Submission to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee call for evidence on behaviour change

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My submission concentrates on question 2. "What are the policy implications of recent developments in research on behaviour change", and does so with reference to cases and examples relating to climate change.

Recent developments in research on behaviour change

In the last few years, substantially and significantly new ways of conceptualising and framing behaviour change have come to the fore across the social sciences. The ideas on which such approaches are based are not, in themselves novel: they have their roots in very well established theoretical ground (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984; Latour 1992; Rip and Kemp 1998). The key development is that increasing numbers of social scientists – including psychologists , sociologists, historians, scholars working in technology and innovation studies, geographers and anthropologists – are using these tools and applying them to contemporary problems of climate change (Southerton, Chappells et al. 2004; Warde 2005; Uzzell 2008; Wilhite 2008; Røpke 2009; Trentmann 2009). Elizabeth Shove's ESRC fellowship on "Transitions in practice: climate change and everyday life" and the recently funded ESRC/DEFRA/Scottish government "Sustainable Practices Research Group", directed by Dale Southerton at Manchester University, are taking the lead in moving such research forward within the UK.

I'll begin by briefly describing core features of what is, in effect, a distinctive paradigm of research and enquiry and then elaborate on what this means for policy.

Rather than focusing on individuals – and on views, beliefs and actions as if these were matters of personal choice – recent research analyses and seeks to understand the changing characteristics of the shared social practices these individuals reproduce. In other words it concentrates on the 'doing' itself, be that eating, cycling, heating or cooling, and considers people as the 'carriers' of such practices (Reckwitz 2002). This is more than a semantic switch in that an emphasis on practice, rather than behaviour, has a number of related implications.

First, what people do, the practices they enact and reproduce, depend on the active integration of historically and culturally specific elements including forms of competence, materials, meanings and conventions. For example, the relatively recent habit of taking a daily shower supposes ready supplies of running hot water, culturally specific meanings and interpretations of personal hygiene, body and freshness, and a daily rhythm into which this practice fits.

Second, the dynamics of practices – how and when they change – consequently vary: though all might count as energy or water consuming 'behaviour', showering and laundering have quite distinct trajectories.

Third, a more subtle point underlined in the literature on transitions, is that change in practices is typically endogenous. In other words, past and present practices, and relations between them

(including competition for time, or for other resources) are themselves sources of innovation. For instance, if people spend time on one practice they have less to devote to others. Likewise, forms of competence and the meaning of participation evolve as practices like showering or using convenience foods are reproduced time and again, and as they are adopted by new or different 'carriers'. In the longer run these allocations of attention matter, collectively, for which practices survive and which disappear.

Much of the conventional literature supposes that behaviours are subject to external drivers like price and persuasion, or that they are obstructed by 'barriers'. This implies a linear relation between factors and effects and supposes that 'outside' forces bear down on behaviour. Although very familiar, interpretations of this kind are incapable of capturing or describing the forms of mutual adjustment, adaptation and accumulation involved in shaping and changing the repertoires of 'doings' that, in combination, constitute contemporary ways of life.

Fourth, and as mentioned already, research inspired by theories of practice and by social studies of technology emphasises the close-coupled relation between objects, infrastructures and 'behaviour', again a link that is rarely made in the classic behaviour change literature most of which overlooks the material basis of what people do. Put simply, roads, railways, freezers, heating systems, etc. are not innocent features of the background. Rather, they have an active part to play in defining, reproducing and transforming what people take to be normal ways of life. The key insight here is that the material world and related systems of production and provision are important in organising, structuring and sometimes preventing certain practices (van Vliet, Chappells et al. 2005). In sum, ways of life of the kind that matter for patterns of sustainable consumption are situated, materially embedded and social: on all counts it makes little sense to view such behaviours and actions as outcomes of individual choice.

There is a growing body of evidence informed by these ideas. This includes but is certainly not limited to published studies of changing practices relating to cooling (Strengers 2008; Strengers 2010); laundering (Shove 2003) patterns of food provisioning (Hand and Shove 2007; Warde, Cheng et al. 2007); water consumption (Sofoulis 2005; Chappells and Medd 2008; Taylor, Chappells et al. 2009); and everyday mobility (Larsen, Urry et al. 2006), to name but a few.

Policy implications

The policy implications of this work are far reaching and important for other questions listed in the call for evidence.

Behaviour change interventions usually target individuals and their purchasing decisions, not the practices they carry. This is a costly and risky approach in that it requires engaging with each and every person and with individual behaviours, one at a time. Second, because behaviour is consequently addressed 'out of context' only some such interventions have any chance of taking effect. A third related point is that because 'behaviour' is treated as a singular concept, subject to more or less universal 'laws', standard methods are developed and applied across different domains (driving, eating, etc.) with scant regard to potentially significant differences in how these practices are configured and organised, or to how and why they vary.

Policies that target practices involve a wider range of actors including producers, providers, and the state itself on the grounds that all are implicated in developing and circulating the elements of which social practices are made. From this point of view, policy is understood not as an external influence but as integral to the systems and patterns of practice it seeks to change (Rip 2006; Voss, Kemp et al. 2006).

One conclusion, significant for questions 5-7, is that policy should re-frame the central problem as one of practice change, not behaviour change. This would entail redefining the meaning of relevant evidence such that it is about how practices develop, and not primarily about individuals' values, beliefs and choices. It would also involve reviewing policy makers' capacity to actively configure the 'landscapes' in which practices do and do not take hold (Shove and Walker 2010). From this point of view there is little merit in separating behaviour change from any other policy intervention – all are of consequence for the ordering of daily life. It is, in addition, equally obvious that government is not the only actor involved: in many cases transitions in practice, for instance in expectations of indoor comfort or in diet, unfold without regard for national borders, being shaped by businesses as well as governments, and by cultural and social trends the influence of which is not confined to the UK.

This does not mean governments have no role. For example, with respect to energy use and comfort the Japanese government has been instrumental in engendering reductions in energy demand and CO2 emissions by means of policies designed to transform conventions of clothing and related practices of cooling. The 'Cool biz' programme launched in 2005 has had a significant impact on collective behaviour in less than five years but not through any of the usual mechanisms. In this case the government mobilised its own role as an employer (government buildings were not heated or cooled between 20 and 28 degrees C); exploited its capacity to enrol diverse organisations (using business leaders, department stores and clothing manufacturers to design and promote light-weight summer clothing); and capitalised on the media profile of ministers and ambassadors (who were used as fashion models). In combination these moves have helped in redefining normal practice such that it no longer involves a distinctly inefficient combination of suits, ties, jackets and extensive air-conditioning.

Although policy strategies are sure to vary from case to case, the method of framing the problem as one of collective convention and of intervening at the level of shared practice is itself transferable.

Research and policy: capacity and translation

Research and theory of the kind outlined above has yet to be appropriated by UK policy on any scale. This is in part because it is not obviously relevant to problems of 'behaviour change' as these are currently and narrowly defined (Shove 2010).

This suggests that challenge is in essence one of developing the capacity to reconceptualise behaviour change *within* policy. If government is to design forms of intervention capable of fostering transitions in practice on the scale required it will be necessary to expand interpretations of relevant theory and evidence. This is not a matter of translating methods, concepts and agendas from a practice-oriented approach into a form that can be digested by 'behavioural' initiatives: rather, it is one of radically extending the meaning of intervention and the conceptualisation of social action. If this is the ambition, the answer to Question 4: "are there adequate structures and

expertise across government and the public services more generally to support the translation of research development in behaviour change into policy intervention" is clearly no.

Finally, much of the literature referred to in this submission is useful in addressing question 6: "how should different levels and types of intervention interact in order to achieve policy goals more effectively?" In relation to this question, research that demonstrates the material dimension of practice and that details links between consumption and production is important in showing that policy areas like those of urban planning, business development and technology are inextricably part of behaviour change, broadly defined.

Although not mentioned in the call for evidence, there is one further aspect of 'behaviour change' that deserves attention. On a global scale, many forms of unsustainable consumption are occasioned by the 'need' to reproduce conditions that characterise a western/northern European way of life, and to do so without regard to local climates or traditions. In the case discussed above the global energy costs associated with year round adoption of the standard business suit are considerable. In Australia and the USA significant resources are invested in maintaining what look like European lawns, and across the world we have seen the diffusion of a wheat and meat diet. There are two points to emphasise here. Discussions of trans-national behaviour change have yet to get underway – this is a field in which more research is required. Second, such research would do well to pay specific attention the part that the UK plays, perhaps unwittingly, in producing and circulating unsustainable interpretations of well being and normal behaviour, and in exporting the technologies and infrastructures that allow people in other parts of the world to live beyond their environmental means.

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