

Lifecourse Transitions: Opportunities for Sustainable Lifestyles?

15 – 16 July 2014

Workshop Report

Lifecourse Transitions: Opportunities for Sustainable Lifestyles? was a two day workshop held at the University of Surrey from 15-16th July 2014. The event was co-organised by Kate Burningham (Sociology and CES), Sue Venn, Ian Christie and Tim Jackson (CES), Birgitta Gatersleben (Psychology), Monique Raats (Food Consumer Behaviour and Health Research Centre). 40 participants from seven countries, including three keynote speakers, attended the workshop which included presentations, panel discussions and interactive working groups.

Workshop objectives

This two day multidisciplinary workshop sought to combine theoretical and empirical contributions from a variety of disciplines to explore the experiences of those undergoing lifecourse transitions, and aspects of sustainable everyday practices and lifestyles. We were interested in gaining insights from:

- empirical work on the experiences of those undertaking a variety of lifecourse transitions, such as leaving home for the first time, having a first child, moving home or retiring;
- empirical work on different aspects of sustainable lifestyles, such as food acquisition, reducing waste, and saving energy;
- theoretical work on habits and practices in relation to their contribution to debates surrounding the meanings and experiences of everyday (sustainable) lifestyles through lifecourse transitions.

Summary of Presentations

Our workshop was opened by **Tim Jackson**, Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey who then introduced our first keynote speaker, **Bas Verplanken** of the University of Bath who looked at the consequences of habitual behaviour, and how lifecourse transitions may offer opportunities to change environmentally detrimental habits. Papers in the following stream were then grouped around the theme of habits, with **Neil Jennings** of the NUS similarly exploring moments of change as opportunities to instil positive environmental habits, or at least to maintain them. **Birgitta Gatersleben** presented evidence from a study of lifecourse transitions which suggests that lifecourse changes are associated with changes in pro-environmental behaviour, but that whilst changes in values are implicated in this, changes in identities are less so. The final presentation by **Ines Throniker** showed that moving home may lead to changes in mobility habits, but that the most likely reason for change is the significance to people of those changes.

A methods stream included **Kiron Chatterjee** who suggested that any behaviour change theory, policy or intervention should not ignore the significance of lifecourse events and **Rachel Howell** who engaged us in practical work exploring the use of graphical representations of practices over an individual's lifecourse as a useful methodological tool.

Bronwyn Hayward from University of Canterbury Christchurch, New Zealand, was our next keynote speaker who explored the political context of youth transitions, and their struggle for

a more democratic and sustainable future. Our final session on day two comprised presentations around the theme of Families and Households. **Kevin Burchall** examined the synergistic potential of working on low energy lifestyles with families and a primary school whilst **Tom Roberts** explored the impact of household demography on energy consuming social practices. Finally, **Kate Burningham** explored the concept of ‘lifecourse transitions’ suggesting they are more complex than merely single ‘moments of change’.

Day two started with our final keynote speaker, **Dale Southerton** from the University of Manchester who gave us some sociological reflections on the implications for understanding trajectories of consumption through a ‘Lifecourse’ approach, suggesting that as a concept it requires critical evaluation. The following group of presentations continued with the theme of Consumption and were opened by **Monica Wilinska** who considered the prevalent view of retirement as opposed to work being based on a rigid distinction between different life stages and types of activities performed at these various ages. **Bérangère Véron** analyzed to what extent lifecourse transitions in old age may lead to more sustainable food practices and **Juneda Sarfraz** described the ‘foodways’ of the first and oldest generation of Pakistani, Muslim families in Scotland.

Our final theme was grouped around the theme of Narratives and consisted of four papers. **Mary Greene** argued that a biographical approach to sustainable consumption research offers huge potential in terms of capturing both short- and long-term transitions in human behaviour. **Barbara Ratzenboeck** presented an analysis of interrelations of artistic life course transitions and social contextualities from her work with literary writers. **Emily Towers** explored how we can create enduring narratives with our clothes through the practice of mending and how this may impact on our continuous consumption of fashion products. The final presentation of the workshop was by **Chris Groves**, who used narrative interviews with participants to understand how energy demand reduction initiatives interact with people’s personal biographies.

Key themes from the workshop

Discussion panels and interactive group discussions were held during the workshop to explore the key themes and to identify areas of learning and potential future interactions. The main points to emerge were:

- Lifecourse transitions, such as having a child, going to university, can be important in understanding change, and stability, in everyday behaviours. Unplanned and unexpected transitions may also have significance, and a narrative approach is important in understanding this.
- Instead of asking people to reflect on the transitions in their lives, we should perhaps give people the opportunity to think forward and talk about the future they want and are able to have.
- Understandings of what lifecourse transitions comprise are highly varied, the concept deserves critical interrogation and multidisciplinary approaches are valuable here.
- Longitudinal work is valuable in understanding the ongoing and interconnected nature of transitions and how they intersect and interweave in households and beyond.
- One possible future research question is to look at how major events or crises impact on practices and potentially alter our values.
- Cross cultural research is important– particularly in recognition of the mobile nature of everyday lives when cultural norms are transferred across different cultures.

Next steps

Several outputs based on the workshop and other activities are planned by the organising committee. Journal editors and publishers have been contacted in order to explore the possibility of an edited special issue, or book based on the key themes of the workshop. Workshop participants will remain in contact with a view to future collaborations.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, our thanks to all our presenters and participants for their interesting, stimulating and thought provoking contributions.

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