Chapter 11

Sustainable Lifestyles: Rethinking Barriers and Behaviour Change

Kersty Hobson

1. Introduction[1]

Current global levels of domestic energy consumption and waste production have been acknowledged as important contributors to detrimental environmental change (United Nations 1998). Political and academic interest in this component of sustainable development implementation has stimulated debates in post-industrial nations concerning the social practices of contemporary consumerism (Macnaghten and Urry 1998) and how we will live in the future (De Young 1993). In response there has been a call for the development of "national policies and strategies to encourage changes in consumption patterns" (UNCED 1992:64). One approach has been the promotion of environmentally-friendly lifestyles which often take the form of media or community campaigns (for further analysis see Hobson 2001). These campaigns encourage individuals not only to decrease the amount consumed, but also to alter the nature of goods consumed (IUCN/UNEP/WWF 1991; Librova 1999).

This chapter will examine one such campaign, called *Action at Home*, that is administered by the charity Global Action Plan UK. It will discuss a preliminary analysis of qualitative research carried out with individuals taking part in the *Action at Home* programme, with a view to gaining some understanding of how such a programme is received and acted upon by participants. This analysis is set within continually emergent discussions in the social sciences about public meanings and understandings of the concepts and communications of sustainable development (see Blake 1999; Bulkeley 1997; Burgess *et al.*, 1991; Burgess *et al.*, 1998; Darier and Schule 1999; Harrison *et al.*, 1996; Myers and Macnaghten 1998; Hinchliffe 1996; Finger 1994; Macnaghten and

Jacobs 1997; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). This chapter does not offer an appraisal of this work, but hopes to build upon some of the theoretical and empirical issues discussed therein, by opening up the concept of sustainable lifestyle for further analysis. I will initially discuss the context of current environmental-communication strategies in the UK and then proceed to offer some observations based on empirical work carried out with Global Action Plan UK. The theoretical implications of these observations for understanding "barriers to action" and behaviour change are then discussed, with a final comment on how these ideas might be mobilised in a policy arena.

2. Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles in the UK

Political attempts to encourage changes in citizens' consumer practices have become prominent in the public arena within the last decade. Tools used to promote sustainable lifestyles have included the widespread communication of sustainable development goals, using social-marketing techniques and educational-information campaigns (United Nations 1998). Examples of the latter include the former Conservative government's "Going for Green" programme, launched in 1996 (Blake and Carter 1997) and the "Helping the Earth Begins at Home" campaign (Hinchliffe 1996). These initiatives provided facts on key global environmental change concepts, such as global warming and/or highlighted small actions that individuals could take within their households to help alleviate environmental problems (Hinchliffe 1996). In May 1999, the Labour government launched a similar "Are You Doing Your Bit?" campaign. This programme aims to encourage individuals to take ownership of their impact on the environment by providing tips for effective action that will also potentially help save on domestic running costs (DETR 1999).

Despite the popularity of this policy tool, research suggests that it is not effective in promoting the public uptake of sustainable lifestyles (Burgess *et al.*, 1998; van Luttervelt 1998). Social scientists have been examining some of the reasons behind this lack of public penetration. In doing so, the political and epistemological assumptions that environmental information campaigns are based upon have been brought into question (see Blake 1999; Burgess *et al.*, 1998; Hinchliffe 1996; Myers and Macnaghten 1998). These discussions will not be revisited in detail here, but it is necessary to briefly recap some of the main underlying assumptions and attendant criticisms that have emerged to set the context for the current discussion.

3. Sustainable Lifestyles Information: Assumptions and Critiques

The success of implementing sustainable development is believed to be contingent upon the existence of an "informed and accepting public" (Macnaghten and Jacobs 1997:15). Sustainable lifestyle information campaigns aim to create this public consent and acceptance. The feasibility of this project rests on the belief that the "environment" has some intrinsic resonance with individuals (Lanthier and Olivier 1999), which can be appealed to, and which is a cause of widespread public concern. This assessment is supported by

numerous national and international polls suggesting that substantial public agreement with sustainable development goals exists, expressed as environmental concern and awareness (Taylor 1997). Why this awareness is not acted upon and how an "attitude-action gap" comes into existence, is due to a lack of specific scientific knowledge and behavioural information in the public arena. This lack of information is believed to be the cause of the low public uptake of the sustainability message. Tapping into this supposed reserve of public support is considered achievable by filling the public "information deficit" surrounding environmental issues (Burgess *et al.*, 1998). By providing facts about environmental problems and potential local/personal solutions, knowledge growth will lead us closer towards achieving sustainable development as individuals utilise new facts to make decisions about consumption choices (Ehrlich *et al.*, 1999).

It is assumed that once this information has been disseminated and read by individuals, behaviour change will follow. Such a direct link between information and behaviour is founded upon positivist linear models of behaviour change. These models suggest that human actions are founded upon rational, cognitive decision-making processes (see Argyle 1992; Billig 1987; Shotter 1993). Computational models such as Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action have been used repeatedly as predictors of behaviour change (for example, see Staats and Herenius 1995). They have indeed proved useful in their own bounded academic remits, but their main input in the policy arena has been to form a set of prevailing assumptions about the affective nature of information and the process of human-behaviour change.

Behaviour changes are also considered possible as individual lifestyles are viewed as consisting solely of "patterns of actions that differentiate people" (Chaney 1996:4). These patterns are discrete and functional sets of actions that are open to alteration. Thus, the lifestyle can be subject to rationalisation and reorganisation, moving everyone's behaviour in a more sustainable direction (Smith 1996).

Social scientists have questioned these assumptions by investigating the relationships between the environment, communications and lifestyles from more embedded, qualitative and discursive approaches, thus questioning the methodological, epistemological and political assumptions of the above framework. For example, positivist research tools used to measure and analyse individual responses to the environmental problematique have been criticised as offering an impoverished view of the complexity of human-social engagement (Macnaghten and Urry 1998). Contextual investigations into the construction and meanings of lifestyles have suggested that they are not simply a collection of cognitive thoughts and discrete actions, but instead are networks of recursive physical and discursive practices, replete with personal meaning and histories, that form the individual's 'life-world' (see Giddens 1991, Lunt and Livingstone 1992). Any new information, such as a programme like *Action at Home*, is sought, understood, utilised and assimilated as part of the on-going constitution of the individual's fully-knowledgeable lifeworld (Finger 1994). This critique raises questions about the nature of environmental knowledges (Eden 1998) and the very existence of an "information deficit" in the public sphere.

This chapter aims to add to these debates by examining further the relationship between environmental communications, lifestyles and practices. More specifically, I am looking at the *processes* that take place when individuals engage with environmental communications. To do this, I have focused on *Action at Home*, to allow me to ask questions about

how environmental information is created, used and acted upon by lay publics. In the following section I will discuss the contents of the *Action at Home* programme and the empirical work carried out in collaboration with Global Action Plan UK.

4. Global Action Plan UK

Global Action Plan is an environmental behaviour-change model and action programme developed in the United States during the late 1980s (Gershon and Gillman 1992) and presented to the 1992 Earth Summit (Global Action Plan International n.d.). It aims to provide willing individuals with tools to alter their domestic behaviour and adopt more sustainable ways of living, by empowering them to feel that they can make effective and worthwhile changes. The foundations of the model rest upon the concept of EcoTeams. These are groups of neighbours that aim to make collective changes to their household behaviours as set out in a Global Action Plan workbook. The EcoTeams meet regularly to offer support and to feed back progress to each other and the national Global Action Plan office (Harland *et al.*, 1993). Advocates hope that through these groups the sustainable lifestyles message will diffuse outwards through a community, creating more widespread change (see Rogers 1995).

The Global Action Plan idea has now spread to many other countries outside of the US, including the UK. In 1994, the Global Action Plan UK (GAP) environmental charity was founded. GAP has reworked the original Global Action Plan model, aiming for more widespread participation by encouraging and helping "individuals to take effective environmental action in their homes, communities and workplaces" (Global Action Plan UK 1998:1). The *Action at Home* programme is a six-month voluntary scheme that encourages changes in individual's household consumption practices by providing information, support and feedback (Church and McHarry 1992). It is not a nation-wide information campaign, but is instead targeted sequentially at specific local areas to enable the establishment of local support and diffusion networks. *Action at Home* participants receive monthly information packs with step-by-step suggestions for making small behavioural changes, plus "money-off" offers on various environmental products. The packs cover topics of waste, water, transport, shopping and energy, ending with a "Next Steps" pack focussing on additional actions that participants could take. This sustained, concentrated action plan makes *Action at Home* a unique form of environmental communication in the UK today.

To date, over 22,000 households have taken part in *Action at Home* (Global Action Plan UK 1999) and this has led to behaviour changes in many of the participant homes. For example, in one *Action at Home* project the questionnaires administered at the start and again at the end of the programme evinced an 18 percent increase in glass recycling and a nine percent increase in individuals turning lights off after use (Global Action Plan UK 1998). However, due to a low return of questionnaires until recently GAP had no clear indications of what was happening to participants during the programme. Engaging with *Action at Home* and its processes presents a valuable opportunity, both for myself and GAP, to examine the experiences of taking part in a concerted effort to adopt a sustainable lifestyle.

5. Research Outline

The empirical part of this research took place between October 1997 and May 1999 in two separate fieldwork locations. I used qualitative interview techniques throughout this aspect of the project. This is consistent with their current widespread use in the investigation of lay environmental meanings and experiences (see Burgess *et al.*, 1988a; Kvale 1996; Shotter 1993). In 1997–1998 I carried out a total of 41 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with *Action at Home* participants in Bournemouth, Dorset. Interviews took place in the participants' homes, both at the start and end of the six-month programme. Then, during 1998–1999, I conducted an evaluation of *Action at Home* in the workplace. Three companies[2] in the North-West of England purchased *Action at Home* as part of a pilot project to offer the programme to employees and to encourage changes in their resource-use behaviours, both at home and work. As part of assessment of this project, each company allowed me to convene one in-depth discussion group at each workplace. The group interviews were chosen as a methodology to allow the examination of the discursive dynamics evoked (Harrison *et al.*, 1996) and also to capture the "communication context" of the workplace environment (Crabtree *et al.*, 1993). Each discussion group met at the start of the programme, three months into *Action at Home* and finally each group member was interviewed individually at the end of the six months. All interviews were recorded and the following discussion is based upon analysis of the interview transcripts.

6. Reactions to *Action at Home*

Action at Home participants offered up varied, complex, sometimes contradictory, but always well-argued reactions to the programme. Reactions were both positive and negative, ranging from debates about the *Action at Home* material to debates about the institutional and social relationships that the information implied and embodied. I will begin by focusing on some of the key issues that add to the critique of prevailing positivist frameworks, by showing how the concept of sustainable lifestyles is thoroughly contested. These contestations centre round questioning the information in the packs, questioning the concept of the "environment" and also considering the meanings of the practices that make up the individual's lifestyle. By looking closely at these reactions, I will suggest that it is possible to begin to construct an alternate and embedded framing of this subject matter.

Questioning "Facts"

Throughout all the interviews, *Action at Home* participants constantly interrogated not only the information in the packs, but also the validity of the institutions and vested interests that these facts represented (see Irwin and Wynne 1996; Myers and Macnaghten 1998;

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[2]These companies were Norweb in Preston, Lancashire; North-West Water in Warrington, Cheshire and British Aerospace in Warton, Lancashire.

Szerszynski *et al.*, 1996). The step-by-step guides to action were questioned on the grounds of the pertinence and reliability of the information, with many interviewees being highly skeptical about the merits of the recommended actions. This ranged from the actual energy-saving mechanics of putting shelves above radiators to affect changes in room temperature, to the over-all environmental benefits of acts such as recycling.

> Now is that not a better way of doing it? What is the point in collecting glass bottles when silicon is the most common element available on the surface? It costs more in recycling costs and heating costs and all the rest, for a bit of glass. (Male, Bournemouth, April 1998)

The contradictions inherent in the array of suggested actions were pointed out time and time again, such as driving the car to the recycling point to dispose of household waste; one action harming the environment and the other (allegedly) helping it. Participants recognised the contingent and uncertain nature of the information within the packs and questioned whether it was possible to ever know the "truth" surrounding environmental issues.

> And that's just the sort of information which just no-one knows. One makes all these assumptions and ending up doing things that are either worse or the wrong thing. (Male, Bournemouth, October 1997)

There were also questions about who produced the information, the vested interests involved and the implausibility of any purveyor of information collecting "neutral" data. This evoked debates about institutional and social trust.

> I certainly wouldn't trust a pressure group because they are going to be biased to be honest with you. I wouldn't necessarily trust a government because again they've got to be biased as well. Trust no one I think!! I would trust an independent researcher, for example, if it was an established credible university doing a study! I would trust that more than a government or a pressure group, provided of course you haven't been funded by a pressure group. I would want to see your accounts. (Male, North-West, October 1998)

In terms of environmental information and its attendant practices, my interviews suggest that there is no "information deficit" to be filled by new facts. Instead, engaging with *Action at Home* takes the form of an *active debate*, one that contests the truth and values of the knowledge being presented in the packs and makes use of the knowledge that exists and is mobilised from each individual's own life and experiences.

Questioning the "Environment"

The meanings implied and mobilised by the concept of the 'environment' were also highly contextual and contested. For example, the global environmental issues highlighted in the packs were not meaningful to a great number of interviewees.

> To be honest I don't even think about the hole in the ozone layer. It's not there when I walk outside so you just forget about it. You can't see it. Well I suppose if I was here and you could see this big black hole in the sky, you'd be petrified, wouldn't you. And everybody would be doing what they could to make it better, but because you can't see it you don't think about it. But if you were sat here watching it, you'd be dead scared, wouldn't you? You'd be doing all you could. (Female, North-West, October 1998)

Links between individuals' own actions and their global consequences are so remote in time and space (Clayton 1993) many respondents were left feeling alienated from key concepts. Interviewees knew about these mediated ideas, such as ozone depletion, but the absence of any direct experience of them meant that they were drawing on their own knowledge to make sense, and often debunk, the claims. In fact, the desire to take on board global environmental issues was limited as many interviewees expressed a desire to *not* be seen being too "green".

> Male 1: If you take something like Greenpeace, a lot of people know it's there, but they're not 100 percent sure what it's about. You know, you're either involved, part of it or not at all. Those lunatics are at it again doing such and such a thing, so it depends. It's actually how you put it across, not what information's in there, it's the image.
>
> Facilitator: Do you think that people are put off by the "green image"?
>
> Female: Very often yeah. Well, governments are, aren't they, they try to blow 'em up.
>
> Male 2: They're from the funny farm aren't they? On the basis they wear funny clothes and they have funny haircuts, they do strange things like digging tunnels. (North-West, October 1998)

What resonance, then, does the concept of the "environment" have? Very few interviewees made any direct links with nature and the natural environment. Instead, the meaning of the term "environment" was quickly linked to the realm of the social. Interviewees saw the environment as *their* environment, total and lived, which encompassed concerns about loss of communities, lack of positive social interactions in urban environments, social equity and justice, inter-generational relations, political and personal responsibility and historical changes in society. The environment, as a bounded concept situated in nature, did not appear to offer much as a source of feelings, meanings and motivations (Strauss 1992; Burningham and O'Brien 1994).

The Sanctity of Lifestyles

Despite the prevailing concept of the lifestyle as a set of discrete functional practices whose logic can be re-directed, *Action at Home* participants clearly felt that their patterns

of everyday activities were not open to external restylisation. The concept of a "sustainable lifestyle" came across as a restrictive set of practices, which ultimately means having to "go without".

> But that is, we can't deny ourselves these things entirely, we have to live today and not in some other fantasy. (Male, Bournemouth, April 1998)

How individuals' preferred patterns of action and choices had become established and executed were contingent upon many factors, such as time, space, circumstances, money, personal preferences, values and goals. The term lifestyle served as a "catch-all" phrase that respondents used to encompass their physical and moral preferences, plus many things over which they felt they had little control. A "lifestyle" was thus a valiant attempt to manage, often contradictory, influences within one life. As far as adopting a more sustainable approach, it was not the case of opening up lifestyles to change, but instead seeing how the suggested new actions might fit into their current patterns.

> I think if it suits your lifestyle and it's not too much effort then yes you do it. But if it's too much effort then you don't. (Female, North-West, January 1999)

Convenience was a key concept, and trying to take on board a whole range of new practices was deemed by interviewees to be both unfeasible and undesirable.

> You basically want stuff on tap to use, you don't want to give up your car and share with a neighbour as you want the freedom to go on your own. And it's very difficult to say, "I like the environment, I want it nice" and at the same time "I want my lifestyle kept as it is." So yes, I will do that, but don't take this off me. (Female, North-West, October 1998)

Lifestyles were therefore not only containers of the multiple demands of modern living, but also were replete with meanings, habits, preferences, memories and others. New behaviours were often rejected on the grounds of going against interviewees' beliefs about the right way to live.

> I wouldn't bother adjusting the toilet to save water, as I don't believe this stuff, that we use vastly, vastly over the top to flush the loos, it is more important to protect your hygiene than save water in that respect. (Male, Bournemouth, October 1997)

Thus, the locale of the home is the site of the creation of a sense of ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1998; see also Giddens 1991). This resulted in strong reactions against external calls for alterations to be made.

7. Why Take *Action at Home*?

The pervasive negativity of the above discussions might lead to the conclusion that an investigation into sustainable lifestyles can only critique and cannot provide any constructive insights. I would suggest, however, that taking a closer look at participants' reasons for becoming involved in *Action at Home* allows the positioning of these debates within a discursive framework of meaning and interpretations of environmental communications. To argue this assertion further, I will begin by asking why interviewees decided to take part in *Action at Home* as a means of examining what drives their involvement.

Financial Incentives

Action at Home packs suggest the main benefits of taking part in the programme are helping the environment and also saving money off domestic bills. Several interviewees did cite making financial savings as one of their main reasons for taking part in *Action at Home*. Amidst the continuing postmodern emphasis on "lifestyles", "choices" and "identity" (Featherstone 1991), it is important not to forget that money is a key motivator in domestic behaviour patterns (Brandon and Lewis 1999).

> You get various things out of this and there is the possibility of saving more money as the months and years go by. But only if it can be done at a fairly cheap cost, so I don't want any expensive measures, like to spend a few hundred pounds to save a few pounds on your heating bills. (Male, Bournemouth, October 1997)

Both the Bournemouth and the North-West projects were offering participants one free energy-saving lightbulb per household, upon completion of the energy pack. This inevitably resulted in some participants signing up to *Action at Home* for this reason alone. However, even those respondents who expressed money as one of their main incentives were quick, within the course of the interviews, to elaborate on environmental and social concerns that they believed the *Action at Home* project would also address. It was also clear that the potential for saving money was considered marginal and would not sustain action in the long term.

> I would say there are a lot of things that can be done at the basic level now. I think to go any further would be incurring quite a cost. So it is quite easy to take the first step and do all these little things, but the next steps are quite difficult. You're talking about double glazing, foam insulation, having bins around the back of your house for segregation. It's quite a big step which you will have difficulty in getting people to do without greater financial benefits. (Male, North-West, January 1999)

Even though money was mentioned frequently as a driver for participation, it rarely surfaced as a key incentive for continuing with the project for six months, or for stimulating

change. Instead, it seems that *Action at Home* presented an opportunity for individuals to engage in a process of self, and social, evaluation. Participants were making active and personal use of *Action at Home*, not simply subscribing to it.

A Design for Life

Most *Action at Home* participants were not taking part in a personal project of "greening" their lifestyles. Instead, many suggested that their involvement stemmed from being "curious", "interested", wanting to "learn more" and wanting to see what they "could do".

> I wanted to measure myself against what these people think is the proper way for us to run our lives I suppose. (Male, Bournemouth, October 1997)

Other empirical research has found that individuals see more information as a solution to environmental problems (Darier and Schule 1999). This does not, however, automatically endorse the "information deficit" model. Rather than seeking facts, interviewees want to find out about possible ways that they might choose to live. They did not want *Action at Home* to dictate a path to sustainable living, as if it represented an absolute goal to strive towards, but instead they sought it out to act as one source of potential guidance, among the many upon which consumers draw (Warde 1997). *Action at Home* offers one perspective, one frame of meaning and reference with which people can examine their own experiences and life practices (Finger 1994), and presents an opportunity for critical self-evaluation using "objective" information (Wayment and Taylor 1995).

> Yes, I was curious about it and wanted to see what was going, as I said before, how I fitted into it and whether I was doing as much as I could, so having done that I can't see me going on. (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998)

Action at Home is being consumed as a "lifestyle guide" with which the individual can address the "fundamental dilemmas of social identity" (Aldridge 1994:899). This finding is in keeping with social-constructionist theories, such as those of Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991, 1994) and Ulrich Beck (1992, 1996), which relate individual engagement with the environmental problematique to the position of the social actor within the processes and institutional relations of current social conditions. Working independently, Beck and Giddens have suggested that one of the defining features of contemporary post-industrial society is an erosion of old forms of stable social identity, such as class and religion. Instead, there is a move towards individualisation "in which agents become ever more free from the normative expectations of social institutions" (Szerszynski *et al.*, 1996:2). It is argued that individuals are now responsible for their own life trajectories and choices, having to constantly ask themselves questions about how they can, and want, to live. This is because "the narrative of self-identity has to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life, on a local and global scale" (Giddens 1991:215). Thus, with ever-changing contexts, individuals are required to, and

able to, examine their own lifestyles, as both a project of self-determination and a moral project. These developments have given rise to the emergence of "life politics" (Giddens 1991) where individuals both attempt to maintain a coherent biographical narrative and to ask questions about the right way to live. Taking *Action at Home* can be viewed as part of this on-going engagement with a project of life politics.

This suggestion is partially tenable (although not fully defendable; see Hobson 2001) because, along with constructing a narrative of self-identity, *Action at Home* participants were asking questions about their own personal and social morality, in keeping with their shifting image of the self. They are seeking to address the social issues that trouble them, the anxieties that they express in the course of the interviews and frame their assessments of contemporary society. In short,

> I think Kersty, it's a fundamental re-valuing of where we are at. (Male, North-West, October 1998)

How does taking part in *Action at Home* do this? Signing up to *Action at Home* is considered an act in itself, not an excuse to avoid actual action (cf. Finger 1994). Taking part and "signing up" to a form of active engagement and debate makes participants feel that they are making a contribution to awakening a public sense of the need for change and a need to think about these issues. This is not about overt campaigning, or even the diffusion of particular ideas through social networks. Instead, engaging with the debates provoked by reading and thinking through the packs is a discursive act in itself, one that hopefully will provoke others to think, debate and help to make the changes needed (Szerszynski 1999).

> And I thought well it's only a start, but people have got to think about it. (Female, Bournemouth, October 1997)

Thus, it is the process of taking part in *Action at Home* that is important, not the endpoint of behaviour change. In fact, many interviewees did not have a vision or expectation of what might result from the programme as a whole. Instead, just taking part was enough in itself.

> So, as I say, I can only say that it is contributing in some respects. Whether one can see that contribution in the end I don't know. (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998)

Taking part in *Action at Home* is not signing up to a sustainable lifestyle, but rather entering into a "moral conversation" about how we, as individuals, and as a society, should and could be living. Beck (1998:28) encapsulates this state when he suggests "This 'me-first' generation has been much criticised; but I believe its individualism is moral and political in a new sense". Taking *Action at Home* does not just make participants feel better about themselves and their lifestyles. Rather it is part of a wider social debate and level of anxiety about the erosion of social relations and mutual respect that does not encompass the "right" way to live.

8. Rethinking Sustainable-Lifestyles Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks

From the above findings it is possible to begin to construct a social-theoretical framework to better understand the relationship between environmental communications and life-styles. To do this, it is necessary to get rid of some of the old concepts and to introduce new approaches in this area of inquiry. In the following section I will make some observations on possible components of such a framework, focusing on information use, barriers to action and behaviour change.

Rethinking Information Use

One important point to reconsider is how individuals make use of environmental information. From the contested reaction of *Action at Home* participants, it is possible to consider "learning" in a rhetorically responsive manner (Shotter 1993). Building upon Macnaghten and Urry's (1998) attention to the work of Billig, it is important to revisit the place that argumentation — that is, debate — has in human thought. Billig, in his 1987 book 'Arguing and Thinking', reawakens the concept of rhetoric to construct a theoretical framework in which human thought is not reducible to isolated logic, but is instead a constantly constructive and discursive act. By paying attention to the argumentative dimensions of social life, rather than lamenting them, we can move away from an approach that considers expressed attitudes as verbalisations of inner beliefs, to an understanding of justifications and criticisms as rhetorical stances, realised in the context of social controversy. Billig (1987:141) states "we can expect private thinking to be modelled upon public argument. In consequence, it should possess a dialogic, rather than a mono-logic, character." This approach helps us to take a more constructive look at the debates that emerge from research interviews, not simply focusing on their contents and reporting them back as public opinions, but allowing a more active approach to be considered. Such an approach examines how individuals make use of particular arguments, discourses or 'commonplaces' (Myers and Macnaghten 1998). This approach also asks questions about how and why particular debates are mobilised in certain contexts and to what political ends (Burningham and O'Brien 1994).

Rethinking Barriers to Action

Sustainable-lifestyle research frequently focuses on an array of "barriers to action" that exist in individual and institutional contexts (see Tanner 1999). These include deficiency of facilities, time needed to take new actions, feelings of powerlessness and lack of agency. I would not suggest that these issues are not real physical and infrastructural problems, as there are very real limitations placed on action by a wide range of socio-economic factors (Blake 1999). What I am seeking to uncover is the development of a framework to understand why actions and awareness are not always related (Finger 1994).

In considering Billig's approach, the contestations around the material shift from being ultimately barriers to the embodiment of the way that humans deal with social controversy and make sense of information. This would also explain why people seek out lifestyle guides, such as *Action at Home*. Entering into these debates, within ourselves and with others, is the very process by which the total social environment is understood. The wide array of social concerns linked to the concept of the "environment" is not something that can, through policy, be eliminated. Instead, they are part of the rich moral conversations and real concerns in which citizens engage. "Barriers to action" thus become a set of discursive practices that individuals use when discussing the environmental problematique.

Rethinking Behaviour Change

Finally, there is one important theoretical issue that has been neglected in much of the work addressing environmental communications and lay publics. That is, where do actions and physical practices fit into a constructionist, discursive and rhetorical approach? By looking at the processes of behaviour change that some *Action at Home* participants experienced it is possible to suggest that a discursive framework for examining such changes is tenable.

Action at Home participants did make some changes in terms of no or low-cost actions. Those already taking many of the recommended actions had little scope for change, but were pleased to confirm to themselves that they are doing the "right thing".

> The actual project itself I haven't found particularly useful, it has just reaffirmed things really that I have already been doing. (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998)

Those who were new to some of the ideas in the packs felt they had been able to make some changes.

> I think it's made me more conscious and I know I never used to put lids onto saucepans and I do that now. But I think that also it makes it boil quicker. You know, just things I had read in a leaflet, about sticking lids on pans and just little things. Like, I don't leave my TV on. I used to leave my TV on stand-by at night and I just turn if off at the mains now. (Female, North-West, January 1999)

Individuals who did make changes did so by an interesting process. They were not learning new facts and then acting upon them. In fact, it was clear from the interviews that few people could recall anything out of the packs only a matter of weeks after reading them.

> I hadn't thought about it, you read and it's a shock and you look at things differently.

> Facilitator: Like what, what's a shock?
>
> Male: I can't remember just now, there was something that I were reading in the last one that we got.
>
> Facilitator: Was that the shopping pack?
>
> Male: I think it was the shopping one yeah. I hadn't realised, you know, and I thought "good idea"! I forgot what it was now.
>
> Female: That's the trouble, I can't remember the questions now.
>
> Male: That's right yeah. It was only last week or the week before we got 'em as well.
>
> Facilitator: Do they go out of your head that fast?
>
> Male: Well, yeah !!! (Mixed group, North-West, January 1999)

Rather it would appear that changes in behaviour occurred as a process of the surfacing and questioning of taken-for-granted habits.

> If it's a simple matter of turning a switch off then yes, I think people will get into the habit of doing that. (Male, North-West, October 1998)

Very few interviewees could explain why they had changed what they had and how they went about it. I would therefore suggest — and I have more fully developed a framework elsewhere (see Hobson 2001) to explain this finding — that we can draw on Giddens' structuration theory to help understand the embedded nature of behaviour change (see Giddens 1984). For example, Giddens' concept of practical consciousness, a form of unsaid knowledge that individuals make use of in going about their everyday lives, neatly encapsulates the habits that *Action at Home* helped to change. What *Action at Home* does is to bring these habits, hidden away in practical consciousness, into discursive consciousness, where they are considered by the individual, and either altered or contested.

> Well, you see what you're doing straight away don't you? There are some things, you think 'well I could do that'. Some things click in your mind, so you do tend to read them. (Female, North-West, January 1999)

Because of the place that these habits have in everyday lives, they are not usually bounded by the argumentative defenses of discursive consciousness, which are the readily accessible debates that interviewees evoked throughout this research, about why they should or could not adopt a particular behaviour. Habits can, however, quickly move "from being one of common sense to one of controversy" (Billig 1987:208) and this is what the *Action at Home* material does, by evoking debate about behaviours that are usually hidden from discursive view. Not only are there already debates around the controversial social issues that *Action at Home* discusses, but also habits become controversial in the light of the sustainable-lifestyles concept. This could help explain why there is so much debate and so little behaviour change. The more socially contentious issues,

such as transport, find the *Action at Home* interviewees ready and equipped with debates about meanings and justifications. It is mostly the actions that do not evoke controversy — those that slip through the net of debate — that seem to enter into people's routines and habits. These findings put forward the possibility of taking a more discursive approach to behaviour-change research, one that can include within its parameters both human psychology and social contexts.

9. "Are You Doing Your Bit?": Conclusions and Future Research Questions

I will turn finally to some possible implications for this framework in the policy arena and future research agendas. There is a wide range of potential policy measures that can be mobilised to stimulate behaviour change. This includes a broad sweep of regulations (Hinchliffe 1996), the building of participatory institutions to create better trust (Blake 1999) with more open relationships between citizens and institutions (Burgess *et al.*, 1998), as well as creating a groundswell of people who "actively care" about the environment (Geller 1995). As the goals of sustainable development are so diffuse and uncertain, the use of multiple strategies is vital. Wardle (1996:6) suggests[3] that in the longer term individual effort alone will not be enough, but there will also be need for "social and environmental action on a wider scale to modify an environment which will otherwise continue to promote the problem which individuals are trying to counteract". This chapter, along with other contributions in this area, has detailed the serious problems with current political usage, and emphasis on, environmental communications as a valid behaviour-change strategy. It has been shown that how individuals react to communications, how they think about and address changing their lifestyles, and how they consider the current framing of the environmental problematique, all contrast markedly with the prevailing positivist assumptions underlying policy strategies.

However, it is also clear that tools like social marketing are not going to disappear as a preferred strategy. Therefore, a constructive ending would be to suggest how this research might make a positive contribution. One suggestion is that rather than placing the emphasis on learning about global issues, there needs to be an engagement with issues that have meaning in everyday lives to capture the energy of the rhetoric with which individuals think. For instance, take the "Are You Doing Your Bit?" campaign. There are some individuals with whom this message would strike a chord, or at least strike a note of responsibility. Mostly, though, I would suggest, if my *Action at Home* interviewees are valid examples, that a response to the question would be something like, "Well, I'm doing what I can and what I think I should be doing, even though it's not going to make that much difference and anyway, what are you doing about it all?"

If it was possible to go some way to entering into the contingencies and contestations of taking positive actions for the environment, perhaps environmental communications could

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[3]Wardle (1996) addresses changing the eating patterns of obese people, but it also resonates with debates about the cognitive/emotional side of sustainable lifestyles.

start down a more positive and two-way route. I agree wholeheartedly that "participation requires effective institutions and mechanisms, but it also requires an effective and common language. That language will ultimately be found in the way people talk, not in policy documents" (Myers and Macnaghten 1998:352). This can refer not only to the *language* of communication, but also to the *form* that these communications take. Pursuing this approach would marry with calls by other scholars for further institutional openness and honesty about the uncertainties of environmental knowledge and the nature of environmental responsibility. How refreshing an environmental campaign called "We Haven't Really Been Doing Our Bit, Have We?" would be! This then turns the discussions to issues of institutional responsibility and transparency. In contemporary society where political institutions are not equipped and ultimately do not have a functional purpose of addressing diffuse, long-term environmental problems (Beck 1992), we have to consider who will rise to the challenge of entering publicly into these moral conversations.

GAP is making interesting headway in these issues by engaging businesses in discussions about bringing behaviour-change programmes into the workplace. Although there have been mixed results because of the number of contingencies involved in making these projects a success, they have shown that creating spaces to engage employers and employees in discussions of concerns and responsibility *does* affect positive change. The question still remains as to how this dialogue could be taken out to a wider community that does not have the bounded and spatially-fixed nature of the workplace. Various potential models for implementation exist, such as the original Global Action Plan EcoTeam model of community workgroups (see Staats and Herenius 1995). Yet, how these models of change actually work is unknown owing to the limitations of previous lifestyle behaviour-change research, especially projects using only quantitative methodologies. To move these debates on, out of the academy and into practice, future research has to take a broader look at means and methods of behaviour change, in consideration of rhetorical approaches of human psychology and the movable positions of environmental debates in contemporary society. Sustainable-lifestyles research must question the implicit assumption that changes in lifestyle practices are individuals' ultimate goals, but are hindered by "barriers to action". Instead, by taking a step back from the narrow conception of the "environment" and a step towards a richer engagement with people's moral conversations, we can at least make a start at reformulating our ideas about the place of "environmental" issues in lay discourses and practices.

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