

## **Prefiguring sustainable futures: Food activism and anticipation among emerging adults**

Maria Ojala

Associate Professor (docent) in psychology, Örebro University

Our world is characterized by various global sustainability problems, such as climate change and depleted biodiversity, which pose serious challenges for humanity. In dealing with these it is important to include young people who are the future leaders of society but also citizens of today. Since many young people have a dark picture of the global future, not least regarding climate change (Connell, Fien, Lee, Sykes, & Yencken 1999; Kramming, 2017; Nordensvaard 2014; Strife, 2012; Threadgold, 2012), it is important to identify factors that can promote hope, empowerment and sustainable behavior patterns. Some researchers summarize this need in the concept of *anticipatory competence* (Barth et al., 2007; Rieckmann, 2012; Wals & Swartzinger, 2012; Wiek, Withycombe, & Redman, 2011, see also Miller, 2010; Poli, 2010). Two main subthemes of this competence are: (1) The ability to deal with uncertainty, conflicts, and complexity when trying to prefigure more sustainable futures in the here and now. (2) The ability to analyze and craft rich ‘pictures’ of the future related to sustainability issues. In this regard one can also point to the emotional character of these subthemes, where the first is about dealing with negative emotions of frustration, ambivalence, and worry, whereas the second is about hope for the future (Ojala, 2017).

This presentation focuses on one way that young people can contribute to a sustainable future, food activism, both in more organized forms and in the private-sphere. I will give an overview of a project which in three sub-studies explore how young people deal with the two subthemes of anticipatory competence mentioned above. The aims of the project are: (1) To investigate how the young cope with frustration, ambivalence and worry in trying to make more sustainable food choices in a more or less unsustainable society. (2) How hope is created in practice through different kinds of food activism. (3) To explore how these two subthemes are interrelated. (4). To, together with educators, discuss practical implications for sustainability education and also what potential positive role AI (artificial intelligence) in the form of, for instance, serious gaming can play in this regard. Ambivalence has often been seen as something purely negative for engagement (Berndsen & van der Pligt, 2004; Chi Con et al., 2013). Ambivalence is, however, unavoidable in relation to sustainability issues, not least food issues, because of uncertainty and complexity. Therefore, researchers during later years have started to argue that ambivalence can be both something positive and something negative depending

upon which coping strategies people use to deal with it (Ojala, 2008; Ojala & Rikner, 2010; Rothman et al., 2017).

In the first sub-study about 20 young food activists (18-26 years) are interviewed. The methodological approach is phenomenological in the sense that it is the participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of the object of study that is in focus. The first aim is to explore border tensions and conflicts that arise when trying to create a more sustainable society within the limits of the present. Internal and interpersonal struggles emerging when utopian ideals and realities clash. The second aim is to investigate how these young people cope with the conflicts and the related ambivalence. The third aim is to explore how hope concerning the future is created. This sub-study take its starting point in the question: What can we learn about coping with ambivalence from those young people who are already active?

In the second sub-study, about 800 18-19 year-olds are answering a questionnaire in school about ambivalent attitudes concerning climate friendly eating, how they cope with this ambivalence and about intention to, and actual, climate friendly food habits in everyday life as well as hope concerning the future. The aim is to statistically test two theoretical models in which climate friendly food habits, one the one hand, and hope, on the other, is predicted by ambivalent attitudes, mediated through coping, controlling for variables such as self-efficacy and gender.

In the third sub-study, highly ambivalent youth (as identified by the survey) are interviewed in order to, on the one hand, get an in-depth understanding of which conflicts they confront when trying to embrace more sustainable food habits and, on the other hand, pinpoint positive and negative strategies to handle ambivalence seen from an engagement perspective.

In the presentation these three subprojects are presented and practical implications for communication and education for societal transformation towards a more sustainable future are elaborated on. The intention is also to open up a discussion about how AI can be used to promote these educational processes.

## References

Barth, M., Godemann, J., Rieckmann, M., & Stoltenberg, U. (2007). Developing key competencies for sustainable development in higher education. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 8(4), 416–430.

Berndsen, M. & van der Pligt, J. (2004). Ambivalence towards meat. *Appetite*, 42, 71–78

- Chi Chong, L. et al (2013). The roles of ambivalence, preference conflict and family identity: A study of food choice among Vietnamese consumers. *Food Quality and Preference*, 28, 92-100.
- Kramming, K. (2017). *Miljökollaps eller hållbar framtid? Hur gymnasieungdomar uttrycker sig om miljöfrågor*. Doktorsavhandling. Uppsala: Kulturgeografiska institutionen, Uppsala universitet
- Miller, R. (2007). Futures literacy: A hybrid strategic scenario method. *Futures*, 39(4), 341-362.
- Nordensvaard, J. (2014). Dystopia and Dysutopia: Hope and Hopelessness in German Pupil's Future Narratives, *Journal of Educational Change*, 15, 443-465.
- Ojala, M. (2008). Recycling and ambivalence: Quantitative and qualitative analyses of household recycling among young adults. *Environment and Behavior*, 40(6), 777-797.
- Ojala, M. (2017). Hope and anticipation in educating for a sustainable future. *Futures*, 94, 76-84.
- Ojala, M. & Rikner, A. (2010). *Att hantera det ambivalenta. Unga vuxnas attityder och beteende gällande energieffektivisering i hemmet*. Report No. 66., Örebro University: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies.
- Poli, R. (2010). An Introduction to the Ontology of Anticipation. *Futures*, 42(7), 769-776.
- Rieckman, M. (2012). Future-oriented higher education: Which key competencies should be fostered through university teaching and learning? *Futures*, 44(2), 127-135.
- Rothman, N. et al. (2017). Understanding the dual nature of ambivalence: Why and when ambivalence leads to good and bad outcomes. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11, 1-40.
- Threadgold, S. (2012). "I reckon my life will be easy, but my kids will be buggered": ambivalence in young people's positive perceptions of individual futures and their visions of environmental collapse. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5, 17-32.
- Tucci, J., Mitchell, J., & Goddard, C. (2007). *Children's fears, hopes and heroes: Modern childhood in Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Childhood Foundation.
- Wals, A.E.J., & Schwarzin, L. (2012). Fostering organizational sustainability through dialogic interaction. *The Learning Organization*, 19(1), 11-27.
- Wiek, A., Withycombe, L., & Redman, C. L. (2011). Key competencies in sustainability: A reference framework for academic program development. *Sustainability Science*, 6(2), 203-218