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Young adult households and domestic sustainabilities

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ABSTRACT

Young adults in the Global North occupy a contradictory environmental identity: they are purportedly more environmentally concerned than older generations, but are also labelled hedonistic consumers. Most studies have focused on young adults still residing in parental homes, neglecting that Generation Y (born between 1975 and 1991) has 'grown up'. The consumption patterns and environmental implications of their newly established households demand scholarly attention. Through a large-scale household sustainability survey, conducted in Australia, we have uncovered important inter-generational differences in environmental attitudes and everyday domestic practices. We found that generational cohorts hold distinct environmental attitudes. Younger households were most concerned with climate change, and least optimistic about future mitigation. However, generational differences influenced everyday domestic practices in more complex ways. All households engaged extensively with those 'pro-environ mental' practices that reflected established cultural norms, government regulations and residential urban form. For other pro-environmental practices there were clear differences, with Generation Y households being the least engaged. A widening 'value-action gap' was apparent across our sample population, from oldest to youngest. However, rather than reflecting Generation Y's supposed hedonism, we argue that this gap reflects generational geographies: how lifecourse intersects with housing and labour markets and norms of cleanliness to shape everyday domestic practices. Our research illuminates the shortcomings of a one-size-fits-all approach to household sustainability. The young adult stage is a time of transition during which homes and independent lifestyles are established, and practices are altered or become entrenched, for better or worse.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, households in the Global North have become a focus of government and non-government sustainability initiatives aiming to reduce environmental impacts of everyday patterns of resource consumption (Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Reid et al., 2010; Waitt et al., 2012). In Australia, depending on the calculation methods used, households are responsible for up to 45 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions through direct and indirect emission pathways (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013). Yet, awareness-raising campaigns around domestic energy and water use, the proliferation of low-tech 'solutions' (energy-saving lightbulbs and water-saving showerheads), as well as federal and state government subsidies to install domestic infrastructures (rainwater tanks, solar panels and home insulation) have not reduced consumption and waste in a linear or reliable way (Hobson, 2008; Moy, 2012). Progress toward reduced household resource consumption has been far from straightforward.

A clear challenge, as evidenced through proliferating research, is that households in the Global North cannot be understood as a homogenous mass (Moy, 2012; Waitt et al., 2012). There is not a singular 'household sustainability' experience or agenda, but rather multiple *domestic sustainabilities* that reflect complex relationships between families and homes, attitudes and practices, households and wider cultural, regulatory and political-economic forces (Head et al., 2013). Drawing on conceptual approaches developed in Head et al. (2013), Lane and Gorman-Murray (2011) and Waitt et al. (2012), we refer to 'everyday' or 'domestic sustainabilities' as attempts by people to reduce resource use within daily household life. These attempts involve complex trade-offs and manipulations to everyday routines, purchasing practices, the use of building, garden and domestic technologies and wider connections to socio-economic and political networks.

Much of this complexity is becoming better understood. Geographers and other social scientists have begun to tease apart households and their sustainability attitudes and practices according to attributes such as socio-economic status (Druckman and

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Jackson, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2014; Sevoyan et al., 2013; Waitt et al., 2012), gender (Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000; Gibson et al., 2013; Organo et al., 2013), ethnicity and migration status (Bradley, 2009; Klocker and Head, 2013; Maller, 2011), household composition and size (Keilman, 2003; Klocker et al., 2012) and dwelling type (Dowling and Power, 2011; Moriarty, 2002). Most recently, research has also begun to document the significance of lifecourse for pro-environmental values, practices and concerns (Burningham et al., 2014a, 2014b; Hitchings et al., 2015; Hitchings and Day, 2011; Shirani et al., 2013). Such research has opened up fresh conversations addressing the generational distinctiveness of household sustainability practices. Emerging insights suggests that lifecourse transitions are not 'moments' of change, but rather processes – inviting opportunities for interventions (Burningham et al., 2014a, 2014b; Hards, 2012). Sustainability improvements may ensue from lifecourse transition processes inadvertently, without conscious performance of 'green' identities (Evans, 2011). They may arise, for instance, as an outcome of juggling competing priorities and moralities during times of transition such as having a baby, retiring or downsizing the home (Gibson et al., 2011). A particular focus throughout has been on older households at the time of retirement (Burningham et al., 2014b; Day and Hitchings, 2011; Guy et al., 2015; Hitchings and Day, 2011). Young people have also been acknowledged in this emerging literature via investigations of parent–child relationships (Ballantyne et al., 2001; Collins, 2015; Gram-Hanssen, 2007; Klocker et al., 2012) and, importantly, explorations into the ways that pro-environmental values and practices can be compared across households of different generations (Hitchings et al., 2015). Yet, the young people involved in these studies have typically still lived in the parental home. Young adults' newly independent households have seldom featured.

This article responds to this gap and directs its focus to a generational cohort – Generation Y – whose transition to becoming new householders has been overlooked in research on households and sustainability. We focus especially on young adults also because of a conflicting view of that age cohort expressed in media and popular culture (Collins and Hitchings, 2012). Generation Y is often assumed to espouse stronger environmental commitments, particularly when compared to older generations (Bentley et al., 2004; Elkington, 2011; Heist, 2014; Hersch and Viscusi, 2006; Rayapura, 2014). Somewhat contradictorily, this generation has also been subject to negative media attention for its alleged excessive consumption practices (Han, 2015; Hoey, 2008; Hume, 2010; Twenge, 2014). These contentions, and the absence of research on the domestic sustainabilities of Generation Y as independent householders, frame the present study. We report on generation-specific attitudes and practices from a large-scale, quantitative household sustainability survey undertaken in the Illawarra, a coastal region approximately 80 kilometres south of Sydney, Australia. The survey data were disaggregated by generational-cohort to explore whether (and how) everyday domestic practices differed between generational householders, with a specific focus on Generation Y (aged between 18 and 34 at the time of survey). Our results indicate that all households, irrespective of generational cohort, engaged with certain 'pro-environ mental' practices with similar frequencies when influenced by established cultural norms, government regulation and constraints that stem from residential urban form. For other pro-environmental practices, there were distinct generational differences. These differences gave rise to a widening 'value-action gap' (Blake, 1999) across generations, from oldest to youngest. Rather than rush to conclude that this evident gap confirms Generation Y's purported hedonistic culture, we argue that it is a function of how lifecourse intersects with housing and labour markets and norms of cleanliness to shape everyday material practices.

2. Talkin' 'bout my generation[1]: the explanatory power of generational cohorts

Generations 'represent a distinct, temporally located cultural field' characterised by taste, values and dispositions shaped by popular culture, social norms and the socio-economic and political circumstances of individuals' formative years (Jones et al., 2009: 101; Mannheim, 1952; Vanderbeck, 2007).[2] Individuals born within the same time period tend to share a range of experiences 'in their maturation and socialization' (Büttner and Grübler, 1995: 116). Several generational labels have become established within the popular lexicon, including The Millennials/Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (Holroyd, 2011; Wyn and Woodman, 2006, 2011). Each comes with its accompanying commonalities, clichés and stereotypes overlaid by subcultural/media constructions (Ulrich, 2003). For instance, having grown up through the Great Depression and the rationing and communal provisioning of World War II, the Silent Generation is known for living by a mantra of thrift and frugality. The Baby Boomers are considered the generation to 'have it all' (Holroyd, 2011), often typecast as competitive free agents with a strong interest in self-fulfilment. Generation X – a name popularised by Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* – is associated with living under the shadow of Baby Boomers. Generation X is said to be politically disenfranchised, possessing a 'fabled refusenik mentality' resistant to 'the selling of our self-image in a consumer culture bent on commodifying our attitudes and entertainment interests' (Curnutt, 2003: 164).

Often cited as 'the world's first digital generation', Generation Y is commonly typecast as being 'materially-endowed' (Browne, 2012; Han, 2015; Holroyd, 2011; Hume, 2010; McCrindle, 2009: 3). Traditional markers of adulthood, such as full-time employment, marriage, or buying a first home, are supposedly being pushed back later in life for Generation Y (Wyn and Woodman, 2011). Recent media coverage has ridiculed Generation Y as a 'stay-at-home' generation (Browne, 2012; Ireland, 2010; McCrindle, 2009), struggling to break free of the parental nest. In Australia, members of Generation Y have been referred to as KIPPERS ('kids in parents' pockets eroding retirement savings'), who purportedly delay moving out to facilitate their own predilection for consumer luxuries (Ireland, 2010). Supporting such media constructions has been recent scholarly research revealing that young adults in the Global North are indeed taking longer to establish independent households (Cobb-Clark, 2008; Keene and Batson, 2010). While an upward trend in the age of home-leaving is evident, the resultant caricatures compel critical scrutiny. Simplistic depictions of Generation Y as never leaving home (or as 'boomerangs' returning home) overlook the effects of housing undersupply and rising property prices, combined with increasing years spent in education (and poor employment prospects post-higher education) (McKee, 2012; Berrington and Stone, 2014; Stone et al., 2011, 2014). Also overlooked is that many members of Generation Y have indeed formed their own households – contra the aforementioned caricature. At the 2011 Australian Census, nearly two-thirds of all adults in the 18–34 year age bracket lived in independent households (ABS, 2011). Yet we still know very little about how this majority of young adults – who live independently of their parents – organise their lives within domestic spaces (Berrington et al., 2009; Berrington and Stone, 2014;

[1] A pop culture reference to the 1965 song 'My Generation' by The Who.

[2] While we acknowledge multiple uses of 'generation' in geography and more broadly in the social sciences, we apply this term to the investigation of extra-familial intergenerational relations. This usage refers to groupings of people based on their time of birth rather than from within a family lineage (Vanderbeck, 2007). This interpretation is more closely aligned to the demographic descriptions of generational 'cohort' (Vanderbeck, 2007).