

Thrifty, Green or Frugal?

Sustainable Consumption in the Context of Economic Crises

Introduction

- Economic crises: Environmental crises
- Age of Austerity
 - EST 'war time spirit'
 - Futerra 'fru-cool'
- Recession – frugal living – sustainable living
- Scarcity and care

Background

- In-depth qualitative interviews
- 28 participants (self-selecting)
- Sustainable Practice: multiple meanings, engagements and justifications (Evans and Abrahamse, 2009)
- Links between frugality and sustainable practice
- Scaling up in light of economic downturn?

Roots

I actually don't have much cop with this whole climate change business. I am not convinced by it, I reckon it is overhyped by the media. Mind you, I cannot abide waste...I mean, I resent spending money for no reason and I think it is just wrong to waste water and electricity and all that. I think people should be able to use as much as they want but only use what they need and I don't need much you see so I don't use much. (Male, 61)

Routes

Well you see, I have always hated waste and I have always hated excess. We both have. Before we were really, I am ashamed to say, properly aware of how awful things were for the environment we had always lived within our means and avoided all the...shall we say trappings of too much consumption? A sort of old fashioned 'don't spend what you haven't got' and 'make do and mend' attitude really (Female, 38)

And as soon as we did know more about the environment, all the things that we were already doing and the ways we were living seemed to make a lot of sense so it was from here really that we got into trying be more environmentally friendly with other stuff (Female, 38)

A Natural Affinity

My partner and I are really quite frugal, you see. We watch our money, not because we are short of it but because we like being that way. For example we will take sandwiches and a thermos rather than eating out and buying cappuccinos...Old fashioned I know but it works for us (Female, 32)

And you see it really isn't about money. Yeah it works for us but we are both quite 'green' if you can say that and so we don't waste anything either and it all works together, you see...it is how we want to live but it is also good by the planet but, erm, it isn't just about the planet as it is good for us...oh, you know what I mean [Laughs] (Female, 32)

A Supporting Discourse

I know for many that – the system that we have got, an economy based on consuming... know that for many this is heaven...boom time...never had it so good. Pure happiness! I think it is awful and I know that this makes me odd, old fashioned or mean. Tight, my children call me (Male, 74)

I am actually socially conservative and I have very little affinity with some of the wackiness that goes along with being green but I do find it very funny that the way I am [...] how this gets seen as green. I mean, of course I care about the environment but I am not a 'wacky' green but the way I am is more acceptable or fashionable once it has that label [laughs] (Male, 74)

Economic Imperatives

Well my situation is this: retired at 50 and I am comfortably well off with a certain amount of capital but no real source of income apart from what I get from my capital. In this situation, I need to be sustainable in order to minimise my economic output so I think about what I spend and I cannot waste a thing...food, energy, nothing. So I came to sustainability out of economic reasons (Male, 53)

I have no objection to investing my capital in things that save money or energy or both...for example, 10 grand in the bank will earn a certain amount of interest but if I can invest it in something that save me a certain amount of money then that is a better deal as I improve my own economic situation but do better for the planet whilst I am at it (Male, 53)

Frugal Consumers, Sustainable Consumers

- Moderate or sparing in use of money, goods and resources.
- Careful expenditure, avoidance of waste
- Moral discourse/moralising about consumption
- Respondents: moral restraint on economic activity that leads to, sits with or is legitimated by the environmental agenda

Convergence

I suppose with your own children you think more about the future but anyway, We can't carry on burning fossil fuels like this and polluting and messing things up and so we all, at least people like you and me, have to change how we live to give other people a chance (Female, 38)

If we have to go without certain things, they are very often things that we don't need really need do we? And even if they are, it is worth doing so that other people don't have nothing. I don't really feel aggrieved about going without an indulgent meal if it means that other people have a chance to eat as I know it is not all about me (Male, 41)

Thrift

- Thrift \neq frugality
 - Saving through spending (Miller, 1998)
 - Doing more with less (Gregson and Crewe, 2003)
- Preservation of (scarce) economic resources
- No restraint on level of economic activity; just expenditure
- Responses are *thrifty* not frugal
- “Don’t change your lifestyle, change your supermarket’

Thrifty Consumption, Sustainable Consumption

- Composition
 - 'Green' consumption premium
 - Luxury consumption (qv. Roland Clift)
 - Durability (Cooper, 2005)
- Volume
 - Spending to save, saving to spend
 - Qualitative evidence (Gregson and Crewe, 2003)
- Long term change?

Frugality *versus* Thrift

■ Frugality and sustainability: convergence

- Moral restraint on consumption maps onto the moral imperative to preserve *natural* resources for distant Others
- Less consumption (of more sustainable goods?)
- Independent of economic circumstances

■ Thrift and sustainability: divergence

- Restraint on expenditure preserves *economic* resources for use by immediate family
- More consumption of less sustainable goods
- Dependent on economic circumstances

■ Ethics *vs.* Morality (Miller, 2001)

Action-Reaction

- Polanyi (1944)
- Economic crises: critique of consumption?
 - Trentmann on Galbraith (2009)
- Scarcity and the ethic of care and compassion?
 - Trentmann on moral and political economy (2007)
- Frugality in affluence (Gregson, 2007)
- Caution: from scarcity and care to scarcity and care?