

Sustainable lifestyles: Framing environmental action in and around the home

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of environmental action in and around the home. Given the rise of local sustainable development and the emphasis placed on individual actions for sustainability, the paper examines the role of citizens in adopting sustainable lifestyles, incorporating a range of behavioural responses from energy saving and water conservation, to waste recycling and green consumption. Focussing on the debate in geography concerning the engagement of the public in environmental action, the paper argues that despite the assertions of those who advocate a deliberative approach to engagement (see [Owens, S., 2000. Engaging the public: information and deliberation in environmental policy. *Environment and Planning A* 32, 1141–1148]), an approach based on a social–psychological understanding of behaviour can have significant benefits. Such an approach is being developed by geographers in a range of settings and in this paper these developments are situated within the context of existing research that has identified environmental ‘activists’ in terms of their values, attitudes and demographic composition. The paper aims to examine environmental behaviour in relation to two key issues: (1) the way in which environmental action is framed in everyday practices (such as consumption behaviour) and (2) how these practices are reflected amongst different segments of the population to form lifestyle groups. The paper provides new insights for examining sustainable lifestyles that further our appreciation of how actions to help the environment are lived in everyday practices and framed by different lifestyle groups. Accordingly, the paper offers both academics and policy makers new insights into the potential use of focussing on lifestyle groups as a means for changing behaviour.

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1. Introduction: environmental action, sustainable development and policy

Publication of the British Government’s Sustainable Development Strategy (DEFRA, 2005) has reignited the policy debate surrounding the role of individual citizens in ameliorating environmental problems caused by over-consumption and the so-called ‘throw away’ society. In line with many developed nations, the British Government’s Sustainable Development Strategy (DEFRA, 2005, p. 25)

places individual actions for sustainable development at the heart of its policies for effecting change:

“Behaviour changes will be needed to deliver sustainable development. However, attitude and behaviour change is a complex subject. Information alone does not lead to behaviour change or close the so-called ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ ... One of the key elements of the new approach is the need to engage people close to home.”

Whilst the British Government’s Sustainable Development Strategy rightly deals with the apparent complexities of behavioural change, there are two significant omissions in the underlying assumptions made in the Strategy. First, there continues a conventional definition of environmental

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action, which is focussed around specific activities, such as recycling, saving energy or conserving water. In reality, it is unlikely that individuals conform to these highly compartmentalised behavioural patterns, but that the benefits of specific actions will have a positive impact on a range of environmental problems. Second, in proposing new policies to effect behavioural change, there is an implicit assumption that messages to engage the population need to be based around information and awareness. Yet this takes little account of the ways in which different lifestyle groups utilise this information or indeed how their perspective on environmental action varies (Owens, 2000).

This paper therefore aims to address these two issues by using data from a large research project in Devon, south west England, to examine:

1. the ways in which environmental action is constructed in everyday life and related to *everyday practices*; and
2. the extent to which there are identifiable groups of individuals with different behavioural properties that exemplify alternative environmental lifestyles and consequently form *lifestyle groups*.

2. Environmental action: values, attitudes and behaviour

Geographers have engaged widely with sustainability, examining the structural and socio-political processes by which sustainability has become incorporated into social life (e.g. Eden, 1993; Munton, 1997; Gibbs et al., 1998; Blake, 1999; Bulkeley, 1999). They have also examined public attitudes towards sustainability (e.g. Burgess et al., 1998; Hobson, 2001, 2002). To these researchers, the very notion of what constitutes environmental action is problematised within a wider political discourse that has become disconnected with society more generally. Pre-determined actions set by national governments and promoted as being ‘sustainable’ are therefore constructed in ways that are not reflected in everyday social and environmental concerns.

Within this context, work in geography on effecting behavioural change has focused around what has been termed a “deliberative” model of public engagement with sustainability (Owens, 2000, p. 1141) and the ways in which individuals receive, interpret and act on environmental information in a range of discursive and institutional contexts. The deliberative model also proposes that engagement of the wider public will be forthcoming only when social and environmental problems are framed and debated within the spatial and temporal scales at which individuals are expected to take action (Blake, 1999). Accordingly, Hobson (2002, p. 113) argues that environmental action based on “voluntary information and lifestyle initiatives will constantly create ‘discursive traps’ ... by information presented in impersonal media”.

Participation in action for sustainable development is therefore seen as contingent on a range of factors, relating to the nature of the information provided and its interpretation (Myers and MacNaghten, 1998), based upon the

trust with which it can be handled (MacNaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Hobson, 2001) and the complexity of scientific information (Eden, 1996; MacNaghten and Urry, 1998) provided by ‘experts’. Overall, as Owens (2000, pp. 1141–1142) noted, this ‘civic’ approach to examining public engagement with sustainability “...is less prescriptive of information flow and admits a wider range of understandings into the category of ‘expertise’” such that “... what is sought here is democratic engagement... moving beyond the prescribed responses to predefined problems”. This democratic engagement has the aim not merely of identifying solutions to problems, but also to ‘re-frame’ the nature of these challenges.

Most crucially, however, this approach is rooted in the belief that policy discourses are strongly focussed on the “rationalisation” of environmental action, which assumes that environmental behaviour can be changed by enhancing knowledge and awareness about environmental problems (Hobson, 2002, p. 95). Accordingly, upon learning about a specific environmental problem, the rationalisation argument posits that “... as a result of this new knowledge, individuals will change their consumption behaviour” (Hobson, 2002, p. 96). Owens (2000) conceptualises the rationalisation argument within the context of what she terms ‘information deficit’ models of behaviour change. Using this framework, understanding and changing public behaviours towards the environment is seen as a process of filling a ‘value–action gap’ (Burgess et al., 1998) with information. As Owens (2000, p. 1142) aptly puts it, surely “... if people had more information about ... environmental risks, they would become more virtuous”. Geographers have therefore argued that information-intensive campaigns are likely to be unproductive given the fundamental assumptions made regarding the definition and operationalisation of environmental action.

These studies, primarily drawn from the geographical literature, propose one epistemological framework that has sought to focus on the cultural and institutional contexts within which behaviour is framed. Behaviour change is therefore seen as dependant on deliberative and inclusionary processes. In contrast, evidence suggests that policy continues to approach the issues of environmental action and behaviour change from what Hobson (2002) terms a ‘rationalistic’ perspective, emphasising knowledge and awareness of specific environmental problems as the mode by which to effect change and close the ‘value–action’ gap. In policy terms, environmental action is framed by existing environmental issues that confront the state, such as ‘energy’ or ‘water’ crises. The determination of how such issues can be addressed is presented to citizens both at varying spatial and temporal scales, through the mode of information transfer which encourages individuals to ‘do their bit’.

The divide between these two approaches could therefore be framed solely in epistemological terms, but the perspectives adopted reflect an underlying but significant divergence in *methodological* terms, most crucially concern-

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