

## Lifecourse Transitions: Opportunities for Sustainable Lifestyles?

15-16<sup>th</sup> July 2014 (University of Surrey)

Summary - the workshop brought academics from different disciplines together to share their experience researching the influence of lifecourse transitions (LCTs) on sustainable lifestyles. With a strong presence of sociologists, attention was given to developing a richer conceptualising of habits and LCTs. A prevailing theme was the question of how much agency individuals have over behaviour (or practices) when they undergo LCTs given the structures within which they live. The workshop inspired those present to refine how they think about LCTs and use this to allow richer understandings to be gained on the behaviours/practices they study.

Professor Tim Jackson (Centre for Environmental Strategy, University of Surrey) opened the event and noted the paradoxical finding from his research that those who succeeded with a goal to change behaviour found it a positive experience but also found making the change entailed conflict and struggle. Keynote presentations were then given by speakers with three different disciplinary perspectives (psychology, politics and sociology) alongside a variety of presentations on specific studies.

Bas Verplanken (University of Bath) is a social psychologist who has been a pioneer in developing understanding of the role of habits. In his keynote presentation he emphasised that LCTs have greater scope for changing complex behaviours (which sustainable behaviours almost always represent) than, for example, nudges. When people undertake LCTs new solutions are needed, new information is useful and there is often a mood for change (although there can be mood for the comfort of old ways too!). His latest research in Peterborough<sup>1</sup> involved a household-based intervention to encourage sustainable behaviours. Results showed those that moved home within the last three months were the only group to become more sustainable in their behaviour. He concluded that the timing of interventions is critical and it needs to be seen how early in transition process this needs to be to have greatest effect.

Bronwyn Hayward (University of Canterbury, New Zealand) is a political scientist with an interest in young people and citizenship. She emphasised the importance of people acting together to mobilise for system-wide change and researchers being aware of political constraints on this. She noted how crises such as the Canterbury earthquake of 2010 can mobilise people to change systems but the establishment can smother lasting change even in these scenarios.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk/projects/change-processes/habits>

Dale Southerton (University of Manchester), who leads the Sustainable Consumption Unit, brought a sociological perspective on habits and LCTs where they were viewed in the context of socio-cultural constraints that exist over the life course of individuals. In Warde and Southerton (2012)<sup>2</sup> habit has been defined in terms of dispositions, procedures and sequences that operate through the life course. Dale conceived of LCTs as events that act to adjust the socio-cultural conditioning of actions, rather than events that simply render automatic processes conscious and induce mindfulness.

The organisers of the workshop from University of Surrey's Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group brought new findings from their ELiCit project<sup>3</sup> which has focused on the effect of two LCTs: having first child and retiring. About 80 participating households were followed after experiencing one of these transitions. Birgitta Gatersleben investigated if changes in behaviour are linked to changes in values and identity using questionnaire data. Values became more self transcendent after transitions but it was only retirees who made positive change in environmental behaviours. A change in identity was not shown to explain behavioural change. The analysis showed contextual (situational) factors played the most important role in explaining change and this provides impetus therefore to consider how context can be modified at times of LCTs.

Kate Burningham reported on analysis of interview data from the same participants. This was the basis for deconstructing LCTs beyond thinking of them as discrete events to recognise them as processes which often involve multiple transitions that coincide or follow each other. They are often experienced and managed jointly with other people at household level. They are a time of reflection and changing resources and are experienced in the context of the 'outer world' pertaining to materials and social norms. It is suggested that interventions need to recognise valued identities at the time of transitions and which issues have purchase, rather than to simply target people with explicit sustainable messages.

Christopher Groves (University of Cardiff) made a similar point with the suggestion based on narrative interviews focusing on the topic of energy use that successful transformations in practices around LCTs occur under certain conditions when people take on new identities and are able to be successfully manage disruptions to emotional attachments.

The effect of having children was a major area of interest at the workshop. A main discourse was the over burdened lives of parents which left little time to contemplate and act regarding sustainable behaviour. The way in which parents resolve their activity goals and schedules (e.g. working hours) provides the opportunities and constraints for performing sustainable behaviours. Retirement was also a major focus. Monica Wilinska (University of Stirling) argued that retirement needed to be viewed afresh with recognition given to the diversity of life histories experienced, identity projects followed and emotions entailed. Food practice around retirement was a focus of two presentations. This emphasised the role of family and cultural context as well as resource availability, health preoccupations and

---

<sup>2</sup> Warde, Alan and Southerton, Dale. *The Habits of Consumption*. Helsinki: Open Access Book Series of the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk/projects/change-processes/elicit>

constraints of self and partner, the built environment context and retirement adjustment issues.

Mobility behaviours came into consideration across a number of presentations as a domain of significance to sustainable behaviour. My presentation (Kiron Chatterjee, University of the West of England) of results from the Life Transitions and Travel Behaviour ESRC project provided clear evidence that those who experience LCTs are more likely to change the way they travel to work than those who do not. Findings on the relative importance of different LCTs and importance of contextual factors were also presented. While the panel data used did not allow in-depth understanding of the process of behavioural change that people experience, I emphasised the main point of the research was to justify LCTs as a worthwhile topic of interest.

Ines Thronicker (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research) tested a field experiment involving a household-based intervention to encourage sustainable mobility behaviour for home movers. She found that inclination to engage with the intervention increased with number of LCTs that were experienced (in addition to home move) and this was associated with increased behavioural change. This indicates that it is important to consider what else is happening alongside the home move and design interventions accordingly.

Innovative methodologies were introduced at the workshop. Rachel Howell (Aberystwyth University) showed life graphs she had been using to obtaining pictorial representations of how behaviours varied over the life course. Annotations were added of changes in 'practicalities' and 'feelings/opinions/values' which were linked to these. The life graphs were similar in concept to those that Heather Jones (University of the West of England) and I have been using in biographical research of walking and cycling histories. Rachel sought views from the attendees on whether this method could be used to collect data (by means of self-administered completion) for larger samples than typically collected in qualitative research and thereby generate more robust evidence for policy makers. Opinion from the attendees was that the method had promise, especially for facilitating discussion on reasons for change ('why') but with uncertainty about whether it could provide quantitative evidence.

Tom Roberts (University of Surrey) introduced walking interviews as a research method that can be used in participants' homes to allow the interviewer to observe practices in situ in the household rather than rely on verbal accounts of practices given by interviewees remote from where they are practiced. He explained how this enabled him to get a more accurate picture of practices and their relationship to each other (e.g. how clothes washing practices relate to heating practices). This led to participants to reflect on the accuracy of the methods they use to study behaviours/practices.

----

More information and presentation slides (forthcoming) from the workshop are available at <http://www.ias.surrey.ac.uk/workshops/lifecourse/>

Kiron Chatterjee (31/07/14)