

Inadvertent environmentalism and the action–value opportunity: reflections from studies at both ends of the generational spectrum

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A recent turn towards a more contextually sensitive apprehension of the challenge of making everyday life less resource hungry has been partly underwritten by widespread evidence that the environmental values people commonly profess to hold do not often translate into correspondingly low impact actions. Yet sometimes the contexts of everyday life can also conspire to make people limit their consumption without ever explicitly connecting this to the environmental agenda. This paper considers this phenomenon with reference to UK studies from both ends of the generational spectrum. The first questioned how older people keep warm at home during winter and the second examined how young people get rid of no longer wanted possessions. Both found that, though the respondents involved were acting in certain ways that may be deemed comparatively low impact, they were hitherto relatively indifferent to the idea of characterising these actions as such. We outline three ways in which sustainability advocates might respond to the existence of such “inadvertent environmentalists” and consider how they might inspire studies that generate fresh intervention ideas instead of lingering on the dispiriting recognition that people do not often feel able to act for the environment.

Keywords: consumption; sustainability; older people; young people; value–action gap

Introduction

This paper emerged from discussions about two UK interview projects. Both were interested in how identified social groups achieve particular mundane objectives and what this suggests about the most effective means of encouraging them to live in less resource consuming ways. The first considered how older people keep warm at home during winter and the second examined the ways in which young people rid themselves of no longer wanted possessions. Both found that, though in certain respects the respondents involved were acting in ways that may be deemed comparatively low impact, they rarely connected these actions to any explicit idea of caring for the environment. The question we ask here is how should those hoping to encourage less resource hungry living respond to such situations and how might our finding feed into sustainability research more broadly.

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As a means of developing our answer, we explore what we characterise here as the “action–value opportunity”. A recent move towards a more contextually sensitive apprehension of the challenge of making everyday life less resource hungry has been partly underwritten by the widespread identification of what has been dubbed the “value–action gap”. This refers to how the environmental beliefs people often profess to hold seldom seem to translate into correspondingly low impact lifestyles. Our purported “values”, it would appear, are often soon overridden by various situational pressures and evolving norms of action that prescribe how we come to live in different social contexts. Yet, as we found in our two studies, the lived experience of identified contexts can also conspire to make people consume less than they otherwise might. Could the gap, therefore, be easier to close if we invert the imagined causal chain and start with this subset of positive actions instead of the values that appear to have only a limited influence?

We begin with a short overview of recent studies that understand less resource intensive living as an outcome of social context more than personal commitment and how these studies have characterised and examined the lived interplay of environmental values and everyday actions. We then detail how the respondents in our two studies revealed themselves as “inadvertent environmentalists” in the sense that past experiences and current pressures were encouraging them to live in certain comparatively low impact ways, though without ever really connecting this to the environmental agenda. We then outline three ways in which sustainability advocates might respond to such situations as a way of thinking about what should be done next rather than as a means of making a case for any one of these three. Our conclusion is that the prospect is not as bleak as the “value–action gap” concept tends to imply and that being alive the existence of the inadvertent environmentalist could lead to fresh ideas about the most effective means of encouraging less resource consuming societies.

Questioning the interplay of values and actions in everyday life

One of the most common ways of characterising the challenge of promoting less resource intensive living is derived from psychological and economic ways of understanding human action in which behaviour appears as the outcome of mental process, often understood as prior deliberation (see, for useful overviews, Jackson 2005, Berthou 2013). Framed in this way, the task has often been understood as one of persuading people about the merits of lower impact living in the belief that they will then act accordingly. The human targets commonly imagined here are “essentially rational” actors who weigh up the evidence and then decide how best to respond (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Two of the most influential applications, for example, are the “theory of planned behaviour” and the “theory of reasoned action” (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Both offer a fundamentally linear model of how various factors combine to influence the ways in which people “choose” to live (Harrison and Davies 1998) such that the objective often logically becomes one of encouraging them to adopt a more environmental “worldview” (see Stern and Dietz 1994). Various subtleties have since been incorporated into these models in an attempt to deal with the complexity of real-world situations (Jackson 2005) and identify how messages might be tailored to particular groups (Barr and Gilg 2006). Yet the central conceptual premise generally remains the same – individualised mental processes come first and the aim is to find the best means of manipulating these processes in pursuit of more sustainable societies.

Following some earlier steps in this direction (Owens 2000, Burgess *et al.* 2003, Spaargaren 2003, Shove 2003), a group of sociologists, geographers and others less inclined to

prioritise mental processes in the same way has since begun to coalesce around the suggestion that we should start instead with how social conventions regulate our actions (Nye and Hargreaves 2010, Shove 2010). Any environmental ethic by which an individual may otherwise want to live is here understood as liable to be soon obscured by the business of living in ways that have been defined as socially desirable in particular places at particular points in time. Agency has now been transferred from seemingly autonomous individuals to the forces that influence how wider societies come to achieve commonplace objectives in some ways instead of others (Shove *et al.* 2012). Correspondingly, the aim is to understand how the contours of what are taken to be “normal” ways of living evolve and then influencing this process so that future collectives simply find themselves adopting more sustainable practices without the individuals involved necessarily needing to reflect on what they ought to do (Shove 2003, Røpke 2009, Hargreaves 2011). The task has now been redefined as one of steering cultural change such that societies eventually come to find themselves living in ways that require, for example, less water use in their gardens, rather than persuading people in the here and now about the value of hosepipe bans (Chappells *et al.* 2011). For some, there is little common ground between this way of defining the problem and the previous accounts centred on mental process (Shove 2011). Others argue for combining both (Whitmarsh *et al.* 2011). Still others (Young and Middlemiss 2012) suggest choosing carefully since each stance can inadvertently bolster policies that researchers might not otherwise endorse (governments can, for example, use individualised models of responsibility to justify doing less themselves).

The move towards the latter, more contextually focussed, approach has been partly underwritten by the widespread identification of a “value–action gap” (Blake 1999, Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Hobson 2003, Barr and Gilg 2006). This refers to the now sizeable volume of evidence suggesting that, despite the fact that many people say they want to live in a more environmentally sensitive manner and believe wider societies should strive to be more sustainable too, they do not often practise what they preach. In other words, and though we must recognise how respondents often want to give the most socially desirable answers, it does still seem to be the case that professed environmental “values” are seldom strong enough to translate into correspondingly low impact “actions”. Recent examples include Waitt and Harada’s (2012) consideration of how some Australians do not change their driving habits because feelings of comfort and protection inside their cars trump any purported anxieties about climate change. Another is Flynn *et al.*’s (2009) study of how the British feel incapable of embracing hydrogen energy technologies because the power of local conventions is such that they feel able to make only the most “convenient” lifestyle changes. A third is Kennedy *et al.*’s (2009) examination of Canadians who recognise the value–action gap in their lives and hint at how time pressures prevent them from making more sustainable choices. If the value–action gap exists, as it often appears to, it seems entirely logical to sideline personal values as the target of intervention. If actions are really what we want to change, and purported values have only a limited influence over them, perhaps we need only engage with the broader cultural dynamics that really shape our actions and forget about the apparent “barriers” (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Lorenzoni *et al.* 2007) that prevent people from doing what they otherwise would.

Rather than ignoring values entirely, our paper starts with the suggestion of inverting the way in which the value–action gap is conceptualised. If the route is blocked when we go in one direction (influencing personal values in the hope that this will lead to environmental actions), could we go the other way? In other words, could existing social contexts that have already proved themselves capable of producing comparatively low impact actions transform the values of those living within them such that they become more widely empowered

to take on the sustainability challenge? We characterise this as the “action–value opportunity”. In developing this suggestion, we see our paper as building on other studies concerned with such “actually existing sustainabilities” (Krueger and Agyeman 2005), understood as ways of living that are currently disconnected from environmental agendas despite being otherwise in line with them. Klocker *et al.* (2012), for example, use this concept to consider the potential energy savings associated with the return of extended family households in Australia whilst recognising how “sustainable” living will likely be far from the priorities of those living out this trend. We also draw inspiration from the finding that small interventions in the contexts of everyday life have the potential to facilitate a promising blend of environmental actions and feelings. Hobson (2006), for example, discusses how the distribution of simple devices to help reduce domestic resource consumption (such as shower timers which remind us to get out and energy efficient light bulbs that are easy to fit) seem capable of both helping people to act for the environment and also to feel more positive about their personal capability in this regard. Though more research is needed to be sure, the exciting suggestion here is that this positivity could then spill over into broader beliefs about their ability to be part of the transition to a more sustainable society.

Other recent studies taking a more contextually sensitive approach to the question of how to make everyday life less resource consuming have also shown how low impact lifestyles may be an outcome of personal circumstance as much as pre-existing commitment. Some respondents in Hards’ study (2012) of keen environmentalists, for example, revealed how it was only when they arrived at particular points in their lives that they found themselves in a position to adopt such a stance. We have also seen how those who may value living in resource conserving ways at home (Barr *et al.* 2011) or at work (Anderson 2011) can elsewhere (most notably with reference to holidays) find it comparatively easy to put these same commitments aside. Far from being displayed through a consistent demonstration of a coherent “environmental identity” (on this see Stern 2010), explicit senses of being an “environmentally friendly” person would seem to come and go in ways that are not easy to predict and which often depend on the situation at hand. Complicating the picture further is the recognition that the ethics linked to lower impact living are not all of a piece. Sometimes, they relate to being frugal more than acting for the environment (Evans 2011) since, for example, many “domestic moralities” (Gibson *et al.* 2011) are attached to acts of consumption at home (Hall 2011).

In summary, the spotlight has recently turned from mental process to cultural context in terms of where our energies should be focussed in the quest for more sustainable living. For some advocates of the latter approach, we do not really need to trouble the values of those we want to influence because values have already been dismissed as comparatively impotent in terms of making more sustainable living the norm. Yet some of these contextually focussed studies have also shown how various ethical registers, environmental or otherwise, continue to pop up in the course of everyday consumption. Developing this less theoretically prescribed approach to the lived interplay of values and actions, and consistent with how both studies sought to explore in a relatively “grounded” (Strauss and Corbin 1990) manner the reasons why our respondents did things in some ways and not others, we now illustrate how they emerged as “inadvertent environmentalists”. To be clear, and in support of the argument that it is the lived experience of identified social contexts (more than otherwise coherent sets of environmental values) that produces more or less resource intensive lifestyles, they did not always fit this characterisation. Both sets were happy to be significant consumers in other aspects of their lives. Yet with regard to the two activities of

particular interest to us, it did seem to apply in certain respects we think are worthy of further consideration here.

Older people achieving winter warmth: more sensible than sustainable

Interviewer: So do you think of yourself as sustainable?

Respondent: Oh I think I would say I can be practical . . . Well I wouldn't put the oven on just to warm up a pizza, I'd wait until I'd got something else in.

The first project examined the various ways in which older people stay sufficiently warm at home during winter, how they had come to adopt certain strategies, and the rationales they associated with them. It involved serial interviews and photo diaries in 21 households whose occupants were aged over seventy in the UK Midlands. The sample included a mixture of single and dual occupancy homes and a variety of housing types and forms of tenure. It was also stratified so that one half was relatively affluent and the other was relatively poor. The justification for this was that, if any strategies or sentiments were revealed as common across this diversity of households, there would be good reason to think they were more generally widespread amongst this generational cohort. One intention was to see what this exercise suggested about the best ways of encouraging less domestic energy use amongst older people today (for more on the project, see Day and Hitchings 2009, Day and Hitchings 2011, Hitchings and Day 2011).

Views differ on how easy it should be to encourage older generations to live more sustainably. Some use trends and forecasts to paint a relatively bleak picture of what societal ageing means for future energy demand as ageing baby boomers with significant disposable incomes refashion our understanding of how later life should be lived (Biggs *et al.* 2007, Haq *et al.* 2010). There is also evidence that older people are increasingly choosing to remain in large, energy inefficient houses that require much fuel to heat (Hamza and Gilroy 2011). Then, there are indications that new aspirations for travel after retirement may lead to yet further carbon emissions (Banister and Bowling 2004). Such studies combine to create a picture of older people as destined to use increasing amounts of energy: they feel entitled to live comfortably, they often have the financial means to do so, and they want to make the most of retirement.

Other research, however, seems to suggest that older people could become effective energy conservation champions. Schor (2004) reminds us that, because of the austerity of earlier phases in their lives, many of today's older people remain keen on economising with a view to ensuring they can cope with any future hardships. This chimes with wider public portrayals of thrifty older people in possession of skills that younger people could benefit from acquiring in pursuit of environmental objectives (Nicol 2010). Others suggest older people may often want to leave a positive social and environmental legacy behind them as thoughts naturally turn to the bigger picture as the end of life approaches (Warburton and Gooch 2007, Moody 2008). Accordingly, Haq *et al.* (2008) make a tentative case for older people being keen to fight climate change, though currently lacking the knowledge and senses of personal agency necessary to act on these feelings. These accounts add up to produce quite a different picture of potentially eager environmentalists – elders who really could “save the world” (Thomas 2004).

This contradictory account is partly down to the still limited volume of work on the implications of societal ageing for sustainability agendas (Pillemer and Wagenet 2008) and partly reflective of the research methods that have been applied so far. In some respects, it mirrors our earlier discussion by highlighting how different approaches naturally produce

different pictures: if we focus on attitudes, the result can be an exciting story of hitherto untapped environmental eagerness, but if we turn to trends in what older people are actually doing the prospect suddenly becomes more sobering. With these opposed positions in mind, our study followed the argument that this area of research may benefit from a contextually sensitive examination of how both suggestions might feasibly feature in the detail of what older people currently do. Whilst well aware that things will certainly change as new generations move into older age, the rationale was that this developing field could be usefully enriched by in-depth research centred on how today's older people meet identified mundane objectives.

How then did our respondents keep warm at home and how, if at all, was this connected to sustainability agendas? Here what was immediately apparent in our study was how sufficient warmth was largely understood as non-negotiable. These older people generally felt they needed higher ambient temperatures as a result of physical ageing and any desires to live more sustainably were unlikely to stop them from responding to this need. Questions of cost and what temperatures were most healthy were also more pressing than any nascent beliefs about environmental responsibility. Towards the end of our second visit, we asked our respondents whether they connected their home heating to energy saving for the environment in any way. The rationale was that, if we had done so any earlier, this might have impeded us from exploring their current winter actions fully and in their own terms. This revealed how domestic warmth and environmental issues were not readily connected. Acting for "the environment" was rather about energy saving light bulbs or recycling schemes. Here there was a general and relatively vague desire to contribute to sustainability agendas – but it seldom advanced any further than that and, most interestingly for us, was rarely connected to domestic warmth.

Yet, when we talked earlier about the steps respondents took to keep warm at home during winter, it was also clear that a variety of strategies were often employed to ensure they were personally not too "wasteful" in this regard. In this way, many seemed to buy into the suggestion that, as one respondent put it, "this is just what you do" – frequently drawing on ideas of "common sense" to justify these actions. Though respondents generally felt they should provide themselves with what they "needed" in terms of health and well-being, this was rarely a case of setting the thermostat for the whole house and then leaving it at that. Many were also making hot drinks, wearing extra clothes, sparingly using plug-in heaters, and cooking several meals together so that regular hot food was easier to prepare without too much overall cost. All these strategies sat alongside a spatially varied use of central heating in which it was often deemed, as one respondent put it, just "silly" to heat the whole house when you did not spend time in all the rooms. So, although these actions were rarely framed as attempts to be more "sustainable" and although we saw anxieties about being perceived as "mean" with the heating, our study nevertheless identified various strategies likely to result in less overall energy use.

This approach to winter cold at home was thrown into sharpest relief when we broached the topic of generational difference. Though respondents were reticent about attaching themselves to stigmatised caricatures of incapable "old people" with out-dated approaches to life (Day and Hitchings 2011), opinions on how their children and other younger people dealt with winter cold were sometimes expressed with passion. Suddenly, many respondents were eager to endorse the idea of generational distinctiveness. Feelings ranged from resignation to scorn, but the central point was that younger people were more wasteful in this regard. Curtains provided a good example since younger generations were often taken to lack any appreciation of their real purpose. For several respondents, curtains were understood as valuable aids in ensuring their homes retained the heat with which

they were paying to fill them. Yet, from what they observed in the houses of their offspring, younger people thought curtains were about decoration or privacy only. In this regard, it was sometimes deemed “strange” that younger people “didn’t even realise” their purpose and might even ridicule those older than them for “worrying about” matters such as the effective use of internal doors to trap heat in certain parts of the house. Some figured this was because younger bodies were more able to endure cold, but still younger people did not think about taking such actions or consider the benefits of staying in the warmest rooms. Younger people had seemingly been socialised into a more self-indulgent approach that left them without the ability or inclination to respond to winter cold through means other than central heating. After all, as some respondents rationalised it, younger people had grown up with it.

The reason why some of these views about the increasing self-indulgence of society, as epitomised by the wasteful home heating of the young, were delivered with some force seemed partly because they had seldom been given voice before. This appeared largely a matter of self-censorship since, as alluded to above, our respondents were eager to distance themselves from the negative stereotype of an unnecessarily frugal older person who was, at best, careful with the heating and, at worst, strangely self-denying in this respect. In this regard, we observed some nervousness about revealing their retention of what one respondent dubbed “the old mentality about warmth”. At times, this manifested itself in a deliberate levity about strategies they personally valued but which, so they seemed to reason, would likely be deemed anachronistic and amusing to a wider society that was evidently headed down an increasingly resource hungry path. As such, our respondents were sometimes keen to underscore how habits of ensuring they always turned the lights off when they left the room or guilty feelings about leaving the heating on when they went out were merely individual foibles. Such actions were taken to be out of step with what one respondent termed the “modern way” of keeping warm and respondents often wanted to demonstrate themselves as aware, if not always approving, of wider cultural change – hence, the reticence about talking with children or other younger people about these matters. No one wanted to be teased about being too much of a “granny” or “grand-dad” in this respect and so our interviews seemed to offer a relatively rare opportunity to express privately held convictions about the “right” ways of keeping warm that were otherwise infrequently articulated.

So, though the idea of living in an overtly “sustainable” way was not one to which our respondents were particularly wedded, and though they were careful about when and how they were discussed, past experiences were evidently encouraging our respondents to retain certain comparatively low impact ways of managing winter cold at home, even though these were often recognised as out of step with wider cultural norms. To be clear, we are not arguing that our respondents were using less energy than others in terms of total amounts. Domestic heating was to be used if needed, many figured they needed more now, and they were often at home more than during earlier phases of their lives. In this sense, our respondents were exhibiting aspects of the tension we identified in the literature, with certain features of their generational experience encouraging them to use more heating and others encouraging them to use less. The point we want to take forward, however, is that the contexts through which they had lived were evidently encouraging them to retain certain energy saving responses to winter cold that were understood as simply the most sensible (or “practical” as put by the respondent with which this section starts) choices. They were “inadvertent environmentalists” in this regard.

Young people doing divestment: more sensitive than sustainable

Interviewer: Why is it important to you that your unwanted things are passed on?

Respondent: 'Cause then it's not waste, in my opinion. 'Cause if it's usable and it's passed on, then it's not waste and someone else can use it

The second project focussed on how the current generation of young people gets rid of unwanted possessions as a means of deepening our understanding of everyday consumption amongst this social group. Thirty-two respondents from the South East of England aged 16–19 were interviewed twice, bringing photos of certain possessions and their most commonly employed divestment channels along to the second meeting. A core objective was to consider what a subtle appreciation of how and why they parted with some items, and why others were retained, would suggest about the most effective means of encouraging young people to adopt more sustainable ways of defining and dealing with “waste” in their everyday lives.

Much like older people, young people have been framed as both the cause and cure of unsustainable consumption (Collins and Hitchings 2012). On the one hand, some see young people as intrinsically hedonistic in their pursuit of possessions for status, entertainment and identity construction. This may be rooted in the popular perception that this is simply what teenagers do (Abrams 1959), a view further magnified by the degree to which young audiences are targeted in the promotion of novelty and fashion (Chaplin and John 2005, Langer 2005, Cody 2012). Either way, the resulting picture of relatively self-indulgent consumers has received empirical support from studies of consumer behaviour, with emphasis placed on seemingly insatiable wants, the pressure to keep up with trends, and acquisition for short-term pleasure (Wilska 2003, Autio and Heinonen 2004, Russell and Tyler 2005).

On the other hand, a second body of work is predicated on the assumption that young people should be very good sustainability advocates. These studies are motivated by the suggestion that young people possesses high levels of influence within their social groups, and thus have significant potential as agents of change within wider networks of family and friends (Uzzell 1999, Ballantyne *et al.* 2001, 2006, Bentley *et al.* 2004, Payne 2005). Accordingly, there are now many youth-focussed initiatives built on the hope that the sustainable behaviours thereby engendered should then diffuse through these channels. However, while young people may report environmental concern (Connell *et al.* 1999, Walker and Loughland 2003, Jenkins and Pell 2006), another “value–action gap” characterised by obstacles ranging from pessimism about personal efficacy to self-confessed laziness and the “inconvenience” of living more sustainably has also been identified amongst this group (Ojala 2007, 2008).

In view of another equivocal account (with some presenting young people as an obvious starting point for attempts at fostering lower impact living and others painting them as the cheerleaders of increasingly consumptive societies), the second project also sought to examine how and when each characterisation could be observed in the detail of everyday actions. As with the previous study, “sustainability” and “the environment” were only introduced towards the end of the process in order to discourage respondents from presenting an uncharacteristically “green” self. One key finding related to how, though often understood in terms of other priorities altogether, these respondents were divesting and retaining items in ways that could arguably be described as allied with the principles of sustainability, though without particularly attaching these actions to this agenda.

Not unexpectedly, some items were simply “binned” (placed directly into the waste stream with little thought of the implications). However, more interesting was how giving things away was often cited as the most common way of dispatching no longer

wanted possessions. Almost all these young people said they did this “because someone else can use it” – either by passing things on to family and friends or by donating to charity shops and clothing banks. A smaller group also sold unwanted items via internet auction sites or car boot sales. While these latter methods are not unproblematic in view of the fuel used in transportation, like giving things away, they nonetheless reflected a commitment on the young people’s part to preventing things from becoming waste. Here was a shared sense that to dispose (via the rubbish bin) of possessions that retained some residual value would, in one participant’s words, “feel a bit bad”.

It was difficult to pin down what exactly was meant by feeling “a bit bad”, but further discussion suggested it was largely an outcome of senses of gratitude and responsibility. These respondents recognised themselves as lucky to be in possession of goods with value and they felt obliged to pass that value on. This seemed a result of previous socialisation into particular attitudes towards ownership and use. Passing things on within and between families had been a norm for all these respondents whilst growing up, thus emphasising how possessions that had become personally unwanted could still be appreciated by others. They had also generally been instructed by family members to take care of the things given to them in a way that underscored the continued economic and emotional worth of such items. The result was a widespread consensus captured well by one respondent who said “I think I’ve always been brought up with the attitude that everything does have a value”.

Attitudes to money also played a significant part, with decisions about whether to get rid of something being influenced by the ease with which a replacement could be found. While some had their possessions bought for them by parents, either directly or through personal allowances, others who worked part-time to generate disposable income and those from lower income families weighed up what to buy carefully. However, concerns with not wasting money were by no means limited to those from poorer backgrounds. Some who enjoyed more comfortable financial circumstances had friends who struggled in this respect. Knowing about this sensitised them to the inequality of access to material things, which then made these respondents more thoughtful about their own acquisition and more generous in their sharing with, and gifting to, others. As one respondent said, reflecting on a friend’s financial difficulties, “I’ve realised that I should put my money towards something more productive, and maybe getting more use out of things is better”. Even those from the wealthiest families were sensitive to the potential for wasting money through superfluous acquisition and this was both the result of parents “teaching” them the value of money and of knowing peers with less available.

A natural corollary of these divestment discussions was conversation about keeping. Here a number of respondents echoed the views of one who emphasised how she “quite liked keeping”. Understandably, items which were especially valued, still in regular use, or characterised by emotional attachment were kept. Yet beyond these, there was often a collection of items that, in the course of clear outs, were almost dispatched – but ultimately retained. Most commonly, this was about having “back-ups” available “just in case” newer equivalents malfunctioned – things respondents were often keen to emphasise that they “might need” in the future. This generally concerned mobile phones and mp3 players as devices deemed central to effective participation in contemporary teenage life. Some possessions – usually items of clothing – were also kept with the intention of repair or repurposing. While this was primarily about bringing a useful or favourite object back into use, repairing or repurposing also resulted in both direct gains – namely the continued use of the item – and indirect benefits, particularly the development of senses of self-efficacy which,

as Ojala (2007, 2008) notes, may be crucial in encouraging sustainable behaviours to endure amongst young people.

A kind of “hedging” also helped divert possessions away from the waste stream by envisioning future scenarios that legitimised current “just in case” keeping. Like backing-up, this strategy was often underpinned by anxieties about taking part in valued youth cultural practices. Commonly with regard to clothing, retaining items in this way alleviated anxieties about future social scenarios in which the respondent found themselves without the “right” things – even if actually wearing them again was acknowledged as unlikely. Indeed so important were certain possessions that ensuring uninterrupted access to the necessary gadgets or garments – even if not the latest in terms of style or functionality – was often a top priority. Although participants sometimes saw the waste avoidance benefits of doing so, this was about anxiety management more than waste minimisation – they were being sensitive to potential social stress more than acting sustainably.

Though these young people talked about feeling distanced from environmental problems and how they felt unlikely to have much individual impact in addressing them, as with the older people, a range of other imperatives were also encouraging them to act in certain, comparatively resource conserving ways. Certainly, these participants appreciated the value of possessions to a greater extent than popular views of teenagers have given them credit for, as reflected in their often thoughtful strategies of acquisition, divestment and retention. In other aspects of their lives, they clearly embraced novelty as a means of demonstrating their enthusiasm for fashion and technological development, and, through this, their skill in “keeping up” with the perceived demands of youth culture. Yet it was also true that another combination of circumstances had created the conditions in which certain approaches to waste avoidance otherwise aligned with sustainability agendas were flourishing, though without the young people themselves connecting these actions to this idea. This second set of “inadvertent environmentalists” was rather being sensitive both to the predicament of others with less disposable income and to how participation in teenage life was now taken to require certain possessions.

What to do with the inadvertent environmentalist?

By examining the interplay of values (environmental or otherwise) and actions in the detail of everyday life, the above two projects sought a comparatively nuanced appreciation of how these respondents went about achieving winter warmth and getting rid of unwanted possessions. Though in subtly different ways, both sets then revealed themselves as “inadvertent environmentalists” in the sense that the contexts through which they lived were encouraging them to take actions which sustainability advocates might very well want to encourage, but as a result of other imperatives entirely. The issue we are left with is what to do with this intriguing category of person when the likelihood is that many other social groups, in addition to the older and younger cohorts studied here, will sometimes end up falling into it. As we now describe, this is no easy question and, tacking back to the different ways of defining the problem we discussed in our earlier review, answers will likely depend on the orientating framework researchers adopt at the start of their studies as much as the empirical material they subsequently extract from the contexts of everyday consumption. Nonetheless, we still want to do more in this paper than merely note the existence of the “inadvertent environmentalist” and so now offer three possible responses. Each takes a different view on whether we really have an “action–value opportunity” on our hands here and how those involved might be engaged with most effectively.

Ignore values entirely

The first position has much in common with the stance that the personal values and ethical priorities of those whose lifestyles we are hoping to influence may not be the best targets. A better strategy might rather be about recreating the conditions in which lower impact living simply becomes the most sensible option. Our studies could easily be used to advance this position. Just as environmental “values” may be red herrings for some of those who now take a more contextually sensitive view of the problem, so they were far from the concerns of our respondents when managing their warmth or deciding how to divest. In this respect, our studies could easily be used to make a case for human adaptability. Since the circumstances of their lives had encouraged both sets of respondents to adopt certain comparatively sustainable practices, we might take this to mean others could be encouraged down comparable paths without this being felt to be too onerous. But how to do this? In this first case, exposing others to ways of managing domestic warmth that are about more than central heating might be one way since they may thereafter be inclined to retain some of these strategies. The older people with whom we spoke in our first study were often quite wedded to practices that were relatively economical in energy use terms but for reasons that were more about how they had become attached to certain ways of staying warm than about trying to save energy for the environment. In the second case, a similar suggestion might be to encourage repurposing or customisation skills to spread more widely amongst young people. Whether this was about avoiding social anxiety, limited personal finances or the simple enjoyment of the activity, some of these young respondents were doing this already. Exposing others to opportunities to try repurposing might encourage senses of efficacy and mean fewer new things are bought. Such strategies may seem quite fanciful. They also have potentially troubling implications if used to argue for increasing fuel costs or reducing disposable incomes as a means of creating contexts for action in which comparatively profligate choices are prevented. Yet this is perhaps where attention needs to focus if we really want more sustainable ways of living to spread. In any case, in this first scenario, there is no “action–value opportunity” since values are understood as relatively powerless when faced with the forces of wider social change that really decide how we end up living.

Work with existing ethics

The second suggestion is to engage with values other than those associated with a commitment to the environment. This would be in line with some of the recent contextually focussed studies that highlight how various value positions may be attached to everyday consumption, and how these are not very often about being green. How would this work for our two groups? For the older people, it would be about recognising and valuing the ways in which older people are already deploying certain skills to avoid “wasteful” heating. A campaign about “sensible” actions that save money might also be appreciated in view of the current economic recession. Recognising the skills of older people in this regard might also lead to more general senses of empowerment amongst this group in terms of the positive implications of actions they already take despite feeling they are going against the grain of evolving social norms by doing so. However, any such campaign would need to be careful not to encourage cutting back on energy consumption to a degree that endangered health. For the younger people, if giving away no-longer wanted possessions reflects senses of gratitude and responsibility, and if retaining certain back-ups is about preventing future anxieties more than avoiding the waste stream, perhaps it is best

to avoid muddying the waters by imposing a sustainability discourse from which many still feel distanced, even while expressing a degree of environmental concern. Since the moral guide for many of their divestment decisions was more social than environmental, the values to emphasise might be about care for others more than care for the planet. This second strategy may feel a little underhand in terms of smuggling sustainability in, but it could be all the more effective for being alive to the ethical registers associated with how those we hope to influence already value certain everyday actions. In terms of the “action–value opportunity”, there is certainly an opportunity here, but the values we are encouraging are not really environmental.

Celebrate hitherto unacknowledged environmentalism

The final suggestion fits the idea of the “action–value opportunity” most fully since we have now decided on an overt celebration of the comparatively sustainable actions that are currently being taken. One of the reasons many people may say they do not act for the environment is because they believe doing so is too difficult in view of how other pressures often get in the way. Yet our studies found that, in some circumstances, and without really thinking about it as such, people are doing it already. So could our inadvertent environmentalists become proud sustainability champions? In our older person study, there could be scope for encouraging them to share what were, in fact, certain sustainability skills, though care would need to be taken to avoid stigmatised stereotypes of a generation out of touch with modern times. In the younger person study, they could become more empowered to act for the environment by recognising how they are already doing quite well in certain respects. In any case, and for both groups, this may be more effective than simply saying they should do more for “the environment” when doing so could easily make them shut down to the idea because of either low commitment levels or feelings of limited agency. For both groups, care would need to be taken to approach them in ways that are not patronising about actions that, for the moment, just seem like the most sensible choices. Care will also be required to avoid the immediate rejection of a clumsy yoking together of what hitherto seemed like quite distinct objectives. Nonetheless, there could still be promise here in activating environmental values that were previously dormant and disconnected from the rationales underpinning current actions that are comparatively low impact.

Conclusion

Building on a recent turn towards a more contextually sensitive apprehension of the challenge of making lower impact living more commonplace, the two studies described in this paper took a relatively grounded approach to how the contexts of lived experience serve to produce particular ways of meeting everyday objectives. We then saw groups from both ends of the generational spectrum reveal themselves as “inadvertent environmentalists” in the sense that they were taking certain actions that were comparatively low impact, but without ever really thinking of them in these terms. This led us to question how sustainability advocates might respond to this finding, using the “action–value opportunity” as a device to help structure the process of drawing out the implications.

Returning to the literature review we presented earlier, some of the more uncompromising visions of how cultural conventions emerge and evolve might immediately dismiss this term since personal values have already been branded as insufficiently powerful to effect

social change of a size appropriate to the problem. Yet we argue it would be a shame to allow the recognition that professed environmental values do not often translate into environmental actions to mutate into the assumption that commitments to doing the right thing are never part of how people go about their daily lives. Though they were certainly far from avowedly environmental, and though they were far from consistently demonstrated across all aspects of their lives, in both our studies we saw such commitments and so there still seemed scope for engaging with them in some way. To be clear, in highlighting this feature we are not advocating the return to a more “individualistic” understanding of the problem in which people appear as relatively unfettered by wider social norms and pressures. Rather our intention is to underscore the potential merit of attending to the subtleties of how practices with resource use implications come to be done differently by different social groups. Past experiences and current pressures were evidently shaping what our respondents felt they should do in terms of staying warm at home or getting rid of things. Our point here is that it is worth considering how such varied experiences can be generative of commitments to particular ways of going about everyday life that could be harnessed to positive environmental ends.

In conclusion, we do not want to press for any one of the three possible responses we presented above since which will be most effective will likely depend on the social context at hand. In this respect, we would encourage future researchers to guard against the temptation to generalise and rather to recognise how identified contexts could feasibly be influenced by a whole range of interventions. In our winter warmth study, we find the third option particularly appealing because it directly undermines negative stereotypes to show how older people could help society as much as need its help. In our younger person project, the second option seems most attractive in view of the central role played by peer relationships and concern for others. In this regard, and to reiterate, our conclusion is about attending to the processes through which different groups come to feel certain ways of living are most appropriate and then seeing where this leaves us. We recognise, however, that this may be an unsatisfactorily evasive finish for some readers. So, as a means of taking a more definitive final stand, there are two broader points with which we would end for now. One is about ways of characterising the problem and the other about strategies of response.

The first is that the picture is not as bleak as the “value–action gap”, and the associated downbeat talk of “barriers” preventing people from doing what they otherwise would, suggests. If we were only to look for them, there are evidently many ways of navigating everyday life that could be deemed comparatively environmental, even if those involved do not necessarily understand them as such. Trading the “value–action gap” for the “action–value opportunity” is a simple conceptual inversion but, by turning things on their head in this way, new possibilities come immediately into view. It may, therefore, be worth allowing this term, or something similar, a place alongside its more established counterpart if only to remind us how the process need not always go in one direction. There will always be a patchwork of more and less resource consuming ways of achieving any given mundane objective. It’s more complex than a simple case of people being unable to do the environmental things they otherwise would and now a matter of influencing the rise and fall of the various ways in which they already live, whether through attempts to activate hitherto dormant environmental values or not.

The second is that being alive to the existence of the inadvertent environmentalist could lead to fresh suggestions about the most effective means of promoting lower impact living. Broad-brush campaigns about the environmental benefits of energy saving or the ethics of household recycling are unlikely to excite those who have

come to occupy this category. Yet questions of what curtains are for or why keeping things can be a good idea may be another matter entirely. Such topics are less often discussed in the environmental literature but if they are those about which our target groups are comparatively enthused, they should probably feature more. Future research in this vein would need to take care about how, and whether, conserving resources is introduced as a discussion topic to potential respondents when the aim is to understand why they have come to live in certain ways as much as to evaluate their feelings about the environmental agenda. Yet it also stands to identify new intervention ideas that could be all the more successful for being derived from a subtle appreciation of how living in certain low impact ways became simply the most sensible option. It may be better to develop this line of enquiry instead of lingering on the dispiriting recognition that it is not always easy to act explicitly for the environment.

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