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Low-carbon practices: a third sector research agenda

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Abstract

Developing a low carbon society will require significant transformations of everyday lives. Academic and policy actors have suggested that third sector organisations (TSOs) can play an important role in the transition to a low carbon society. Whilst there is some empirical evidence that third sector organisations can successfully encourage changes in everyday practices, their role is not yet well understood. As part of the TSRC programme of research, our aim is to understand better the potential contribution of TSOs to changing everyday practices. This paper reviews different conceptions of behaviour and practice change and provides an overview and analysis of the literature on the role of TSOs in promoting change. We then offer a social practice framework that will guide empirical research into the types of interventions undertaken by TSOs and the different barriers that confront change.

Keywords

Low-carbon lifestyles; behaviour change; practices change; pro-environmental behaviours; third sector organisations; intervention.

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Introduction

A transition to a low carbon society will require major changes to everyday lives: in the way we heat our homes; the food we eat; the way we move around; the leisure activities in which we engage; and the many other goods we consume. This is a significant challenge and there has been increasing interest in the contribution that third sector organisations (TSOs) might offer in enabling such change. Recent academic and government research has suggested that the potential effectiveness of third sector initiatives rests on, for example, the proximity of TSOs to citizens and the greater degree to which citizens trust TSOs than government or businesses (HM Government 2005; Seyfang & Smith 2007; DEFRA 2008c; Middlemiss 2009; HM Government 2010; Seyfang, Haxeltine et al. 2010). However, there is still a lack of understanding of the effectiveness of different types of third sector activity.

Before considering the role of TSOs, the first section of this paper provides an overview of two contrasting approaches to understanding how our actions might be changed to reduce their impact on climate change. The first draws on social psychology, focusing on individual behaviour. This is the approach that has influenced much government thinking (Shove 2010). The second draws on the sociological tradition and focuses on social practices as the unit of analysis. We find this second approach more compelling as it is better suited to capture the complexities of social and technological contexts.

However, while the social practice literature is particularly effective at explaining how practices become embedded, it has less to say about how practices can be shaped through active and intentional interventions by TSOs or other actors. Drawing on relevant literature, we develop an account of social practices and explore how scholars have conceptualised TSOs' role in facilitating change. This work has not yet systematically analysed the role of different types of organisations or types of intervention. In response, we offer a framework for understanding how interventions by different types of TSOs might shape low-carbon practices through various interventions; a framework that will guide our forthcoming empirical research.

Behaviour change approaches: the dominant paradigm

Behaviour change has risen up the policy agenda in recent years. This is most explicit in recent debates about 'nudge' (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) and the emergence of the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office. The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has been particularly active in this field, developing its own model of pro-environmental behaviours (2008b).

Behind this popular policy discourse is an extensive academic literature on behaviour change and pro-environmental behaviours, primarily located in social psychology and economics. The individual and his/her behaviour is taken as the unit of analysis. Many models of individual behaviour focus predominantly on 'internal' barriers to change such as (lack of or inappropriate) knowledge, attitudes, values, motivation, emotions, personal habits and routines as well as self-efficacy (self-perception of the ability to change). Persuasion theory, for instance, hypothesises that behaviour change can occur if new information influences individuals' attitudes, emotions or motivation (Jackson 2005: 106ff.).

However, empirical studies have found little evidence for the effectiveness of persuasion as such (Jackson 2005). This is confirmed by 'value-action-gap' approaches which find that individuals may not adopt pro-environmental behaviours even though they hold pro-environmental attitudes (Kollmuss & Agyeman 2002).

This is explained by more complex behaviour (change) models which acknowledge that both 'internal' and 'external' factors can act as barriers to change. For example, theories of 'reasoned action' take the influence of social norms on individuals' behaviours into account (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980). According to such theories, individuals' behaviour may not change if they think that their (altered) personal attitudes are not supported by surrounding social norms. This is based on the assumption that individuals orient their behaviour to the norms and behaviours of others around them. Other behaviour models take wider social, political and economic factors into account. For instance, Gatersleben and Vlek's (1998) norms-opportunities-abilities model accepts that an individual's resources and wider circumstances can hinder change in behaviour even though they might in principle be willing to change.

In response to theories of reasoned action which emphasise the importance of group norms, several approaches have proposed that attitudes and norms change more easily if they are challenged in group situations and that individuals can take on new behaviours by learning from each other in groups (social learning approaches). Strategies like 'community-based social marketing' (McKenzie-Mohr 2000) seek to exploit group settings to introduce and maintain behaviour change. Similarly, Kurt Lewin's theory of stages of behaviour change ('freezing, unfreezing, re-freezing') assumes that the 'unfreezing' of behaviours most likely occurs in group settings (Jackson 2005: 115). Researchers have used such models to help explain the group processes that induce and maintain new behaviours in pro-environmental projects such as Global Action Plan (GAP), or more recently, Carbon Conversations and Carbon Clubs (see Georg 1999; Hobson 2003; Hargreaves et al. 2008).

The behaviour change approach can be criticised for its limited (from a sociological perspective) conception of the individual which is strongly influenced by psychological models, rational choice theory and methodological individualism. This has several implications, some of which the more sophisticated models have attempted to address, but have not been able to fully resolve. As Shove suggests, social psychology models typically regard barriers to behaviour change as 'located' within the individual rather than wider social, political or economic contexts. While it is true that more complex models take contextual factors into account (e.g. the role of norms as advocated in the theory of reasoned action or wider contextual factors in the norms-opportunities-abilities model), they are still based on a model of the individual that does not reflect the 'social constitution' of actors and their attitudes and behaviours.

This is reflected in the way in which such models of behaviour have been taken up in official circles. Elizabeth Shove highlights a 'slew of recent reports dealing with issues of lifestyle, behaviour, and climate change' where 'issues of climate change have been framed in terms of an already well-established language of individual behaviour and personal responsibility' (Shove 2010: 1274). These include in the UK:

- *Framework for Pro-environmental Behaviours, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA 2008b);*
- *Creatures of habit: the art of behavioural change (Prendergast et al. 2008);*
- *I will if you will (SDC/NCC 2006);*
- *Changing Behaviour Through Policy Making (DEFRA 2008a);*
- *Motivating sustainable consumption (Jackson 2005);*
- *Driving public behaviours for sustainable lifestyles (Darnton 2004).*

For Shove, a particular theory of social change from within social psychology has dominated the research and policy communities which she characterises as the ‘ABC framework’: attitude-behaviour-choice. She criticises this framework by pointing out that it focuses on individuals’ responsibilities and the change that their individual behavioural choices can bring about. This channels attention away from the role that governments and other actors play in ‘sustain[ing] unsustainable economic institutions and ways of life’ (Shove 2010: 1274). Through an analysis of the interaction of individuals and their social contexts, sociological accounts are better placed to understand the impact of policy frameworks and broader social norms, discourses, power relationships and unequal distributions of resources.

Social practices: an alternative perspective

Emerging research within environmental sociology and the sociology of consumption has begun to challenge the dominant social-psychological conceptualisations of behaviour and behaviour change by drawing on the concept of social practices. This concept is rooted in various sociological traditions and regards our actions as social, collective phenomena rather than individualised behaviours. While there is no single agreed definition of ‘practice’, there would be broad agreement that it entails routine types of activity or recurring ‘doings and sayings’ (Schatzki 1996: 89, 192). Such practices can reach from the common everyday (e.g. eating, travelling, cleaning, etc.) to more complex practices (e.g. business, farming, political practices, etc.) (Schatzki 1996: 98).

Practice theorists argue that by focusing on social practices, we can understand how actors’ ‘agency’ is linked to ‘social structures’. Actors are neither completely free to act nor are their actions entirely determined by social structures. Rather, agency and structure are inter-related: actors continually (re)generate social structures through the social practices in which they routinely engage whilst those practices are themselves embedded in social structures (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984: 25ff., 162; Bourdieu 1990: 52ff.; Schatzki 1996; Schatzki 2001; Reckwitz 2002; Reckwitz 2003).

In addition, practice theorists have analysed the role that physical artefacts and/or wider technical infrastructures play in the construction and reproduction of practices (Shove 2003; Spaargaren 2003; Van Vliet et al. 2005; Pantzar & Shove 2010). Interactions with forms of technology are integral to the reshaping of practices: think, for example, of the use of computers, or the way that electric showers have replaced baths. And on a larger scale, ‘systems of provision’ can ‘lock-in’ particular practices, making it difficult or less attractive to engage in other forms of activity. One example is the way in

which the development of motorway infrastructure led to a particular form of automobility (private car use over public transport). Artefacts and broader infrastructures play a crucial role in establishing, stabilising and transforming practices.

These literatures inform our own account of social practices. We distinguish analytically between five different aspects of the contexts which co-constitute social practices, namely:

- *meaning*
- *competences*
- *social structures*
- *artefacts / infrastructures*
- *environmental context*

Social practices are not only embedded within these aspects of context, but also shape (generate, maintain and alter) them as practices are repeated or transformed.

Meaning refers to the way in which actors make sense of themselves (their identities), their practices and their contexts. A focus on meanings also enables us to understand actors' motivations, desires, goals and emotions that are implied in their practices.

To engage in a practice requires particular 'know how', or competences. This refers to actors' mental and bodily skills of knowing what to do in a particular situation (Giddens 1984: xxiii), of moving around and of using things (Giddens 1984; Schatzki 1996; Reckwitz 2002; Pantzar & Shove 2010). Competences may be social – how to relate to other people involved in the practice – or technical – knowing how to operate a particular technology.

From the social practice perspective, social structures are not independent from practices and actors, but rather constituted, reproduced and transformed by actors who engage in ongoing practices. At the same time, practices are also embedded in these social structures: structures 'frame' and stabilise practices. The form that social structures take and the manner in which they impact on practices vary. Social structures have different dimensions: particularly significant are discourses, social norms, rules and resources. These elements of social structure can be distinguished analytically (thus are useful for empirical analysis), but in fact are mutually constitutive and reinforcing.

We can define a discourse as a shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that provide a framework for making sense of situations (Hajer 1997: 44; Dryzek 2005: 9). Within society there are competing discourses, with some more significant than others. Consumer capitalism is one such dominant discourse, shaping the way we conceive of the world and what is possible. At present, discourses associated with environmental protection tend to be much weaker and in fact often become subsumed within more dominant discourses. So, for example, the discourse of ecological modernisation is one in which economic growth and environmental protection are reconciled; whereas more radical green discourse would require significant changes in our patterns of consumption (Dryzek 2005).

These discourses also frame the emergence of various social norms, rules and institutions. Norms, rules and institutions structure appropriate forms of behaviour. Included within this aspect of social structure would be laws, regulations and policies established by public authorities, organisations and

supranational bodies. As well as the material incentives that such rules can generate (e.g. through the tax system or the regulation of markets), they also reinforce social norms. Norms may well clash – for example, social norms associated with fashion are often in tension with those related to fairness (particularly towards cheap labour). Norms may also differ markedly within and between social groups – be it on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, geography, etc – which can support more or less hierarchical relations, cooperation or conflict.

Another approach to analysing social structure is in relation to the distribution of different types of resources across society and different social groups. Resources are the basis for ‘capacities’ to act and influence others. Therefore, they influence which types of practices actors participate in. Resources come in a variety of forms, for example, we can make distinctions between:¹

- *economic resources – command over material, financial and natural resources;*
- *social resources – resources linked to access to social networks and groups in society;*
- *cultural resources – forms of knowledge and information typically related to educational opportunities and achievement.*

The interaction of meanings, competences and social structures reinforces the social differentiation that occurs in practices. As Warde argues:

we might differentiate between longstanding participants and novitiates, theorists and technicians, generalists and specialists, conservatives and radicals, visionaries and followers, the highly knowledgeable and the relatively ignorant, and the professional and the amateur. (...) Hence we can differentiate on the basis of the potential contribution of agents to the reproduction and development of the practice (Warde 2005: 137).

Exploring the interaction between meanings, competences and social structures therefore helps understand patterns of inclusion and exclusion and actors’ different roles and positions within the same practice. There are strong connections here with empirical research which demonstrates close affinities between social background, status, tastes and lifestyles (Bennett et al. 2009).

Practices are also constituted by ‘things’: artefacts and infrastructures (Shove 2003; Van Vliet et al. 2005; Pantzar & Shove 2010). It is difficult to think of social practices that do not involve interaction with material artefacts and broader infrastructures. Returning to an earlier example, practices associated with automobility require cars (the artefact) and a broader infrastructure including car production, provision of roads and access to services such as petrol stations. Artefacts and infrastructures (and hence access to these artefacts and infrastructures) shape and are shaped by practices. Theoretical and empirical work reinforces the extent to which the complex infrastructures which enable the provision of a range of services such as energy and water, waste disposal, communication and transport can lead to ‘lock-in’: changing practices may require significant changes to large-scale technical networks, which are themselves maintained and reinforced by aspects of social structure (be it government policy, social norms, etc.).

The final aspect that co-constitutes practices are environmental contexts. This has not yet been explicitly included within accounts of social practices, which tend to focus on man-made technologies.

¹ Those distinctions are inspired by Bourdieu (1984).

While recognising that no sharp distinction can be drawn between the 'social' and the 'natural' (Macnaghten & Urry 1998) or between 'nature' and 'artefacts', it is useful to recognise the impact of environmental contexts on practices – and vice versa. At a basic level, resources are drawn from the non-human world to sustain practices: the natural resources that are consumed to produce goods and services; artefacts and infrastructures. Particularly relevant may be the impact of a potential future decrease in the availability of fossil fuel resources which are still a crucial condition for high-carbon lifestyles (IEA 2008; Sorrell et al. 2010).

But we can also consider the extent to which practices have been developed in response to particular environmental contexts: this explains, for example, differences between the construction of dwellings in hot and cold climates; or the capacity to grow food. We should also not overlook the way in which interaction with the environment can affect meaning: access to 'nature', for example, can lead to different orientations towards the environment – thus affecting social norms and the appeal of particular discourses. The environmental context thus shapes practices, but is itself shaped by them as resources are removed (sustainably or otherwise), greenhouse gases emitted, landscapes 'managed', and so forth.

How do social practices change?

The social practices literature is strong on explaining how particular practices have emerged and been sustained. It also provides insights into resistance to change: for example, the way in which routines and social sanctions can defy change (consciously or otherwise) in deeply entrenched and embodied practices (Southerton et al. 2004: 40; Warde 2005: 140).

Whilst there is undeniably more emphasis on the stability of practices, several authors have stressed that it is both possible and necessary to provide sociological accounts of the ways in which practices may change (Reckwitz 2002; Reckwitz 2003; Shove 2003; Warde 2005; Pantzar & Shove 2010). Reckwitz (2002: 255; 2003: 294), for instance, argues that social practices are inherently open to change because actors' meanings and competences are flexible and can be transformed in the continuous re-enactment of overlapping social practices.

Shove and colleagues have also contributed to the conceptualisation of practices change (Shove & Pantzar 2005; Pantzar & Shove 2010). They suggest that change implies a transformation of the relationships between the different aspects that constitute practices, in their account 'meanings, skills and things'. They use the example of Nordic Walking to illustrate this approach: according to their framework, the rise of Nordic Walking as a new practice involves the arrival of a new artefact, the Nordic walking stick, changed meanings that actors attach to walking with a stick (fitness rather than fragility) and the new and specific competences that are involved in using them. In earlier work on showering, cleaning and heating/cooling homes, Shove (2003) has also demonstrated the interlinked changes of elements of practice: the introduction of new technologies, changing meanings and desires, and the emergence of new skills that established energy-intensive practices.

This approach focuses less on specific causes for change; rather, it provides an account of the ways in which elements of practices co-evolve in the process of practice transformation. However, if, as suggested above, meanings, competences, things, social structures and environments are

understood as contextual aspects of practices (rather than 'elements' of practices), we can analyse the extent to which purposive interventions are successful or otherwise in affecting these aspects of practices and hence shaping practices themselves. For example, we can analyse the impact on everyday practices of particular policy reforms, price changes, changing social networks and so on. That said, as different factors leading to practice change are likely to be multiple, interrelated and historically specific, a simple and universal theory of practice change is unlikely to emerge.

Our aim, then, is to seek to understand the role that specific factors might play in influencing everyday practices. Our specific interest in the TSRC is in the role that intentional interventions by TSOs can play in promoting low-carbon practices, an area in which there has been little work to date.

TSOs and the promotion of low-carbon practices

Work on intentional interventions to promote low-carbon practices (either through re-orientating existing practices or creating new ones) is patchy at best, even more so when the intervention comes from TSOs. And while there is a small literature on the role of the third sector in environmentally-orientated behaviour change (for instance: Georg 1999; Church & Elster 2002; Hobson 2003; SCR 2006; SDC/NCC 2006; Seyfang 2006b; Seyfang 2006a; Seyfang & Smith 2007; Hargreaves et al. 2008; Lucas et al. 2008; DEFRA 2009; Middlemiss & Parrish 2009; Middlemiss 2009; Seyfang 2009; Hale 2010; HM Government 2010; Seyfang et al. 2010), very little is located within the practice framework. An exception is Middlemiss (2009) who explicitly relates her work to the social practices approach. Her work provides the most recent and comprehensive literature review and empirical study on this topic, although it is primarily focused on community-based organisations within the third sector. There is also an emerging literature on 'grassroots innovation'² which although not usually using the vernacular of practices, examines the potential of community initiatives to trigger wider social change. Furthermore, there are insights to be gained from the social movement literature.

Middlemiss combines Pawson's realist evaluation approach with practice theory to examine the effectiveness of TSOs' activities in promoting 'sustainable practices'. Based on the realist evaluation framework, Middlemiss identifies a range of *context* factors (relating to the individual, the nature of specific practices and the organisation), *mechanisms* that lead to change, and potential *outcomes* (different degrees of change, additional benefits for the participants) to assess the impact of different third sector initiatives. Whilst different contexts, mechanisms and outcomes were relevant in different case studies, she concludes that individuals' 'sustainability practice histories', degrees of community engagement, the 'nature of the community-based organisation and the activity that it runs' are the most important context factors for explaining the degree of change in sustainability practices (Middlemiss 2009: iii). In particular, her findings highlight that people who do not have a history of 'green' engagement, but only recently participated in a community initiative are most likely to adopt more extensive changes in practices. Those individuals who have been less exposed to low-carbon practices by definition have the most room for adaptation (Middlemiss 2009: 190ff.). Drawing on Giddens (1984), Middlemiss offers a distinction between practical and discursive consciousness

² However, both community-based and grassroots organisations are only part of the wider third sector.

'within' individuals and rules and resources as provided by TSOs as elements which can encourage practice change (Middlemiss 2009: 122f., 241). First, she emphasises that sustainability projects 'move habitual practices (back) into the discursive consciousness stimulating the participant to re-examine their habitual acts' (2009: 244). Second, referring to Giddens's conception of structures as 'rules and resources', she regards 'community-based organisation[s] as a new structure which is added to the 'multiplicity of structures' that guide practice' (Middlemiss 2009: 122). In particular, she identifies four different elements of 'structure' that TSOs can offer: 'cultural rules' as 'norms of social conduct'; 'organisational resources' that the TSO can provide such as leadership, getting people together, partnerships between organisations and financial resources; 'infrastructural resources' such as 'information, services or facilities offered'; and 'participant resources' which are the 'skills and time' provided by participants (Middlemiss 2009: 124).

The grassroots/social innovation and transition/niche management literatures have begun to contribute to our understanding of the role of TSOs in transitions to low carbon societies (Kemp et al. 1998; Smith 2004; Seyfang & Smith 2007; Seyfang et al. 2010). This literature is interested in the dynamics of technological and social change more generally. It regards the role of TSOs that are active at a grassroots level as one of several possible venues of change and perspectives of analysis. With links to literature on (technical) innovation and alternative technologies studies (e.g. Kemp, Schot et al. 1998; Berkhout 2002; Berkhout et al. 2004; Geels 2004; Geels et al. 2004; Smith 2004; Mulgan 2007b; Mulgan 2007a; Seyfang & Smith 2007; Seyfang 2009), this approach emphasises the way in which '[e]ntrenched cognitive, social, economic, institutional and technological processes lock us into trajectories and lock out sustainable alternatives' (Seyfang & Smith 2007: 588). Within this framework, change derives from micro level niches *outside* stable mainstream regimes and 'landscapes' (Seyfang et al. 2010: 5). Here, grassroots organisations provide an opportunity for actors to develop alternative practices that are different from those in mainstream systems. Central questions within the transitions literature have focused on how technological or social innovations spread to the mainstream; which contexts and governance mechanisms may be conducive to diffusion; and whether diffusion can be intentionally 'engineered'. In their recent work, Smith and Seyfang (Seyfang & Smith 2007; Seyfang 2009) in particular have explored potential benefits of grassroots innovations (typically the more counter-cultural element of the third sector) as well as the various challenges that they are facing in diffusing them into the mainstream, including conflicts with mainstream ideology and values, policy contexts, lack of resources and the rootedness of initiatives in their local settings. Seyfang and colleagues (2010) have begun to integrate work on social practices into their perspective as a way of investigating the emergence and diffusion of niche innovations. They have also recognised the value of insights from social movement studies.

The social movement literature can contribute in several ways to our understanding of TSOs' role within practice change. It is important to recognise that the relationship between the third sector and social movements is not clear cut: social movements engage in goal-oriented, mostly non-routine, non-institutionalised collective action (Diani 1992; Snow et al. 2007) and as such, it is only certain TSOs that would be classified within social movements. These typically more radical TSOs are thus part of movements that seek to change established elements of the 'social order', for example

discourses, norms, cultures, etc., as well as individuals' beliefs and values (Earl 2007). In practice terms, their interventions are aimed at shaping both social structures and actors' meanings. Typically the transformation of established beliefs, values, discourses, norms occurs through the creation of sub-cultures and communities 'outside' the mainstream (Earl 2007). But, as movements such as feminism and environmentalism have shown, this can over time have profound impact on mainstream discourses and norms, although often not to the degree that more radical activists would wish.

The social movement literature also provides insights into how social movements emerge and grow and how they recruit new participants (Joas 1996: 290ff; Buecheler 2007; Morris & Staggenborg 2007). The 'order collapse' explanation states that movements arise as a response to a collapse or disturbance of social orders, rapid structural change or tensions within social structures which lead to a questioning of established norms, institutions, discourses, etc. and destabilise people's identities. Social movements then emerge as they offer alternative norms, discourses, identities, etc. (Joas 1996: 304). Whilst this explanation focuses more on 'structural' explanations of movements, other explanations highlight the role of actors or 'movement entrepreneurs' in establishing social movements. For example, movements can emerge if actors are able to frame issues in new and appealing ways and have resources (financial, networks, etc.) to mobilise wider parts of the population (Morris & Staggenborg 2007).

A further strand of research emphasises the role that networks play in the spread of movements (i.e. the recruitment of new supporters and actors). Movements are more likely to recruit people who are already members of other organisations or are connected to people who are already active in the movement (Diani 2007). At the same time, new members' beliefs and practices are likely to be altered if they gain access to new social networks by joining a social movement (Diani 2007).

To summarise, the different strands of literature presented here all help us understand different aspects of practice change and how TSOs can contribute to it. Middlemiss highlights how important an individual's history of involvement in 'green' initiatives and the organisational capacities of a TSO are for generating change. The grassroots innovations approach emphasises the 'lock-in' of practices through wider social norms, structure and technical infrastructures and thus the significant barriers that local 'niche innovations' are confronted with in relation to their wider diffusion. The social movement literature makes important contributions to understanding the social conditions and capacities of movement actors (including TSOs) that help spread new practices.

While these insights are useful, there are at least a couple of limitations to the analyses that have been offered to date: as of yet a more extensive, systematic analysis of the role of different types of TSOs as well as different types of interventions is lacking. The framework that we develop here aims at facilitating such comparative work.

A framework for analysing practice change through TSO intervention

The aim of our research is to better understand whether and if so how TSOs foster low-carbon practices. This is a challenging endeavour given (for example) the range of different types of TSOs, the different types of intervention available to them and the variety of practices that they can target. We are not expecting to find large-scale radical shifts: after all, TSOs are aiming to promote low-carbon practices against a social, political and economic backdrop that tends to promote unsustainable patterns of activity. However, through an analysis of where TSOs have made a difference, we can begin to understand how practice change can be promoted more widely. Our interest here is not in the *indirect* role that TSOs play in lobbying or protesting against public authorities such that the authority reshapes practices through the tools of government; rather the role TSOs play in *directly* engaging with individuals, households, neighbourhoods and communities (geographical and interest-based), etc.

In attempting to understand the impact of the variety of third sector activity, we distinguish between the following categories to guide our empirical research.

Types of intervention

There are a variety of different types of intervention undertaken by TSOs. A non-exhaustive list of possible interventions, which can be combined in different ways by the same TSO, includes (with illustrative examples):

- *provision of information/advice – e.g. 10:10, a global campaign that seeks to persuade and support individuals and organisations to cut their emissions by 10% each year;*
- *deliberative approaches – e.g. Carbon Conversations, a short-term course which aims to change people's values and behaviours towards energy use;*
- *practical activities – e.g. BTCV, the National Trust (engagement through conservation projects), community cycling events;*
- *provision of physical artefacts/infrastructure – e.g. community-financed renewables projects; ecovillages*
- *provision of access to resources, e.g. local trading schemes, GardenShare projects.*

Intensity

The intensity in which those interventions are offered and the respective level of participation that they expect from participants can vary. For example, some interventions may be one-off events, other might be repeated several times or take place on a regular basis.

Types of practice

While the unit of analysis in our work is a practice, it is not always easy to define what constitutes that unit. We can look at very specific practices – 'driving' for example – or view that as part of a broader practice (or set of practices) of 'travelling'. Given our interest in low-carbon practices, we distinguish between interventions aimed at the following practices:

- *home energy use*
- *travelling*
- *eating*
- *leisure*
- *consumption of other goods and services*

But not all TSO interventions respect such analytic boundaries between practices and may aim to alter more than one practice (if not all). Examples such as carbon footprint activities or certain arts projects aim for changes at a more holistic level. However, even with such holistic approaches, it is an empirical question as to whether they affect those practices equally; or have differential effect across practices. The latter would give an indication of the practice-sensitivity of such holistic approaches. We cannot necessarily expect interventions to be transferable from one practice to another. Practices themselves are more or less embedded; more or less amenable to change.

Scale

TSOs operate at different geographical levels and will have different ambitions in terms of impact of their interventions. The 10:10 campaign, for example, is a nationally-focused intervention; whereas the Stroud Valley Car Club is quite clearly geographically-limited in its ambition. But the issue of scale is not quite as simple as these two examples suggest. After all, a national strategy may well be based on very local (household, neighbourhood, congregation, etc) interventions. Taking our cue from elements of social movement theory, the existence of supportive networks may well prove important in embedding and reinforcing low-carbon practices. The conditions for dense networks are arguably often more favourable at the local level, although work on 'place' highlights how the nature of networks differs between localities (Nicholls 2009). That said, organisations with disperse memberships but strong loyalty (National Trust, for example) may well be able to draw on that identification to shift practices. Similarly, the emergence of online communities may overcome some of the traditional restrictions associated with time and space. As we have already argued, existing work on practice change tends to focus on the community or grassroots element of the third sector. We hope that our research will bring a broader understanding of how very different types of third sector organisations – from small-scale community initiatives to those undertaken by mass-membership national organisations – might shape low carbon practices. The literature has tended to focus on small scale community-based and/or grassroots organisations rather than the broader third sector.

Organisational culture

There are significant differences in the culture of TSOs that will affect the nature and effectiveness of interventions. One of the most significant relates to worldview. One example for this is Andrew Dobson's useful distinction between 'environmentalism' and 'ecologism':

environmentalism argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption... ecologism holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the natural world, and in our mode of social and political life. (Dobson, 2007: 2)

The difference then relates to whether TSOs are aiming to work with or challenge existing 'values or patterns of production and consumption'. This will have an impact on the extent of practice change, but also potentially the attractiveness of particular TSOs to different groups. For example, groups with explicitly radical aims are less likely to mobilise 'mainstream' sections of society (and other TSOs).

Target group

Those subject to TSO interventions – the 'target group' – may differ in terms of their relationship with the organisation and the extent to which they self-identify as green. Interventions can be aimed at individuals and groups who are pre-existing members of the TSO, in which case they already have some commitment to and familiarity with the organisation. Alternatively the intervention may be focused on participants beyond the organisation where that commitment and familiarity is less evident. Second, target groups (or participants within a group) will differ according to the extent to which they identify already with green activities and practices. Middlemiss' research suggests that it is non-greens whose practices may be changed most significantly (2009). That said, embedding and reinforcing low-carbon practices amongst such participants may be more difficult compared to those with a pre-existing green disposition.

There are, thus, different types of interventions aimed at altering different types of practices, amongst different target groups, across different scales, by different types of organisations, and embedded in different places. We hope that those distinctions will be helpful in understanding different levels of success and different types of changes that TSO interventions can bring about.

A good starting point in thinking about the ways in which those interventions can influence practices is to consider how they may relate to the aspects which co-constitute practices and within which practices are embedded as identified above: meanings, competences, social structures, artefacts/infrastructure and the natural environment.

In relation to *meanings*, TSO interventions may provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their existing practices, offering alternative understandings, goals and motivations. TSOs may provide crucial networks which reinforce new meanings and identities. Taking on a 'green' identity can lead to social sanctions from those who do not share such a disposition: by providing supporting networks of likeminded people, TSOs may help strengthen the resolve of participants engaged in new ways of doing and saying.³

TSOs can provide the skills and knowledge necessary to undertake new ways of doing things – developing the *competence* (and often confidence) of participants to engage in a new or reshaped practice. This may be the case particularly for participants who are enabled to engage with new artefacts (e.g. renewable energy technology) or existing artefacts in new ways (e.g. less intensive household energy use).

TSOs are rarely in the position to completely displace dominant *social structures*: discourses, norms and rules and unequal distribution of resources tend to reinforce patterns of unsustainable consumption. However, their interventions can play a role in disrupting these social structures providing a space within which alternative discourses, norms and rules are reproduced, more

³ See the recently published and influential report by Crompton et al. (2010) on the role of TSOs in influencing values through their campaigns and communications.

supportive to low-carbon practices. Depending on the type of organisation this can take place at different scales: some TSOs seek to influence national or international discourses through campaigning, lobbying, direct action, etc. whilst others are more to create local niches within which alternative discourses and norms prosper. Similarly, the actions of TSOs can provide resources which participants may otherwise have had more difficulties accessing, for instance, practical knowledge, access to supportive social networks, community allotments, energy monitoring equipment, shares in community renewables projects, etc.

In relation to *artefacts/infrastructures*, again the extent of change that we can expect from TSOs needs to be tempered. They will typically not be in a position to create large-scale technical infrastructures, but they may be able to provide access to artefacts and local infrastructures necessary for low-carbon living, be it outlets for organic food, wind-turbines, community solar arrays, bicycles, eco-houses, etc.

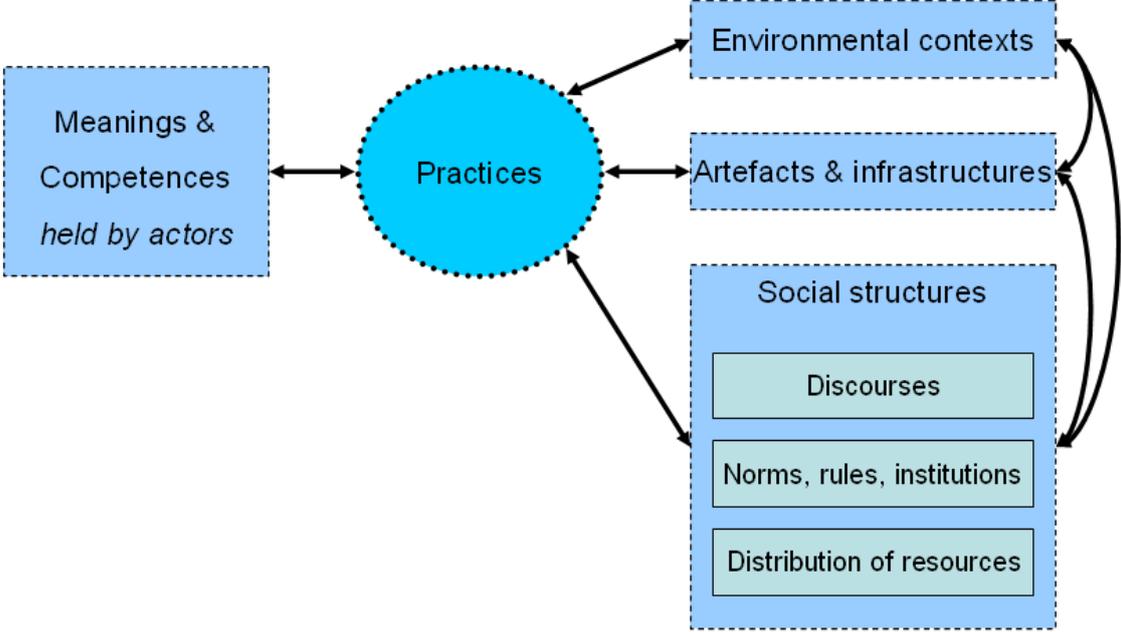
Finally, TSOs can also be active in shaping *environmental contexts*: as guardians of woodlands, nature reserves, etc. As such they provide opportunities to experience non-human nature and/or to engage in projects to 'improve' local environments.

As we have pointed out above, the distinctions between the different aspects which co-constitute practices and within which they are embedded is largely analytical as those aspects interact in bringing about and following from changes in social practices. However, those distinctions help us identify the type of contributions that TSOs can be expected to make to the transformation of practices as well as the scope and limitation of the influence that TSO interventions may have.

Conclusion

A move to a low-carbon society will require significant changes in everyday lives. Studies of social practices help us understand why it can be so difficult to change well-established and embedded, but environmentally unsustainable, practices related to energy use, travel, eating, leisure and the consumption of other goods and services. Our aim has been to interrogate this literature to develop an account of social practice that can be used to understand the impact of different interventions of TSOs that aim to promote and shape low-carbon practices. The social practice approach is particularly useful for conceptualising social change as it moves beyond a focus on individual behaviour and responsibility, recognising the complex interaction between actors and broader social, technological and environmental contexts that both constrain and enable practices. The framework provided in this paper unpacks the different contextual aspects that co-constitute practices and identifies different features of TSOs and their interventions. This will facilitate systematic research within TSRC on the effectiveness of TSO interventions aimed at reshaping the way we live.

Appendix: Conceptualisation of practice theory



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Environment

Whilst environmental protests have had a big voice in recent years, we have relatively little knowledge about the broader third sector's relationship with the environment. This project will examine the activities and contributions of a broad range of environmental organisations, as well as the extent to which wider elements of the third sector are responding to environmental challenges, in particular climate change. The project focuses on three main elements:

1. Mapping the environmental third sector - the extent and contribution of environmental third sector organisations (TSOs); the policy context and sector infrastructure within which environmental TSOs operate.
2. Mainstreaming the environment - the variety, take-up and influence of environmental performance tools and techniques; the extent to which the mission, policies and programmes of TSOs are affected by the climate change agenda.
3. Promoting sustainable living - the form and effectiveness of practical interventions developed by TSOs to promote sustainable practices by individuals, households and organisations.

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