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Identifying and explaining framing strategies of low carbon lifestyle movement organisations

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade we have seen the growth and development of low carbon lifestyle movement organisations, which seek to encourage members of the public to reduce their personal energy use and carbon emissions. As a first step to assess the transformational potential of such organisations, this paper examines the ways in which they frame their activities. This reveals an important challenge they face: in addressing the broader public, do they promote 'transformative' behaviours or do they limit themselves to encouraging 'easy changes' to maintain their appeal? We find evidence that many organisations within this movement avoid 'transformative' frames. The main reasons for this are organisers' perceptions that transformational frames lack resonance with broader audiences, as well as wider cultural contexts that caution against behavioural intervention. The analysis draws on interviews with key actors in the low carbon lifestyle movement and combines insights from the literatures on collective action framing and lifestyle movements.

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen the emergence, development and growth of community-based organisations that seek to support members of the public to save energy and reduce personal carbon emissions. Prominent examples are the Transition Town movement, the Greening Campaign, Carbon Conversations, and Carbon Rationing Action Groups that were all founded between 2006 and 2008, in addition to a large number of local sustainability, climate change and energy-saving organisations. We use the term 'low carbon lifestyle movement organisations' (LCLMOs) to capture their characteristic approach. These organisations can be understood as part of a 'lifestyle movement' (LM) (Haenfler et al., 2012) because they seek to resolve climate change and foster social change primarily by influencing individuals' lifestyles. While the literature on lifestyle movements is in its infancy, examples include the "straight edge movement" (an alternative punk movement that refuses the use of drugs) (Haenfler, 2004a); virginity pledgers (Bearman and Bruckner, 2001); slow food/slow living (Parkins and Craig, 2006); vegetarianism (Maurer, 2002) and voluntary simplicity (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Elgin and Mitchell, 2003; Grigsby, 2004). Haenfler (2012: 2, 5) also mentions the "green living" movement and the lifestyle "wing" of the environmental movement as examples but so far they have not been analysed in more detail from an LM perspective.

The idea of LMs has emerged to distinguish resistance and/or social change embedded in individuals' lifestyles from the more familiar 'new social movements' (NSMs), which seek to foster social change through collective attempts to impact culture and/or policy. Although the distinction between LMs and NSMs is more blurred than posited by the originators of the concept (Haenfler et al., 2012), there remain important differences between the two. Whilst both NSMs and LMs seek to foster social change, they do so with slightly different orientations. Public collective action and the construction of collective identity are critical for NSMs, as part of their broader goals, which pose a fundamental challenge to the social order. Whereas NSMs seek to 'change the world', LMs seek to 'be the change'. LMs, therefore, focus more exclusively on individualised forms of action and lifestyle change and so public displays of collective action are more marginal and sometimes even eschewed (Haenfler et al., 2012: 8-9).

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Jasper (2006) captures the distinction in terms of the 'Janus dilemma' faced by groups: many NSMs prioritise (and have been criticised for) 'reaching in' to service the interests of their members rather than aiming to affect broader lifestyle change 'beyond the activist ghetto' (Saunders et al., 2014). In contrast, the explicit purpose of LM organisations (LMOs) is to reach out to encourage lifestyle change across broader publics. As we will see later, for some LMOs this may involve addressing audiences that are at least sympathetic to their cause which has an element of 'reaching in' even though it does not go as far as only addressing those who are already fully 'converted'.

Numerous practitioners and academics have supported the view that community-based LCLMOs have potential to play an important role in encouraging the public to take up low carbon behaviours (e.g. Hargreaves et al., 2008, 2013; HM Government, 2010; Middlemiss, 2011; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Nye and Burgess, 2008; Seyfang and Smith, 2007), especially in the context of a political deadlock on climate change (Hale, 2010). However, the ways in which community-based LCLMOs can most effectively contribute to carbon reduction have been debated. Two main positions can be identified. The first holds that these organisations have more potential to promote behaviour change to wider audiences than government-led action because they are considered more trustworthy and are better connected to local communities (DEFRA, 2008a; DEFRA, 2008b; Fudge and Peters, 2011: 801-2, 805; Hale, 2010: 256, 264; HM Government, 2010: 79). The second position sees community organisations' capacity for change in their potential for innovation as they often operate in societal 'niches' away from the 'mainstream' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Steward et al., 2009). One question is to what extent these two approaches are compatible: can LCLMOs move beyond niches and persuade 'mainstream' society to take up more radical low carbon behaviours? While Seyfang and Smith concede that it might be difficult for 'grassroots' initiatives to scale-up niche 'innovations', they remain optimistic that they can "eventually exert influence upon the mainstream" (2007: 597).

This raises the central question of this paper, namely, how do LCLMOs seek to persuade the wider public to make changes? Which behaviour changes do they promote and how do they motivate people to take them up? In other words, how do LCLMOs frame their attempts to interest people in personal carbon reduction? In this paper, we understand framing as an activity that movement organisers and adherents engage in when they attach meanings to and communicate aims and activities "in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198).

Two contrasting positions on how LCLMOs might frame their activities can be identified. The *first* holds that people who are not yet converted to the cause of climate change are best motivated by highlighting non-environmental, often personal (read financial), benefits (e.g. DEFRA, 2008a: 48; Futerra, 2010). The *second* perspective has criticised this approach (e.g. Corner and Randall, 2011; Crompton et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2013), questioning whether "self-enhancing" motivations such as saving money or enhancing one's social status really are a solid basis for long-term action on climate change because they only work where and as long as such external incentives exist. Instead, advocates of the second approach argue that low carbon behaviours are more effectively and long-lastingly motivated by "self-transcending" values and that these values can be activated or strengthened through appropriate framing (Crompton et al., 2010: 34, 36-8, 47).

The framing strategies adopted by LCLMOs (and LMs more broadly) are little understood. Therefore we draw on research that focuses on the framing strategies of social movement organisations (SMOs) (including NSMOs). This work acknowledges that organisations seek to motivate and recruit supporters through the selection of accessible and convincing frames. It is usually assumed that SMOs adopt 'transformative' frames that challenge, often fundamentally, the social order (e.g. Benford and Snow, 2000; Melucci, 1996; Snow et al., 1986). This paper examines the extent to which LCLMOs are similarly able to adopt transformative frames and how this relates to the types of audiences they target. By 'transformative' or 'radical' we refer here to frames that highlight the urgency of climate change and support more far-reaching actions to reduce individuals' carbon footprints (for instance, giving up flying or moving to a vegan diet can be considered as more 'radical' than switching off lights when leaving the room). These frames and actions do not necessarily but may co-exist with those that challenge the system of global capitalism directly. Are LCLMOs limited in their framing choices because they target individual behaviour change on a broad basis rather than establishing and/or reinforcing a counter-cultural collective identity?

Our methodological approach to understanding framing strategies draws on interviews with organisers of LCLMOs (those who actively construct frames) alongside documentary and website analysis of the groups that provide additional evidence of the nature of those frames. In doing so, this paper provides a first analysis of the transformational potential of LCLMOs by examining the types of frames they adopt and their justifications for doing so. In the next section of the paper, we draw on the literature on collective action framing and lifestyle movements to present a framework for understanding differences and similarities in the framing strategies that LCLMOs adopt. We then provide details of the data and methods of analysis, and present and discuss our results.

2. Framing in social and lifestyle movements

To better understand the extent to which LCLMOs are willing or able to adopt 'transformative' frames to encourage low carbon behaviours and why, we find it useful to draw on the literature on "frame resonance" and "cultural resonance" within collective action framing to understand differences as well as similarities of framing strategies.

The perspective of collective action framing highlights that social movements are not simply "carriers of extant, preconfigured ideas and beliefs" (Snow, 2007: 384) but that framing approaches are generated through actual or imagined interactions between movement activists, participants, antagonists, etc. (ibid.). Snow and Benford (1988: 200-4) have identified three main framing tasks: activists need to identify the problem under consideration through "diagnostic framing"; identify solutions and strategies through "prognostic framing"; and provide a "rationale for action" through "motivational framing". Since all of the LCLMOs included in this study adopted similar diagnostic frames, seeking to mitigate climate change by reduction of personal carbon emissions, this paper focuses on organisations' prognostic and motivational framing. Which behaviour changes do LCLMOs promote as a solution to tackling climate change (prognostic framing) and how do they attempt to motivate people (motivational framing)?

We suggest here that it is useful to combine two aspects of the literature on framing strategies as developed within the social movement literature. The first represents the idea that framing as an activity is dialogical and that to be successful, frames need to resonate with the audiences they address (e.g. Benford and Snow, 2000; Boström, 2004; Pellow, 1999; Snow, 2007; Snow and Benford, 1988). The second argues that framing strategies will be influenced by "cultural repertoires" (Kubal, 1998; Williams, 1995, 2007; Williams and Kubal, 1999), defined as culturally acceptable ways of thinking, arguing and acting, that are available to framing