



Climate change, carbon dependency and narratives of transition and stasis in four English rural communities



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the carbon dependency of life in four villages in England, the degree to which residents in these villages are aware of and concerned about this dependency and its relationship to climate change, and the extent to which they undertake actions that might mitigate or adapt to this dependency. The paper identifies high degrees of carbon dependency and awareness and concern about climate change and carbon dependency, although relatively low levels of mitigative or adaptive actions. The paper explores how this disjuncture between awareness and actions persists, arguing that attention needs to be paid to how people narrate stories to themselves and others that account for inaction. Five narratives of non-transition or stasis are identified, along with three, less widely adopted, narratives of transition. The significance of rurality and emotions within these narratives is highlighted.

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1. Introduction

“The last few years have seen a growing scientific consensus about human influence on climate and the significant risks posed by climate change ... Policy-makers have responded by implementing policies to curb greenhouse gas emissions ... Yet, this discourse of consensus ... contrasts with the cacophony of opinions expressed by others within society. Analysis ... highlights various competing discourses about the existence and causes of climate change and how to tackle it, including denial, doubt and apathy”.

[Whitmarsh, 2011, p. 690]

As Whitmarsh indicates, a need to transition to some form of low greenhouse-gas emitting society appears widely accepted amongst both scientific and policy-making communities. Such ideas also figure to an increasing extent not only within geography but also within the wider social sciences, where they form the focus of numerous empirical studies and theoretical reflections, with influential social theorists reframing conceptions of society through references to climate change and transitions from carbon dependency to a low- or post-carbon future. Urry (2011), for

example, argues for a recasting of notions of post-Fordist, post-modern and neo-liberal societies, and his own conception of disorganised capitalism, into resource terms, and calls for the development of a ‘post-carbon sociology’ that “emphasises how modernity has consisted of an essentially carbonised world” and explores paths towards ‘post-carbonisation’ (Urry, 2011, p. 1; see also Giddens, 2009; Clarke, 2011).

Urry argues that transitioning from high carbon dependency is extremely difficult, not least due to strong carbon-based vested interests, as well as diverse discourses and uncertainties surrounding climate change and post-carbon energy systems. The opening quote from Whitmarsh emphasised the latter point, suggesting that there is a ‘cacophony’ of popular discourses about the existence, causes and remedies to climate change, including expressions of apathy, doubt and denial. She adds that whilst studies suggest recognition of climate change is “now very high”, research also shows that mitigative/adaptive actions are “a low priority issue for most people” (Whitmarsh, 2011, p. 690; see also Hobson, 2003; Whitmarsh et al., 2011b; Svensson, 2012; Upham, 2012; Hadfield-Hill, 2013). However, it has also been argued that the time for mitigative actions has passed and the future lies in an “emergent beast of adaptation” (Wainwright and Mann, 2015, p. 315) in which “a predatory ‘disaster capitalism’” may come to thrive (Harvey, 2015, pp. 254–5).

Many discussions of carbon dependency and transitions to post- or low-carbon societies have been urban in focus (e.g. Betsill and

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Bulkeley, 2007; Bulkeley et al., 2012; Davis, 2010), or have drawn attention to potentially catastrophic impacts of climate change on communities in marginal areas within the ‘majority world’ (e.g. Dulal et al., 2010; Haidera et al., 2011; Magrath, 2010).¹ This paper, however, focuses on the potential for transition in communities located in rather less widely studied areas (although see Trier and Maiboroda, 2009; Wall and Marzall, 2006), namely areas of the countryside located in the ‘minority world’, and specifically in three English districts. The paper draws on research conducted as part of Research Council UK’s *Rural Economy and Land Use* (RELU) programme that sought to understand the potential for climate change mitigation and adaptation activities within communities in the local authority districts of East Lindsey, Harborough and West Berkshire (Fig. 1).

After reviewing understandings of transition, the paper explores ‘disjunctures’ between expressions of concern about climate change/carbon dependency and behaviours to mitigate or adapt to these concerns. It is argued that many interpretations adopt a ‘deficit’ focus, whereby inaction is seen to stem from some form of shortfall, be this in availability of information, understanding, trust or belief. Such interpretations imply that people are unaware of or unconcerned about the presence of disjunctures between stated attitudes and actions, a disavowal that is questioned. Attention is drawn to studies suggesting people are highly conscious of such disjunctures, which become the subject of ‘narratives to the self and others’ about why actions are necessary or not. We develop this argument drawing on a questionnaire survey conducted within four villages located in the three districts identified above. After outlining the methods employed in the study and characteristics of the districts as they relate to carbon dependency, attention is paid to residents’ attitudes and actions with respect to climate and energy issues. It is argued that ‘disjunctures’ between awareness and actions are evident, but many people were conscious of the degree to which their actions failed to address climate and carbon related challenges. Drawing on the concept of ‘narratives to the self’, the paper identifies narratives of stasis, or non-transition, and narratives that foster actions to mitigate or adapt to climate change and carbon energy dependency. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the study’s findings.

2. Transition, attitudes and actions: theoretical discussions

Authors such as Shove (2010b), Lawhon and Murphy (2011), Brown et al. (2012) and Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) have highlighted how the term transition has been employed across a range of discourses, including governmental policy-making, academic research and political activism. As Shove (2010b, p. 280) remarks, such debates have “fuelled the development of hybrid ... theories of transition”, drawing on “a number of traditions, including innovation studies, science and technology studies, evolutionary economics, history and complexity science”, although she also argues that many of these frame transitions through concepts that place responsibility for change upon people’s attitudes, behaviours and choices (what she refers to as the ‘ABC framework’). Within such perspectives, transitions such as “system-wide transformations ... to address the challenges posed by climate change and the move to a low-carbon economy” (Seyfang and Haxeltine,

2012, p. 381) are viewed as being driven by changes in people’s attitudes and values, which then transform people’s behaviours.

As Shove (2010a, p. 1274) stresses, such conceptions can be critiqued as individualistic interpretations of change that ignore “the extent to which governments sustain unsustainable ... institutions and ways of life”. A range of alternative frameworks have emerged for understanding and analysing such ‘sustainability transitions’, including a series of perspectives on socio-technical systems and their management (e.g. Geels, 2002, 2010; Grin et al., 2010; Kemp et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2005, 2010), applications of social movement theories (e.g. Jamison, 2014; Pickerill, 2010; Seyfang et al., 2010) and reflections on the political economy of transitions (e.g. Davis, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010; Wainwright and Mann, 2013, 2015), as well as the practice theory approach favoured by Shove (e.g. Shove, 2012; Shove et al., 2012; Shove and Walker, 2010, 2014; Spaargaren, 2003, 2011).

Despite the significance of these perspectives and the critique raised about the individualistic focus of the ABC framework, as Whitmarsh et al. (2011a, p. 258) observe, research on attitudes, behaviour and decision-making is far from homogenous, with there being a “range of theories and approaches”, not all of which adopt asocial behavioural perspectives. Similar arguments are advanced by Nye et al. (2010a) and Norgaard (2011), who both argue for the adoption of psycho-social approaches to understanding transition attitudes and behaviours.

A common concern within such psycho-social research and ABC framework studies is the presence of disjunctures between expressions of concern about climate change and carbon dependency, and adoption of practices to address these, with a series of studies identifying levels of the former far exceeding levels of the latter (see Bulkeley, 2000; Norton and Leaman, 2004; Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Poortinga et al., 2006; Upham et al., 2009; Whitmarsh, 2009, 2011). Studies employing the ABC framework tend to adopt, albeit often implicitly, what has been described as the ‘deficit model of public understanding’ (Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Miller, 2001; Norgaard, 2011; Sturgis and Allum, 2004). Within such a perspective, lack of activity is attributed to a shortage of some key ingredient to action, such as knowledge, trust or motivation.

Such conceptions can be criticised for neglecting material and cultural barriers, or ‘lock-ins’, that might limit the possibility of implementing understandings (e.g. Barr and Gilg, 2007; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Nye et al., 2010b; Sanne, 2002; Shove, 2003; Unruh, 2000); their inattention to the range of reactions surrounding people’s engagement/non-engagement with mitigation/adaptation activities beyond the dualism of acceptance or denial (e.g. Lorenzoni and Hulme, 2009; Norgaard, 2011; Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2001); and the degree to which information needs to connect with people’s pre-existing concepts and interpretations (e.g. Hards, 2012; Spaargaren, 2003; Tindall et al., 2003; Whitmarsh et al., 2011b). Moreover, Stoll-Kleemann et al. (2001) argue that deficit models tend to presume only academics, policy experts and committed environmentalists are aware of, and concerned about, disjunctures between awareness and behaviour. They suggest, however, that many people are highly conscious of such disjunctures, a point clearly articulated by Latour who, although an academic, admits to quite personal feelings of inability to act in response to climate change:

“the reason why I, to begin with, feel so powerless, is because of the total disconnect between the range, nature, and scale of the phenomena and the set of emotions, habits of thoughts, and feelings that would be necessary to handle those crises—not even to act in response to them, but simply to give them more than a passing ear”.

[Latour, 2012, p. 2]

¹ The terms ‘minority world’ and ‘majority world’ are used rather than terms such as developed/developing, First/Third World or North South because, as Punch (2000, p. 51) argues they both avoid many of the empirical inaccuracies of these terms and “shift the balance” in the descriptions in that it is the richer countries are described in terms of “what they lack (population and land mass)”, rather than it being the poorer countries that are positioned via “what they lack”.

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