



TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES

by

David Evans and Tim Jackson

RESOLVE Working Paper 03-07



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Abstract

Whilst discourses of 'lifestyles' and 'lifestyle change' are fast becoming ubiquitous; there is a dearth of critical engagement with these terms. This paper considers the ways in which sociology can illuminate these concepts and inform a pressing issue in environmental policy. Specifically, the question of why and how we are able to think about lifestyles in relation to the issue of 'sustainability' is posed. To answer, the ways in which 'lifestyles' can be conceptualised within the sociological imagination are considered through recourse to understandings of (sub)culture, habitus, reflexive modernity, aesthetics, identity and consumption. Crucially - through discussions of ethics, sociality and meaning - 'lifestyles' are theorised as a domain through which persons and collectives create a cultural defence against *anomie*. With this, it is argued that we *can* conceive of lifestyles as an appropriate conceptual unit through which to consider social change and motivate sustainable patterns of consumption.

Keywords

Lifestyles/sustainable consumption/reflexive modernity/habitus/anomie/

Introduction

The term 'lifestyle' occupies a salient place in popular consciousness – a cursory consideration of the lifestyle features found in newspapers and magazines alongside the apparent tendency of (some) modern persons to frame themselves and their identity in relation to their 'lifestyle choices' testifies to this. In everyday usage, the term is relatively unproblematic; it can be taken to mean the 'way of life' that is associated with an individual or a collective. Similarly, the term is often utilised in the practice of 'segment analyses' – a tool most notable for its application in market research. Here, the term is again quite straightforward. It rather neatly delineates 'the market' and positions persons within distinct, stable and homogeneous categories with a view to targeting particular products and services at particular 'lifestyle groups'. For sociologists, a good deal of depth and complexity underlies these 'everyday' understandings of the concept. The analysis here seeks to provide a sociological definition of (or more accurately, a sociological approach to) 'lifestyles' but a good starting point might be as follows:

“'[l]ifestyle' referred to the patterns of consumption and use (of material and symbolic goods) associated with different social groups and classes...Lifestyles may be understood as a focus of group or individual identity, in so far as the individual expresses him or herself through the meaningful choice of items or patterns of behaviour, as symbolic codes, from a plurality of possibilities...However, the analysis of lifestyles must address the degree to which choice of lifestyle represents genuinely free and creative choice” (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999: p. 216)

The task of elaborating the concept becomes even more difficult when our focus is *sustainable* lifestyles; indeed the *technical* definition of 'sustainable' is seriously open to question. Our task however is to think sociologically about it and here it is enough to note that in the present cultural climate, we are stuck with the term. In media, policy and comment, 'sustainable lifestyles' are presented as a magical elixir with which to ameliorate our present environmental crises. For example, we have Tony Blair (2006) stating that:

'Making the shift to a more sustainable lifestyle is one of the most important challenges for the 21st century. The reality of climate change brings home to us the consequences of not facing up to these challenges'.

Nevertheless, there is a good deal of ambiguity as to what this actually means coupled with a relative absence of critical engagement with the term. Again, the analysis here demonstrates that the tools, techniques and traditions of sociology can be brought to the table to explore and illuminate the issues surrounding discourses of sustainable lifestyles.

The present paper derives from a wider program of work within RESOLVE that is seeking to develop a conceptually robust and policy relevant sociology of sustainable lifestyles. There are many interrelated aspects of this and they revolve around the dynamics of the concept at theoretical and empirical levels. They include:

- Analyses of the shift from discourses of sustainable consumption to those of sustainable lifestyles with a consideration of why and how this has happened.
- In depth qualitative work to explore sustainable lifestyles as a members' category through focusing on (i) The experiences of those whom we assume (or who claim) to be living them (ii) How meaningful the notion of lifestyles and sustainable lifestyles are across a range of socio-demographic groups
- A critical consideration of how and why 'sustainable lifestyles' may not be an appropriate way of bringing about longer term social change.

Of course, the scope of this work cannot be captured here and as such, the focus is narrowed down to two things. Firstly, to elaborate on the definition above to provide a distinctly sociological approach to the concept of lifestyles by drawing on existing insights and understandings of related concepts, most notably accounts of *reflexive modernity* (Beck, 1992) and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). This will be built on by considering the ways in which lifestyles provide a cultural defence against anomie and then taken together, the analysis addresses how and why lifestyles *may* become an appropriate conceptual unit for motivating sustainable patterns of consumption. But let us begin by posing an intellectual puzzle.

Joining Lifestyles with Sustainability?

To talk about lifestyles is – in general – to talk about convenience modernity, urbane middle class aspiration and above all, consumerism. It is no surprise then that the title of Rob Shields' influential edited collection (1992) is *Lifestyle Shopping: the Subject of Consumption* and that lifestyles are often theorised in terms of 'the social patterning of consumption' (Chaney, 1996). On top of this, we most readily associate lifestyles with a largely superficial concern for aesthetics, identity play and the performance of style (see for example Featherstone, 1991). Brief consideration of the ways in which discourses of 'lifestyles' are generally used - such as the marketing of brand new 'apartment' blocks- supports this. All of this seems rather far removed from any sort of ethical or environmental agenda. A recent radio 4 discussion regarding sustainability and housing captured this incongruity quite succinctly when one of the interlocutors stated that 'people's houses are about their lifestyles, not the environment' and was met with approval and agreement from the rest of the panel. The implication here is that lifestyles do not sit easily with discourses of sustainability.

Of course, sociology has a rich tradition of theorising ethical and environmentally focused ways of life *but* they seem to sit easier with an analysis of New Social Movements and political/ideological issues. The trouble is – as Hetherington (1998) points out – that lifestyles cannot be understood as either 'new' or 'social movements', especially when we consider the ways in which social movements often get formalised and/or stabilised in some form or another - whether in the form of an institutionalised pressure groups or a dispersed network (Melucci, 1989). As will become clear, 'lifestyles' are better theorised – especially in light of our present ambitions – in a way that this does not and cannot be captured in these terms. So, on the one hand I am arguing that lifestyles are about more than consumption and

meaningless aesthetics, but on the other I am arguing that lifestyles are not to be understood as ideological or political social movements. What then am I arguing? Well, again following Hetherington (1998), I am suggesting that 'one cannot separate politics from issues of identity and lifestyle' and that we need to re-think the ways in which we theorise 'lifestyles' if we are to appreciate the conceptual dynamics of 'sustainable lifestyles'.

Culture, Subculture, Lifestyles

The first step in developing a sociological approach to lifestyles is a consideration of culture. Of course, the term culture is as problematic as the term lifestyles and Raymond Williams (1983) goes as far as suggesting that it is 'one of two or three of the most difficult words in the English language'. However, the following is an approximation of a stock definition:

"The independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general". (Williams, 1983: p.90).

This seems like a reasonable way to approach the concept of lifestyles in so far as it hints at a distinctive pattern of social life. To build on this, we can turn to Clifford Geertz who notes:

"[m]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun, I take culture to be webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of *meaning*" (Geertz, 1973: p.5).

As will be seen, an appreciation of meaning and meanings is absolutely central to this analysis. For now, we can take culture to be something along the lines of a distinctive mode of living (Sobel, 1981) or 'way of life' that comprises its own webs of meaning. Although this also *seems* like a reasonable definition for lifestyles; a departure needs to be made.

Usually, although by no means always, culture is thought of as the *totality* of social life; the understandings, values, rules and meanings that are shared by a group of persons which in turn constitutes their 'way of life'. The same cannot be said of lifestyles:

"[l]ifestyles are...a way of using certain goods, places and times that is characteristic of a group but is not the totality of their social experience...are sets of practices and attitudes that make sense in particular contexts" (Chaney, 1996: p.5)

The implication of this is that 'lifestyles' capture the impurity of culture, the fragmentation of experience and most importantly, a sense of multiplicity and freedom. Indeed, Sobel's (1981) effort to explicate the concept of lifestyles stresses the importance of *choosing* between alternatives.

However, a turn to 'lifestyles' is not the *only* option. We cannot ignore the fact that some of the most seminal works within sociology of culture have concerned

themselves with the phenomena of *subculture* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). This begs the question: what can the concept of 'sustainable lifestyle' offer that an analysis of 'sustainable subculture' could not? Well, the term subculture is hugely limited. For a start, subcultural analyses are tied too closely to class, ignoring the significance of other 'variables' such as gender. Similarly, it assumes groupings to be stable, fixed and homogeneous ignoring the complexity of any given assemblage *and* the movement between them. Another fundamental issue is that subcultures are assumed to be distinct from and oppositional to the 'mainstream' of society. However, we are not interested in opposition and oppositional values; we are interested in the 'mainstreaming' (for want of a better term) of lifestyles that are conducive to sustainability agendas. A sustainable subculture will only ever sit on the margins whereas a sustainable lifestyle at least gives hope for translation on a wider scale. Crucially, theories of subculture fail to account for *process* and yet an understanding of this is essential if we are to fully appreciate the possibilities of and for 'sustainable lifestyles'.

Process: Reflexivity and Habitus

To appreciate the importance of process, we must first re-think our understanding of culture. The definition of culture that was presented above would suggest that the webs of meaning that constitute a particular culture are somehow 'fixed' (or at least relatively stable) and external to the individuals experiencing them. In turn, this intimates that culture is a 'social fact' that expresses some variant of social order. However, one of the insights that we can derive from contemporary sociology is that it makes little sense to think in terms of social *order* as stabilised, fixed and concrete. It makes more sense to think in term of social *ordering* which is a process of assembling and reassembling (Latour, 2005), a verb rather than a noun (Law, 1994) and something that we *do* as well as something that we are in. Consequently, we can stop thinking of the meanings that constitute culture as 'out there' as social facts and recognise that they are elicited through the work of social ordering such that they are the *effect* rather than the starting point of culture. With this, lifestyles can be theorised as a related process of marking *difference(s)* - caught up in the play of ordering the social, delineating culture and eliciting meanings. Indeed, this process can be thought of as a labour of division (Munro, 1997) through which persons and collectives mark 'social differences stemming from ways of using rather than producing resources' (Chaney, 1996). This suggests that lifestyles are distinctly modern forms of *status* groupings (Chaney, 1996) which in turn raises some interesting issues that can be illuminated by turning to some well established sociological thinking on 'lifestyles'.

If lifestyles are about the marking of status and difference; it is a short step to consider the importance of identity. The ground here is well trodden but in linking lifestyles to identity, we *have* to acknowledge the various interrelated accounts of 'reflexive modernity' (Beck, 1992 Giddens, 1991, Lash, 1993). The argument here is that in 'modern' times, identity is no longer fixed and stable, nor is it ascribed by one's belonging to a traditional 'status group' (Bocock, 1992) such as a nation-state, occupational class or family structure. As a result of continued 'de-traditionalisation', persons are increasingly free from conventions such that identity becomes a project

of self and a reflexively organised endeavour (Giddens, 1991) through which identities are fashioned in the context of a multitude of possibilities. It is almost impossible to separate accounts of this process from accounts of consumer culture on the grounds that playful consumerism is seen as the key medium through which persons are able to do so:

‘Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of goods, clothes, experiences...they design together into a lifestyle’. (Featherstone, 1991: p.86)

The logic here suggests that lifestyles or life projects are *processes* through which individuals playfully and capriciously fashion their identity through a range of consumption practices. This is a very useful and commonplace way of thinking about lifestyles. It is, however, deeply problematic on the grounds that it tends to overplay the freedoms that ‘modern’ persons enjoy and gets rather close to postmodern celebration of style over substance. In defence, I would add that the likes of Beck and Giddens do not do away with social ‘structures’ and take care to link these freedoms to contemporary risks (Beck, 1992) and the development of a coherent ‘life politics’ (Giddens, 1991).

Similarly, we cannot ignore the concept of habitus. Turning to Mauss (1934), we find the idea that habitus is the aspects of culture that are grounded in the daily practice of individuals and this clearly sits comfortably with all that has been written here. However, it is in the work of Bourdieu that we find the most essential insights:

“The habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices” (Bourdieu, 1977)

It is very easy to consider one’s lifestyle in these terms; as a set of practices that are broadly related to one’s wider dispositions such as beliefs, values and tastes. In respect of *tastes*, Bourdieu’s analysis provides support for idea that lifestyles are about marking difference through the ways in which resources (and here, despite the obvious temptation, I am referring to more than economic resources and consumer goods) are deployed in practice:

“In matters of taste... all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes... provoked by horror or visceral intolerance... of the tastes of others” (Bourdieu, 1984).

Indeed, more broadly, the concept of habitus is understood to classify and delineate the social world, albeit at a subconscious level. This – in contrast to theories of reflexive modernisation – suggests something that is largely unreflexive and pre-conscious; determined, as it were, by one’s past and ‘objective’ conditions. However, it would be a mistake to consider Bourdieu’s analysis as a deterministic argument in which social structures produce the habitus which in turn structures practice. Indeed, he is quite clear on the *generative* capacity of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) which is to say that one’s dispositions are ‘created and reformulated through the conjuncture of

objective structures and personal history' (Harker *et al*, 1990). Essentially, the concept of habitus allows us to consider the practices that make up an individual's lifestyle as a process; the result of the continual interplay between individual agency and the objective conditions encountered and experienced.

Taken together, the concept of habitus and accounts of reflexive modernisation go a long way towards illuminating the concept of 'lifestyles'. We have established that lifestyles can be understood as the practices that make up a given way of life although *not* the totality of experience in so far as they are intermezzo social forms (straddling agency and objectivity) that allow for the choosing and movement between alternatives. We have also established that they are best thought of in terms of *process* in so far as they are *projects* - caught up in the play of delineating culture, marking differences and above all, eliciting meanings. At this juncture, it is important to make the distinction between meanings as the stuff of culture and *meaning* in the sense of having a meaningful life or creating a meaningful social world. In doing so, we can theorise lifestyles as projects through which we attempt to elicit meaning as well as meanings and thus to create and maintain a cultural defence against *anomie*.

Anomie and Meaning

Anomie is most eloquently described in the words of Keith Tester (1997) as the 'ghost at the banquet of the *nomos*'. Of course, talk of the *nomos* requires a turn to Peter Berger who conceives of the *nomos* as a socially constructed network of meanings and establishments of meaningfulness (Berger, 1967). In drawing our attention to the distinction between meanings and meaning, Berger's analysis allows us to understand the process of nomisation in terms of both the work of ordering the social *and* 'the never completed exercise of building a humanely meaningful world' (Berger, 1967). With this, Berger argues that nomisation is the most important function in any society and so it follows that 'the ultimate danger is the danger of meaninglessness' or *anomie*. My argument here is that the process of eliciting meanings as part of a life project or 'lifestyle' is –or could be - coupled with the process of staving off the ever present threat of anomie and the meaninglessness/senselessness that it entails. To enhance our understanding of anomie we need to return to Durkheim. Now strictly speaking, anomie pertains to insufficient *regulation* of the individual by the collective (Durkheim, 1897); however, it also carries connotations of insufficient social *integration*. Although Durkheim's study of suicide (1897[1952]) suggested that the latter deficiency results in *egoistic* suicide and the former in *anomic*; we can take anomie to mean a combination of insufficient integration *and* insufficient regulation because it relates to a sense of normlessness (insufficient regulation) *and* a sense of isolation (insufficient integration). Common to both predicaments is the symbolic distance of individuals from the collective. Recall, Durkheim was concerned with the *balance* between society and the individual and anomie represents too much individualism at the expense of the social. Or, put another way, the exhilaration that comes with the freedoms afforded by processes of reflexive modernisation soon gives way to the runaway child's sense of hunger, loneliness and fear. To see how 'lifestyles' might remedy this, we need to re-theorise lifestyles as a domain through

which persons seek social integration and social 'regulation' (or moral governance) by drawing out the links between (i) identity and identification and (ii) aesthetics and ethics.

Identity and Identification

Theories of reflexive modernity make it clear that lifestyles can be thought as projects of identity formation through which persons mark differences and distinctions. However, it would be a mistake to think of lifestyles as narcissistic and atomised projects of self. In many ways, the concept of lifestyles can be thought of as straddling the tension between notions of individuality and identity on the one hand and community/sociality on the other. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that we can turn to in order see the impossibility of separating a focus on identity from a concern with identification:

"Identity is about more than the development of a life project...it is fundamentally about issues of belonging, expression, performance, *identification* and communication with others" (Hetherington, 1998: p. 62)

At a basic level, projects of self actualisation cannot take place in a social vacuum because any identity created does not mean anything without others to consume the meanings attached to the practices and resources utilised in doing so. More importantly (because here we are shifting from meanings to meaning), it suggests that persons do not seek isolation and that their life projects necessarily involve a search for belonging and communion/communication with others. In other words, they seek meaning on affective and emotional grounds. Similarly, even though we have noted that lifestyles are about the marking of status; we have stressed that lifestyles are modern forms of status *groupings*, which of course, positions lifestyles as a collective social form.

To make sense of this, we can consider lifestyles in relation to (post)modern forms of sociality. There are many concepts to which we could turn such as Turner's notion of 'communitas' (1969) or Bauman's 'peg communities' (2002) but it is Maffesoli's analysis of neo-tribalism (1996) that is most amenable to our analysis. Maffesoli addresses the prevalence of 'elective affinity' groupings that people move in and out of with the idea is that people do not belong to a single group or tribe; rather they move freely between many attachments and groupings. Hetherington (1994), looking back to Schmalenbach's concept of the *bund* tightens this up. A Bund is an elective affinity grouping that sits somewhere between notions of community and those of individuality; providing freedom from the ascriptive and negative elements of community alongside opportunities to experience the 'transcendent warmth of the collectivity'. This suggests yet another way in which lifestyles can be theorised as *intermezzo* social forms in so far as lifestyles can be seen to embody notions of choice and self-actualisation alongside opportunities for collectivity and attachment.

Of course, we *could* argue that the creation and maintenance of identity is in itself a cultural defence against anomie. For example, Bauman suggests that the creation and

maintenance of identity is a project that individuals undertake in response to global uncertainty and ambivalence. Although Bauman is very critical of this; we could still read this as an attempt to combat anomie. However, such a solution would not address the deficit in social integration that characterises anomie. In drawing out the links between identity and identification to consider lifestyles in terms of neo-tribal social forms, it is becoming clear that lifestyles could stave off anomie in far more successful ways. We can even go a step further. Returning again to Bauman's take on identity and the ideas emanating from the work of Beck and Giddens we are left with the idea – as far as I understand it – that the realm of 'life politics' (his use of the term is different to Giddens' – see below) precludes the possibility of collective (let alone global) solutions to global problems (such as our present environmental crises). By contrast, the work of Maffesoli and Hetherington - through which we can see the links between life politics/lifestyles and collectivity - suggests that we *do* seek collective responses. To make this move, we need to appreciate the importance of *ethics* and to do so we can look to their analysis of expressivism and expressive identities.

Aesthetics and Ethics

It is all too easy to think about lifestyles in terms of shallow, playful performances that represent the triumph of style over substance and aesthetics over ethics. Indeed, in this framing we can perhaps understand the hostility that the concept attracts from certain sociological camps being, as it is, somewhat 'trendy', vogueish and above all inaccurate (allegedly) in rendering consumption, dress, fashion and recreational practices as legitimate ways of conducting serious sociological enquiry. Of course, in arguing that lifestyles may provide a cultural defence against anomie; I am arguing that it is not satisfactory to think in these terms. Staving off anomie requires the provision (or at least presence) of social regulation or moral governance and here, it is argued that this is mobilised through lifestyle choices and affiliations. For example, Giddens (1991) suggests that lifestyles – or at least life politics – can be thought of existential projects that addresses issues of how one should live one's life just as Beck (1992) stresses the importance of the responsibilities that come with the freedoms available to contemporary persons. Indeed, theories of reflexive modernisation seem to advocate the development of a coherent lifestyle narrative rather than a blind celebration of aesthetic play.

To make the link to ethics more concrete; we can turn to Bauman who, as we know, recognises the existence of *intermezzo* social forms such as neo-tribes but considers them to be anathema to any real form of sociality. For him, they are characterised by disposable social bonds that are liable to disappear at the precise moment that they are required to materialise. From this, he posits a deficiency in ethics on the grounds that he locates ethics in the relationship of Self to Other wherein we must be 'for' the Other ahead of being with the Other. With this, we can turn to the theories of Maffesoli and Hetherington in order make clear the links between identification, Otherness and ethics. Hetherington notes that those electing affinity within a lifestyle grouping are:

"[m]ore likely to seek collectives of like minded others. This is especially so in the case of those who seek to create a lifestyle that is ethically committed towards others" (Hetherington, 1998: p.94)

He goes on to note that:

"[l]ifestyles...seek to make life meaningful on affectual and value-rational grounds...others – indeed the whole category of Other – becomes significant on emotional *and* moral grounds" (Hetherington, 1998: p.94 my emphasis).

It follows that there is no real distinction between an *emotional* community (having some sort of social bond with others) and a *moral* community because 'morality' (however we define it, a detailed discussion is beyond the remit of this piece) is innately tied up with notions of emotional attachment and community. This idea is nothing new. In Durkheim's notion of 'moral individualism' we have a very strong case for thinking of sociality – in his terms, solidarity - as grounded in shared values and an emotional attachment to the Other.

So, what about expressivism? Put simply, expressivism refers to the joining of ethics and aesthetics and my argument here is that lifestyles are expressive social forms through which expressive identities can be occasioned. On the one level, we can think in terms of aesthetics expressing ethics by considering the ways in which a person's display and demeanour can provide clear and easily recognisable symbols that represent their underlying ethics. In Paul Willis' terms (1978) this suggests a degree of *homology* - unity in style and ideology - or a coherent lifestyle narrative in which an individual's identity stands for much more besides. The trouble with this is that it only applies to a marginal minority and as such, fails to transcend the limits of subcultural theory. Accepting that sustainability is at odds with the majority of life projects and lifestyle aspirations on the grounds that consciously reducing one's consumption, installing energy efficient light bulbs and remembering to make sure that the television is not left on standby is relatively boring and mundane by comparison to the process of fashioning and performing an identity through playful (and ultimately unsustainable) consumption practices; the question remains as to how much sense this 'joining' makes to anybody aside from those who already constructing their life project around the principles of sustainability and presenting themselves accordingly.

Thankfully, the concept of expressivism is not exhausted by the semiotics of subculture and actually allows for a good deal of subtlety and sophistication. Expressivism enables us to see that the aesthetic agendas we associate with lifestyles and life projects – the marking of style, difference, personhood and status are being turned to and joined with 'ethical' agendas that are conducive to sustainability. This is not simply a matter of integrating 'sustainability' into existing social practices; it involves an appeal to existing lifestyle aspiration to mobilise social practices (and patterns of consumption) that are more sustainable. We can already see the ways in which ethical and environmental agendas are being snuck in through the backdoor as a by-product of life projects. For example, in early 2007 a 'designer' canvas bag bearing the slogan 'I'm not a plastic bag' went on sale in the UK and sold out

immediately with many changing hands on e-bay for large sums of money. To date, the demand for this product is still outstripping its supply with the frenzy being repeated in many other countries. In terms of sustainability, the bag is fantastic as its popularity has raised awareness whilst its users/owners may now be less inclined to use disposable carrier bags. But let us not be naïve, the *true* appeal of this bag on such a large scale is as a lifestyle accessory; the environmental benefits are simply a pleasant consequence. Similarly, the rapid increase in sales of organic food in many European countries over the past five years cannot be taken as an indication of everybody becoming green. The enduring (and only partly mythical) image of a North London couple picking up their organic produce in a 4x4 testifies to this. Of course, green is part of it, as are issues of health and food quality but it is also about *lifestyle* – the marking of status, difference and prestige. Again, ethical agendas are tended to as a by-product of lifestyle aesthetics. In theorising lifestyles as an expressive social form and seeing *how* ethical agendas can be joined with aesthetics; we are opening up a significant conceptual space in which to consider ways of motivating sustainable consumption by appealing to lifestyle aspirations.

Lifestyle(s), Consumption, Meaning

Rather like a bad detective novel, I am getting to the point at the end of the article. Having noted that discourses of (sustainable) lifestyles are fast becoming a holy grail for environmental policy; it needs to be made explicit that this is taking place against a backdrop of *sustainable consumption*. Of course, the definition of ‘sustainable consumption’ is open to contest but the National Consumer Centre definition is sufficient for our purposes:

“Sustainable consumption is a balancing act. It is about consuming in such a way as to protect the environment, use natural resources wisely and promote quality of life now, while not spoiling the lives of future consumers” (NCC, 2003)

The need to motivate sustainable consumption has been firmly on the agenda since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Jackson, 2006). The key policy document emerging from here, Agenda 21, had a chapter entitled ‘Changing Consumption Patterns’ in which attention was drawn to the environmental impacts of unsustainable patterns of consumption taking place in industrialised countries. This resulted in countless policy initiatives in many countries and by 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development had identified that changing patterns of consumption (and production) was one of the three main objectives for sustainable development. Having established the importance of sustainable consumption, we can return to Agenda 21 and note that it called for a better understanding of the *role* of consumption (Jackson, 2006) in order to do so. Given the wealth of approaches to consumption in the social sciences; it is a short step to recognise that they have an important part to play here. With this in place, we need now to appreciate the conceptual mileage and ‘value added’ (to use an awful phrase) in turning to from discourses of ‘sustainable consumption’ to those of ‘sustainable lifestyles’. Of course, there is no denying the conceptual links between accounts of ‘consumption’ and those of ‘lifestyles’ but we have to appreciate that lifestyles are not adequately theorised as simply ‘the social

patterning of consumption' (Chaney, 1996). In doing so, we can explore the practical limitations of using the concept 'sustainable consumption' and in turn explain the shift to a focus on 'sustainable lifestyles'.

Patterns of consumption in consumer societies are clearly unsustainable and if we are to appreciate the dynamics of (un)sustainable consumption then we need to consider the logic of consumerism. Out of the many possible ways to do so; it is particularly useful in light of the arguments here to consider consumerism as an attempt to create a cultural defence against anomie (Jackson, 2006). Recalling previous arguments about the distinction between meanings and meaning we can turn to the well established idea that consumption has a symbolic dimension (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) in so far as consumer goods can be seen to carry the meanings that form the building blocks of culture (Fiske, 1991). From here, we can argue that there is a sense in which the capacity of consumer goods to elicit cultural meanings gets confused and conflated with the ability of the consumer society to provide a cultural defence against a sense of meaninglessness or *anomie*. The failure of the consumer society to provide *meaning* stems from its tendency to ensure that meaning is always tantalising close and yet always *just* out of reach (Bauman, 2002). For example, the consumer goods we desire - that new model of mobile phone, that red sports car, that 'next generation' I-pod promise so much until they are obtained and then the pursuit of meaning lies in the pursuit of another good such that the logic of consumerism is perpetuated. Of course, it is not the place of the sociologist to suggest that consumerism's promise of meaning is somehow shambolic; we can only suggest that it is always in deferral. On this note, McCracken (1990) suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, this endless deferral (in his words, displacement) is itself a source of meaning that fills what would otherwise be an empty void. This implies that consumerism fulfils an important social role but still, we cannot ignore its adverse environmental impacts. Taken together, this creates a problem for motivating sustainable consumption in as much as a simple rationalisation of this process takes away a salient source of meaning in modern societies and offers nothing in its place.

It is for these reasons that a focus on *lifestyles* more broadly becomes important. Having theorised lifestyles as an alternative (to consumerism) cultural defence against anomie, we have seen their importance as a domain through which persons can make life meaningful on 'affectual and value rational grounds'. With this, it is not difficult to see that they offer something, offer *meaning*, in place of what is taken away by reducing consumption. This may involve a conscious and deliberate effort to reduce consumption as part of the one's life project or it may be involvement in things, such as community, that do not require such fervent engagement with the logic of consumerism. Similarly, as with the case of the 'I'm not a plastic bag' phenomena, we have seen how 'lifestyles' can mimic the meanings and replicate the sense of meaning afforded by consumerism in a manner that is conducive to sustainability. It is noteworthy that the language and dynamics of lifestyles suggest that (i) persons can choose to reduce their environmental impacts as part of their project of self actualisation rather than being told that they have to (i.e. it is less dictatorial than discourses of sustainable consumption or even 'behaviour change') and (ii) it entails a qualitative shift in practice rather than a quantitative reduction

such that 'quality of life' is not in question. Returning to Agenda 21, we can see this language embedded at the very beginning of the debate surrounding sustainable consumption in the call for:

'New concepts of wealth...which allow higher standards of living through *changed lifestyles* and are less dependent on the Earth's finite resources'.

So whilst consuming less is in itself not an option; a shift in practice might just be possible.

Unsustainable consumption and the impacts of unsustainable lifestyles are about much more than the consumption of material goods. Indeed, many aspects of our lifestyles – such as international travel- have significant environmental impacts in terms of energy consumption/carbon emissions and yet have little to do with material, consumer goods. Equally well, the practices that make up a lifestyle – sustainable or not - often have nothing to do with identity, performance or display. It is important that we recognise this, especially in light of the space dedicated to aesthetics in the discussions above, because much of what we do is embedded in everyday routines and dispositions. This is particularly significant in relation to the issue of sustainability in so far as leaving a mobile phone charger plugged in, using disposable coffee cups or even doing one's laundry several times a week have virtually nothing to do with life projects because they are habitual and largely non-reflexive practices. Of course, this *is* allowed for in accounts of consumption, most notably through Elizabeth Shove's (2003) notion of *inconspicuous* consumption. That said, once we recall the concept of *habitus* in relation to our earlier explication of lifestyles; we can see that inconspicuous consumption can be built into a proper understanding of 'lifestyles'. Similarly, we can also allow for a range of practices that have an environmental impact and implications for sustainable consumption that cannot be captured by a narrow focus on consumption, even when the inconspicuous is allowed for. A focus on lifestyles can get at all forms of consumption - conspicuous and inconspicuous, material and immaterial - alongside a range of non-consumption practices. As such, it seems reasonable to consider it as a useful conceptual tool for addressing the question of sustainable consumption.

Discussion

Wrapping up a discussion of lifestyles is going to be problematic for as long as we have the words of Michael Sobel ringing in our ears:

'If the 1970s are an indication of things to come, the word lifestyle will soon include everything and mean nothing, all at the same time' (Sobel, 1981).

There is a good deal of truth in this claim in the present day, especially in its peculiar joining with sustainability. Nevertheless we are, for the time being, stuck with discourses of sustainable lifestyles and the purposes of this paper has been to view them through a sociological lens in order to understand *why* this is so and more

importantly *how* the concept might work in practice as a means of motivating sustainable patterns of consumption.

Of course, the idea that we can address the question of sustainable consumption *sociologically* is nothing new; the work of Gert Spaargaren (2003) makes departures from social-psychological approaches to the environmental dimensions/implications of consumption (such as 'Attitude-Behaviour' models) with a turn to the concept of lifestyles. He utilises Giddens' *structuration theory* - in which *social practices* are presented as a middle ground between 'structure' and 'agency' - to suggest that departures can be made on three grounds:

1. We should focus on actual behaviour practices that an individual *shares* with others instead of focussing on individual attitudes or behaviours.
2. We look at the possibilities of designated groups reducing their overall environmental impact across a range of domains instead of focusing on individual and isolated actions.
3. We focus on the *deliberate* achievement of individuals in relation to their 'systems of provision' such that social structure is brought into the centre of analysis instead of leaving it out as an 'external variable'.

This suggests that 'lifestyles' are the accomplishments of individual human agents, made up of the different social practices that they embrace which in turn rest on the possibilities afforded by different systems of provision. In recognising the middle ground between 'structure' and 'agency'; these insights seem to sit well the analysis offered here in which lifestyles have been theorised as an *intermezzo* social form. However, if I understand Spaargaren correctly, he positions social practices and not lifestyles as the *intermezzo* form which has consequences in terms of how 'lifestyles' get theorised. On the one hand, it implies that an individual's lifestyle is of their own deliberate choosing which is to overlook the importance of 'structure' (even if it is allowed for in relation to social practices) and the insights offered by the analysis of *habitus*. On the other, it suggests that lifestyles are relatively fixed and stable when in reality, a lifestyle is liable to require constant (re)creation and maintenance across a range of social practices with constant negotiation across different 'systems of provision'. Essentially, this is a failure to account for *process* which is particularly problematic when thinking about *sustainable* lifestyles. We have to recognise that one is never at a point where one can state 'I am living sustainably' and hopefully, the approach to lifestyles set out here allows for this.

Whilst Spaargaren may conceive of lifestyles as fixed and stable; he *does* recognise the importance of movement across social practices and this sits very well with the analysis offered here (for example, movement is the essence of neo-tribalism). In departing from social psychology he notes that this means that 'the concept of a green or sustainable lifestyle is different from the concept of an environmentally friendly attitude since it cannot be measured using only one dimension or scale' (p.169). This suggests that (i) sustainable lifestyles are composed of social practices that vary amongst themselves and (ii) those who set out to live a sustainable lifestyle may not consistently subscribe to a whole range of 'environmental' social practices.

That is, it is virtually impossible to give a definition of *a* sustainable life because any model must allow for the fact that the overall impact of an individual's life should be taken into account rather than a formulaic expectation that 'sustainability' will govern conduct across all practices. Given the impossibility of demanding consistency across the range of practices that make up any given 'lifestyle'; we can see how discourses of 'sustainable lifestyles' carry no connotation of de-ontological commitment to the cause of sustainability. Instead, they suggest that persons can modify practices that they want to but leave others untouched. Viewed as such, we have another reason why the term is both culturally feasible and politically viable.

One of the most important insights to come out of this analysis is that lifestyles are potentially *expressive* forms in which we find the potential to join ethics with aesthetics. We saw examples of this through reference to organic food and the 'I am not a plastic bag' phenomenon and, as noted, the implications of this are potentially huge. For example, there is little doubt that air travel is one of the most carbon intensive and environmentally destructive practices that we engage in as part of our lifestyles. Looking at this historically, it is not hard to imagine a time when flying was considered the preserve of the elite, carrying connotations of prestige and status. But look at it now: the experience of flying can only be thought of as increasingly unpleasant. It would not be difficult to attach prestige to other – less damaging – forms of transport such that those wishing to perform a labour of division (even those with little to no interest in environmental issues) and express their 'visceral intolerance of others' might choose 'greener' alternatives to international air travel. Whilst we cannot negate existing aspirations or the status quo; we *can* try to attach the meanings (and of course, the sense of *meaning*) currently attached to environmentally damaging practices to ones that are more conducive to sustainability. It is a question of working with existing structures of meaning and in appreciating that lifestyles are an ongoing process of eliciting meanings and *meaning* we are able to see that the connection of meaning/s to specific practices is inherently unstable which in turn offers hope of their being somehow malleable. Essentially, it is an act of mimesis (Taussig, 1993) through which we end up mimicking the meaning/s of our existing society to make life meaningful on new grounds or more accurately, the same grounds but in new ways. We have already seen how discourses of sustainable lifestyles can operationalise this logic to motivate sustainable consumption in so far as they do not threaten the meaning/s of a consumer society (as a call for sustainable – or reduced – consumption might); instead they can replicate them and offer something in place of what might get taken away.

Nevertheless, this all comes with several words of warning. Firstly, that we are unable to define or demand consistency from sustainable lifestyles is to heighten its political appeal in ways that are less than noble. On the one hand, there are issues of accountability. If we cannot define sustainable lifestyles; it is hard to assess the effectiveness of policy measures taken to move towards them. On the other, there is the issue of floating responsibility; in appearing to give individuals the freedom to fashion their own life projects, responsibility is shifted away from government and industry just as individuals can claim that their failure to live sustainably stems from a deficiency in existing systems of provision. Furthermore, discourses of 'sustainable

lifestyles' purport to be symmetrical and neutral and yet the extent to which persons have the freedom to have (let alone chose) a 'lifestyle' becomes hugely questionable once we account for a range of socio-demographic groups. Indeed, the term 'sustainable lifestyle' is more than likely to be meaningless outside of certain social groups. Finally, the efficacy of relying on something as fragile as lifestyle aesthetics to motivate sustainable practices is limited by the amount of time that a particular fashion can last. If the appeal of organic food or reusable bags is grounded in fashion and identity politics rather than ethical commitment; we run the risk of it going out of fashion. As such, it may not provide a long term solution. So, clearly, we would be mistaken if we were to assume that the concept of 'lifestyles' will *inevitably* help us out of our environmental crises. Nevertheless, we are stuck with the term and the challenge is to build on its appeal to ensure the possibility of long term social change.

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