research field (Bauer et al., 2018). If we want to question existing conventions, a deliberative and inclusive process of problematizing current lifestyles, as well as technologies, infrastructures, social norms and power relations maintaining them, is needed.

(3) **Consuming differently (efficiency) versus consuming less (sufficiency)**: the normative concept of sufficiency, also referred to as 'enoughness' or 'strong sustainable consumption', has gained increasing attention, as it has been recognised that "*the levels rather than the patterns of consumption are decisive for environmental degradation*" (Spangenberg and Lorek, 2019). Consumption corridors is a term used to illustrate the "safe operating space", with minimum standards for a good life in the inner ring, and maximum use of resources on the outer ring (Di Giulio and Fuchs, 2014). These approaches challenge the efficiency-oriented ideas on how 'better' technologies allow present, or even escalating, levels of consumption, reminding us that efficiency is a relative, rather than absolute concept. They also highlight the (intra- and intergenerationally) equal distribution of resources. Although the goal of decoupling economic growth and natural resource use has been on the policy agenda for decades, the development has been rather modest (Kjaer et. al., 2019). However, there has been little effort in actually defining minimum and maximum levels of consumption.

Where should we go from here?

Researchers like Shove, Welch and Southerton call for a radical societal change to address the scale of the global challenge of climate change (e.g. Shove, 2014; Welch and Southerton, 2019). Based on the three interlinked continuums presented above as well as the discussions among Nordic early-career researchers, we want to ask where we should go and how should we define sustainable consumption?

- **Whose consumption should be under concern?** How to address the interlinkages between individual and collective consumption (i.e. consumption of municipalities, public and private organizations, food service companies etc.) and their implications for sustainability goals? Or should we rather focus on individual consumers and their role in mitigating climate change?
- **What would it mean for sustainable consumption research to focus solely on sufficiency** (consuming less)? Moreover, the global circulation of goods, services and people shows how many countries in Global South are dependent on consumerist practices in Global North (e.g. tourism, fashion industry). How to end unsustainable consumption practices while avoiding social disruption of those dependent on these practices?
- How could sociology of consumption illustrate **what radically different lifestyles would look like**? What kind of imaginaries are needed and how to make them a serious alternative to present consumer lifestyles also in political discussions? The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how, on one hand, what is normal can change in a blink of an eye while, on the other hand, societies are strongly committed to preserving the present opportunities to consume (e.g. by support packages for polluting industries, animal-based agriculture and travel business). Furthermore, drawing on conceptual discussions during the workshop, what do we even mean with 'radical'? Is it first and foremost a temporal term (alluding to something happening in a narrow time span) or a content-based term (substantial change, possibly over generations).
- **Is radical shift to sustainable consumption even possible** in a democratic society? If yes, within which time frame and with which means? If even the global pandemic fails to instigate radical societal change, what is needed for sustainable consumption and how to ensure that the shift takes place while "no one is left behind"?

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the ‘Sustainable consumption, everyday life and social change’ workshop participants for inspiring discussions and their contribution in developing this discussion paper: Agnese Bankovska, Patricia Eustachio Colombo, Francesco Colona, Nils Ehrenberg, Freja Friis, Tuija Kajoskoski, Sarah Kollnig, Marius Korsnes, Laura Krumm, Eliisa Kylkilahti, Line Valdorff Madsen, Daria Morozova, Anne Sofie Møller, Anne Nielsen, Aleksi Ojala, Jenny Rinkinen, Maria Sandberg, Josefine Løndorf Sarkez-Knudsen, Jesse Schrage and Carolin Zorell.

References

- Bauer, B., Watson, D. and Gylling, A. C. 2018. Sustainable Consumption and Production. An analysis of Nordic progress towards SDG12, and the way ahead. Nordic Council of Ministers, online: <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1231011/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Di Giulio, A. and Fuchs, D. A. 2014. Sustainable Consumption Corridors: Concept, Objections, and Responses. *Gaia* 23(S1), 184–192. Online: <https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.23.S1.6>
- Evans, D. M. 2019. What is consumption, where has it been going, and does it still matter? *Sociological Review* 67(3), 499–517.
- Gough, I. 2017. *Heat, Greed and Human Need. Climate Change, Capitalism and Sustainable Wellbeing*. Edward Elgar Publishing
- Heiskanen, E., Johnson, M., Robinson, S., et al. 2010. Low-carbon communities as a context for individual behavioural change. *Energy Policy* 38(12), 7586–7595.
- Jackson, T. 2014. “Sustainable Consumption.” in *Handbook of sustainable development*. Edward Elgar Publishing
- Keller, M., Halkier, B. and Wilska, T.A. 2016. Policy and governance for sustainable consumption at the crossroads of theories and concepts. *Environmental Policy and Governance* 26(2), 75–88.
- Kjaer, L. L., Pigosso, D. C., Niero, M., et al. 2019. Product/service- systems for a circular economy: The route to decoupling economic growth from resource consumption?. *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 23(1), 22–35.
- McMeekin, A., Geels, F. W. and Hodson, M. 2019. Mapping the winds of whole system reconfiguration: Analysing low-carbon transformations across production, distribution and consumption in the UK electricity system (1990 – 2016). *Research Policy* 48(5), 1216–1231.
- Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K. et al. 2009. A safe operating space for humanity. *Nature* 461, 472–475.
- Shove, E. 2014. Putting Practice into Policy: reconfiguring questions of consumption and climate change. *Contemporary Social Science* 9(4), 415–429.
- Spangenberg, J. H. and Lorek, S. 2019. Sufficiency and consumer behaviour: From theory to policy. *Energy policy* 129, 1070–1079.
- Welch, D. and Southerton, D. 2019. After Paris: transitions for sustainable consumption. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 15(1), 31-44.