



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

# **Making practice theory practical: reflections and hands-on experiences from Estonia**

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# Today's agenda

- The main strengths and pitfalls of a social practice theory (SPT) inspired approach - based on practical experience
- Project vs process view
- Some tools that might be usable – with an extension to a “quick and dirty” test in the afternoon workshop
  - *Warning – the messages will not come in a neat linear order*

## The individual-based approaches were already there...



- Central premise: individual knowledge – attitudes – behaviour - bring about social change
- Individuals are rational (most of the time)
- Individual-centric thinking particularly tempting in case the focal audiences are fragmented and massive – the “general public”
- The easiest tool at hand - an awareness campaign



***VUNK – schools on the move* -  
a programme for physical  
activity breaks at Estonian  
schools**

- An interdisciplinary academic + non-academic team
- 10 schools in the network as pilot
- Objectives of changing:
  - school class routines (activity breaks)
  - active breaks between classes
  - sports curriculum



BMC Public Health. 2016; 16: 346.  
Published online 2016 Apr 18; doi: [10.1186/s12889-016-3000-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-3000-6)

## Objectively measured physical activity levels and sedentary time in 7-9-year-old Estonian schoolchildren: independent associations with body composition parameters

Eva-Maria Riso, Merike Kull, Kerli Mooses, Aave Hannus, and Jaak Jürimäe

PMCID: PMC4635886

### Conclusions

The results of present study showed that about 11% of primary school children were engaged in PA of at least 60 min of MVPA daily. While MVPA is negatively associated with fat mass indices and positively associated with FFM regardless of different confounders, sedentary time is negatively related to FFM and positively with fat mass values after adjusting for several confounders. These results suggest that higher MVPA level and lower sedentary time level are important in maintaining and developing healthy body composition in primary school children during growth.

## The situation is **bad!**

Changes needed – increase of MVPA to 60 minutes per day.....

...or in other words

Get teachers and students stand up during classes and do something other than sit, at least a few minutes

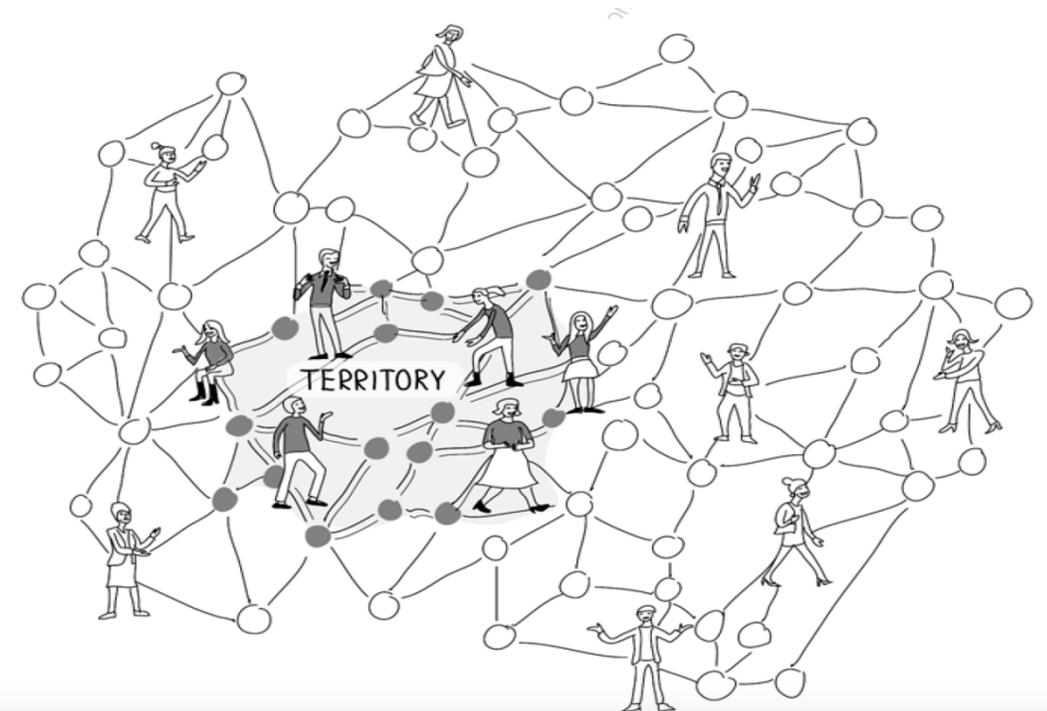
Get students off their smartphones during breaks – to go outside and/or move!

# We entered the field with 2 basic tools

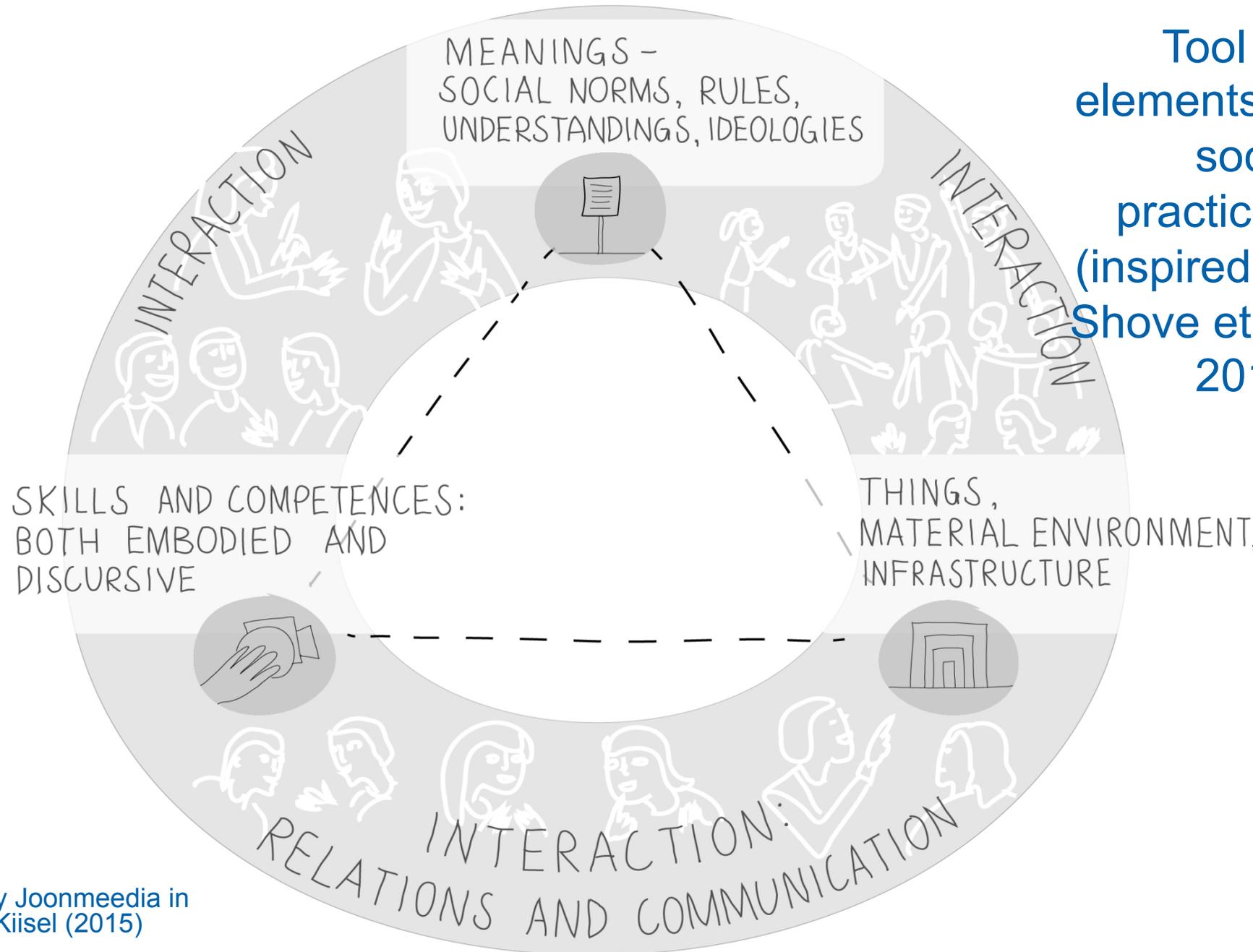
Skills, competences, knowhow



Tool 1 - socio-material network – people, things, activities, norms, habits that are relevant to the problem at hand



Tool 2 -  
elements of  
social  
practices,  
(inspired by  
Shove et al,  
2012)





# What needs to be changed?

To shape a new normality that:

Unties studying from sitting, embeds activity breaks during classes; roots active breaks as normal; makes outdoor breaks (in cold climate) normal; makes sitting most of the schoolday abnormal

What is needed to achieve that:

**Meanings** – studying does not automatically mean sitting; activity breaks during classes are not weird; yes I can do it, there are many little doable ideas; active breaks are accessible for every school, they are not expensive and do not result in massive traumas

**Skills** – teach teachers and senior students for activity “leadership”, ideas, skills, bodily self-confidence

**Materials** – open (so far mostly locked) indoor sports halls; let kids go outside, install various (cheap) sports and game gear all over school, create playful tracks and paths indoors and outdoors, change school furniture; forbid smartphone use

Lots of sharing and interaction to learn and to normalise

# How things unfolded

- Sports scientists and sociologists/communication researchers can work together
- Psychologists left the group ...
  - Search for a perfect evidence -based intervention that can be imposed top-down on schools by omniscient academics – a dream that got shattered ..
  - “Let’s get our hands dirty, design, trial, re-design, let’s talk to practitioners and let’s see how meanings, objects and skills can be changed” – i.e. a mundane simple version of SPT won

• The project is evolving into a longer term state funded pro

• Schools enthused, more to be recruited

• Seeds sown to make the initiative viable and self-reproducing





## Why? – or in other words, the strengths of SPT

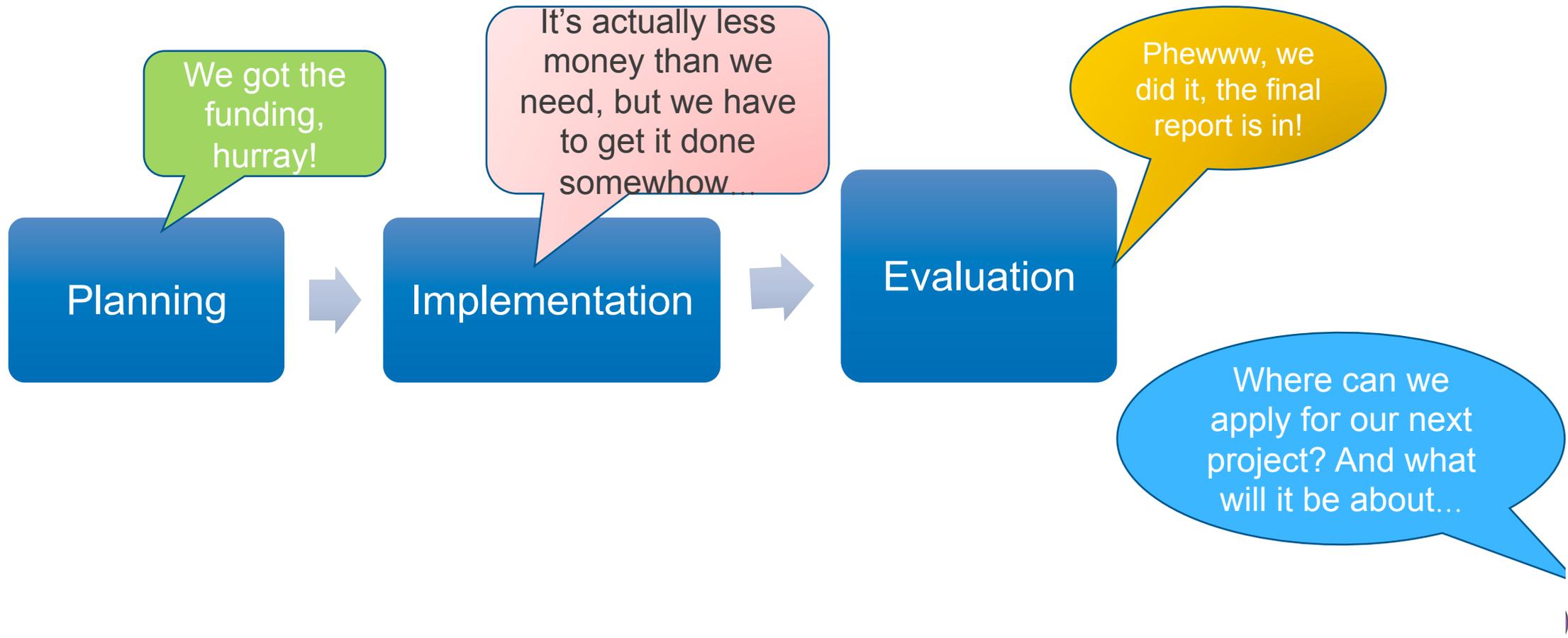
- Material environments matter both in theory and in real life
- Human bodies, a sensitivity to what actually happens
- Co-creation and design thinking
- A potential to reshape intervener practices just as much as “target group” practices



Socio-material  
literacy

# Project thinking and doing

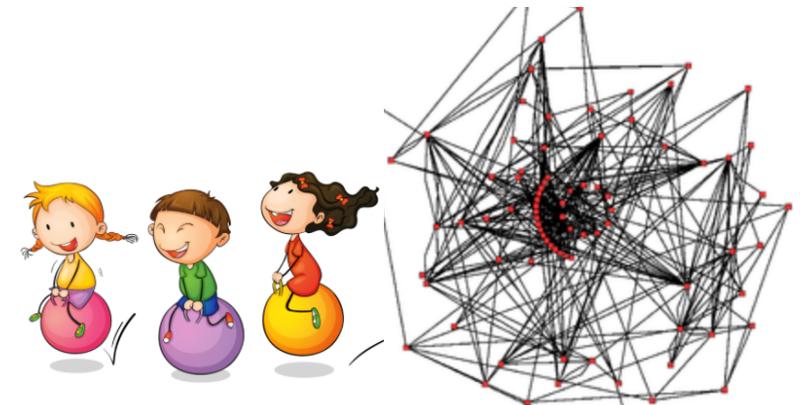
Projects are relatively neat and funder-friendly, but their potential to affect real social change alone is small.





## ...versus the messy reality of processes and flows, i.e. social practices changing incrementally

- which requires a much longer-term programme and a big coalition of change agents (not so funder-friendly any more)





## Potential pitfalls with SPT

- To engage with a community and to do things hands-on takes very much time and energy
- Many people are deeply immersed in project thinking which lifts people onto a meta-level of caring for the project, not for the actual change
- Paradigmatic turf wars – e.g. ABC vs SPT
- SPT (which engages with practices as entities) requires at least “an enlightened monarch” with immense power or a huge coalition of change agents
- Facilitation and “translation” needed at every step. Who is qualified to do that?

# Issues to be developed and discussed within SPT

- Supra-practice level discourses (such as healthiness, sustainability...)
- Time – socio-temporal rhythms, time use, acceleration of social time
- Power and agents within and across practices

**A lesson about power:** nothing happens unless the school headmaster/mistress is deeply engaged in the intervention

**A lesson about time:** the school timetable is a strong coordinating agent, rescheduling that enables practice change



## Positive lessons learned

- VUNK (pilot) programme has shown that mutual learning is possible
- Actual practitioners have a “naïve”, spontaneous practice-based view
- Co-creation with multiple stakeholders – although very time-consuming – is possible and potentially rewarding
- Social interaction – sharing experience both in mediated (e.g. FB group, mass media coverage) and unmediated ways is paramount!

Photo: Sirje Aher



## The 3 take-aways

- Keep some basic SPT based tools always at hand – i.e. think and act socio-materially (and socio-temporally) even if the theory gets diluted and simplified
- Do not aim to affect long-term change within a project, even try to root out “projecty” language along your way
- Build a coalition, a community of practice(s) and be prepared for the constant need of “translation” (good facilitators come in handy).