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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 916903244]

Publisher Routledge

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Environmental Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713635072>

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To cite this Article Evans, David and Abrahamse, Wokje 'Beyond rhetoric: the possibilities of and for 'sustainable lifestyles'', *Environmental Politics*, 18: 4, 486 — 502

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09644010903007369

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644010903007369>

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Beyond rhetoric: the possibilities of and for ‘sustainable lifestyles’

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Discourses of ‘sustainable lifestyles’ and ‘lifestyle change’ are becoming ubiquitous in media, comment and environmental policy, but there is ambiguity about what this means and entails. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork exploring ‘sustainable lifestyles’ from the perspective of persons who identify themselves as living, or attempting to live, in more sustainable and/or environmentally friendly ways, the tensions, constraints, rewards and opportunities detailed in respondents’ narratives are described. ‘Sustainable lifestyles’ are far more complex than the rhetoric would suggest. They need to be understood in relation to wider social and cultural processes. ‘Structural changes’ to enable ‘lifestyle choices’ that are conducive to sustainability are needed, but it is important to look beyond ‘sustainability’ (however defined) and appeal to other agendas and identities in order to motivate pro-environmental behaviour.

Keywords: sustainable lifestyles; social practices; sustainable consumption; qualitative methods; pro-environmental behaviour

Introduction

It is increasingly difficult, in the present political and cultural climate, to avoid the language of ‘sustainable lifestyles’. Against a backdrop in which there is widespread recognition that climate change and related environmental crises are among the most serious problems facing humankind, there is a tendency to conceive of ‘lifestyle change’ and the transition to ‘sustainable lifestyles’ as the solution. To give an example from the UK: Tony Blair, when he was prime minister, stated that: ‘Making the shift to a more sustainable lifestyle is one of the most important challenges for the 21st century. The reality of climate change brings home to us the consequences of not facing up to these challenges’ (Blair quoted in DEFRA 2006).

This is just one example among many of these discourses becoming part of the linguistic repertoire that politicians deploy. Nevertheless, it would be somewhat cynical to write this off as mere rhetoric, especially when there are

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very practical attempts in the international political arena to understand and enable sustainable lifestyles. For example, the United National Environment Programme is carrying out a global survey on sustainable lifestyles as part of their work on sustainable consumption and production. Furthermore, the popularity of these discourses seems to be spilling over from the domain of politics and into the popular imagination. One can scarcely turn on the radio or television without hearing something about ‘sustainable lifestyles’ as newspapers, supplements and magazines – and not just the ones from which one might expect this – increasingly carry features about lifestyle change and how individuals can change their lifestyles for the good of the environment.

There is, however, a lack of clarity when it comes to understanding just what ‘sustainable lifestyles’ are and how they might operate to foster pro-environmental behaviour and sustainable patterns of consumption at the individual level or how they might relate to wider issues of social and environmental change. Of course, it is tempting to sidestep the concept of sustainable lifestyles altogether and turn to the analysis of pro-environmental behaviours. Indeed, studies in social and environmental psychology have created a rich body of work that explores (i) the factors influencing pro-environmental behaviours such as reducing car use (Bamberg and Schmidt 2003, Nordlund and Garvill 2003), recycling (Guagnano *et al.* 1995, Schultz *et al.* 1995), and the purchase of organic food products (Grankvist and Biel 2001) and (ii) the effectiveness of intervention strategies to encourage such behaviours (Abrahamse *et al.* 2005, Brandon and Lewis 1993). Whilst some studies do look at sets of related behaviours (Harland *et al.* 1999, Staats *et al.* 2004), the focus is generally on understanding and changing individual behaviours as opposed to exploring sets of (social) practices and their inter-relatedness. By the same token, sociological work that *does* address lifestyles and the connections between social practices (Bourdieu 1977, Featherstone 1991, Giddens 1984, 1991) has tended to be theoretical in nature whilst overlooking questions of environmental sustainability. As such, in addition to the ubiquity of the term, there is good reason to explore the concept of sustainable lifestyles as a potentially useful way of thinking through approaches to pro-environmental behaviour and sustainable consumption. Furthermore, there have been some serious attempts by social scientists to do just this (Connolly and Prothero 2008, Hobson 2002, Shove and Warde 2002, Spaargaren 2003). Our intention here is to contribute to this explication by drawing on the experiences and subjectivities of those who identify themselves as attempting to live a sustainable lifestyle. The rationale for doing so stems from the idea that a focus on those who already embody the concept in which we are interested will enable us to address questions of what sustainable lifestyles might entail and how they might operate to bring about social and environmental change and, in turn, shed some more light on the possibilities of and for sustainable lifestyles.

Setting

The research was carried out in the South East of England over a period of eight months between 2007 and 2008. Having decided to recruit those who are

deliberately attempting to live in ways that are sustainable and/or environmentally friendly; a *purposive* and *theoretical* sampling strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was deemed appropriate, as was a 'self-selecting' set of respondents. As such, we created advertisements giving details of our research and inviting those who identified themselves as suitable participants to come forward. These advertisements were placed in a range of geographical locales in order to pick up different socio-demographic features as well as using a variety of locations – including internet notice boards, local newspapers, environmental forums, community centres, supermarkets, charity shops and strategic locations such as 'alternative' cafés – to try and capture a broader cross-section of appropriate respondents. Furthermore, as result of several respondents telling us that they hesitated in responding out of concern that their way of life may not count as 'sustainable', we changed the wording of our advertisements from a call for those 'attempting to live sustainably' to a call for those 'attempting to reduce their environmental impact'. Consequently, more participants came forward and we were able to capture the perspectives of those who were trying to make more modest changes to their lifestyles in the interests of environmental sustainability. In the process of negotiating access, respondents were asked – via telephone or e-mail – to provide some background information about themselves and in total, there were 28 respondents of whom 17 were male and 11 were female, whose ages ranged from early 20s to mid 70s. The majority of respondents could be categorised as middle-class, although at least five respondents described themselves as having a working-class background, and in terms of ethnicity most were of European and/or Caucasian origin with the exception of two who identified themselves as Asian. It should be noted that there are some obvious limitations to this sample, namely: (i) a focus on London and the South East of England overlooks the perspectives and experiences of persons in other geographical locations; (ii) a focus on self-selecting respondents, despite our best efforts, inevitably overlook the perspectives of 'ordinary' people who are making small changes to their lifestyle; and (iii) whilst a sample size of 28 is appropriate for the qualitative and explorative work offered here, it not sufficient to make any generalisations.

In order to develop in-depth understandings of the respondents' lives and real world experiences, we conducted a long qualitative/ethnographic interview (McCracken 1988, Spradley 1979) with each participant. In all of the interviews, only one researcher and one interviewee were present and they were carried out in a location of the respondents' choosing (their home, our office or a neutral location). We adopted a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to the collection and analysis of the interview data which meant that respondents could tell their own story in their own terms such that the insights generated were grounded in their perspectives as opposed to any particular theoretical framework. Accordingly, the interviews were largely unstructured but guided by an *aide memoir* that was constructed in relation to some of the puzzles that we wanted to explore. Some of the questions that we

used to guide the interview included: 'so you responded to our advert; perhaps you could begin by telling me about some of the things that you are doing in order to live more sustainably?' and 'what difficulties do you encounter in your efforts to reduce your environmental impact?' Whilst the interviewees were given scope to shape the structure of the interview, we devised a series of prompts that could be used (if necessary) to ensure a steady flow of dialogue and a focus on the issues at hand. These included the invitation to discuss their way of life in relation to key areas (food, transport, leisure, the home) as well as speculative questions about what else they would like to see other people doing in respect of living more sustainably.

The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim, generating a substantial amount of data to analyse. The research was not characterised by distinct and discrete periods of data collection and data analysis but rather an integrated process (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983) in which the transcription and preliminary analysis of one interview would generate new ideas to be explored in the next such that analysis informed data collection as well as vice versa. Indeed, the interview protocol and the content of the *aide mémoire* evolved as we learnt more about the lived experience of the respondents to include, for example, the rewards and sacrifices associated with sustainable living and the perceived efficacy of individuals in relation to social and environmental change. Having collected all of the data, we set about conducting analysis proper through continued immersion in the data, before coding, categorising and developing hypotheses surrounding the themes that we wanted to explore and those that became relevant as a result of conducting the research. These initial categories and hypotheses were contextualised and 'tested' in relation to data and the existing theories that transpired as relevant such that our ideas were refined and rewritten through an iterative process between desk and data. Consequently, we generated a range of insights that seemed to 'fit' the data (i.e. the analytic categories were readily applicable observed phenomena) and 'work' insofar as they have decent explanatory power across a range of observations. What follows is a discussion around some of these insights.

Social practices

Lifestyles can be understood, at the most basic level, as the assemblage of social practices that represent a particular way of life and give substance to an individual's ongoing narrative self-identity and self-actualisation (Giddens 1991). As such, the most obvious place to start is with a discussion of the social practices that feature in the respondents' narratives of living a sustainable lifestyle. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the range of social practices reported tended to revolve around food, transportation, energy consumption in the home, waste/recycling and recreational activities. Furthermore, these bundles of social practices were not common across respondents, nor was the importance placed on different domains of activity. In terms of narrative structure,

interviewees tended to begin with a lengthy discussion of the areas that they conceive of as the most important and those in which they are making the most significant effort. For example:

I suppose that my main effort, really in living sustainably is really about looking at and getting my energy consumption down and my emissions down, my CO₂ emissions down. (Male, 74)

The main practical things that I do would involve choosing, um, choosing efficient or uh or low emission methods of transport, for example, not flying um which is quite a difficult one because of my job unfortunately but I try to avoid it for other reasons. For other travel. My uh, well I run my car on vegetable oil, I have done for quite a while, both my current car and the one before so that is about five years or something. And that is probably the most major thing I do, if you like. (Male, 32)

The main thing that I do is avoid waste. Me and my boyfriend recycle pretty much all that we can – the facilities are quite good in our area – and plan what we buy so that we don't have to waste anything, especially food. We generate one small bag of landfill every two weeks and since living together we have only thrown out half a bag of spinach and a handful of strawberries. (Female, 27)

Similarly, respondents engaged with each particular domain in many different ways. For example, when it came to food there were those who had adopted relatively 'extreme' measures, such as following a raw food vegan diet, those who tried to buy food that is more 'sustainable' – and this was generally understood in terms of organic food or products with low food miles – and those who highlighted the importance of how the food is cooked:

Cooking is another area where I think that I am reasonably sustainable. When we cook, we try to cook efficiently. If we boil something on the hob we will use that water until there is no water left so we don't lose that heat [...] Um, the oven doesn't go on unless we've got more than one thing to cook in the oven ... Yeah, I microwave things when – I mean microwaving is pretty efficient so we do that when we can but I don't tend to use it often. In terms of food generally, I really do think about food. (Female, 36)

Virtually all respondents positioned their more sustainable social practices in terms of *changes* that they had made such as giving up flying where they used to fly a lot or being mindful of household energy consumption where they used not to be. From here, respondents' intimated that making a one-off change was not, in isolation, sufficient:

So we bought the Toyota Prius and got rid of our second car. That was great but the important thing became how we use it, otherwise it is a total cop-out. We have the car for when we HAVE to use it but we don't use it as a matter of course. If we can plan properly and find a way around it then we do and do you know what? Between us we have only done 5,000 miles in one year which ain't bad. (Male, 52)

This connects well to the idea that the challenge of sustainable lifestyles is not a technical problem in which people can carry on doing what they are doing

whilst efficiency gains in resource productivity provide the solution and eliminate the need for individuals to make changes to their lifestyle (Hobson 2002). Similarly, this respondent goes on to note that:

You see, the good stuff we do with the car does not give us a get out of jail free card and excuse the things we do elsewhere in our lives. In fact it forces us to do similar things, like, with our home and not flying ...

The implication here is that these 'sustainable lifestyles' are characterised by changes across multiple domains such that changes in one social practice do not, in isolation, constitute a sustainable lifestyle. This sits well with the idea that lifestyles are made up of relatively consistent and coherent bundles of social practices (Giddens 1991). This feeds into the idea that changes in one social practice lead to further changes in other domains. This idea was common to virtually all respondents and exemplified best by the following:

It isn't just a matter of changing light bulbs and 'that's it'. It is a progressive thing you see and you have got to do more and more each year. It's no exaggeration to say that this whole green thing, if you like, changed my life. It's addictive really – I started off by getting my flying and car use right and then it seemed stupid to not get other things sorted especially when you learn more. So from there, I decided to get energy at home sorted and from there we started thinking about where our food comes from ... One thing leads to another. (Male, 59)

Many respondents suggested that, no matter how many changes they had made, they could or should be doing more. As such, it makes sense to think of sustainable lifestyles as an ongoing process, requiring constant negotiation and maintenance across a range of social practices, meaning that individuals never reach a point where they can state 'I am living sustainably' and stop. Taking it up another level, thinking in terms of change and process suggests that individuals deliberately and reflexively choose their bundles of social practices as part of an ongoing narrative of self-actualisation. In turn, this suggests a particular framing of 'lifestyle' as *life project* which is useful up to a point and appropriate for the analysis of the data presented here. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a conception of lifestyle that overlooks the notion of *habitus* – structural dispositions which function as the generative basis of unified social practices (Bourdieu 1977, p. 72) – would be deeply problematic for the analysis of sustainable lifestyles in relation to persons who are *not* deliberately trying to live one.

On becoming

Respondents' narratives suggest that the (ongoing) process of living sustainably begins with one key change from which others tend to follow. This raises questions of where these initial changes come from and in some cases the answers are not that surprising. For example, there are those who

have had a longstanding concern for environmental issues and now feel that they should assume personal responsibility for ‘making a difference’ and those who – as a result of increased media attention – have become more aware of the issues and intimate that they have felt an imperative to act. There are even those who suggest that they should ‘practice what they preach’, such as one respondent who started running a Carbon Rationing Action Group in his local community:

I realised when I decided to do these talks, that apart from getting more informed – obviously – to do the talks ... which makes you more alarmed and more motivated to do something ... there is also the very practical thing that sooner or later, some bright spark in the audience would say ‘well what are *you* doing then’ ... I thought that I cannot really go along and talk to people without being a reasonably good example of what you can do. (Male, 74)

Very few respondents, however, arrived at the process of attempting to live sustainably or those initial changes via an explicit or isolated concern with the agendas of environmental sustainability. To the contrary, their narratives of becoming suggest a more complex history in which ‘sustainability’ is caught up with other concerns and agendas. For example, one of the most common routes to sustainability was frugality, especially in the case of older respondents. To give an extreme example:

I actually don’t have much cop with this whole climate change business. I am not convinced by it, I reckon it is overhyped by the media. Mind you, I cannot abide waste ... I mean, I resent spending money for no reason and I think it is just wrong to waste water and electricity and all that. I think people should be able to use as much as they want but only use what they need and I don’t need much you see so I don’t use much. (Male, 61)

Far more common were respondents who found that the social practices that their frugality entails, such as not wasting things and being careful with money, sat comfortably with their emerging concern with environmental sustainability even though it did not emerge from this:

We have never lived beyond our means and I suppose, as time goes on our means have become more and more comfortable and money isn’t really an issue but still, we do live very simply. For example, we don’t impulse buy. If we see something that we want to buy we don’t and then say to ourselves ‘well if we still want it in a week we can come back and get it’ and 9 times out of 10 we don’t. Same goes for car journeys and putting the heating on ... we don’t do it until we know for sure that we need to. It is very sensible and of course, it is much better for the environment. (Male, 56)

Another interesting route was becoming a vegetarian out of concern for animals and then finding meaningful connections to environmental sustainability:

Well I became a vegetarian when I was 12 and I knew nothing really about the environment but having learnt that not eating meat is a really sustainable thing to do it all kind of made sense to me. (Female, 27)

In a similar way, many respondents had changed their diets for health reasons and through doing so learnt more about food and found a route into sustainability.

I feel that I became ill because I was not in contact with myself, with my own body. [...] That is what happened to me in the process of cancer. I learned how to listen to my body, and then I knew that I had to follow such a routine that would allow me to survive, without becoming ill again [...] In terms of what I eat. You know, the same again. My body had cancer and because of the cancer I became aware of the need to be conscious of how one eats. [...] I can't afford organic, sadly, I can't afford it. It's very expensive. But right now I'm planning to, just as you were coming up, there's a part of my garden, I am going to grow vegetables, so I can have some organic food of my own. (Female, 68)

More broadly, many respondents detailed longstanding concerns with 'ethical' and 'alternative' living grounded in human/animal rights and worries about global consumerism that found a comfortable bedfellow in environmental concerns. Some even went as far as putting the environment at the heart of their ethical living:

Since my late teens I have tried to live and consume as ethically as I can and I always found it hard but since I have learnt more about the environment it is become clear to me that this is what it is all about. I mean, I care about animals and I care about people but none of this is any good if there isn't a good environment to live in and then if you look ... global business and consumerism is damaging the environment just as they exploit people and animals. Way I see it, it is all related and if we sort out the environment, everything else will follow. (Male, 33)

Taking all of this together, 'sustainable lifestyles' seem to emerge from and sit well with a range of other social practices relating to health, frugality, animal rights, human rights and social justice. Indeed, there is good reason to theorise this collecting of discourses in terms of a broader milieu around which respondents are organising their life projects with sustainability playing an important and complementary part. Again, this is true to an extent but such an understanding would underestimate the tensions and inconsistencies that characterise the experience of attempting to undertake one such life project.

Tensions and inconsistencies

The data reveals a range of perceived inconsistencies amongst and across the social practices that constitute respondents' lifestyles such that their narratives intimate a sense of 'falling short', in some way or another, of their objective to live more sustainably:

And you see, I don't know if what I am doing is enough or even that sustainable and I know there are people doing a lot more than me ... I see it as a spectrum from doing buggar all to doing all that you possibly can and I guess that I am somewhere between the middle and that 'doing all you can'. (Male, 33)

I do a lot, I suppose, a lot to be more sustainable but I could do more. I do more than most ... but I know full well there are those that do much more than me and then there are those that do much more than them. Apart from a few nutters living alone up a tree, we are all in a situation where no matter what we have done, we could and probably should be taking further action but sometimes it is hard and sometimes you have to have a life, you have to be a bit selfish. (Female, 27)

These inconsistencies, in part, seem to stem from the tensions that characterise the experience of attempting to live more sustainably. Crucially, two types of tension were identified: those that arise between sustainability and the demands of living a 'mainstream' consumer lifestyle and those that arise between sustainability and 'complementary' agendas detailed in the previous section.

Respondents detailed tensions between efforts to reduce their environmental impact and their desire to engage in more familiar 'lifestyle' pursuits. For example, the respondent above described the need to 'have a life' and be a 'bit selfish' and this is echoed across respondents in accounts of allowing themselves 'little treats' to compensate themselves and make up for the other things that they have chosen to go without:

I know it is bad but I love clothes. I am a fashion victim and here I just let myself go. A bit lame really but I do so much ... I mean I try so hard so I figure that I deserve *one* guilty pleasure and treat myself. Haha, I try and do it ethically but sometimes the clothes have to win. (Female, 27)

I suppose my main, my only significant vice is my gadgets. Typical boy with his toys you know. My laptop is always on, downloading usually and I use my ipod a lot and have a really cool phone [laughs] and all that and, but, I do find myself feeling bad but then I just think, I'm like 'ah – what the hell I don't have a car, I don't fly ...'. (Male, 24)

Similarly, many respondents made explicit their longing to live a more hedonistic consumer lifestyle alongside a sense of having to give this up for the sake of the environment:

It is hard. Well for some people it might not be but for me it is. I look around at people having and doing all these lovely things and I want it, I catch myself thinking 'why can't I have that' you know, if they can and then it gets to the point that I have a 'fuck the environment' mindset ... but I know that I can't be that way and it isn't right. So I carry on, through gritted teeth [Laughs]. (Female, 38)

By contrast to the narrative lines that juxtapose 'sustainable lifestyles' with the pursuit of hedonistic desires; there were those that emphasised the 'other pleasures' of living sustainably (Soper and Thomas 2006).

Interestingly enough, the pleasures of living a sustainable lifestyle were seen to be connected to the pleasures of living a frugal, healthy or 'ethical' lifestyle:

It's brilliant. Cycling, weather permitting, is so good for me ... and I only started doing it really to get my carbon down. I am so much fitter which is important at

my age, I save a fortune and I just enjoy getting around more. Rather than thinking 'here we go again' I look forward to my cycling trips and don't want them to end. (Male, 56)

This of course lends support to the analysis in the previous section and the idea that 'sustainability' is intimately tied to other agendas to form a milieu that resembles an alternative vision of the 'good life'. Nevertheless, respondents detailed instances where this harmonious relationship did not hold and demonstrated that choices had to be made between living sustainably and living 'ethically', frugally or healthily:

My husband is a fussy eater and when it comes to fruit, he really wants to have apples. Apples . . . every time that we go shopping. Now obviously I only want to buy them when they are in season and local but I am not going to deter him from having one of the things that he eats that are good for him. (Female, 36)

Goodness, I find myself with all sorts of dilemmas. I mean, I am vegetarian obviously but one of the only places to buy meat substitutes – tofu and all that which I need, I am not a good enough cook to not have them – the only place I can go is the supermarket and that isn't really good. I don't like supermarkets. So being veggie is good for the environment but supermarkets are wrong for the environment and a load of other reasons. (Female, 27)

This objection, in theory at least, to supermarkets is common across respondents as part of wider 'anti-big business' and 'anti-globalisation' ethos that connects to tensions around the local and the global in relation to the demands of living a sustainable lifestyle. These tensions are most eloquently captured in the following quote:

It becomes a real pain actually. Do I buy organic food from the supermarket or non-organic food from the local grocer? And then again, it may be local business but it isn't necessarily local produce but I get to thinking. Is local necessarily best? On the one hand yes, it has to be better for the environment, right? But trade is also good right? I mean fair trade obviously but trading with the third world helps them develop and that is worth doing. Going local is like protectionism again. And I think it is good to have choice – I remember how boring Britain was in the 70s and now we can have all sorts of lovely things from all over the world and this is actually very very good for our cultural tolerance. (Female, 58)

Again, this sense of connection to a global world in terms of cultural exchange (as well as or in addition to economic exchange) was constructed, by many respondents, as synonymous with the process of living sustainably. Consequently, foreign travel became a real source of tension for many respondents and several described an unwillingness to give up air travel, most notably:

I know that taking a flight to Australia is bad for the environment and I wouldn't mind betting that the damage it does outweighs the good things I do elsewhere with my car and my food and whatnot. But still, that is not what it's all about, is it? I mean, it is a state of mind isn't it? As long as you think about what you do then you are doing the right thing. That's my view anyway. (Male, 30)

However, the crux of all these tensions is captured by a seemingly mundane example:

Honestly, I find this with the most banal things. I mean, coffee – do I go for organic or fair trade coffee? Stupid isn't it but it is an issue. One is good for the environment; one does right with human rights and that so I have to make a choice between people and the environment. And I shouldn't have to as these things are or should be related. You know, the only coffee available should be fair trade and organic. Ok, this isn't just about coffee, it is a dumb example but you see what I mean ... (Male, 33)

All of these tensions demonstrate that whilst in one framing sustainability is a consistent feature of living frugally, healthily and ethically, there is a slight problem for those wishing to promote sustainable lifestyles by exploiting these multiple entry points insofar as sustainability, in another framing, is a potential antagonist of these agendas. Indeed, the interviewees seemed to join these agendas in some instances and detach them in others depending on which of their social practices they were talking about. Whilst our analysis cannot find any discernable patterns across respondents in terms of where sustainability sits easily with 'related' agendas and those in which it does not, there are some interesting points of commonality. Firstly, virtually all respondents found the term 'sustainability' to be problematic and difficult to define by comparison to the relative ease with which they could impute meaning to other agendas. Indeed, taking food as an example (as most respondents did): it is far easier to establish the requirements of a vegetarian diet than it is a 'sustainable' one. As a consequence, both the concept of sustainability and the practicalities of living a sustainable lifestyle were constructed by respondents as an emergent property of bringing together these other discourses or agendas. In turn, this rendered 'sustainability' something of a fragile and ephemeral concept that tended to 'lose out' to more concrete concerns when it came down to it. Secondly, and more positively, respondents tended to acknowledge that in *essence*, sustainability – or at least minimising environmental impact – is not an antagonist of these other agendas but in the current social, economic and political order it ends up this way. Consequently, respondents gave a strong sense of the need for structural and social change in order to preserve the 'natural' joining of minimal environmental impact and their chosen way of living.

Systems of provision and social change

As noted, the tension between sustainability and complementary agendas were understood by respondents to be the source of their perceived inconsistencies such that they often accounted for 'falling short' of living sustainably on the grounds that they were doing something else that was also 'ethical'. More importantly, in the strategies deployed to account for these inconsistencies, they were quite explicit that these tensions arose as a result of social institutions and arrangements that are beyond their immediate remit and control. This

hints at the important relationship between individual lifestyle change and changes in existing systems of provision. Spaargaren (2003) has pioneered the case for bringing social structure into the analysis of sustainable consumption/lifestyles instead of leaving it out as an ‘external variable’. He argues that a sociological approach to sustainable consumption can and should conceive of ‘lifestyles’ as the accomplishments of individual human agents but also recognise that these rest on the possibilities afforded by different systems of provision. The data gathered here certainly supports this idea insofar as respondents identified, quite clearly, that their ability to engage in sustainable social practices was constrained by existing infrastructures and systems of provision. For example, one respondent who identified being ‘green’ as a central objective:

And then I certainly always used to always shop in the organic shop, going back a few years um but then with work commitments and so on you find that you just can’t and it doesn’t help that there is no, as far as I know, organic shop in Guildford or Godalming . . . ok, there is one in Cranleigh but then it is quite a significant drive to get to that organic shop and it is only open normal hours plus the weekends and so I have to make the effort to go at the weekend because I am at work during the week so um, I don’t feel particularly satisfied. And I think it is little by little, if you like, that you don’t meet the expectations that you have of yourself or what you can achieve from a, from a Green point of view. (Male, 33)

He was not alone in finding ‘structural’ limitations to his attempts to live more sustainably:

There is so much more I would do and I would do it more often but sometimes you just cannot, through no fault of your own. I remember wanting to recycle but having no facilities so I couldn’t recycle. I would like to buy only local and in season food but that isn’t really an option. I would love to be able to cycle everywhere but in this country work is so far from home and our cycle network is . . . well our cycle network is [laughs] appalling. So you fall short and there is only so much guilt you can assume as one woman. (Female, 38)

Having detailed these difficulties, respondents tended to suggest that changes to systems of provision would make their existing efforts easier as well as encouraging them to make further changes and, in turn, more progress towards living a sustainable lifestyle. Similarly, virtually all respondents suggested that changes to the country’s existing infrastructure would be necessary if other – less ‘well intentioned’ – persons were to be persuaded to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. Nevertheless, when asked what changes they felt should be made; very few respondents were forthcoming with any practical solutions beyond the idea of monetary incentives or market based solutions:

I mean society has to – one way or another – either by pricing or by regulation or by rationing or by *something*, has to enable or force people to get their energy consumption down. (Male, 74)

I know it's very autocratic, you know, very top down, but I think carbon rationing is a possible solution. (Male, 31)

Indeed, the idea that *something* needs to be done alongside a general sense that nobody knows quite what came out in the majority of interviews.

This ambivalence and ambiguity is reflected in the idea – common to all respondents – that lifestyle change is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the social changes required to avert present environmental crises. For a start, many respondents suggested that changes to their way of life would not be as effective as taking action through other channels. For example, several respondents belonged to the local Green Party and suggested that this is a more appropriate conduit for change – a view echoed by those who identified the relative efficacy of their involvement in campaigning activities and activist networks. There were also those who felt that their activities at work would be more fruitful than changes in their private lives and leisure time. For example, efforts to 'green' the workplace through official (such as being employed to minimise the environmental impact of the company's activities) and unofficial (getting the canteen to recycle or colleagues to switch off their computers) channels were identified as far more substantial than anything that could be done in or around the home. Many suggested that the nature of their employment was important:

I work in telecoms selling new phone systems to companies, it is not particularly useful ... so another path, whether it be renewable energy or whatever would be much more, would be much more impact, haha, and I think it is probably more important than um living life sustainably, I think um that just keeping your head down and living life sustainably doesn't have a massive impact. Not like, not like, I mean you can have a much bigger impact by choice of career and what you do for work. (Male, 32)

Taking this and thinking back to lifestyle change, many respondents felt that their voluntary efforts and those taken by people like them are simply not a large enough solution to cope with the scale of the problem:

The answer isn't actually voluntary action at all ... the sort of 'do your bit approach' which inevitably is only key people doing their bit. You are not going to get most people responding to propaganda and do your bit stuff, it is only a proportion of people. So it is only going to be a proportion of people which is not enough, I'm afraid. (Male, 56)

Similarly, the majority of respondents thought that widespread and large-scale lifestyle change would still not be enough:

You could even get everyone doing things but that isn't enough. There are only little bits that people can do within the current infrastructure and resources that we have got and isn't enough because p-people, I mean people might perfectly and genuinely want to use their car less for instance – to use an obvious one – but if in fact they are living in a place where the public transport is useless or unsafe or

dirty or ... you know ... which is probably quite likely then they can't. Or they can't in the short term can they? Now, if, in the brave new world the country did have adequate public transport and planning was more sensible such that people could live closer to things then people could and should be able to give up their cars but without changes to bigger changes, people can't do it. (Male, 74)

Even though respondents attached a certain sense of futility to the whole domain of lifestyle change, nobody suggested that this was grounds for them or anybody else to give up on personal efforts to combat environmental problems. To the contrary, respondents felt that they *had* to 'do their bit' no matter how small the impact might be:

It is hugely important to do what you do and you can. Just because you cannot see the results immediately, or other people aren't doing their bit, or business needs to change before things get better or whatever ... or China and India are growing. None of these are good reasons to throw in the towel. I get annoyed by that attitude. (Female, 27)

Nevertheless, respondents suggested that their individual changes needed to be complemented by 'top down' initiatives on the part of government and industry:

Well, I actually think it should be coming from the top down, through legislation ... so a big example would be much greater tax on energy in general [...] but rather than just trying to make green things cheaper, other things have to reflect the real cost ... to society I suppose and I really think that that is the way, the way to do it. (Male, 32)

I would feel a lot less, how do I put it? Aggrieved about what I am having, well choosing, to do if I saw that businesses – who are the real bad guys here – were doing their bit as well. So it would be like we are all playing for the same team. We also need proper role models as well, I mean instead of aspiring to be like celebs in the magazines it would be wonderful if people aspired to be like responsible, I don't know, citizens. (Female, 38)

Viewed as such, it would certainly seem that respondents felt their efforts were valuable but, recognising the limits of individual action, would like to see their changes complemented by the action of other individuals, institutions and organisations. Crucially, whilst respondents seemed unwilling to give up on the grounds that their efforts might make little difference, there was a sense that their efforts would be more meaningful if situated in a coherent framework of social change geared towards environmental sustainability. Indeed, there was a very strong sense that change needs to come from above and that 'bottom-up' contributions, such as theirs, form a small but important part of the process. Taking all of this together, the implication – from the respondents' points of view – is that systems of provision need to change in order to enable sustainable lifestyles but, more importantly, that structural and social change is required in its own right.

Conclusion and discussion

The overarching idea here is that sustainable lifestyles are far more complex than the rhetoric would have it, and that any attempt to motivate their uptake on a wider scale needs to understand the many facets, tensions and difficulties associated with ‘real world’ attempts to live one. Our analysis has intended to convey a sense of these complexities but there are some conceptual moves to be made here. For a start, the analysis has demonstrated that those who are attempting to live a ‘sustainable lifestyle’ construct and pursue this process through a number of different channels. Rather than having a single model of what a ‘sustainable lifestyle’ might entail, there are multiple assemblages of social practices that are, hopefully (for an assessment of what and what isn’t ‘sustainable’ is beyond the remit of our analysis), less unsustainable. As such, it makes sense to think in the plural – sustainable lifestyles rather than sustainable lifestyle. In addition to this heterogeneity across respondents, it makes little sense to conceive of any individual’s lifestyle as an internally coherent ‘life project’ concerned only with the reduction of environmental impact. The analysis here detailed inconsistencies across social practices and tensions between sustainability and other agendas such that any given ‘lifestyle’ – sustainable or otherwise – does not represent a fixed bundle of social practices or even the totality of any given individual’s experience. In addition to viewing sustainable lifestyles, as Spaargaren (2003) points out, in terms of individuals negotiating the demands of environmental sustainability across a range of social practices, the analysis here argues that individuals continually negotiate and renegotiate a range of conflicting agendas *against* each other. Consequently, instead of conceiving of (sustainable) lifestyles as fixed, we suggest that they need to be understood as a *process* which in turn implies that individuals have – and move between – multiple bundles of social practices such that they have more than one lifestyle and these are not necessarily all conducive to a reduction in environmental impact.

Breaking the term ‘sustainable lifestyles’ down into its constituent parts, it can be seen to be an even more problematic concept. The underlying message here is that, from a respondents’ point of view, ‘sustainable lifestyles’ are not divorced from wider social and cultural processes. For a start, ‘sustainable lifestyles’ are about more than just sustainability. Aside from the obvious difficulties in defining what ‘sustainability’ is, the respondents’ narratives suggested that sustainability is caught up with any number of other agendas such as health, frugality and human rights. Indeed, we would go as far as saying that the inherent difficulty in defining sustainability and the concomitant heterogeneity of respondents is a reflection of the ways in which ‘sustainable lifestyles’ materialise through the connections between other discourses and practices. This is good news for those seeking to motivate pro-environmental behaviour on a wider scale as it suggests that, rather than relying on appeals to the agendas of sustainability or notions of a green identity, there are multiple entry points through which to mobilise the uptake of sustainable lifestyles.

Nevertheless, a note of caution is required because these multiple entry points can become a source of conflict with the specific agendas of environmental sustainability such that it is not always the guiding principle across all social practices. Of course, there is a sense in which these tensions and choices are understood to be 'false' and the result of existing systems of provision when, ideally, there would be no choice because all these things are, or should be, related.

Secondly, the term 'lifestyle' carries connotations of *individual* responses to/ responsibility for social and environmental change and yet the respondents – who *are* willing to assume these responsibilities – suggested that changes in systems and infrastructures of provisions would facilitate further choices and changes on their part as well as making easier the ongoing process of living sustainability. Furthermore, there was broad consensus among these respondents that individual lifestyle change is not enough to bring about the changes that they suggest are required to ameliorate present environmental crises. As such, they suggested that vast 'structural' changes are needed such as economic, educational and social reform to engage more people in attempts to live more sustainably alongside the aforementioned changes in systems of provision to make these attempts accessible to and feasible for a broader range of people. Common to all respondents, however, was the idea that individual change alone is not enough. Whilst they acknowledged the importance of lifestyle change and view a situation in which *everybody* makes the effort to live more sustainably as one that would go a long way towards solving the problem, they all stressed the need for government and industry to assume responsibilities and make changes. Indeed, the efficacy of individual lifestyle change and in fact the whole domain of 'sustainable lifestyles' seems to rest on government and industry change in a manner that is not exhausted by enabling individual change and ensuring that it makes a difference. The data suggests that individual responses need to connect to wider, 'structural' initiatives such that individual action is situated in a meaningful framework of social and environmental change.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through funding from the ESRC Research Group on Lifestyles Values and Environment (RESOLVE) (Grant Number RES-152-25-1004). We are grateful to colleagues at the University of Surrey for their feedback at various stages throughout this work and to the three anonymous referees whose comments have no doubt made this a stronger paper. Finally, we are grateful to the respondents who gave up their time to share their experiences with us.

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