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Grassroots social innovation and the mobilisation of values in collaborative consumption: a conceptual model

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ABSTRACT

There is growing interest in the potential of grassroots innovations to play a role in the transition to sustainable production and consumption systems. However, the role of values has been little considered in relation to the development and diffusion of grassroots innovations. We develop a conceptual model of how citizens' values are mobilised by grassroots innovations, drawing on the value theory of Schwartz et al. (2012) and the theory of collective enactment of values of Chen et al. (2013). Using the results of a large scale survey of free reuse groups (e.g. Freecycle and Freegle), which enable collaborative forms of consumption, we apply the conceptual model to explore how participants' values are mobilised and expressed. We show that while the majority of free reuse group participants do hold significantly stronger self-transcendence (i.e. pro-social) values than the wider UK population, they also hold other values in common with that population and a minority actually place less emphasis on self-transcendence values. We conclude that diffusion of this particular grassroots innovation is unlikely to be simply value limited and that structural features may be more significant.

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1. Introduction

It has long been recognised that the systems of production and consumption in industrialised consumerist societies are unsustainable (Rockstrom et al., 2009). However, many questions remain regarding how and why we are locked into these unsustainable systems, what a transition to more sustainable systems might look like and how such a transition might take place (Vergragt et al., 2014). As populations grow ever more urbanised (The World Bank, 2014) the role of cities in both the reproduction of these unsustainable systems and the transition to sustainable systems grows ever more important (e.g. Bulkeley et al., 2010; Hodson and Marvin, 2010). To address the transdisciplinary questions posed, above, the emerging field of sustainable production and consumption systems research seeks to integrate perspectives including social practices, environmental psychology, economics, governance, social movements and socio-technical transitions (Vergragt et al., 2014).

In terms of the latter, research in the field of socio-technical transitions has tended to focus on the potential of technological innovations and the market economy to drive the transition to a sustainable society (Markard et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2010). However, there is now growing interest in *civil society* as an overlooked site from which 'grassroots social innovations' with potential to contribute to this transition may emerge (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Seyfang and Smith (2007: 585) "use the term 'grassroots innovations' to describe networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved". To date, grassroots innovation research has focussed on the dynamics of international and national networks of social economy and civil society actors (Vergragt et al., 2014). Such networks of grassroots innovation connect societal experiments, which take the form of community-based initiatives grounded in a specific local context and explore alternative configurations of urban production and consumption systems (Heiskanen et al., 2015). Studies of grassroots innovation have explored the promises and perils of community energy systems (Hargreaves et al., 2013a), cohousing provision (Boyer, 2014), community currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013), local food production systems (Kirwan et al., 2013), and democratic

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innovation systems (Smith et al., 2014). Such research has tended to draw upon models from transitions theory originally developed to explain the dynamics of technological innovations in the market economy – e.g. niche development theory (Geels and Raven, 2006). Hence, it is unsurprising that the central role of values in grassroots innovations has been acknowledged but remains to be explicitly conceptualised. Furthermore, Seyfang and Smith (2007: 599) argue that “Grassroots initiatives exhibit their own micro-politics and can be exclusive to some and inclusive to others. Much work needs to be done regarding ‘whose’ alternative values are being mobilised in niches”.

Here we show how societal experiments – within ‘grassroots innovation’ networks – respond to and mobilise the values of the citizens involved. We offer a conceptual model of these processes that spans two scales of analysis: (1) the individual scale – exploring which values are held by people participating in societal experiments; and (2) the collective scale – at which values are mobilised within societal experiments. To develop the conceptual model, we draw on theory from social psychology on basic values (Schwartz, 1992, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2012) and sociological theory on the collective enactment of values (Chen et al., 2013). We apply, test and discuss the model with a case study of the role of values in online, free reuse groups such as Freecycle. These groups have millions of members across the world (Freecycle, 2014; Freegle, 2014a) and enable people to freely and directly give unwanted items to others in their local area (rather than sending items to their local authority waste management system). In general, online free reuse groups enable a form of collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011) and hold potential to reduce consumption and waste in cities by extending product lifetimes.

In the next section we outline the core theoretical constructs on which our conceptual model is based. We then present the background to the research, describing how free reuse groups operate and how they have developed. This is followed by an overview of the research methodology, a large scale survey measuring the values of free reuse group participants. Finally, the survey results are presented and then discussed, highlighting the implications of our research findings for the diffusion of grassroots innovations.

2. Theory

The study of grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) has emerged within the field of socio-technical and sustainability transitions (Markard et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2010). Research in this field focuses on the dynamics of societal transformation, i.e. transitions, conceptualising these dynamics as interactions between the multi-level socio-technical structures that constitute society (Geels, 2005). Much of the research around transitions is concerned with the emergence, development and diffusion of market-based technological eco-innovations with potential to contribute to the transition to a sustainable society. Furthermore, studies of grassroots innovations have tended to evaluate the applicability of aspects of transitions theory originally developed to explain the dynamics of technological and market-driven innovation (e.g. Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013). Unsurprisingly, these theories do not yet account for the value driven nature of grassroots innovations. So whilst the emerging studies of grassroots innovation have focussed on community activities driven by radical (deep green) values there has been considerable ambiguity in the role played by these values.

Values are a contested but widely and variously used concept in the social sciences. Indeed Hitlin and Piliavin (2004: 360) identify that there “are at least four concepts with which values are conflated: attitudes, traits, norms, and needs”. Furthermore, values are theorised to be held and enacted at multiple scales, so we can

delineate between individual (Schwartz, 1992), collective (Chen et al., 2013) and cultural values (Schwartz, 1999). Consequently, the literatures that relate to values are substantial, spanning large areas of social psychology and sociology. A full review is beyond the scope of this paper and we suggest Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) and Dietz et al. (2005) as an initial starting point for an overview of the literature. Here, we select and integrate theories of values aligned with our objective of understanding how societal experiments within grassroots innovations respond to and mobilise the values of participants. In particular we integrate theory enabling the exploration of the values of participants in a societal experiment, along with the ways in which collective activities, such as societal experiments, are shaped by and seek to shape values.

Individual values are usually theorised as mental structures, constructs with motivational implications. Schwartz and Bilsky (1987: 551) thus identify five core features of values: “According to the literature, values are (a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviours, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance”. Schwartz (1992) has developed a prominent theory of individual values, which has been applied in hundreds of research studies (Schwartz et al., 2012). This theory identifies ten basic values (see Table 1) which Schwartz argues are grounded in universal human requirements for survival and existence, including biological needs and the need for social coordination (Schwartz, 1992). The ten values are theorised to form a circular motivational continuum (see Fig. 1) where the distinction between adjacent values is blurred (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012) and the proximity or distance between a given pair of values suggests the degree of compatibility or conflict between them. Furthermore, each basic value is theorised to be connected to one of four more abstract values: openness to change, conservation, self-transcendence and self-enhancement (see Fig. 1). Two scales for measuring the importance an individual places on each of the values have been developed and extensively tested; the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992) and the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz, 2006).

In order to conceptualise how societal experiments within grassroots innovations mobilise and respond to the values of participants, we draw on a sociological perspective on values and organisations. Chen et al. (2013: 857) identify organisations as one context “where values are collectively enacted or carried out”. Further developing their argument that “Values may be discerned in any organization’s goals, practices, and forms, including “value-free” bureaucracies and collectivist organizations with participatory practices” (Chen et al., 2013: 856). Based upon a review of organisational and sociological research Chen et al. (2013) suggest that far from being value-free, organisations in practice reflect, enact and propagate values. Drawing on this model we argue that the mobilisation of values within societal experiments can be understood in terms of the processes of reflection, enactment and propagation (Chen et al., 2013) as outlined below.

- Reflection – the outcomes, processes and structures of societal experiments reflect values. Furthermore, the values reflected and the meanings associated with these values may vary depending on the perspective adopted.
- Enactment – societal experiments provide space in which participants and activists can collectively enact both mainstream and marginalised values. Furthermore, values can be enacted both through the objectives (ends), and the collective practices (means), of societal experiments.
- Propagation – values are propagated both within societal experiments and beyond their boundaries. In both cases institutional work – i.e. the efforts of “individual and collective actors

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