Interiority and exteriority in governing for sustainability: expert knowledge as collective imagining

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One of the core problems in embedding sustainability into contemporary environmental governance is that there is ample and increasing knowledge about what needs to change, but this knowledge has decreasing epistemic power. The responsibility to take action appears to rest in the politically fragile realm of interior and subjective values. It seems hard if not impossible to translate this situation into the transformative power and co-creative capacity required to align different stakeholders and transition to sustainability. This is made even more hopeless by the values of neoliberalism, i.e. reducing everything to cost-benefit analysis.

Drawing on qualitative research on the work of experts in environmental governance in Finland – foresters, biochemists, urban designers, and sustainability scholars – together with the idea of “collective imaginings” outlined by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd in their book of that name (1999), we propose a less hopeless framework for thinking about the value of environmental knowledge.

It begins from the recognition that to produce new knowledge is the human way of adapting to existence. Furthermore, a conceptual overview of sustainability policies shows that the trend has been towards sustaining the adaptive capacity of life in an all-encompassing sense. Contrary to the dominant view of expert knowledge, the notion of “collective imaginings” explicitly accounts for the adaptive or transformative power of human thought by bringing in the material, embodied, and collective aspects of imagination that is, according to Spinoza’s philosophy, where all knowledge starts.

Our empirical work shows that collective imaginings do inform expert practice, though this may be difficult to encode in policy. Images create different registers of knowing which foster or hinder co-creative capacity in specific ways. Our approach highlights the significance of the body as a source of ideas, which helps establishing a link between the interior and exterior dimensions of sustainability.

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