

Activity focus groups – a discursive, practical and social method for studying consumption practices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a novel qualitative activity focus group (AFG) method for studying consumption practices. This participatory method, which is inspired by practice-theoretical thinking, combines focus group discussions with activities that represent the practices at the centre of the research.

Design/methodology/approach – The application of the AFG method is demonstrated with an empirical study of the transition to plant-based food consumption practices in Finland, involving four group sessions of 13 participants.

Findings – The findings from the empirical application of the AFG method illustrate that its key strength is the ability to foster fruitful and natural discussions on routine consumption practices that connect with discursive and practical dimensions and thus generate multidimensional data in resource-efficient ways.

Originality/value – The AFG method extends the methodological approaches in practice theory-oriented research, responding to the call for creative, real-life-reflecting methods that are able to grasp the discursive and embodied dimensions of practices. The method is proposed to be particularly suitable for research on mundane consumption practices.

Keywords Qualitative methods, Practice theory, Sustainable consumption, Activity focus group method, Consumption practices

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Practice theories, which belong to the family of interpretive and cultural theorising (Reckwitz, 2002) and which focus on routine activities (Warde, 2014), have gained more ground in recent decades, and their potential has also been acknowledged in environmentally sustainable consumption research (Corsini *et al.*, 2019; Hargreaves, 2011; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Warde, 2014). However, being originally a conceptual approach, practice theory must be operationalised by researchers to work empirically (Corsini *et al.*, 2019), resulting in varying methodological approaches in studying everyday practices in interdisciplinary research fields (see Hui, 2023, p. 10). For example, practice theory-oriented



qualitative researchers in the field of sustainable mundane consumption have used and developed various interviewing and group discussion methods (e.g. Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022; Hoolohan *et al.*, 2018), ethnographic approaches (e.g. Heidenström and Hebrok, 2021; Sirola *et al.*, 2019) and interventional designs (e.g. Sahakian *et al.*, 2021). However, although each method has its strengths and weaknesses, there is still room to develop efficient, real-life-reflecting interpretive methods that enable the analysis of the discursive and practical dimensions of practices and their change.

This paper introduces a novel participatory method – *activity focus groups (AFG)* – to study consumption practices and, in particular, practice changes. The AFG method combines thematic focus group discussions with activities, such as grocery shopping, cooking and sharing a meal. The practical implementation of the method is demonstrated in this paper by describing an empirical study of the transition to sustainable plant-based food consumption practices in Finland. We argue that the method is particularly well suited to, but not limited to, studying issues related to changes in mundane practices such as food consumption. By presenting the practical, discursive and social AFG method, we aim to contribute to the practice theoretical research on consumption by providing a novel participatory method involving ethnographic and even interventional features. With this method, mundane consumption practices and their changes can be approached comprehensively but efficiently, leaving room for varying analytical approaches depending on the research project.

This article is structured as follows: First, the practice-theoretical approach in consumption research is discussed. Next, the background and design for the AFG method is explained and its employment in an empirical study is exemplified. Finally, we conclude by discussing the strengths and limitations of the method and providing a checklist for researchers interested in applying AFGs in their future research projects.

The social practice theory approach to studying changes in mundane consumption

Practice theories – despite the name – are not only theories but “instruments of selective attention” (Warde, 2014) that also inform the choice of appropriate methods for empirical research. Therefore, it is necessary to present the theoretical basis of practice theories before detailing the methodological considerations. Practice theories have shifted the focus from individualistic choices to routine consumption, in which the actual doings, materials and competences are emphasised (Warde, 2014). Thus, ways of practicing do not represent individual characteristics (Halkier, 2017, p. 195). Instead, practices are recognisable entities consisting of heterogeneous elements (Evans, 2019). The components of practices have been approached theoretically using various terms. One popular definition of these elements is by Shove *et al.* (2007, 2012), who described the elements as *materials*, *meanings* and *competences*. Materials refer to tangible objects that are part of the practice, as well as the human body and physical spaces (e.g. food products, cooking tools and supermarkets). Competences, in turn, include knowledge and skills required to perform the practice (e.g. cooking skills and knowledge of foods). Finally, meanings consist of ideas, images and symbols as well as aspirations associated with practices (e.g. the cultural meanings of foods and social norms of eating). These elements form recognisable practice entities when linked together; however, practices must be performed to exist (Warde, 2005, p. 134). From a practice theory viewpoint, consumption is performed as a practice, as part of practices and as their consequence (Shove and Pantzar, 2005, p. 45). For example, food consumption practices are considered interdependent activities of provisioning, preparing, storing, eating and disposing foods (Warde, 2016, p. 49).

From the social practice theory viewpoint, practices are also characterised by their social nature (Shove *et al.*, 2007; Shove *et al.*, 2012). For example, although food consumption is

about addressing the individual's fundamental need for nutrition in the first place, it is also regulated by socially shared rules and conventions, such as what defines good taste (Marshall, 2005). Food consumption is also often part of social events, such as a get-together with family. Thus, eating patterns are formed in social relationships and networks (Delormier *et al.*, 2009). Marshall (2005, pp. 71–72) argued that the social context can even define food more than its nutritional values.

Consequently, change in (unsustainable) consumption does not happen solely through changing opinions, as pro-environmental behaviour does not straightforwardly follow consciousness (e.g. Barbarossa and Pastore, 2015). Instead, it can happen through challenging the links and elements of unsustainable practices and reconfiguring them in new, sustainable ways (Hargreaves, 2011, p. 83). Transformed practices can emerge as new compositions of former practices or as new elements combined with former ones (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Furthermore, the social and cultural context, as well as the network of other practices, play a remarkable role in the change of food consumption practices. According to Warde (2016, p. 146), in attempts to change eating practices, success is more likely to be achieved when an individual receives social support.

When studying changes in consumption practices empirically, researchers should use methods that enable them to capture all the above-described elements of practice and the social and cultural context of the practices. The challenge is to be able to simultaneously consider multiple levels of analysis – concrete doings and sayings, implicit understandings and material and cultural contexts. While observational methods can be useful for capturing actions as they happen, interview data are often required to ascribe meanings to people's actions and to learn more about the teleoaffective structures of practices, such as norms and goals (Schatzki, 2002). Warde (2014, p. 13) suggested that individual practices could be detected by asking people to state whether they engage in a practice, whether they can allocate time for this practice and whether specialised equipment exists for enacting the practices. Furthermore, it has been argued that interviews in which informants must recollect their practices are not enough to capture the embodied and situational nature of practices (Mak *et al.*, 2022). Instead, methods such as walk-along interviews have been suggested. However, as practice theory aligns with an interpretivist research philosophy, there is no certain method that offers the most accurate or truthful depiction of practices or their elements. Rather, all data are always interpreted (Halkier and Jensen, 2011).

State-of-the-art methods for studying sustainable consumption practices

Practice theory research on mundane consumption has mostly adopted qualitative methodologies. This is typical of practice-theoretical research, as practice theories are rooted in the interpretivist research philosophy. Food, energy and clothing seem to be popular topics in the research field of environmentally sustainable consumption practices, perhaps as these objects of consumption are among the most resource intensive in the everyday lives of consumers in terms of environmental footprint (see, e.g. Sahakian *et al.*, 2021; Muylaert and Maréchal, 2022; Röpke, 2009; Wendler, 2023). Table 1 lists some examples of recent practice theory-oriented publications on sustainable consumption, including studies on food, energy and clothing, and their methodologies. The methodological variance highlights how practice theories allow for different methodological choices, as the approach itself does not provide strict guidelines on how practices should be studied (Halkier, 2017) and even involves discussions on whether a thing as “practice theory methodologies” exists (see Hui, 2023; Shove, 2017). Hence, the referred methods in Table 1 range from talk-based (focus group discussions (Hoolohan *et al.*, 2018; Maréchal and Holzemer, 2018; Muylaert and Maréchal, 2022) and individual interviews in various forms (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022;

| Paper title | Method |
|--|--|
| Wendler (2023) . The social challenges of not eating meat: how social interactions shape the role of meat in everyday food practices | <i>Interviews followed by focus groups</i> |
| Fuentes and Fuentes (2022) . Reconfiguring food materialities: plant-based food consumption practices in antagonistic landscapes | <i>Ethnographic interviews</i> with photo journals |
| Muylaert and Maréchal (2022) . Understanding consumer lock-in mechanisms towards clothing libraries: a practice-based analysis coupled with the multilevel perspective | Workshops (online) involving <i>individual (thinking) exercises</i> and <i>group discussions</i> |
| Röös et al. (2022) . Meat tastes good, legumes are healthy and meat substitutes are still strange – the practice of protein consumption among Swedish consumers | <i>Quantitative online survey</i> |
| White et al. (2022) . Consumer adoption of plant-based meat substitutes: A network of social practices | In-depth <i>interviews</i> |
| Heidenström and Hebrok (2021) . Fridge studies – Rummage through the fridge to understand food waste | Fridge studies: <i>an unstructured rummage through the fridge contents</i> of the participating households, including performative questions |
| Sahakian et al. (2021) . Challenging social norms to recraft practices: a living lab approach to reducing household energy use in eight European countries | Mixed-method <i>household living labs</i> of nine months involving challenges with materials and tips; baseline, exit and follow-up surveys, focus group discussions and closing events |
| Biermann and Rau (2020) . The meaning of meat: (Un)sustainable eating practices at home and out of home | <i>Quantitative online surveys</i> |
| Armstrong and Park (2020) . Online clothing resale: a practice theory approach to evaluate sustainable consumption gains | In-depth <i>interviews</i> |
| Sirola et al. (2019) . Mottainai! – a practice-theoretical analysis of Japanese consumers' food waste reduction | <i>Mobile ethnography</i> combining diary methods with multi-sited and digital ethnography |
| Hoolohan et al. (2018) . Food-related routines and energy policy: a focus group study examining potential for change in the United Kingdom | In-depth <i>focus group discussions</i> |
| Maréchal and Holzemer (2018) . Unravelling the 'ingredients' of energy consumption: exploring home related practices in Belgium | <i>Group conversations</i> with collective (talk-based) exercises |
| Devaney and Davies (2017) . Disrupting household food consumption through experimental HomeLabs: outcomes, connections, contexts | The HomeLabs: Five-week <i>living lab interventions</i> involving tools, food products and educational materials. Implementation and evaluation using mixed in-depth, multi-media ethnographic methods |
| Paddock (2017) . Household consumption and environmental change: rethinking the policy problem through narratives of food practice | <i>Interviews</i> with the aim of reconstructing practices through participants' <i>narratives</i> |
| Pfeiffer et al. (2017) . How social practices impact (non-) sustainable food consumption/eating habits | In-depth <i>interviews</i> plus multiple phone interviews between the in-depth interviews |
| Klepp and Bjerck (2014) . A methodological approach to the materiality of clothing: wardrobe studies | Wardrobe studies consisting of <i>an inventory of clothes in a wardrobe</i> , involving/combined with interviews, fieldwork and laboratory testing |

Source: Authors' own work

Table 1. Practice-theoretical research on food, energy and clothing consumption

Armstrong and Park, 2020; Paddock, 2017; Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2017; White *et al.*, 2022; Wendler, 2023) to interventional “living lab” designs (Devaney and Davies, 2017; Sahakian *et al.*, 2021), ethnographically oriented approaches (Heidenstrøm and Hebrok, 2021; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014; Sirola *et al.*, 2019) and even a couple of quantitative studies (Biermann and Rau, 2020; Røös *et al.*, 2022).

Interestingly, with the exception of a few group discussion approaches, most methods seem to be individually oriented, leaving out social interactions [apart from those between the researcher(s) and the research participants or possible household members]. However, this is not surprising, as mundane consumption is ultimately quite private and household-centred. We also acknowledge that methodologies that require visiting participants’ homes (e.g. Devaney and Davies, 2017; Heidenstrøm and Hebrok, 2021; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014) are naturally individually oriented and might not work with the presence of other participants. However, as practices are fundamentally social and thus influenced by social norms and conventions (e.g. Schatzki, 2002), we believe there is a place for methodological designs that involve the social aspect of mundane consumption *in situ*. This may help sensitise both the participants and the researcher to these aspects and also bring forth the diversity in practices that are carried out individually but ultimately socially shared and thus help generate richer qualitative data (see also Hoolohan *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, there has been a concern in practice-theoretical research about the dominance of interview-based methodologies and their missing ability to take into account the embodied (i.e. tacit, physical and practical) dimensions of practices, whereas observational methods used to be seen as the most representational methods of practices (Halkier, 2017). Indeed, it seems that interview-based methods have gained some popularity in this context as well. Nevertheless, Halkier (2017, p. 199) argued that methodological questions focus on the balance between the embodied *and* discursive dimensions of everyday practices (see also Närvänen, 2014; Mak *et al.*, 2022). We find fridge studies (Heidenstrøm and Hebrok, 2021) a great example of such balancing, as they combine interviewing with rummaging through the interviewee’s fridge. Halkier (2017) concludes that the dimensions emphasised depend, naturally, on the interests of the research project; however, applying methods that consider both dimensions can be fruitful for practice-oriented research. Moreover, practices, including discussions in the research setting, can help in revealing underlying tacit know-how, general understandings and normativity behind routinised practices (Schatzki, 2002) that cannot be grasped by simply observing (Maréchal and Holzemer, 2018).

Furthermore, many mundane consumption practices (and their change processes) are complex despite being routinised, as they are affected by not only individual motivations but also contextual, cultural and infrastructural issues, for instance, that need to be taken into account when steering them towards sustainability (Devaney and Davies, 2017). In addition, practices are part of the nexus of practices involving multiple coexisting, interweaving practices (Schatzki, 2002, p. 88). Therefore, it is not an easy task to comprehensively cover the complex array of aspects of even one area of consumption in one study, as noted by Devaney and Davies (2017), and it can be resource demanding. Hence, we suggest that there is a use for methodological approaches that acknowledge this multidimensionality and aim at comprehensive data, yet without resulting in too complex, resource-demanding designs.

Finally, it is proposed that practice theories call for creative methodologies with which practices can be studied in natural settings, resulting in a richer view of consumers’ daily activities instead of collecting data solely through surveys or interviews (Browne, 2016; Hargreaves, 2011, p. 84). The few ethnographically inspired and interventional approaches listed in Table 1 represent attempts to grasp practices in rather natural settings (in

households) (Heidenström and Hebrok, 2021; Klepp and Bjerck, 2014; Sahakian *et al.*, 2021; Sirola *et al.*, 2019). Yet, such approaches seem to be quite absent for practices that reach outside the household space. Hence, there is room to develop more methodologies that address consumption practices in natural settings involving multiple integrated practices that also reach outside households.

To conclude, there is a need to develop more creative approaches to studying mundane consumption practices in a holistic manner, acknowledging the complex social environment in which consumers operate. With the AFG method, we respond to the call for creative, comprehensive, real-life-reflecting methodologies and approaches that balance discursive and embodied features in terms of practices. In this way, we further extend the array of creative qualitative methodologies, particularly in sustainable consumption research and provide a novel alternative for practice theory researchers to consider. The design and application of the AFG method are discussed next.

Activity focus group method

Combining discussion and activities to achieve contextually rich data

To respond to the call for new creative qualitative methods, we refined a widely used method of focus group discussions and named it the *AFG method*. We consider “practice” quite synonymous with “activity” (see Warde, 2014, p. 287); however, we believe the term “activity” describes well the nature of the method and does not confine it to the theoretical concept of practices. AFGs can be defined as group discussions conducted while performing activities that represent the practices at the centre of the research. In changing everyday consumption practices towards increased sustainability, it is crucial to take into account different elements of practices and the variety of practices involved. For example, in our empirical study, we examined mundane food consumption practices and the shift to plant-based food consumption. Therefore, the activities included in our AFG sessions covered planning a dish, acquiring necessary groceries, cooking the dish and eating it in the group. The aim of the activities was to foster group discussion and vice versa.

Focus groups have been among the most commonly used methods in social and behavioural science since the mid-20th century, and in qualitative marketing studies their popularity has steadily grown over the past decades (Stewart *et al.*, 2007; Stokes and Bergin, 2006). Browne (2016, pp. 202–203) saw focus groups as a potential method to study conventional practices because they allow new data to emerge, such as information of shared routines, or they can even challenge social norms. Focus groups, either as pure discussion sessions or discussions involving tasks such as photo collage, have been used in sustainable consumption research (e.g. Hoolohan *et al.*, 2018; Varela *et al.*, 2022; Weinrich, 2018). Also, walking-with techniques have been applied in studying the mundane practices of individuals, such as commuting (Mak *et al.*, 2022). However, to our knowledge, the way in which AFGs combine *group* discussions with several consumption *practices* is novel.

The interaction of the participants in focus group discussions provides fruitful opportunities for the researcher, especially in “exploratory” research contexts that do not aim at diving deep into consumer motivations (Stokes and Bergin, 2006), as, for example, contested or additional issues can be brought to the discussion (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 75). Hoolohan *et al.* (2018) suggested that focus groups can bring forth otherwise mundane routines and foster critical reflection on their possibilities for change in a non-confrontational environment, bringing value in terms of practical implications of practice-oriented research. Particularly in less-structured focus groups, the role of the moderator is mainly to encourage discussion and stay less active. Hence, interaction between the participants plays a key role, and the setting aims to resemble natural social interaction

(Liamputtong, 2011, pp. 3–5; Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p. 72). The AFG method represents such a less-structured form of discussion, aiming for natural and even spontaneous discussion and co-interviewing between participants.

Focus groups have been criticised for being unnatural or shallow, as there is a risk that participants will adjust their sayings to the opinions of others or do not actively take part in the discussion (Liamputtong, 2011; Prince and Davies, 2001; Stokes and Bergin, 2006). On the contrary, the presence of other participants can give support and thus provide a way to understand shared symbolic and representational discourses of daily consumption practices (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, pp. 73–74; Catterall and Maclaran, 2006; p. 256). In AFGs, the risk of unnaturalness is diminished by mundane activities that could also be conducted in the group in everyday life. Because the focus is not on uncovering consumer motivations or preferences, but on practices, we believe the risk of seeking consensus is not that critical. We suggest that the activities can also encourage less talkative persons to participate in the discussion, as the person talking is not in the spotlight in the same way as when sitting around a table and discussing.

Moreover, focus groups have been criticised for being based only on talking and thus not being able to grasp actual practices (Browne, 2016). In the AFG method, this problem is addressed by adding the activities (practices) and thus extending the discussion to a practical level. Yet, the aim here is *not* to present a method for studying *how* practices are actually conducted in the everyday life of the participants. Instead, we believe the activities at hand can help foster fruitful discussion on practices, thus resulting in rich data that also connect with practicalities. Thus, the AFG method offers a way to produce relevant, contextually rich data about everyday practices.

Demonstrating the activity focus group method through a study of plant-based food consumption practices

Reducing excessive meat consumption is one of the key issues in mitigating climate change and in aiming to achieve the 2030 UN sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015). Thus, there is an urgent global need for a shift towards diets featuring plant-based foods (Springmann *et al.*, 2018; Willett *et al.*, 2019). There is no strict definition for a plant-based diet, but the most important characteristic is the dominant role of plant-based foods and the major reduction of (red) meat, but not its complete exclusion (e.g. Willett *et al.*, 2019). In Finland, there has recently been a growing interest in and an evolving market for plant-based foods (Knaapila *et al.*, 2022). Consumers hold favourable attitudes towards decreasing red meat consumption; however, these are not necessarily reflected in behaviour, or red meat is replaced with poultry, for example (Erkkola *et al.*, 2022). It has been proposed that research designs should concentrate on those consumers who have an interest in reducing meat consumption instead of those with the strongest barriers to it (Pohjolainen *et al.*, 2015; Knaapila *et al.*, 2022). Hence, for our study, we sought people who are interested in changing their overall (meat-based) food consumption practices towards a plant-based diet.

We targeted the generation of millennials (born in the 1980s and 1990s), as they are often concerned about environmental issues and have shown interest in plant-based eating (Knaapila *et al.*, 2022). The participants were recruited via the researchers' networks, resulting in 13 people (see Table 2), all representing university students who were employed part-time. All four of our AFGs were organised in early 2018, and the shared meal was offered as compensation for participation. A pilot AFG session was first conducted and the performance of the method was analysed, resulting only in slight modifications in the interview questions. The sessions were conducted by one researcher responsible for guiding

the discussion and activities, audio recording the discussion and photographing the purchases and dishes.

The participants in each group were friends, which was important in terms of creating a natural situation. Catterall and Maclaran (2006, p. 264) proposed that having friendships in focus groups can ease shyness, and Halkier (2017, p. 201) added that knowing the trajectories of each other's practices outside the research setting can also help in fostering co-interviewing and concrete negotiations on practicing. In our study, it was crucial that the participants were not strangers, as conducting food-related activities with unfamiliar people would risk the ease of the situation and shift the focus to negotiating on how to perform the tasks as a group. Furthermore, we believe that having participants who represent very different cultural backgrounds or generations might also be problematic. Hence, we suggest that AFGs require the group participants to represent the same social group and to know each other beforehand (e.g. as friends, colleagues or family members) for the method to work as intended.

Our AFG sessions began inside the entrance of a middle-size grocery store (same store for all groups), where the participants were presented some introductory questions: If you think about a plant-based diet, what comes to mind? How would you describe or define a plant-based diet?

Next, the participants were given the task of selecting ingredients for a plant-based dish that would be cooked in the group. The researcher defined a plant-based dish only as meat-free; otherwise, the participants were given the possibility to define it further and to freely select the ingredients. The discussion continued while the participants were shopping for the ingredients, and the researcher provided some questions on the available and chosen plant-based products. The time spent in the store was limited to around 30 min, but the following phases did not provide a time limit (see Figure 1). After exiting the store, the discussion continued spontaneously while walking to the cooking location. The cooking location was chosen as the researcher's home kitchen close to the supermarket, as it served as a neutral but a convenient and natural space.

| Group no. | Participants | Session duration | Age range |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 (pilot group) | 3 (women) | 90 min | 24–27 |
| 2 | 3 (2 women, 1 man) | 80 min | 24–26 |
| 3 | 4 (3 men, 1 woman) | 105 min | 24–25 |
| 4 | 3 (women) | 95 min | 23–25 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>13 (9 women, 4 men)</i> | <i>Average 93 min</i> | <i>23–27 years</i> |

Table 2. Participants in the AFGs conducted in Finland

Source: Authors' own work

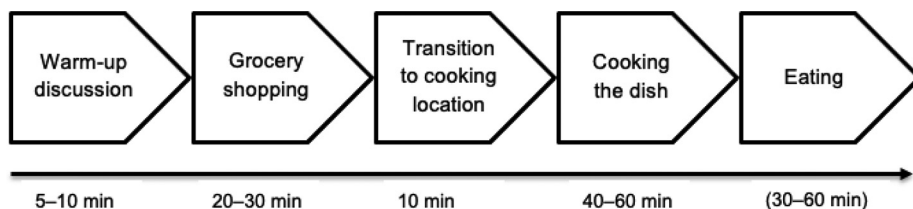


Figure 1. Structure of the AFG sessions

Source: Authors' own work

The researcher photographed the ingredients before cooking. The participants were first informed about where to find the necessary cooking utensils and were then asked to start preparing the meal together. The researcher encouraged discussion during the cooking, asking questions about food consumption habits and the social environment in food consumption. All participants did not participate in the cooking as actively (which was not the aim after all); however, this did not seem to affect participation in the discussion, or vice versa. Finally, the dish was eaten together while continuing with the recorded discussion for a while, depending on whether the participants were still able to add to the discussion. The final meals were also photographed by the researcher (see [Appendix](#)). Finally, the recordings were transcribed the next day, resulting in 74 pages of data that were analysed with a qualitative content analysis approach ([Spiggle, 1994](#)) based on the practice-theoretical framework and interpretivist research philosophy.

Implications of the implementation of the activity focus group method

The purpose of our empirical study using the AFG method was to describe and analyse what kinds of issues consumers encounter in their daily food consumption practices that can hinder or support the transition to plant-based food consumption. In our AFGs, the three elements of practice, that is, materials, meanings and competences ([Shove et al., 2012](#)), were clearly present. When the groups selected the ingredients and prepared the dish, materials for food consumption practices (e.g. supermarket facilities, food items and cooking utensils) were handled concretely. In this way, the mundane materials were brought to the forefront, helping to evoke discussion about them. For example, when the participants looked at the meat substitute products in the store, it provoked reactions such as disgust or excitement and deliberation on whether such products could support plant-based food consumption or not. In addition, when the groups needed to choose something instead of familiar meat products, it revealed the role of meat as a central material in everyday food consumption, around which dishes are usually composed. This brought up the idea of simply replacing meat with plant-based alternatives (i.e. replacing the former material element with a new one):

“M3: Hey, I have an idea. Let’s take Quorn”.

“M4: Yes, but what is it?”

“M3: Like chilli con carne, but then it’s chilli con Quorn”.

“M4: So, what are you replacing with Quorn? Like in terms of meat?”

“M3: Umm, minced meat. So it replaces minced meat.”

When the groups succeeded in selecting ingredients for the dish, the satisfaction and even pride were easy to notice: the activity was a concrete exercise in plant-based food consumption and therefore also a chance to not only reflect on but also disrupt daily habits and gain experience with “new materials” (plant-based foods). The task provoked discussion, for example, on which products in the store are familiar and whether the dish is something the participants have or could make at home. Moreover, the cooking phase evoked talking about materials, such as the differences between food safety in meat and plant-based foods. When one of the groups was frying a dairy-based meat substitute product on a pan, they raised the safety issue:

The easiness of these [referring to the dairy-based meat substitute product] compared to meat is that you don't have to cook these; it's enough to throw them into the pan, fry for a moment and it's ready. It saves a lot of time, and you don't have to think about food hygiene the same way as you do while cooking with meat. (W5)

Regarding competences, the AFG sessions revealed and even tested the skills of the participants in relation to (plant-based) food consumption and evoked deliberation on the role of competences in the shift to plant-based food consumption. For example, there was clearly a lack of knowledge and varying ideas on what a plant-based diet means. One of the groups ended up excluding all animal-derived products from the dish after negotiating on what constitutes the "proper way" to eat plant-based products, whereas others used dairy products or eggs more or less (see [Appendix](#)). It was also noticeable throughout the sessions that the participants often associated plant-based eating first with vegetarianism or even with veganism, i.e. stricter forms of plant-based eating (see e.g. [Hoek et al., 2017](#)):

"W7: Does it mean the same as vegan?"

"W8: Or is it different than vegetarian food?"

"W9: It's not from animals".

"W7: But does that make it vegan?"

"W8: It sounds like the diet is mainly based on vegetables, and you eat less of, for example, meat or fish".

Furthermore, the cooking phase brought to the fore the participants' skills in relation to plant-based cooking. Some of the participants were clearly unsure how to prepare the dish and thus needed to discuss this with the group, during which they explained the difficulties in cooking plant-based dishes in general. For example, challenges in proper seasoning were brought up, and some participants expressed how they found plant-based cooking more troublesome and time-consuming, especially if they had partners who were not interested in plant-based eating and thus could not share meals with them. In addition, the discussion addressed how some lacked knowledge on how to compose nutritious meals from plant-based ingredients:

I have not cooked [plant-based dishes], so I have not formed routines so that I could cook a plant-based dish out of habit. So, when I prepare a plant-based dish, it is a salad. And then it is too light because I don't know how to make it filling enough. (M4)

However, it seemed the groups did not have major problems with cooking the dish and many participants expressed positive surprise regarding the ease and outcome of their cooking. Again, this indicates how AFGs can also work as interventional sessions that make the participants question their assumptions and test their skills and thus provide an opportunity for learning. Besides, the sessions provided an opportunity to reflect on the possibilities of continuing such plant-based eating in everyday life after the session. For example, all groups highlighted how they prefer flexibility and versatility over absoluteness; that is, diminishing the role of meat in daily food consumption practices was considered more attractive than fully abandoning it. Moreover, making gradual instead of radical changes and learning step-by-step were emphasised. Therefore, the AFGs could also work as a kickstart to the process of changing meat-based food consumption practices or as a chance to get more motivation for continuing the process.

W3: Maybe not all of a sudden and completely, like “now I will not eat any meat or milk, etc.” but I can make individual, separate choices and probably will, too. That I notice that the vegetarian version of a particular product is as good or better than the original one, and gradually begin to use it.

In terms of meanings in food consumption practices, we were able to grasp such meanings in the discussions throughout the activities. This ranged from the meanings of certain foods to broader meanings of everyday food consumption practices. Hence, the AFGs served as an arena for discussing not only the meanings of (plant-/meat-based) food consumption on a general level, but also the meanings and ideas attached to the materials (foods) that were concretely present. For example, when discussing plant-based meat substitute products in the store, some participants perceived them as unnatural, revealing the ideal of consuming natural and healthy foods in everyday life. On the contrary, some participants brought up mainly positive images of plant-based foods, as they found them healthy, colourful and aesthetic, among others:

W5: It's so lovely, when you look at this food [the dish the second group was cooking], it's so colourful. That's nice.

Moreover, the high appreciation and value of meat was exemplified by how some participants found plant-based foods highly priced and did not necessarily see them giving as much value for money as meat. In addition, the meaning of meat as something rewarding and “comfort food” versus plant-based eating as something ideal was discussed. One of the participants explained it nicely, exemplifying how the meaning of everyday food consumption is not something static but fluctuates and is situation and mood dependent:

M3: And also, depending on the day a lot, sometimes if I have a pro-myself day, then I might have something plant-based, but not if I've had a terrible day like yesterday, when I was going to have lunch with a few colleagues and we went to a Thai place, and I really did not choose vegetarian. They had the freaking greasy, freaking good chicken wing things there.

M4: That's the kind of comfort food. Meat is a kind of comfort food. So, it's like when you want to cheer up.

However, this group ended up cooking plant-based “kebab meat” with sweet potato fries and salad, so the participants expressed positive surprise when they noticed that they were able to prepare a “comfort food” dish with plant-based ingredients. Hence, this illustrates how the AFGs not only bring forth the ideas and meanings attached to food consumption on both material and practice levels, but also encourage participants to question them.

Finally, the meanings were also discussed in relation to the social environment (outside the social situation in the AFG sessions) and other practices in “the nexus of social practices”, as formulated by [Schatzki \(2002\)](#). For example, the participants discussed the social norm of eating meat that is revealed in social situations:

W2: It can be a huge social issue, which is why I'm not completely vegetarian. There are so many situations where you don't want to be “the difficult one”.

W1: Especially if you're in a group where everyone is omnivorous.

In terms of the meaning of plant-/meat-based food consumption in relation to other practices, some groups pointed out the image of environmental friendliness. This idea was doubted when the effects of plant-based foods were compared with changing other practices, such as reducing flying. Thus, this exemplifies how the discussion in the

AFGs also reached outside the practices at hand, indicating that the discussion is not limited to the practices that are represented in the sessions. This illustrates that the AFGs is also a flexible method in this sense, as it leaves room for moving between practical and more abstract levels in the discussion, which of course depend also on the chosen interview questions.

To conclude, the findings presented in this section show that change in interdependent food practices is not a straightforward process, but a multidimensional issue. With the AFGs, we were able to address this multidimensionality through activities and discussion, resulting in comprehensive data covering both practical and abstract issues.

Discussion

In this paper, we introduced the AFG method and outlined its practical application in the study of the transition towards plant-based food consumption practices. The aim of AFGs is to grasp the multidimensionality of everyday food consumption and provide a new method of examining issues in mundane practices. It aims to efficiently combine actual food consumption practices with group discussions and to foster conversation in a relaxed, real-life-reflecting social situation. When stimulated by the activities, participants can raise practical issues in the discussion, such as how our groups defined a plant-based diet through selection of ingredients or how the cooking exemplified preparational advantages of plant-based foods. However, the discussion was not limited to practical issues, as it also touched on abstract issues related to meanings and social norms in food consumption. We propose the strengths of AFGs (see [Table 3](#)) as follows: the ability to foster fruitful and natural discussion on routine practices that connects with discursive and practical dimensions and thus generates multidimensional data in a resource-efficient way.

We believe social interaction and action can help in extending the discussion and in revealing issues that an individual would perhaps not recognise or express if interviewed individually. In AFGs, the participants need to consciously seek ways to perform familiar practices within the group. Therefore, they provide an arena for reflection on mundane consumption practices with the help of the group. The key in this method is its ability *not* to provide data on *how* practices are performed in everyday life but to *disrupt* the routines and thus to make consumers actively *reflect* on them. Hence, it responds to the challenge of encouraging reflexivity about routine behaviour ([Närvänen, 2014](#)). In this way, the method holds the potential to be an interventional approach, as the AFG sessions also serve as

| Strengths | Limitations |
|---|---|
| Connects a discursive dimension with practicalities → multidimensional data | More resource demanding than traditional focus group discussions |
| Conducting familiar activities in the group fosters reflection on routine behaviour | The activities can take focus away from the discussion or leave some participants with a minor role |
| A low-threshold setting | Only suitable for research contexts that are not too personal nor too complex |
| Efficient: multiple practices in one session | |
| Natural: ability to release tension and formality and to keep participants active → fruitful discussion | |

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3.
Strengths and limitations of the AFG method

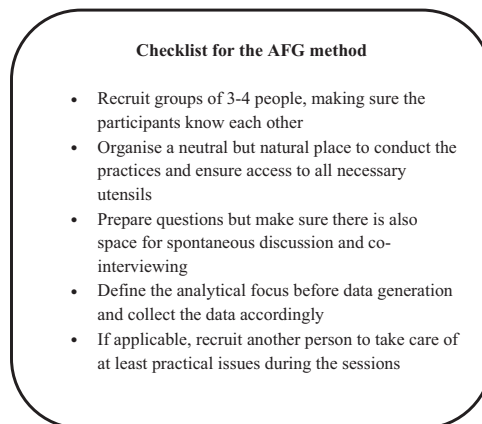
opportunities to concretely try new ways of practicing and to gain positive experiences in a natural environment.

In addition, AFGs represent a low-threshold setting for participants not only because they involve eating with familiar people, but also because they do not require researchers to enter homes, which can cause feelings of discomfort (see [Heidenström and Hebrok, 2021](#)). Because the method includes multiple activities in a single, maximum 2-h session and does not require many practical arrangements apart from the cooking place, we suggest it is a resource-efficient method for studying practices holding ethnographic and interventional features. We believe the activities can create a less formal atmosphere in the group that fosters natural and equal interaction, also helping in preventing boredom or fatigue by keeping the participants active. Finally, the AFG method is able to highlight the role of material arrangements and objects in practices, including the body, as participants can select, touch, handle and show them to the moderator and each other while talking and performing the activities with their bodies.

We acknowledge that the AFG method has limitations. First, it requires more arrangements compared with traditional focus group discussions. Besides, the participants' abilities to focus on the discussion might suffer or some can be left with a more minor role, particularly if they continuously need to seek synergy on how to conduct the activities. However, researchers can address this by encouraging the discussion and ensuring easy access to necessary utensils, and making sure the participants know each other beforehand (or preferably, are, e.g. friends, family or colleagues). Furthermore, we propose that the method is only suitable for research contexts that are not too complex or too sensitive, as conducting somewhat personal practices (e.g. doing laundry) or practices that would require a lot of organisation for the sessions (e.g. home renovation) would not fit with the method. Finally, regarding future modifications to the method, the AFGs could make use of another researcher to help with the practicalities and with guiding the discussion and to minimise any "moderator bias" (see [Prince and Davies, 2001](#)). We have provided a checklist (see [Figure 2](#)) that lists the key issues to consider when applying the method to further research contexts.

With the AFG method, we respond to the call of [Halkier \(2017\)](#) to apply methodological designs to practice-oriented consumption research that aim at addressing not only the

Figure 2.
Checklist for
conducting AFGs



Source: Authors' own work

embodied and material side of practices (see e.g. Kuuru and Närvänen, 2022) but also the conversational side. As a practice can be defined as “a nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 2002, p. 73), in the design of AFGs, the “doings” are concretely present while bringing forth the “sayings”. However, we emphasise that the tacit, embodied dimension was not part of our data *analysis per se*, as we focused on the discursive data as a representation of the practices. However, we suggest that the data produced with AFGs could include observations on, for example, gestures or body language (see Halkier and Jensen, 2011) or on how the practices are performed in a group. This depends on the interests of the research project and thus needs to be considered when planning the application of the method. Hence, we would like to emphasise the flexibility of the method, as it allows the researcher to choose where to focus and not be stuck with a certain practice-theoretical framework either (even if we draw on the framework of the three elements here; Shove et al., 2012).

With the AFG method, we extend the use of creative, varying methodologies, particularly in the field of mundane consumption practices and their sustainability. We conclude by suggesting that there is a potential for applying AFGs in other research contexts other than food or sustainability. For example, the method could work when studying the practices of public food consumption, such as lunching or dining in a restaurant with friends. Shifting away from food, AFGs could be implemented in studying clothing consumption by conducting discussions while shopping for clothing, or in studying people’s recycling practices. To conclude, we believe the potential for applying AFGs extends to various research contexts and suggest that the method’s initial design leaves space for further development.

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Appendix. The ingredients and prepared dishes from the activity focus groups conducted in Finland

Activity focus groups

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Source: Authors' own work

Plate A1.
Group 1: Pasta sauce with mushrooms, spinach, zucchini, cherry tomatoes, parmesan cheese, oat-based "cream" and artichoke hearts



Source: Authors' own work

Plate A2.
Group 2: Rice noodles and sauce with Mifu (a dairy-based meat substitute product), mushrooms, red onion, zucchini, pepper, sugar peas, coconut milk and Thai paste for seasoning



Source: Authors' own work

Plate A3.
Group 3: Seitan kebab with sweet potato fries, salad with cherry tomatoes, cucumber and Cantaloupe melo

Plate A4.

Group 4: A pie with feta cheese, spinach, cherry tomatoes, spread cheese and mozzarella cheese. Dough made of milk, wheat flour, butter, and eggs. The pie was served with a salad of cucumbers, cherry tomatoes and seeds



Source: Authors' own work

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