ARTICLE

Thinking Habits into Action: the role of knowledge and process in questioning household consumption practices

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ABSTRACT *Despite occupying a central place in the sustainable development paradigm, calls for individuals in high-income countries to adopt patterns of sustainable consumption have failed to gain ground in the past decade. The low uptake of public messages that emphasise links between the environment and the home are caused by a plethora of 'barriers to action', which range from individual circumstances to public norms and structures. This article argues that in addition to these barriers, consideration of how individuals read and react to sustainable consumption information is important. Based on interviews with participants of a sustainable behaviour change programme called Action at Home, this article considers both how, and in what form, knowledge is mobilised when individuals rethink their personal practices. Using Giddens' structuration theory, a framework is presented. This framework emphasises the importance of 'known' or 'local' information, as well as discursive processes, in addressing individual consumption practices and argues that a 'cultural politics' of sustainable consumption needs to be factored into on-going academic and policy debates.*

Introduction

Agenda 21, the 'blueprint for sustainable development' produced from the 1992 UNCED Rio conference and preceding meetings, argues that the practices and material goals of high-income countries are responsible for the majority of today's global environmental stresses (UNCED, 1992). To begin to alleviate these stresses, Agenda 21 calls on all social actors, from governments to individuals, to adopt more sustainable practices (WCED, 1987; Dowdeswell, 1997). This call has given fresh impetus to the concept of 'sustainable consumption', which suggests that all social actors should optimise their efficient use of available resources by 'doing more with less'. As this broad aim has been

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translated into an international policy discourse (e.g. UNCED, 1992), the individual's role has been cast as one of adopting a 'sustainable lifestyle', wherein considerations of the environmental impacts of personal consumption become part of day-to-day practices and decisions.

The sustainable consumption and lifestyles agenda's biggest challenge is how to translate these aims into policy approaches that positively affect the actions of citizens. For the most part, governments have used environmental education and information as their main tools (Hawthorne & Alabaster, 1999), in schools, and as lifelong learning and work-based education programmes (UK Sustainable Development Education Panel, 1999), as well as through public information campaigns. Examples of the latter in the UK include the former Conservative government's 'Helping the Earth begins at Home' and 'Going for Green' campaigns, as well as the on-going Labour Government's 'Are you doing your bit?' initiative (Department of the Environment, 1996; Going for Green, 1996; Department of Environment Transport and the Regions, 1999). The policy rationale of these campaigns is to fill a supposed 'information deficit' that exists within the public's understanding of environmental change (see Burgess *et al.*, 1998; Owens, 2000). The logic of this approach rests on the assumption that information will prompt individuals to adopt sustainable lifestyles (Burgess *et al.*, 1998).

Yet the past decade has seen a continuing increase in household resource consumption in high-income countries (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001; Dzioubinski and Chipman, 1999). Thus, changing consumption patterns is still one of *the* outstanding tasks facing environmentally concerned governments, NGOs, researchers and citizens today (Pantzar *et al.*, 2001), presenting a profound political, economic and social "challenge to every notion we have about how to live our lives" (Bunting, 2001, p. 11). As a consequence, it is argued that only sustained, well-supported and inclusive policy efforts will secure marked changes in consumption practices (Burgess *et al.*, 1998).

The environmental charity Global Action Plan UK (GAP) has developed one such sustained approach to address domestic consumption practices. This entails providing detailed environmental information over many months, positioned within a range of consumption contexts such as schools, homes and workplaces. GAP's approach thus offers an interesting research opportunity to examine the processes that occur when individuals reconsider their consumption practices. To this end, this article reports on qualitative research carried out with participants of one of GAP's programmes called 'Action at Home'. It aims to maintain GAP's emphasis on the contexts of consumption by considering the contextual processes involved in questioning household practices. In doing so, it focuses on how, and what forms of knowledge and discursive processes are evoked when individuals rethink their consumption practices, and how these processes impact on behavioural outcomes.

Global Action Plan and the EcoTeam Programme: a brief history

GAP was founded in the USA in 1989 by a group of environmentalists frustrated at the lack of information available about how to live more sustainably. To

address this dearth of information the EcoTeam Programme was developed, which aims to provide guidance through outlining practical actions to take, as well as supporting individual's during efforts to make changes, thus, addressing both behaviour and attitudes simultaneously (Harland *et al*., 1993; Global Action Plan Nederland, 1998; see also http://www.globalactionplan.org/ecoteam.htm). The Programme is structured by creating a local EcoTeam from neighbouring households who volunteer to take part. Each participating household is given a workbook containing step-by step and detailed actions to take, as well as spaces for recording and measuring changes made.[1] Changes are regularly reported and collated in EcoTeam meetings, where participants share experiences and support each other through the many challenges of trying to make substantive changes to household practices.

This approach has proved relatively successful in encouraging behaviour changes in the 50 000 participants to date, who are spread across 11 countries including the UK (although this is a broad approximation as little direct research has been carried out into its behavioural impact except in the Netherlands: e.g. Harland *et al*., 1993; Harland & Staats, 1997; Staats & Harland, 1995).

GAP UK and Action at Home

In 1994 GAP UK was established with the aim of helping "households to reduce their impact on the environment and save money" (GAP UK and WWF, 1999, p. 1). Although it began by adopting the EcoTeam model, lack of public interest necessitated a quick development of new programmes that were less time-consuming and able to reach wider audiences (although a UK EcoTeam workbook was initially written: see Church & McHarry, 1992). Thus, GAP developed three programmes that focus on the different contexts of resource use: Action at Home, Action at Work and Action at School. This research focuses on Action at Home.

Action at Home is a six-month voluntary scheme that encourages individuals to take positive environmental action in their households that, to date has had over 30 000 participants (see http://www.globalactionplan.org.uk). Unlike many other sustainable consumption initiatives, it is not a national information campaign but is targeted sequentially at specific geographical locations, and is structured as follows. GAP writes and administers the programme material that is then purchased by a local authority or organisation interested in promoting sustainable consumption within its community or workplace. These purchasers have two roles. First, they promote and encourage involvement in Action at Home to local households or employees through advertising, meetings etc. Second, a local 'volunteer group' is established with the help of GAP through in-house training and programme management. The purpose of this group is to give the programme local impetus and voice, as well as creating more publicity for Action at Home through environmental events and networking in their communities. Thus, each project involves GAP, a local organisation, a volunteer group and local households.[2]

For the household participants, the programme works as follows. Households enrol directly with GAP, paying a signing-up fee (currently £12). Each house-

hold receives a 'welcome' questionnaire that asks simple questions about day-to-day resource use. A sample page of this questionnaire can be seen in Figure 1. These questionnaires are returned to GAP, who calculate each household's 'Greenscore'. This is a mark out of 100 that measures the household's current environmental impact and is also a baseline to compare any subsequent behaviour changes against.

Then participants receive one information pack a month on the topics of water, waste, energy, shopping and transport consecutively. As the sample of a page from the water pack shows below (see Figure 2), the packs are a mixture of information to address frequently asked questions, tips for actions and sources for further information. The focus is on small 'do-able' actions and the positive effects of making incremental changes to everyday life. Finally, participants receive a 'next steps' pack on how, if they wish, they could continue making changes into the future. They also fill out the 'welcome' questionnaire again and receive a 'Greenscore 2' to measure the extent of changes made over the six months of the programme.

Researching Action at Home: research methods and case studies

Since its inception GAP has continually sought to evaluate and develop its programmes (e.g. GAP UK, 1998a, 1998b). These evaluations show that Action at Home does have a positive impact on participants' behaviour. However, due to low return of the 'welcome' questionnaires and doubts over the effectiveness and reliability of questionnaire methodologies (e.g. Corral-Verdugo, 1997; Macnaghten & Urry, 1998), GAP has found it hard to assess what is happening to participants *during* the programme. To address this question, in 1997 GAP and University College London began researching the experiences of Action at Home participants. This research is theoretically positioned as part of a positive trend in the critical social sciences, which aims to examine environmental issues from the voices of 'non-expert' individuals (for example, see Eden, 1993; Finger, 1994; Harrison *et al.*, 1996; Hinchliffe, 1996; Macnaghten & Jacobs, 1997; Bulkeley, 1997; Burgess *et al.*, 1998; Burgess *et al.*, 1988a, 1988b; Blake, 1999; Burningham, 2000; Bickerstaff & Walker, 2001). Qualitative research methods were used to examine the *processes* evoked through participation, enabling research participants to put experiences in their own words.[3] Semi-structured single and group interviews were carried out with Action at Home participants in two the contrasting locations: households in Bournemouth and workplaces in the North-west of England.

Case Study One: households in Bournemouth

The first research site was Bournemouth in Dorset, a medium sized town on the south coast of England, with a high retiree population and emphasis on 'quality of life' (see http://www.bournemouth.gov.uk/index.asp). In autumn 1997 Bournemouth Borough Council (BBC) purchased Action at Home to help meet its Agenda 21 and Home Energy Conservation Act obligations (Bournemouth

2 Energy

8. Does your home have...

	Yes	Some	No	Don't know or n/a
reflective foil behind the radiators which are on outside walls	☐	☐	☐	☐
draught excluders fitted to the doors or windows	☐	☐	☐	☐
lagging on the pipes	☐	☐	☐	☐
lagging on the hot-water tank	☐	☐	☐	☐
low-energy lightbulb(s) in use	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. Does your home have... (these may be more relevant to homeowners)

	Yes	Some	No	Don't know or n/a
cavity wall insulation	☐	☐	☐	☐
a gas condensing boiler	☐	☐	☐	☐
double or secondary glazing	☐	☐	☐	☐
loft insulation	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. Do members of your household...

	Always/almost always	Often	Occasionally	Never/ almost never	n/a
turn the TV off at the set instead of leaving it on stand-by	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
put lids on saucepans when cooking	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
keep the thermostat temperature as low as is comfortable (e.g. between 18° and 21° C)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
defrost the fridge/freezer at least once a year	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
read the electricity and/or gas meters	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
turn lights off when leaving a room	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
keep windows closed when the heating is on	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
dry clothes naturally (instead of using a tumble dryer)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3 Water

11. Does your home have a garden? ☐ Yes ☐ No → (If 'No', go to question 13)

If 'Yes' a) is there a water butt installed in your garden? ☐ Yes ☐ No

b) does your household compost organic waste? ☐ Yes ☐ No

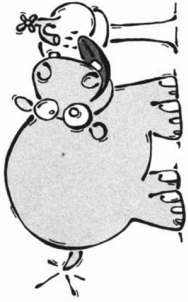12. If you have a garden, do members of your household...

	Always/almost always	Often	Occasionally	Never/ almost never	n/a
water plants in the early evening	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
water plants close to the roots	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
use a hose or sprinkler to water the garden	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. Do members of your household...

	Always/almost always	Often	Occasionally	Never/ almost never	n/a
turn off the tap whilst brushing teeth	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
reduce water use by taking shallow/shared baths or quicker showers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
fix leaking taps	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
make sure the dishwasher/washing machine is full before turning it on	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
dispose of cooking or motor oil down the toilet or drain	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
dispose of solid waste down the toilet or drain, such as cotton buds, sanitary products etc.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

FIGURE 1. Sample page of Action at Home 'welcome' questionnaire.

Borough Council, 1997). Its availability was advertised in local newspapers and amongst BBC staff. In response over 300 people enrolled.

action
@ home

QUESTIONS FIRST

Where does it go?

One person typically uses the equivalent of 18 buckets of water a day – that's 150 litres. The average household uses its water like this:

Flushing the toilet	30%
Baths and showers	30%
Washing machines	15%
Dishwashers and washing-up	6%
Outside (garden, car washing etc)	4%
Other indoor uses (cooking, drinking, cleaning etc)	10%
Other	5%

Here are some answers to the most commonly asked questions about saving water.

Q. Shouldn't the water companies be doing more to save water?

Yes, they should. As a result of growing pressure from the public and government, many water companies are beginning to take this responsibility more seriously. For example, companies are having to spend much more money on fixing leaks in their supply pipes. But it is also up to everyone to do their bit – on average each of us uses the equivalent of 6,500 buckets (55,000 litres) every year!

Q. My garden is my pride and joy. Will I have to skimp on watering it?

It is possible to keep your garden looking gorgeous and use less tap water. For example, watering your plants at sunset, rather than in the heat of the day, means that the water will have a chance to get to the roots rather than simply evaporating. Step two of this guide provides lots of ideas for keeping your garden green.

Q. Surely the odd water shortage doesn't hurt?

Unfortunately it does, particularly when combined with drier weather. As we demand more water, the water companies are having to extract more from existing underground reservoirs which are not being refilled by rainfall and from rivers which are already running low. This has two main effects. Many species of wildlife, such as otters and butterflies, suffer as too much water is drained away, affecting their natural habitat. And low river levels increase the concentration of pollutants in the water. This also means that there is less oxygen for the plant and animal life.

Q. Does having a water meter help?

Water meters *can* save money, as you only pay for the water you actually use. They also help you to keep tabs on your water use and on whether you have any leaks. If your house is large with just a few people, or if you don't have a garden, you may find a water meter works for you. Some water companies will install them for free, or give you a trial period so that you can find out whether it will save you money.

TIP TIME

How to use Hippo the Water Saver
Inside this pack you will find your free Hippo. When you put him in the water cistern of your loo, he will help you save buckets of water by taking up some of the space that would otherwise have to be filled by new water each time you flush. Simply follow the instructions on the back of the Hippo to fit him in your cistern. He should settle in with no problems at all.

But if you find he is spoiling the performance of your flush, try trimming the bag down and putting him back in. If you already have a Hippo, please pass him on to a friend. If you have any questions about your Hippo or would like to buy any more, contact **Hippo the Water Saver on (01989) 766667.**
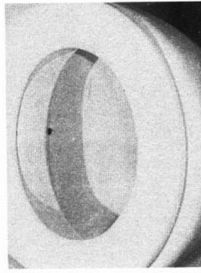
FIGURE 2. Sample page of Action at Home water pack.

Interviewees for this research were recruited from GAP's participant list over the telephone or by personal contact through the researcher being present at a volunteer group training day. The first round of interviews took place at the start of the six-month programme in October 1997. A total of 23 interviews were carried out with nine local household members (mostly retirees wanting to save money on their household bills); three volunteer group members (younger professionals with environmental concerns); and 11 council staff (interested in supporting and finding out more about this BBC–lead initiative).[4] Throughout the research all interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed by coding transcripts for key themes and issues (see Strauss, 1987). In late April 1998 another round of interviews took place. A total of 12 individuals were interviewed again, plus nine new interviewees were recruited, drawing heavily on the volunteer group as GAP wanted additional information on how the group was faring.[5]

Case Study Two: north-west workplaces

The second research site was in the north-west of England. By 1998 GAP had turned their attention to attracting large businesses to Action at Home. The rationale was that businesses could reduce resource costs through employees changing consumption practices at home and bringing these new habits into work. To this end, United Utilities and British Aerospace purchased the programme as a pilot to run in selected workplaces for 200 employees per site. These workplaces were the electricity company Norweb in Preston, Lancashire; North-West Water in Warrington, Cheshire (both owned by United Utilities); and the British Aerospace Areodrome at Warton, Lancashire.[6]

Initially an 'Action Team' of between 5–10 people was established at each site, consisting of workers from the 'shop-floor' and middle management who became involved either voluntarily or through being 'encouraged' by managers. The remit of these Action Teams was similar to the local volunteer groups (see above). They also served as a recruitment source for the research interviews, which consisted of participants of the project, both as Action Team and non-Action Team members.[7] Here group interview methods were used to enable in-depth and dynamic conversations to take place (see Harrison *et al*., 1996) and to mirror the 'communication context' (Crabtree *et al*., 1993) of the project.[8]

The first group interviews took place in October 1999 when all groups met separately for one hour. Groups met again in January 1999, half way through the programme. Finally, at the end of the programme, single interviews were held with some group members plus other staff who had been involved in implementing Action at Home. Here, a total of 21 single interviews took place across the three workplaces.

The choice of these two contrasting sites and research methods was partially an attempt to look at how Action at Home operates in different contexts. However, it also resulted from the practicalities of working with an environmental charity. GAP is able to run only a limited number of projects consecutively and therefore the case studies used were as much a matter of timing as of choice. Thus, this research was not set up to directly compare the two case studies, but

rather seen as an opportunity to look at the different, or similar, dynamics and experiences of both the Bournemouth and North-west participants. This article therefore seeks to examine *common processes* that emerge from both studies, in reference to how participants engaged with Action at Home.[9]

Consumption and Behaviour: building a theoretical framework

This research supports GAP's assertion that Action at Home does encourage some individuals to make pro-environmental behaviour changes. In Bournemouth, eight participants reported changes to at least one practice. In the North-west, the total was nine. All the behaviours changed were no-cost or low-cost practices that took little time to execute, such as turning the taps off whilst brushing teeth and turning the lights off after leaving a room. All other individuals and practices remained unchanged.

This level of behaviour change is not surprising considering the findings of literatures on (sustainable) consumption and/or behaviour change, which span a number of disciplines and collectively highlight the difficulty of altering practices. For one, psychology literatures have outlined the resilience of current behaviours in light of complex and often confounding relationships between attitudes, values, norms, intentions, behaviour and individual contexts (e.g. Gray, 1985; De Young, 1993; Karp, 1996; Taylor, 1997; Brandon & Lewis, 1999; Tanner, 1999). Environmental psychology has focused specifically on environmental behaviour and its relationship to values, arguing that a dearth of widespread environmental values may contribute to a dearth of pro-environmental behaviours (Stern & Dietz, 1994).

Early sociological arguments focused on finding correlations between environmental behaviour and social markers (such as gender, education, income: e.g. van Liere & Dunlap, 1980) with no clear consensus about findings emerging. Another strand of work has more recently focused on the nature of pro-environmental practices, showing how environmentally detrimental behaviours are often hidden from view as forms of 'inconspicuous consumption'. These practices are implicit in the infrastructures and technologies of daily lives, becoming unquestioned habits and contextual norms, and transforming natural resources such as water and coal into market commodities (Spaargaren & van Vilet, 2000). Added to this, conspicuous consumption behaviours, such as transport use and shopping, are argued to be forms of social and cultural norms with underlying goals that often counter environmental concerns, such as convenience, profit, freedom and safety (Warde *et al.*, 1999; Vigar, 2000; Maxwell, 2001).

Critical social scientists have added a further dimension by illustrating the array of social contingencies that affect the sustainable consumption and environmental policy agendas. For one, the salience and resonance of the 'environment' as a motivating public 'good' is questioned through its inextricable linkage to broader social debates about who individuals trust; who is responsible for making changes; public understandings of the science of climate change; and the fall of the environment from the public agenda during the 1990s (e.g. Harrison *et al.*, 1996; Macnaghten & Jacobs, 1997; Hobson, 2001b). Thus, the

idea that the individual 'lifestyle' is the site of social change has been critiqued. Whilst sustainable lifestyle messages focus on the individual (consumer) making empowering choices (e.g. Giddens, 1991), it is argued that lifestyles cannot simply be viewed as frivolous sites of being. Rather, they often 'juggle' the multiple demands of modern life, especially for women who work full-time *and* do the majority of domestic work (Cowan, 1983; England, 1996; Thompson, 1996; McKie *et al.*, 1999). This touches upon studies of the micro-politics of the household that highlight the *collective* nature of consumption, which makes it contested, negotiated and driven by motives other than need, e.g. love and duty (Miller, 1998) in a space that is a home, not merely a house (see Bowlby *et al.*, 1997; Domosh, 1998).

Finally, a significant literature exists concerning consumption as social practice, focusing on its role in the formation and enactment of identities. These arguments are framed from varying perspectives, such as how particular identities are created and maintained (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992; Pred, 1996; Bedford, 2000); how consumption is also a form of social exclusion (Piacentini *et al.*, 2001; Williams *et al.*, 2001): how 'postmodern' society is in fact a 'consumer society' (Featherstone, 1991; Baudrillard, 1997); and how particular goods circulate and have a 'social life' (Appadurai, 1986). In sum, these literatures point towards the implicit cultural and personal meanings that are inseparable from goods and consumption practices, thus presenting a strong and complex case as to why more consumption behaviours do not change in light of environmental concerns.

This article aims to add to the above arguments by examining consumption practices as forms of social knowledge in relation to sustainable consumption and behaviour change. Often, research into 'barriers' to sustainable consumption frame practices in a deterministic fashion, seeming to suggest that by adding together a particular practice and its social context, the nature of barrier, and therefore what social action needs to be taken, are immediately apparent (Hobson, 2001a, 2001b). The question this article seeks to address is where the individual as a knowledgeable social agent sits within this framing, especially in relation to how individuals react to new environmental information. The basic premise of this article is that sustainable consumption information is not merely added onto current lifestyles, being either accepted or rejected due to the nature of barriers to action. Rather, new information interacts with individuals' knowledge, to create a questioning of participants' lifestyles that is *fundamentally discursive*. This argument uses a theoretical framework based on Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory, to understand more about how and why some practices questioned in Action at Home change, whilst others do not.

Theorising Change: structuration theory and the consciousness of everyday practices

In *The Constitution of Society* (1984) Giddens presents a compelling framework for understanding how post-industrial societies function. He argues that, counter to many 'grand' theories, bounded social structures do not define social action. Instead, social structures are 'works in progress'. Everyday practices, such as

those of the household, are not simply mundane acts but rather daily habits and practices that constantly create and recreate social ordering.

Space limits a critical review of structuration theory (see Bryant & Jary, 1991; Kilminster, 1991; Boden, 1994) and its implications for the framing of environmental problems (see Clayton, 1993; Spaargaren & van Vilet, 2000). Rather, this article uses Giddens' framing of the forms of social knowledge involved in structuration. For one, he argues that the routine practices that create the recursive nature of social life are a form of 'hidden' knowledge called practical consciousness. This knowledge enables individuals to 'go on' in daily life without having to make new decisions every moment e.g. "how shall I brush my teeth or turn this tap off?" This is not simply a cognitive form of knowledge but is embodied and experienced in the flow of daily practices. Added to this, the awareness with which individuals think and talk is called discursive consciousness, a body of knowledge that is an on-going development of ideas and possibilities, anchored in knowledge, values and experience.

It is argued here that these two forms of knowledge mirror the differences between the practices changed and those unchanged by Action at Home participants. Giddens' framework is thus developed here to offer some new insights into the processes and knowledges involved in questioning consumption practices.

Questioning Practices: bringing habits from practical to discursive consciousness

The practices changed as a result of taking Action at Home were arguably part of participants' practical consciousness before the programme began. Participants stated they had never really thought about these habits before, and could not understand why they had gone unnoticed for so long. Reading the packs brought habits into discursive consciousness, making participants reconsider what they do, and why, as the quote below exemplifies.

> I think it's made me more conscious and I know I never used to put lids onto saucepans and I do that now. Also it makes it boil quicker. You know, just things I had read it in a leaflet, about sticking lids on pans and just little things. And I don't leave my TV on, I used to leave my TV on stand-by at night and I just turn if off at the mains, which I never, never did before. (Female, North-west, April 1999)

This process is in keeping with Giddens' suggestion that the boundary between practical and discursive consciousness is moveable through time and experience. By taking the daily flow of routines apart step-by-step, through reading the packs and questionnaires, many participants reported a revelatory 'why do I do that?' experience. The (il)logic of their practices are uncovered and if no valid reasons for continuing as normal are found, many concluded that 'I can do that', in terms of making some recommended changes.

This process is contingent not only on the type of knowledge being questioned, that is, practical consciousness, but also on how Action at Home framed the practice questioned. As well as the packs taking apart routines that usually

flow, such as cooking and washing, comparing these isolated practices to a known or imaginable quantity also had a strong impact. For example, a statement in the Energy pack suggests that "If we all stopped leaving our TVs on stand-by it would save enough electricity to power a town the size of Basingstoke or Burnley". Framing practices in this manner seemed to have a considerable impact on how interviewees saw their own actions. As one interviewee noted:

> They're very good[10] because you look at them and they say "if you leave your TV on overnight it's the equivalent of …" and they give you a fact. I think it wastes 50% of its life or something? I can't remember what the fact was now but it was a lot. I think it was good how they compare, they gave us comparison, telling you it was more expensive because it does make people listen. I think if you hit people with facts regarding money or something they know, they'll listen rather than saying so many acres of rainforest get chopped down a day to make them people's paper. (Female, North-west, January 1999)

Therefore, it is not only the process of having the 'unquestioned questioned' that creates positive behaviour change, but also the forms of knowledge represented in this questioning process. Knowledge that 'speaks' to participants' emergent discursive consciousness and experiences enables connections to be made between individual practices and environmental impacts (Bickerstaff & Walker, 2001).

New Practices and the Creation of a 'Lens of Difference'

The reconsideration of habits quickly created new habits, which participants believed would remain.

> I don't think I could go back to the way I used to be. I've seen people put pieces of paper in the bin and it breaks your heart to see anything. "Oh no" you know "some people have just thrown these in the bin". I've only changed in the past couple of months. (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998)

Although these new habits quickly become part of a reformed practical consciousness, the effect of rethinking practices created a new discursive awareness or a 'lens of difference'. This is not because individuals had learnt new facts that will inform later actions (cf. Ehrlich *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, it was striking how interviewees rarely remembered the facts from the Action at Home packs. Rather, through the experience of realising they *could* act differently some participants felt able to reapply this questioning process to other parts of their lives, using these insights at other times in the future. As one interviewee summarised:

> Well it makes you look at things, I think you do tend to look at things differently. When you've read it you put it to the back of your mind to make you try your best. (Male, Bournemouth, April 1998)

This should not be seen as a conversion to 'green' or sustainable living *per se*—interviewees rarely felt they *should* be doing all the things that GAP recommend. Rather, through engaging with Action at Home, participants experience new ways of thinking and talking about the purpose and impacts of their practices. This discursive awareness stays as part of individuals' discursive consciousness, not necessarily altering what they know and do, but becoming part of on-going understandings and debates about lifestyles and values.

Practices Unchanged: discursive consciousness and Action at Home

These newly uncovered practices also become part of, and interact with the on-going debates into more complex and contentious actions outlined in the packs, such as transport use and shopping. These practices rarely changed during the programme. They differ from the habits discussed above as they are already situated in individuals' discursive consciousness, requiring some on-going awareness to execute, e.g. "What do we need from the supermarket this week?" They also differ by being inextricably bound up with debates about implicated sets of social and power relations (Darier & Schule, 1999; Myers & Macnaghten, 1998) and the meanings of practices (Baudrillard, 1998).

For example, one issue that featured strongly in the interviews concerned shopping practices. Individuals argued they would not change how they shopped because, for one, they felt strongly about unequal consumer and producer relations, powers and responsibilities. As one interviewee noted:

> Things are over-packaged. Going back to pizzas or beefburgers, 10 inch pizzas that will come in a box about 12 inch square to make it look bigger. So it's the marketing that always try to make the products look bigger and better than what they actually are. If they were honest, they might never sell anything. (Male, North-west, October 1998)

Others argued they felt manipulated into buying more when out shopping, making them wonder how much power the individual consumer has to change anything. These reactions are not misunderstandings or the making of excuses (cf. Stoll-Kleemann *et al.*, 2001), but are the fundamental ways that individuals deal with socially complex information, by debating, contesting and positioning a piece of information or proposition within their own knowledges (Billig, 1987; Shotter 1993a, 1993b).

Although this does not lead to widespread behaviour changes it shows that behind a public veil of behavioural inertia there are constructive, discursive processes taking place that are not just focused on individualised consumption but also touch upon the uncertainties and social implications of the knowledges and practices detailed in Action at Home.

This process is summarised in Figure 3, which aims to offer a framework with which to understand the multiple discursive processes taking place when individuals engage with Action at Home. It suggests that practices that are part of participants' practical and discursive awareness become part of an iterative process wherein the implications of Action at Home information are questioned
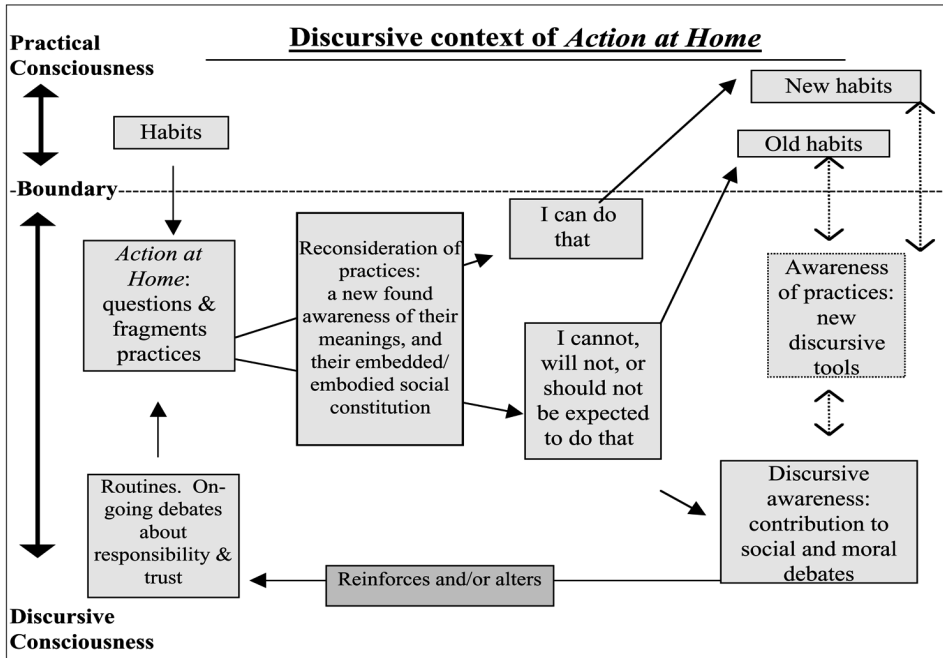
FIGURE 3. Diagram of discursive processes and their impact on behaviour change in relation to Action at Home.

and (re)considered. This results in some behaviour change, but mostly in the re-building and realigning of participant's discursive consciousness.

Concluding Remarks: representing experience through knowledge

Using Giddens' structuration theory to explore what happens when consumption practices are questioned is an attempt to better understand some of complex, and often hidden processes involved in trying to think about and/or enact a sustainable lifestyle. With the aims of making the social actor the central focus, this article offers one way of seeing the constructive and discursive role that knowledges play in taking part in Action at Home. The positive message is that behaviour changes to some environmentally malignant practices *can* be encouraged. However, this is contingent upon the forms of knowledge used and practitioner's understandings of the lay meanings implicated in the sustainable consumption project.

That is, advocates of sustainable consumption/development projects often argue that 'more and better science' is needed to overcome public ignorance and inertia (e.g. Dwyer *et al.*, 1993; Royal Society, 1997). By contrast, this article argues that practices change not through exposure to scientific knowledge *per se* but through individuals making connections between forms of knowledge that link their own, everyday and experiential environments to broader environmental

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concerns (Strauss & Quinn, 1997; Bickerstaff & Walker, 2001), thus enabling them to see old practices in new ways that make intuitive 'common sense'.

Sustainable consumption advocates therefore would benefit from considering who and what is represented in the framing of environmental information, i.e. how are the vested interests, ambiguities, and uncertainties dealt with and framed within a discourse whose underlying aim is to (try and) tell individuals how they should behave in their own homes? In this way, sustainable consumption should not only be viewed solely as a neutral tool of environmental policy. Rather, there needs to be an acknowledgment and engagement with a 'cultural politics of consumption'. This follows Nash's (2001, p. 81) assertion that often social theorists neglect the 'political aspects of contemporary social practices'. The discursive processes outlined in this article highlight how the broader political and social contingencies and debates evoked by questioning personal consumption practices are the dominant experience of those engaged with Action at Home's sustainable lifestyle discourse. Thus, consumption practices need to be seen not merely as problematic sites of extravagant resource use but also as sites of daily political/personal struggles. This would result in a broadening of the sustainable consumption discourse and debates beyond their current remit. Perhaps then, a more reflexive political and public engagement with the central ideas of sustainable consumption as a positive social project can begin to be mapped out, not only on the political landscape, but also as part of our daily lives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] For example, one action is weighing household waste sent to land-fill at the start of the Programme. Then participants begin recycling and composting, and weigh their land-fill waste some weeks later to note any changes.

[2] However, since this research took place, GAP has changed their operating procedures and programme structure. The volunteer groups have been disbanded. This is because GAP is not able to offer the required financial, administrative and moral support to keep all the groups going. As a result, Action at Home is now available nationally rather than just in specific designated regions.

[3] For more information on this methodology, see Hobson (2001a). For further discussion on the merits of interview techniques as a research method see Burgess *et al.* (1998a); Miles & Huberman (1994).

[4] There were 17 females and 6 males. The age distribution was 6 aged between 18–35; 8 between 35–55; and 9 aged over 55.

[5] A breakdown of interviewees is as follows. There were 21 in total; 4 from local households (1 new, 3 from previous interviews); 9 from the volunteer group (6 new, 3 from previous interviews); and 8 council officers (3 new, 5 from previous interview). There were 14 females and 7 males. Ages ranged from 7 individuals between 18–35; 8 between 35–55; and 6 over 55.

[6] Final recruitment rates were 133 at Warton, 176 at North-West Water and 195 at Norweb.

[7] The Norweb interview group numbered 7 (5 male and 2 females). Ages ranged from 4 between 35–54 and 3 over 55. The Warton group consisted of 6 men; 2 were aged 18–35; 3 aged 35–54; and 1 over 55. Finally, the North-West Water group totalled 5 individuals, 4 women and 1 man all aged under 35.

[8] Here, the 'communication context' is defined as the context in which individuals are experiencing the subject being talked about. In this case, Action at Home was being taken through a work-based, interactive context, that would hopefully be reflected (upon) in the group interviews.

[9] However, detailed project evaluations of both the Bournemouth and North-west projects were carried out for GAP, to help them develop their programme materials and structures. These are unpublished internal reports.

[10] The interviewee is talking about GAP posters and stickers that were placed around the North-west workplaces of the second case study.

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