

Chapter 21

Assuming change for the better:
the role of assumptions in a change
programme on food consumption

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Abstract

“We need to change people’s norms and values” is a frequently heard proposition in discussions about changes towards more sustainable ways of living. A widespread assumption, also held by the large majority of participants in a recent study, is that educating children about healthier and more sustainable behaviours helps to achieve such change in lifestyle. This chapter traces how people involved in change initiatives subscribe to assumptions about what is at stake and how change can be achieved. The notion of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) is central to our analysis of the way assumptions work. The case discussed is a dietary change initiative for German schoolchildren. The findings of this initial study show that – irrespective of their veracity – assumptions matter because they inform and guide actions. Our findings show how assumptions based on personal beliefs, previous experiences and (strategic) evaluation find their way into the construction, implementation and outcomes of an initiative targeting lifestyle changes.

21.1 Introduction

Consumerist lifestyles in the Western world and among the wealthy across the globe are blamed for the many social, economic, and environmental problems that current and future generations are faced with. For decades now, calls for change towards sustainability have been becoming more and more numerous, urgent and loud. Not only is it a challenge to agree on the kind of change needed, but another question is how to bring about any kind of change. These two questions are closely related, of course, because a change strategy always hinges on problem definitions and politics: what is regarded as the problem and who is considered to be the main causer of that problem?

One possible strategy to stimulate sustainable living is to educate children about sustainability and the impact of behaviours. In a survey carried out as part of the co-funded EU project POLFREE in the winter of 2013/14 among more than 1,200 households in Austria, Hungary, and the Netherlands, almost 90% of all respondents considered educating children about resource consumption to be a desirable or very desirable measure to tackle sustainability-related challenges. In addition, more than 75% of all respondents indicated that they expected this approach to be effective or even very effective. Thus, it is a prevalent assumption that educating children is a powerful way to stimulate sustainable living.

Social science theories stress that assumptions shape actions that make up the world we live in (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Assumptions about the way change can be brought about shape sustainability initiatives, regardless of their validity. Such underlying, yet often unacknowledged assumptions include definitions of what constitutes sustainable living, how it can be achieved and supported and who should be involved and how. Thus, it is clear that assumptions matter – it is less clear, however, *how* they matter. Based on a case study of an educational initiative aimed at lifestyle changes among children, this chapter deals with the way people who engage in change initiatives define what is at stake regarding a more sustainable future, and how it can be achieved. Before considering the case, however, we turn to social science theories of how people generally make sense of the world and how their actions are influenced by others and by their social and physical environment.

21.2 Theory: sensemaking and practice-based thinking

The first theory inspiring our study of assumptions is the theory of “sensemaking”, which addresses the question how people interpret a (seemingly) novel phenomenon in the light of existing routines and institutions. In his seminal work on *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Karl Weick (1995) identified seven key aspects of the sensemaking processes:

1. Identity: constructing who the “I” or “we” is.
2. Retrospective: looking back to make sense of what happened.
3. Enactive: people simultaneously interpreting and creating their world.
4. Social: it is never an individual achievement, but deeply social.
5. Ongoing: sensemaking never starts and never stops.
6. Extracting cues: people use ‘cues’, or points of reference, that enable sensemaking.
7. Plausibility over accuracy: plausible representations matter more than accurate ones.

Weick’s starting point is that the social world does not simply manifest itself to people but is continuously constructed through labels and narratives. It is thus possible to find out how people make sense of the world by looking at how they talk about it, how they (collectively) act in it and how they respond to situations or encounters that do not immediately or apparently match their sensemaking. These ideas have informed our approach to tracing the role of underlying assumptions in the development and implementation of an educational initiative aimed at sustainable lifestyle changes.

Theories of social practices, our second conceptual basis, take people’s “sayings and doings” (Schatzki, 1996) as the unit of analysis and look at how the material world, skills and competences, as well as meanings that people attach to them, shape and are shaped by practices. A practice can be simply defined as a cluster of behaviours, e.g. cooking, taking a shower, travelling to work, or taking care of others. Practices require and are dependent on systems of provision, such as transport infrastructures, policies or the power grid. Practices are generally rather stable entities, yet there are dynamic variations across space and time. Practice theorists have only recently shown an interest in changes and variation of practices (Backhaus, Wieser & Kemp, 2015), yet the theoretical tradition of considering their stability and spread is well developed (Gram-Hanssen, 2013; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). It is precisely this strength of practice-based thinking which allows us to reflect on the effectiveness of the food initiative analysed here. Conceptual awareness of how deeply cooking and eating behaviours are entrenched in systems of provision, cultural norms, family traditions and personal habits triggers the question to what extent cooking sessions for primary school children can contribute to changing food consumption patterns.

21.3 Methods

The basis of our analysis is formed by an educational initiative that aims to teach children about more sustainable ways of living. We conducted interviews with people who developed and are implementing the initiative, and also performed ethnographic research into two implementation sessions. We also analysed the available information materials and an expert evaluation of the initiative. Data derived from these various sources are first scrutinised below according to Weick’s key components of

sensemaking. Subsequently, we critically evaluate assumptions emerging from this in the light of practice-based thinking.

21.4 The case study: a “food licence” for children

The Food Licence initiative forms part of the IN FORM programme, a national action plan of the former German Federal Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV) to address malnutrition, lack of physical exercise, overweight, and related diseases. It was developed by the *aid-infodienst* (aid information service), a publicly funded institute involved in the dissemination of scientific evidence and practice-based knowledge related to agriculture, food, and nutrition. The Food Licence initiative targets primary school children and aims to teach them about a healthy diet, food preparation, hygiene, and table manners in six to seven practical sessions, including two playful assessments. The initiative offers an information kit for teachers as well as the option of hiring an expert to run the sessions. In addition, a booklet is provided to the children, with explanations, assignments and recipes.



Figure 21.1 Logo aid’s Food Licence for children

By March 2013, after the initiative had been in place for six years, over 580,000 children had obtained a Food Licence. The large coverage of the initiative is partially due to financial support by the BMELV and expert support by the *LandFrauen Verband* (Countrywomen’s Association).

An evaluation among 77 school classes across Germany found that the initiative has positive and lasting effects (tested after 6 months) with respect to knowledge, motivation, competencies, and behaviours. The evaluation also showed that children greatly enjoyed participating. Parents noted that after participation children were keener to help with grocery shopping and food preparation, and also paid more attention to food hygiene and table manners (Sommer, Ekert, & Otto, 2011).

21.5 Results and analysis

To trace the way assumptions influence thought and action we analysed interviews and participant observations with developers, implementers and participants of the Food Licence initiative. Sensemaking mechanisms obviously play a role for all actors involved and can hence be analysed from various perspectives. Our focus here is on those developing and implementing the change initiative, while to a lesser extent, we also reflect on participants' views. Key to the notion of sensemaking is an understanding of an individual's view in the context of an organisational setting. In other words, personal experience and expertise always play a role and are interpreted in the light of collective rules or procedures.

As proposed in Weick's framework, our findings show sensemaking as a deeply *social, continuous and enactive* process. In conversations with the developers and implementers of the Food Licence initiative, it became apparent how *particular cues* are used to justify collective actions. For example, increased numbers of overweight or obese children, bad dietary habits, diminishing knowledge about fruits and vegetables, kitchen know-how, and skills were frequently mentioned as reasons to construct and implement the initiative. Teachers' frustration about children arriving at school without breakfast or with lunch boxes filled with sweets were mentioned as motivators to participate in the Food Licence programme (B. Kaiser, personal communication, 11 September, 2013). One of the core assumptions underlying this initiative is therefore that information and skills training for children help tackle these problems. It is through this assumption that the initiative receives its general form and approach.

In line with Weick's framework, we also found that the extraction and interpretation of cues is governed by *plausibility rather than accuracy*. The idea to develop a "food licence" was born on the spur of the moment when one *aid-infodienst* employee thought of the "bike licence" that children obtain upon mastering certain cycling skills and traffic education. Following this initial conception, a programme consisting of several practical sessions and small, playful assessments was developed, also taking into account the experience that the *aid-infodienst* had already gained with similar programmes (Kaiser, personal communication, 11 September, 2013). The basic assumption at work here is that some practical training and assessments of cooking skills can teach skills and know-how that are necessary for a healthy diet.

As the spillover of ideas and assumptions from past initiatives into this initiative shows, positive implementation experiences can turn into cues supporting a chosen approach – or, to put it another way, experiences may confirm and reinforce particular assumptions. In addition, experiences gained during the implementation of the initiative, such as children enjoying the practical sessions and teachers' appreciation of expert involvement, as well as enthusiastic parental feedback, function as cues for its continuation in the current form. However, unlike what was predicted by experts, teachers preferred expert support during practical sessions even if they had already

participated in numerous sessions, mainly because implementation runs much more smoothly when guided by an expert. A detailed evaluation of the programme attests to long-lasting effects in children, as was also reported by parents (Sommer, et al., 2011). The implementers of the initiative report that children who have been involved in the Food Licence programme and whom they meet again a few years later in the context of different (often also food-related) school programmes exhibit greater interest, commitment, and knowledge. In other words, there are personal and collective procedures to capture cues, make sense of them, and decide on plausible further or future strategies. Some cue-extracting procedures are formalised in evaluations and assessments, others are rather informal and personal. In either case, the results of these procedures appear to generally confirm the assumptions already held, and contribute to a stabilisation and continuation of the initiative in its original form. The only assumption currently being questioned by the experts who designed the programme based on implementation experiences and evaluations is whether it suffices to involve only children. The aid-infodienst now considers adding a session to the programme specifically targeting parents.



Figure 21.2 Pictures of two Food Licence sessions in Reichshof, Germany, 5 February 2014

Identity construction reveals itself as an interesting and complex process within this initiative. On the one hand, developers carefully constructed an “identity” for the initiative, including a recognisable logo and the “Cat Cook”, a small animal that guides children through the practical sessions, offering additional tips and tricks. Teachers and experts who implement the Food Licence programme at schools have different ways of organising the sessions and communicating the information they would like children to remember. In other words, based on the way implementers view their roles and responsibilities, they imprint an additional identity layer on the programme. Finally, children participating have different ways of being engaged in the sessions, e.g. as the “expert chopper”, “skilled peeler”, “ingredient or equipment supplier” or “head chef”, which means that each of them perceives their personal identity and the programme

itself in a different manner. The sensemaking processes of identity construction by both experts and children relate to several assumptions about the effectiveness of the Food Licence programme. One such assumption is that experiencing oneself in a particular role as part of a team and collectively working towards a shared goal enhances learning. This assumption justifies the focus of the initiative on group assignments.

Our interview- and ethnography-based data also support Weick's assertion that sensemaking is always *retrospective*. For example, the current experiences of experts who facilitate classroom implementation refer back to previous experiences. Similarly, teachers and children make sense of their current lived experiences during the Food Licence sessions in relation to past experiences at home or during previous sessions. Initiative developers also construct sense and meaning for their actions in relation to past involvements, experiences and evaluations. People's retrospective reflections on current events allow them to make sense of what they are doing and, at the same time, appear to strengthen their assumptions about what is at stake and how to act.

We also found an element of *prospective* goal-setting or targeting that inspires the actions of people involved and that gives meaning to actions taken. For example, initiative developers assume that the programme they have developed helps to address general societal goals as well as session-specific target skills. Initiative implementers, in turn, assume that their actions help provide children with an enjoyable and informative experience, as well as keeping teachers as potential clients for future instances of implementation. Teachers assume that children will take their enthusiasm and experiences home and, at least to some extent, preserve them for the future. Either set of assumptions contributes to stabilising social relations and continuing collaboration towards particular goals (though the goals vary among actors).

21.6 Concluding remarks

Assumptions matter in the development, implementation, and outcome of initiatives addressing behavioural change. With the help of Karl Weick's framework of sensemaking, we traced assumptions in a particular project targeting food consumption behaviour, i.e. the German Food Licence initiative for children. Uncovering assumptions invites a critical questioning of their veracity.

The core assumption underlying the Food Licence initiative is that unhealthy and less sustainable food consumption habits largely depend on individual knowledge and skills. However, practice-based theories of human behaviour point to the interrelatedness of people's actions with other people's actions (e.g. parents), their embedding in available systems of provision (such as supermarkets) and their interaction with other practices (such as working, attending school, doing sports). Acknowledging this interdependency requires broadening the initiative to involve parents and address the way families organise their household and food routines.

Although initiative developers are considering involving parents, all they are currently envisaging is an additional informative session for this target group. These plans run counter to the core assumption that solely addressing children's kitchen skills falls short of achieving a shift in their food consumption. The evaluation of the initiative showed that it increases children's interest in fresh food (Sommer, Ekert, & Otto, 2011), and implementers also report that children readily connect with the topic (Engel, personal communication, 5 February 2014). The present preliminary study clearly shows that – irrespective of their veracity – assumptions matter because they inform and guide actions. Our findings show how assumptions based on personal beliefs, previous experiences, and (at times, strategic) evaluation find their way into the construction, implementation, and outcomes of an initiative targeting lifestyle changes.

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