Future consumption research priorities: where to from here?

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Overview

1. Critical examination of current trends in social-scientific consumption research
2. Identify possible future pathways
3. Example: ConsEnSus research project on consumption, environment and sustainability on the island of Ireland
Context

• 4 year interdisciplinary research project (2009-2013) exploring 4 key areas of household consumption – transport, energy, water and food


• [http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book235581](http://www.uk.sagepub.com/books/Book235581) for further information and sample chapters 1 and 10
Setting the scene...

Need to balance commonly held notions of consumption as an economically necessary, but environmentally problematic, activity carried out by individual householders, with concepts that emphasise its wider social and cultural significance, its multi-scalar effects and its structural root causes.

The danger of perpetuating, rather than challenging, established ways of thinking about, and measuring (un)sustainable consumption remains a critical issue for researchers and their audiences....
Researching (un)sustainable consumption

Strengths and weaknesses

👍 Significant theoretical advancements ‘beyond the ABC’ (Shove 2010)
  – Practice-theoretical approaches
  – Systems and transitions

👍 Increased awareness of opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinarity

👍 Enhanced engagement with policy makers and practitioners

👍 Methodological innovations
  – Visioning and backcasting
Researching (un)sustainable consumption

Strengths and weaknesses

- Remaining sectoral divisions and ‘silo thinking’
- Over-reliance on policy-driven funding
- Divergences between theory & empirical work
  - Problems ‘translating’ abstract theory into measurable concepts
  - Continued dominance of methodological individualism
- Lack of longitudinal research to capture long-term changes
Researching (un)sustainable consumption

• SC research throws up interesting questions around what to measure, why and how

• Concept and rhetoric of measurability → idea that things do not matter (or perhaps do not even exist) if they cannot be measured

• Does a commitment to bid ‘farewell to growth’ (Latouche 2010) and to challenge unsustainable consumption require a departure from established ways of doing research?
Where to from here?
New thematic areas in (U)SC research

• Need to connect people’s **time use** patterns with their spatial and material footprints

• Focus on **life events/life course transitions** and their connections with consumption (Schaefer, Jaeger-Erben and Bamberg 2012)

• Links between consumption and **quality of life**
Where to from here?
Methodological innovations

• Shift towards **integrated indicators** of (un)sustainable consumption that combine insights from social and natural sciences

• Growing commitment to **inter- and transdisciplinarity**

• **Innovative methodologies** that combine qualitative, quantitative and visual aspects

• **BUT**: continuation of well-established methodological debates and practices in the social sciences to **complement** emerging innovations
EXAMPLES from ConsEnSus

• **EXAMPLE 1:**
  – Cross-sectoral ConsEnSus Lifestyle Survey (Lavelle and Fahy 2012)

• **EXAMPLE 2:**
  – Visioning and backcasting techniques (Davies *et al.* 2012)

• **EXAMPLE 3:**
  – ConsEnSus longitudinal study of changes in everyday mobility practices in the west of Ireland (Heisserer 2013; cf. Rau and Edmondson 2013)
Overall Project Structure

Foundation
- WP 1: Governing tools
- WP 2: Sustainable living survey

Exploration
- WP 3: Transport
- WP 4: Energy
- WP 5: Water
- WP 6: Food

Integration
- WP 7: Synthesis, engagement & management
Building scenarios for a sustainable water future (www.consensus.ie)
ConsEnSus 2.0

• Follow-on project that focuses on selected themes and aspects of consumption

• Researching the ‘consumption of distance’ over time – matching physical mobility biographies and history of mobility practices

• Actioning promising practices in households to test visions in a real-world context
Points for discussion/conclusions

• Growing interest in time use and its material impacts has yet to be matched by more time-sensitive designs and research methods → need to ‘temporalise’ (U)SC research

• Real commitment to longitudinal research that focuses on sustainability transitions and long-term impacts
Points for discussion/conclusions

• Participation in policy-relevant research offers both opportunities and constraints → need for cross-sectoral efforts that connect theory with (‘good’) policy and practice
• More nuanced debates around benefits and drawbacks of inter- and transdisciplinarity that focuses on conceptual, methodological and practical issues
• Greater recognition that researchers’ methodological choices reflect their concepts of human (consumption) behaviour
Points for discussion/conclusions

• Twin goals of disciplinary integration and joined-up thinking and problem-solving not yet a reality in (U)SC research, policy and practice

• **BUT**: emergence of more integrated, time-sensitive approaches and interdisciplinary research infrastructure
Bibliography (selection)


