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Keeping it in the Family? Re-focusing Household Sustainability

Abstract

Recent research on how best to support the development of pro-environmental behaviours has pointed towards the household as the scale at which interventions might be most effectively targeted. While pro-environmental behaviour research has tended to focus on the actions of adults, almost one-third of UK households also include children and teenagers. Some research has suggested that young people are particularly adept at exerting influence on the ways in which the household as a whole consumes. Yet this influence is not only one-way; parents continue to have direct input into the ways in which their children relate to and interact with the objects of consumption (such as personal possessions) through routine processes including acquisition, use, keeping and ridding. In this paper I draw on qualitative research with British teenagers to highlight how young people and their parents interact when managing household material consumption. I use this discussion to suggest that promoters of sustainability might increase the efficacy of their efforts by engaging households as complex family units, where individual household members' distinct priorities are linked by shared familial values, and where family-based group identity is used to encourage shared commitment to lower-impact living.

Key Words

Family; Identity; Young People; Consumption; Sustainability; Divestment

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been growing consensus that the household – as the “primary unit of consumption” (Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009: 930) – constitutes a key target for promoters of sustainability. Inhabiting what Reid et al. (2010) identify as the ‘meso’ level of action, between the micro and macro scales of individual and societal action, the household is where personal values, societal norms and institutional demands (such as government policies) collide to shape consumption practices (Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Waitt et al., 2012). While in one sense the household has been characterised as a place of mundane, habituated activities within which modification of routines proves challenging (e.g. Hobson, 2003; Ilmonen, 2001), in another, variation in the influences which shape those routines (new cultural practices, emergent social norms, etc.) can prompt the development of new practices. It is on this basis

that the household has been portrayed as a potential crucible of new – more environmentally sustainable – behaviours (Gatersleben et al., 2010; Gibson et al., 2011; Organo et al., 2013; Reid et al., 2010).

Growing interest in the household as the crucible for sustainability has been linked to the hope that pro-environmental practices can be transmitted between households (e.g. Hobson, 2002; Hargreaves et al., 2013), ‘greening’ neighbourhoods through the establishment of new social norms. This has been evidenced recently, for instance, by energy company E.ON producing customer information materials which encourage households to compare their energy consumption with averages for their neighbourhood (E.ON, 2013). However, before focusing attention on how best to encourage transmission of pro-environmental behaviours between households, we first need to establish them *within* households, including those inhabited by different generations (i.e. parents, children and sometimes extended family; see Klocker et al., 2012; Hadfield-Hill, 2013) where family members may have different priorities shaping their consumption.

Just under one-third of UK households include children or young people under eighteen (ONS, 2012), yet research into how sustainable consumption is organised within households has tended to leave younger members on the margins (Munro, 2009); at best acknowledging their existence through adults’ references to managing children’s ‘clutter’ (e.g. Dowling, 2008; Dowling and Power, 2012) or demands that children reduce their consumption of water or energy (Gram-Hanssen, 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2013). Overlooking the complex parent-child interactions that shape everyday consumption risks undermining the efforts of sustainability promoters by underplaying the potential impact of negotiations, contestations and compromises on a household’s ecological footprint (Larsson et al., 2010).

In this paper I draw on empirical research with British teenagers to reveal some of these complexities. By highlighting the shifting, relational roles of the young people and their parents in this context, my aim is to emphasise the fact that household members inevitably have different (and changing) priorities which dictate the nature of their consumption. I use these findings to suggest how promoters of sustainability might refocus their efforts to engage parents and their children *together* in ways that, rather than ignoring their different priorities, work *with* them to give all household members some degree of ownership over, and investment in, the process of living more sustainably.

I begin by considering the ways in which sustainability initiatives targeting adults and those targeting young people have framed the adoption and transmission of pro-environmental

behaviours. After introducing the empirical study I draw on conversations with participants to illustrate the negotiations that characterised their attempts to manage their personal possessions. I then move to my suggestions for refocusing sustainability initiatives around *all* household members.

2. Focusing Sustainability Initiatives: On the Individual, or the Household?

In the last decade initiatives aimed at encouraging engagement with sustainability amongst citizens of developed economies have proliferated, emerging primarily from government departments (in the UK, primarily the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and non-governmental organisations (such as Global Action Plan and Waste Watch). Whilst most of these have been characterised by an implicit assumption that the pro-environmental practices promoted are easily transferrable amongst socially proximate others (such as household members), they often fail to take account of the intricacies of everyday domestic life which present resistance to such change.

The approach taken by initiatives popular over the last decade has reflected dominant thinking in the late 1990s and early 2000s that focusing on individuals' values, attitudes and behaviours is the way to drive change (e.g. Hobson, 2006). Yet research carried out over the same period (e.g. Barr, 2003, 2006; Blake, 1999; Hobson, 2003; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002) demonstrated that individual values and attitudes have a relatively weak impact on the genesis of more sustainable consumption. Whilst they might create the intention to live more sustainably, the infrequency with which corresponding actions occur has revealed multiple barriers to change, from the infrastructural (e.g. accessible recycling services; Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009) to the socio-cultural (e.g. concerns about peer perceptions; Hards, 2013; Hitchings and Day, 2011), as well as a paralysing ambivalence resulting from conflicting messages and emotions (Ojala, 2005, 2007).

Research has also revealed that, even for one individual, multiple, sometimes conflicting, values and attitudes shape consumption, with many people more engaged with notions of social responsibility and equity (Hall et al., 2013; Hobson, 2002), health (Day and Hitchings, 2011), thrift or 'common sense' (Evans, 2011a; Hitchings et al., 2013) than environmental care. Recent sustainability initiatives have tended to ignore, rather than accommodate or harmonise with, potentially complementary values, thus constraining participants' ability to sustain positive change over the longer term as newly-adopted pro-environmental practices fail to 'gel' with existing routines (Fröhlich et al., 2012; Hargreaves et al., 2013). In households with

two or more residents this may be exacerbated as a wider range – and greater number – of personal priorities must necessarily be reconciled (Epp and Price, 2008). Hargreaves et al. (2013: 132-133) have recently described this in the context of energy consumption, noting that,

“... consumption in households involves multiple rationalities and logics, performed by multiple householders, often in complex and dynamic negotiations with one another...”

Further, although some projects (such as Global Action Plan’s *Action At Home*) have actively sought to bring neighbours together (thus addressing concerns about peer perceptions), this has relied on the willingness of neighbours to participate in explicitly pro-environmental projects together, having already identified as pro-environmental ‘types’. In short, approaches to promoting sustainability focused on the individual (even under the guise of ‘household’ sustainability) have achieved only moderate success (at bestⁱ) because they have rarely accommodated the competing imperatives that shape everyday consumption; nor have they acknowledged the additional challenge presented by the fact that these are potentially multiplied according to the number of household residents.

However, this should not be taken to imply that instigating change amongst household residents is necessarily more complex or less likely to succeed than initiatives focused on individuals. Whilst individual-level behaviour change initiatives have encountered stumbling blocks associated with transposing pro-environmental attitudes into corresponding actions, household-level initiatives have demonstrated some, albeit modest, success. Research into the success of such initiatives has, so far, been dominated by studies into energy saving mechanisms, particularly smart meters. Some studies have reported discernible benefits in terms of greater understanding amongst householders of their levels of energy consumption (e.g. Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2011; Murtagh et al. 2014; Schwarz et al. 2013), although there is acknowledgement that the level of success of such technology-led attempts at behavioural shifts has been modest (Buchanan et al. 2014; Hargreaves et al. 2013). As highlighted by Fahy and Davies’s work (2007) into household-focused waste reduction programmes, short-term behaviour changes reported within the timeframe of the project may give cause for optimism as to the project’s success; however, the lack of longitudinal research which revisits participants months, or even years, beyond the initial project means it is difficult to claim long-term success.

Nevertheless, given acknowledgement of the difficulty of ‘scaling up’ individual commitment to sustainability, as well as the modest success of household-focused initiatives, I suggest that further insight into the intra-household framing and organisation of everyday consumption practices would benefit attempts to promote long-term household sustainability. By situating the multiple preferences of household members at the centre of attempts to recast practices as sustainable, the necessary dynamism that results from attempts at their reconciliation may mean that the fundamental, seemingly contradictory, ‘humanity’ of the household can be mobilised in support of sustainability.

Before introducing the empirical study, I briefly review how the ‘household’ has been constructed within recent scholarship concerning the material production and consumption of the domestic dwelling.

2.1. Defining the (Sustainable) Household

The term ‘household’ is most commonly taken to imply some configuration of adults co-habiting as partners; single or partnered adults living with their young, teenage or adult children; or other combinations of close kin, sometimes including extended family, such as elderly (grand)parents. Other forms of household do, of course, exist – such as young professionals house sharing (e.g. McNamara and Connell, 2007) or single person households. However, since both sustainability initiatives and research concerned with domestic sustainability focus primarily on households comprising family members, and since I am concerned here with negotiations between young people and their parents, my use of the term ‘household’ refers to family households; that is, at least one adult with one or more dependent children.ⁱⁱ

There are significant bodies of work which theorise both the ‘household’ and ‘family’, although how these intersect has infrequently been drawn out. It is worth doing so, briefly, here, before thinking through the meaning of the ‘household’ in more detail. In one sense, family ‘produces’ the household. The ‘work’ of familial care (e.g. acts including provisioning, tidying, furnishing) is fundamental to the organisational structures which constitute the household (Cox, 2013), both socially and materially. This emphasises constructions of the household as a site of (social) (re)production (Valentine, 2008). Particularly when it comes to materialising familial relationships, households take shape in ways that simultaneously accommodate and produce individual and shared identities (Reimer and Leslie 2004), including those shaped by ideas of the ‘right’ way to embody or perform family life (Johnson, 2006). In another sense, the household ‘produces’ the family – or, more specifically, ways of ‘doing’ family. This might

be manifested in the production of domestic spaces of comfort, familiarity, relaxation or conviviality (Hollows, 2008). It might equally be characterised by the strained interpersonal interactions that reflect some expressions of care, or even more persistent and insidious forms of tension associated with the exertion of intra-household control. In sum, what characterises a *family* household is a particular kind of intimacy (Hollows, 2008; see also Valentine, 2008) – a deep knowledge of one another, even if this knowledge does not always result in agreement or harmony.

Research concerned with household sustainability (including but also going beyond the family household) has employed definitions of the ‘household’ which simultaneously describe a physical, bounded space of residence and acknowledge the social and cultural meanings created and embedded through inhabitation (e.g. Klocker et al., 2012; Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011). Whilst physical structure, infrastructures, material furnishings and possessions play a key role in shaping domestic practice (highlighted by research into the role of housing design and socio-technical systems in facilitating or inhibiting sustainability: see, for example, chapters by Davison and Crabtree in Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Hand et al., 2007; Shove, 2003a; Wilhite and Lutzenhiser, 1999), of particular significance to the constitution of any household are the social relations within it which connect to wider social networks and cultural meanings, and which are fundamental to making a household a ‘home’.

Although discussions of the ‘household’ often blur its definition into that of the ‘home’ (e.g. Blunt, 2005; Blunt and Varley, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006) there is a subtle but important distinction in meaning. Whilst ‘home’ generally emphasises the production of material and symbolic space, ‘household’ might be thought of as a social structure through which these interactions, alongside tasks fundamental to the living of everyday life, are organised. Home is more than a household, but meanings and experiences of home are necessarily mediated through the organisational processes that characterise being a household. Sometimes this organisation has to take precedence, with household members needing to know their ‘place’ or ‘role’ in the domestic setting in order to feel comfortable ‘at home’ (Hollows, 2008; Wood and Beck, 1994) – particularly within a family context as expectations around household ‘duties’ need to be reconciled with one’s sense of ‘place’ within the family structure. The relationship between ‘home’ and ‘household’ should indicate that, for those seeking to promote particular kinds of behaviour within the domestic sphere, there is not one, but *two* key meanings and their associated practices to accommodate.

The household, as a set of organising processes, is highly personal. On the one hand these processes look inwards; they are oriented around constructing a shared (familial) identity (Epp

and Price, 2008), emphasising particular roles and expressing care towards co-habitees (e.g. Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2004; Gregson et al., 2007a). Fundamental to this – particularly within family households – is a sense of ‘collectivity’ (Epp and Price, 2008; Valentine, 1999) – a sense that ‘we’re doing this together’ (e.g. Gregson et al., 2007a, 2007b). On the other, household organisation is concerned with external interactions, particularly communicating household inhabitants’ priorities to neighbours (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2004), as well as conformity to dominant cultural practices through ‘keeping up appearances’ (e.g. Wilhite and Lutzenhiser, 1999). Each household has its own ideas about how to live (Hawkins, 2011), conventions it seeks to uphold (Evans, 2011b; Shove, 2003b) or ‘moral economies’ (Hargreaves et al., 2010; see also Hall, 2011). It is with reference to these influences that the household is viewed as, “an organisational unit over which householders have significant control...” (Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011: 1).

Yet it should be noted that the household is rarely a single coherent identity or set of values. Rather, households contain the views and priorities of multiple individuals and those individuals are likely to have ideas, values and preferences which do not always result in a single coherent identity or point of view. For this reason, within any household there are typically competing beliefs about the ‘right’ way of going about everyday consumption practices (Hand et al., 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2010; Klocker et al., 2012). The sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting preferences of household members are fundamental to the way consumption within that household is managed, with disagreements often forming part of the process (Evans and Chandler, 2006; Hanson, 1980).

This discussion highlights two issues worthy of attention: first, the accommodation of practices which constitute ‘home’ alongside those associated with the (family) ‘household’ within any guiding framework for the promotion of sustainability; second, the impact on engagement with sustainability of the sometimes-complementary, sometimes-conflicting priorities of household members. I move now to consider the ambivalent nature of young people’s presence (or lack thereof) in attempts to understand and promote the sustainable household.

2.2. Young People in the (Sustainable) Household

It has been argued that young people, in the UK and other developed economies, possess good, if inconsistent, knowledge of sustainability, as well as a sense of responsibility towards the planet (Hicks and Holden, 2007; Jenkins and Pell, 2006; Renton et al. 2011). Of the few studies which have focused specifically on the sustainability of young people’s consumption,

researchers have found modest commitment to saving energy and reducing waste (Autio and Heinonen, 2004; Breunig et al., 2013; Hayward et al., 2011) – although reluctance to make too many compromises in terms of personal material consumption is common (Carbon Trust, 2012; GAP, 2011). Nevertheless, the environmental concern commonly expressed by young people, coupled with their social location within both family and extensive peer networks, has meant that they have been framed as potentially powerful drivers of more sustainable consumption (Ballantyne et al. 2006; Collins and Hitchings, 2012).

To date, youth consumption research has largely focused on the role of material possessions as mediators of young people's peer relationships and fluid senses of identity (e.g. Croghan et al., 2006; Marion and Nairn, 2011; Russell and Tyler, 2005), rather than their agency within more mundane domestic settings. However, in recent years a handful of studies have sought to acknowledge the presence of young people in households, with varying levels of attention paid to their unique experiences. Hargreaves et al. (2010) refer to the engagement of children and young adults through the introduction of smart energy meters to households; discussing how pro-environmental practices are introduced at home, Gentina and Muratore (2012) balance the voices of their adolescent participants with those of their mothers; Léger and Pruneau (2011; 2012) and Payne (2005; 2010) draw on the comments of the younger members of family groups in their discussion of promoting household sustainability; and Hadfield-Hill (2013) incorporates the experiences of young people in her discussion of eco-community households. Beyond these studies, young people's voices are rarely heard in the increasingly expansive literature on household sustainability, even when their presence in the research setting is acknowledged (e.g. Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2004; Kleinschafer and Morrison, 2013). This is puzzling in light of the effort expended by promoters of sustainability to educate young people into pro-environmental practices in the hope that they might act as 'Trojan horses', taking sustainability into the home and 'recruiting' family members into new practices (Ballantyne et al., 2006; Collins and Hitchings, 2012).

Outside of the domain of sustainability, child-parent (or parent-child) influence on consumption has commonly been characterised in one of three linear ways. The first describes the socialisation of children into the attitudes and practices which constitute familial consumption norms (Grønhoj and Thøgersen, 2009, 2012; Shim et al., 2011), with parents generally identified as the most important influence on the development of these attitudes (Cotte and Wood, 2004; John, 1999). The second and third characterisations are drawn from framings of parents in studies of youth consumption, where they are represented as either direct influences on a child's consumption (e.g. Rawlins, 2006), or as a target for 'pester power' from

their children (e.g. Ekström, 2007). Indeed, the over-simplification of children's role in family consumption as 'pester power' has been argued to reflect the lack of critical interrogation into its prevalence or effectiveness, or even what it means in practice (O'Malley and Prothero, 2007).

Thus there has been a persistent lack of attention paid to the distinct goals of family members in contexts where consumption is negotiated, particularly regarding how the multiplicity of roles and identities individuals draw upon impact the outcome (Epp and Price, 2008). Tutt (2008) provides a rare insight into this in his ethno-methodological study of parent and child negotiations around the use of home media. Drawing equally on the voices of parent and child, Tutt reveals how family members shift roles (such as from obstructive teenage sibling to helpful daughter) according to their aims in a particular moment. He highlights the frequency with which a diverse array of tactics are employed – by all family members – as a means of disrupting routine practices, with those tactics directed at fulfilling individual needs. As Larsson et al. (2010) have identified, understanding acts such as these is crucial to discerning the effects of young people's attempts to promote particular approaches to consumption, such as sustainability, within their households.

In sum, although the bi-directionality of child-parent influence is acknowledged in family consumption research, assumptions around the straight-forward linearity of the process and its effects have been subject to insufficient critical investigation. Little detail is offered within extant studies on the complex processes of negotiation around multiple simultaneous imperatives that characterise the realities of 'muddling through' everyday life for different generations of one family household. Yet the needs and priorities of co-habiting parents and children cannot be divorced from one another; they must necessarily be reconciled within the space of the family household, sometimes necessarily resulting in conflict, compromise or subversion.

I move now to introduce a recent qualitative study with young people from which data is drawn to illustrate the kinds of negotiations that characterise how the demands of everyday domestic consumption are managed, particularly, in this case, the accumulations of material 'stuff' which often typify family households. My aim is to articulate a means of promoting household sustainability that *works with*, rather than ignores, the differing roles, responsibilities and priorities possessed by household members.

3. Introducing the Study: Managing Possessions at Home

Research concerned with consumption negotiations amongst household members has most commonly focused on material purchases (e.g. Hamilton and Catterall, 2008) or the use of utilities (energy or water; e.g. Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2004; Hargreaves et al., 2013), rather than the management of material objects within the home. The study on which this paper draws was concerned with deepening understanding of young people's consumption by exploring how and why they divest themselves of possessions. Divestment – or the 'ridding' phase of consumption – constitutes a particularly revealing case study through which to explore the potential for household sustainability. The decision to rid oneself of a possession connects the *perceived* dis-utility of that object with a desire to relocate it outside of one's spaces of everyday encounter – most commonly the home. Whilst the relocation of an unwanted object has clear implications for sustainability (disposing via a rubbish bin vs. a second-hand shop, for instance), so too does the *perception*, often fed by socio-cultural cues, that an object is 'old', 'unfashionable' or 'unfixable'. Approaches to divestment therefore reflect household members' perceptions of the value of material things and their willingness to perpetuate that value by 'moving things along' into contexts of reuse (Gregson et al., 2007b).

Many techniques have been employed in research into sustainability and household consumption, with qualitative methods being used to revealing effect in studies seeking to understand why certain behaviours are practised (or not), as well as the subjectivities associated with the imposition of change. The study presented here employed a qualitative approach aimed at allowing participants to reflect on their relationships with the objects of consumption. Fieldwork was carried out over seven months (September 2010 – March 2011) with 32 young people aged 16-19 in the city of Cambridge in the east of England. Participants were recruited through schools: one a co-educational state comprehensive; one a leading co-educational independent school; and one a small independent sixth form college. Eight of the participants were male and 24 female. Of those who disclosed their ethnic background, 19 identified as White British or Irish, and seven as belonging to another ethnic group. Around half were resident in the city or surrounding villages, whilst the other half travelled in from around Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire.

Although the project as a whole was concerned with how young people might be more effectively engaged in sustainable consumption, the fieldwork was framed as an investigation into young people's relationships with their material possessions, rather than an exploration of young people's (attempted) practices of sustainability. The aim was to elicit from participants how they went about materialising their adolescent identities, on the basis that promoting an

alternative orientation towards consumption is easier when people's natural priorities are accommodated (Evans, 2011a; Hitchings et al., 2013). This decision was made at an early stage in recognition of the fact that attempting to recruit participants into an explicitly sustainability-focused project would predominantly attract volunteers for whom sustainability is already a priority, or lead to recruits presenting an uncharacteristically 'green' self. In order to engage a range of young people the project was presented as an opportunity to talk about why certain material objects matter a great deal to them, and why others don't.

The students participated in two extended interviews each and completed a photo documentary task between meetings. The photography task invited participants to document some of their possessions in situ in their homes, in order to facilitate conversation around certain objects.ⁱⁱⁱ Topics discussed during the interviews included: object attachment; ownership; novelty; processes of acquisition and ridding; attitudes to repair; and what makes possessions 'valuable'. The theme of sustainability was carefully managed during the interviews, being introduced only towards the end of each conversation unless the participant introduced it earlier. In the first interview no questions concerning sustainability were asked directly, but some questions were posed where sustainability concerns might have featured in the response, for instance, "Would anything make you think twice about getting rid of something?" In the second interview sustainability-related topics were introduced more directly, but only at the end of the conversation.

In the discussion that follows I present a series of examples which illustrate how my participants negotiated the keeping or ridding of their possessions. In order to align the discussion with recent work employing the household as a key analytical focus, I primarily emphasise the situation of the events presented within that same socio-spatial (set of) structure(s). However, in light of the mutually constitutive relationship between 'household' and 'home', I also draw attention to moments in which 'home' is a particularly relevant point of reference.

4. Conflict, Subversion or Collaboration? Parent and Child Roles in the Management of Possessions

It is worth reiterating that co-habiting family members are perhaps the strongest influence on one another's consumption. That the participants in this study frequently described their actions in terms of "we" rather than "I" alludes to the mutual reinforcement of habits; for any household, certain ways of practising consumption "make sense" in the context of their specific circumstances. The dominant role dichotomy is that of the care-giving parent tasked

with the maintenance of order and standards within the household, and the care-receiving child, the focus of these efforts. Often this relationship proceeds unproblematically, with children, including many of the adolescents in this study, happily conceding domestic responsibilities to their parents. At other times, parental concern with maintaining an identity based on the expression of care towards their children (cf. Gregson et al. 2007a; Miller, 1998) conflicts with young people's own preferred mode of self-expression. Under the headings of 'conflict', 'subversion' and 'collaboration', I discuss how this shifting relationality was manifested in the participants' households, before presenting a broader discussion of the implications of such relations for the promotion of household sustainability. It should be noted that, in light of my concern with avoiding encouraging participants to present an uncharacteristically 'green' self, the theme of sustainability is conspicuous by its absence in the data presented. Rather, my aim has been to unpack the nature of the parent-child negotiations featured and, subsequently, discuss the implications of these for embedding more environmentally sustainable practices in the household.

4.1 Conflict

The disjuncture between parental and adolescent priorities was a common source of frustration for participants. The nature of the disagreement varied but generally centred on how the young people materialised their identities through accumulations of material things, which conflicted with parental notions of order. Sally, for instance, said:

My mum keeps threatening me with redoing my room... [...] but I'm trying to get out of that one... 'cause I like my room the way it is.

The bedroom is a site which, by virtue of its material form and (dis)organisation, plays a central role in the materialisation of adolescent identities, yet for these same reasons it is also a space over which parents often seek to exercise control. As such it is a key site for parent-child conflict over how consumption is practised. Such clashes were not limited to young people's 'personal' space, however. Tessa wanted to compost the food waste her household produced, but this did not correspond with her father's priorities:

Tessa My dad won't get a compost heap. Even though it's really simple he just won't get one 'cause he can't be bothered to set it up, or whatever.

Despite Tessa's enthusiasm and encouragement of her family in a wide range of pro-environmental household practices, her desire to take this further through composting was resisted by a father who did not wish to incorporate composting into the household routine, perhaps feeling, as a result of the family's otherwise quite extensive waste-avoidance strategies described by Tessa, that they were 'green enough'.

A different example was offered by Maggie. Maggie came from a military family and had spent her childhood and teenage years regularly moving between army bases. Whilst her mother's response to this had been to minimise the accumulation of possessions, for Maggie, her possessions constituted 'home' to her more profoundly than any house she might temporarily inhabit. Retaining these items, even those infrequently used, was therefore very important to her. Her mother's role as household 'de-clutterer', always with the spectre of another relocation on the horizon, conflicted with Maggie's need to maintain some stability in her identity through the retention of a range of material things. Thus, whilst both Maggie and her mother were performing identities associated with their belonging to a military family, the nature of their different roles – Maggie as a teenager managing the crystallisation of her identity as a young adult; her mother as the manager of domestic space and the logistics of moving house – meant that the objects of consumption took on different meanings for each of them: a source of comfort for Maggie but stress for her mother.

Another participant, John, similarly resisted the ridding of his possessions according to his mother's desire to 'de-clutter'. Talking about an old pair of trainers he continued to make use of when doing odd jobs around the house, he said:

John They've survived repeated attempts of trying to get rid of them by my mum.

Int. Why is it that your mum wants to get rid of them?

John It's because they're old. And she doesn't... like clutter and she wants to... to get rid of them.

In our second conversation, he relayed the story of the demise of his Xbox computer games console:

Int. Why did you get rid of your Xbox?

John I didn't get rid of it. [...] It was thrown away.

Int. Ok. What happened?

John It had a confrontation with my mum. [pause] It didn't win.

For John, these contestations with his mother were less about emotional attachment to the objects in question; rather, they had become a battle of wills based upon his insistence that he should be able to decide upon the usefulness or uselessness of his possessions on his own terms. Tina illustrated the same principle in reverse. Her wish to sell her no-longer-used keyboard was obstructed by her father's insistence that she keep it. Although she no longer identified with the younger self that had once played it, she suggested that her father's reluctance for her to part with it was based on his attachment to an image of his younger daughter enjoying an item he had bought for her.

Here, mundane disagreements accepted as simply part of family life reflect fundamentally different positions adopted by the young people and their parents – differences which, as Tessa illustrated, can form barriers to the introduction of alternative practices. Conflict arose when participants' desire to make decisions about the keeping or ridding of their possessions according to their present identities clashed with parental definitions of familial identity or preferred household practice – specifically, here, appropriate means of managing 'surplus' possessions. Whilst the organisational processes of sorting, clearing or 'de-cluttering' associated with the socio-spatial construction of the household are clearly discernible, so, too, is the importance of 'making home' through the decisions made about material possessions – as evidenced by Maggie. The implication of these conflicts – small though they seem – loom large in terms of scope to introduce more environmentally sustainable practices into household routines. The 'freezing' of younger household members in the role of care-recipient potentially limits their ability to take responsibility for their share of household consumption, or take wider responsibility as a means of expressing care towards their family by accepting a particular set of household responsibilities. Furthermore, failing to accommodate younger household members' needs within the construction of 'home' and 'family household' may reduce their willingness to 'buy in' to practices imposed by parents. I return to the implications of these points later. I move now to consider how these young people responded to conflicts between their priorities and those of their parents.

4.2 Subversion

Sometimes differences of opinion between parent and child were settled through the (willing or unwilling) concession of one party to the other (John, for example, did finally concede that his Xbox was broken), or through one party taking action without the consent (and sometimes knowledge) of the other. On other occasions there was direct subversion of parental wishes.

Often these acts involved the recruitment of other family members. John, for instance, used his father's use of his trainers for doing the gardening to help legitimise their retention. Maggie and her sister employed a scheme whereby their possessions moved discreetly between their respective bedrooms in order to give the impression to their mother that they had been disposed of:

Int. I just wondered how you passing stuff to your sister fitted with your mum's desire to de-clutter. Do things just kind of move round... and not entirely disappear?

Maggie Yeah. What mum doesn't know won't hurt her. *[laughs]*

Int. Ok. So things get passed around and your mum doesn't know that it's not actually leaving the house?

Maggie Yeah. She's like, it's all being chucked out and then it's like, no, it's actually gone into that room there.

Int. So it kind of... it moves but under her radar.

Maggie Yeah. Like the other day I pulled out a dress, and she was like, oh, I thought I chucked that away. And then I was thinking, oh my god, please don't remember that dress. *[laughs]*

Another commonly used tactic involved playing off parents against each other, with participants invoking the attitude of one in order to legitimise to the other a particular course of action. This was particularly common amongst participants whose parents were divorced or separated.^{iv} Olivia's parents had separated when she was a young child. Having lived for many years with her mother, described by Olivia as "a bit of a hippy", Olivia had incorporated her mother's approach to material things – keeping everything on the basis that a use might be found for it later. Having moved to live with her father, whose approach she described as "not minimalist... but he has [...] only the basics", during her early teens, she struggled to reconcile the practices with which she had been raised with the new norms imposed by her father. This resulted in her 'hiding' her possessions around the house, rather than disposing of some of them, as directed. When asked what she would do with an item she had expressly been asked to clear out, she replied:

Probably hide it from my dad *[laughs]* so then he wouldn't know I didn't get rid of it. 'Cause I've got these drawers under my bed and they're crammed full of things that my dad goes, oh you should chuck it away, and I put it in there. [...] You know,

and my dad always says well everything's got a home, and... a lot of it's under my bed, but *[laughs]* that's its home. But I'd probably just keep, I don't know, I... I'd hide it, shove it in the loft or... yeah.

Like Olivia, Rosa often felt conflicted, struggling to reconcile the strict anti-waste values of her mother with the gifts and money she was given by a father she sees infrequently. This was reflected in a palpable anxiety in many of her comments. It was clear that she felt, as a young person, she had the right to express herself through her material consumption; yet at the same time she was more sensitive than many of her peers to her responsibilities as a consumer, particularly in terms of environmental impacts, even if she did not always know what action to take. As such, Rosa clearly embodied the ambivalence that can result at the nexus of contradictory influences. Studies concerned with young people's attempts to translate environmental awareness into sustainable consumption have linked this ambivalence to feelings of helplessness, resulting in what has been termed 'action paralysis' (Connell et al., 1999; Ojala, 2005, 2007). In light of the aspiration for young people to promote sustainability in their family homes, the potential for 'action paralysis' to result from an inability to manage conflicting personal and familial values is important for promoters of sustainability to note.

To summarise thus far, discrepancies between adolescent and parental aspirations for the materialisation of personal and shared identities within the home can result in acts of subversion. For promoters of household sustainability, this highlights the need to accommodate the multiple identities that comprise a household, since adopters of identities which are actively marginalised may seek to disrupt or undermine (new or existing) dominant practices as a means of claiming participation in 'making home', as well as self-expression. Additional complexities issue from the separation or blending of families, with differences in parental approaches that might be reconciled (or at least minimised) in a shared household instead being magnified as parents' contrasting attitudes amplify away from the direct challenge of the other parent. The implications of this for the promotion of environmentally sustainable domestic practices may be significant, particularly in light of the threat of 'action paralysis' resulting from overwhelming conflicting influences. In the following section, I shift focus to consider parent-child interactions characterised by shared rather than opposing practices, noting that these may present no less of a challenge for promoters of sustainability.

4.3 Collaboration

Here I consider a mode of parent-child interaction based on collaborative action. It has been evident so far that a key role for parents is that of household organiser – ensuring their children have everything they need and divesting the household of unwanted items. This organisational role necessarily creates rules concerned with the maintenance of household order; what kinds of possessions can be kept, where, and for how long. However, parents are not *only* domestic care-takers. They are also individuals with tastes, interests, preferences (which may or may not relate to their roles as parents) and multi-faceted identities – like their teenage children – who, in embodying these, possess material things which they are obliged to manage within the physical limitations of their abode. In contrast with the scenarios described above in which parents' care-taker roles conflicted with the identity expressions of their children, sometimes there was a far closer alignment between their priorities.

This related primarily to the accumulations of un(der)used possessions inhabiting marginal spaces around the home – 'spare' rooms, lofts, garages, sheds, landings and under-bed drawers. By undermining their own demands about divesting 'clutter', parents demonstrate the conflicts that occur within their *own* priorities around how family life should be lived. The desire for a tidy house is played off against notions of what it means to 'make home' – retaining material things for reasons of sentimentality or 'just in case'; keeping evidence of past selves to create a sense of the home as 'lived in', not just in the present but over time; and even materialising a facet of self-identity that represents a degree of unapologetic complacency, in contrast with their role as domestic care-taker. Here, parents and children together, through the ways in which they appropriate and colonise spaces around the home for the placing of un(der)used possessions, create an unspoken set of rules which embody their shared practice of home-making through clutter creation.

This was expressed most vividly by one participant's story about the colonisation of a space on the upstairs landing of his home. Daniel explained the process by which the function of this space changed:

Umm, I think it was... started off, uh, when I moved, uh, when I sold my drum kit which used to be in this space. Umm, and we put about... a box, uh, about two foot by two foot in there, umm, just in the corner to keep... sort of excess toys and things, lego... Umm, and then it just... grew.

He went on to state that the pile had been covered over with a blanket "so it doesn't look so bad". Whilst on the surface this implies an aesthetic motivation to improve the appearance of a jumbled collection of items (which, Daniel stated, included bags of clothes, toys, games,

pillows, a mattress and a tool box), it might also reflect a parental need to distract from responsibilities that lurk beneath the blanket's surface by making the objects temporarily invisible.

Daniel's colonised landing space was by no means the only example of the ways in which participants and their parents cohabited amenably with "sticky" possessions which resisted ridding. Ella, for instance, spoke of her family using space in her sister's room since she had left home; Mark photographed a chaotic spare room in which furniture was piled up the walls and the floor was not visible; Olivia had appropriated an entire spare room as her personal 'overflow'; and Elspeth documented childhood toys stored in the garage, their neatly-boxed appearance suggestive of a compromise between clutter management and disinclination to follow through with the actual act of divestment. The key point is that householders adopt some consumption practices – namely retaining and storing – because they are convenient, but also because they permit the materialisation of home life, away from the demands of presenting a respectable household identity. In contrast to the first set of examples, here, the participants' and their parents' roles are closely aligned with both seeking to 'make home' through the accumulation of material remnants of their shared past. This sharing of both priorities and practice has been identified by researchers investigating household consumption as fundamental to the persistence of those practices over time (Epp and Price, 2008; Léger and Pruneau, 2011, 2012; Tutt, 2008) – the challenge is, then, to promote shared priorities and practices associated with lower impact consumption.

It is worth noting that the long-term retention of un(der)used material possessions occupies an ambivalent position in discourses of household sustainability. Opinion remains divided as to whether keeping un(der)used objects prevents their passage into the waste stream or whether their 'invisibilization' in marginal storage spaces permits the acquisition of new items as existing possessions are forgotten or deemed 'out of date' (e.g. Gibson et al., 2011; Ongondo and Williams, 2011). Whilst retention and divestment of possessions represents only one facet of household consumption, it is useful to use this case to highlight that instances in which the actions of family members align might in fact present promoters of sustainability with a greater challenge than those around which opinions differ. In part this is because instigating change in this context necessitates altering the actions of all family members, rather than only some. More significantly, though, those which are taken up by all family members without conflict or subversion are likely to be those which, by nature of their ease and convenience, are most likely to be heavily routinized.

Nevertheless, the fact that there *are* realms of household consumption in which the attitudes and practices of parents and children are aligned should offer promoters of household sustainability a glimmer of hope – as should the fact that there are areas in which the priorities of parents and children differ. Both present opportunities for intervention capable of creating change. I move now to suggest why this mix of similarity and difference might be beneficial, and I offer some suggestions as to how promoters of sustainability might capitalise on those benefits.

5. Discussion

It is a fact of co-habitation that co-habitees often possess contrasting ideas about how to manage the demands of everyday living, particularly those associated with consumption, with the practices that result necessarily constituting an amalgam of attempts to address a range of priorities (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009). This is vividly demonstrated by the data presented here, with the participants expressing a range of responses to the necessity of negotiation with their families. The evidence of conflict highlights the strength of feeling amongst younger household members that they should be able to make decisions about their possessions on their own terms. This might be read as an attempt to claim a larger share of everyday domestic responsibilities, which, for sustainability professionals keen to promote youth as ‘Trojan horses’ of change within households, may validate their interest in this group. The subversive tactics reported suggest that the agency which characterises the ‘Trojan teen’ is already in evidence and capable of producing powerful effects when driven by young people’s own priorities. Finally, the evidence that there are some domestic practices around which parents and children naturally collaborate suggests their priorities are not always as disparate as their commonly-ascribed dichotomous roles of care-giver and care-recipient imply. More importantly, it highlights that all household members inhabit shifting roles which, in one moment might be characterised by action and responsibility, and in the next inaction and complacency.

In a sense, these findings merely emphasise the complexity and ‘muddiness’ of domestic life and familial identities. As such, attempting to formulate a clear course of action through which the complexities can be untangled in the service of more sustainable living might seem like a fool’s errand. Nevertheless, in light of the continued focus on the household as *the* place in which to focus attempts at promoting greater sustainability (Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009; Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Reid et al., 2010; Waitt et al., 2012), and in light of ongoing

commitment from sustainability promoters and environmental educators to equipping children and youth with the means to initiate the shift (e.g. Otesha Project, 2014; Se-ed 2014; Sustainability4Youth, 2014), using the findings of this project in order to suggest how these two ‘prongs of attack’ might be better aligned remains a worthwhile exercise.

There are three key points that can be taken forward. First, younger household members should be encouraged to claim a greater share of responsibility within the context of domestic routines – becoming ‘care-sharers’ rather than perpetual care-recipients. Having greater ownership of their actions, and their subsequent impacts, may contribute to the formation of the kind of self-efficacy needed to counteract feelings of ‘action paralysis’ associated with intermittent or unsupported attempts to maintain more sustainable practices (Ojala, 2005, 2007). Second, the aims of younger household members should be visibly accommodated, alongside those of their parents, within the recalibrated household repertoire. Valorizing young people’s priorities in this way may emphasise their sense of responsibility as they seek to fulfil those aims, underlining their capacity to bring about the kind of changes they consider important. Third, it should be acknowledged that the aims of an individual, as well as a group, are multiple and shifting. As such, the commitment required on the part of at least one household member in order to ‘recruit’ others into new practices may only ever be temporarily present. Thus, any new practices introduced should not depend on the persistent performance of one ‘persona’. How, then, might promoters of sustainability (through an environmental lens or otherwise) respond to the intra-familial intricacies evidenced here, allowing a division of responsibilities which accommodates the dominant care-giver/care-recipient dichotomy, yet facilitates a move towards more care-sharing for younger household members, at the same time as accommodating each household members’ individual aims?

A suggested first step in reconciling these demands might be for household members to reflect on their shared family identity, since different households possess different capabilities and are thus positioned to be more or less sustainable in different ways (Waitt et al., 2012). It has previously been suggested that families are more likely to sustain newly adopted or recalibrated domestic practices, particularly those suggested by younger members, if open communication is fostered around the reasons for their adoption (Léger and Pruneau, 2011; Watne and Brennan, 2011). A preliminary conversation exploring what family members are able to agree on in terms of priorities for organising their everyday consumption need not be formal or long-winded – a chat over dinner may be all that is needed to establish commonalities. Importantly, the terms in which a household articulates its identity need not have conspicuous environmentalism at its heart; rather, it might bespeak ‘inadvertent

environmentalism' (Hitchings et al., 2013) – aims aligned with sustainability but without an explicit environmental discourse – through identities such as 'the Money-Savers' or 'the Waste-Haters'. Further, and significantly in light of the need to accommodate multiple identities, priorities and thus orientations to new practices, household members need not interpret or perform this identity in the same way (Epp and Price, 2008); rather, the objective is to agree on one key aim to which, in different ways, each household member contributes. Prioritising one motivation helps avoid the anxiety associated with juggling multiple conflicting demands – the frustrations of which, as noted above, have been associated with action paralysis.

Having articulated a shared identity to which all family members relate, they might then consider the actions suited to fulfilment of that identity. To appease concerns about social perceptions – which can apply to even the most inconspicuous forms of consumption (Hards, 2013) – 'conspicuous conservation' behaviours, such as car sharing, might be incorporated as a means of externalising the family identity within the neighbourhood, making visible new practices noticeable by neighbours and visitors but which are not necessarily explicitly environmental. Encouraging households to devise their own programme of change according to their priorities increases the opportunities for them to bring social and/or economic concerns into a lived concept of sustainability in the broadest sense – environmental, economic and, in terms of working with family members' shared and individual priorities, personally and collectively sustainable, too. Within this structure responsibilities for tasks fundamental to the (re)production of shared family identity can be apportioned, with each individual's responsibilities helping to constitute facets of both shared and individual identity. Promoting 'ownership' of both tasks and identity in this way may help to counteract reticence on the part of some household members to participate, thus reducing the risk that whole household commitment will be compromised (Hargreaves et al., 2010).

In sum, shifting household consumption towards a more environmentally sustainable footprint needs to be made manageable, realistic, and reconcilable with both the individual and shared identities of household members. In particular, there is scope to give young people freer rein to express the agency which they demonstrably possess. Making sustainability manageable increases the likelihood that new practices are perceived as appealing, and thus increases the chance of long-term success.

6. Conclusions

With growing attention paid to the household as one of the key sites for the promotion of sustainability, there is still much to understand about intra-household consumption dynamics. This paper has been a response to recent calls to, “go beyond narrow understandings of individual decision-making [...] and begin instead to account for the full range of household dynamics and practices” (Hargreaves et al. 2013: 132), thus increasing understanding of the ways in which intra-household relationships impact on the ability of that household to consume sustainably (Klocker et al. 2012; Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2011). As O’Malley and Prothero (2007: 159) have identified, “much of our extant knowledge oversimplifies family roles and consumption behaviours”. Further, and as noted by Larsson et al. (2010), there has been a persistent separation between literature concerned with young people’s ability to promote sustainability at home, and the nature of their influence on household consumption in other contexts. My aim here has been to bring these bodies of work together whilst highlighting the complexities that characterise domestic consumption. In doing so I have emphasised that co-habiting family members – of all ages – inhabit shifting and relational roles, the dynamism of which has significant implications for the way in which sustainability might be taken up. These dynamic interactions are, additionally, fundamental to ‘making home’ through everyday acts of consumption.

My suggestion is, thus, that household-focused sustainability initiatives may be best placed to achieve success if they acknowledge, and utilise, the diverse priorities and roles of household members, incorporating as a first step a process through which a shared value (set) and *modus operandi* can be articulated. This collective value (set) around which the household seeks to mobilise should not be taken for granted; it requires negotiation, and perhaps renegotiation, over time. Importantly, it must not inhibit socio-culturally significant practices of home-making; to do so would limit engagement amongst those for whom environmental concern is marginal (at best) to their construction of home and/or familial identity. Ensuring unity around this driving motivation is likely to be fundamental to the persistence of new or altered domestic practices.

Whilst family households are not the only form of contemporary living arrangement, the focus of many promoters of sustainability on children and young people as ‘Trojan horses’ for sustainability within their homes and families constructs the family household as a crucible of potentially significant shifts towards more sustainable living (Collins and Hitchings, 2012). As evidenced by the agency expressed by participants’ acts of conflict, subversion and collaboration in the study discussed here, there is a strong argument for sustainability promoters focused on children and youth, and those focused on larger-scale social

organisations and networks, to more effectively align their projects. Doing so may offer a useful means of linking micro-scale complexities, such as those that characterise everyday domestic interactions, with the larger-scale practices, services or systems of provision into which they are inevitably tied (Head et al., 2013).

To end, I wish to emphasise that, in advocating an approach to the promotion of household sustainability which engages whole families, I am not suggesting that seeking to engage adults, children and youth separately on sustainability is necessarily always problematic. There are many reasons – from the unique responsibilities of adulthood to the necessity of employing different engagement techniques for older and younger audiences – why doing so is frequently beneficial. Rather, my aim has been to highlight that abstracting the relationship between adults and young people has allowed the barriers to the transmission of pro-environmental behaviours to be conveniently overlooked. We should be careful not to ‘pass the buck’ to today’s youth, whose purportedly strong environmental knowledge and expressions of care suggest enthusiasm for tackling the challenges of sustainability. Instead, it is necessary to face up to the difficulties of encouraging whole families to ‘buy in’ to the importance of a more sustainable household. A key step in doing this is thinking through how family members can be engaged simultaneously separately and together through a frame of reference which amplifies rather than overlooks the importance of ‘making home’ and ‘doing family’.

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- ⁱ The extent to which newly adopted pro-environmental behaviours persist over time remains largely unknown due to scant longitudinal research on this topic. Broadly comparable research by Sullivan (2004) into gendered housework practices suggests that new practices are more likely to endure if everyone in the household perceives their importance and if there is a discernible social attitude which contributes to the normalisation of that practice.
- ⁱⁱ Within this definition there is, of course, a diversity of family 'types'. The need for brevity precludes further elaboration on this point here, but I refer to, for example: same-sex parent families; families with three (or more) generations living under one roof; and 'blended' families of two separated or divorced adults with children uniting their families within one household.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Whilst ethnographic approaches have been common in recent research into household consumption and sustainability, a range of complex ethical and practical issues relating to working with under-18s in private household spaces made ethnography unfeasible within the time frame of this project.
- ^{iv} This highlights a salient, and particularly under-researched, issue; that of the implications of separated or blended families for family – and especially young people's – consumption, specifically in terms of duplication of consumption (for example if children have two bedrooms, one at each parent's house) and in terms of the growing number of influencing factors – and thus spaces of negotiation – around how consumption is organised and practised. It has previously been noted, for instance, that the per capita resource consumption of divorced households (in the United States) is up to 60% higher than that of (re)married households (Yu and Liu, 2007).