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Commentary

Climate change or social change? Debate within, amongst, and beyond disciplines

In "Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change", Shove (2010) acknowledges her position to be "deliberately provocative" (page 1273): and as (social) scientists of all descriptions interested in climate change, we should welcome an openness and questioning of the methodologies and epistemology underlying our research. Shove aims to explain how all social science disciplines contain theoretical understandings that can constructively contribute to improving the management of huge societal challenges such as climate change and, ultimately, sustainability.

Shove's paper is enlightening in many ways, highlighting the need to give greater attention to structural dimensions of unsustainability and social change, to the limitations of individualistic models of behaviour, and to the value of sociotechnical and practice approaches to address climate change. One of Shove's main critiques, we find, lies in the suggestion that the ABC ('attitude – behaviour – choice') model remains prevalent in policy circles, as it tailors with "the dominant paradigms of economics and psychology" (page 1274).

Our reading suggests that her paper is restricted in its simplistic portrayals of psychological models of behaviour, and wholesale dismissal of nonsociological approaches to social or behavioural change. It is frustrating—especially in relation to sustainability where there has been some success in bringing together different disciplines towards similar aims and goals—that different disciplinary perspectives continue to be perceived both as necessarily opposed and in opposition.

Sustainability is a complex and multi-layered problem—evident at the levels of both social structures and individual actions—which demands contributions from a range of perspectives, not one single worldview, theory, or research methodology. Of course, different disciplines have different strengths and weaknesses, which is precisely why we need interdisciplinary approaches to address important societal and environmental problems. Naturally, insofar as we can generalise, psychologists tend to focus on individuals—albeit within a social and physical context—while sociologists tend to focus on the context—albeit how individuals enact and reflect that context. However, just as psychologists may tend towards an overly individualistic or decontextualised view, so sociologists tend towards the overly structural and undifferentiated. Similarly, while psychologists may indeed be relatively uncritical of dominant societal assumptions in their work, sociologists could equally be criticised as offering little in the way of practical solutions to pressing societal problems such as climate change (as Shove herself acknowledges). Critically, though, to claim that research within this very broad field is "homogenous" (as Shove claims, page 1278), and to state that there is "a dominant line of reasoning reinforced by extensive mutual cross-referencing" (page 1274) is far too simplistic and does not do justice to the range of theories and approaches which are extant in the diverse literature of climate – society interaction. Shove sets up a 'straw man' of psychology and economics—referring to the so-called ABC model—and yet refers to the C in Stern's (2000) environmental psychology ABC model as Choice, rather than Context (as originally intended). No doubt, individual choice is a feature of many social science models, but anything more than a casual inspection reveals a far more complex academic landscape. Perhaps the more fundamental, deeply rooted, and difficult question that Shove subtly suggests here, and more

directly spells out at the beginning and end of her paper, relates to the political connotations and implications of focusing on individualistic, choice-based models of behaviour in policy making, a point we return to later.

By not acknowledging her normative position, and referring to social change of a type never explicitly defined (but often implicitly assumed), Shove makes it difficult for the reader to understand exactly what type of social change she is referring to and how this may be achieved societally and politically. There are various components or facets to sustainability. In our view there is a critical difference between addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation (as much current research and policy seeks to do), and seeing climate change through the lens of panacea/opportunity for radical social change.

There is widespread recognition both within and outside academe that information provision is not a sufficient strategy for changing behaviour [cf both practitioner and academic contributions in Moser and Dilling (2007)]. Yet, without information (for example, about the differing emissions contributions of air, road, or rail travel), how can policy makers or citizens hope to contribute—in any capacity—to societal transition towards sustainability? Shove is right to highlight the imbalance in environmental policy which tends to emphasise individual responsibility for social change, whilst redistributing the responsibility our institutions and governance structures should arguably shoulder; but we also do not wish to move too far in the other direction—towards a situation where individuals are excluded from societal decision making and participation in enacting change.

Consequently, and consistent with the literature on mixed-methods research (eg Bryman, 1988), using multiple perspectives and approaches can offer a complementary, and potentially more complete, view of the object of study. For example, we can achieve a much greater understanding of obesity if we examine the physiological aspects of hunger and satiety; variation in individual tastes and choices; as well as the range of food options available, their social meanings, and the extant opportunities for active lifestyles (eg Jones et al, 2007; Maio et al, 2007); but just highlighting obesogenic environments, for instance, does not explain why some people are *not* overweight. Furthermore, Shove only points to one form of solution—structural transformation. While such transformation [eg in "patterns of time and mobility" (page 1281)] is undoubtedly what some of us would like to see, individuals do have—and should have—some self-direction of their own behaviour. Asserting this does not require rejection of the evidence that 'choices' are constrained and culturally shaped, and that behaviour is often not the outcome of conscious deliberation. Furthermore, when we are discussing transformation and transitions, one might hope individuals too could have some active participation in deliberating what the 'new system' might look like. Unfortunately, there is no 'I' (for Individuals) in the SP (Systems and Practices) model Shove advocates.

Moreover, while sociological and psychological approaches often provide very different insights, there are important points of intersection where they converge. For example, many psychologists would agree that habitual behaviour is not consciously driven but rather a product of (temporal, social, spatial) contextual cues; and that social norms and identities are powerful influences on behaviour. The sociological concept of practices similarly reminds us that action is in large part due to norms and institutions, and that individuals in turn perpetuate these norms and institutions through their action. Yet Shove dismisses constructive attempts to integrate these literatures, or to extract policy lessons from both sides of the disciplinary line (eg Evans and Abrahamse, 2008; Jackson, 2005; Sustainable Consumption Roundtable, 2006).

Interdisciplinarity is increasingly valued and—in contrast to Shove's claim that behavioural and practice perspective are "chalk and cheese" (page 1279)—there are many examples of successful interdisciplinary working which bring together sociological, psychological, and other approaches (eg Darnton, 2010; Devine-Wright, 2010; Upham et al, 2009; Whitmarsh et al, in press), for example to elucidate energy consumption and the potential for a sustainability transition within energy systems (Nye et al, 2010). It is disappointing, and frankly very worrying, if efforts such as these are dismissed because they include contributors from a range of backgrounds. We should be vigilant against claims that one particular perspective is the only, and correct, one—particularly when this view is one in which society must change but sees no role for citizens in directing or enacting this change.

However, Shove provides thoughtful reflection upon how decisions are currently taken on promoting sustainability in the UK: in particular, highlighting the political preference for certain (individualistic) models of social change. Shove thus brings to our attention the "political advantages" of an emphasis "on individual choice" (page 1283) and inevitable resistance to transformative social change by "regime" actors (cf Geels, 2005).

Her suggestions can be constructively built upon: (a) by enabling resources to be channelled to other "models of social change and policy" (page 1282) as well as (b) carefully considering how sustainability is conceived and enacted in various realms of the policy arena. Bearing in mind this is multifaceted and heterogeneous, it should be imbued with an appreciation of the intrinsic value that all social, as well as natural sciences can bring to improving humanity's welfare and directing it towards a more sustainable course. Acknowledging the similarities as well as the differences between different disciplinary contributions and embedding these into effective modes of policy making may present some of the options and challenges to overcome the status quo. The question still remains unanswered, however, of what political change may be needed for this to become operationalised.

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