



## Banal Sustainability

### Renewing the Cultural Norm of Not Wasting Food

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Recently food waste has been raised as a major sustainability problem: roughly one third of the food produced globally ends up lost or wasted. This article investigates how people attach meaning to food waste reduction, based on eight individual interviews conducted with people met at a consumer education event in Helsinki in 2017. It is shown how the traditional cultural norm of not wasting food is reproduced in *discourse on thrift and frugality* and renewed by research-based arguments from *circular economy discourse* and *environmental and sustainability discourse*. It is proposed that the interplay of discourses merge into what Lars Kaijser calls banal sustainability: the complicated issue of food waste is translated into everyday practises, and traditional practises are reframed as tools for making a better future.

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### The Food Waste Festival: Introducing Banal Sustainability

It is a bright September day in Teurastamo, a former slaughterhouse area in Helsinki, recently renovated into a lively urban space for food culture and related events. People wander around, stopping at small desks where other people are sharing information and presenting their products, innovations, and services. In a show kitchen, food bloggers give demonstrations on how to cook porridge from dried rye bread and to make a pizza out of whatever is left over in the fridge. Long tables in the main hall are filled with diners enjoying a three-course meal cooked from local groceries' surplus; a voluntary payment of ten euros can be dropped into a transparent plastic box to support protection of the Baltic Sea. It is the food waste festival *Hävikifestarit*, a consumer education event organized by the Consumers' Union of Finland during the fifth national *Hävikiviikko* – an annual campaign week against food waste. The food waste festival and the campaign week aim to share information and promote food waste reduction among consumers.



**Figure 1:** Festival visitors watch as a food blogger prepares a leftover omelette at the food waste festival, Helsinki 2017. (Photo: Liia-Maria Raippalinna).

In this article, I investigate how people attach meaning to food waste reduction based on eight individual interviews conducted with people I met at the food waste festival in 2017. Their interview responses provide a vernacular view on “the new visibility of food waste” (Evans, Campbell & Murcott 2012). In the present millennium, food waste avoidance and reduction have gained political and societal relevance as part of sustainable development and more sustainable food systems. Various actors have

united in the fight against food waste at international, national, and local levels. These include political bodies, businesses, governmental and non-governmental organizations, the media, activists, and individual citizens. The food waste festival in Helsinki is a good example of such collaborative activity. It was funded by the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, organized by a magazine (*Kuluttajalehti*) owned by the Consumers' Union of Finland, and drew together dozens of local and national actors and hundreds of visitors.

I ask how the rationale for food waste reduction was discursively constructed in the interview responses. In my analysis I propose that different discourses on food and food waste have merged into what Lars Kaijser (2019) calls *banal sustainability*<sup>1</sup>: a process in which complicated, abstract and distant environmental challenges are domesticated into everyday routines and sustainable consumption practises (Kaijser 2019: 75–76). Kaijser shows how, in guided exhibition tours at a science centre, scientific insights on environmental challenges are translated into people's daily activities. Seeking to promote environmental awareness, the centre ascribes meaning to peoples' everyday actions and provides visitors with practical know-how for dealing with environmental challenges in their daily lives. Tours in the exhibited rainforest provide an emotional and bodily experience. The staged forest functions as an “attachment site, where you go from wonder to insight to action, from feeling to knowing to doing, from wow to aha” (ibid.: 88). The centre empowers visitors and gives them hope that their daily activities will turn into a better future. However, it simultaneously downplays more structural and political aspects of environmental problems. In addition, the proposed adjustments are relatively small; instead of suggesting fundamental changes in lifestyle, banal sustainability ultimately encourages carrying on as usual: “It is a future-oriented approach, rooted in a (wish for) cultural durability” (ibid.: 87–88). Similarly, consumer education on food waste, seeking to encourage consumers to take responsibility for their food waste, translates the complicated issue of food waste into small adjustments in everyday consumer behaviour through informative slogans and practical tips.

In my interviews, Markus (30 years)<sup>2</sup> connected his personal life history to a broader cultural change that has taken place over the past decade:

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Michael Billig's (1995) *banal nationalism*.

<sup>2</sup> To ensure anonymity I use pseudonyms, and the reported ages have been rounded up or down (20, 25, 30 etc.). The quotes have been translated nearly verbatim from the interviews. In quotes, [...] indicates an omission and ... indicates a pause in the interviewee's speech.

[When I was around twenty], you didn't really talk a lot [...] about food waste but instead generally about climate change. [...] You could quite blithely chat about climate change and be really concerned, but not really about this really concrete matter, about what you could do in your own household, for example.

Markus' example illustrates the process where environmental problems have been domesticated (Kaijser 2021) and brought into everyday life, within the reach of individuals. Abstract environmental concepts such as climate change move across different discursive practises in science, politics, media, and everyday life, creating different meanings and inviting different actions (Kverndokk & Eriksen 2021: 5). Here I focus on the way banal sustainability, promoted in consumer education on food waste, is adopted and (re)produced on a vernacular level among people interested in food waste reduction. This is not to contrast lay or vernacular knowledge with expert knowledge, but to acknowledge the expertise of lay people as well as to understand (often research-based) knowledge provided at the festival as produced by real people in their various positions, both lay and expert (see Kverndokk & Eriksen 2021: 12). Six of the interviewees in this study attended the food waste festival as regular visitors and two were involved as presenters. They all were notably aware of the food waste problem and related discussions, as even some of the regular festival visitors had been involved in activities related to food waste reduction. Their expertise gained through profession, studies and civil activism merged with meanings and experiences gathered in everyday life. I analyse interviewees' grassroots discourses and descriptions of their own practices related to food waste reduction and argue that various discourses and practices come together in the production of banal sustainability.

### **Discourse Analysis of Interview Data**

My research data consist of eight individual interviews with people who participated in the food waste festival in September 2017. I went to the festival to look for participants for my interview research. While watching the cooking presentations, touring the presentation desks, having lunch, and chatting with people, I openly presented my research to those around me and asked if they would be interested in participating. The general atmosphere at the festival was easy-going and enjoyable. It was easy for me to fit in, being of the same ethnicity, language group and socio-economic class as the majority of the participants. Particularly, doing research on food waste reduction, I was merely one of many actors participating in the event. People were eager to participate in my research, and after the festival I had contact information to more than 40 interested participants. The purpose was to conduct the interviews in the following spring, but the interviews had to be postponed for personal reasons.



**Figure 2:** Slices of potato pizza prepared by a food blogger at the food waste festival, Helsinki 2017. After cooking demonstrations, delicacies were offered to festival visitors to taste. (Photo: Liia-Maria Raippalinna).

Eventually, eight interviews were conducted in the spring of 2019 with those participants whom I could reach and who were still willing and able to participate. The interviewees were educated Finnish women and men living in the metropolitan area of Helsinki at the time of the festival. Their age varied from their early twenties to early sixties. One had retired, one was a student, and others were in their working life. The interviewees signed a consent agreement with regard to participation. All personal names and identifiable details have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. The interviews took place either in the interviewees' homes or in a café, according to their preference. They were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. They took the form of semi-structured, active qualitative interviews with open-ended questions (Holstein & Gubrium 2003; Warren 2001). The same themes were discussed in every interview, but the order and formulation of questions varied. Food waste reduction was discussed both as part of participants' everyday lives and as a societal issue. Focus was on the interviewees' own views, actions, and experiences. The length of the interviews varied from one to two and a half hours. Even though the interviews took place more than a year after the food waste festival, the situational

context (Blommaert 2005) of the interviews was characterized by the event. As a shared experience, it offered common ground for discussion and framed mutual assumptions about shared contextual knowledge (Blommaert 2005) and expectations regarding the interview, the interviewee, the interviewer and the purpose of the research (see Abell & Myers 2008). In the interview situation, this situational context was actualized by a warm-up question asking the interviewee's reason for attending the festival.

I approach the interviewees' responses related to food waste from a discourse studies perspective, in which discourse is regarded as social action involved in the production of social reality (e.g. Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak 2011). *Discourse* as an uncountable noun refers generally to language use, whereas *a discourse (discourses)* as a countable noun means a relatively coherent system of meaning, a point of view from which the subject matter is constructed (Fairclough 1992). For language users, discourses work as both resource and restriction (Abell & Myers 2008; Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 1992) as they enable and delimit the ways social realities are – and can be – constructed and communicated. From this point of view, the way interviewees use language in my data appears to be individual adaptations of available intertextual and interdiscursive resources (Fairclough 1992; Blommaert 2005). Their personal discursive repertoires (see e.g. Abell & Myers 2008) have evolved in the course of their life history and are embedded in available discourses and resources. The interview responses reflect and construct the participants' sociocultural realities and the changes taking place therein. Such construction also takes place in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee in the interview situation.

In my analysis of the data, I apply Jackie Abell's and Greg Myers' (2008) method for discourse analysis of interview data, in which the analysis takes place at four levels of context: text-internal, intertextual, situational, and historical-political. I started the analysis by looking for key terms and repeated meanings used by each interviewee in constructing a rationale for food waste reduction. I then looked for intertextual and interdiscursive relations (Abell & Myers 2008; Fairclough 1992; Blommaert 2005) between the interviews and between the interviews and other texts,<sup>3</sup> for instance those present in media, in order to identify discourses in which rationales for food waste reduction are constructed. These included direct and indirect referencing and reporting (for instance news media, research-based facts, and consumer education), commonplace phrases (such as “finishing one's plate”, “kids in Africa”, “using up”), and keywords referring to values, discourses, attitudes, and ideologies. Finally,

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<sup>3</sup> Texts referring widely to various types of communication, including written and spoken as well as visual and multimodal communication.

I focused on the interplay of the discourses and the ways interviewees within the interview responses reflected, represented, and constructed what they expressed as cultural shifts and continuities.

### **The New Visibility of Food Waste in Finland**

The global food system has been increasingly recognized as the major cause of global environmental change. Food production is the major cause of biodiversity loss and waterway pollution, and responsible for 40% of land use, 70% of freshwater use, and 30% of greenhouse emissions (Rockström et al. 2020; Willet et al. 2019: 449). Major transformations are therefore needed in the food system (Rockström et al. 2020). From this perspective, it is indeed problematic that roughly one third of the food produced globally is currently lost or wasted in the food system (Gustavsson et al. 2011). UN member states have signed a resolution with the target of halving consumer and retail food waste and reducing food losses in production and distribution as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see United Nations 2021). The European Union has implemented this target in its Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission 2015).

In Finland and other affluent European societies, households are the major single source of food waste (Katajajuuri et al. 2014). Therefore, public discourse has focused on changing consumer behaviour. Consumers are being encouraged to take responsibility for their food waste and its environmental impact through events like the food waste festival and other forms of consumer education (see e.g. Raippalinna 2020; Sutinen 2020). However, the end-of-the-pipeline approach adopted in public discourse has been criticized for putting too much responsibility on consumers, overlooking the social embeddedness of individual choice and behaviour, and downplaying political and structural drivers of food waste, such as agricultural policies, global capitalist markets and related power inequalities (see e.g. Alexander, Gregson & Gille 2013; Evans 2014; Gille 2013). In the meanwhile, consumer education on food waste seems to fall in a fertile soil, since a large majority of Finns find food waste reduction important or extremely important (Silvennoinen et al. 2013). At a grassroots level, people seek change and mobilize each other for food waste reduction (see e.g. Närvänen et al. 2018).

In the Finnish context, the new visibility of food waste is marked by a new term for it: *ruokahävikki* (food loss), introduced in the beginning of the 2010s (Raippalinna 2020). The issue was raised by the Finnish Institute for Natural Resources (LUKE) following political and scientific discussion in the EU (Raippalinna 2020; see Evans, Campbell & Murcott 2012; Evans 2014; Evans, Welch & Swaffield 2017). The institute's definition of *ruokahävikki* as "avoidable food waste", that is, once edible food or drink

that ends up wasted at any point of the food chain (Silvennoinen et al. 2012), has framed Finnish discourse on the issue. The term covers both food losses and retail and consumer food waste (see Parfitt, Barthel & Macnaughton 2010), although in public discourse it more often refers to the latter (Raippalinna 2020). The definition has been used in consumer education materials and it is also found in my interview data. When asked directly what they mean by “food waste”, interviewees’ responses more or less echoed LUKE’s definition:

Food waste means that food or some raw material is thrown away [...] unused, at some stage in the food chain. (Karina, 45 years)

Recent discourses on food waste have made visible the material flows that run through our everyday life as well as their impact on the global environment. An associated change has taken place in relation to all kinds of waste. What was previously hidden and managed out of sight (Åkesson 2012) has been made culturally visible, and everyday waste disposal practices have turned into focused activities (Johansson & Ek 2020), particularly as the European Union’s circular economy policies have turned wastes into raw materials and resources for industrial and economic activity (Kinnunen et al. 2020; Lehtokunnas et al. 2020). An analogous politicization has taken place in connection to consumption and household practices generally: Everyday life has always been shaped by governmental practices, but under the neoliberal economic regime daily life has become the most important site of improvement in which people are encouraged to be better citizens in all areas of life (see Sandberg 2014: 7–8; Jespersen & Damsholt 2014).

Households and household practises have been the focus of ideological struggles for over a century, when it comes to for instance hygiene, health, rationalization and progress (Jönsson 2019; Kylli 2021). In Finland at the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, home economics education played a central part in building the nation state and in producing thrifty and frugal citizens. Education aimed at rationalizing housework and modernizing Finnish society took place through magazines, as well as through agricultural and household education organizations aimed at women. Home economics education emphasized an older norm of not wasting food that had arisen as response to centuries of poverty and scarcity in Europe’s northernmost agricultural region. As late as in 1867–68, roughly 10% of the population died during an extensive famine. Protestant ethics reinforced these norms. During the Second World War, household education merged with state propaganda, and the period of post-war reconstruction was characterized by a lack of resources, food rationing and war reparations paid to the Soviet Union (Kylli 2021; Heinonen 1998).



From the 1950s onwards, extensive structural changes swept across the country, leading to rapid urbanization and industrialization. Finland became a consumer-society, and cooking became a leisure-activity instead of a necessity (e.g. Kylli 2021: 365–366, 416). The past decades in Finland have witnessed an explosion of food choices as well as the strong centralization of the food market. However, even in the age of abundance, traditional ideologies of thrift and frugality maintained a place in household education practised by educational institutions and civil society organizations. As part of the new visibility of food waste, they have now been brought back in public and media discourse.

### **Three Rationales of Food Waste Reduction**

In the following three sections, I present three rationales identified through my analysis and the ways they were discursively constructed. Then I move to analyse the interplay of these discourses and how they together produce banal sustainability.

#### ***The Circular Economy***

Food waste is food that ends up in the bin. But not all food, but the kind of food made for someone to consume. Let's say that something's already been produced for an end purpose, but it ends up unused, in the bin. That can be true of quite a lot of places in the production chain. [...] Resources are wasted that have been dedicated for some particular purpose. [...] It's a purely economic question, that things, the more they're refined, the more energy is used on them, and the energy can be purely energy [...], it can be time, it can be money, and we invest in these. If the refining is wasted, then you're wasting resources. That's it. Those resources could have been used for something else. (Markus, 30 years)

Markus worked for a company redistributing surplus food for consumers. He presented food waste as the loss of the natural, social, and economic resources invested in foodstuffs during production and processing. This is the core of the concept of the circular economy (CE), which emphasizes resource efficiency as the basis for growth and wellbeing. The European Union's CE policies aim to minimize waste and create economic and competitive value from already existing resources and to encourage the utilization of surplus food to mitigate poverty and social and economic inequality (European Commission 2015; EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste 2019). While Markus does not directly talk about the circular economy, CE discourse appears in the vocabulary he uses to describe the food waste problem: investments, production chain, use and waste of resources.

Innovative technologies, products, businesses, and practices play an important role in CE, turning valueless surplus into utility and value. Economic and social innovations based on re-valuing and redistributing surplus food had a strong presence at the food waste festival, and they were also discussed in the interviews. Another interviewee, Ulla (40 years) had devoted herself to a non-profit food waste reduction project on a voluntary basis. Referring to the festival, she mentioned having tasted a beer made of surplus bread. The beer called *Wasted* was introduced in 2017 in collaboration with Vaasa Bakery in Finland and a non-profit organization called Waste to Taste. Ulla presented it as an example of the “concrete utilization” of surplus “according to circular economy principles”.

Private behaviour surrounding waste has become of political interest, as the planetary future and the functioning of societies depend in part on the way people sort out and recycle their waste. The circular economy needs citizen participation to function (Kinnunen et al. 2020; Valkonen & Loikkanen 2020). Ulla and Markus were the most prominent users of CE discourse and both were involved in establishing surplus circulation practices. Ulla even described practising “a small-scale circular economy” in her housing cooperative that composted bio-waste to grow vegetables in the garden. On the other hand, not all of the interviewees had adopted CE discourse in their own interview responses. Yet they recycled their waste, were sympathetic to recent surplus innovations, and most had at least tried some of the new products or services. In other words, while they had not adopted the discourse, they participated in the circular economy processes.

Several interviewees were particularly supportive towards initiatives for the redistribution of surplus for social purposes. Karina (45 years) participated in the festival as a presenter in a role related to her studies. She had both a personal and a professional interest in food and food waste. At the festival, she had been attracted by a communal food aid project, *Yhteinen pöytä* (Shared Table). The Shared Table action model, created and funded in the city of Vantaa, Finland, by the city and its Evangelical Lutheran Parish, aimed to develop a food aid system involving the distribution and utilization of surplus food. In the interview she presented redistributing retail surplus as an effective solution to the food waste problem:

So if you think about this Shared Table, for example, it feeds thousands of people from Vantaa every week instead of [the food] going in the bin. [...] Of course, it's a problem, it shouldn't happen, but as long as it does happen, then I think it would be just crazy if it wasn't utilized in some way. (Karina, 45 years)

In CE discourse, the *rational* utilization of existing resources and particularly surplus food is juxtaposed with the *irrationality* and *insanity* of wasting it. While there are ethical and moral considerations involved, the rationale of food waste reduction in CE is explained primarily in terms of practical (and economic) rationality.

### ***Environment and Sustainability***

The second discourse constructs a rationale for food waste reduction based on environmental and sustainability arguments. For Ulla (40 years), concerns over climate and the global environment constituted the ultimate reason for action. While using circular economy concepts such as the effective use of resources, she constructed a rationale for food waste reduction by referring to the environmental impact of “our global food system”:

It’s now an absolutely senseless waste of resources. If something gets left over, the most sensible thing is clearly to use it primarily as nourishment instead of producing more of it all over again. [...] It’s just absolutely senseless, and from the point of view of nutrients too. They should be utilized somehow. [...] At the same time, if you think of the whole ..., our global carbon footprint, [...] about seven percent is made up of food going to waste alone. It is like absolutely senseless. The percentage for traffic is about twelve percent, and air travel is two percent. So in relation to that, like there’s really no sense in it at all. (Ulla, 40 years)

In the environmental and sustainability discourse, food production is understood as contributing to global environmental crises, while food waste reduction aims to decrease the environmental effect of food production and consumption. In my interviews, the discourse was indicated by utterances containing terms related to environmental impacts (climate change, climate impact, carbon footprint, climate emissions, carbon dioxide emissions, emissions, pollution, environmental load and environmental footprint) as well as utterances containing terms referring to the solving of environmental issues (environment-friendly, news on climate, environmental questions and environmental consciousness). The discourse also appears in the way that the interviewees attached food waste reduction to other consumption-related issues and practices such as transport and diet. Most of the interviewees described their attempts to reconsider and change their everyday consumption practices in order to reduce their environmental impact. Karina makes the connection explicit by comparing food waste with meat consumption with regard to the use of natural resources:

[When wasting food], natural resources are thrown into the bin [...] and in the world, at the moment, like one third of the food is thrown away [...] so when they talk about whether there's enough food in the world and that we should stop eating meat, then the most important thing in my opinion would be first of all to get this food wastage reduced. (Karina, 45 years)

From the point of view of ecological limits and natural resources, food waste reduction was related in this discourse to food sufficiency, hunger, and sustainability. While some interviewees used the term “sustainability”, none of them actually referred to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. However, Anna (35 years), a mother of small children, presented herself as a citizen deeply worried about “the state of the world”. She made a particularly strong connection between environmental concerns and sustainability. The way in which she constructed the rationale of food waste reduction resembles the classic Burtland Report (United Nations 1987) definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”:

[Food waste] is a bad thing because we soon really won't have any food [...] then you sort of think that you should do your own bit at least to make sure the world isn't destroyed. [...] Just yesterday ... that report was published ... that one third of the world's nature will be destroyed by the year 2050. [...] So it's like absolutely incredible how much of the world man has destroyed ... Mankind itself will soon be in danger, or is. But of course, you could think what do I care about it, I'll be dead then anyway, but certainly with their own children in mind many have woken up to [the situation], or with their own grandchildren in mind [have thought] that it would be nice if there was something of the world left for them too. (Anna, 35 years)

Environmental and sustainability discourse is strongly future-oriented in my data. Anna concludes that she can make a difference, among other things, by not throwing away food and “[not] contributing to the wastage that happens in Finnish households”, thus representing herself and other consumers as being at least partly responsible for the environmental effects of their consumption. The idea of individual responsibility is generally promoted in environmental discourse and food waste education (Raippalinnä 2020), where large-scale environmental and food-system problems are domesticated into sustainable consumption (Kaijser 2019; also Guthman 2008). Research-based knowledge and argumentation play a major role in the way interviewees construct their understandings of environmental rationale and related responsibility.

### ***Thrift and Frugality***

Liia-Maria: “Can you say why you’re interested in this [food waste]?”

Jani: “[...] Well [...] in my opinion, it’s somehow a shame to think that [...] so much food and other similar goods that in principle would be useable get thrown out ... generally that kind of ideology. And I’ve also heard about all these things, the effects on the climate – and of course it would be more climate-friendly to produce only the kind of products that are going to be used, and not just unnecessary stuff. There are many reasons, but [...] that’s perhaps the biggest one, something that’s been there ever since childhood, perhaps, just the fact that you don’t throw food or goods away unnecessarily – that kind of thing.” (Jani, 20 years)

Jani (20 years) makes sense of food waste reduction through the cultural “ideology” of thrift and frugality. He presented himself as a thrifty and frugal consumer who did not want to buy new things as long as the old ones “still work somehow”. He gave an example of his habit of buying products near or past their sell-by date that groceries sell at discounted prices. He explained that buying these discount products “helps [...] in the battle against waste and at the same time at least saves me some money”. Thrifty and frugal practices were described using the same Finnish words, for example thrifty (*säästäväinen*), sparing (*säästeliäs*), economical (*taloudellinen*), frugal (*niukka*), meagre (*nuuka*), and careful (*tarkka*).

Thrift and frugality are deep-rooted cultural ideals originating from the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. They have dominated Finnish cultural ideologies of consumption and principles of good citizenship particularly since the rise of bourgeois household ideologies and household advice given by elites to the people from the end of the 1800s onwards (Aro 2010; Heinonen 1998; Åström 2010; Uusitalo & Takala 2020). It has been shown that those generations born soon after the Second World War still produce less food waste (Parfitt, Barthel & Macnaughton 2010: 3079) and value thrift and frugality rather than endorse environmental values (Aro 2010; Evans 2011; Hebrok & Boks 2017: 383). Elsa, a recently retired woman in her sixties, presented food waste as the antithesis of frugality. She stated that any surplus or product going out of date can be processed and consumed rather than wasted: in her childhood, milk and eggs were added to left-over oat gruel and fried into pancakes. Elsa had come to the festival out of curiosity and to meet a friend, but she did not think it had anything to offer her already routinized practice of frugality. She took an outsider position in relation to the whole phenomenon of food waste reduction, as she herself did not produce food waste:

Yes, well of course I've sort of heard and read about it, [...] I've wondered at ... the amount that people throw out; it's something that I can't understand at all. (Elsa, 65 years)

Thrifty and frugal practices with food were presented as what could be called an *inherited mentality*. This refers to ways of thinking (*ajatusmaailma*), value systems (*arvomaailma*), ideologies (*ideologia*), attitudes towards food (*suhtautuminen ruokaan*), appreciation of/respect for food (*ruuan arvostus/kunnioittaminen*). This mentality can be traced back to earlier generations, particularly to grandparents who lived through the Second World War. For some, the mentality was present in their childhood home, where thrifty and frugal practices were a natural part of everyday life, although most considered economic reasons and necessity to have been the main driving forces for food waste avoidance. For example, Tuukka (35 years), now a father of small children, explained the “natural practice” he learned in his childhood home as being the result of his family's economic circumstances. However, he explained that this learning from necessity was a basis for his later “healthy” and “respectful” relationship with food. Tanja (55 years) reasoned that her father's childhood in a farmhouse in the 1950s, where family members picked berries and mushrooms,<sup>4</sup> carried over to what was given to her as childhood treats in a 1970s' suburb. Potatoes and root vegetables such as turnips, swedes, and carrots have played a central part in Finnish nutrition of the past, which otherwise consisted mainly of barley, rye and salted fish (Kylli 2021). For Tanja, munching turnips while watching television represented the “rather strict economy” of her middle-class childhood home in the 1970s:

Father always made us [...] these turnip sticks, [saying], “Here are bits of turnip peeled and sliced for you” [Tanja laughing]. (Tanja, 55 years)

Here, in the form of turnips sticks, thrift and frugality merge into a single cultural landscape characterized by an economic utilization of resources. However, whereas thrift means saving money for future use, frugality relates to the virtues of prudence and non-wastefulness (Evans 2011; Lehtonen 2011). Some of the interviewees insisted on distinguishing between the two. For instance, Elsa (65 years) made it clear that her extremely non-wasteful food practices were not based on necessity. Similarly, Anna (35 years) emphasized that for her, avoiding food waste “has never been” related to money but is important for “some [other] reason”. She explained that even in “the time of

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<sup>4</sup> Use and preservation of products from the forest was also a central theme in household education (Kylli 2021: 218, 285).

overconsumption” in the 1980s, her relatively wealthy middle-class childhood family used to eat leftovers from previous meals. Despite travelling extensively, driving two cars, and buying toys, they tried to avoid throwing away food and would eat “macaroni and meatballs and meatballs and macaroni” two days in a row. They were frugal with food while spending money on other goods and services.

While the economic rationale of thrift (saving money for future use) seems obvious, it never stands alone in the interviews but rather supplements other rationales. The rationale of frugality on the contrary, eschewed straightforward expression but seemed to constitute an unquestionable basis for food waste avoidance – “the other reason”. This is visible from Elsa’s (65 years) description of the difficulty of throwing away food:

I’m awfully bad at throwing things away. [...] I get a bad conscience if I throw any food away that might [...] still be edible or usable ... (Elsa, 65 years)

Trying to explain the reasons for this, she ends up stating that she just does not like the idea of food being thrown away since “wasting food is one’s own fault”. The idea of individual responsibility has deep roots in peasant ethics and home economic education constructing the ideal of a good housekeeper.

## Discussion

In some interviews, explanations derived from circular economy discourse and environmental and sustainability discourse merge with and replace traditional cultural ideals of thrift and frugality. In other interviews, however, these traditional cultural ideals constitute a base on which new knowledge and meanings are attached. The new awareness of environmental issues has made food waste reduction a meaningful activity (again). Traditional cultural ideals have been updated and the social norm of not wasting food has been renewed in a different guise. Regardless of how much food is wasted in today’s food culture, the norm of not wasting food seems to have held its place as a cultural ideal against which we evaluate the times that we live in, as well as our own actions (see also Evans 2014). Many interviewees described guilt, shame and negative feelings that resulted from having to discard unused food (see also Evans 2014; Lehtokunnas 2020):

Karina: “If something has been left at the back of the fridge, for example, and then it’s gone totally rotten in there, you just have to throw it away, [...] then you get a stab of conscience especially if it’s meat you have to throw away. You get a guilty feeling that this animal has died and it ends up in the waste bin, and I don’t even eat it.”

Liia-Maria: “Is this then... a new thing, these kind of feelings?”

Karina: “Well, I don’t know. It’s probably [been there] ever since childhood, the feeling that you mustn’t throw food out, [...] although then there was no talk of food waste, [...] but perhaps this ecological seriousness and perspective has come into it now in these last few years. With increased knowledge and pain.” (Karina, 45 years)

Most interviewees brought up that exposure to knowledge, facts and statistics on food waste had increased their awareness of food waste and resulted in rethinking their daily practises. For instance, Tuukka and Markus explained how dealing with these issues in their studies and work had changed their own understandings. In addition, personal life events and visual and somatic experiences were pointed out as eye-opening. Karina depicted the huge quantities of wasted food she saw when working in catering at mass events, while Ulla described her experience of working in a supermarket and discarding edible food “day after day”. For Tanja (55 years), a revelatory experience took place in a lunch restaurant, when she found out that the staff were not allowed to sell surplus goods after closing time owing to the then existing health safety regulations. She also recalled reading news about dumpster divers who scavenge food from supermarket garbage bins and found it thought-provoking. The story left her wondering why on earth the “alternative youth” presented in the paper would want to eat from garbage bins. Eventually, however, she changed her opinion since “Why not? [...] After all, that [wastage] is just sickening.” These emotional experiences result in increased understanding and action. They can be seen as moments of attachment, where you go from “wow to aha” (Kaijser 2019: 88, see my introduction). Instead of produced in a guided tour at a science centre, this “aha” linked to banal sustainability evolves in the course of everyday life.

Wake-up-call experiences reveal the wastage taking place in everyday surroundings and express the gap between cultural ideals and material realities. In my data, factual knowledge and everyday aha-moments appear as empowering, as they encourage people to take action in their personal life. Simultaneously, the recent discourse on food waste has provided new space for expressions of shock, shame, and failure. These expressions, for their part, have turned into discursive resources for reproducing the cultural ideal of not wasting food and communicating anxieties related to living up to it. Anna (35 years) described the feeling of shame resulting from leaving food on the plate when dining with her new colleagues for the very first time. She had felt compelled to explain that the food was too salty and she just could not eat it. In this way, she was able to communicate her strong commitment to the ideal of not wasting food despite the salty sundried tomatoes remaining on her plate.



As part of their daily lives, the interviewees reproduced and renewed the norm of not wasting food and participated in the process of banal sustainability. They made shopping lists, used dinner leftovers for lunch, “salvaged” surplus food from supermarkets, asked for a doggy-bag in the restaurant, engaged in discussions about everyday consumption and promoted alternative practices in their social environments. This banal sustainability to some extent renders less urgent the political and structural dimensions of the food waste problem by translating the multifaceted issue of food waste into banal actions in everyday life. By incorporating political (sustainability) aims in mundane actions, banal sustainability constitutes lifestyle and identity projects (Kaijser 2021: 120) as an answer to the global challenges threatening the future. At the same time, however, my interviews indicate an orientation towards normalizing and routinizing non-waste behaviour, which means making sustainability thoroughly banal: ordinary, plain, dull, too trivial to notice – deprived of obvious political orientation.

The sustainability transition will take place – or not – at the local level of everyday life and not merely in the distant realms of politics and economics (Hämeenaho & Wollin 2020). Yet, the daily lives of people are framed by diverse social, political, and economic structures and dynamics. While rarely brought up in media discourse and education targeting consumers, food waste is linked to macro-level political and structural issues such as overproduction, the global market economy, unequal power relations, and the capitalist orientation towards low-cost production and high economic profit (see e.g. Alexander, Gregson & Gille 2013; Gille 2013; Willet et al. 2019; Rockström et al. 2020). Media and consumer education play a remarkable role in disseminating scientific knowledge on food system issues to the public, and in emphasizing individuals’ responsibility on their consumption choices and routines. Yet this banal sustainability education is offering simplistic views on problems and solutions. It is offering an end-of-the-pipeline approach where problems embedded in food systems and economic systems are seen to be solvable by focusing on consumer practises at the very end of the production chain. From this perspective, food waste appears primarily as getting rid of surplus (see Raippalinnä 2020) – the unnecessary excess we don’t need in the first place – without changing the dominant mechanisms of the global food system.

While my interviewees reproduced banal sustainability in both their interview responses and everyday actions described in them, many of them seemed to be aware of broader structural issues and were critical towards the capitalist economic system. For instance, Markus complained that instead of setting things in perspective and critically comparing the environmental impact of various alternative ways of reducing food waste, the media tended to produce enthusiastic lifestyle news promoting redistribution of surplus as an easy and trendy solution to sustainability issues. While

the interviewees hoped to see wider cultural and structural change, banal sustainability empowered them to act and provided them a space for agency and personal impact, however limited.

My point here is that the cultural problematics of food waste hark back to the mentalities of thrift and frugality from earlier centuries. Suggesting small changes in everyday life, banal sustainability seeks change while maintaining a continuity in cultural norms (Kaijser 2019; Milkær 2021), in this case those of thrift and frugality. Inherited mentalities – respect for food and willingness to show it in practise – play an important role in the construction of this continuity. These mentalities, through which interviewees situated themselves along a generational continuum, have provided a fruitful ground for banal sustainability by keeping alive the traditional cultural norm of not wasting food even in the midst of abundance. This is probably one of the reasons why current discourse on household food waste has resonated with Finns and spread through Finnish society so successfully.

## Conclusions

Based on eight individual interviews conducted with people recruited from the food waste festival in Helsinki 2017, I have investigated how the interviewees attach meaning to food waste reduction by analysing how the rationale of food waste reduction is discursively constructed in the interview data. My analysis pointed out three major discourses through which interview participants attached meaning to food waste reduction and constructed its relevance in individual and societal endeavours. In *circular economy discourse*, food waste reduction was grounded in practical rationality and resource efficiency, as making use of existing resources to provide a base for sustainable growth and wellbeing. In the *environmental and sustainability discourse* food waste was represented as an environmental and sustainability problem, threatening both the global environment and future generations. In the *discourse on thrift and frugality*, the rationale of food waste avoidance was reproduced by referring to deep-rooted cultural ideals of thrift and frugality.

My analysis showed that the traditional cultural norm of not wasting food has been renewed and replaced by fresh arguments combining elements of environmental discourse, sustainability, and the circular economy. I have analysed this as *banal sustainability* (Kaijser 2019), defined as a process in which complicated social and environmental challenges are turned into everyday routines and consumption practices. Banal sustainability appeared in my analysis as two interrelated processes. On one hand, the abstract and multifaceted issue of food waste was translated into household-level non-waste routines and sustainable consumption practices. On the

other hand, the mundane practises of food waste avoidance were reframed as tools for bettering the future. In both, scientific knowledge on the concrete and measurable environmental consequences of food waste played a major role underlining the urgency of food waste reduction.

The social norms of thrift and frugality are deeply rooted in Finnish food history. As part of the recent discourse on food waste, traditional ideals stemming from historical conditions of scarcity have gained new relevance in a context of economic and material wealth and abundance. The pre-existing cultural problematics of food waste have provided a fruitful ground for banal sustainability: As banal sustainability, the everyday practice of food waste avoidance provides simple and familiar culturally embedded tools for solving the abstract and complicated issues of food waste. These skills and practices relate to what I call inherited mentalities, through which people connect to previous generations. Through them, current (consumer education on) food waste reduction is perceived as a continuum with traditional cultural ideals and older forms of household economic education. This creates the sense of using the frugal past to attain a sustainable future – a future threatened by current volumes of wastage. Such culturally embedded tools and mentalities allow us to confront the wasteful present while feeling that the cultural as well as the everyday continuity is preserved.

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