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Article:

"I'm not a tree hugger, I'm just like you': Changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles

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'I'm not a tree hugger, I'm just like you': Changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles

Abstract

For many in the Western world there is increasing recognition of the fundamentally unsustainable nature of the everyday actions and modes of consumption that form part of normal life. Some individuals attempt to challenge current ways of consuming and living in order to address these underlying issues. However, these efforts often continue to be positioned as unusual or unconventional, meaning that adopting sustainable lifestyles may be subject to wider negative perceptions. At the same time, some forms of action toward sustainable ways of living are becoming increasingly normalised as more people make moves toward sustainable consumption. Drawing on data from the qualitative longitudinal Energy Biographies project, we consider the experiences of those who describe their efforts to live sustainably, the relationship between sustainability and normality, and what the implications of this might be in a context of fundamental trends toward unsustainable social systems.

Introduction

The term 'sustainable lifestyle' has gained increasing traction in recent years in relation to debates about energy and climate change (see Evans, 2010). This is strongly evident within UK policy; for example, the UK government Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in 2011 issued a framework for sustainable lifestyles, which aims to identify best practice and influence behaviour. Environmental issues have seldom received the level of attention that they are currently experiencing in the popular media; exposure to such issues now pervades many elements of everyday life. Citizens are regularly exhorted to

participate in a series of environmental actions to 'help' the environment, from recycling waste and reducing personal car use to saving energy or water in the home (Barr et al., 2011). This focus on sustainable lifestyles has come under criticism for its connotations of individual responsibility, and for offering only very limited purchase on processes of broader socio-cultural change (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009; Butler, 2010). To date, however, few studies have dealt with questions about how those engaged in sustainable lifestyles perceive their efforts in the context of broader change and situate them in relation to wider societal trends. In this paper, we seek to address these questions through analysis of case biographies pertaining to two participants that self-identified as being engaged in sustainable lifestyles.

Despite the pervasiveness of the term and the policy attention given to changing personal behaviour, there remains little consensus as to what a sustainable lifestyle actually involves. For example, Spaargaren (2003) suggests that green lifestyles are composed of lifestyle segments or sectors that make variable contributions to the net environmental impact of the lifestyle of the individual human agent. Drawing on Giddens (1991), Evans (2010, and with Abrahamse, 2009) conceptualises lifestyles as the assemblage of social practices that represent a particular way of life. Lifestyles are thus not necessarily consistently sustainable across social practices but indicate *an effort* to live and consume sustainably.

Alternatively, some existing research has explored notions of sustainable lifestyles in relation to consumption. For example, Soper (2008) argues that we are seeing the emergence of a counter-consumerist trend, based on disenchantment with consumerist lifestyles and an alternative conception of the good life, evidenced in 'downshifting' narratives exemplified in contemporary television programmes (also Thomas, 2008). Both Soper and Thomas frame this trend in terms of 'alternative hedonism', which involves a rejection of consumerism and

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related environmentally-destructive lifestyles in favour of alternative pleasures, such as a slower and more peaceful life. Consequently, sustainable lifestyles are not just about consuming differently but also involve different relationships to the environment, resources and one another (Hobson, 2002).

Despite these changes, debate continues as to whether living a sustainable lifestyle is a mainstream concept. Some research has suggested that normality is often equated with unsustainability (Hards, 2011). On an everyday level, Shove (2003) explores the collective dynamics of normalisation in relation to unsustainable practices and resource consumption taking indoor comfort and cleanliness as examples. Rettie et al. (2011) found that although participants recognised flying for foreign holidays as not green, they regarded it as a normal part of modern life and something they would not contemplate changing. Conversely, others have suggested that social norms indicate support for environmentally friendly activities (Barr et al., 2011). For example, a report by the Task Force on Sustainable Lifestyles (2010) suggests 'sustainable lifestyles' is no longer a niche concept but is increasingly becoming part of mainstream thinking. There is also evidence of increasing interest in sustainable living and alternatives to mainstream living, such as ecovillages (Miller and Bentley, 2012). Miller and Bentley suggest that it may be possible for some principles of ecovillage life to be transferred to the mainstream. They contend that sustainability visits, enabling people to try a low-impact lifestyle without commitment, might help to engage people with possibilities for adopting these practices. Similarly, Anderson (2007) argues that rather than representing an escape from the mainstream, alternative sustainable communities can act as important 'encounter spaces' which offer vital opportunities for people to engage with sustainability.

The debate on sustainable lifestyles is further informed by studies that have considered the position of green niches and their relationship or translation to the mainstream. For example, Smith (2006) explores organic food as an established green niche, discussing the way wider interest in it has correlated with tensions in conventional farming and food processes (e.g. the BSE crisis). Smith concludes that the relationship between niche and mainstream is dialectic as developments in each will be carried out with reference to the other. Similarly, Rettie et al. (2011) describe a process of 'social normalisation' in which green products and activities (such as recycling) gradually become accepted as mainstream, showing how what is regarded as 'normal' changes over time and across the lifecourse (also Hards, 2011). This suggests the importance of considering how sustainable lifestyles may be differently regarded. For example, in their interviews with women about anti-consumption for sustainability, Black and Cherrier (2010) discovered that despite performing what could be considered 'radical' behaviours in aid of conservation, respondents rejected labels like 'tree-hugger'. The authors suggest that fear of being seen as outside the mainstream restricted the performance of some practices. Similarly, Bedford et al., (2004) argue that where environmental actions are not the norm, it is unlikely that the individual will act in accordance with personal environmental values, as people continue to distance themselves from negative connotations of environmentalism (e.g. being perceived as hippies). Moreover, some research has indicated a classed dimension to environmentalism and sustainability (e.g. Paddock, 2009), thus it is important to acknowledge that what is considered normal or desirable is likely to vary across social groups.

Bedford et al. (2004) contend that people will resist making changes to their lifestyle if they feel that their quality of life will be reduced. Therefore perceptions that some forms of sustainable living involve deprivation and hardship may limit the adoption of sustainable

lifestyles. Consequently, we argue that changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles may be crucial for understanding the enactment and wider up-take of such ways of living. We use the term 'changing perceptions' to reflect how our participants thought that other people's views of their sustainable lifestyle practices had changed over time. This is particularly significant given the importance placed within policy on shifting to more sustainable lifestyles, including high levels of energy demand reduction (e.g. Department of Energy and Climate Change, 2011).

This paper speaks to the themes outlined here by considering the experiences of those who have made efforts to adopt sustainable lifestyles across two very different communities in the UK. By exploring these individual stories in detail, we illustrate the challenges involved in people's efforts to engage with sustainability, and elucidate how perceptions of their actions have changed over time, demonstrating movement in the relationship between 'green' lifestyles and the mainstream. In concluding, we explore the implications of the analysis for thinking about transitions to sustainable lifestyles in contemporary Britain.

The study

Data for this paper come from the qualitative longitudinal Energy Biographies project, which aims to explore people's current energy use in the context of personal lifecourse trajectories and across the different spaces people inhabit in and through their everyday lives. Within four case site areas in the UK, interviews were conducted with individuals on three occasions over a one year period. Interviews were semi-structured and covered a range of issues related to participants' lives and energy use, for example; reflections on past experiences and lifecourse transitions, current community contexts and relationships, and anticipated future trajectories.

Between interviews, participants were involved in multimodal activities designed to evoke further insights into energy use as part of the lifecourse. In total, 74 people participated in first round interviews and a sub-sample of 36 took part in subsequent interviews and activities.

The four project case site areas represent a continuum from niche to mainstream according to the presence of energy system and lifestyle interventions. We understand *niche case sites* as distinct areas signifying the presence of 'niche innovations, or spaces where things are done differently' (Hielscher et al. 2011:4) and *mainstream* case sites as areas containing more 'conventional' ways of living. In this paper we focus on two of the project case sites. The first is Peterston-Super-Ely, an affluent commuter village on the outskirts of Cardiff, which sits towards the centre of our continuum. The village has a green group that meets regularly and has undertaken a number of activities and campaigns in the local area in relation to energy and environment. In addition to the promotion of solar photovoltaics (PV), the group also undertakes activities such as litter picks, wildlife walks and is establishing a community orchard. The second case site we include is the Lammas Tir-y-Gafel ecovillage in Pembrokeshire, at the niche end of our spectrum. Ecovillage residents are living off-grid, building homes from sustainable materials and have land-based livelihoods. The site is unique as the first of its kind in the UK to receive planning permission, which requires residents to meet 75% of their basic needs from the land within 5 years[1].

These cases were selected for the insights they provide into the experiences of individuals who explicitly articulated their attempts to live sustainably for several years. This is not to suggest participants in the project's other case site areas did not also adopt lifestyles that could be considered sustainable, but that they did not describe them in this way. As we

consider later, participants across our case sites were also differently resourced to engage with sustainability initiatives. Whilst Peterston residents ostensibly live relatively conventionally, some have made efforts to engage with sustainability in many areas of their lives. In contrast, the ecovillage lifestyle is a more unconventional one, which comes with particular expectations about residents' commitment to sustainability.

For each site we draw on case biographies, an approach in qualitative longitudinal research that offers a way of achieving in-depth analysis of particular cases to bring insights pertinent to wider social life (e.g. see Thomson, 2007 on case histories and Butler et al., 2014 for further discussion of our case biography approach). This approach enables us to foreground the longitudinal biographical experiences of individual participants in order to illustrate how narratives emerge over time in their account (Shirani and Henwood, 2011), in this case, in relation to sustainable lifestyles. In our analysis, we focus primarily on two male participants who have explicitly articulated their attempts to live a sustainable lifestyle over a period of time, in order to consider how this has been differently supported across their lifecourse. Although some research has indicated a gender difference in environmental concern, the varying evidence has been described as controversial (Autio et al., 2009). However, similar to the approach of Autio et al. (2009) we have chosen to focus on the selected participants because their accounts provided some of the most detailed reflections on changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles, rather than selecting them on the basis of gender.

The accumulation of data in qualitative longitudinal research arguably provides a better understanding of the individual (Thomson and Holland 2003), offering a more substantial base for understanding a person's life and the changes throughout than a one-off approach. Subsequently, we bring together data from across three interviews to facilitate a layering,

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thickening or accumulation of detail, which helps to further situate the accounts. We also interweave extracts from others in the same case site areas to provide further illumination of sentiments expressed. As such we seek to emphasise the detail and complexity in individual accounts whilst demonstrating awareness of how they are situated within the wider dataset (Thomson, 2009). This approach enables us to explore personal experiences and to draw on these accounts as a window onto wider social change by eliciting issues of broader significance (Yates, 2003). In the following, pseudonyms are used and in order to maintain anonymity some detail is omitted.

Data: Changing perceptions of sustainability?

Peterston - Jeremy

For several years, Jeremy, now in his 60s, has been living in Peterston-Super-Ely with his wife and children, and commuting to professional employment in Cardiff. This rural living contrasts with much of his childhood and early adult life living in inner-city areas where there was 'not a blade of grass in sight', and was motivated by wanting a large garden. Early in the first interview Jeremy described himself as an 'environmentalist', an outlook he feels has been consistent throughout his life.

> 'I've been an environmentalist all my life and I've been plugging insulation
> and renewable energy since the seventies, when they almost dragged you away
> to the lunatic asylum for talking such things.' [sic]

Jeremy attributes his environmentalism to early experiences, although not to a particular event (see Hards, 2011). He describes this as a longstanding viewpoint which he intimates has moved from being seen as marginal or extreme to being more acceptable over time. These are issues we seek to explore throughout the discussion.

Responding to prompts about where his environmentalism came from, during his initial interview Jeremy suggests it is something he feels he has always had and was not attributable to parental influences.

> 'I wouldn't say I've acquired any energy saving habits from my parents particularly; I just seemed to have them in me ridiculously. I can remember when I was a kid … saying my prayers as a little boy alongside my bed and turning the light out to say my prayers because what was the point, I had my eyes shut, it was a waste! That's not something that my parents ever told me, so I don't know where that came from. But no, I don't think I acquired it from them.'

However, in his second interview, Jeremy more explicitly acknowledges the impact of his upbringing and family circumstances on his efforts to reduce energy.

> 'I kind of know where it comes from in terms of energy that's kind of a bit home-grown, maybe it's a consciousness that we weren't a well off family, that kind of thing so it's always been an issue for me and so there's a lifestyle around it.'

Jeremy relates his efforts to save energy and reduce waste to childhood experience of growing up in a family that was not 'well off'. Other participants made similar comments, indicating the relevance of frugality as a route to sustainability (see Evans and Abrahamse, 2009).

Alongside early experiences as part of family life, and the influence of overseas travel, several participants described other life events as crucial in developing their environmental consciousness. Unlike Jeremy's suggestion of an inherent environmental awareness, others pointed to particular moments or events of significant influence[2]. Experiences around education were particularly important, as another Peterston resident, Jonathan, indicates:

'I was retaking my A-Levels in the Eighties and I was getting the New Scientist every week. And that was the first beginnings of people talking about climate change seriously and the biodiversity crisis and the threats to the rainforest. And I remember being incandescent with rage reading articles on the way back from the Sixth Form College on the bus and reading these … it was an emotional reaction, it just felt wrong and immoral to be destroying nature. So that's where an environmental thing came from.' (Jonathan, 40s, Peterston)

Returning to Jeremy's account, as part of his sustainability ethos, he felt compelled to be active within his local community and was part of the local 'green group'. For him this community activism was a fundamental element of his sustainable lifestyle.

'I'm a political activist as well as an environmental activist. And part of that personal philosophy is that, not only should you campaign at the political level of legislation and all the rest of it, you actually have to live that in your local community and work within your community and live it within your personal life … If there are things going on in your community, if issues come up, well you have a civic responsibility to be involved.'

In accounts of their involvement with the local green group, both Jonathan and Jeremy show considered decisions about what kinds of interventions and activities would best suit their community, making efforts to avoid a 'hardcore' attitude to sustainability, which may have been off-putting to some (DeLaure, 2011). To illustrate, one of the major interventions the group has undertaken was related to solar PV installations, garnering the interest of a number of individuals within the village in order to approach installers and negotiate a group discount. As many residents were relatively affluent, the approach was to publicise PV as an investment opportunity with subsidiary environmental benefits. Whilst the installations were individual investments, the village community and the connections between residents were important in encouraging take-up of solar PV. Several residents acknowledged that they had been encouraged and reassured by receiving information from trusted friends and neighbours, which was crucial in their decision to invest.

Though the financial investment aspect gave group members one way to approach people, a general interest in sustainability and 'growing awareness' remained important for wider community action and sustainable activities. One example Jeremy described was the increased demand for allotments that the village has seen in relatively recent years, which he linked to emphasis on 'good food' in the popular media:

> 'I kind of think it's a weird thing, but the number of cookery programmes on television, the kind of drive about good food, fresh food and all the rest of it, and not junk food, I think that's had an impact. There's probably some minor motivation around, oh well it saves money because we're growing our own. I don't believe it, not in an area like Peterston, you know, where people are not struggling for that. And they're also quite busy people who, if their normal hourly rate, the time you spend on the allotment is not going to be a worthwhile investment. So I think it's about commitment to sustainability and good food and exercise as well … the reality was there were empty allotments nearly nine years ago and there aren't now.'

In this extract, Jeremy makes clear that the motivation for engagement in the activity is not financial. Indeed the time-costs involved mean that it is not a 'worthwhile investment' (in opposition to the PV which is a time-light and financially beneficial one) and the lack of these ostensible benefits is why Jeremy sees it as indicative of a commitment to sustainability. This shows some similarity to discussion around the acceptance and uptake of recycling – an activity apparently undertaken for environmental reasons without personal gain – which has been highlighted as demonstrating that it is possible to introduce actions to reduce environmental impacts (Bedford et al. 2004).

Allotments have a long history in the UK, but after numbers peaked during world war two (linked to the 'dig for victory' campaign) their popularity declined as food became more abundant and standards of living improved. However, there has been a surge in interest in

allotments in recent years, which has been variously attributed to economic recession, rising food prices and increasing popularity of home grown food (as evidenced in popular television programmes, Thomas, 2008). In affluent Peterston, Jeremy posits the latter as the most likely explanation, highlighting changing trends in relation to food as relevant for sustainable behaviours. Exploring the changing trends of allotments illustrates how one of Jeremy's longstanding activities as an environmental activist has come to be differently regarded over time.

Jeremy indicated during his second interview that he was seen as unusual by some, although this did not seem to be particularly problematic for him.

> 'I tend to the oh sod 'em point of view, I don't care, I'm out of kilter with thinking in many different ways and many different people of conventional thinking so if I was going to worry about what people think about my views and my behaviour I'd be a complete neurotic so I don't care really over much.'

However, during his third interview he again referred to a change in general attitudes towards his sustainability practices, which he felt meant that he had moved from being seen as 'crackers' to being 'mainstream' without changing his behaviour in any way.

> 'We notice as old lagging environmentalists a generational change in the attitude to recycling for example and energy conservation and a whole host of environmental issues and I've probably said it to you before you know we move from being crackers you know crackpot kind of ex-hippies to being mainstream without changing our stance whatsoever, it's merely the world changed around us.'

Participants also spoke about how these changing perceptions of sustainable lifestyles were evident amongst their own family members, who appeared to regard the participants' views and lifestyles differently over time, as Jeremy describes:

'I mean they're different in a, none of them are environmentally kind of orientated, though my eldest brother – who I used to argue with to the point of conflict … [subsequently] said "do you know Jeremy, all that stuff you used to say about the environment, you had it right really didn't you?"'

Some regarded the change in perceived acceptability of sustainable behaviour as relatively recent. For example, teenage village resident Phoebe felt that her environmental interests were initially regarded as 'nerdy' by schoolmates but are now seen as more widely acceptable and even mainstream.

'Phoebe: I suppose other people do do it but like when it was less well known it was kind of a bit geeky kind of thing to do, I suppose it's got cooler essentially to do it but it was originally a bit of nerdy kind of thing.

Interviewer: And why do you think it's got cooler?

Phoebe: Because more people will just do it really so the majority do it therefore it is more cooler because then more people do it, in that sense.'

Green group member Jonathan also suggested that perceptions of environmentalism and sustainable lifestyles had changed over time, and gives a more expanded account of how he feels that this occurred.

'That Sixties counter culture was very, there was a strand to that which was very environmentally aware … And so people's, particularly in Wales, people's perception of environmentally aware people is that they are this inheritance from the Sixties, and they do tend to look like hippies… living in tipis and stuff like that. And that has coloured the whole perception of environmentalism, which is now changing. But for a long time, to be environmentally aware and sympathetic was to be a tree hugger and a hippy… it's lingering there but just more and more people now are, it's becoming more and more mainstream … I think you're cutting your bills and stuff like that. But also the relentless coverage of climate change and biodiversity loss over the last ten years, just like hammering information into people's heads really.' (Jonathan, 40s, Peterston)

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These participants perceive quite significant changes in the way their sustainable lifestyles and views are regarded, to the extent that many of their own practices are now seen as mainstream supported. This is also evident from our wider dataset, which illustrates that many of those who live in the village were supportive of the group's campaigns, even if not directly involved in them, indicating the importance of active groups within wider communities for the development of sustainable lifestyles. As Jeremy discussed above, being active in the community and having good relationships with his neighbours has allowed him to pass on knowledge and information to others, which he sees as a key aspect of his sustainable lifestyle.

In light of changes in wider societal attitudes, it could be argued that Jeremy's practices are no longer particularly unusual and therefore the negative perceptions towards his sustainable lifestyle that he previously felt existed are now less evident. Questions remain, however, about those who live in ways which continue to be regarded as extreme. All participants were asked about ecovillage life as an alternative to an increasingly technological future. Jeremy articulated mixed views about this prospect:

> 'I think we can persuade the majority of the population on the strand of lower impact, high-tech living, I think we can persuade some of the population to do more for themselves but not a lot, and on the communal and cooperative side, I think you're looking at a fairly steep mountainside on that one so I don't think they are the model for the future but they have aspects of a model for the future.'

In this extract, Jeremy positions himself as part of a group distinct from the mainstream – who still need to be persuaded about sustainability – suggesting he continues to regard unsustainability as normal (although not desirable). One of the biggest barriers Jeremy perceives to wider take-up of ecovillage sustainable lifestyles (along with important issues

around the availability of land, as he believed that there was not enough land in the UK to support everyone adopting this lifestyle) is the association with communal living, which he sees as unappealing to the majority. In light of these perceived challenges, we turn now to the case of Peter, from the Lammas Tir-y-Gafel ecovillage.

Lammas - Peter[3]

Peter lives in the ecovillage with his partner and children, and the family are involved in a range of activities as part of establishing their land-based livelihoods. In describing the move to Tir-y-Gafel, Peter discussed a 'strong existing alternative culture' in West Wales, which he felt drawn to, and believed that the relatively remote location would better support the aims of the ecovillage than being within the realms of a big 'unsustainable' city:

> '[i]t's difficult trying to be sustainable in the context of an unsustainable society and the closer you get to an unsustainable society the more of a challenge it is.'

Whilst intimating that his lifestyle choices would be regarded as unusual, they were less controversial in West Wales, with what Peter described as its history of supporting alternative cultures, than they may have been elsewhere. In discussing other low-impact communities in the area, Peter felt that the notoriety of some had given people preconceived ideas as to what the Lammas ecovillage would involve, which ran counter to ideas for Tir-y-Gafel. He and other ecovillage residents have been keen to integrate with the local community in order to demonstrate that they do not want to live a separate lifestyle but live in conventional family setups in a more sustainable way.

Like Jeremy in Peterston, some Lammas residents described an early environmental awareness that has remained relevant throughout their lives. For one ecovillage resident, Joseph, longstanding concerns make living a sustainable lifestyle seem 'normal' to him.

> 'I don't really consider myself to be that ecologically-minded anymore, I <u>am</u> if you stood me up against someone else who is not if you know what I mean but I don't consider myself as a green type really. I used to be far more vocal when I was younger. It just seems normal to be trying to live a sustainable lifestyle.' (Joseph, Lammas)

By contrast, Peter, like others in the ecovillage, had what they described as a mainstream[4] upbringing, with the route to adopting a sustainable lifestyle beginning in early adulthood. Peter went on to describe how on a 'whim' during his holiday from university he decided to spend some time in an alternative community which had a significant impact on him.

> 'I found it [alternative community] and totally fell in love with it. I'd never come across anything like it before in my life because I'd just grown up in mainstream culture and it was just so kind of radical and so wonderful, just wow, changed my life really … I was hooked and there was no going back.'

In light of this 'transformative moment' (Hards, 2012) Peter spent several years living in an alternative community adopting a very different lifestyle from his mainstream upbringing:

> 'When I was in my late twenties I had reached probably about a low energy a lifestyle as is possible in this culture. I was living in a homemade straw bale roundhouse in the woods, I was working horses for a living, laying hedges … used to go shopping on a horse you know really really eco. And having kind of realised that dream and that place it was like ok but so what? I'm just some crazy guy living in the woods on my own, so what?'

This 'epiphany' meant Peter 'felt compelled to go back into mainstream society' where he lived a more conventional lifestyle again for several years. For Peter, the appeal of Lammas lies in providing a 'bridge' to the mainstream; offering an opportunity to explore an

alternative lifestyle, but one which is not so extremely different compared to other alternative communities. For example, whilst living in the Lammas ecovillage involves some elements of collaboration, the idea is that households should be able to live as individual units as in a conventional village. Relatedly, although resources limit its use, technology is relevant to life in the ecovillage and thus life there is not necessarily associated with the kind of privations that may be expected based on perceptions of other alternative communities. Peter relates the importance of maintaining a connection to mainstream lifestyles and avoiding the images of sacrifice associated with sustainability that can be off-putting (Levitt and Moses, 2010).

> 'I think you know the prospect of being able to run washing machines and fridges and power tools and bits and bobs like that is an important aspect for people living here because people for the most part came to live here not because they wanted to live some kind of frugal peasant lifestyle you know they wanted to live a first world lifestyle in a sustainable way.'

Other Lammas residents expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that being a bridge between mainstream and alternative lifestyles contributed to public interest in the project, indicating that it had a wider appeal.

> 'I think it's wonderful that, I think one of the things that Lammas is doing is being not fully alternative and being this bridge between mainstream and alternative trying to show that it is possible to do the eco thing in a way that could appeal to more people than yeah living in benders[5].' (Emmanuelle, Lammas)

It is this balance between mainstream and alternative that he also feels Lammas offers which leads Peter, in his second interview, to suggest that this will be an increasingly popular way for people to live in future.

> 'I see this project as playing some kind of role in a solution in that it offers people a way out of the mainstream and a way to live on the land which

doesn't kind of trash the planet … it's important that we can share what we're doing and it is having an impact … I think this option or this, the potential to do this is going to look more and more attractive and it's going to be, yeah I think it's just going to be taken up more and more because it offers so much.'

Other Lammas residents made similar remarks suggesting that the large number of visitors to the site was indicative of public interest, and that the ecovillage lifestyle is likely to appeal to increasing numbers of people. Below, Roy contextualises the ecovillage lifestyle choice in the context of a recent food contamination scandal, widely publicised in the UK media, and a subsequent emphasis on 'real food', echoing Jeremy's earlier comments about allotments. Roy indicates perceived disillusion with mainstream consumer culture, positioning the ecovillage lifestyle as an option that will become increasingly popular in future. This posits their green niche as a solution to problems in mainstream farming and food production (Smith, 2006).

'And yet there's another percentage that I think that would probably see the home of the future as something more like this … the opportunity to be growing their own food you know, come out of that loop where there's likely to be horse meat in your burger and actually grow most of the stuff yourself and actually know the farmer and have seen the sheep that you're buying the lamb from that's made your burger and getting back into that loop. And I couldn't say what the percentage is but I suspect that it's growing you know? The number of people who have seen through that as a kind of con and don't want it any more yeah?' (Roy, Lammas)

In interview three Peter expands on the changing popularity of low-impact living by highlighting a number of practical and policy changes designed to facilitate this kind of lifestyle. Whilst there remained a number of difficulties associated with making this a reality, the very existence of the policy could be seen as signifying a change in perception of these developments.

'We've seen new guidance coming through, the One Planet Development practice guidance coming through; we've seen new national planning policy PPW, particularly Chapter 4 planning for sustainability or presumption in favour of sustainable development. So we're seeing quite a lot of legislation from the Welsh Government which is really supporting this way of life and really trying to create a robust and comprehensive framework under which you know similar projects can operate.'

Similarly, Roy describes a wider change in perceptions of sustainable lifestyles as evidenced by media coverage, which is largely positive:

'I would say we started really changing it [lifestyle] ten years ago and [mum] thought it was awful, she was embarrassed … I would say three years ago, it's started turning up in the colour supplements and it's all, it's getting trendy and everyone has got to have a yurt. We've almost got celebrity status now and so it's completely turned around. It's a mad thing but now it's very mainstream supported, it's nothing bad at all; we are the most interesting of her children to talk about ... I think that's indicative of a general mind-set change as well and it's not very easy to see but I think it has happened … I think there has been a certain mad mainstreaming of this whole thing and I think the whole coffee table supplement glamorisation of it all has, yeah certainly in our case it has played into our hands, so now it's no longer something we have to be hopelessly embarrassed about.' (Roy, Lammas)[6]

In this extract Roy refers to the increasing popularity of yurts as indicative of a changing 'trend'. Yurts are semi-portable dwellings traditionally used by nomads and with a longstanding use in UK alternative culture. Their growing popularity has been associated with music festivals; now arguably regarded as mainstream rather than the alternative events they once were. Yurts are marketed as a luxury camping or 'glamping' option, which have grown in popularity as festival and holiday accommodation, often marketed as an 'eco-friendly' choice. Like the allotment, the yurt as an object which symbolises sustainability illustrates changing perceptions of alternative lifestyles over time. For Roy, whose family have lived in yurts for several years, this 'mainstreaming' of his lifestyle has led to changes in his family relationships. As with Jeremy, although his own lifestyle has not changed,

Roy's mother has moved from being 'embarrassed' of him to finding his lifestyle 'interesting' in light of her sense that wider public attitudes have changed.

Peter also suggests that his family have been influenced by his own lifestyle choices, although acknowledges that this is not necessarily straightforward.

> 'Peter: It raises questions like my dad was really proud when he got a Toyota Prius and he was very keen to tell me and show me.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think he would have got a Prius if it wasn't for you?
>
> Peter: I'm not sure. Possibly, possibly but I think he's found it very hard to maintain you know it may almost be impossible to maintain that kind of awareness when you're living in mainstream society because the odds are so stacked up against you, you know financially it's not, it's just not easy to do it because of the whole context.   So I think yeah I have had an impact on them in terms of awareness but I don't think it's been comfortable because it's not something that they can easily resolve.'

These final extracts illustrate how participants' sustainable lifestyles prompted their families to engage with environmental issues and how the ways in which their families viewed their lifestyles have changed over time, along with perceived changes in environmental awareness more widely.

Concluding Discussion

In this paper we have considered our participants' accounts of their efforts to enact sustainable lifestyles, along with their perceptions of how sustainable lifestyles have changed over time and in relation to wider social trends. Whilst some participants made clear distinctions between their own lifestyles and those of 'the majority', they also recounted changes in wider views and discourse, indicating that what were once regarded as unusual or

alternative practices are now seen as mainstream or mainstream supported. This raises positive possibilities; namely the potential for greater adoption of sustainable lifestyles and ways of living which are less impactful in terms of energy and the environment. It is also indicative, however, of remaining tensions that exist in efforts to enact sustainable lifestyles in the context of wider processes of normalisation toward unsustainability. In our concluding discussion we address these issues and discuss the relative significance of different mechanisms of change toward sustainable lifestyles identified through our data analysis.

Despite discussion of changes in wider societal perceptions, participants continued to distinguish their own lifestyles from those of the more unsustainable majority. For example, the green group in Peterston promoted the solar PV scheme primarily as a financial investment to make it appealing to others, who may not share their environmental motivations. However, unlike in Black and Cherrier's (2010) research, our participants did not seem concerned about being seen as outside of the mainstream, or seek to avoid being viewed in this way. Indeed there appeared to be a certain value placed on being forward thinking; that the mainstream was now finally catching up with their views and practices. In addition, participants from the Lammas case site felt it was partly through being 'pioneers' that the ecovillage attracted so many volunteers, who in turn were a crucial part of making the project possible. Yet some felt that volunteers and visitors may be more difficult to recruit if ecovillages become increasingly ubiquitous. Therefore whilst the mainstreaming of sustainable lifestyles could be seen as beneficial, it may also prove a challenge to these lifestyles as they are currently formulated. This raises an important set of questions about the possibilities for 'scaling up' - a notion that infers connection between niche sustainable lifestyles and mainstream society. For example, is it possible that the ideal of the 'good life' will promote a different kind of consumption, such as the replacement of functioning goods

with eco-friendly alternatives, thus driving more consumption (Isenhour, 2010)? Another challenge is the potential coupling of sustainable and unsustainable practices. For example, some residents in our Peterston case site were opposed to increasing the availability of allotments due to concern that this would lead to an accompanying increase in car use and traffic in the area from people tending their allotments.

Individuals in both case site areas described their changing positions in relation to the mainstream and their efforts to work within these parameters. Whilst Lammas residents felt the site offered a 'bridge' to the mainstream, participants from our other case site areas, as illustrated by Jeremy, often saw ecovillage living as too extreme and unlikely to convince others to live sustainably. However, this view was bound up with a perception of ecovillage life as involving communal living, which was not part of the Lammas vision. This indicates the extent to which some stereotypes about low-impact living remain pervasive and may limit openness to the lessons that can be learned about sustainable lifestyles from these communities. In addition, existing research has suggested that misguided images of sacrifice may be putting people off living more sustainable lifestyles (Levitt and Moses, 2010). Whilst such sacrifice may assume a moral position, it is at odds with normal behaviour in consumer society (Bedford et al., 2004). It may therefore be beneficial to promote sustainability in ways that do not contravene such norms. This was apparent in our case examples, such as where ecovillage living was described as offering 'so much', particularly in terms of self-reliance. Countering perceptions of deprivation would therefore appear to be important in encouraging wider take-up of sustainable lifestyles.

Focussing on two case site areas, one niche and one more mainstream, has provided insight into how sustainable lifestyles are variously practiced and regarded in different contexts.

Whilst using the term lifestyle, which can be seen as implying individual responsibility, we have indicated the relevance of community, policy, media and wider social change in enabling these practices. Both communities are located in rural areas, which offer particular possibilities for sustainable action, such as growing food. Indeed, it is the availability of these opportunities which drew many of our participants to live in these areas. Subsequently it is important to acknowledge that there are likely to be different opportunities and challenges for living sustainably in urban areas; notably, the availability of land to grow food and sustain other land-based livelihoods. Similarly it must be noted that not everyone has the same ability to make choices about sustainable lifestyles and ethical consumption (Paddock, 2009). Our participants were differently resourced, which could influence their ability to engage with sustainability; for example, investing in solar PV technology, despite the introduction of such schemes as the Green Deal and lowering capital costs, is still not a financially viable option for many households in the UK and financial barriers remain significant for numerous consumers (Isenhour, 2010). However, whilst the Lammas project also required some financial investment, several residents described their decision to live there as motivated by the opportunity to own their own homes and land, which would have been unobtainable to them in a more conventional village. Consequently they see the self-build ecovillage as a model of living which could be taken up more widely in terms of affordable housing.

Returning to the idea of 'encounter spaces' (Anderson, 2007) this offers a useful lens for considering experiences across the two case sites. Through site tours and volunteering at Lammas, and community activities in Peterston, those who are invested in living sustainably have sought to provide such 'encounter spaces' which appear to be valuable engagement opportunities. The successes of the two communities discussed here suggest that greater prevalence of such spaces could prove beneficial in encouraging interest in sustainable

lifestyles. These encounters with sustainability were also realised through family relationships, with some of our participants seemingly acting as 'encounter agents', although, as we have indicated, this does not necessarily lead straightforwardly to changes in practice.

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[1] For information about planning regulations for the site see www.lammas.org/uk

[2] These moments of transition are being explored in current project analytical work

[3] We do not identify individual ages for Lammas participants in order to protect anonymity. However, all adults on site were aged between mid-30s and mid-50s.

[4] As with our case sites, we understand mainstream lifestyles as related to more conventional ways of living

[5] A tent-based shelter

[6] See Butler et al (2014) for further discussion of Roy's case