Times for (Un)sustainability? Challenges and opportunities for developing behaviour change policy. A case-study of consumers at home and away

Stewart Barr [a,*], Gareth Shaw [b,1], Tim Coles [b,2]

[a] School of Geography, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ, United Kingdom
[b] The Business School, University of Exeter, Streatham Court, Exeter, Devon, EX4 4PU, United Kingdom

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the assertion that individuals with seemingly high levels of commitment to the environment at home may also be those engaged in less sustainable leisure and tourism behaviours, including a high dependency on air travel. This potential difference in environmental commitments between different consumption settings is placed within the context of recent policy developments that have seen the rise of segmentation as a commonly applied technique used to understand and encourage pro-environmental behaviours through the notion of 'sustainable lifestyles' and social marketing campaigns. Using data derived from a questionnaire of consumers in the UK, three distinctive, empirically-defined 'lifestyle' groups are identified, based on the respondents' environmental behaviours. Significant differences emerged in reported environmental commitments according to their consumption setting. Those with higher levels of commitment in and around the home also tended to be those who flew furthest and most frequently, whilst those with moderate-to-high commitments 'at home' often failed to transfer these activities to their holiday environments. The paper concludes by arguing that both academics and policy-makers need to address the role of different consumption settings in which behaviours are undertaken and the ways in which these relate to underlying social practices within these settings.

1. Introduction

The challenges faced by nations confronted with increasingly pessimistic data concerning global environmental change have partly been addressed in recent years by the emergence of 'citizen–consumers' as key environmental actors, encouraged to make responsible choices about various forms of consumption and other behaviours (Johnston, 2008; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008). Although citizen–consumers have played a relatively minor role in environmental politics since the 'environmental crisis' of the 1960s, new and wider-spread forms of citizen–consumer action (rather than activism) have begun to emerge in the past 10 years or so. These 'new' environmental actants have their beginnings in domestic recycling schemes, which began to develop in North America, Europe and Australasia from the late 1970s onwards. However, the challenges posed primarily by climate change have energised policy makers into encouraging a wide range of behavioural changes, from recycling paper and glass to reducing

personal carbon footprints (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), 1999; Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), 2005). Moreover, the scale and context of the commitments implicitly required for combating climate change means that a shift is required from a focus on the home environment to the wider issue of changing behaviours in a wide range of consumption settings (e.g. home, work, and leisure) that are characterised by spatially and temporally configured sites of consumer behaviour (Dickinson and Dickinson, 2006). This is supported by the emerging literature within tourism studies (Becken, 2007; Gössling and Peeters, 2007), for example, that suggests public attitudes and responses to climate change are often highly negative, with many tourists contesting the science behind climate change and the importance of tourist consumption to global carbon emissions. Accordingly, understanding the ways in which behaviours are undertaken at different sites of consumption in time and space and the relationships that may (or may not) exist between these settings is crucial to appreciating the likely success of behaviour change policies focused on reducing carbon emissions to combat climate change.

Yet despite the implicit logic of looking across consumption settings (such as those relating to domesticity and tourism), behaviour change policies are still mostly focused on changing

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01392 723832; fax: +44 01392 723342.
  E-mail address: S.W.Barr@exeter.ac.uk (S. Barr).
[1] Tel.: +44 1392 723332.
[2] Tel.: +44 1392 724441.

behaviour in and around the home environment (DEFRA, 2008). Indeed, there is a tacit assumption that demonstrable commitments to the environment in and around the home will be reflected in similar commitments in other spatial and temporal settings. This paper aims to explore this assumption and to question the current basis for framing so-called 'sustainable lifestyles' in and around the home, which has been the conventional means by which both policy-makers and academics have approached this issue (Barr and Gilg, 2006; DEFRA, 2008).

The paper will also examine contemporary understandings of environmental 'behaviour' that challenge the concept of framing sustainable lifestyles through single, environmentally-focused domains (for example energy conservation, recycling and water saving), by arguing that such behaviours reflect their wider consumption settings, for example sites of domesticity, work, leisure and tourism. In so doing, the paper will argue that situating behaviours, as defined by certain academics practitioners, needs to be linked to the underlying practices that have become routinised and established in such settings (Shove, 2003). The paper will start by first exploring the diverse and discrete literatures that have emerged on pro-environmental behaviour change, reflecting the challenges for addressing particular behavioural commitments across sites of consumption. This will be contextualised by the emerging debate on the notion of 'spill-over' effects and the extent to which commitment to the environment in one setting may lead to a similar commitment elsewhere. Indeed, the review will draw on recent research that has argued for an understanding of environmental behaviours as culturally-embedded within existing and broader notions of social practices (Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009; Shove, 2003). Second, the paper will outline the dominant policy context for promoting behaviour change, using the UK's Framework for Environmental Behaviours (DEFRA, 2008) to illustrate the ways in which policy makers are adopting lifestyle segmentation techniques as a way of classifying individual commitments towards the environment. Third, the paper will use data from a recent research project on tourism, environmental behaviour and climate change to explore the ways in which environmental behaviours are framed in different settings, using a series of quantitative analyses to illustrate the ways in which individuals with high levels of commitment to the environment in and around the home engage in different behaviours when leisure travel is considered. In so doing, the paper will highlight the importance of situating such behaviours within sites of consumption and thus the settings that (re)produce broader, established forms of social practice.

2. Pro-environmental behaviour (change)

Research into pro-environmental behaviour is both prolific and varied, spanning a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, geography, sociology and management studies. Despite such variation, some commonalities in research approaches are evident, although the following review does not seek to be comprehensive. First, the dominant theoretical perspective has conventionally been driven by those undertaking what can broadly be termed 'behavioural research' and has been conventionally conducted by social psychologists who have utilised a range of models and frameworks to plot the influences on environmental behaviours. Some of the most commonly-applied models include Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action and Ajzen's (1991) subsequent Theory of Planned Behaviour. Researchers well beyond social psychology have adopted and adapted these frameworks to the study of a range of different environmental actions (e.g. Barr et al., 2001) and they have often sought to explore a broader set of influences on environmental behaviour. This research has considered, for example, the role of values and beliefs on pro-

environmental behaviour (Stern et al., 1995; Nordlund and Garvill, 2002; Groot and Steg, 2007); environmental worldviews and concerns (Dunlap, 2008); socio-demographic links to pro-environmental behaviours (Schultz et al., 1995); and a wide range of other variables.

This broad 'behavioural' approach has, however, been critiqued by a number of researchers who have argued that social psychological theories tend to over-rationalise (Burgess et al., 1998) and hence simplify the debates concerning environmental practices. Indeed, as Eden (1993) has argued, rationalistic approaches to behaviour change have been too closely aligned with a linear approach to decision-making, where knowledge is assumed as the major barrier to the adoption of pro-environmental behaviours. This 'deficit model' (Agyeman and Angus, 2003) has led researchers such as Shove and Warde (2002), Shove (2003) and Gregson et al. (2007) to question the notion of specifying 'environmental behaviours' as distinct from other forms of everyday practice or habit. Indeed, rather than focusing on environmental practices per se, Shove (2003, p. 9) argues that it is the basis for practice itself which is the main concern:

> "This politically explicable emphasis overshadows prior questions about the framing and formulation of 'normal' practice. Just as important, it raises the point that much consumption is customary, governed by collective norms and undertaken in a world of things and sociotechnical systems that have stabilizing effects on routines and habits".

Accordingly, this second broad perspective places an emphasis on 'social practices' (Verbeek and Mommaas, 2008) in which 'environmental behaviour', in its conventional setting, is framed by and within the daily practices of individuals and their interaction with different social, political and material cultures.

These two broad approaches to exploring the notion of environmentally-responsible commitments have been augmented in recent years by a growing interest which has appeared at the interface of academic and policy-facing research, and which has sought to examine the notion of 'sustainable lifestyles' (Jackson, 2005). This term is conceptually imprecise and is used in different contexts with varying degrees of clarity to mark out studies that have focused on the role of consumer choices, being partly dependent on how academic disciplines define and operationalise the term (Hobson, 2001; Jackson, 2005). Indeed, at a theoretical level, authors such as Hobson (2001) have heavily critiqued the notion of 'sustainable lifestyles' as a coherent and meaningful term, a concern which has been implicit within arguments advanced by Shove (2003) about the importance of deeper, underlying social practices that transcend notions of individualistic (sustainable) lifestyle choices.

Set against the backdrop of these theoretical concerns, this paper seeks to provide a policy-facing critique of the ways in which political responses to promoting 'behaviour change' have adopted and utilised a particular notion of 'sustainable lifestyles'. Within the context of the UK Government's attempts to develop a pro-environmental behaviour change strategy, Darnton and Sharp (2006) reviewed a wide range of policy-orientated 'lifestyle' frameworks and concluded that the notion of 'sustainable lifestyles' has been characterised by the development of complex and varied segmentation models, which seek to assign individuals to particular groups or segments. Such models attempt to make sense from a complex array of individual behaviours and attitudes to inform policy and encourage behaviour change, and are based on an appreciation that pro-environmental behaviours relate to wider consumption patterns, that is to say the aspirations and expectations of individuals within and beyond environmental concerns. Just such an approach has been employed in a range of settings,