

Literature Review on Sustainable Lifestyles

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Introduction

Sustainable lifestyles has become a major topic of research and attention over the last few years, after it was recognized that improved production processes and more efficient use of energy and resources was not managing to achieve the level of change needed for living within planetary boundaries. International organizations and countries had promoted and implemented programmes for resource efficiency and pro environmental behavior which culminated in a series of reports to the world summit in 2012 Rio+20 promoting a green economy. Mainstreaming environmental considerations into economic decision making seemed to be the fulfillment of the environmentalists' agenda.

When climate change showed that incremental improvement through greening was far from reaching the target of not exceeding 2 degrees and when the global footprint showed a huge and increasing overshoot, policy analysts and research institutions changed their focus from greening existing products and processes in the current economic framework to seeking different lifestyles with a lower level of material consumption (eg Tim Jackson, SLRG Surrey).

Current front line research is therefore looking at sustainable lifestyles, not sustainable consumption in terms of products. The research community involved are social psychologists and psychologists who are looking at social norms, attitudes, motivations and identities and how they are influencing the choice of lifestyles, when and where people change their lifestyles and how psychology and behavioural science can assist in overcoming barriers to changing to more sustainable lifestyles.

Social Practice

One school of thought (eg Shove at Lancaster University UK) maintains that lifestyle follows patterns which become accepted as the normal code of behavior and replace previously accepted codes because of their social connotations. The patterns result from a combination of attitudes, behavior and processes of change. They involve the active integration of 3 groups of elements: Materials, objects and infrastructures, secondly competence and knowhow and finally images and meanings. Practices have careers and trajectories of their own. People's lives intersect with those of the routines and practices they sustain and reproduce, which are linked together in social and technical systems. An example quoted frequently is the change in water use associated with norms of cleanliness, as people in England changed from a weekly bath to a more frequent use of showers, which resulted in an initial saving of water but later generated a major increase in water demand as the social norm for multiple daily power showers became accepted. The focus of this research group is therefore not on individual attitudes and behavior but on the formulation of social norms within society and their transformation over time.

Personal Wellbeing

Research on individual wellbeing has checked whether materialism generates a higher level of personal wellbeing (Dittmar, Sussex). Results show that there are limits to the benefits gained from materialism and that higher materialistic value orientation is not linked to a higher level of personal wellbeing. Moreover, materialistic individuals are less satisfied with themselves and more prone to depression. They assume that more materialism will help them feel better, using it as a therapy or identity repair, and thereby endorse their materialistic orientation. If a person feels insecure or unhappy about themselves, they are likely to buy more. Generating an image or feeling of inadequacy and insecurity will therefore encourage consumption.

Brown and Vergragt propose reframing the idea of a good life through seeking what makes people happy and satisfied with the mass acquisition and use of material goods. They found that the characteristics sought for a subjective feeling of wellbeing always include a stable marriage, good health, community and friendships, social trust and autonomy. On the other hand, characteristics identified as reducing wellbeing include unemployment, divorce, poor health and economic instability. Since people judge their material wealth in relation to other people, after basic subsistence needs are met, high economic growth can in fact result in more unhappy people who never reach a level of material wealth which gives them satisfaction.

Hedonic and Endaimonic wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined in very different ways. Hedonic refers to a personal level of satisfaction; endaimonic refers to a group or to communities or the wellbeing of others.

Social scientist quote the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen who defined wellbeing as enjoying the capabilities (to be or do) that one values (individually or collectively). This is a relative definition, not related to comparative measurements of physical benefits and therefore consumption does not necessarily improve wellbeing in terms of the capability approach. Necessities are defined culturally and comparatively, not absolutely.

Individualism has over the last 50 years strongly linked wellbeing with consumption. When traditional elements were dominant in defining capability, such as religious and ethnic characteristics, consumption was not necessarily the dominant element in defining an individual's identity or wellbeing in relation to his society. However, with the weakening of the traditional elements, and greater emphasis on individualism, consumption has now taken a leading role in defining how people see themselves in relation to the society around them.

Identity

Psychologists now emphasize the importance of consumption as an identity factor. They maintain that identities are not fixed but are multiple, malleable and change throughout the lifespan, often in relation to intra group solidarity and inter group distinction. Consumption

provides meaning and purpose in the modern world and a vehicle for exhibiting status.
Henwood and Pidgeon state that

‘challenging identities that are currently anchored in unsustainable consumption practices and an economics growth ideology sets one of the most intractable changes in thesustainability area for government.’

They raise doubts that behavior change alone can significantly change consumption patterns.

‘overreliance on individually or choice based behavior change initiatives...may be counterproductive if they fail to address people’s more deep seated, valued identity concerns’

The identity approach (well reviewed in a recent paper by FoE) claims that behavioural change, such as promoted by nudge, will be hard to achieve as it underplays the potential roles of government, legislation and collective action to frame and guide the way people behave. It tends to give preference to short term actions and highlight the subconscious, instinctive ways and downplays political organization. It may be reflecting government’s unwillingness to face up to and change the basic paradigm underlying consumption.

Breaking Habits

All research relating to habits show that they are very difficult to break and that they become automatic behavior perceived as ‘under the radar’. It requires a process of unfreezing habitual behavior by disruption and discontinuity, usually best achieved in groups within short periods of a change when there are windows of disruption or over extended periods of multiple disruptions. People seek order to cope with the disorientation of changing to new surroundings and will easily return to their known comfort zone even in a new location. Habits can be unfrozen by changing the cues and context, such as providing a small reward such as free passes on public transport in a new location. ‘We cannot change behavior but we can enable people to change if they perceive it as more effective, more comfortable, provides social engagement and is fun’. People do not respond to threats and do not always respond to incentives. They are more convinced by their own peers, friends and family where the changes required are made easy, obvious, repetitive, convenient and with dignity.

Social Marketing

The approach of social marketing (eg Doug McKenzie Mohr, Canada) developed out of commercial marketing strategies but focuses on non commercial goals, such as obesity, smoking, alcohol and gambling.

Commercial marketing identifies what people are willing to pay for, not what they need. It is fuelled by the provision of credit and loans for the purchase of goods. Consumers do not

necessarily do what they say, consequently market research shows a willingness to pay slightly more for an environmentally friendly product but this is not translated into actual behavior 'People don't think how they feel, don't say what they think and don't do what they say' (David Ogilvy, marketer) Surveys do not reflect real choice and trade offs.

Social marketing selects a particular behavior which should be promoted for achieving sustainability (conservation, energy efficiency, transport, waste, water issues). Its purpose is to identify what motivates people to act, to uncover barriers to changing their actions and to identify how benefits could be enhanced. The barriers which need to be uncovered and removed may be internal or external.

Strategies include strengthening commitment as individuals and as a group, providing prompts, reinforcing norms and providing incentives.

Social Innovation

Another approach is deliberate disruption (eg Andy Stirling, SPRU Sussex), seeking opportunities of stress for innovation and change, transforming from an unsustainable to a more sustainable lifestyle as a positive response through shifts and adjustments

This is the theme of a current online conference entitled 'Disruptive Innovation Festival' organized by the Ellen Macarthur Foundation.

Collaborative Consumption

The front edge of collaborative consumption is what is happening in practice but there is some academic literature.

The rapid rise of the sharing or collaborative economy may be associated with 2 parallel trends (Brown and Vergragt 2014). One is the trend of millennials to move into cities, adapt their lifestyle to a smaller amount of space without room for accumulated goods. The other is the reduction in sources of income and job security and the need to manage on tighter budgets. Collaborative consumption at a small or local scale may strengthen connections between a community with shared norms and values. However the large platforms based on central ownership of assets like Zipcar reflect efficient organization and have not been found to be strengthen community connections.

An authority on the collaborative economy (Owang, Cloud companies) provided a taxonomy of the collaborative economy and an analysis of customers and the drivers:

- Goods: pre-owned, loaned, custom providers
- Services: professional, personal
- Transportation: services, loaner vehicles
- Space: office space, place to stay
- Money: money lending, crowdfunding

Ebay and Craigslist are already used by a third of the North American public. The fastest growing sectors of collaborative economy, according to a survey of 90,000 people in North America and the UK, are pre-owned goods and places to stay. The other sectors are all

expanding but at lower rates of increase. The customer to customer economy is heavily funded by Venture capital and is enabled by apps, the internet of things and social networking. The survey identified 3 groups of customers:

- Non-sharers: intend to share
- Re-sharers: already using pre-owned goods
- Neo-sharers: already involved in the collaborative economy

The rapid rise of the collaborative economy has been generated by 3 sets of drivers which are amplifying and building up on existing behaviours:

- Societal drivers, including the desire for an independent lifestyle and disillusionment with aquisition
- Economic drivers, including rising costs, resource mobilization and freelancing
- Technological drivers, including mobile devices, social networks, sensors and payment systems.

The highest participation group in the collaborative economy is the 18-34 age group who use social networking and are always online. They responded that it provides convenience even more than savings and provides high customer satisfaction. They are open to trying new business models and once sharing, will expand to other forms of sharing. It was also found that re-sharing of pre-owned goods was a gateway to neo-sharing (higher in UK and probably in Europe and slightly higher among women than men) and that inviting friends to join (word of mouth) was very effective, especially when given a small prize. Although sharing can be seen as saving costs, the participants who are currently sharing are likely to be more affluent and not in the low-income class. Current users of sharing are surprisingly more likely to be married, educated, home-owning and politically aware. Once people start sharing, they widen their areas of sharing.

The items people responded they would like to share are: books, cars, clothes, apartments, discs, jewelry, computers and electronics, furniture, cleaning services, money, toys and writing services.

A survey by Latitude 2013 found the potential for sharing was highest where there are high barriers to ownership or a burden of ownership, especially in transportation, household, sport or events goods infrequently used and the use of spare physical space.

Owng recommends that businesses offer "lifestyle as a service" to younger and more affluent markets. Younger and more affluent people are more likely to be neo-sharers, as this lifestyle helps them access a life of luxury and ease without being saddled with ownership. Therefore, luxury brands should offer access over ownership for affluent customer bases, giving them exclusive goods on demand and the prestige of trying new items. Marketers should emphasize access to luxury, ease and convenience and pricing over sustainability or altruistic messages.

Urban areas are at the forefront of the move toward the collaborative economy, not only due to the economies of scale afforded by greater urban density, but also because that

same density facilitates the word-of-mouth recommendations that drive much of sharing's growth

An indication of the explosion of this new economic model can be found in the annual OviShare Fest in Paris which in 2014 was attended by over 1000 entrepreneurs.

The collaborative/sharing economy has its critics who doubt the environmental and social benefits and see it as another business model in the digital age. Maurie Cohen describes it as business intermediaries who are exploiting casual labor with few productive assets and appropriating a social desire for ecological absolution!

Sharing Cities

There is a strong intersection between cyber space and urban space. To some extent, it reflects the tension between what is regarded as public and what as private. Sharing can be seen as promoting the urban commons as opposed to the commercialization and privatization of public spaces in the neo liberal economy which has favoured individualistic self reliance and emphasized the value of goods over relationships.

The right way of harnessing the benefits of sharing for the community seems to lie in local level platforms initiated or supported by local authorities for the public benefit, not in enabling the international sharing platforms to exploit local labor and resources. Moreover, it appears that free exchange platforms may be more conducive to building communities than selling pre-owned goods on the market through an internet site.

Shareable 2013 maintains that the sharing economy has deep implications for city design in terms of planning spaces and infrastructure, enabling mixed use, facilitating platforms for services and social exchanges.

A document issued by Friends of the Earth (Agyeman 2013) concludes that

'building a sharing infrastructure and culture is quite simply one of the most important things cities can do to contribute to a fair and sustainable world'

Seoul, Korea

Seoul is branding itself as the sharing city. The Mayor and the local authority are leading the process as the meta-intermediary, building the platforms, linking sharing operators and providing quick and easy access for users.

The city is developing its own platforms rather than enabling the development of international companies. Examples include sharing rooms and parking. In this way it strengthens the community interconnections within the city's population rather than encouraging individual engagement with an international platform. The city is branding itself as a place where it is easy and convenient to live because of the availability and accessibility of sharing services. It provides business incubation support, direct subsidies, accreditation, city wide promotion and collective branding. The city itself procures services from the sharing economy. It shares its own municipal buildings off hours and on idle days.

It is also upgrading the digital infrastructure to enable such platforms to operate efficiently.

San Francisco

San Francisco is the heart of the development of sharing platforms which are now spreading around the world. It sees itself as the natural leader of the sharing economy. Although it set up a task force to follow up the decision of the US Mayors' conference in 2013 to promote sharing cities, it has apparently not developed the idea as Seoul has done.

San Francisco put the emphasis so far on its own physical assets. It has developed the physical space of its streets and intersections for community activities and for promoting innovation. It initiated 2 projects, currently in operation, funded and operated by the city. It is creating 'parklets' through pavement to parks and is promoting Living Innovation Zones LIZ along the streets.

Portland Oregon has a similar use of intersections for local community services. In California, Oregon and Washington states, laws were changed to enable carsharing by imposing liability on car rental companies and prohibiting cancellation of insurance.

Copenhagen

Copenhagen has not branded itself as a sharing city but is known for specific projects which demonstrate the sharing economy. They include cycling, cohousing and neighbourhood food.

Neuroscience and neuro marketing

Neuroscience can now indicate 4 areas relevant to an individual's sense of identity (David Hawksworth, Given London):

- Contentment – minimizing harm
- Nurturance – facilitating bonding
- Seeking – rewarding curiosity and achievement
- Assertiveness – overcoming restrictions

Sensors and brain science are now being harnessed to indicate how people respond to choice in marketing (Ramsay, Copenhagen).

Although currently focused on commercial marketing, neuroscience could provide some indications relevant to sustainable lifestyles if activities and relationships stimulate positive brain response no less than material consumption.

Possible interventions

The papers currently available are not too clear about interventions, however it is possible to pick up a number of directions:

- Consumption is heavily linked to identity affirmation. If people have stable and secure identities, well esteemed and accepted in their social surroundings, they may have a lesser need to exhibit their status through acquiring material goods.
- Nudge and greening are both ways which can lock in existing patterns of consumption and are not capable of changing the identity affiliation of consumption
- Strengthening local and community affiliation could have a significant impact on reducing the need for material consumption to exhibit status
- Cities are the centre of the sharing economy because of the density of population and infrastructures
- Local level collaborative and sharing platforms can contribute to inclusiveness and building communities more than participation in international sharing platforms
- Local authorities have a crucial role to play in enabling and encouraging local sharing platforms to serve their citizens
- Consumption is highly linked to individualism. Education towards empathy could encourage a shift from the consumer culture to attaching values to relationships and belonging to a group, outaspection as opposed to introspection (Krznicaric).