

Institution: The University of Manchester
Unit of Assessment: 23 (Sociology)
Title of case study: Sustainable Practices: Influencing Policy Understandings of Consumer Behaviour
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research at the University of Manchester (UoM) using a ‘sustainable practices’ approach has made a significant contribution to reconceptualising behaviour change in relation to sustainable consumption. Impact emerges via a landmark report written for the Scottish Government (focusing broadly on the field of environmental sustainability) which provides an alternative framework, alongside policy guidance for considering behaviour change. Working with policy partners, the ISM (Individual, Social, Material) approach to behaviour change, outlined in the report, has been converted into a scalable ISM toolkit; positioned as a <i>‘practical device for policy makers and other practitioners’ who want to influence people’s behaviours and bring about social change.</i> (Scottish Government Website).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research took place at UoM (2000-date). The key researchers were: Professor Dale Southerton (2000-); Professor Alan Warde (1999-); and Dr David Evans (2009-). It draws on nine research grants (2002-2013); five funded by the ESRC (c. £6m) and four funded through the Tesco backed Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI) (c. £1.4m). The three key awards that contributed to the impacts claimed are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (2001-06) ESRC ‘Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition’ (Warde, Co-I, £3.5m) • (2010-12) SCI ‘Modelling Consumer Behaviour’ (Southerton PI, £955K) • (2010-13) ESRC/DEFRA/Scottish Government ‘Sustainable Practices Research Group’ (SPRG) (Southerton PI, £1.65m) <p>This research challenges dominant understandings of consumption, and contributes towards a more refined understanding of change processes. Challenging orthodox interpretations – typically centred on consumer choice – the research has developed a sociological ‘practices’ approach that is sensitive to policy concerns, yet clearly foregrounds the shaping of consumption and behaviour via the material, cultural and socio-economic ordering of everyday life. Part of the ‘practice turn’ in social theory [C], the research has significantly influenced the study of consumption, shifting attention to how the usage of goods and services is embedded within, and constitutive of, the changing dynamics of daily life. Key findings include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habits and routines undermine the extent to which consumers’ have free choice. Challenging notions of the ‘sovereign consumer’, the research suggests that consumer choice is constrained by socio-cultural factors, with the act of selecting goods or services just one, relatively marginal, aspect of wider processes of consumption. [C][D] • Researchers should renew focus on the ordinary and mundane, as opposed to ‘conspicuous’, forms of consumption. The research reveals that processes of ‘normalization’, which create and hold stable routines and habits, lock social groups into environmentally problematic everyday practices. [A][D] • The manner by which different social groups consume – and what they consume – is closely connected to temporal organisation: to the schedules of everyday life. Accordingly, a key mechanism for understanding – and changing – consumption behaviour rests in the scheduling and coordination of practices (as in, for example, changing the scheduling of recycling kerbside collections relative to other household rubbish to establish kerbside recycling as ‘everyday’ behaviour). [A][E] • A focus on ‘practices’ presents a more progressive approach to tackling problematic trajectories of consumption. Standing in opposition to ‘portfolio models’ of action (which dominate economics and psychology), the research has reshaped understandings in the field by arguing that radical shifts in behaviour cannot be achieved by concentrating attention solely on the attitudes and choices of individuals, but must rather take fuller account of the material,

cultural and temporal factors that shape patterns of everyday life. [A][B]

Taken together, the **social practices framework** that emerges represents a fundamental challenge to orthodox theories within the fields of sustainable consumption and behaviour change. Policies geared towards attitude change have had limited success in changing actual behaviour. By affording a more nuanced understanding of ordinary consumption, the social practices approach provides the basis for targeted interventions in specific policy areas, permitting the research to be translated into tailored expert advice. These impacts are illustrated most vividly through the widespread policy adoption of what has come to be known as the ISM (Individual, Social, Material) model for understanding behaviour change, first developed in [B].

3. References to the research (all references available upon request - AUR)

The five ESRC projects were evaluated as either 'very good' or 'outstanding' and reference [C] was ranked first in 'most cited articles' in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2008-).

- [A] (2012) McMeekin, A. & Southerton, D. "Sustainability Transitions and Final Consumption: Practices and Socio-Technical Systems" *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management* 24(4) 345-361 (REF 2014) doi:10.1080/09537325.2012.663960
- [B] (2011) Southerton, D., McMeekin A., & Evans, D. 'International Review of Behaviour Change Initiatives: Climate Change Behaviours Research Programme' Scottish Government (January) (AUR)
- [C] (2005) Warde, A. "Consumption and Theories of Practice" *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5(2) 131-153 (RAE 2008) doi:10.1177/1469540505053090
- [D] (2004) Southerton, D., Chappells, H & Van Vliet, B (eds.) *Sustainable Consumption: The Implications of Changing Infrastructures of Provision*. London: Edward Elgar (AUR)
- [E] (2003) Southerton, D. "Squeezing Time': Allocating Practices, Co-ordinating Networks and Scheduling Society" *Time & Society* 12(1) 5-25 (RAE 2008) doi:10.1177/0961463X03012001001

4. Details of the impact

The impact of the research has been achieved through three main pathways:

- **challenging conventional wisdom** and improving public understanding of sustainable consumption and behaviour change;
- **helping to reframe policy debate** on these issues, with ideas and evidence adopted by national and international policy *fora* and non-governmental organisations;
- **contributing directly to policy innovation** through incorporation into the development of frameworks for devising and assessing policy recommendations, and associated policy toolkits.

A wide range of **public engagement activities** was adopted to influence public discourse and help open up a space for debate. Examples include Southerton's public lectures for the Cheltenham Science Festival (2010) and British Library (2012), with additional lectures and debates (to audiences in excess of 100) delivered on ten occasions, in six countries. Significantly, the research has been covered by several media outlets, with appearances such as that by Evans on the BBC Breakfast programme (21st September 2011), highlighting scope for ongoing diffusion and impact.

The field of sustainable consumption is a broad one, ranging from energy policy through to transport and food policy. Nonetheless, this research has had a particularly wide influence and reach, as indicated by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) who note that the practices approach "*offers us the possibility of a genuine paradigm shift in the world of behaviour change and disease prevention in ways that have for the most part to date been unexplored. It also offers theoretical purchase in a field dominated by psychological models with only the most cursory consideration of social context*" [1]. Moreover, the potential for ongoing impact is clear, and it is confirmed that: "*The team at Manchester... have been involved in a number of very important theoretical and empirical projects using the sociological conception of social practices as a way of describing health related behaviour change. This is a very significant*

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departure... NICE will be exploring with [UoM] the possibilities of developing these ideas further" [1]. Specific partnerships with policymakers (seeking to tackle the 'value-action gap') are outlined below, offering 'proof of principle' for the ISM approach.

Public Policy: Practice approaches to consumption and behaviour change appear within UK Government reports from 2008 – and are emphasised at the launch of the SCI in 2009 – but it is the 2011 Scottish Government ('SG') Report that forms the basis of this case [B]. The Report put in place a conceptual framework – **the ISM approach** – that was further refined into an applied toolkit, co-created by Evans and Southerton, and launched on 5th June 2013. Together the approach and toolkit critiqued existing policy initiatives (focused extensively on information campaigns and financial incentives) and, as the Principal Research Officer of the SG notes, have "gained considerable currency within the environmental behaviour change field in Scotland, which is only likely to grow given the publication of the ISM user and technical guides" [2].

The 2011 launch of the SG Report was attended by c.100 stakeholders; a third policy makers, and a similar percentage academic staff. In noting that the SG has both 'drawn extensively' on the report and 'adapted' it within presentations, the SG's Principal Research Officer, confirms that both the Report and ISM model that emerged from it "has had a direct impact on the development of the Scottish Government's approach to influencing low carbon behaviours" [2] The Report was picked up in several ways:

- **Key documents:** The SG Report was referenced by the Scottish Environment Minister in the Scottish Parliament as written evidence for consideration by the 'Transport Infrastructure And Climate Change Committee'; used as evidence in the report 'Regulation of Energy Efficiency in Housing'; and cited within the 'Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting our Emissions Reduction Targets 2013-2027' document [3].
- **Additional uptake:** The Scottish Government's Environment Research team included substantial reference to the SG Report's theoretical framework in a number of internal and external presentations [2], with independent researchers AD Research and Analysis (ADRA) utilising the SG Report as a framework for devising and assessing policy recommendations in the report 'The Impact of Workplace Initiatives on Low Carbon Behaviours' [4]. More specifically, ADRA made significant use of the ISM model to explain critical success factors, leading to best practice guidance (published separately for internal use) that adopted 'built-in' principles established in the SG report, as ADRA note "ISM again proved its worth, not simply as an evaluative or analytical framework, but also a practical way of thinking about policies and interventions, and one which practitioners and publics seemed to find intuitive" [5]. Following this engagement, the Scottish Government drew extensively on the SG Report in 'Research Findings from the Climate Change Behaviours Research Programme' which sets out findings from across its wider 'behaviours programme'. This document focused on the need for integrated approaches, moments of change and robust evaluation, which were all key findings from the SG report [2][6].
- **Stakeholder focused:** In April 2012 the Scottish Government adapted the SG Report into a presentation for stakeholders on their approach to behaviour change policy, with its Principal Research Officer noting that: "This represented an important moment in disseminating published insights into the practices of policy makers and provided the 'impetus' for the commissioning of an ISM toolkit" [2]. The subsequent project, entitled 'The ISM Model: User Guide', aimed to provide concrete guidance to policy makers and stakeholders on how to pragmatically rethink intervention planning. In applying the ISM approach set out in the SG report, Evans co-wrote the toolkit with ADRA, and "Southerton and colleagues then reviewed this draft Technical Guide." As ADRA recognised throughout: "ISM provides a way of thinking and talking about behaviour and practices which policy makers find instantly easy to grasp, and yet which goes on to challenge the common assumptions of their profession (e.g. that information and incentives are sufficient for lasting change)" [5].
- **Further afield:** It is notable that the reach of the ISM approach is increasing. In June 2012 an

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enquiry was made to the Scottish Government from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to discuss the SG Report, with officials meeting to discuss the toolkit [2]. Additionally, the work has been utilised: by ADRA on a project tackling obesity for the UK Department for Health “... used as an explanatory device, to analyse the elements of effective interventions, but also to organise the complex evidence on the determinants of obesity. Armed with the observation that most of the factors influencing weight among young people fall into the ‘Social’ context, DH are now working up ideas for pilot interventions, as part of the Change4Life campaign” [5]. The European Commission ‘Science for Environmental Policy Future Brief’ has employed the SG Report to summarise key approaches to behaviour change, borrowing key recommendations for its ‘policy implications’ section [7]. Finally, the work has been cited: in a World Economic Forum report; in Australia, and by the Queensland Department of Transport [8].

Expert advice: As suggested by the engagement with NICE, summarised at the outset, UoM researchers have purposely sought additional avenues for the ISM approach, taking up expert advisory roles when appropriate, and consistently seeking to influence the framing and development of *future* policy and research strategy. Excluding general advice or consultancy roles, the following engagements foreground the application of research findings and the ‘practices’ approach’ developed by the researchers:

- **Warde:** member of the 2008 European Environment Agency panel advising on sustainable consumption and behaviour change; appointed to the International Scientific Committee for the *Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique* (INRA) instructing on food research strategy in France.
- **Evans:** ongoing role with the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), where he “advised on the implications of ‘social practices’... and thinking about possible interventions for waste reduction. The insights... have also influenced the design of WRAP’s interventions to tackle food waste and the targeting of these interventions” [9].
- **Southerton:** appointed to the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) expert panel on ‘Energy Behaviours’ (2012-date), where he has been instrumental in re-directing policy and research strategy in the area of behaviour change, a former DECC manager noting that Southerton’s first workshop “led our team to reconsider our approach by drawing more attention to the complexities of the issues and highlighting potentially more productive avenues to explore” [10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (all claims referenced in the text)

- [1] Testimonial from Director of the Centre for Public Health, NICE (10th June 2013)
- [2] Testimonial from Principal Research Officer, Scottish Government (May 2013)
- [3] **Scottish Government** (cited in order): (2011) Supplementary Written Evidence, submitted to the ‘Transport Infrastructure And Climate Change Committee’ meeting, (25th January); (2011) ‘Regulation of Energy Efficiency in Housing: Report on the Scottish Government’s approach to energy efficiency regulation’ (March) (p.3); (2013) Scottish Government ‘Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting our Emissions Reduction Targets 2013-2027: The Draft Second Report on Proposals and Policies’ (January) (pp.60-63)
- [4] (2012) Cox, A. *et al* ‘The Impact of Workplace Initiatives on Low Carbon Behaviours: Case Study Report’ Scottish Government: Edinburgh (pp.1,18,22)
- [5] Testimonial from Managing Director, AD Research and Analysis (11th June 2013) & (2013) ‘The ISM Model: User Guide’: AD Research and Analysis (June)
- [6] (2013) ‘Main Findings from the Climate Change Behaviours Research Programme’, Scottish Government (4th March) (p.4)
- [7] (2012) EC ‘Science for Environmental Policy Future Brief’ (October) (pp.6,8)
- [8] (2012) WEF ‘More with Less: Scaling Sustainable Consumption and Resource Efficiency’ (January) (p.29); (2012) McGill, J. *et al* ‘Australasian Transport Research Forum – Not Everyone gets a Back Pack; Developing a Targeted Approach to Travel Behavior Change’ Queensland Department of Transport (p.17)
- [9] Testimonial from WRAP Research Analyst (12th June 2013)
- [10] Testimonial from (former) Manager, DECC Customer Insights Team (12th June 2013)