



Keeping it in the family? Re-focusing household sustainability



Rebecca Collins

Department of Geography & Development Studies, University of Chester, Best Building, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Recent research on how best to support the development of pro-environmental behaviours has pointed towards the household as the scale at which interventions might be most effectively targeted. While pro-environmental behaviour research has tended to focus on the actions of adults, almost one-third of UK households also include children and teenagers. Some research has suggested that young people are particularly adept at exerting influence on the ways in which the household as a whole consumes. Yet this influence is not only one-way; parents continue to have direct input into the ways in which their children relate to and interact with the objects of consumption (such as personal possessions) through routine processes including acquisition, use, keeping and ridding. In this paper I draw on qualitative research with British teenagers to highlight how young people and their parents interact when managing household material consumption. I use this discussion to suggest that promoters of sustainability might increase the efficacy of their efforts by engaging households as complex family units, where individual household members' distinct priorities are linked by shared familial values, and where family-based group identity is used to encourage shared commitment to lower-impact living.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been growing consensus that the household – as the “primary unit of consumption” (Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009: 930) – constitutes a key target for promoters of sustainability. Inhabiting what Reid et al. (2010) identify as the ‘meso’ level of action, between the micro and macro scales of individual and societal action, the household is where personal values, societal norms and institutional demands (such as government policies) collide to shape consumption practices (Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Waitt et al., 2012). While in one sense the household has been characterised as a place of mundane, habituated activities within which modification of routines proves challenging (e.g. Hobson, 2003; Ilmonen, 2001), in another, variation in the influences which shape those routines (new cultural practices, emergent social norms, etc.) can prompt the development of new practices. It is on this basis that the household has been portrayed as a potential crucible of new – more environmentally sustainable – behaviours (Gatersleben et al., 2010; Gibson et al., 2011; Organo et al., 2013; Reid et al., 2010).

Growing interest in the household as the crucible for sustainability has been linked to the hope that pro-environmental practices can be transmitted between households (e.g. Hobson, 2002; Hargreaves et al., 2013), ‘greening’ neighbourhoods through the establishment of new social norms. This has been evidenced

recently, for instance, by energy company E.ON producing customer information materials which encourage households to compare their energy consumption with averages for their neighbourhood (E.ON, 2013). However, before focusing attention on how best to encourage transmission of pro-environmental behaviours between households, we first need to establish them *within* households, including those inhabited by different generations (i.e. parents, children and sometimes extended family; see Klocker et al., 2012; Hadfield-Hill, 2013) where family members may have different priorities shaping their consumption.

Just under one-third of UK households include children or young people under eighteen (ONS, 2012), yet research into how sustainable consumption is organised within households has tended to leave younger members on the margins (Munro, 2009); at best acknowledging their existence through adults' references to managing children's ‘clutter’ (e.g. Dowling, 2008; Dowling and Power, 2012) or demands that children reduce their consumption of water or energy (Gram-Hanssen, 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2013). Overlooking the complex parent-child interactions that shape everyday consumption risks undermining the efforts of sustainability promoters by underplaying the potential impact of negotiations, contestations and compromises on a household's ecological footprint (Larsson et al., 2010).

In this paper I draw on empirical research with British teenagers to reveal some of these complexities. By highlighting the

shifting, relational roles of the young people and their parents in this context, my aim is to emphasise the fact that household members inevitably have different (and changing) priorities which dictate the nature of their consumption. I use these findings to suggest how promoters of sustainability might refocus their efforts to engage parents and their children *together* in ways that, rather than ignoring their different priorities, work *with* them to give all household members some degree of ownership over, and investment in, the process of living more sustainably.

I begin by considering the ways in which sustainability initiatives targeting adults and those targeting young people have framed the adoption and transmission of pro-environmental behaviours. After introducing the empirical study I draw on conversations with participants to illustrate the negotiations that characterised their attempts to manage their personal possessions. I then move to my suggestions for refocusing sustainability initiatives around *all* household members.

Focusing sustainability initiatives: on the individual, or the household?

In the last decade initiatives aimed at encouraging engagement with sustainability amongst citizens of developed economies have proliferated, emerging primarily from government departments (in the UK, primarily the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and non-governmental organisations (such as Global Action Plan and Waste Watch). Whilst most of these have been characterised by an implicit assumption that the pro-environmental practices promoted are easily transferrable amongst socially proximate others (such as household members), they often fail to take account of the intricacies of everyday domestic life which present resistance to such change.

The approach taken by initiatives popular over the last decade has reflected dominant thinking in the late 1990s and early 2000s that focusing on individuals' values, attitudes and behaviours is the way to drive change (e.g. [Hobson, 2006](#)). Yet research carried out over the same period (e.g. [Barr, 2003](#); [Barr and Gilg, 2006](#); [Blake, 1999](#); [Hobson, 2003](#); [Kollmus and Agyeman, 2002](#)) demonstrated that individual values and attitudes have a relatively weak impact on the genesis of more sustainable consumption. Whilst they might create the intention to live more sustainably, the infrequency with which corresponding actions occur has revealed multiple barriers to change, from the infrastructural (e.g. accessible recycling services; [Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009](#)) to the socio-cultural (e.g. concerns about peer perceptions; [Hards, 2013](#); [Hitchings and Day, 2011](#)), as well as a paralysing ambivalence resulting from conflicting messages and emotions ([Ojala, 2005, 2007](#)).

Research has also revealed that, even for one individual, multiple, sometimes conflicting, values and attitudes shape consumption, with many people more engaged with notions of social responsibility and equity ([Hall et al., 2013](#); [Hobson, 2002](#)), health ([Day and Hitchings, 2011](#)), thrift or 'common sense' ([Evans, 2011a](#); [Hitchings et al., 2013](#)) than environmental care. Recent sustainability initiatives have tended to ignore, rather than accommodate or harmonise with, potentially complementary values, thus constraining participants' ability to sustain positive change over the longer term as newly-adopted pro-environmental practices fail to 'gel' with existing routines ([Fröhlich et al., 2012](#); [Hargreaves et al., 2013](#)). In households with two or more residents this may be exacerbated as a wider range – and greater number – of personal priorities must necessarily be reconciled ([Epp and Price, 2008](#)). [Hargreaves et al. \(2013: 132–133\)](#) have recently described this in the context of energy consumption, noting that,

"... consumption in households involves multiple rationalities and logics, performed by multiple householders, often in complex and dynamic negotiations with one another..."

Further, although some projects (such as Global Action Plan's *Action At Home*) have actively sought to bring neighbours together (thus addressing concerns about peer perceptions), this has relied on the willingness of neighbours to participate in explicitly pro-environmental projects together, having already identified as pro-environmental 'types'. In short, approaches to promoting sustainability focused on the individual (even under the guise of 'household' sustainability) have achieved only moderate success (at best¹) because they have rarely accommodated the competing imperatives that shape everyday consumption; nor have they acknowledged the additional challenge presented by the fact that these are potentially multiplied according to the number of household residents.

However, this should not be taken to imply that instigating change amongst household residents is necessarily more complex or less likely to succeed than initiatives focused on individuals. Whilst individual-level behaviour change initiatives have encountered stumbling blocks associated with transposing pro-environmental attitudes into corresponding actions, household-level initiatives have demonstrated some, albeit modest, success. Research into the success of such initiatives has, so far, been dominated by studies into energy saving mechanisms, particularly smart meters. Some studies have reported discernible benefits in terms of greater understanding amongst householders of their levels of energy consumption (e.g. [Grønhøj and Thøgersen, 2011](#); [Murtagh et al., 2014](#); [Schwartz et al., 2013](#)), although there is acknowledgement that the level of success of such technology-led attempts at behavioural shifts has been modest ([Buchanan et al., 2014](#); [Hargreaves et al., 2013](#)). As highlighted by [Fahy and Davies's work \(2007\)](#) into household-focused waste reduction programmes, short-term behaviour changes reported within the timeframe of the project may give cause for optimism as to the project's success; however, the lack of longitudinal research which revisits participants months, or even years, beyond the initial project means it is difficult to claim long-term success.

Nevertheless, given acknowledgement of the difficulty of 'scaling up' individual commitment to sustainability, as well as the modest success of household-focused initiatives, I suggest that further insight into the intra-household framing and organisation of everyday consumption practices would benefit attempts to promote long-term household sustainability. By situating the multiple preferences of household members at the centre of attempts to recast practices as sustainable, the necessary dynamism that results from attempts at their reconciliation may mean that the fundamental, seemingly contradictory, 'humanity' of the household can be mobilised in support of sustainability.

Before introducing the empirical study, I briefly review how the 'household' has been constructed within recent scholarship concerning the material production and consumption of the domestic dwelling.

Defining the (sustainable) household

The term 'household' is most commonly taken to imply some configuration of adults co-habiting as partners; single or partnered adults living with their young, teenage or adult children; or other

¹ The extent to which newly adopted pro-environmental behaviours persist over time remains largely unknown due to scant longitudinal research on this topic. Broadly comparable research by [Sullivan \(2004\)](#) into gendered housework practices suggests that new practices are more likely to endure if everyone in the household perceives their importance and if there is a discernible social attitude which contributes to the normalisation of that practice.

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