

Understanding and Practising Sustainable Consumption in Early Motherhood

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Abstract

This paper explores when environmentally sustainable consumption occurs for new mothers, and how their constructions of sustainable lifestyles align with, or are challenged, by the everyday priorities of family life. The study involved longitudinal qualitative research with new mothers. Interviews focused on how ordinary consumption shifted or remained stable, with sustainability only being explicitly discussed in the final interview. Environmentally sustainable modes of consumption were adopted when they were considered to be in synergy with the over-riding project of doing family. Participants constructed environmental sustainability as an ideal at odds with the reality of everyday family life. We suggest there is a need for greater attention to the gender and relational dimensions of environmentally sustainable practice, and for the promotion of holistic discourses of sustainable consumption which align sustainable living with the maintenance of family life.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption; sustainability; motherhood; family life;

Introduction: New mothers, everyday consumption and sustainability

The significance of family relationships is recognised within studies of consumption (e.g. DeVault, 1991; Miller, 1998; Lindsey and Maher, 2013). Consumption practices are informed by family identities and relationships and play a fundamental role in the 'doing' of family (Morgan, 2011).

How mothers orient to consumption and the role it plays in the construction of appropriate mothers has received much attention (e.g. Thomson *et al.*, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2004; O'Donohue *et al.*, 2014; Casey and Martens, 2007). New mothers are bombarded with product marketing and encounter shifting routines and financial resources which shape domestic consumption contexts and decisions. Research focuses on the choice, purchase and use of products through which caring work is done and identity is constructed (e.g. Clarke, 2004; Miller, 2014), but there is also interest in more mundane consumption such as laundry practices (Pink, 2016) and family meals (Halkier, 2014). Such work:

'puts up front that consumption is frequently a social activity conducive to and illustrative of the nature of social relations, including gender relations, rather than an activity engaged in by an individual solely for their own "selves" (Casey and Martens, 2007: p.6)

To date, however there has been little consideration of sustainability within such research.

Recent work on the sustainability (in particular the energy and water demands) of consumption practices often focuses on activities (such as cooking and laundry) which take place within the context of families and are performed by women (Shove, 2003). However, the insights of research on family practices are rarely drawn on. While ‘the interactions between different actants within and around the site of the home’ (Strengers, 2016: p.766) or ‘interpersonal dynamics’ (Pullinger *et al.*, 2013: p.80) are recognised as significant in informing household resource use, the language of gender, identity, family and relationships remains largely absent.

Thus work on domestic consumption as part of family practice is largely separate from that on everyday consumption and its implications for sustainability. As Jamieson indicates:

‘A detailed understanding of the intersections of familial or intimate relational practices with environmentally consequential practices is needed to illuminate the possibilities of social change’ (2016: p.356)

This paper contributes to this research gap and focuses on where modes of consumption activity - which might be deemed environmentally sustainable - emerge for new mothers and how they understand and respond to the concept of sustainable lifestyles.

Both sustainable and ethical consumption are complex and contested concepts. Hobson suggests that sustainable consumption:

“broadly denotes the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and foster a certain quality of life, while minimising environmental harm to ourselves and future generations” (Hobson, 2013: p.1).

While Barnett *et al.* define ethical consumption as:

“any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment or obligation towards distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of the activity to the actors involved” (Barnett *et al.*, 2005: p.29).

Thus there is clear overlap between the concepts and they are often used interchangeably. One key distinction might be that consideration of environmental issues is always an integral part of definitions of sustainable consumption but may not be within ethical consumption. Another is that the notion of ethical consumption involves self reflection on consumption practices, while some discussions of sustainable consumption rely on evaluations of the impact of activities without the actors involved necessarily reflecting on this themselves. Our research interests were framed in terms of sustainable consumption so we use that term throughout the paper, however much of the discussion could equally be considered to be about ethical consumption.

The Study

We conducted research exploring how everyday consumption changed or remained stable through the transition to motherhood.

40 participants were recruited (in London, Kent, Fife and Lancaster & Morecambe) and each was interviewed three times: prior to the birth of the baby; six to eight months after the birth and approximately 8 months later. No mention was made of sustainability until the end of the final interview.

More participants were recruited from socio-economic groups A, B and C1 than C2, D, Eⁱ(see Appendix 1). However, our sample includes women with diverse occupations and economic circumstances. At the start of the project participants ranged in age from 20 to 39. The majority were white British although there was some ethnic diversity amongst the sample. We did not ask questions about sexual orientation but all had, or had had, male partners.

In-depth interviews were conducted in participants' homes. The first interview explored what was important about their home, food purchase and consumption, modes of transport and leisure activities, and participants were asked to reflect on how these things may change as they start a family. If participants spontaneously raised ethical or sustainable consumption issues (e.g. organic food, energy use, concerns about materialism, waste) these were pursued, but they were not explicitly introduced into the conversation. Subsequent interviews followed a similar format with participants reflecting on what had changed since the previous interview and their feelings about this.

Our analysis presents two separate, but linked elements, which develop an understanding of the limited possibility of sustainable everyday consumption within the context of early motherhood. We begin by exploring what shapes everyday consumption practices in early motherhood and then consider data from the final interviews in which participants talk about their understandings of the concept of sustainable lifestyles.

Doing sustainable consumption and doing motherhood and family

Participants explained everyday consumption practices in terms of what works for them given their characterisation of the reality of early motherhood. This reality is comprised of three intertwined priorities- a new orientation around the baby- to being a good mother and doing family life; new routines and a sense of time squeeze, and concerns about financial resources and the importance of thrift (Burningham *et al.*, 2014).

At times, for some, there was synergy between these priorities and more environmentally sustainable modes of consumption. However, for others (and for the same people at different times), practices which run counter to the demands of sustainable consumption are justified on the basis of these same priorities. The key point is that it is these priorities, which together constitute the reality of early motherhood, which shape consumption practice in this period.

Existing work on new mothers and consumption emphasises the important role played by commodities in the transition to motherhood, however, ordinary, inconspicuous consumption is also shaped by the new identity of motherhood and orientation around the baby. This is less about displaying appropriate identity through consumption choices and more about how activities are organised so that they fit with what is deemed best for the baby.

This is notable in relation to heating. Evidence of a link between overheating and cot death ensures that room temperature is a subject which new mothers engage with (e.g. Lullaby Trust, 2016). While health advice focuses on avoiding babies

ⁱ Five participants were recruited as replacements for individuals who dropped out after the first interview. These replacement participants were interviewed twice - before their baby was born and six to eight months later. Their second interview included the questions about sustainable lifestyles asked to other participants in the third interview.

ⁱⁱ Recruitment company used the NRS scale which has the advantage of being based on a simple question about occupation but is a very limited measure of social class as it ignores issues of wealth and of partner's occupation.

overheating, participants' concerns were often that their baby might be too cold:

“and previously we'd just have been a bit colder and wouldn't have turned the heating on, if it was two of us we'd just put a jumper on, but because we worry about her we'll have the heating on” (Fiona, London, Int 3)

“my heating bill has gone up.... yeah, and if it was just me I wouldn't mind chucking a blanket round me but it's ... (baby's name)” (Paula, Kent, Interview 2)

Thus energy consumption practices are clearly shaped by considerations of care for other family members.

Concerns about the baby's wellbeing also recurred in discussions around food shopping and consumption. Previous research has illustrated how 'good mothers' seek to 'preserve their children's purity and protect the environment' through choosing organic baby foods (Cairns *et al.*, 2013). We have multiple examples of this, but highlight here how everyday practices of shopping for food are also shaped by ideas of what is best for the baby. A clear change in some of our participants' shopping practice was the adoption of shopping online for groceries. Online grocery shopping has been linked to less food waste (WRAP, 2013) and fewer car journeys. It was positively evaluated because shopping with a baby was often described as un-enjoyable, and because it freed up time to 'do stuff' as a family:

“I online shop now... Honestly shopping with him's hideous, and unpacking the car is hideous and I thought we'd give it a go, realised it wasn't as difficult as I'd always envisaged and never looked back.” (Charlotte, London, Int 3)

“because of how busy I've got and because of how Olivia is now, in that she doesn't enjoy going to the supermarket and I don't want to take her to the supermarket on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday because they are our days to do stuff, I do it on-line now.” (Kelly, Kent, Int 3)

Concerns about the baby's welfare and the experience of 'time squeeze' (concerns about a shortage of time and an acceleration of the pace of daily life, Southerton & Tomlinson, 2005) also converged to shape some participants' gardening practices. Before her daughter was born Kelly had been using her greenhouse to grow vegetables. In the third interview she explains:

“We had a greenhouse, maybe the first time you came and we've attempted some things down there. But we've had it, because it was a bit unsafe down there last summer, we had it all tidied up down there, so there isn't really the..

I: You've got a playhouse instead?

R: Yes.

I: And a slide and a swing?

R: Yes.” (Kelly, Kent, Interview 3)

The move from greenhouse to playhouse, slide and swing provides a strong image of the way in which priorities have shifted with motherhood and how concerns about what is best for the baby, not only in terms of avoiding danger but also about enhancing their pleasure, shape consumption decisions.

Thus new mothers' orientation around the baby's wellbeing and around the need to preserve family time, along with an increasing sense of time squeeze, shape modes of everyday consumption, with varying implications for sustainability. There

is ongoing flux in what is deemed best for the growing child and what works for the family as routines and finances shift over time.

Understanding sustainable lifestyles

At the end of the final interviews we asked participants what they understood by the term 'sustainable lifestyle' and whether they considered their own lifestyle to be sustainable. Most understood the concept in terms of environmental sustainability:

"I would interpret that as being more energy aware, down on your food waste as well...and also maybe not using the car unless we really have to." (Lucy, Scotland, Interview 3)

"Well for me a sustainable lifestyle is leaving as little impact on the earth ... so try not to waste food, try not to pollute, try not to use your car that much, try not to be wasteful of anything of energy, or of money or of food." (Mary, Lancaster Interview 3)

Normative assumptions about what constitutes sustainable behaviour at the household level are shared widely (Gibson *et al.*, 2011) and overwhelmingly attribute responsibility to individuals (Hobson 2004, Middlemiss 2010). Participants understood sustainable lifestyles to be about things which they should - or should not - do, and pointed to their pro-environmental actions. Some participants indicated that these actions were motivated primarily by considerations of the baby's safety or by thrift:

"We are quite good when it comes to energy and things like ... we won't leave lights on if we are not in the house... I don't like plugs being left on especially now that Travis walks around and picks things up." (Polly, Scotland, Interview 3)

"So I do try to turn the lights off and I do try not to waste water and things, but to be honest I do it more for my own pocket than for other reasons." (Rachel, Kent, Interview 3)

These accounts reinforce our earlier observation that what might be regarded as environmentally sustainable consumption practices emerge when they are aligned with the priorities of early motherhood.

Environmentally sustainable lifestyles: an impossible dream

What is notable, however, is that an environmentally sustainable lifestyle was ultimately constructed as unachievable, even by those who had clear ideas about what it entailed and some sense that it was desirable. This is best illustrated through examples.

Charlotte is a teacher and her husband is also employed, they own a house and car. By the final interview she was working part time and pregnant again. Here she talks about what a sustainable lifestyle means:

"I mean in my little ideal head I'd quite like to go and live in some nice green little commune ... not commune, but do you know what I mean? Solar panels and a sustainable lifestyle.... I think we're probably less sustainable realistically. We eat less organic fruit and veg because we can't afford it. We do use the car...if we want to go and see people for two hours, to do it by public transport becomes a pain... Disposable nappies are not sustainable by any stretch of the imagination. We use the washing

machine more, an awful lot more... I'm aware of it, but not aware of it enough to do anything about it or aware of some of my choices. I don't like a lot of my choices, but I find it's just a reality of life ..." (Charlotte, London, Interview 3)

She starts by outlining an ideal sustainable lifestyle, but through repeated use of 'little' ('my little ideal head' and 'nice green little commune') she diminishes and gently pokes fun both at herself and at the idea of sustainable lifestyles. This idealised vision is dramatically contrasted with the demands of reality governed by financial constraints ('we can't afford organic'), time pressures ('public transport is a pain') and the need for convenience and cleanliness (disposable nappies, washing machine use). A sustainable lifestyle is constructed as being about green living and a matter of knowledge ('I'm aware of it') and individual choice ('I don't like a lot of my choices') and is found to conflict with the everyday reality of ordinary life as a young family.

A similar construction of sustainable lifestyles is evident in Iris' account. Iris was unemployed throughout the research period. By the final interview she had split from her baby's father and was living in a privately rented house in poor repair with an overgrown garden. She does not have a car or washing machine. Here she outlines her understanding of a sustainable lifestyle:

"I don't know, are they on about like the stuff you have on your roof for the electric, solar panels and growing your own food and things like that... I prefer to save energy and grow your own food and have fresh things, but... at the moment with my garden being overgrown and everything it's going to take me ages to sort out if I did want to grow something out there. ... I just haven't got the time or the money to do the garden. ... all the women in my family are quite, 'oh I wish we had grown up in the country', they are all quite nature loving and they grow their own vegetables and they make their own cakes. So I think it's just the way I have been raised.... I would be happy living in a caravan in the middle of a forest somewhere...with a little growing patch outside, baking my cakes, I would be happy with that.

Interviewer: And so what, in the sense, what do you think would help you to live more sustainably now? What would be the biggest thing that would help you do it?

"I don't know. Having my garden finished I suppose, so I could grow stuff and have a compost heap and have recycling bins out there, but I can't do that ... if it was done already, I would just carry it on and I would do it and it would just be part of everyday. But it is, money and time mostly to actually get it done." (Iris Kent, Interview 3)

While Iris' life is very different from Charlotte's, she shares a similar discourse of a sustainable lifestyle as a dream ('a caravan in the middle of a forest somewhere...with a little growing patch outside, baking my cakes'), a rural idyll entirely at odds with her life in a Kent town. For her, living sustainably involves living somewhere else entirely, and is not possible here and now.

Like Charlotte, Iris constructs sustainable living as about the environment and relying on individual preferences and actions. She focuses on issues around food and draws on family traditions to explain this (Hards, 2011, Jamieson, 2016, Henwood *et al.*, 2016). What constrains her, however, from even modest attempt to grow vegetables, is time and money. She indicates that living sustainably is currently not 'everyday' for her and that there would need to be physical changes in her surroundings and in local provision of services for it to become so.

Iris starts by constructing the concept of sustainability as something which is distant from her own life (what 'they' are on about). Her lifestyle almost certainly has a lower carbon impact than Charlotte's as she does not drive, have foreign holidays,

have money to spend on products and tries hard to economise on energy use (Druckman and Jackson, 2009). However, while Iris' life may involve low carbon impacts it cannot meaningfully be regarded as sustainable because it comes as a result of poverty and impacts negatively on her family's wellbeing.

Sustaining family life

Several participants (8) initially defined a sustainable lifestyle in terms of maintaining family life:

“for me it would be affording bills like rent and your basics, electricity and gas etc and food. Like I think as long as you have food in the cupboards, particularly for children, for me that is living sustainably...paying your bills and having a roof over your head-

You know I always want Will to feel like he is in a secure loving environment... As long as I can put food on the table, cook the meals, then for me that is living sustainably.” (Dawn, Kent, Interview 3)

“I suppose something that you can keep going; living within your means... Kebab a week; Chinese. [laughter]...I suppose yes, I mean at the moment with the prices and stuff going up trying to reduce what we're spending so that we can keep the same level overall.” (Ellen, Kent, Interview 3)

There are interlocking economic and social dimensions to this understanding of a sustainable family life. It involves sufficiency to provide the basics for decent family life (Druckman & Jackson, 2010) which encompasses participation in activities which constitute family time (Ellen's takeaways). It is also fundamentally about the need for care for others within the family - Dawn emphasises the provision of 'a secure loving environment' for her son. From the perspective of new mothers maintaining the doing of family is a crucial part of the social dimension of sustainable lifestyles.

Concluding discussion: Sustainable consumption practices and everyday family life

Our participants explain their consumption activities in terms of the reality of new motherhood - managing the interlinked demands to care for their child and be a good mother within the constraints of limited time and money. What we might see as *more* environmentally sustainable modes of consumption were adopted when they aligned with the priorities of new motherhood, but the same priorities also explained what we might regard as moves to *less* sustainable modes of consumption.

Most participants understood sustainable lifestyles in terms of environmental sustainability. While this was seen as something to aspire to, it remained a vision which bore little resemblance to the reality of everyday life. Living sustainably was constructed as an *individual* task, but everyday consumption was understood as profoundly *relational*. Thus there is an inherent tension between the individualised demands of current constructions of sustainable lifestyles and the relational character of consumption which means that sustainable lifestyles remain practically unattainable.

There is a need for holistic discourses of sustainable living which embrace the relational character of everyday life to be employed both in research and policy. In an exploration of the meaning of social sustainability Vallance *et al.* (2001) identify 'maintenance sustainability' as being about 'those ways of life that people would see maintained or improved' (p.344) and

emphasise the need for ‘a better understanding of how to frame sustainability goals so that they seem more consistent with that which people value and would like to preserve (2001: p.346). Our research shows clearly that new mothers prioritise the maintenance of family life, a concept which encompasses having enough to provide basic necessities such as food and shelter as well as participating in family activities, providing care and a sense of a secure future.

Rather than seeing family identities and care as problematic for sustainable practice a more positive reading stresses the importance of ‘focus(ing) now on circumstances enabling families and personal relationships to be part of the solution to “environment” issues, rather than part of the problem’ (Jamieson 2016: p.336). Any attempt to facilitate the uptake of more sustainable modes of everyday household consumption must be sensitive to the priorities and demands of family life if they are to have any chance of success.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: Final sample by NRS socio-economic group and location

Socio-economic group				
	A, B	C1, C2	D, E	Total
London	6	4	0	10
Kent	2	5	1	8
Lancaster	2	5	3	10
Scotland	7	1	1	9
Total	17	15	5	37

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