
Behaviour, norms and sustainable consumption

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1) Consumption, environment and sustainability: the problem

- If climate change science is correct, then radical changes in patterns of consumption among the populations of the richer societies are essential to reduction, mitigation and adaptation.
 - Economic growth in developing economies and population growth additional pressure on environment.
 - Predicted consequences: destruction of infrastructure; refugees and migration; less available energy; much less mobility; environmental degradation; war ...
 - Travel, domestic heating and cooling, and eating as major sources of individual consumer responsibility for carbon emissions (42% of all emissions)
 - UK food consumption = 31% of all consumption-related GHG emissions (EC, 2005, life cycle environmental impact of products [EIPRO])
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Analysing consumption

Note: Consumption is not restricted to purchase – despite the discourse of consumer sovereignty and individual choice – but is a matter of appropriation and use of goods and services.

- Consumption is ineradicable
 - Consumption is beneficial:
 - is enjoyable and pleasurable; supports socially meaningful practices; supplies intellectual stimulation; provides refreshing entertainment; fosters meaningful work; promotes the aesthetic attitude; facilitates social rebellion; sustains comfort.
 - But consumption is environmentally harmful
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Uneasiness and perceived need for change

- ... but there is still uneasiness and ‘ambivalence’
 - environmental problems of exhaustible natural resources and ecological diversity
 - an ethico-political problem of global equity (China’s dirt makes British toys; UK import of foods)
 - Might we just all consume less, or should we consume differently?
 - perceived limits of the technological fix
 - *And* if so, what have the social sciences to say about how?
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2) Strategies for changing behaviour

Four strategies for changing individual behaviour are commonly pursued.

Strategies for change?

		lever for change
	<i>authoritative regulation</i>	<i>personal education</i>
<i>homo economicus</i> (<i>rational action</i>)	<i>financial incentives</i>	<i>information</i>
<i>homo sociologicus</i> (<i>normative action</i>)	<i>prohibition</i>	<i>conversion</i>
mode of individual action		

All have a part to play but not resoundingly successful because based on limited understanding of consumption and its dynamics.

Sustainable consumption and behaviour change on the political agenda

- Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, paper 'Personal Responsibility and Behaviour Change' (2003)
 - HM Government, Securing the Future – UK Government sustainable development strategy (2005)
 - Government's Social Research Unit, Behaviour Change Knowledge Review (2008)
 - House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee on Behaviour Change, October 2010
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Policy beyond the technological fix

- Strategies for individual behaviour change
 - Information
 - Does anyone take any notice?
 - Ethical exhortation
 - The value-action gap
 - *Nudge*: surreptitiously steering conduct
 - Power and interests
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3) Alternative social scientific perspectives: The Behavioural Moment

- Disciplines and solutions to social problems
 - From Culture to Behaviour
 - Unpopularity of Behaviourism
 - Behaviour = environment and habit (cue and response)
 - Changing individual behaviour by conditioning and steering, without reliance on deliberation and decision-making
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Environmental architecture: *Nudge*

- A new direction for policy from behavioural economics.
 - Rationale: brain has two systems-generating behaviour, one 'automatic' (uncontrolled, effortless, associative, fast, unconscious and skilled), the other, 'reflective' (controlled, effortful, deductive, slow, self-aware and rule-following). We employ the first far more, resulting in biased judgments, difficulties in resisting temptation and a strong tendency to social conformity.
 - Defaults, infrastructural design, feedback on the outcomes of our actions, and properly aligned economic incentives can predispose us to adopt courses of action that will enhance personal and/or collective welfare.
 - 'Libertarian paternalism': *Nudge* takes people at their worst – selfish, lazy, thoughtless, distracted – and proposes techniques to get them to behave in their own and everyone else's best interests.
 - R Thaler and C Sunstein, *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness*, (Penguin, 2009)
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Thinking, fast and slow:

Daniel Kahneman

- sustained critique of orthodox neo-classical Economics and the model of the rational actor
 - plethora of mechanisms arising from the precedence of System 1 over System 2 (see p.105), inc: ignoring of absent evidence, neglects ambiguity and suppresses doubt, infers and invents causes and intention, biased towards believing and confirming, represents sets by norms and prototypes
 - behaviour is irrational if measured against statistical risk:
 - Loss aversion
 - Prospect theory (more sensitive to changes than to states)
 - Inconsequential factors determine preferences because of inappropriate framing when making decisions
 - Systematic deviation from rational action model
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Inadequate assumptions of rational action model

- Utility governs decisions
 - Rational calculation involved
 - Risks are correctly estimated
 - Deliberate decisions made
 - Thought overrules emotion
 - Control is exercised in course of action
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Reflections on *Nudge*

- Exceptionally attractive to government; displacement of political responsibility
 - unappealing to social and political movements for change
 - (Ironically market failure resolved by market mechanisms)
 - Effective mechanism where widespread consensus and no conflicts of interest
 - Can powerful actors be nudged?
 - Offers alternative theoretical understanding of action
 - to alter behaviour requires changing the environment of action rather than minds.
 - questions whether changing individual's behaviour is place to start for radical reform of patterns of consumption
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Behavioural Economics

- Contests neo-classical abstractions about rationality
 - Seeks psychological realism
 - Observes behaviour and practice
 - Acknowledges habit, emotion, imitation, etc.
 - External environment more than a prop
 - Still explanation in terms of individual actors
 - Individual rationality is the implicit yardstick
 - Reinvents sociological and anthropological knowledge
 - Tempted by evolutionary psychology rather than institutional explanations
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4) The limits of reflection and conversion

- The power of habituation
 - Inconspicuous consumption
 - Comparative ignorance
 - Competing demands
 - Established circumstances and institutionalised procedures
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Elements of alternative approach: understanding habits and environments

- Habits and routines
 - External institutional processes (the ‘social environment’)
 - The compulsive force of objects and infrastructures
 - Other people and shared norms
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- E.Shove (2010) ‘Beyond ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change’, *Environment and Planning A*, 42: 1273-85.
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Understanding the changing of behaviour

- Other disciplines, new theories
 - (Interdisciplinary) theories of practice
 - Practices (eating, heating, travelling) as conventional, routine, using similar tools and procedures, operating to normal standards
 - The making and changing of norms (CHARM)
 - Attending to the practice, to collective behaviour, rather than values and intentions of individuals
 - Social movements, government intervention, social engineering
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5) Dilemmas of collective behaviour change

- large-scale experiments in lifestyle transformation: downshifting, voluntary simplicity
 - Can you imagine, by dint of will, becoming vegetarian (it would help), or having one bath (and no showers) per week, or having a kitchen-less house, or wearing outdoor clothes in the office, or always using public transport?
- government implementation of radical programmes of reform
 - to overcome lobbying, partiality, denial, and other priorities, to obtain required action by rich and powerful agents, and to be re-elected
 - cooption and regulation of companies, taxation, rationing, transformation of urban environment
- multiple, piecemeal, local, practice by practice, interventions to engineer socially approved better use of resources
 - which interventions work? at what scale of effects?

The end

