A Smarter Choice? The limitations of behaviour change for environmental sustainability

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Outline

- The Neo-liberal setting: citizen-consumers as agents of change;
- The emergence of behavioural change as a form of Libertarian Paternalism;
- Exploring sustainable mobility;
- The policy and practice of sustainable mobility;
- Evaluating ‘choice architectures’ and behavioural change.
“Neo-liberalism reactivates liberal principles: scepticism over the capacities of political authorities to govern everything for the best; vigilance over the attempts of political authorities to seek to govern. Its language is familiar and needs little rehearsal. Markets are to replace planning as regulators of economic activity. Those aspects of government that welfare construed as political responsibilities are, as far as possible, to be transformed into commodified forms and regulated according to market principles (Rose and Miller, 1992, p. 98).
“Citizenship is not dead, or dying, but found in new places, in life-politics” (Scammell, 2000, p. 351)

The citizen-consumer (Johnson (2008, p. 232): “…implies a social practice that can satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an ideal rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons)”.

Citizen-consumers indicative of (Slocum, 2004, p. 765):
“…an outgrowth of classical liberal theory that universalises the logic of the market for all institutions”, creating ‘passive’ citizens and challenges to progressive politics.
“The concern here is that sustainable development is seen as reformist, but it mostly avoids questions of power, exploitation, even redistribution. The need for more fundamental social and political change is simply ignored. Instead, critics argue, proponents of sustainable development offer an incrementalist agenda that does not challenge any existing entrenched powers or privileges” (Robinson, 2004, 376).
The emergence of ‘behavioural change’ as a tool of Neo-liberal governance

“We all – governments, businesses, families and communities, the public sector, voluntary and community organisations – need to make different choices if we are to achieve the vision of sustainable development”

(DEFRA, 2005, p. 25)
“...any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not” (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008, p. 8).
Who is doing what

High CO2 impact

Impact (CO2)

High proportion of population

1,000kg/hh

Low CO2 impact

Low

Use more efficient vehicles

Use car less for short trips

Avoid unnecessary flights (short haul)

Install insulation

Waste less food

Increase recycling

Better energy management

Install microgeneration

Adopt lower impact diet

Eat more food that is locally in season

Buy energy efficient products

More responsible water usage

Eat more food that is locally in season

Use car less for short trips

Avoid unnecessary flights (short haul)

Install insulation

Waste less food

Increase recycling

Better energy management

Install microgeneration

Adopt lower impact diet

Eat more food that is locally in season

Buy energy efficient products

More responsible water usage

Source: DEFRA (2008)
Segment willingness and ability

Ability to act

High

Low

Willing to Act

Low

High

1: Positive greens
I think it’s important that I do as much as I can to limit my impact on the environment.
18%

2: Waste watchers
‘Waste not, want not’ that’s important, you should live life thinking about what you are doing and using.
12%

3: Concerned consumers
I think I do more than a lot of people. Still, going away is important, I’d find that hard to give up..well I wouldn’t, so carbon off-setting would make me feel better.
14%

4: Sideline supporters
I think climate change is a big problem for us. I know I don’t think much about how much water or electricity I use, and I forget to turn things off..I’d like to do a bit more.
14%

5: Cautious participants
I do a couple of things to help the environment. I’d really like to do more, well as long as I saw others were.
14%

6: Stalled starters
I don’t know much about climate change. I can’t afford a car so I use public transport.. I’d like a car though.
10%

7: Honestly disengaged
Maybe there’ll be an environmental disaster, maybe not. Makes no difference to me, I’m just living life the way I want to.
18%

Source: DEFRA (2008)
The rise of Libertarian Paternalism

Key characteristics:
• Focused on the individual;
• Utilising market principles;
• Hidden ‘nudges’;
And:
• Politically implicated;
• Choice tightly restricted;
• Behaviour framed as ‘passive’ and non-activist.
(Jones et al., 2011a, 2011b; Whitehead et al., 2011)

Jones et al. (2011) highlight the epistemological basis for this approach: “using the new sciences of choice from psychology, economics and the neurosciences – as well as appealing to an improved understanding of decision-making and behaviour change – a libertarian paternalist mode of governing is being promoted in the UK (2011, p. 15).
Exploring Sustainable Mobility

ACT ON CO2

Campaigns
- Drive 5 miles less a week
- Change how the story ends
- Remember, Reduce Reuse Recycle
- Save water
- Save money, save energy

5 ways to save 5 miles
Life on two wheels – nearly a quarter of all car trips are under two miles. Cycling instead can take just 12 minutes and is a great way to exercise – each two-mile trip can burn up over 100 calories.

Plane Crazy

ACT ON CO2

easyJet passengers produce less CO2 per kilometre than the average car

Save Money, Car Share

08700 11 11 99
carsharedevon.com
1. Role of psychological approaches and models (e.g. Anable, 2005).

2. The role of habits in travel decision making (Kenyon and Lyons, 2003; Harms, 2007).

3. The role of social practices: “Social practices are conceived as being routine-driven, everyday activities situated in time and space and shared by groups of people as part of their everyday life” (Verbeek and Mommaas, 2008, p. 634).

4. New, hybrid forms of environmental social science (Whitmarsh et al., 2011; Wilson and Chatterton, 2011)?
The policy and practice of sustainable mobility

- Mixed-methods approach;
- Stakeholder input;
- Study areas and sample sizes.
### Table 7
Mean scores for items within selected factors related to holiday travel and environmental issues\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Cluster 1</th>
<th>Cluster 2</th>
<th>Cluster 3</th>
<th>Cluster 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Addicted Car Users</td>
<td>Aspiring Green Travelers</td>
<td>Reluctant Public Transport Users</td>
<td>Committed Green Travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental benefits of sustainable travel</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking and/or cycling will help to tackle problems like climate change</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using cars contributes to problems like climate change</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking/cycling reduces environmental impacts</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using public transport will help to tackle problems like climate change</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will all need to make sacrifices in our lifestyles to reduce environmental problems</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using of public transport reduces environmental impact</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing car use is not an individual's responsibility</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) All items recorded statistically significant differences between the clusters using the Kruskal–Wallis test.

\(^b\) Items have been recoded to reflect a pro-environmental direction for the factor.
Contested Mobilities

“I suppose people think a holiday is a holiday and that they go there to relax and do their own thing. And you know, it sounds a bit nasty but you know, when you’re holiday, you’re really thinking about yourself aren’t you because it’s your time away”

“Yes... like I recycle 100% of what I possibly can so like now, there’s not one piece of paper goes in my bin, so that kind of makes me feel less guilty about using my car as much as I do [and] flying as much as I do, but I don’t think I would [off-set] if I’m honest”

What’s green and flies? An eco-hypocrite

Challenges:
• Putting ‘environment’ in context;
• Modes of social practice;
• Sites of practice;
• Architectures of choice;
• The politics of choice.
Mobility as situated practice

• **Individual convenience and situated practices:**

“...well I feel guilty about the pollution of the car but I just have to [use the car]....with the nature of my work, because I am self employed I can work anything between 80 and 60 hours a week and very flexible hours. So you know I might need to pop into [town for] 2 hours, I might need to come back later, I might need to have a passenger, I might need to go onto hospital. It’s just absolutely impossible to do by bus” (Cheryl, Crediton)

“I think society has got so dependent on the convenience and everything else that even if things were improved and other forms of transport were improved I think there still would be a lot of people that who would cling to that car because it means so much to them now...the pre-dominancy of the car in life for all of us and everything, shopping, whatever it is, is kind of designed in as time goes on, around the use of the car” (Tim, Cullompton).
Underlying architectures of ‘choice’

• **Physical ‘choice architectures’:**

  “...Our towns...we are still planning and building our town of Exeter around the car we haven’t stopped that. You know *Toys R Us* [toy superstore] has just opened in Sowton, which is clearly built for the car isn’t it; you know you can’t walk there or cycle there as a family. It’s built a big car park: you are going to drive there [and] park up” (Matt, Polsloe).

  “That sort of contradicts it all doesn’t it? You know they are trying to make it greener in Exeter and they put the *Toys R Us* there” (Derek, Polsloe).
Underlying architectures of ‘choice’

• Socio-economic ‘choice architectures’:

“When we were not such an insulated society, for example, people who worked at Dagenham, Fords of Dagenham or somewhere like that, they ran car clubs, because they all worked at the same place and they all started at the same time, or whatever shift there was, the cars were then loaded with guys ‘it’s your turn to drive’ that doesn’t work. More people today live alone. Now young people your age who have their own house are not part of anything like that, they have their own transport, they do everything on the internet. So there’s no society as it was like that. No nuclear family, or in large family, people don’t work like that anymore. That’s the big change” (Thomas, Cullompton).

“Far more individualism isn’t there, yes”. Tim, Cullompton
Policy, politics and fatalism

• The wrong ‘choice architectures’? Beyond ‘structure-agency’

“I think it’s totally confused actually. I mean I don’t think the Government has a consistent policy, particularly going through the economic situation we are, where on one hand the Government wants more and more cars to be sold, and on the other hand they are saying they want people to use public transport, not cars” (Thomas, St. Loyes) (Author’s emphasis)

“Really comes down to that, [I] don’t have a lot of faith in them [government], so people are more individual and the more individual you become and the more technology allows you to become more of an individual, so unless you are really bothered about the rest of society...” (Thomas Cullompton).
What is the ‘smarter choice’?

For researchers:
• Travel *and* mobilities;
• Travel behaviour *and* mobility practices: wider sets of social practices;
• Transforming social science research on the environment.

For policy makers:
• The partiality of choice architectures;
• The need to alter physical architectures through planning.

“The comfortable perception that global environmental challenges can be met through marginal lifestyle changes no longer bears scrutiny. The cumulative impact of large numbers of individuals making marginal improvements in their environmental impact will be a marginal collective improvement in environmental impact. Yet we live at a time when we need urgent and ambitious changes” (Crompton and Thogersen, 2009, p. 6)
Key challenges

• Understanding **underlying processes** that drive demand, mobility and energy use;
• Exploring how **practices might change in the future**;
• Thinking radically and pro-actively about **sustainable futures**;
• Doing so in a **democratic and transformative economic and political context**.
Research Programme and Methodologies

Household Waste Management (1998-2001)

ESRC Environmental Action in and Around the Home (2001-03)

DEFRA Sustainable Lifestyles (2005-06)

British Academy Low-cost Airlines (2007-08)

Leverhulme: Lifestyles, Life-courses and waste management (2009-2012)

ESRC Promoting Sustainable Travel: a social marketing approach (2008-10)

ESRC Social Marketing for Sustainability (2011-12)