Collective solutions to a global problem

David Uzzell delivered the joint British Academy/British Psychological Society Annual Lecture, on psychology and climate change

The public are concerned about climate change. Typically, surveys from governments, pollsters and universities show that around 80 per cent of adults are very or fairly concerned about climate change. But levels of concern are on the wane – the UEA e-mails affair, the hype surrounding Copenhagen and the failure of the politicians to produce a significant agreement, and scepticism in the media have no doubt all played a part.

But the public's concern is more nuanced than these headline statistics suggest. When people are asked about their concerns over climate change in the context of the trials and tribulations of everyday life, climate change assumes significantly less importance than issues such as employment, taxes, healthcare, education, crime, etc. We have conducted a series of international studies over the years investigating the concern of different groups (e.g. urban/rural; environmental NGOs; children) about the environment. These demonstrate that people think that the condition of the environment is more serious at the global than at the national level, and at the national than at the local level. In the most recent of these studies interviewing UK and Swedish students (Räthzel & Uzzell, 2009) we found, in addition to the distancing effect, that students thought that environmental problems will be significantly worse in 20 years' time at the local and national levels, but not at the global level. In other words, the worst things affecting the world will be visited upon the local environment in years to come. There is dislocation from the local, to the national and to the global, and from the present to the future.

It is not only the public that dislocates climate change. The conventional approach to calculating carbon emissions is to focus on production: this includes emissions embedded in exports but excludes those in imports. From this standpoint, the UK performance over the last decade looks good. If we measure emissions from a consumption perspective (i.e. goods produced in China for the UK market) the picture is very different (Druckman & Jackson, 2009). From 1995 there has been a year-on-year increase in carbon emissions. This indicates that the UK has increasingly 'off-shored' carbon intensive industries overseas.

Unfortunately, one consequence of this is that many people believe that the causes of climate change lie elsewhere. How often do we hear 'What's the point of us doing anything if the Chinese continue to build a power station every two weeks?'. The demonising of the 'Other', to use Edward Said's term (1978), of those in the East for their 'rampant' and 'irresponsible' growth, provides a good reason for inaction on our part in the West.

In the UK/Swedish study, we asked a series of questions as to what students saw as the most important causes of environmental degradation. As with the approach to calculating carbon emissions, you get a completely different answer if you use a different accounting method. First, we used a five-point rating scale. The items that produced the highest mean score for both Swedish and UK students were 'weak political action on part of the government' followed by the 'environmental policies of industries'. This mirrors a Defra survey in 2007 that found that 60 per cent of the people interviewed said that 'If government did more to tackle climate change, I'd do more too'.

If, however, instead of taking the highest mean score as an indicator of strength of feeling, we look at the proportion of students who rated these issues as extremely or very serious, we find that students identify the 'industrialisation of developing countries', 'poverty in developing countries' and 'overpopulation' as being the principal causes of environmental degradation. It doesn't seem to be appreciated that industrial development and its impact on carbon emissions in the Global South cannot be separated from consumerism and lifestyles in the Global North.

Even if the public are concerned, there is clearly a reluctance to make significant changes to lifestyles and practices – what we as psychologists call the value–action gap. How do we explain this, and what has been the government response?

The policy options are typically expressed in terms of tackling consumption (which largely focuses on the individual consumer), and production (which focuses on technological fixes). Government policy has typically sought to bring the public onside by means of education, persuasion and sticks and carrots. Such a strategy rests on an assumption of individual choice and agency; as Elizabeth Shove puts it, 'the assumption being that consumers can reduce the weight of their personal environmental "rucksack" if that is what they choose to do'. This is confirmed by numerous government reports with titles such as 'Personal responsibility and changing behaviour', 'I will if you will', 'Driving public behaviours for sustainable lifestyles' and, most recently, 'Mindspace' (Dolan et al., 2009). These immediately locate social change in a particular policy space that centres on the individual. For example, the UK government's 1998 report *Sustainable Development Opportunities for Change* claims 'consumers can have a huge impact on sustainable development through their influence as purchasers. But they need help to make choices'. Do we really

references

Dolan, P., Hallsworth, M., Halpern, D. et al. (2009). *Mindspace: Influencing behaviour through public policy.* London: Institute for Government.

Druckman, A. & Jackson, T. (2009). *Mapping our carbon responsibilities: More key results from the Surrey Environmental Lifestyle MApping (SELMA) framework.* RESOLVE Working Paper 02-09. Guildford: University of Surrey.

Räthzel, N. & Uzzell, D. (2009). Changing relations in global environmental change. *Global Environmental Change, 19,* 326–335.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage.

Sennett, R. (2008). *The craftsman.* London, New York: Penguin Books.

believe the consumer has this degree of influence? Surely this fails to recognise the way decisions by government and producers structure the constraints and opportunities in which we act as individuals and as collectivities in relation to the environment and consumption?

This may be one of the reasons why the public are distrustful of government. On the one hand they feel they are subject to finger-wagging criticism for satisfying their hedonistic desires by consuming too much of the wrong things. On the other, the government encourages them to 'spend, spend, spend' in order to dig the economy out of a recession. Is it surprising that the public feel the government is hypocritical, and respond by distancing themselves from the causes and solutions to the problems?

The government is now trying to bring about change in more subtle ways through promoting policies such as 'nudging'. It is not difficult to see why politicians and the government would like to nudge us to a sustainable future. It doesn't sound like the heavy hand of government; it implies gentle persuasion and fun. But despite the fact that David Cameron says 'Changing our culture is not easy or quick… You cannot do it top-down', the opposite is implied in its advocacy. Maybe nudging will lead to new habits, but it does not address the root causes of the problems we face. Equally importantly, this is the language of the quick-fix solution, the language of management. Consider these extracts from the *Mindspace* report (2009): '…behavioural approaches offer a potentially powerful new set of tools… [that] can lead to low cost, low pain ways of "nudging" citizens – or ourselves – into new ways of acting by going with the grain of how we think and act'; and 'changing behaviour without changing minds… focuses on the more automatic processes of judgment and influence – what Robert Cialdini calls "click, whirr" processes of mind'.

Do we really want to change behaviours without changing minds? Is this the kind of society we want? Surely we need more socially participative models which involve people as partners in creative and rewarding solution-generating, decision-making and implementation processes? Models in which those in power treat the community not as a group to be persuaded and coerced, or even subtly manipulated, but as partners with whom they should work?

Let me be clear. I am not saying that individual choice and action are unimportant, nor that psychological constructs such as attitudes, values and beliefs do not have explanatory or predictive value. They do. There is excellent work in psychology that demonstrates that we are able to facilitate and increase pro-environmental behaviours, for example, by changing social norms. But we need to understand where such attitudes, behaviours and choices come from, rather than just assuming they are the product of 'human nature'. We need to appreciate that the playing field upon which the consumer makes choices is not a level one in terms of information and power. And we need to recognise that consumption is not an

Government policy rests on an assumption of individual choice and agency – each person reducing their own personal environmental 'rucksack'

exercise in individual choice but is a shared and collective activity that will be inconsistent and contradictory across time and space.

The promotion of individualism and consumer choice has been an overriding aspect of political culture over the last 20–30 years. One consequence of advancing individualism is that it can lead to the weakening of collective organisations and undermine a culture that encourages and supports cooperation and solidarity. Paradoxically, one implication of the absence of intrinsically motivated collective action is that we could end up with a Hobbesian scenario in which socially responsible behaviour has to be imposed from above by a strong State. In other words, if – through the promotion of individualism – social capital, social cohesion and cooperation decline, then it may be necessary to coerce people into acting in support of interests other than just their own. For example, in the UK/Sweden study we looked at students' attitudes towards and responsibility for climate change actions.

These students not only considered environmental degradation a consequence of ignorant, errant and self-serving consuming behaviours, but thought that the solution should lie in coercive government action. They supported policy instruments of incentives, laws and penalties. Very few saw themselves as actors with a capacity to take action on climate change.

Evidence for the potentially negative and unintended consequences of forcing behaviour change without understanding people's concerns comes from a local authority in southeast England which introduced an Alternative Weekly Waste Collection Scheme. On paper it was highly successful – over nine months, recycling rates went from about 27 per cent to just under 40 per cent. This reduced waste going to landfill by about 500 tonnes a month – 50 fewer lorries. But there was a great deal of public opposition – letters, protests, headlines in the local paper. People continued to recycle, but they took their revenge at the ballot box. The ruling party that introduced the scheme lost 24 seats at the following election, and the introduction of the scheme was seen to be a highly significant factor in that turnaround.

If we want to change behaviours then we need to concentrate on those attitudes and values that drive behaviours. Those values and attitudes, however, are not formed in a social and cultural vacuum. They are embedded and nurtured in and emerge from a social context, such as class, gender, ethnicity and environmental settings, all of which lead to the development of everyday cultures and practices. For example, if driving a particular kind of car is a reflection of class and gender cultures as well as the desire to create and promote particular identities, then there is little virtue in trying to persuade people to travel by public transport or buy a hybrid car. People occupy multiple roles and have multiple identities, often coming into conflict with each other – parent, office worker, school run driver. For the government to say to such people, journeys under one mile should be on foot fails to recognise conflicting demands on their time and resources at a practical level, and how such importuning may threaten their identities at a psychological level. What was it Margaret Thatcher was

alleged to have said? 'A man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure.'

We need to tackle the societal structures and processes that promote and reinforce such identity desires, values, images and inequalities if we are serious about changing car usage behaviour. In other words, while attitudes and values are seen by psychologists as residing within the head, we must remember they have got there somehow, and applying our psychological knowledge and theories to these conditions should be as much the concern of psychologists as investigating the attitudes and values themselves.

As consumers, we are repeatedly told that the route to success is through the display of material possessions (i.e. having) and the acquisition of a socially desirable identity (i.e. being) and the two are inseparable. Comparatively little attention has been given – certainly at a policy level – to examining the ways in which consumption processes are created and shaped by the needs of producers to market their products, or how producers and marketers make the link between 'having' and 'being' and use this in an iconography and literacy to sell us images of ourselves as successful people.

I would like now to discuss two research studies we are doing at the University of Surrey in conjunction with the University of Umeå in Sweden. These, we believe, are highly innovatory in terms of capturing the societal, spatial and historical context of environmental behaviours and practices.

What goes on in the kitchen is clearly highly significant in terms of climate change. Some 22 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to food and catering, cooking and eating (Druckman & Jackson, 2009). It has been estimated that meat consumption in the UK has doubled over the last 40 years. Although the public have been encouraged to eat less meat and dairy for health and environmental reasons, relatively little attention has been given to the eating and cooking practices in which these products are consumed.

If we are to encourage people to follow more sustainable diets we need to have a better understanding of the

conditions in which poor an unsustainable diets have come about. To do this we used a 'life histories' approach, gathering in-depth information about the individuals' changing behaviours and practices within the wider social, political and economic context. This captures the real-life complexity that often gets left out of quantitative approaches such as attitude surveys.

We interviewed 14 women from Surrey and Northumberland, in three different age groups: 20–25, 30–55, and over 70. People told us their life story, walking forward in time and telling us how their life changed over the years. How family, community, national or even global influences and forces led to changes in their relations, what they did, how they travelled, what they consumed, and so on. Their accounts of how they were introduced to new foods became contextualised in larger social and economic processes. Through this we are better able to understand not only how food is chosen, prepared, cooked, eaten, but what are the practical and symbolic meanings of food and eating.

Meat served a number of different functions in the lives of the women interviewed. It had a central role in representing traditional meals – it marked a fault line between simple (traditional) and sophisticated (modern) foods. Meat denoted status, and was used to display cooking capabilities. It was viewed as a necessary addition to the diet for good health, and one of the strongest themes which emerged during the analysis was the way in which food – and meat-centric meals – was used as a catalyst for social relations. The meal – often with meat – is used as an excuse or an incentive for gathering family and friends together, whether for celebrating festivals such as Christmas or simply satisfying the belief that it is important to sit down together as a family unit to talk. A shared meal is also a way of honouring people, to invite them to sit at your table and to share your food may be the most valuable thing you can give a guest. And historically, with people you honour, you give them meat. It is a sign of generosity and a sign of affluence, and those values have remained to the present day.

Meat is also highly gendered. In our study, gender differences in attitudes towards a low-meat or vegetarian diet were not confined to barbecues, the archetypal male cooking arena. Eating less meat was something that appeared to be at odds with the identities of the men in the lives of some of the women. Although eating little meat was seen as part of a modern diet and highly acceptable to the women, vegetarianism was seen as something of a taboo. Whilst eating less meat appears to be the norm for many of these women, it is generally perceived that the men in their families need meat and/or that they would find a low-meat or vegetarian diet unacceptable. Other interviewees revealed the change from traditional British food to more exotic, varied foods; how people started to travel around the world more, and how this has affected dietary preferences; and how the introduction of a new grocery store enabled the neighbourhood to experience different foods. They showed that our preferences and actions – and as a consequence our greenhouse gas emissions and the impact we have on the environment – are the product as much of the opportunities we are offered, as of our desires and tastes.

So while behaviour change of individuals is important, how and why we consume is, as Elisabeth Shove reminds us, 'the outcome of wide ranging, systemic transformations in culture, technology and social practice'. This is why we need to understand production processes and the ways in which available products guide our consumption. We are beginning to take this step with the second example of new research that I would like to discuss.

Production – and thus jobs – will be affected by any kind of climate change policies, something we often forget. Even policies that centre predominantly on consumption – changing consumption through changing behaviour – will create less or changed demand and will influence production processes indirectly. Therefore, we ought to investigate how workers and management relate to

DAVID BACON/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

This is an edited transcript – for the full audio version see tinyurl.com/uzzell. To hear more about British Psychological Society Public Engagement events, and to receive limited edition 'Sharing our science' coasters, sign up to the mailing list at www.bps.org.uk/soslist.

climate change and to the policies that are developed to combat it.

The first step we have taken to research this is a project being undertaken with my Swedish colleague, Professor Nora Räthzel. In this, we are examining the climate change policies of trade unions in the Global North and South. Trade unions are typically not seen as standing at the front line of combating climate change. They are often perceived to be reluctant to change and hostile to any kind of legislation that might threaten jobs; and workers in the major carbon-emission industries – steel, cement manufacturing, transport – are doubly condemned as these industries are perceived to have a major responsibility for climate change. However, this is an inaccurate perception. The TUC in this country has been running a highly effective Green Workplaces programme. The Blue Green Alliance in the USA started as collaboration between the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club to expand the number and quality of jobs in the green economy and now includes a wide range of labour organisations and environmental NGOs.

We have interviewed senior trade union policy makers and officers in Europe, Brazil, South Africa, India and Malaysia. One of the major planks of trade union policies is the concept of 'just transition'. Formulated by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the policy states there is a need 'to create green and decent jobs, transform and improve traditional ones and include democracy and social justice in environmental decision-making processes'. But while the ITUC has recognised that 'The main victims of climate change will be the workers, in particular in developing countries, whose sole responsibility will be to have been born poor in the most fragile parts of the planet', it is acknowledged that jobs may have to go and jobs may have to change. Just transition is far from easy to implement. One of the goals of our project is to understand better some of these challenges, as exemplified by two of our interviewees from the metalworkers union.

One Canadian union official argued that 'green jobs' is a term from the environmental movement, not the labour movement. Another senior trade unionist saw the traditions of his industry and the identity of its workforce being challenged by the notion of greenness:

> Green jobs are insulting. Steel are brown jobs. You can't build windmills and aircraft without steel. The steel job is a green job. A rigger is a rigger when he is working in brown or green job. What is a green boss? A green boss is still a boss. A green capitalist is still a capitalist? Vestas – they might be green, but they are still bosses.

One of the key questions our research is asking is: What are the psychological barriers at the collective and individual level to a just transition? A senior international trade union policy maker – Julio – provides an example of how political and technological changes are related to broader societal problems and one cannot tackle environmental issues without addressing the social and the psychological:

> Because, for example, the social problem of...road transport. ...it's not easy, because the position of the driver is a real position in society. When you are a driver, it's the same thing as when you are a miner: you do not have a high qualification but you have a real job – and you have real recognition. ... You have a real identification. Because when you are a...young boy, you play with a car, and you hope to become a driver. ... It's not a technical problem. We know the technical problem perfectly well now. ... It's to change the social image and to change the population.

Steel workers, chemical workers, or, as in Julio's example, lorry drivers, are proud of their work and their skills. Their aim is to do 'a job well for its own sake' as Richard Sennett (2008) expresses it. But Julio is also referring to another aspect of people's work: jobs are articulated in terms of a certain way of being in the world, they give people a sense of purpose and imply a specific 'way of life' that is associated with specific kinds of work. In the case of a long-distance driver – adventure, independence and freedom. Julio speaks about identification with a 'position in society'. In other words, work identities are not merely individual identities. They develop within a process in which people occupy positions that have existed long before they occupied them and will continue to exist after they have left them.

Threatening industries threatens jobs, which in turn threatens identities. This is a potential major barrier to change. How can we formulate just transition policies and practices that recognise this? Can we provide new jobs, green jobs, decent and non-precarious jobs that not only enable the construction of new identities but also positive identities in the context of carbon-reduced production?

This brings us full circle in some respects, to the kind of conclusions that Martin Seligman made last year in this same BA/BPS Annual Lecture. He argued for a psychology of positive human functioning that draws upon the scientific understanding of people as well as generating effective interventions that allow individuals, communities and societies not just to endure and survive, but also to flourish. I cannot help but feel that a psychology that sees its contribution to the major problem facing the world as only one of advising on individual behaviour change is perhaps selling short its legacy and aspirations. Psychology has to have a broader vision. Just as environmentalists talk of the importance of focusing on environmentally significant actions as opposed to environmentally convenient ones, we should be focusing on significant areas of explanation rather than familiar and comfortable areas of psychological practice. This will almost certainly require us to work in multidisciplinary teams and in interdisciplinary modes.

I was struck by another comment from Julio, who said:

> Sustainable development is a possibility to build a new project for humanity. Because nobody knows what a sustainable society should look like. So each trade union in the world, each person in the world, each population in the world, has the possibility to express their views and their opinion in order to build this project.

What Julio is suggesting is a vision of a sustainable society that could be seen not as a threat or a sacrifice but as an opportunity – an opportunity for which all of us have a responsibility to create a world in which our relations with others and nature are more equitable and just.

This brings to mind the African concept of *ubuntu*, 'a person is a person through other persons'. We are our social relations. Community, well-being, rootedness to the environment, quality of life, beliefs and identity are always lived out among others. An individual's well-being is caught up in the well-being of others and it is from others and with others that we learn, teach and act. It will be through working with and through others that we may have a chance to solve the serious social, economic and environmental problem we call climate change.

I **David Uzzell** *is Professor of Environmental Psychology at the University of Surrey d.uzzell@surrey.ac.uk*