Institutions and Agency in the Sustainability of Day-to-Day Consumption Practices: An Institutional Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Consumption is essentially an institutional action. While both the formal institutional environment and cultural embeddedness shape consumption, individuals may reciprocally amend the institutional setting through consumption choices that challenge the prevalent institutional constraints. This paper reconciles theoretical and conceptual premises from institutional and practice theory literature to study the sustainability of consumption. Using institutional ethnography as a methodological approach, the study explores the pendulum between embeddedness and agency in shaping the sustainability of day-to-day consumption of necessary goods; and further, how the external institutional environment may interact with human behaviour to contribute towards sustainability. The study finds a hierarchy of informal institutions, each level of which interacts differently with external changes. For example, sustainability is found to be more widespread the more it is embedded in practices, and this is a result of overall institutional development beyond regulation and choice editing. The results also highlight the importance of understanding unintentional sustainability in consumption practices.

Keywords Sustainable consumption · Practices · Institutional ethnography · Agency · Culture · Cultural context · Institutions · Informal institutions · Unintended sustainability behaviour

Introduction

Sustainable consumption is recognised as a crucial contributor to overall sustainable development. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly states that transition towards more sustainable consumption requires systemic changes in society: “We [countries] commit to making fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services”. However, we know surprisingly little about how institutions in society interact with individual efforts towards more sustainable consumption (Kemp and van Lente 2013; McMeekin and Southerton 2012). This paper aims to build knowledge on this crucial ground. Given that conventional policy approaches, such as information provision and targeted taxation, may fail to promote large-scale behavioural change (Akenji 2014; Spaargaren 2013), it is of urgency to widen understanding of how to build an institutional environment

that could help transform, necessarily and sufficiently, our consumption patterns towards more sustainable practices. The link from practices to broader society remains, however, to be established, both theoretically and empirically, and this poses a crucial bottleneck to a wider understanding of how to promote sustainable consumption practices in society.

In order to initiate the above-mentioned “fundamental changes” in our societies, we first need to understand the status quo: how much is sustainability in our consumption embedded in the institutional setting of a society, and how much is sustainability due to individual agency? Furthermore, how do embedded sustainability and self-motivated pro-sustainability agency relate to each other, and to external changes, such as attempted policy measures? This paper embarks on an institutional ethnographic endeavour in order to conceptualise this bundle of research questions.

The issue of the importance of individual agency versus societal structures is studied through household practices whose performance intrinsically involves the use of material commodities. The data are collected in a medium-sized Finnish city with eighteen informants, using multiple methods: participant observation, visual (photographic) documentation, informal discussions, and interviews. In terms of

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the contested concept of sustainable consumption per se, the empirical analysis incorporates a relative approach (Jennings and Zandbergen 1995), as opposed to absolute sustainability (Rimppi et al. 2016). Actions are assessed on the basis of whether they are likely to contribute towards the macro goal of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987).

Institutional ethnographic methodology allows for building an understanding of everyday practices under the inbuilt idea of coordination and control of human behaviour beyond the microenvironment of an individual (Smith 2005). To grasp the agency dimension of action, the analysis further makes use of fundamental concepts that shaped the body of practice theories (Bourdieu 1990; Reckwitz 2002). Building on the practice theoretical understanding of consumption, the study essentially addresses the sustainability of the flow of material commodities as a part of the practice of running a household (Röpke 2009; Warde 2005; Reckwitz 2002). A practice is understood to be a routinised way of conducting life, interconnected to the formal and informal structures that allow the practice to emerge and endure.

The practice theoretical view on sustainable consumption implies that the stress our consumption poses on the environment and society depends largely on our way of living (Keller et al. 2016; Halkier 2013; Warde 2005), which links back to the interest in institutional impact. After all, our lifestyles have taken shape during societal evolution (Cockerham et al. 1997), firmly tied to its formal and informal rules (Williamson 2000). In enhancing the conceptual understanding of the interface between agency and structure in an institutional frame, this paper eventually addresses the question of the interaction between formal and informal institutions and their impact on people’s economic actions (North 1990; Williamson 2000; Baumol 1990; Scott 2008). The importance of the matter is widely acknowledged but explored to a lesser extent. Empirical literature on the matter remains scarce, narrow in scope, or on a conceptual basis (Alesina and Giuliano 2015; Chang 2011). This paper makes connections to institutional economic literature along the storyline, to point out both its common ground with reasoning in practice theories and the relevance of the analysis to the institutional economic conceptualisations of informal and formal institutions.

The paper begins with a literature review that places the research questions within the studies on sustainable consumption, focusing on the position of practices in the literature. The methodological section introduces the approach of institutional ethnography, and further couples it with practice theory and institutional economic literature on consumption. After introducing the research methods, fieldwork, and data, the paper proceeds to a theory-driven analysis of the role of

agency and embeddedness in the sustainability of day-to-day household consumption. Conclusions follow.

On Sustainable Consumption

From an Aware Consumer to Taken-for-Granted Practices

The sustainability of consumption is not a straightforward matter. Defining sustainable consumption proves challenging both technically (Rimppi et al. 2016) and epistemologically: sustainability means different things to different people, as it provides various motivations to act on environmental or social concerns (Toppinen et al. 2013; McDonald and Oates 2006). The term is often cited to refer to “the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations”, as formulated by the Oslo Symposium in 1994 (Kovačič Lukman et al. 2016, p. 142). Although the definition of sustainable consumption remains elusive in academic and public debates, the working definition of the Oslo Symposium brings forth some widely shared understanding of the matter. The impact of consumption should be assessed on a life-cycle basis, and the costs of this impact should not be left on the shoulders of future generations. However, this definition puts a clear emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainability, although sustainability per se is commonly used to cover ecological, social, and economic responsibility. In essence, parallel concepts, such as green consumption, ethical consumption, and political consumption, exist to emphasise the various connotations.

Regardless of the definitional complexities, a plethora of studies exist to address the various aspects of sustainable consumption. In the context of sustainable household consumption, energy is among the most studied commodities (Hafner et al. 2019; Abrahamse et al. 2005). Hafner et al. (2019) review the literature on psychological barriers to reducing demand for heating energy. They focus on individual decisions about investments in heating systems that reduce the demand for purchased thermal energy at home. The literature also addresses direct electricity usage, including, for instance, the role of information (Ueno et al. 2005) and the role of circumstantial factors in the childhood home (Hansen 2018) in enabling or constraining sustainable energy use.

The sustainability of material household consumption is most commonly studied in relation to food (Verain et al. 2012; Hughner et al. 2007). In particular, organic food consumption and related consumer characteristics, attitudes, and

perceptions have attracted academic attention (Pearson et al. 2010; Lee and Hwang 2016; Oroian et al. 2017). However, the environmental sustainability of organic food can be contested (Meier et al. 2015), which renders the actual literature on sustainable food consumption scarcer and perhaps more controversial. Studies on the role of information in encouraging sustainable food purchases reveal the difficulties that consumers face in assessing sustainability (Lazzarini et al. 2018; Grunert et al. 2014). The same difficulty is likely to resonate on the level of empirical research too. For instance, studying the characteristics of a consumer who is most likely to act pro-sustainably becomes complicated in light of the complexity of assessing sustainability *per se*.

The sustainability of material household consumable goods, other than food, remains a less explored topic, in comparison to topics such as energy demand or the so-called high-involvement products. For example, sustainable consumption of forest products is mainly studied for such items whose purchase requires substantial consideration, such as wooden terrace products (Holopainen et al. 2014) or furniture, flooring, or other value-added wood products (Kozak et al. 2004). However, more mundane forest products such as toilet paper, purchased and used with less effort, have not been widely studied through the sustainability lens. Yet this sort of research could reveal the underlying structures that maintain practices through which daily consumption materialises.

Recent critics, increasing in number, claim that the prevailing paradigm in the proliferating sustainable consumption research often places an individual and their attitudes and preferences at the centre of the analysis (Keller et al. 2016; Halkier 2013; Spaargaren 2013). Despite the undeniable importance of understanding green preferences, this approach risks giving one-sided policy recommendations. According to the critics, many of the policy approaches addressing the problems of the transition to sustainable consumption focus on providing information to consumers (Akenji 2014; Spaargaren 2013).

Knowledge and information can be powerful tools to influence people's behaviour (Lazzarini et al. 2018; Ueno et al. 2005). However, in initiating behavioural change towards more sustainable consumption, this leaves at least two great questions uncovered. First, policy measures that rely on information provision assume that an individual, fed with the right information, would turn into a responsible consumer (e.g. Akenji 2014; Halkier 2013). Yet there is a well-documented phenomenon called the attitude-behaviour gap among people that do share green values and concern for the state of the environment (Carrington et al. 2014; Barbarossa and Pastore 2015; Chandon et al. 2005). People who self-claim to have pro-sustainability values and attitudes do not necessarily act accordingly. Second, there are people who do not receive this targeted information, or who might

not care to act on it even if they were aware of this information content (Pekkanen et al. 2018). The question arises of whether it would ever be possible both to make everyone aware and to make everyone act upon this awareness towards sustainable choices. Would these choices suffice to guarantee overall sustainable development? The strategy towards sustainable consumption needs to acknowledge these issues and find broader avenues to account both for individual agency and, at the same time, for the role and impact of broader societal structures.

In the research on sustainable consumption, the practice theoretical view has grown to challenge the prevailing dichotomy between the so-called structural and individualist paradigms (Keller et al. 2016; Røpke 2009; Warde 2005). While the latter refers to the above-mentioned research on individual agents acting deliberately, the structural paradigm focuses on the impact of social structure on consumption. Practice theory is an emerging integrative approach that acknowledges human behaviour as being partially embedded in societal and cultural structures and partially due to individual agency (Spaargaren 2013). The methodological unit of analysis is the practice, and central research questions include the way people engage in consumption as part of their everyday life practices (Keller et al. 2016).

Practice theoretical view on how behavioural change can be initiated shifts the focus from convincing individuals 'to consume in a more sustainable manner' to understanding how resource-intensive practices come into being, what kinds of societal structures maintain them, and, finally, how they may change or be changed (Shove and Walker 2010; Warde 2005). According to Reckwitz's (2002, p. 249) widely cited definition, a practice is "a routinised type of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge". He further reiterates that any practice as such cannot be disaggregated into one of the aspects mentioned above; a practice is an intertwined web of all of these aspects. Having practice as the unit of analysis therefore enables both contextual factors and individual agency to be accounted for in the analysis.

Several empirical studies address household consumption through the lens of practice theory. Energy consumption, as an inconspicuous commodity, serves as an enlightening example of how consumption can be inseparable from the practices to which it pertains (Butler et al. 2016; Strengers et al. 2014). Mylan and Southerton (2018) study laundry practices, advancing a framework that culminates on four mechanisms that relate household level variation in practices to broader coordination in society. These mechanisms pertain to gendered division of labour at home, material facilities such as spatial layouts, conventions concerning

especially the cleanliness standards and, finally, collective scheduling of practice performances conditioned by, for example, office hours and leisure time. Mylan and Southerton (2018) argue that these elements link domestic laundry practice performances to broader patterns in society.

Furthermore, studies exist that address the relations of power as potential forces in the social ordering of sustainable consumption practices (Anantharaman 2018; Hargreaves 2011). Although these studies give a clear indication that practices are rooted in the surrounding structural environment, the nature of this linkage remains elusive, as will be further elaborated in the following section.

From Practices to the Broader Societal Context

Understanding practices in their social, historical, cultural, economic, political, and technological environments could offer a fruitful avenue to understand how transition in a society could be encouraged and initiated towards less resource-intensive ordinary, daily human behaviour. However, as Brown et al. (2013) articulate, the research on understanding practices has not quite expanded to cover the system perspective: how prevailing and evolving technological and other contexts link to the change of practices.

The suggested framework to tackle the link from consumption practices to societal evolution embarks from the literature on socio-technical transitions, and more specifically from the so-called multi-level perspective (Kemp and van Lente 2013; Geels 2002). The multi-level model and approaches building on it (Geels 2014; Frantzeskaki and Loorbach 2010) were initially and are essentially focused on meso-level sustainability transformations. In short, the model separates the macro-level landscape (geography, resources, cultural patterns, and lasting structures of society) from socio-technical regimes characterised by rather stable interlinkage between established technology, knowledge, infrastructures, and policy. Industrial changes are seen to arise from nascent micro-level (technological) innovations that may come to challenge the prevailing socio-technical regime (dominant design) under favourable macro-level pressure. Analogously, when applied to consumption practices in society, the micro-level refers to local practices that are shaped by the prevailing socio-technical regimes and, further, the macro-landscape (Kemp and van Lente 2013). The change drivers work from the bottom up, from the so-called grassroots sustainability innovations, which can emerge as path-breaking alternatives to the existing socio-technical regimes if the pressure from macro-landscapes aligns to favour transitional change (Korjonen-Kuusipuro et al. 2017; Hielscher et al. 2013; Seyfang et al. 2014). The change-favouring macro-environment, on the other hand, may open up due to environmental or political crises that

ultimately cast a favourable light on grassroots innovations on a niche level (Hielscher et al. 2013).

Hess (2013) argues that the socio-technical transition approach to sustainability issues falls short in giving guidelines for fast enough transition pathways: the theory allows for a better understanding of long-term changes in socio-technical systems, and the empirical research has indeed been concerned with such historical case studies. Hence, the theory does not quite address the urgency of many environmental issues. Arguably, there are other shortcomings, too, when applied at the level of practice. The view that sustainability transition originates from various kinds of grassroots innovations emphasises the role of the motivation of individual people to initiate change. Although motivated individuals can and do initiate sustainability start-ups and community projects (Seyfang and Longhurst 2013; Seyfang 2010), which may act as vehicles of change from the bottom up, all the way to wider changes in society, this approach overlooks and simplifies the potential powerful influence of institutions on various levels. Indeed, the multi-level perspective has developed separately from institutional economics and organisational institutionalism (Geels and Schot 2007).

Moreover, the idea of local practices as micro-level change initiatives grants agency to the practices. In the case of high-involvement investments such as solar panel installation initiatives, this may prove sufficient. However, when dealing with more embedded practices, the grassroots innovation approach falls short in accounting for both agency and structure. To elaborate, as defined by literature on practice theory, practices are eventually ways of engaging in things, ways of doing things and thinking about things on a daily basis. Material consumption, for example, occurs as an integral part of various everyday life practices that, in turn, have taken shape as a cultural–historical–institutional outcome over time. The culturally and contextually learned aspects of practices therefore fit poorly with the grassroots innovation approach, which relies on highly motivated individual initiatives. The section that follows introduces an alternative methodology that has the potential to broaden understanding of the interface of agency and institutions.

Methodology

On Institutional Ethnography and Practices

Institutional ethnography is a methodology aimed at exploring how a practice is shaped by institutional forces (DeVault 2006). The starting point of an inquiry is identifying and understanding an experience or an everyday practice from the peoples' perspective. Smith (2005, p. 2) sees the roots of institutional ethnography in Marx's materialist method and ethnomethodology in that it commits "to begin and develop

inquiry in the very same world we live in, where we are in our bodies". This standpoint deviates drastically from the hypothesis testing approach prominent in the social sciences. Indeed, institutional ethnography roots its methodology in the inductive side of the social sciences, which arguably facilitates the explorative nature of the inquiry (Locke 2007). Furthermore, in an institutional ethnography, there is an inbuilt idea of the existence of coordination and control of people's activities beyond the microenvironment of an individual. The *social* in institutional ethnographic research, then, becomes "the ongoing concerting and coordinating of individuals' activities" (Smith 1999, p. 6).

In an institutional ethnographic inquiry, the activities of individuals are often conceptualised as collective practices (Smith 1999, p. 6). Here, the methodology shares conceptual ground with practice theoretical research, discussed on an empirical level in the previous section. The first common cornerstone culminates in the way the nature of human action is conceptualised. Smith (1987) writes:

The disjuncture that provides the problematic of this inquiry is that between the forms of thought, the symbols, images, vocabularies, concepts, frames of reference, institutionalised structures of relevance, of our culture, and a world experienced at a level prior to knowledge or expression, prior to that moment at which experience can become 'experience' in achieving social expression or knowledge, or can become 'knowledge' by achieving that social form, in being named, being made social, becoming actionable. (Smith 1987, pp. 49–50)

The idea of knowledge embedded in structure is intrinsic in the purpose of an institutional ethnographic inquiry, according to Smith's (1987) account. In a way, institutional ethnography aims to make this knowledge prior to social expression of experience visible. Understanding the role and realm of tacitly and intrinsically learned ways of participating in everyday life can lead us to further understand the role of agency, consciously made choices, and performed acts. Empirically, however, this requires further conceptual support. Practice theories have their roots in the very similar notion of the origins of human action, and can provide further guidance in the conceptualisations of agency versus structure.

Practice theories initially go back to Bordieu's (1990) and Giddens's (1984) works, which challenged the prevalent dichotomy between agency and structure. Bourdieu (1990) named the central concepts of his work as '*habitus*' and '*field*'. The idea of knowledge embedded in structure, discussed before, is reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1990) notion of '*habitus*', which emphasises internalised behaviour, such as beliefs, that in an individual's action does not necessarily go back to any rationale, but occurs as an adopted way

of engaging in things. *Habitus* refers to the tacit way of understanding, the tacit way of engaging in things, which is embodied in individuals through learning and growing up in certain circumstances. *Field*, furthermore, refers to the limits for the experiences through which *habitus* develops.

Giddens (1984) writes about the relationship between agency and structure, treating the structure as a constraint and a resource for flows of action. Practice theoretical thinking, drawing on these ideas, places the *social* in a practice, instead of some mental capacity of an individual (as in rational choice theories) or any social structure of culture or class. A practice, as verbalised by Reckwitz (2002, p. 249), is "a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, things and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge". Furthermore, Reckwitz (2002) points out that a practice, such as the practice of consuming or cooking, cannot be reduced to any of the above-mentioned aspects alone, but is an interconnected web of all that. Shove (2003, p. 2), in her practice theory account of comfort, cleanliness, and convenience, illustrates a practice in a similar vein as "the creep of convention and the escalation and standardization of conditions and circumstances that people take for granted".

Moreover, understanding the embedded role of sustainability requires the conceptualisation of a cultural context, meaning shared or collective "symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms and to behave in corresponding ways", as Reckwitz (2002) spells out the cultural theory point of view on social analysis. Through the concepts of *habitus* and *field*, the cultural context embedded in household practices could refer to the shared *dispositions* of individuals' *habitus* due to a shared cultural *field* in which they grew up.

Hence, making a practice the unit of study enables both agency and contextual factors to enter the analysis. Institutional ethnography, in turn, provides an open-ended methodology to explore and further conceptualise how various practices link to their context of ruling relations. Before introducing how the methodology is taken onto the level of conducting this empirical inquiry, a note on the century-old research line that links institutions to consumption may be in order.

A Note on Institutional Economics

Looking back over a 100 years sheds an interesting light on the contemporary void of theories on consumption and institutions. The very roots of institutional economics had indeed to do with consumption. Veblen (1899) wrote about conspicuous consumption in the wake of times of consumerism.

He saw consumption in relation to a broader cultural and societal development; in relation to status and its display, the desire to live up to the next class up in the social hierarchy.

The old institutional literature on consumption shares conceptual common ground with the approaches in practice theory. First, there is the conceptualisation of human action as being partially embedded in culture, partially due to the cognitive deliberation of an individual, a central tenet of practice theories. The institutional literature also infers the very idea that “behaviour is both individual and social at the same time and that the form that it assumes is a culturally conditioned and derived one”, as Hamilton (1987, p. 1541) puts it. More specifically, Veblen’s (1899) theory sees the preferences about the ways in which wealth is displayed evolving along with broader societal development. Hamilton (1987), in his writings on Veblen, articulates that the theory of the leisure class takes the study of consumption from an individual to a cultural level. Trigg (2001) further pronounces that Veblen’s (1899) writings on conspicuous consumption include the very idea that not all of our actions are conscious for us; that there are cultural forces, of which we are unconscious, that guide our behaviour. The desire to “live up to the conventional standard of decency” may manifest itself in various ways, with motivations and reasons of which we may remain unconscious (Veblen 1899, p. 103). This idea of unconscious and conscious acts shaping our behaviour becomes perhaps more evident in Veblen’s (1914) later writings, drawing on instinct theory (Asso and Fiorito 2004). Veblen (1914) posits that instinct, together with the material environment, gives rise to such informal institutions as habits and conventions. The later developments of institutions and consumption along this research line are rare, but they build on the same premises and understanding of the nature of human action (Dolfsma 2002; Coşgel 1997).

Second, another intersecting conceptual culmination between the thinking in practice theory and the literature on institutions and consumption seems to stem from the view that the consumption of material goods occurs along an ongoing process of events, as opposed to the idea that consumption is some sort of a grand end of economic activity. As Hamilton (1987, p. 1540) puts it: “Life is an on-going active process with nothing that can be substantively distinguished as a consummatory end from a productive means.” Similarly, in practice theoretical thinking, we acquire goods and services in the course of engaging in practices; for instance, we buy groceries as part of the practice of running a household.

To emphasise the point, literature on practice theory and early institutional literature share not only the acknowledged focus on the external institutional setting, but also the profound way they conceptualise human action (Hamilton 1987; Reckwitz 2002; Trigg 2001). Although these similarities have been recognised in the literature before (Trigg

2001), the strands of literature have not developed together. Understanding of how the external institutional environment may interact with human (consumption) behaviour remains underdeveloped (Kemp and van Lente 2013; McMeekin and Southerton 2012; Geels 2002). The empirical work that follows uses these conceptual similarities under the guidance of institutional ethnographic methodology to explore the interface between everyday material consumption and institutions.

Fieldwork and Data

On the level of conducting research, institutional ethnographic inquiry proceeds, as presented by DeVault and McCoy (2002), most commonly in a three-stage manner: the practice of interest is identified and explored; the institutional forces or processes shaping the practice are identified; and the institutional processes of interest are explored further. The point of departure, to reiterate, is understanding the nature of a practice. This is, both within the institutional ethnographic tradition and in the framework of practice theories, primarily an ethnographic endeavour.

Smith (2005) emphasises the open-endedness of the inquiry: understanding how people put the world together on a daily basis, in connection with various chains of action that relate us to the formal and informal institutional environment, calls for explorative, inside-out methods. Smith (2005) further emphasises the role of introspection as the point of departure; another common starting point for such an ethnographic inquiry would be participant observation (Bernard 2002, p. 323) and, further, interviews (DeVault and McCoy 2002, p. 756). The role of interviews can be understood in two ways, differing somewhat in their epistemological perspectives. Building understanding about *what the practice or experience is like* proceeds through a web of conversations with informants, from formal interviews to informal “talking with people”, in the pursuit of forming a general picture of what is happening. On the other hand, analysis of *how a practice comes into being* and what settings allow it to endure shifts the focus to institutional cues instead of patterns of action (DeVault and McCoy 2002, p. 753). Although ethnographic research often entails co-living in the studied community for a longer period of time, institutional ethnographic research often concerns circumstances and communities that the researcher is familiar with from the outset and, thus, shorter periods of fieldwork may prove sufficient (Bernard 2002, p. 330).

In this study, material day-to-day consumption, as part of the practice of running a household, was studied through a multi-perspective spectrum of methods: participant observation, visual (photographic) evidence, semi-structured interviews, and introspection. The fieldwork was conducted during the period from February 2016 to August 2016, in a

medium-sized municipality (nearly 73,000 inhabitants) in Finland. Eighteen (18) informants, from a total of fifteen households, took part in the research. All of the informants were academic adults, aged 22 to 37, with either a university or college degree, or university studies under way. Educated, young individuals in an industrialised country constitute an interesting focus group from a policy perspective that emphasises the education of consumers and choice editing: these potentially highly eco-literate, environmentally aware, and often pro-responsibility people are those that are likely to be interested in sustainability-related information and to look for it when making purchases (Pekkanen et al. 2018). Although the market segmentation literature does not entirely agree on the characteristics of a potential green consumer (Laroche et al. 2001), the selected group of informants, based on the demographics, is likely to fall within the category of consumers with a propensity for pro-environmental action (Inglehart 1995; Marquart-Pyatt 2008). Moreover, the informants were selected in an attempt to control for cultural background, and thus, all the informants were born and raised in Finland. In addition to these homogenising background factors, there were differentiating demographics in terms of field of work/study, level of income, and mode of living. The gender distribution was ten (10) men, and eight (8) women. The background information about the informants is summarised in Appendix 1 in Table 1.

The informants were recruited through a snowballing technique, starting from acquaintances and students recruited in class.¹ Contact with informants was established either face-to-face or by phone. A confirmatory e-mail with detailed instructions and information on the research was sent to all informants. At the outset, the informants were told that the research concerned daily consumption practices, without referring to the sustainability dimension of the research question.

After establishing contact with an informant, participant observation began in a grocery store of the informant's choice. While specific attention was paid to the informant's way of choosing items, as well as the types of items selected, most of the informants naturally became engaged in an informal discussion at the same time, resulting in a more elaborate picture of their grocery shopping patterns, their motivations for selecting particular goods, and the kinds of products they purchased. As the purpose was to accompany informants during their shopping routines, some informants were met in one supermarket according to their grocery shopping patterns, and some informants were observed and followed in several stores during one shopping trip.

Thereafter, the informants were advised to take photos of their everyday household activities at home over a period

of 1 week. They were instructed to focus on the moments of everyday routines that involved the handling of a commodity of material necessity. Both the observations and the photographs served as a basis for further interviews conducted in the homes of the informants. The semi-structured interviews, lasting from 50 to 90 min each, revolved around the practice of running a household, and consumption in general and as part of housekeeping. In addition, themes such as worldviews and values, and sustainability in general and in everyday life were elaborated upon (see Fig. 2 in Appendix 2 for the original interview guide). Whereas some of the informants from the same household were interviewed separately (and provided separate sets of photographs), some couples preferred to be interviewed together. In addition to interview transcripts and visual consumption diaries, the data comprise field notes from the grocery store visits and about several informal discussions with the informants. A research diary was also kept for personal reflection; introspection serves as a complementary perspective to the data gathered through other means.

Processing of Data

The data from all the available sources were first compiled for each household separately, to form a coherent picture of their everyday household practices. The sustainability of practices is assessed on a relative basis. In practice, the relative sustainability is considered between a realised action and an alternative to that action, the sustainability of which can reasonably be assessed by the agent. Reasonable alternative here refers to a choice that an informant could make in situ; for instance, not acquiring a certain product at all, choosing an alternative product from similar products, or choosing a substitute or an alternative way of accomplishing similar ends. For example, one can buy a larger package of hand soap and refill an existing bottle by the sink at home. This would be considered more sustainable than buying a bottle of soap each time. Another example of relative sustainability would be the use of eco-labelled products. Within the information reach of a consumer, eco-labelled products can be assessed as being more sustainable than non-labelled items.

The baseline for the awareness and understanding of sustainability, in turn, is derived from the interviews held with the informants. In other words, the choices are first considered in the light of a collective understanding of sustainability, based on which an informant could make informed choices. How such collective understanding looks in relation to more absolute, objective terms, and how possible discrepancies may influence the real sustainability of practices are further considered in the light of existing knowledge.

Understanding each informant's daily household practices, through which material consumption occurs, laid the

¹ Econometrics tutorials for advanced Bachelor's level students.

foundations for further analysis. Household practices were further compared across households, and the following analysis begins with the elaboration of these common practices. Understanding this common gridline of everyday life allows for the comparison of emerging differences fuelled by individual agency. The relative sustainability of the consumption of goods can further be detected both for the common, embedded ways of conducting everyday life and for acts due to deliberate choices by individuals.

The analysis was guided by the means of qualitative content analysis (Berg 2001): codes were attached to sustainability features at a household level, and further, the emerging similarities across households formed higher-level themes. The role of coding was facilitating, used as a means to explicate the data to recognise themes of collectively shared embedded or deliberate sustainability of household practices (Syrjäläinen 1994). First, the relative sustainability of consumption at a household level was coded both for the ways of consuming and for the characteristics of the consumed goods. The codes were attached to sustainability features in the interview data, but also to field notes and visual observations. Thus, the number of occurrences appears less crucial, emphasising the guiding role of coding, and the importance of theory-driven analysis.

To give examples of the sustainability features at a household level, buying unbleached filter bags for a coffee machine and eco-labelled toilet paper, and favouring potatoes over rice, are all purchases of lesser environmental burden. The ways of using and purchasing things were also considered. Minimal use of personal hygiene products and walking to the nearest supermarket would also pose a smaller stress on the surroundings. These sustainability features were then compared across households and further explicated in terms of the driving force for sustainability behaviour: whether it was a choice or whether it was a feature of embedded sustainability.

In contrast, the institutional cues were also coded throughout the different kinds of collected data, but the analysis was not driven by a search for emerging themes. Instead, the institutional references, often made implicitly, were treated as potential avenues for understanding the inter-relatedness of external drivers and the emerged features of sustainability. At this stage, the content analysis proceeded in a theory-driven manner, in that concepts from practice theory and institutional theory were used to compile the whole picture of the sustainability of household practices in an institutional environment (see Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2011).

Accordingly, the following chapter progresses from consciously made sustainability choices towards the elaboration and analysis of more subtle, embedded sustainability features, with the analysis being guided by the practice theoretical concepts of *habitus* and *field* (see section “On Institutional Ethnography and Practices”). The theory-driven

analysis, culminating in an overarching conceptual model of how the institutional environment interacts with the sustainability of domestic consumption, is reasoned thereafter.

Analysis

Material Consumption on the Gridline of Everyday Life

When the informants were asked to elaborate on material goods they use while running the household, they started with food. Many of the practices around food appear similar, although a lot of variation occurs in terms of preferences. In contrast, strikingly many forgot to document any use of paper products in their photo diaries. However, everyone uses at least toilet paper. The use of filter bags for coffee machines and baking paper is also firmly embedded in the collectively adapted ways of cooking and brewing coffee. Both kinds of paper products were eventually found in nearly every household.

Other household practices involving the use of material commodities pertain to personal hygiene and the cleanliness of the house. All the informants cleaned their homes and did their laundry themselves, and the minimum set of chemicals included some sort of multi-purpose cleanser, dishwashing liquid, and laundry detergent. The minimum set of personal hygiene products, in turn, seems to comprise shampoo (and often conditioner), shower gel, hand soap, and deodorant. However, although the cleaning and personal hygiene practices are very similar across households, the number of various hygiene and cleansing products varies a lot, reflecting different habits and preferences.

Material consumption, and the household practices embracing it, appears to fall into four categories. Food-related practices and personal hygiene form the most visible categories, whereas cleaning chemicals and paper products appear to be integrated into household practices to such an extent that they vanish from sight in the taken-for-granted setting of a household. Accordingly, food is the product category in which individual preferences, pro-sustainability or not, play out most significantly, along with personal hygiene products. The (un)sustainability in the use of paper and cleaning products is often more subtle, embedded in the ways of conducting everyday life at home, as will be elaborated upon in more detail in the following sections.

The Conscious Choice and Sustainability

Some of the informants self-declared as having pro-sustainability preferences, but not all. In food consumption, those who consciously took environmental considerations into account chose to favour plant-based and/or locally produced

food. Two of the informants were (lacto-ovo) vegetarians; four other informants had consciously paid attention to meat consumption for environmental reasons. Although decreasing meat consumption was commonly understood as a way to lower the environmental burden of eating, replacing meat with plant-based protein is, however, exceptional in the commonplace diet in Finland (de Boer et al. 2006). Meat (pork, beef, fish, or poultry) is considered to be an essential part of every meal, which was reflected in the informants' eating habits, as well.

Another food-related preference with a conscious environmental motivation concerns the domestic production and origin of the ingredients. Short transportation distances were considered environmentally friendly, and consuming domestically produced food was seen as responsible, in terms of supporting the domestic economy but also from the environmental and ethical point of view. Favouring Finnish produce and other groceries for the sake of responsibility appears as a prominent discourse; a collective way of understanding reality, verbalised and referred to as something commonly perceived.

Organic food appears as a more multifaceted sub-category of food. Since organic food tends to command a price premium, buying organic food is mostly intentional, indicating a preference for organic consumption. However, motivations for purchasing organic are diverse. Health and environmental reasons, and some sort of sympathy towards organic food production, explained informants' buying behaviour. It seems noteworthy that some informants, without having any self-expressed motivation for environmentally or socially responsible consumption, nevertheless bought organic food intentionally. From the group of informants in this study, this phenomenon seems to be connected to having grown up in the countryside.

Sometimes health and practical reasons outweighed sustainability-related preferences, even for environmentally or ethically motivated consumers. To illustrate this, only on rare occasions did the informants go to a specific shop to find some sort of eco-grocery, but for specific personal hygiene products or cosmetics, many were willing to make the extra effort. Sometimes practical reasons were also brought up to compete with environmental motivation. For example, one informant who would prefer both an eco-labelled laundry detergent and a big package size, said that this combination was not available.

The examples reveal the devious relationship between self-motivated choices and their sustainability outcomes. Some choices that are motivated by environmental concerns also turn out to be sustainable, such as reducing meat consumption, according to extant knowledge. However, the responsibility and environmental claims about Finnish produce may be problematic in many respects. Moreover, choices that are not motivated by sustainability concerns, but

by something else, may turn out to be sustainable. Organic food provides an example of this.

Moreover, the data serve several examples of the uneasy relationship between pro-sustainability values and sustainability acts. Informants who eventually turned out to have deep environmental concerns wished to distance themselves from what they called "environmental hippiness". For instance, one informant packed mushrooms in a plastic bag in a grocery store, mentioning that she would have preferred a paper bag. The moment she ended that thought, she hurried to explain that she meant that mushrooms go bad in a plastic bag, and that there were no other reasons for her worry over choosing the plastic option. Another example would concern buying eggs originating from cage-free chicken farms: an informant who pointed out that he did not have any sustainability-driven motivations for consumption choices, bought eggs from cage-free farms. The only explicitly articulated reason was: "I don't want to buy from cage farms".

The Embeddedness of Sustainability

Cultural Dispositions and Practices

Somehow, there is this endeavour to live within the cycle of nature, not to go backwards in development [...] I wouldn't go to extremes, I don't know how to tell.²

This interview excerpt implies the deeply rooted, implicitly ubiquitous, collectively shared way of understanding sustainability at large. More elaborately, the path towards contributing to sustainable development would open up through a more self-sustained life, in a deeper connection with nature. In a very practical and realistic manner, the conception has a sense of a 'back to the nature' mentality combined with and supported by trust in technological development and the opportunities this may open. In terms of *habitus* and *field*, this could be conceptualised as a shared disposition of the informants' habitus due to the shared cultural field in which they grew up. These dispositions are difficult to detect from inside the cultural context, as they are essentially part of a shared, and often very unconscious, way of understanding and interpreting the world.

These dispositions seem to lay the foundations that shape practices—the gridline of everyday life. Culturally shared dispositions lay the foundations for regarding something as ordinary and may thus be realised through practices that are *sustainable* by their very nature. An example would be the berry-picking tradition and other personal use of forests.

² The interviews were carried out in Finnish, and the excerpts were later translated into English by the author.

Even though the informants live in a city, half of them went berry picking in the autumn, and preserved the berries in a freezer. Three of the informants ate game-meat regularly, and one other informant raised an interest in learning how to hunt. Some informants get produce from their parents' gardens. Notably, people do not pick berries because it is an ecological deed; it is part of an ordinary way of life that does not need justification or a reason. These are habits and traditions that involve people regardless of their attitudes, intentions, and motivations for pro-responsibility behaviour. In other words, when culturally widely shared practices embed sustainability, it is adopted by a variety of people and enables sustainability to pervade the society.

Sustainability at this gridline practice level concerns mainly the way we are used to using particular material goods in our daily lives; no one questioned the use of toilet paper, shampoo, or disposable sanitary pads, for example, although their use as part of household practices is neither self-evident nor universal. However, practices may involve choices that eventually become integral parts of the practices themselves. For example, the use of paper products was an integral part of practices that were similar across households. In that, the potential sustainability of paper use is limited mostly to the choice of products. The following concisely toned interview excerpt tells a prevailing story:

Interviewer	What is the trademark of the toilet paper you buy?
Informant	I don't recall
Interviewer	What is the reason you have chosen this product?
Informant	It doesn't cost like heck, and it feels okay in use
Interviewer	Does the colour matter?
Informant	Not really
Interviewer	What do you mean by not really?
Informant	Well it doesn't really matter, but it seems that those slightly better papers, those are white; and those like sandpaper, those have [a browner] colour
Interviewer	The paper you usually use, do you remember whether it has any environmental label on it?
Informant	I don't remember, I haven't checked
Interviewer	Would it matter for you in these kinds of products?
Informant	Not really, it's more like, if it turns out that something kills half of Finland, then I can switch to another product, otherwise it is not so strict

The informant did, in fact, use eco-labelled toilet paper. Nearly every informant used eco-labelled toilet paper,

but only a few were aware of it. Similarly, not everybody recalled the trademark of the toilet paper that they used, not even in the common case that the informant would always select the same paper, out of routine. Notably, the informants who intentionally wanted to purchase environmentally friendly toilet paper assessed sustainability based on whether the paper was bleached, instead of choosing an eco-labelled product. Furthermore, informants who made no conscious effort towards sustainable paper purchases had a remarkably similar set of preferences to each other, which is evident from the conversation excerpt above: toilet paper should be inexpensive, but for reasons of convenience, not the cheapest option. Products meeting these preferences appear to be eco-labelled, as a rule. The choice of an environmentally sounder paper itself seems to be embedded in the practice due to a match between preferences and the available selection. Thus, when it comes to paper products, sustainability appears to be largely embedded in practices, equalising sustainability across various types of consumers.

People can also choose consciously to act against practices. This seems to require both extra effort and high motivation. A sustainability-related example of these widely shared ways of doing things would include the position of meat and milk in the commonplace diet. Being a vegetarian most often requires breaking away from the adapted way of carrying on with life, and learning deviating ways of doing things in the same institutional context that helps to maintain the traditional way of doing things. On the other hand, vegetarianism is enabled, for instance, by transnational learning, due to mobility and easy access to information, as well as markets that respond to an increasing demand for plant-based proteins. In addition to the effort, it requires conscious motivation: both of the vegetarian informants had a strong personal drive to live in an ecological manner.

Another example of the extra effort required to do things differently on the level of a culturally widely shared practice concerns patterns of shopping. The retail of day-to-day consumer goods in Finland is an oligopoly. The two major grocery retailers together hold a market share of over 80%. People are used to doing grocery shopping within the supply of these two chains, and many people buy all their day-to-day consumer goods from these stores, which has become the ordinary way of daily matters. Some of the informants, however, deviated from this pattern. One couple purchased produce from local farms through a small, locally operating non-profit organisation that arranges the delivery process. Another informant bought shampoo refills for her own bottle from a special shop. Both cases, again, involved a high level of self-motivation.

To reiterate, sustainability in culturally widely shared practices makes sustainable behaviour pervasive among a variety of people. When these practices are non-sustainable, however, it requires an extra high level of self-reflection and

motivation to engage in more sustainable ways of carrying out things.

Routines

Largely constrained by the culturally widely shared ways of doing things, people develop different kinds of routines reflecting the different circumstantial social fields that conditioned the development of their *habitus*. The difference between practices and routines may appear subtle. To illustrate, everyone cleans and eats, and takes care of personal hygiene. In a given location, household practices tend to share remarkable similarities: people take care of their cleanliness in a certain manner, they are used to particular patterns of eating, and they shop for groceries, do laundry, and store items for further use in a certain way. However, the routines around these practices involve various kinds of products and their use.

Compared with culturally widely shared practices, the level of routines is generally more conscious to the agent. For instance, many of the informants were used to frequently picking up the same products from the grocery store, which was both evident from their way of acting in the store, and in many cases articulated explicitly by the informant.

Furthermore, routines change more easily than practices, either due to self-motivation or because of a circumstantial influence. The effect of a partner was evident. One informant had adapted to vegetarian eating habits at home due to a vegetarian partner; another said that she had a strong preference for vegetarian food before moving in together with her partner. Partners influenced food-related practices in a more subtle way, evident to the informants, too. Informants described putting more effort into cooking when sharing meals with someone, and being “lazier with food” when living temporarily alone. When asked what might bring about a change in consumption habits in general, an informant said:

If I lived with someone. I’m just so used to making always the same food, but if someone put a list in my hand and told me to buy these things, that could change [my consumptions habits]

Routines may also appear as an outcome of a chosen lifestyle, or a lifestyle one has adopted less consciously, over a longer period of time. In particular, several informants lived a very minimalistic life in terms of material consumption, for various reasons. Some connected it with a desire to live as ecologically as possible, but one brought up an ascetic ideal of avoiding everything unnecessary; another said that her anti-materialistic lifestyle was a result of moving a lot and often. Although a minimalistic lifestyle was a choice for these informants, for some it seems to be a reflection of both personality and circumstances: the way life just is. One informant realised this during the interview; when asked

whether he would describe his lifestyle as sustainable, he replied:

No. Although I consume rather little, so that’s positive, in the end I consume surprisingly little, now that I think about it [- -] [Interviewer: Why do you consume little?] Because I don’t need anything. I’ve thought about this, that even if I had millions [of euros], I wouldn’t probably consume any differently, because it does not mean anything to me.

Furthermore, the pure urge to consume only “what you need” seems to be connected with organised patterns of grocery shopping, few impulse purchases, and careful preservation of ingredients and left-overs, resulting eventually in negligible amounts of food waste.

Routines, in other words, relate to both practices and consciously made choices and preferences. Sustainable practices may serve as a platform for sustainable routines to emerge. Thus, routines may appear sustainable without consciously and pro-sustainably made choices. On the other hand, a conscious effort can be made to change one’s consumption routines. Sustainable choices may become a natural part of everyday routines. However, preferences that are detached from sustainable motivations and intentions may also shape routines that are, eventually, sustainable.

A summary of the key observations on features of sustainability embodied at various levels of embeddedness is given in Table 2 in Appendix 3.

How Do Conscious Choices and Embeddedness Relate? (Institutions Revisited)

The theory-driven explication of the sustainability of household consumption in the light of *habitus* and *social field*, presented in the previous section, is summarised below in a conceptual model (Fig. 1). The model forms a hierarchy, ranging from cultural dispositions and practices to routines and preferences. Each of these levels depicts a nature of human action that bears sustainability in a distinct way.

The hierarchy that emerges consists of four layers of the underlying structures that shape our action. The levels differ in terms of how much power is exerted by agency versus cultural heritage (social structure) in each. In an attempt to render behaviour more sustainable, we thus need to understand from which level the reason for undesired action stems. *We also need to understand how the levels interact with each other, and with the surrounding institutional setting.* These issues are intertwined and shed some interesting light on the interaction between informal and formal institutions.

A central internal feature of the hierarchy lies in the time span that it requires for each layer to change; the higher the level, the more time it takes to change. Two of the top-most layers illustrated in the figure depict the so-called cultural

Fig. 1 Hierarchy of informal institutions

context: cultural disposition depicts the way the informants had grown up understanding and attaching meanings to the world; simply put, practices refer to the ways the informants had grown up doing things and engaging in things. The evolution of cultural dispositions is, arguably, an extremely slow process, connected with nature and geography, climate, and language, to say the least. The permanent nature of practices compared to routines and preference-based choices implies their firm interconnectedness to formal structures of society; practices, as taken-for-granted ways of carrying out our daily lives, have evolved together with the wider institutional structures in which our behaviour is partly embedded (Shove 2003). These institutional structures take a long time to change (Williamson 2000), implying that the moulding of practices, as a tied process to institutional structures, would also be a slow and long process. Routines, in turn, are built upon practices (and eventually upon cultural dispositions); they are different ways to perform things within the cultural context. They are more conscious to the agent than the cultural context, and they change more quickly. Preferences, in turn, may change overnight. Furthermore, routines and preferences are more likely to be affected by such institutions as discourses, media, and marketing, for they are primarily controlled by agency.

To illustrate this internal logic, many of the informants brought up a desire not to acquire and keep things that they do not need. Several of them made a comparison with their parents, who used to “hoard things”. When asked to consider why their parents’ behaviour differed in this sense, one informant said: “They are probably preparing for a winter war.” Although it was said with a grain of sarcasm, the other

side of the coin tells a story of how habits change due to evolving circumstances, but how it may take a generation for the change to be realised. Another informant, living a (not environmentally motivated) minimalistic life, said that money is purely a matter of security to him. Material possessions may have represented security for the parents’ generation, in the same way that money does for the 30-year-old informant today. Security, after all, was the feature that was always brought up when the informants described a society that is good and desirable. Habits stick, and while the institutional setting is now shared by both generations, their behaviour differs.

Linked to the more permanent nature of the higher levels in the hierarchy, they can be thought of posing constraints on lower-level institutions. In practice, this means that if a behavioural change was initiated through external intervention, such as a policy measure, the goal of the intervention at a certain level would need to be in line with the higher levels of the underlying structure of action. For instance, if a practice is unsustainable by its very nature, changing people’s preferences is not likely to lead to a desired change in behaviour. The higher level, in other words, defines what is seen as legitimate, to some extent. To illustrate, interventions planned to promote green consumerism, as in the buying of more environmentally friendly products, will not take hold if the goal of this intervention contradicts the cultural disposition shaping the understanding of what is sustainable and what kinds of actions would eventually contribute towards sustainable development. In the present study, a deeper connection with nature, living directly from nature as much as possible, was seen as the end of the sustainability

axis. Purchasing eco-labelled products, in other words, is not seen as a way to make a difference. This is probably further reinforced by the evident suspicion towards marketing as an institution.

The hierarchy of cultural context and agency, as elaborated above, may inform us further about the potentially different ways in which certain formal institutions may interact with informal structures in society. Depending on the nature of the informal institution, its permanency, and its relation to other informal institutions, its interaction with an external institution may lead to various economic outcomes. This finding may open up new avenues for understanding, for example, why some formal institutions take hold in a society, whereas others do not. Moreover, the conceptualised hierarchy of informal institutions may further prove useful together with the hierarchy of (formal) institutions presented by Williamson (2000). These two hierarchies appear commensurable in their internal logic, and bringing these two hierarchies into contact may inform further hypothesis-building on the combined impact of formal and informal institutions on economic activity more generally.

Furthermore, instead of considering a practice as one informal institution, the study places the practice as the unit of analysis through which the economic action occurs. Consumption, as part of the practice of running a household, is considered to be shaped in interaction with various institutional forces, both formal and informal. In that, the angle of this study can be seen as an extension to the institutional economic idea of institutions and embeddedness; a practice also embodies the cultural context in which formal institutions may become embedded. Studying individual economic actions through a practice that is shaped by the institutional environment opens up an angle to reason how meso- and macro-forces come into contact with micro-activity.

Summary and Conclusion

Transitioning to a sustainable society is the challenge of our time, and patterns of consumption play a role in this challenge. Despite the academic interest and the acknowledged policy relevance of the issue, the question of how agency in sustainable consumption relates to broader societal structures remains largely unanswered (Kemp and van Lente 2013; McMeekin and Southerton 2012). The prevailing paradigm in sustainable consumption studies is still largely

built on an image of a consumer whose preferences and values are to be 'greened' in order to achieve a more sustainable society (Keller et al. 2016; Halkier 2013).

However, we do not consume in a vacuum. Our consumption behaviour is affected by the structures and rules surrounding us. The study at hand set out to study how agency relates to societal structures in the context of sustainable consumption. Methodologically, the study builds on practice theoretical understanding of human action (Bourdieu 1990; Warde 2005), recognising the similarities it shares with the so-called old institutional economics (Trigg 2001). The explorative study draws on the methodological ideas of institutional ethnography. The aim of institutional ethnographic research, which is to give an analytical description of how the relations of ruling, organisation, and control shape the activities of people, provides a natural point of intersection with theories of practice and institutional theory.

The results of this ethnographic inquiry contribute to the literature both theoretically and on a subject level. First, the study concludes the theory-driven analysis with a conceptual model that can inform further studies and further understanding of how sustainability, rooted to different natures of action, interacts differently with different institutions. The paper argues that in order to understand how various institutions interact with the sustainability of consumption, it is crucial to recognise the underlying structures that shape the actions: cultural dispositions, practices, routines, and preference-driven choices all interact differently with external changes. Furthermore, these four layers form a hierarchy that imposes consequences for policy interventions. As the cultural context (cultural dispositions and practices) changes slowly and is likely to be firmly intertwined with the existing institutional environment, sustainability is more widespread if it is embedded in the cultural context, as opposed to being a result of more agency-driven forms of action. In other words, if a pervasive sustainability is to be achieved and maintained, it should be embedded in practices that have taken shape together with the wider institutional structures of society. Conversely, if sustainability is to be rooted through choice editing, the intervention is more likely to take hold the more it is in line with the more permanent structures of actions, meaning the cultural context. In this light, the evidence of this study gives a rather pessimistic view on choice editing. The informants' intrinsic understanding of what is sustainable relates to a more self-sustained life, in deeper connection with nature. Buying products that claim

to pose less stress on the environment than ordinary products is hardly perceived as being in line with the forces that could boost sustainable development.

Theoretically, the conceptual model has the potential to further widen the understanding of the interaction between informal and formal institutions within the literature on institutional economics. A stable view of culture is replaced by a holistic way of engaging in things: partially embedded in the social structure, partially due to the cognitive processing of an individual, and allowing for a dynamic view of the informal institutional framework and its interaction with formal institutions. As for the literature on sustainability transitions, the conceptual model offers insight into how cultural context interacts with sustainable consumption agency, which remains an aspect given very little attention in the literature.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the importance of understanding the various roots and causes of consumption that can be considered sustainable. The evidence tells the story that practices may be moulded to become sustainable due to an institutional process over time; sustainable routines may emerge against this backdrop or they may be, for example, a result of a chosen minimalist lifestyle, due to ascetic ideals. The outcome of people's choices can be sustainable even though they were made due to preferences that were not linked to environmental or social motivations or values. The variety of reasons for which people behave sustainably without pro-sustainable intentions deserves and calls for further research, urgently. This non-intentional sustainability behaviour in consumption has gone under the radar in academic literature, although its policy relevance is obvious. The difficulty in getting people to act on environmental concern (let alone the difficulty in 'greening' peoples' values) is well documented. Understanding the reasons why people act in a sustainable manner without a conscious intention to do so could help in designing policy measures that would reach a wider group of citizens, beyond environmentally and socially aware consumers. The policy measures would need to acknowledge and address both the culturally embedded sustainable practices and the (non-green) preferences that lead to sustainable behaviour.

This study analysed household practices that involved the use of a range of consumer goods. Further insights could be obtained either by broadening the studied set of products or by narrowing it down to a more specific set of practices. The study is also delimited to a rather specific geographic and demographic stratum, which allows for a deeper understanding within this context, but at the same time limits the generalisability of the results. Furthermore, the study accumulates

knowledge on sustainable consumption in the very context that is already most covered by academic literature: in a high-income country in the Northern hemisphere. In order to widen the understanding of sustainable development on a global scale, sustainable consumption should be addressed extensively in the context of developing economies, as well. In general, carrying out similar investigations in various contexts could further inform both the generalisability of the results and the desirable policy recommendations for reinforcing sustainability in various institutional contexts.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Pekkanen T-L declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Appendix 1

See Table 1.

Table 1 Background information on the informants and data sources by informant

Household	Informant	Age	Type of dwelling		Members of the household				Occupancy			Field of profession				Data sources by informant				Further notes
			Apartment	Attached house	Owner of the property	Tenant	Lives alone	Lives with partner	Lives with partner and children	Lives in shared flat	Student	Part-time job/summer job	Full-time job	Engineering, environmental/energy	Engineering, other	Business & economics	Health sciences, social services	Photo diary	Participant observation ^a	
A	1	X	X			X				X				X			X	X	X	One photo diary together Interviewed together Interviewed in the inter-viewer's office Participant observation in several grocery stores One photo diary together Interviewed together
	2	X	X			X				X							X	X	X	
	3		X				X				X			X			X	X	X	
	4		X				X				X				X		X	X	X	
	5		X			X				X		X					X	X	X	
	6		X			X			X	X					X		X	X	X	
	7	X	X			X		X		X						X	X	X	X	
G	8	X		X						X						X			Interviewed together Interviewed in the inter-viewer's office Participant observation in several grocery stores One photo diary together Interviewed together	
	9		X	X		X	X			X				X			X	X		X
H	10	X		X					X	X	X					X	X	X	Participant observation in several grocery stores One photo diary together Interviewed together	
	11	X		X						X							X	X		X
J	12			X	X			X				X	X				X	X	X	
	13			X	X			X				X	X				X	X	X	
K	14	X		X				X		X			X				X	X	X	
	15	X		X				X		X									Interviewed together	

Table 1 (continued)

Household	Informant	Age	Type of dwelling		Members of the household				Occupancy		Field of profession			Data sources by informant			Further notes				
			30–37	Apartment	Attached house	Owner of the property	Tenant	Lives alone	Lives with partner	Lives with partner and children	Lives in shared flat	Student	Part-time job/summer job	Full-time job	Engineering, environmental/energy	Engineering, other		Business & economics	Health sciences, social services	Photo diary	Participant observation ^a
L	16	X	X	X		X				X	X	X	X		X				X	X	The informant introduced his household products before the interview at home
M	17		X	X		X					X	X	X			X			X	X	Participant observation in several shops
N	18		X		X			X					X			X			X		Extensive informal (unrecorded) discussions in the supermarket and in the informant's home

^aIn a grocery store^bIn the informant's home

Appendix 2

See Fig. 2.

Fig. 2 Interview guide

Appendix 3

See Table 2.

Table 2 Key observations of features of sustainability embodied at different levels of embeddedness, categorised by product type and data source (*P* photo diary, *O* participant observation, *I* interview)

	Product categories			
	Food	Personal hygiene products	Cleaning chemicals	Paper products
Preferences	Vegetarianism, reducing meat consumption ^{P,O,I} Organic food (perceived sustainability) ^{P,O,I} Domestic origin of food/ locally produced food (perceived sustainability) ^{P,O,I} Eggs from cage-free farms ^{P,O,I}	Organic products ^{P,I} Products not tested on animals ^{P,I}	Eco-labelled products ^{P,I}	Non-bleached toilet paper ^{P,O,I} Non-bleached coffee filter bags ^{P,O,I} Eco-labelled products ^{P,O,I}
Routines	Using re-usable bags for grocery shopping ^{P,O} “Buying only what you need” (prevention of food waste through planning and organised shopping patterns) ^{P,O}	Minimal use of hygiene products (only the minimal set) ^{P,I} Use of refill bottles for hand soap ^P Buying shampoo and soap in one’s own bottles directly from the shop ^P Thorough use of purchased items ^{D,O,I} Careful selection of products (negligible impulse purchases) ^{P,O,I}	Favouring big package size ^{P,O,I} Minimal use of cleaning chemicals ^{P,I} Rare use of strong, special cleaning chemicals (such as for the oven) ^P /wide use of one or two eco-labelled multi-purpose cleansers ^P	Re-usable substitutes for baking paper ^I
Practices	Berry picking ^{P,I} Produce from parents’ garden ^I Hunting ^I Careful preservation of food and left-overs ^{P,I} Separate disposal of compostable waste ^I			Minimal use of disposable paper towels (using re-usable cloths for wiping surfaces) ^D Unintentional and routinised use of eco-labelled toilet paper ^{P,O,I} Recycling of forest products ^I
Cultural dispositions	Understanding of game meat as sustainable food ^I	Understanding of minimal use of things as sustainable ^I Appreciation of things and food acquired as directly from nature as possible ^I		

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