Individuals, Morality, and Social change: Fostering a Culture of Sustainable Consumption

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ABSTRACT

At times heralded, at times maligned – the role of the individual in creating a more sustainable society is the subject of both philosophical and policy debate. Existing research focuses largely on the quantitative potential of citizens to reduce their personal consumption, rather than the qualitative potential for committed individuals to foster moral and cultural change around consumption habits. Current policy for sustainable consumption rests largely on taxes and incentives and thus assumes that monetary rewards are necessary for changed consumption behavior. Indeed, arguments for abandoning the individual as an agent for social change rests on a fallacy of thinking that treats individual change as mutually exclusive from cultural and policy change. In the following article, we explore the role of individuals in developing morality with respect to consumption. We characterize this morality and comment on its efficacy in fostering sustainable consumption using 26 semi-structured interviews conducted in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Our findings suggest households that openly tie their consumption to morality and lead lifestyles that conspicuously support sustainability can help to facilitate the cultural shift needed to reduce overall consumption.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; morality; cultural narrative; social values

> Were it to accept and take this challenge seriously, today's generation would become the first to decide, self-consciously and purposefully, to rewrite its cultural narrative. Survival demands that we create a new, more sophisticated cultural myth incorporating core beliefs and values that are compatible both with biophysical reality and socio-political necessity on a finite planet. (Rees 2009: 308)

1. Introduction

"We cannot change the world by changing our buying habits" is the title of George Monbiot's blog for November 6, 2009[1]. Indeed, for the majority, adopting small changes (e.g., buying carbon offsets) rarely escalates to more meaningful choices (e.g., giving up air travel). If not backed by effective regulation, incentives, and full-cost accounting, individuals' daily practices are unlikely to amount to a significant decrease in

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[1] http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/nov/06/green-consumerism

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environmental impact[2]. Monbiot (2007) uses the same argument elsewhere as evidence that the individual is ineffective as a locus for change, and he is not alone in this assertion (Szasz 2007; Mazar & Zhong 2009).

In the following article, we comment on the potential for individuals with strong codes of environmental conduct to foster cultural change towards sustainable consumption. Precisely by supporting and influencing one another, small networks of committed individuals can create a "critical mass" in their neighbourhoods, changing social norms and creating systems of provision that facilitate sustainable consumption (Dietz et al. 2009; Gilligan et al. 2010). We seek to demonstrate that such a commitment rests on morality, that is, a code of conduct that guides individuals' perception of "right" and "wrong", and shapes their norms and behaviour. We assume that a normative definition of morality commits a person to regarding some behaviour as immoral and that by recognizing the moral consequences of behaviour; individuals can shape their lives to reduce temptation to buy and consume things they do not philosophically want to be part of their lives (Barnett et al. 2005).

2. Background

There is a great deal of scientific evidence that our current levels of consumption are unsustainable, driving climate change, loss of biodiversity, and creating prodigious amounts of waste (Arrow et al. 2004; Boyd 2003). Nonetheless, these logical arguments for sustainable consumption have not resulted in wholesale commitments to reduce consumption by governments, industries, or individuals (Gilligan et al. 2010; Hamilton 2010; Rees 2009). As a response to the failure of the international community (e.g., at Poznan in 2008 or Copenhagen in 2009) to achieve a binding commitment to sustainability, some argue for a renewed emphasis on the ability of individuals to adopt voluntary measures to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. For example, Gilligan et al. (2010: 17) write,

> "The nations of the world have repeatedly agreed to a goal of limiting global warming to 2˙C, but there is a widening gap between this goal, or even the more modest one of limiting greenhouse gases to twice their pre-industrial concentrations, and the actions nations are willing to undertake to achieve it. Voluntary energy conservation by individuals and households could produce significant rapid reductions at low cost and without intrusive and politically controversial government regulation."

Yet such calls focus on changes in individual practices without regarding changes in thinking about the root causes of environmental problems, or the ability of people to delineate between individual and structural sources of environmental damage (Westheimer & Kahne 2004). Popular policy around sustainable consumption directed at the individual, such as taxes and incentives, similarly overlooks the importance of cultural change and is instead focused on short-term behaviour change (Speth 2008; and see for instance OECD 2008).

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[2] Although Dietz et al. (2009) estimate that households could account for a 20% decrease in the United States total greenhouse gas emissions through the adoption of 17 straightforward practices.

2.1. Culture, Morality and Social Change   We argue that to ignore culture is imprudent: culture serves a foundation to all other forms of action and offers the possibility for long-term change (Rees 2009). For instance, charging shoppers for plastic bags at grocery stores (a tax) may reduce bag consumption as long as the charge is in place. However, without a normative understanding of why we should reduce consumption of plastic bags (e.g., waste and pollution resulting from use of plastic bags), there is little opportunity for broad and long-lasting cultural change.

Indeed, one of the most significant problems with taxes and subsidies to encourage behavioural reform is that such approaches target isolated individuals, rather than consider the social context of much consumption (Lintott 2007; Westheimer & Kahne 2004). There is much evidence to suggest that, "individual power remains virtual as far as it is isolated." (Wallenborn 2007: 69). Policy instruments and structures that encourage social interaction and the formation of social networks have the potential to encourage reflexivity and accountability amongst groups of citizens. However, such programs and instruments are rare (Westheimer & Kahne 2004) and commitment to social structures that encourage interaction seems to be constantly declining (Putnam 2000). As Wallenborn (2007: 69) explains,

> *"Apart from policy instruments focused on production, different pathways to 'socialisation' are not being sufficiently explored or used: direct and overall socialisation through norms laid down by politics; socialisation through the empowerment of civil society associations; the socialization of consumers though objects of consumption themselves."*

We begin by presenting arguments for a reduction of material consumption, followed by a short summary of the primary thesis of this article. This paper is still in draft form but we hope to convey where our thoughts are coalescing in regards to morality and consumption. We briefly review our methods and then comprise the bulk of the remainder of the paper in the interview findings. Finally, we provide a brief discussion of the findings and make a few conclusions. It is the aim of this paper to articulate a meaningful role for the individual in achieving a balance between humans and our environment, in particular, emphasizing the importance of cultural values and morality. To do so we rely upon literature from the sociology of morality to construct an argument for the individual's ability to strengthen others' capacity to reduce as well as to respond to environmental crises at the individual level.

The thesis of this article is as follows: first, there is a moral and cultural shift needed to supplant current policy attempts to address environmental issues like climate change. Second, many treatises on sustainability both malign and underestimate the capacity of individuals to aid in the shift to reducing consumption, instead focusing on micro-level fixes such as incentives and technology, or macro-level issues like the (in)compatibility of sustainability and capitalism . When the individual's role is considered, it is often in the context of recognizing that changes in household consumption behaviour are needed, but such considerations too often result in encouraging individuals to buy "green" products rather than promote reflexivity, participation in supportive networks, and meaningfully reduce material consumption (Gilligan 2010 et al.; Sandilands 1993). In fact, Mazar and Zhong (2009) used

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psychological experiments to determine that buying green products precludes many from adopting other ethical behaviours; limiting individual action to ethical consumerism risks, and inadvertently discouraging cultural shifts towards sustainable consumption.

A transformative exegesis on the potential of individuals to contribute to cultural change should consider the role of individuals in formal institutionalised change (e.g., non-governmental organizations) *and* in moral and cultural change (Gilligan et al. 2010). We focus on the latter; on how individuals can do more than buy better dish detergent, but can foster networks of reduced material consumption and increased quality of life, built upon morality and principled codes of conduct (Ruwet 2007). Such networks affect friends, family, neighbours, and co-workers, strengthening the ability of others to reduce consumption, to cope with the effects of environmental crises, and to reflect on the influence of our choices on the environment and on others.

Most of our everyday lives are guided by unconscious, habitual mental processes that are prompted by normative signals in our social environment (Giddens 1991; Middlemiss 2009). Our social environment is strongly shaped by morality, communicated through cultural narratives and myths (Rees 2009). Indeed, myths convey the morals that construct our society, allowing individuals to distinguish between right and wrong. Often, myths can be so entrenched as to be largely unquestioned, regardless of their accuracy or veracity. For instance, the myth that growth can continue unabated pervades our legislatures, malls, schools, and our own beliefs and attitudes. Convincing scientific evidence exists to counter the notion that constant growth is possible (IPCC 2007) yet culturally, we seem to tolerate rising sea levels, food shortages, and extreme weather events in exchange to adopting behaviors that change these trends. In this respect, nascent cultural narratives and morals founded on principles of what we do in our everyday matters to these larger consequences must be better understood. In particular, scholarship on sustainability then should characterize this morality, understand its impacts, and articulate how this knowledge could be used to inform policy. Below, we draw upon literature and interview data to characterize the morality that could foster a culture of sustainable consumption and discuss the impacts of such a morality. In the conclusion, we speculate as to how this information could be used to effect social change, commenting on how this information could be used in the policy process.

Boulanger and Zaccai (2007) was the first to apply Kohlberg's (1981) typology of stages of moral development in children to the process of developing moral codes of conduct around consumption. However, the authors do not use empirical data to elaborate on the matrix of moral development. Here, we use results from the interview data to expand upon the categories of moral development first outlined by Kohlberg (1981). Following this, we comment upon how such a morality could inform cultural shifts to sustainability, again drawing upon interview data. Kohlberg described three phases of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional moral, and post-conventional moral (Boulanger and Zaccai 2007). Preconventional moral refers to a consuming only in relation to rules or threat of punishment, which is not relevant to our study and consuming in relation to personal interests in well-being, comfort and convenience, which we did receive accounts of in our study. Conventional moral refers to consumption as a display of group membership, or cultural belonging, and – regulated and proper consumption (no excess, no waste, expectations to be reasonable and use

resources wisely as a "good housewife", for example); and post-conventional moral refers to solidarity consumption, where consumption is deliberately chosen to promote certain social relations among the producers of that item. For example, those who choose fair trade and locally made goods may have clearly ethical principles for buying items regarding the ethics of their production. Thus, in the final category, it is a categorical imperative that responsible consumption is an "intentional duty" (Jonas and Ward, 2007: 235).

3. Methods

Our argument is built from data collected from 26 interviews with 13 families in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada during 2009. Key informants were recruited via a snowball sample that started with key contacts in the Strathcona Farmer's Market of Edmonton and moved out from there to a broader network of adult individuals significantly committed to low consumptive lifestyles. All interviewees were adults with children and residents of Edmonton, Alberta. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted one to two hours long. There were two sets of interviews with each respondent, which sometimes involved a couple. All interviewee were asked the same questions in the first round, whereas each family was asked unique questions in the second round of interviewing regarding their sources of support and difficulties for their low consumptive lifestyles. Questions addressed motivations for and practices of living sustainably. All interviews were organized and coded using NVivo 8.0, a qualitative software package that allows coding the data into themes. The names tied to the individual quotes are pseudonyms.

4. Findings

We found that many of the participants' practices constituted a moral response to these questions. We were also surprised at the extent to which participants inspired others in their neighborhoods to reduce consumption. These findings contradict Monbiot's (2007) assertion that the individual is ineffective as a locus for change. Moreover, this discussion complements the work of Szasz (2007) who examined the stultifying effect on sustainable living of taking residence in a homogenous, gated community or suburb. The participants here effectively engage other like-minded households in an ongoing discourse and practice of sustainable living. Here we provide examples of several moral responses to the existential questions above. We mention the role of social networks as important drivers and mediators of daily practices and note the potential for structural change as a result of the actions described.

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Each phase is comprised of two stages. In table 1 we briefly outline each stage in the second column and illustrate with excerpts from the interviews in the third column.

Table 1: Morality and Consumption

Phase	Stage	Illustrative excerpts from interviews
Pre-conventional moral	No rules – obedience to authority, fear of punishment	*Not applicable*
	Search for personal interest (e.g., well-being, comfort, convenience)	*I've really found that when I look at it from a perspective of health, it's really been helpful to keep consumption lower. In terms or whether it is food or toys or anything, I think keeping that framework has been helpful.*
Conventional moral	Search for group approval and belonging	*Well I think that we were, when we had free time we were using that free time in circles, social circles where everyone was very environmentally and socially aware. Like I said, if you showed up with a shirt that said Gap on it or something, people would be like, "What are you doing?"*
	Respect of laws and sense of duty; "respect of social rules"	*And I just went, well I would just as soon not waste that much stuff and in the end have it going to a landfill because if I do it, what's to say everyone else shouldn't be entitled to do the same thing? And if everyone wasted the amount that some people do, we would be just buried in garbage.*
Post-conventional moral	Care for others' well-being (and future generations, environment)	*I have people say to me, "Well, I could not have strawberries in December." I'm like, why couldn't you? If you actually realized the cost in terms of the environment of being in Edmonton, AB and eating strawberries in December, you just wouldn't do it. I bet most people wouldn't anyway.*
	Reflection on ethical principles and codes of conduct	*For me, how we live and how we consume, they need to fit with my spiritual beliefs because I love the earth and our existence so much. How I live, as much as possible, needs to be a demonstration of respect, an honoring of that. And so if I can consume as wisely as I can, for me those are actions of reverence.*

Figure 1: Adapted from Boulanger and Zaccai, 2007, p.235

The remaining section of our findings focuses on some key themes that fell into the conventional moral category and more importantly the post-conventional category. These are the categories that illustrate the linkage our respondents made between their consumption behavior and the moral, value-based reasoning behind such behavior.

4.1. Conventional moral category

Several of our respondents emphasized a desire to reduce waste as a guiding principle of good living, whether or not it was tied to positive environmental outcomes. This commitment to thrift was often tied to a realization that more stuff does not make most people happier, and that many of the items people buy is not deliberately or thoughtfully chosen. This deliberate thought process around consumption was often tied to reflective questions about how goods were made (their ecological and social embeddedness), and who benefitted from their sale. Additionally, this reflexivity was tied to a willingness to set limits on themselves regarding the waste stream from their household and correspondingly to save and buy high quality items over poor quality items that too quickly are thrown away. Others talked about a repulsion toward waste knowing that it goes to a landfill and carries with it a burden for its eventual biodegradation and costly consequences to land, water and city taxes. For example, the following quotes capture much of this sentiment, which could be seen in the old adage, "waste not, want not."

4.1.1. Waste not, want not

"I would just as soon not waste that much stuff and have it go to a landfill because if I do it, what's to say everyone else shouldn't be entitled to do the same thing. And if everyone wasted the amount that some people do, we would be just buried in garbage I would think." -- Len

"I've come to sense that we've become this commercial society where a whole lot of people are discontent and we think that the way to become content is to buy more because that's the messaging that we get. I think we've lost sight of the fact that stuff isn't going to make us happy." --Callie

"I think probably the biggest challenge right now is that there is very little restriction in many ways on how much people can consume. And that consumer goods are relatively inexpensive and so there's less discipline and less restriction. What we've tried to do, and what I'm proud of, is try to establish some limit or at least a philosophy around consumption, how much and what we buy. We try to be very conscious about what we consume: who made it, how was it made, do we need it. We try to maintain a sense of quality and a sense of consciousness." – Mary

Many of our respondents also justified their low consumptive lifestyle with a broader commitment to social change that allowed them to see their lifestyles and demonstration to others as a transformative force in society, albeit starting at their community influence.

4.2. Post-conventional moral category

In the post-conventional moral category respondents emphasized the relationship between consumption and care for others, and living by a deeper code of ethical principles. Our interviews yielded two themes in this category, namely the desire of

many of our respondents to create the social space where low consumptive lifestyles could become normalized, and secondly, to create an ethic of care for future generations by demonstrating and articulating that commitment in their present day consumption choices.

4.2.1. Lead by example and nurturing the social context for mindful consumption
Several of our respondents did not set out per se to demonstrate to others the full happy lives they could lead by consuming much less than the average Edmontonian, but have found that this is a rewarding part of how they live which has energized them to embrace serving as an example to others. Respondents found joy in seeing others adopt lower consumptive practices, sharing items, and sharing skills that would otherwise require cash exchange. A number of exemplary quotes below refer to the joys of seeing their values reproduced by others who are inspired by their low consumptive lifestyles.

"Individuals not driving is not going to stop global warming -- I agree with the science on that. But I think the only way you will ever get change is if you have individuals start living more authentically. So setting a good example is important." – Ryan

"I really believe that you can't change people by telling them. You have to change people by showing them. And that's exactly how I try to live… My role as an individual is to be the person who gets it started for other people… I think you have to think positively otherwise it's not very encouraging to continue trying. I feel good because in my small group of people, it's getting better all the time and sustainability is becoming a trend." -- Cory

"We are proud that we've set an example - that you don't have to have a show-home to have nice things and a good life. One of the things that we stand out for is that we end up walking and biking places where other people wouldn't. People will often say, "Oh you biked here? I guess I could have too". -- Sheila

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"You're going to have individuals who are willing to live sustainably by themselves but then there are going to be a huge number of people who aren't going to unless there is regulation, or, it somehow it gets into the consciousness, into societal values, that these are things we should be doing. I think those individuals who are willing to do it on their own are part of what makes that [regulation] happen and pushes things forward. And it's not enough just to do your own thing; you have to be helping everybody else to do it too. And so part of me feels guilty that we're not doing more than just our own thing within our family and influencing people in our lives; that we're not taking more of an activist role by lobbying government or trying to increase public awareness or whatever, but I don't want to minimize the importance of the impact you have on the people around you, I mean we've had people say to us, "You guys inspired us to do this," or, "We were thinking of you and so we made this decision." And it's awesome." -- Theresa

"I think we have a pretty strong presence here. We were thinking one day that we are like a neighborhood of excellence. In terms of, you know if you found out tomorrow you can't live with this, this, this and that, you know, suddenly you can't drive your car anymore -- many of us would just carry on doing our thing. And so I think just by being here people know that there is another way to do things. That you don't have to follow what everybody else is doing. And for the most part, people who loan me their car or what not, I think they admire how we live and they also know that their car sits unused eighty percent of the time, so what the heck. That's the kind of bartering thing that builds community I think. You get to know people better because of that. I have this; what do you have? Oh okay, maybe I could use yours and I will make you a meal and whatever." – Mark

Similarly, respondents often spoke to their worries about environmental consequences of over-consumption on their children and future generations in general. Their frame of reference was longer term, and their notion of consequences of their consumption behavior cross ocean borders, indicating a deeper ethic of global citizenship.

3.2.2 Care for future generations by what we consume now The quotes that follow illustrate this sense of responsibility to demonstrate to one's children that the meaning of life is loosely tied to things per se, and for creating the conditions in which future generations can live reasonably healthy and full lives as well. This sense of responsibility often means recognizing the importance of tying one's current consumption to cumulative effects that exacerbate problems of climate change (profligate energy use) and lack of preparation for peak oil societal transformations.

"When you have kids then you're on that next level of passing on to the future. So you want to teach them to use less and that when they're enjoying themselves, it's not related at all to money or objects or whatever, it's the time we spent with them." – Ted

"I think that the environmental challenges that we are likely going to face in our lifetime require new morals. We're raising a generation that is dependent on electricity, utterly. Dependant on resources, utterly, utterly. And that's just unethical

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given what we know [climate change, peak oil] is likely coming down the pike." --
Mike

"I'm envious, in a way, that people can live so, I hate to say selfishly, but it is.
They're thinking about what they're providing for their kids right now. I don't get the
disconnect: like they think they're doing the "right" thing for their kids, and these are
all people who love their children, yet don't see that the over-consumptive way that
they're raising their kids is actually a profoundly neglectful and irresponsible thing to
do. And I don't know, how do they not see that?" – Cory

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our interview findings demonstrate the moral character of many of these parent's consumption decisions. We suggest these moral responses can produce positive changes to social structures and potentially be a transformative force, even one neighborhood at a time, which empowers individuals act together. This collective awareness, they believe, can lead to social pressure for higher level regulations and policies, which would be a fruitful direction for future research. As one of our respondents argues, "It doesn't take a lot of people if the relationships and the passion are strong and they're committed. But they do have to be connected and they do have to have a common vision."

We found that those informants who had access to a group of like-minded others were more fully able to accelerate their own sustainable practices and encourage others to do so. For example, Louise describes the importance of such a community,

"I find it comforting to hang out with people who are like us. It can make me sad if
I'm always in a mixed group where not everyone sees what I see. I think there are
times when we need to be with people who know exactly what you're talking about or
where you're coming from. We still have community connections with people like that
and I find it spiritually and emotionally comforting to be with those people. Not all
the time but enough to kind of recharge you or sooth you a bit."

Those participants who are committed to reducing their impact on the environment, and have constructed a moral code around reducing consumption, are an important part of a cultural shift to a more sustainable future. Others have commented on the need for new narratives (Leiserowitz & Fernandez 2008). Narratives rooted in morality have the advantage of acknowledging that there are behaviors one might wish to engage in but this desire is counterbalanced by a sense of right and wrong. As Gert (2008, 27) explains, "Accepting a normative definition of morality commits a person to regarding some behavior as immoral, perhaps even behavior that he is tempted to perform." Popular policy around sustainable consumption directed at the individual, such as taxes and incentives, similarly overlooks the importance of cultural change and is instead focused on short-term behavior change (Speth 2009). Similarly Rees (2009, both quotes below on p. 308) argues that technological changes and manipulation of market forces are only window dressing to a more significant call for a cultural shift, opening up an entirely new window:

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...as humans have always done, they hide behind socially constructed myths that entrench the status quo. The mainstream assumes we can resolve the sustainability conundrum through improved technology, increased factor productivity (material efficiency) and market forces alone. Politicians and ordinary citizens fear that policies that would effectively mitigate ecological degradation would slow economic growth.

And, sustainability on a crowded resource-constrained planet requires that the denizens of high-income consumer societies begin an unconstrained reassessment of their prevailing cultural beliefs, values and assumptions – this is what 'paradigm-shifting' is all about. We have no choice but to reinvent ourselves. Everyone, from ordinary citizens to the highest levels of government, should be involved in what should become a full-scale bottom-up, top-down international debate.

This paper describes the value based rationale that our sample of low consumers in Edmonton are using to support their own emerging lifestyle and to build a greater vision of a social movement toward mindful, deliberate, lower consumptive lifestyles. This study shows how a group of urban residents have tried to create a local web of influences on sustainable lifestyles and enact cultural change, thus this study contributes to the study of "the social context of waste" by illustrating the importance of moral motivations to sustainable consumption.

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