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**No Through Road:**

**A critical examination of researcher assumptions and approaches to researching sustainability**

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## **No Through Road:**

### **A critical examination of researcher assumptions and approaches to researching sustainability**

In this chapter we start from the premise that the ways in which academic researchers frame and conduct their sustainability research is worthy of critical examination. By looking closely at our own practices as a field we can come to understand how the assumptions that we have made about sustainable consumption and the ways in which we have pursued it in research terms are inextricably linked to the outcomes that we produce from that research. We begin with a discussion of the ways in which sustainable consumption has been conceptualised within marketing, examining the words used to describe what we are researching and the individuals engaged in sustainable consumption. We question the norm of using the individual as a unit of analysis which has become accepted across several social science disciplines as well as numerous managerial and policy arenas. We argue that individuals rarely act in a way that is acontextual and that as people shop, live and make decisions as households or communities, that the single consumer is too small a unit of analysis. However we also highlight a number of streams of evidence for inconsistency of consumer behaviour which suggest that the individual consumer is too large a unit of analysis for sustainability research. We examine the effects on research of conceptualising individuals as either 'green' or 'not green' and the problems of implying homogeneity within each of these 'groups'. These norms have been inherited from positivist social science traditions and we also discuss the lasting effects of these traces of positivism within our thinking and research designs. We also look at how we are measured as academics: this has an influence on the ways in which we seek to carve up the problems of sustainable consumption between disciplines and parts of the supply chain. The purpose of the chapter is to ask: through what frames do we look at this problem; and to what extent are we limited by these frames? We conclude that in order to make progress in sustainability research alternative frames, terms, units of analysis, method(ologie)s and research ambitions are needed.

## **No Through Road:**

### **A critical examination of researcher assumptions and approaches to researching sustainability**

**Seonaidh McDonald, Caroline J. Oates and Panayiota J. Alevizou**

Forty years after marketing academics began to research issues related to sustainability we can look back on much industry within the academy, but not much progress (Peattie, 2010; Baker, 2015). Although many commentators suggest that the problems lie with green consumers who express their wish for, but do not buy green products, we offer here an alternative view: that the approaches favoured by marketing researchers and the assumptions implicit within these approaches are problematic for studying sustainability. We aim to turn the mirror upon ourselves and thus provide insights based on an epistemological critique.

In this chapter we will look critically at the academic literatures that are engaged in addressing aspects of sustainability. By drawing attention to the assumptions implicit within some of these literatures we are able to consider the effect that these assumptions are having on the shape and progress of the marketing field with regards to understanding and facilitating sustainable consumption. We will focus on three inter-related issues: the way that green consumers have been conceptualised; the problems inherent in positivist approaches to researching green consumers; and finally the effects of privileging the researcher perspective. Each of these will be considered in turn with reference to work done by ourselves and by others that is situated in the marketing and related social science literatures.

#### **1. Conceptualisation of sustainable consumption**

In this section we will argue that some of the assumptions that marketing researchers have made about green consumers, although understandable, are problematic for advancing our understanding of sustainable consumption. This includes the fact that we have traditionally taken the unit of analysis to be the individual, that we have looked at consumption in isolation and that we have conceptualised individual consumption as either green or not green. We will examine the effect on the discipline of each of these implicit assumptions in turn. First however we will consider the terms used to describe people who participate in sustainable consumption.

##### *1.1. The framing of the green consumer*

What 'sustainable' means often provokes a lot of technical debate. For example, people question whether it is more sustainable to collect recyclables door to door if that means two large vehicles driving around collecting our rubbish instead of one and/or transporting materials over long distances in order to process them, suggesting that the extra fuel consumed wipes out any potential environmental benefit to be had from not simply burying them in the ground. Examples of these narratives abound in both the academic literature and the general media. There are also expert debates on whether sustainability is, for example, best served by buying organic vegetables from a supermarket or buying whatever is in your local independent greengrocer, regardless of organic

status. It can be argued either way. And that is because what 'sustainable' means many different things to many different people, both personally and as part of societal stakeholder groups. Different people will privilege different elements of sustainability according to their own values or preferences in that moment. In our view, these debates are both inevitable, because 'sustainable' is a contested term and pointless because what is 'sustainable' is socially constructed. We prefer to resist attempts to either define or defend sustainability as a term, deferring instead to the multiple meanings we see in our qualitative data. Our concern here is rather to discuss how the terms we use to label sustainable consumption and those who practise elements of it suggest different framings of the same issue(s) and reveal something of the assumptions that different communities of researchers have made about how it can and should be studied.

In the marketing literature, the term 'green consumer' is one which is often employed. This term can be viewed as paradoxical. If we understand 'green' to imply environmental concern, used in this context it suggests someone who deliberately changes or reduces their consumption. The term 'consumer' used in isolation would however tend to suggest someone whose role it is to consume, someone driven by consumption. This point has been made many times before (see for example Petit & Sheppard, 1992; Peattie, 2001; Redclift, 2005). However there are other problems with this term. If 'green' as a term suggests 'environmental' then some argue that this ignores a wide range of issues related to the social justice (such as fair trade) or the non-anthropocentric (such as animal welfare) elements that they see as an important parts of sustainability. Academics considering these issues often use the term 'ethical consumer' in preference to 'green consumer' in order to signal the kinds of issues they privilege within the notion of sustainability (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Newholm & Shaw, 2007; Bray, Johns & Kilburn, 2011). The term ethical consumer can also incorporate notions of 'doing without' as in reducing consumption, for example voluntary simplifiers (McDonald et al., 2006), as well as indicating engagement in alternative consumption patterns, such as moving to fair trade brands. However some use the terms 'green consumer' (e.g. McDonald et al., 2012) or 'ethical consumer' (e.g. Shaw & Shiu, 2002) to encompass all these ideas and more, some use both together (see e.g. Bartels & Onwenzen, 2014) to signal a wider conception than either term alone, some commentators have developed green/ethical as a joint term (see e.g. Chatzidakis, Maclaran & Bradshaw, 2012) and some use them interchangeably as if they were synonyms (see e.g. Young et al., 2010). Despite the focus on debating (sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly) whether we should be labelling people 'green' or 'ethical' consumers, we will argue later in this chapter that two of the assumptions underpinning the notion 'consumer' are potentially far more problematic for researching sustainable consumption than either 'green' or 'ethical'. First the term 'consumer' suggests that the individual is (and perhaps even, should be) the unit of analysis when researching sustainable consumption; secondly 'consumer' suggests a primary focus on the act of obtaining goods and services, as distinct from producing them, using them or disposing of them.

### *1.2. Problems with adopting the individual as the unit of analysis*

Within the Marketing literature as a whole, two units of analysis have traditionally been privileged: the individual and the firm. A great deal of the work done in the field is interested in determining the characteristics and behaviour of the individual and how that translates into markets for products and services offered by firms. Drawing on the norms of base disciplines such as Economics, where the

individual is conceptualised as essentially rational and Social Psychology where they are considered as cognitive actors, a picture of the consumer is formed which depicts the individual as independent of context and motivated to maximise economic benefit and/or personal utility. When Marketing turned its attention to matters of sustainable consumption, these same norms have naturally become adopted as part of the lens through which we consider the green consumer.

### *1.2.1. Consumption is located at the household level*

However by listening to research participants engaged in various research projects over a number of years it has become clear to us that these assumptions are not necessarily appropriate for understanding the green consumer. Firstly, we have found that many activities are negotiated at a household level. The most straightforward example of this is the weekly shop. It is easy to see that what is actually bought in a weekly trip to the supermarket represents the needs and preferences of a household rather than the person(s) who is(are) doing the shopping (Miller, 1998). Someone in a household might prefer fair trade coffee; another member might be brand loyal to a specific mainstream brand. This might mean that alternate brands are bought depending on who is actually doing the shopping on a particular week, on the basis of 'turns' or one brand might be privileged based on the negotiation skills or power structures between household members (Scott, Oates and Young 2015). We have found the same to be true of other decisions about, for example holiday travel (Oates & McDonald, 2014).

However this is also manifest in less obvious ways. In a project about the process of purchasing sustainable household technologies respondents in rented accommodation reported not being able to buy low energy light bulbs or switch to green energy tariffs (McDonald, Aitken & Oates, 2012) without their landlord's permission. Consider also the issue of recycling, which is also undertaken at the household level, raising questions about how recycling activities sit within the context of other domestic tasks. Reflecting on these issues led to a study which asked households to tell us who initiated and who practiced the recycling within their households (Oates & McDonald, 2006). The findings of this study show that that different people may initiate and maintain recycling schemes within households and that there may be a gendered element to these roles. There is also a literature about the presence and role of children in inculcating pro-sustainability behaviours within households. Within the education literature, for example, researchers have studied what they term 'reverse socialisation' processes whereby environmental education received by children at school (Evans, Gill & Marchant, 1996), or through the media (Oates et al., 2013), is brought home and influences the behaviours of adults within the household (Gentina & Muratore, 2012; Gentina & Singh, 2015).

For all of these reasons, the 'consumer', the individual, is too small a unit of analysis for the examination of sustainable practices. Instead we should be looking at the household, or, as Moisander (2007) points out, even the community as a unit of analysis for sustainability.

### *1.2.2. Rational actors vs evidence of inconsistency*

The second concern that we have with using the individual as the unit of analysis is that, as Peattie pointed out in 1999, consumers are not consistent. Having borrowed the notion of the rational, optimisation seeking consumer from Economics, we have made a range of assumptions about the extent to which (non)green behaviours can be explained by individuals, attributed to market segments and predicted by researchers. However researchers point out that many purchases are context specific and that purchase criteria can vary between purchases (McDonald et al., 2009).

#### *a) Inconsistency between attitudes and behaviours*

One of the few things that all researchers engaged in studying sustainability agree about is that there is a discrepancy between what people say they currently do, or will do in the future, and what they actually do (Belz & Peattie, 2012). This phenomenon is known as the Attitude-Behaviour Gap and it takes several forms. In a very few studies the claims (for example about amounts recycled) of a specific group are compared to the concrete outcomes of a specific initiative (e.g. Hamad, Bettinger, Cooper & Semb, 1980; Barker et al., 1994). More often however, general reporting of high levels of green attitudes, values or intentions are compared with a lack of sea changes in demand for green products generally (for a discussion of this, see Peattie, 2010 ) or a low uptake of specific sustainability activities, such as recycling (see for example, Perrin & Barton, 2001). The most common approach to studying the Attitude-Behaviour Gap is to firstly conceive of it as a negative effect that is treated as a black box in otherwise logical models of consumer behaviour (such as Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) or Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)) that must be predicted and eradicated. For a recent review of work in this area, see Caruana, Carrington & Chatzidakis (2015). We have argued elsewhere that this phenomenon is exacerbated by the convention of using self-reports in quantitative research designs (McDonald et al., 2012). As qualitative researchers we see levels of self-reported behaviour as revealing the social norms individuals feel compelled to comply with, rather than understanding them as a deliberate attempt to mislead researchers. We will return to this issue in the section on positivist approaches. In fact we believe that these norms mean that self-reported environmental values, attitudes and intentions are all over-reported as well as environmental behaviours. This is a point on which the Attitude-Behavior Gap literature is completely silent.

Researchers do tend to assume that the gap between attitudes and behaviours that they routinely uncover is the responsibility of the researched and not the researcher. This is an interesting assumption which bears some examination. It is worth bearing in mind that the self-reported behaviour that turns out to be exaggerated is not offered by respondents spontaneously. Rather it is deliberately sought out by researchers who elicit estimates of amounts, frequencies and numbers of sustainable activities from their research subjects, whilst simultaneously invoking the powerful social norms they know skew the very results they are asking for, in the moment in which they are given. In other words, the research design is not a neutral, apolitical vehicle for collecting 'truths', but a socially constructed, loaded instrument that invokes meaning and situated reaction from both the researcher and the researched. Added to this is the oft used convention of using hypothetical questions. It is common, for example, within green marketing to ask members of the public not just how often they buy organic vegetables (thus seeking self-reported behaviour) but also whether they

would pay a premium for organic vegetables. Sometimes consumers are asked to estimate how much of a premium they would pay (see Davis 2013). These research designs are going beyond self-reporting into the realms of asking the individual to imagine how they might respond in a hypothetical, future situation. Obviously, the problems that we have already discussed for self-reporting, would also hold for these hypothetical questions, but we would argue that hypothetical questions have a further set of problems. In our experience, when you ask individuals to talk about recent, actual purchases or behaviours, they tend to describe their behaviours. However when you invite them to talk about what they 'would' do they tend to give answers which describe, not actual purchases or behaviours, but idealised ones (Oates & McDonald, 2014). In other words, what the researcher using hypothetical questions is eliciting is not behaviours, but attitudes or values. The trouble is that researchers, particularly, but not exclusively, within the quantitative domain often do not distinguish between these behaviour and attitude data, conflating them and reporting them all as behaviour without reflection.

#### *b) Inconsistency between product categories*

As well as the documented inconsistencies between the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, we have uncovered other inconsistencies through our own research, which we think could be key to understanding how sustainable consumption actually takes place in practice. By asking individuals in a lot of detail about how they approached the recent purchase of technology-based products for their households, we found huge differences between the processes and purchase criteria adopted by the same people for researching and purchasing different products. Our initial reason for asking people to describe the purchase of more than one technology-based product was to build up as large a dataset as possible of detailed purchase narratives that were based on the (non) purchase of each product type. We had assumed, like others before us, that the narratives sourced from the individuals that we interviewed would surface a variety of consumer strategies that would vary *by consumer* but be roughly similar across all a single person's purchases. As marketers would predict that some purchase processes would entail higher levels of consumer involvement than others (De Pelsmacker et al., 2013), we felt that we would find differences in the way an individual approached the purchase of a refrigerator and their weekly food shopping. However, because we implicitly fell in with the notion that an individual's knowledge, attitudes and values with respect to sustainability underpin their consumer behaviour we felt it would be reasonable to expect that if someone was the sort of consumer who did a lot of research before they bought a fridge, and then based their choices on the energy performance of the appliance, that they might apply the same process and criteria to their purchase, later the same year, of a washing machine. However, by collecting multiple examples of purchases of white goods and other technology-based household products (from cars and solar panels, to music systems and green energy tariffs) what we found was that there was more similarity between the purchases made by different people in the same product category than there was between the different purchases made by the same person (McDonald et al., 2009). In other words, the same individual will approach purchases in different product categories completely differently in terms of information seeking, purchase criteria and priorities.

There could be a number of reasons for the patterns we uncovered. One might be that some of the sustainability issues are competing and need to be traded off against each other in terms of personal



sustainability priorities. For example when shopping for fruit and vegetables, an individual engaged in trying to green their lifestyle might choose to privilege fair trade vegetables over organic ones, or fruit produced locally over fair trade alternatives that have travelled more 'food miles', depending on the aspect of sustainability that they personally felt was most important. Another reason that different criteria might prevail in different product categories is that different sustainability issues are regarded as salient for different products. For example, recyclability might be an important criteria for a product packaged in a plastic bottle (such as ketchup (see Holusha (1990) for an overview of this 1990s controversy)), but less important for the purchase of a motor car. Although cars are often recyclable, most consumers would tend to view the fuel efficiency of a vehicle as a more significant environmental criterion (Moons & De Pelsmaker, 2015). The criteria that are selected for scrutiny (or not) by consumers is also heavily influenced by advertisers and retailers who privilege some information and information sources over others, as illustrated by the fact that energy ratings are heavily promoted (and thus used by consumers) to judge refrigerators, but the same is not true for televisions. This suggests that individuals acting differently in different product sectors may be a sign of a very sophisticated understanding of both sustainability and the framing of sustainability by the media, rather than the lack of it.

### *c) Inconsistency between contexts*

Evidence is also gathering of inconsistency across contexts. Researchers within the travel and tourism domain have been discussing this for some time. They have long established the fact that green views do not translate into green tourism (Budneau, 2007; Prillwitz & Barr, 2011; Higham et al., 2014), in line with parallel discussions of the Attitude-Behaviour Gap in marketing more generally. However a less emphasised variation on this theme is that the same consumer who recycles or buys fair trade or eschews car travel for their commute to work in their everyday lives can act very differently whilst on holiday (Barr et al., 2010). This moves away from the much established refrain that 'attitudes do not predict behaviour' which has attracted a great deal of academic interest from across the social sciences to a different insight: behaviours do not predict behaviours. This is not a new idea. We already know that green purchasing behaviour in one market segment (such as household cleaning products) will not predict purchasing behaviour for a different product group (such as a washing machine) (McDonald et al., 2009). However this new thread underlines a slightly more perplexing variant on this theme: the same people don't necessarily demonstrate the same behaviours if the context is different. These findings are echoed in waste management research, where we have demonstrated that the same individuals, who have well established recycling routines at home, do not translate that into recycling in their workplaces (McDonald, 2011). In her research looking at household decision-making around a wide range of sustainability issues, Scott (2009) showed that students who held strong pro-environmental attitudes and would always recycle whilst at home, failed to do so whilst living in their term-time accommodation. The reason that some of these differences have not come to light is that research tends to focus on a single context and also focus on behaviour within the domestic context (Oke, 2015).

This evidence suggests that the 'consumer' is in fact too large a unit of analysis. If people are not consistent over time, between product categories, or across contexts then we should instead, as

Peattie (2001 check) suggests be looking at individual (non) purchases as a more appropriate unit of analysis for examining sustainable behaviours. It also suggests that studying non-purchases would be as potentially revealing and valuable for marketers as studying purchases.

### *1.2.3. Individuals are conceptualised as either green or not*

Across the social sciences the language used to describe people involved in sustainability tends to suggest that individuals are either green, or not green. Thus in the social psychology literature we find discussion of voluntary simplifiers (see e.g. Etzioni, 1998) and non voluntary simplifiers (see e.g. Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Within the waste management literature, it is usual to refer to recyclers (see e.g. Vining & Ebreo, 1990) and non-recyclers (see e.g. McDonald & Oates, 2003). Although marketers are wont to differentiate between consumers who are green (or in some strands of the literature, ethical) and others who are not, there is a tendency not to define what the consumers who cannot be described as 'green consumers' or 'ethical consumers' ought to be called. This is perhaps because, in focusing on one aspect of a consumer's shopping, such as whether they buy fair trade foodstuffs, it might be considered a stretch to refer to consumers who buy fair trade as 'green' (or ethical) even if the researchers only have evidence for one element of that person's green or ethical consumption, but this is a much smaller and less offensive leap of logic that it would be to term someone who does not show any evidence of supporting fair trade a non-green or unethical consumer. This highlights the fact that calling someone a green consumer because one aspect of their consumption is green is problematic. It also suggests that marketers regard 'green consumer' as a socially acceptable label which will not offend people, and by contrast underlines the unease that marketers feel in labelling a consumer non-green or unethical (the logical opposites of these terms). Wagner (1997) uses 'grey consumer' to describe the group of consumers who are not green consumers and this is a term we have also adopted. This term can be seen as problematic because 'grey consumer' is also used in the marketing literature to signal a focus on older consumers (see for example, Carrigan, 1998). Perhaps Ottman's (2011) use of 'browns' to describe those who are not green would be a better alternative. What is important is that we do not simply leave the consumers who are not green undescribed because if we do not offer an explicit opposite for 'green consumer' or 'ethical consumer' (and therefore, if you follow the tenets of sociology, the meaning of the terms themselves) then the unspoken assumption is perhaps that the opposite is the mainstream or (in terms often used by our students) normal consumer. As green marketers, we definitely need to think through the implications of this assumption. Not least because, by extension, this is an assumption that pervades most of marketing, turning green or social marketing into a specialist concern for those colleagues keen to label themselves in this way, rather than a problem that concerns marketing as a whole discipline. In other words, green marketing is conceived of as working to serve specialist interests rather than towards a paradigm shift.

Whether the opposites of terms like 'green consumer' and 'ethical consumer' are made explicit or not, the fact remains that within these social science literatures it has become the norm to conceptualise these as two, mutually exclusive groups. There are two ways in which researchers have tried to complexify this picture. The first is by conceptualising more than two (still mutually exclusive) groups, usually placed along a continuum. For example, Prothero (1990) uses the terms 'light green' and 'dark green' and Barry (1994) examines the notions 'shallow green' and 'deep

green'. What is implied here is that people might start off in the less green groups and move gradually towards the more green groups. We have taken this approach in the past, arguing that rather than just voluntary simplifiers and non voluntary simplifiers, it was useful also to consider a middle, transitional group, that we termed beginner voluntary simplifiers (McDonald et al., 2006). The second approach is to produce typologies of green consumers which emphasise different ways of being green as opposed to different degrees of greenness. The most famous of these is probably the typology produced by Ottman (1993), based on work by the Roper Organisation (1992) which segregates individuals into two non green groups (basic browns who have non interest in green issues and grouse who feel that it is someone else's problem), two green groups (greenback greens who spend money to be green but otherwise don't change their lifestyles, and true blue greens who are very active in a range of areas) and a 'swing' group (sprouts) who are uncertain on whether to back the environment or the economy in their decision-making. Even where attempts have been made to offer multiple groups, or different positions on a continuum (such as do Paço & Raposo, 2010) there is still an implicit assumption that these groups are homogeneous: that one green consumer is like another.

In our research we have also surfaced a typology of green consumers who we distinguish from each other in terms of the ways that they are greening their lifestyles (McDonald et al., 2012). Our qualitative work uncovered people who concentrated on one (or several) specific area(s) of consumption, such as waste, or organic food (selectors), people who passively waited to be told how to respond to sustainability, but then more or less responded as directed (translators) and people with a sophisticated and active orientation to comprehensively greening their lifestyles who nevertheless allowed themselves one or more non-green exceptions (exceptors). These sorts of typologies are more meaningful because they help us to understand that different people can be equally (or perhaps better to say equivalently) green in very different ways. By emphasising the similarities of greening processes and examining *how* people are greening, rather than *what* they are greening, it is possible to draw out similarities within groups of people that are meaningful for marketers but still allow for an appreciation of the heterogeneity of individual experiences. This rather goes against the quantitative research conventions embedded within segmentation approaches and we will come back to this issue when we discuss the limitations of quantitative approaches in section 2.

To characterize individuals (or households, or purchases) as green or not green is an increasingly unrealistic shortcut in thinking. Over the course of our research it is becoming harder and harder to find people who have no sustainable behaviours at all. It is still possible to find people who have wholly anti-sustainability attitudes, of course, but since social norms across Europe around recycling have changed beyond recognition and some decisions are being taken out of consumers' hands (such as Cadbury making all of its product offerings with fair trade chocolate and the EU law changes making it impossible to buy incandescent light bulbs) it is less and less likely that we will find European consumers who have no green elements in their lifestyles, whether they like it or not. Equally, no matter how hard a household tries to reduce its environmental impact or control its carbon emissions, it is very hard indeed wholly to embrace sustainability in the context of Western capitalism without seeking the kinds of self-sufficiency and off-grid living that would permit households to live without earning income and interacting with society. The research that underpins our typology (McDonald et al., 2012) helped us to re-examine this assumption that people are 'green' or 'grey' (or any other set of poles on a continuum) and understand that every one of us is

caught in a tension between green and grey, or perhaps between social pressures to be green and social pressures to ignore green. Equally, it underlined the need to conceptualise everyone, even very committed green consumers, or the most cynical 'browns' as being in the process of greening whether this process is conscious and willing or not.

#### *1.2.4. A shift in how we conceptualise individuals approaching sustainability*

In section 1.2.1. we reflected that since consumption, use and disposal are located at the household, rather than individual, level that the consumer is too small a unit of analysis. In section 1.2.2. we argued that because consumers do not necessarily act on their espoused values and are not consistent over time, between product categories or across contexts that the consumer is too large a unit of analysis. In section 1.2.3. we pointed out that because no one is wholly 'green' or 'not green' but rather caught between the two, it doesn't make sense to think of any person or purchase in these terms. Taken together, what we are proposing is that the individual is both too small and too large a unit of analysis for researching sustainability. We suggest that what is needed instead is analysis at the level of the stream of (probably inconsistent) individual purchases and activities but examined in the context of whole households, or even communities. We further suggest that this requires a dynamic rather than static understanding of 'green' which will need to be supported by research that looks at these households over time.

This view of greening raises a number of quite profound critiques of the extant marketing literature. For example, research which centres on the notion of the Attitude-Behaviour gap is assuming that there is, or could be, a relationship between an individual's attitudes (or in some work, values/beliefs) and their behaviour. However our discussion of inconsistencies demonstrates that this is unlikely to be the case as we have demonstrated in previous work that the same people act differently over time, between product types and across different contexts. If there was a straightforward relationship between attitudes and behaviours then you would expect to find that people tended to make the same, or similar decisions each time, approach the purchase of different product types in roughly equivalent ways and transfer their behaviour in one part of their lives (home) to other parts (such as work). So this reconceptualization represents a rejection of the assumptions that much of the work that discussions of the Attitude-Behaviour Gap is based upon. This will include popular models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Theory of Reasoned Action which have been widely used in green consumer behaviour research (see Armitage & Connor, 2001 for a review) and these insights suggest that a careful review of the usefulness of this kind of work for understanding greening would be appropriate.

This reconceptualization offers an important insight into the problems associated with another major area of marketing endeavour: the quest to identify (and then segment) the green consumer. There is a vast academic literature and a great deal of practitioner market research aimed at trying to pin down the green consumer using demographics, psychographics and socio-demographics. The intent is clear: If you can identify them, you can segment and then target them with green products or services. This is seen as an important endeavour both for those designing green products and services and for those trying to promote their uptake. Here, the idea of maintaining consumption levels is still pursued as the goal, but now with alternative products. There is some agreement amongst commentators that this endeavour has been somewhat less than successful (Peattie, 2010;

Straughan and Roberts, 1999; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003). The challenges presented to the notion of a 'green consumer' outlined here help to explain this failure to identify such a creature. In other words, the inability of all the studies of demographics and psychographics and socio-demographics to identify the green consumer is not really a failure: it is a resounding endorsement of the points made here.

Problems of conceptualising the individual as the unit of analysis are not however confined to quantitative approaches. With the emphasis on the individual interview as the research approach of choice within the qualitative research community, this assumption has also been allowed to go largely unquestioned within many qualitative studies. This technique also allows an implicit privileging of the individual viewpoint, an acceptance that the espoused narratives will represent actual rather than idealised accounts (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) of pro-sustainability behaviours and provides the researcher the opportunity to use the account of one person as a proxy for understanding the behaviours of a household in the same way as a quantitative study would.

Returning to the earlier discussion of how to label people engaged in sustainable consumption, having considered the problems of using individuals as a unit of analysis it demonstrates the assumptions framing terms such as 'green consumer' or 'ethical consumer' which both assume and perpetuate the norm of making individuals the focus of our inquiry. In order to move away from this mindset, terms like 'sustainable consumption', 'greening' or even 'green behaviour' are more appropriate, although they still have problems of association ('consumption' precludes production and disposal; 'green' suggests only environmental aspects) for a conceptualisation of sustainability research which is concerned with (inconsistent) streams of activities set within shared household contexts. Despite this, 'greening' has the advantage of signalling the dynamic and incomplete nature of change and also highlights the notion of process rather than implicitly emphasising the role of values as 'green consumer' does. New terms like 'sustainable behaviours' or 'sustainable practices' (Black & Cherrier, 2010) are even more neutral, and we suggest therefore useful, in this respect.

### *1.3. The emphasis is on consumption*

The second problem with the term 'consumer' is that it implies an emphasis on consumption (or even just purchase) (McDonald & Oates, 2006) rather than seeing it as part of a much larger, integrated, interdependent system of production, consumption (including both purchase and use), and disposal (Alevizou, 2011). The preoccupation with the point of purchase is a natural one for marketing as an academic domain. It is also broadly in keeping with the norms of free-market capitalism where the consumer is the key figure at the meeting point between the forces of supply and demand. Even in the broader focused domains of social marketing and public policy, the consumer is often depicted as a key instrument of change, shouldering the responsibility for changing the world through their personal agency and their purchasing power. It could be argued that although many marketing literatures are silent on the issues of production, and disposal, this falls outside the scope of their domain. There are of course whole other literatures dedicated to production. There are green debates within the design, production, quality, energy and supply chain management literatures, to name a few. The same is true of disposal, with separate, well developed environmental literatures in the field of waste management. These do tend to focus on technical aspects and are predominantly quantitative in nature. Perhaps because social sciences such as

marketing are seen as taking care of the problem of the consumer, and perhaps because they are heavily grounded in the norms of natural science, production (and to some extent disposal) is seen as neutral and unproblematic and as something that is ultimately caused by the (bad) consumer.

It is important to focus research on specific parts of this whole, but it is equally important not to lose sight of the fact that they are just that: parts of a whole. We will argue in the next section that researchers have been keen to implement positivist conventions of simplifying reality in order to research it, and reducing systems to their constituent parts in order to study them, but we have forgotten that they are positivist conventions and that they do not represent our social reality: we have forgotten to put them back together and see individual studies, and even individual disciplines as pieces of a much bigger jigsaw.

## **2. Positivist approaches**

Positivist understandings of economic behaviour have been translated for greening. So for example, consumers' decisions are imagined to be consistent and rational. As we have discussed already, both of these assumptions are unhelpful in the study of sustainability. They are also assumed to be apolitical.

Positivist approaches are evident throughout marketing thinking about sustainability at the micro, practical level of individual research designs. For example, our earlier discussion about surveying individuals, asking them what they recycle and then mapping their demographic, psychographic or socio-demographic characteristics against self-reports of behaviour demonstrates a number of positivist assumptions that are problematic for understanding sustainability. The assumption that self-reported behaviour (or in the willingness to pay literature, intention to act in a hypothetical situation) will approximate actual behaviour is one made out of a wish to a) simplify the situation and b) make it researchable using a survey. We contend that the question should not be: how can we frame a research question that can be answered using a survey; but rather, what do we need to know about recycling habits and what research instrument would best approach these issues. What is problematic here is that it is a convention that has become largely unquestioned in the marketing, and wider management literature. However even a cursory reflection on whether self-reported behaviour or hypothetical questions will be an accurate representation of actual behaviour would lead most of us to see this as an unconvincing conflation of intention with behaviour. The other positivist convention at work here is to conflate behaviour with intention. In other words, if someone recycles, we 'count' them as a recycler without any knowledge of their intentions. In a study of plastics recycling in the 90s (McDonald & Ball, 1998), a questionnaire was developed to ask people about their recycling habits. Five hundred people were stopped in the street and asked about their perceptions of different materials, their recycling of these same materials and some classification data were gathered relating to their age, gender, employment, and income level. Imagine that one of the authors of this chapter had answered these questions. A picture might be painted from their data of an informed and committed recycler. And this would be more or less an accurate and appropriate description. However imagine now that one of our long suffering partners was stopped in the street and asked the same questions. Their reported recycling behaviour is excellent, as befits a person living with an informed and committed recycler. However the question of whether they would have developed these recycling activities independently is something that a

survey recording their behaviour and collecting their classification data cannot inform. The effect that their classification data will have on the aggregate picture of 'who recycles' will be to contribute to a misleading view of the recycler. Equally, if someone refuses to be part of a kerbside paper recycling scheme we might decide that they are a 'non-recycler' without realising that they have decided to share a paper bin with their neighbour in order to minimise the environmental impact of the council collecting two half full bins (McDonald & Oates 2003). This is best explained with reference to a different study. We found that two people can buy the same very energy efficient fridge in the same city, with a similar amount of background research within a few months of each other for an identical price, but do so with very different intentions, criteria and, ultimately meanings attached to these purchases. One might select the fridge for its A++ energy rating, whilst the other might buy it because it matches his kitchen. Annoyingly these fridge shoppers could even belong to the same household and be relating the (completely different) stories of how they came to buy the same fridge. This is not a problem for a qualitative study like ours, trying to understand how people buy fridges (Young et al., 2010) because we accept that the fridge has simultaneous, contested meanings and that there is no single 'true' story of how it came to be purchased. However it is easy to see how a researcher looking at the results of a quantitative survey could record the A++ fridge as an environmental purchase, associating this with the demographic characteristics of only the survey participant and conflating behaviours with intentions. People carry out sustainable actions for a whole host of reasons. They cycle to work to keep fit rather than reduce carbon, they eat organic food for taste reasons, not caring whether they reduce the use of pesticides. We have even found that many people who start 'green' businesses do so because they see it as an entrepreneurial opportunity rather than because they have environmental values (Gan, 2010). The simplification of concepts required to operationalise research questions through a questionnaire and the habit of conflating intentions and behaviours conspire to make data collection less meaningful in these situations. Further, a reliance on quantitative instruments has long masked problems with individuals as a unit of analysis, as discussed above.

There is also evidence of positivist assumptions running through the field of marketing at a macro level. It is our view that a positivistic drive to dissect and simplify complex problems has reinforced the fragmentation in the ways in which we study sustainability issues. Once split up at the level of individual approaches to specific activities (for example by studying only purchasing of fair trade coffee, or only the recycling of plastics in the UK) this is compounded by the need to undertake a degree of simplification of the problem so that individual components can be reliably measured, and their relationships modelled. Within this reductionist approach there is an implicit assumption that the pieces can be put back together, but often this is never attempted. There is a conspicuous dearth of sensemaking work which seeks to stand back and look at how all the incremental measuring and modelling activity actually looks as a body of explanation within each fragment of the literature, let alone how each of the fragments fits together. Worse, we suspect that if this was attempted that we would find that the sum was in fact much less than the sum of its parts. This is at least in part due to the faulty positivistic assumptions that activity in one realm might be thought of as 'equivalent' to activity in another. Quantitative researchers hope that at worst this will mean that what we learn about recycling will transfer to the purchase of ethical bank accounts, and at best the presence of activity in one domain will allow the prediction of activity in another. However qualitative approaches demonstrate that this is simply not the case (McDonald et al., 2012).

Throughout a number of the marketing discourses surrounding the green consumer, the failure to identify the green consumer and/or predict their behaviour has been implicitly understood as a failing on the part of the green (or not-so-green) consumer. In the work on Attitude-Behaviour Gap, for example, when these models such as TPB and TRA fail to explain or predict consumer behaviour it is often implied that consumers are over-reporting their intentions. Sometimes this is portrayed in a relatively neutral way, depicting consumers as subject to social pressures to be 'seen to be green' or as exaggerating in order to please the (presumably green) researcher as part of a natural social process of emphasising what you have in common with those with whom you interact. Sometimes, though the implication is framed (but never stated) more negatively: consumers do not answer surveys honestly; consumers say they are green but they are too lazy/uncaring/selfish/short-termist/miserly to actually do what they have said they will.

Related to this is the reaction of the research community to research like ours which surfaces the inconsistencies in individual behaviour. Reporting of inconsistencies is often met with the assumption from our peers that we regard this as a negative finding: that inconsistency is bad. There is of course no reason to assume that inconsistency is negative, but it is a positivist convention to assume that consistency (predictability) is positive and inconsistency is therefore not. Flowing from this assumption, as a field we tend to read these as inconsistencies as due to some lack in the consumer, such as a lack of complete knowledge, a lack of capacity to take a large number of complex factors into account, or simply (and more neutrally) a lack of agency associated with financial or other constraints. In fact we suggest (from a qualitative perspective) that these are not evidence that the inconsistent consumer is bad, but that instead it may speak to the importance that context plays on sustainability decisions. Equally it suggests that methods of inquiry based on assumptions of rational actors that concern themselves with developing models with causality at their heart that have the ability to predict behaviour might not be best suited to the work of examining sustainability.

These negative framings of the consumer are interesting to us because they suggest that researchers (and policy makers) lay the blame for the lack of green consumption at the door of the consumers. In fact we suggest that there is another type of 'failure' which is not being considered. If research is not identifying and explaining green behaviour, might that not in part be a failure of the research design? We suggest that this disconnect between the theory and reality of green consumption can at least be partly explained by the problems of relying on positivist assumptions about behaviour and using positivist research instruments for the task of researching green behaviour. This lack of critical reflection about the limitations of our own assumptions and approaches is linked to the problem, set out in the next section, of privileging the researcher perspective.

### **3. Privileging the researcher perspective**

Within the social science discourses surrounding sustainable consumption there is an explicit privileging of the view of sustainability that is framed by the assumptions and needs of the academy. This is of course inevitable because the discourses are produced by and intended for fellow academics. However some of the assumptions implicit in this framing are worth highlighting because of the effects that they have on the research that is and can be done on sustainable consumption. We will consider two main issues here: the academic lens and the structures of the academy.



### *The academic lens*

When academics enter the field they bring social science terms for the things they see. This can help by tying the phenomena they observe back to wider debates, however it can also hinder the progress of the field. Following an immersion in the plastics recycling literature, a waste management academic would be forgiven for developing a tendency for naming bottles according to the names of the polymers used to manufacture them. Those commonly present in UK domestic waste are PET, PVC, LDPE and HDPE. On entering the field however she might learn that consumers, who do not purchase plastic bottles in order to own them, but rather to consume their contents know them by what they contain (coke bottles, water bottles, milk bottles, and washing up liquid bottles), or by where they are stored within the household (bathroom bottles, kitchen bottles). The assumption that the naming of things belongs to academics is a positivist one (see section X) and can hamper dialogue within the field, weakening research results and dissemination of research findings to the field, reducing its impact on practice.

In fact inductive research with householders in Sheffield led us to the revelation that although as academics we conceive of recycling as a green activity, an everyday act of green consumerism (or even green activism) our respondents understood it quite differently: as housework (Oates & McDonald, 2002). Similarly, although production, consumption and disposal might all seem like separate issues to an academic and thus be reported in different and separate literatures we find that these are not understood or treated as separate issues by consumers (McDonald & Oates, 2006) who see traces of the whole system embedded in the products and services they select. So in a real life decision-making process the energy efficiency of production, the ethics of the retailer, the organic status of the product and the recyclability of the packaging might all be considered simultaneously, or traded off against each other for a single purchase.

### *The structure of the academy*

We have already alluded to the fact that there is a high degree of fragmentation of research into various aspects of sustainability across the social sciences. Some of the divisions of labour that have grown up within disciplines and between literatures seem quite straightforward and understandable. It is easy to see the logic of writing about purchasing behaviours in the marketing literature, but discuss recycling activity in the waste management literature. However others seem more arbitrary to the casual observer. For example, discussions about holiday travel are situated in the travel and tourism literature but journeys related to commuting are considered in the transport literature. This leaves us wondering what happens to studies of academics traveling to far flung destinations in order to attend sustainability conferences as this would be work-related travel which could not be considered commuting. Similarly, studies of recycling at home can be found in the waste management literature but studies of recycling at work are part of the Organizational Citizenship Behaviour literature, which is part of Organizational Behaviour, a strand of the Management literature. And if your purchasing behaviour is related to a green energy tariff you should expect to find this discussed, not in the marketing literature alongside a myriad of other purchasing behaviours, but in the energy literature. As previously mentioned, there is also a

disconnect between literature which considers the environmental aspects of the production, purchase, use and disposal of the same object. So the chances of anyone putting together any kind of big picture from this wealth of knowledge is quite small and it is beginning to look like the work in these areas is parallel and not cumulative.

Just to complicate the issue further, these issue-specific debates are underpinned by a variety of base disciplines including social psychology, geography, management, marketing and social marketing. Each of these disciplines favours slightly different research conventions. This can be illustrated by the somewhat trivial example of the range of labels that are used to describe people engaged in sustainability activities. Some of these labels are discipline specific; for example, they are referred to as green consumers in the mainstream marketing literature and ethical consumers in the ethics literature and the sustainable development literature, as discussed above. In other parts of the literature they are variously termed voluntary simplifiers (McDonald et al., 2006), downshifter (Nelson, Rademacher & Paek, 2007), ecologically conscious consumers (ECC) (Roberts & Bacon, 1997) or citizen consumers (Scammell, 2003). Terms used to describe their behaviours include: Environmentally Responsible Behaviours (ERBs) (De Young, 2000); pro-environmental behaviours (Steg & Vlek, 2009); Organizational Citizenship Behaviours (Daily, Bishop & Govindarajulu, 2009) and ecological consumer behaviour (Fraj & Martinez, 2007). This plethora of terms is unhelpful, as previously discussed, at a conceptual level, but also, importantly, at a practical level. It is simply very difficult to find work from disciplines other than your own because searching won't necessarily pick them up if you don't already know what terms they use.

These are all ways of dividing the debates and although they are helpful to academics in that they reduce the scope of the field making the vast and unruly literature which is relevant to sustainable consumption more manageable in terms of the individual paper, ultimately this false partitioning of the field (through discipline boundaries and language) is unhelpful because it stops the insights garnered in one academic's work flowing through the whole community of scholars engaged in sustainability research. This means that we are channelled into tackling the problem of greening as a series of separate activities. It also means that we are reinventing the wheel. The alternative is cross disciplinary scholarship which means either teams of social scientists or large (career slowing) investments by individuals in many literatures.

The problem of compartmentalizing discipline based fragments of the sustainability debate is reinforced by the institutional structures in the academy. In many disciplines (Business & Management and Marketing among them) the emphasis is on the peer-reviewed journal article as the most privileged form of output (Wells, 2010). This means that all of our insights need to be delivered in circa 8,000 word fragments. Other, less constrained vehicles for the dissemination of research ideas such as books are much less valued within some academic disciplines and will not win an individual who writes them the peer esteem or publication record required to access any of the career rewards available from appointments panels, promotions boards and funding bodies. For some disciplines (again, we speak from a position of familiarity with the Marketing and Business & Management literatures) it is not sufficient to constrain researchers in terms of the type of output that is acceptable, but there is also a privileging of journals that are considered to be within discipline. This discourages individuals from publishing in (and therefore reading and engaging with) research written by researchers outside their immediate field. With increasing competition for publications in the top journals, journals have become gatekeepers for academic success. They

privilege work which is squarely within their discipline norms and it becomes very difficult to publish multi-disciplinary work, or work which steps outside or challenges those norms. This makes the very kind of work that is needed to address problems of sustainability the very kind of work that you would not recommend to your colleagues in career progression terms.

The game becomes to publish papers on sustainable consumption rather than to solve the problems of sustainable consumption.

#### **4. In summary:**

In summary then, what we are saying is that ***pro-sustainability attitudes (or intentions) will not predict pro-sustainability behaviour***. Although we have argued that research designs conflate attitudes and behaviours and that the approaches to recording and 'measuring' these are both flawed, we are suggesting that even if we resolved these methodological and empirical issues, researchers would still not find a strong correlation between attitudes and behaviours. This is not a novel statement. It has been borne out by the cumulative efforts of 40 years of social psychology and green consumer behaviour research and is conceptualised within these literatures as the Attitude-Behaviour Gap. However we further suggest that evidence of ***pro-sustainability behaviour will not predict pro-sustainability attitudes***. It is misleading to interpret statistics about the use of public transport or the purchase of organic food as evidence of a greening population, as we have demonstrated here with illustrative anecdotes from our own research. Crucially though, we would also maintain that emerging evidence from the research of others, as well as ourselves shows that ***pro-sustainability behaviour will not predict pro-sustainability behaviour*** over time, between product categories or across contexts. Thus whilst we are saying that segmentation approaches have been deeply flawed methodologically we suggest that the deeper understanding of greening strategies and the meanings and minutiae of sustainable practices that our work represents present a more profound, epistemological and ontological challenge to extant approaches to green marketing. It is not that segmentation approaches and assumptions about the ability of marketers to interest a consumer engaged in one 'green' activity to take up another are just badly designed: it is that they are wholly irrelevant. And that this is partly made inevitable by the very structures and practices of the academic institutions of which we are all a part.

#### **5. No through road: moving forward**

Based on the cumulative insights from work done by ourselves and others whose approaches have kinship with our own, this critical reflection on the norms and assumptions of marketing as a discipline and as an academy suggests a number of ways forward for researching sustainability. As will be evident from the discussion that follows, these should be viewed as inter-dependent.

We suggest that debates about what to call what we do are not trivial: these terms underpin our conceptualisations going forward and profoundly affect the research we design and the questions we can ask, and cannot ask. In terms of how to label our research endeavours in the field of sustainability, in light of our discussions about the connotations of specific terms, the plethora of naming conventions, the problems inherent in framing sustainability at the level of the individual,

the need to capture decisions not to buy as well as to buy, and to understand (non)purchases as part of a wider system of production, consumption and disposal, we suggest using 'sustainable practices' as a more inclusive term which is also appropriate with respect to both unit and level of analysis. This is in line with our belief that there is a need for sustainability research to make a conceptual and practical shift towards **households (or even communities) as a stream of (inconsistent) practices**. 'Practices' infers a link with a sociological framing of the problems raised by sustainability and this we think is a helpful conceptualisation as it underlines the need for understanding the wider context (social norms) as well as the immediate contexts (households, organisations, communities) within which practices are set. Thinking of practices as the unit of analysis will also help researchers engage with sustainability as part of the private, every day, habitual, unquestioned domestic sphere of a household's existence, rather than conceiving of it as a series of miniature acts of public activism. Further it suggests a need to study actions and meanings in a lot of detail (Fuentes, 2014). This work is best suited to qualitative approaches, at least until such times as strong theoretical frameworks can be offered by the grounded, crafting of theories from data relating to actual behaviours, or decisions not to act. Qualitative approaches are not perfect, of course, and as discussed above, have also tended to focus on the individual as a unit of analysis, but they offer the opportunity to move us away from blind attempts at measurement, at least until we understand what we are measuring. An important part of moving away from quantitative approaches will be finally letting go of the implicit positivist assumptions that individuals are rational, consistent and predictable.

The next big challenge for researchers is to begin to take a much wider range of research into account. Although there will always be a place for focused, single activity research in order for us to understand the challenges of sustainability at a detailed level, there is also a need to join up the results of these individual studies in order to see a bigger picture and be able to move the whole field(s) forward. This means looking at sustainability holistically, as it is viewed by households: as an infuriating set of contradictory, overlapping and inter-dependent, socially constrained and globally expressed set of issues, rather than isolating specific activities, or privileging production, consumption or disposal phases. In order to do this **it will be necessary to look across literatures** and therefore activities and at the same time across activities and therefore literatures. It will mean reading, and even publishing outside our own narrow disciplines. This is a tall order for researchers practically, because of the sheer volume of research and the myriad of terms and approaches used, but also politically and personally, because it will surely slow down the rate of their personal output and complexify the process of publication significantly. This will have an inevitable impact on progression and promotion for the individuals who attempt it. These are sacrifices that many individuals may not be able or prepared to make on a personal level. One possible way to ameliorate these effects is through genuinely multidisciplinary approaches designed by teams of academics representing wide ranges of disciplines and approaches. This will allow individual researchers to harness insights from different issues and cut down the investments required by individuals to reach a big picture view that incorporates multiple literatures and streams of research practices.

As a research community we would do well to deal with the question of the locus of responsibility for change in a more explicit manner. We need to begin by chasing out the notions implicit in our language that individuals are bad. Of course the cumulative effect of individual behaviour is to blame for the predicament we find ourselves in at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But **individuals are not bad** they are just not rational or consistent and are acting in accord with powerful social norms (see for example, work on the Dominant Social Paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997)). It is

economics that is wrong here, not people: rationality is a simplification too far. (Un)sustainable practices are very complex and cannot be understood without understanding the contexts they operate through and within. Consumers are not to 'blame' for the problem of non/partial compliance. Neither are they the only locus for solutions and change, despite the assumptions of a free-market society. Individuals, households and communities do need to change. However institutional structures and ***social norms also need to change*** as these constrain practices both conceptually and practically. This is not an easy thing to do, but there are a few examples of success that we can look to for inspiration. Norms have recently been tackled by placing *real* constraints upon the consumer through simply taking less sustainable options out of the marketplace. This has been accomplished both by large organisations (such as Cadbury changing all its chocolate to fair trade) and by Governments (such as the European Union ban on light bulbs that are not energy efficient, or the Scottish Government ban on retailers supplying free carrier bags). However they can also be tackled by placing *cultural* constraints on the consumer. Looking at the fact that smoking in the UK has gone from a ubiquitous, socially accepted behaviour to a socially derided act of the few shows us that it can be done, and that there is a very real role for marketers in achieving this. Once researchers start to look at actual practices rather than (or as well as) espoused values/attitudes/behaviours they can move beyond asking 'what is the difference between attitudes and behaviours' to asking 'why are attitudes and behaviours different'. This will need an examination of current behaviour as a stream of (non)actions set within a social context that is bound by pervasive, unquestioned and invisible norms. We need to treat gaps between attitudes and behaviours as signs of these norms at play rather than misinterpreting them as laziness or stupidity on behalf of the consumer.

The path that our collective, unexamined assumptions have ushered us down has turned out to be a dead end street. We have done our best to examine it in minute detail. We have learned a lot but essentially we are looking in the wrong place. It is time to admit that we have navigated into a cul-de-sac and look together for new paths.

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