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MOMENTS OF CHANGE—ARE LIFECOURSE TRANSITIONS OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOVING TO MORE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

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Abstract

The idea that lifecourse transitions might offer ‘moments of change’ in which to encourage more sustainable consumption is popular. However, insights from sociological literature on lifecourse transitions have rarely been brought to bear on this assumption and little research explores how everyday consumption may change through such transitions.

This paper focuses on two distinct lifecourse transitions - becoming a mother and retirement – and through qualitative longitudinal research evaluates the assumption that such periods provide opportunities for movement to more sustainable consumption. Three interviews were conducted with 40 new mothers and 40 retirees in the UK exploring change and continuity in aspects of everyday consumption. While our findings confirm that these are times of significant change with potential impacts on the sustainability of everyday consumption, we conclude that to characterise such transitions as ‘moments of change’ fails to adequately capture their lived experience.

Introduction

Within discussions of sustainable consumption, lifecourse transitions are increasingly identified as points at which individuals’ lives might be redirected onto more sustainable paths (e.g Darnton et al. 2011; Thompson et al. 2011; Verplanken and Roy 2015). The idea that interventions might be more successful if targeted when people are already undergoing major life changes has intuitive appeal and is tantalising for policy makers. However, assumptions made in this context are often un-informed by sociological literature on lifecourse transitions and fail to consider the lived experience of these periods.

Research in this area has mainly involved controlled trials which administer behaviour change interventions and measure self-reported sustainable behaviours before and after the intervention (Schäfer et al. 2011; Verplanken and Roy 2015). Such studies reveal little about the lived experience of transitions or what informs change or stability over time in everyday consumption. Conversely, rich longitudinal studies of lifecourse transitions rarely consider everyday consumption or issues of sustainability.

This paper reports on qualitative longitudinal research exploring how everyday consumption changes or remains stable through the early months of two lifecourse transitions; becoming a mother and retiring from paid work. We have considered elsewhere how particular consumption practices are affected during each of these transitions (Burningham et al 2014; Venn et al 2017), here we reflect across the whole study considering both retirement and new motherhood. This enables us to draw conclusions about common features of these transitions which have implications for everyday consumption and, thus, to critically evaluate the assumption that such transitions might prove good opportunities for everyday life to move in a more sustainable direction.

We begin by considering the grounds on which lifecourse transitions might be significant in terms of sustainability, and then outline our study. Our analysis explores how everyday consumption through these transitions is affected by the experience of ongoing shifts in social roles and aspirations; temporalities and economic circumstances and orientations to thrift. We emphasise that transitions are often experienced as multiple, intersecting and in the context of relationships and that they are always socially and materially situated. Our analysis thus problematises the assumption that transitions are 'moments of change' which provide opportunities for the adoption of more sustainable practices.

Sustainable consumption and lifecourse transitions

Patterns of individual and household consumption in western societies make a significant contribution to resource depletion and to the production of greenhouse gases and waste. Sustainable consumption does not just entail choosing 'green' products or participation in pro-environmental behaviours (e.g. recycling, avoiding waste) but also mundane consumption of water and energy in heating homes, washing, cooking and transport (Gronow and Warde 2001). Much debate concerns whether sustainable consumption primarily requires individual behaviour change or more systemic change, with psychologists and economists predominantly favouring the former view and sociologists the latter (e.g. see Southerton and Welch 2016). It is clear, however, that more sustainable modes of everyday life would involve both consuming differently and consuming less, and extend beyond purchasing decisions to changes in the everyday

practices in which energy and other resources are consumed (Shove and Spurling 2013; Butler et al. 2016).

One suggestion that has attraction across disciplinary boundaries, is that lifecourse transitions might provide periods in individuals' lives when changes in consumption practice might more easily take hold. Recent psychological work focuses on the disruption of everyday routines which often accompanies a lifecourse transition. Verplanken et al. (2008) argue that as much everyday consumption is habitual, changes in individuals' interactional and physical context might disrupt habits and provide 'cues' for new behaviours. This 'habit discontinuity hypothesis' also suggests that during transitions people are more receptive to information which indicates alternative ways of doing things (e.g. about public transport, energy use etc.) (Verplanken et al. 2008; Verplanken and Roy 2015). A report for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs claims:

'It has been found that particular life events represent moments of disruption to people's routines, which in turn can serve as 'windows of opportunity' in which to deliver interventions when people may be more able or willing to do things differently. Moments such as moving house, changing jobs, becoming pregnant or retiring from work all represent transitions when people's daily routines are disrupted, and need to be reconsidered before new routines emerge. There is increasing evidence that habit change interventions delivered at these 'Moments of Change' can be more effective than if delivered at another time' (Darnton et al. 2011:6)

Supporting evidence for this thesis is largely drawn from health prevention, where it has been shown, for instance, that smoking interventions are more likely to succeed if targeted at key life events like pregnancy (Thompson et al. 2011; Schäfer et al. 2011). However, evidence that a similar case might be made for interventions to promote more sustainable ways of living is limited and somewhat contradictory (e.g. see Schäfer et al. 2011 and Verplanken and Roy 2015).

While sociological understanding of sustainable consumption largely avoids a focus on individual behaviour change, there is interest here too in the way in which performances of everyday practices (which have implications for sustainability) might shift during periods of transition. Southerton et al. suggest:

'Behaviour change initiatives will be more effective if they go beyond targeting the individual context (especially through informational

campaigns) to include mechanisms which intervene in the social and material contexts. Targeting moments of transition (moving home, having children and so on) and pressure points in infrastructure systems represent opportunities for sustained behaviour change' (2011:3)

Sociological interest in the potential of transitions as fertile periods for changing consumption practices is informed by the understanding that these may be times of changing social roles, of reflection on the lifecourse, and of temporal and financial changes. Traditionally sociological approaches to transitions have conceptualised them as relatively bounded periods within which individuals exit one social role and enter another (George 1993). In contrast, anthropological approaches have concentrated more on the process and cultural meaning of the transition itself, focusing on the rituals which enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). While anthropological approaches are distinct in emphasising the process and experience of transition, they align with traditional sociological approaches in conceiving of transitions as temporary periods between clearly defined roles or statuses (Grenier 2012:41).

If transitions are understood as periods during which individuals enter a new social role, then particular goods might be expected to fulfil aspects of the new role and/or to denote the new status. In addition, economic changes might lead to conscious decisions to consume more economically (buying fewer or cheaper goods, wasting less food, conserving energy etc.) and temporal changes might result in changes in patterns of everyday inconspicuous consumption (e.g. how much driving is done and when, periods of time which the home is heated, how much washing is done etc.) all of which have sustainability implications.

Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), challenge the conceptualisation of the lifecourse as a fixed sequence of stages through which individuals pass, inhabiting new roles as they proceed. Instead they emphasise the diversity and variability of lifecourses and the significance of personal agency. Hockey and James suggest that such an approach positions itself 'precisely in opposition to' (2003:11) more static and normative perspectives on the lifecourse, however, points of transition remain significant in such accounts. For Giddens, a predictable sequence of lifecourse transitions has increasingly been replaced with 'fateful moments' in the reflexive project of self, during which the individual reflects on the life they have and their choices for the future, and acts in the light of these considerations. Critiques

of the extent and social distribution of such reflexivity and choice are widespread (e.g. Holland and Thomson 2009; Warde, 1994), but the idea that transitions are points at which individuals reflect on their lives and think about their future is widely assumed. If this is the case, then they are potentially significant periods for reassessment of everyday routines and broader aspirations – both of which might have implications for the sustainability of everyday life.

Despite such diverse hopes for the opportunities lifecourse transitions offer to facilitate more sustainable consumption, there has been surprising little engagement from scholars of sustainable consumption with sociological work on lifecourse transitions. Our study is informed by this literature and explores the lived experience of how everyday consumption practices change or remain stable as people move through two very different transitions. Through this empirical consideration we evaluate assumptions that such transitions might provide opportunities for interventions to facilitate more sustainable consumption.

The study

We chose to focus on the transitions to motherhood and to retirement for a variety of reasons. To date, most work testing the ‘moments of change’ hypothesis has focused on moving house (Verplanken et al 2008; Verplanken and Roy 2015); a transition which offers particular opportunities for adoption of new practices by virtue of changes in geographical context, the infrastructure of the house and local service provision. In focusing on first time motherhood and retirement we deliberately chose two transitions which do not necessarily involve a change in the location and physical characteristics of the home, in order to explore what other features of transitions might have implications for consumption practices. In addition, these are both drawn out periods of transition associated with particular points in the lifecourse and associated with marked changes in social identity and role. Finally considering both resulted in a sample which was immediately diverse in terms of age.

Extensive literatures already exist on the distinct expectations, norms and experiences which characterise transitions to retirement and motherhood, and the intersecting dimensions of difference experienced within both are well documented. It is not our intention to replicate this work; our distinct focus is on identifying features which are common to these two very

different transition periods and exploring how these impact on everyday consumption practices.

In April 2011, a recruitment agency was used to recruit ten people in paid employment who planned to retire before the end of the year, and ten women at least three months pregnant with their first childⁱ within four locationsⁱⁱ (total n=80).

- (a) Balham, Merton, Carshalton and Clapham (South London districts)
- (b) Lancaster and Morecambe (northern urban context)
- (c) Kent (seaside towns and surrounding areas)
- (d) Fife in Scotland (accessible remote and rural context)

To avoid only recruiting those with an interest in sustainable lifestyles and the over reporting of pro-environmental behaviour, no mention was made of sustainable consumption at the recruitment stage, and the issue was not explicitly addressed until the final interview.

Table 1 Sample by socio-economic group and location

	Socio-economic groups A, B and C1		Socio-economic groups C2, D and E		Total
	Mothers	Retirees	Mothers	Retirees	
	London	12	9	0	
Kent	7	6	2	5	20*
Lancaster	7	5	3	5	20
Scotland	8	8	2	2	20
Total	34	28	7	13	82

*Includes participants recruited to replace non-responders after phase 1

The recruitment company used NRS (National Readership Survey) social grade scale to categorise individuals' occupations as an indicator of socio-economic group. More were recruited from group 1 (A, B, C1) than group 2 (C2, D, E). The NRS scale has the advantage of being based on a simple question about occupation but is a limited measure of social class, ignoring wealth and partner's occupation. In addition, some participants' occupational and personal circumstances changed during the research period making the initial classification problematic. Despite these

limitations, our sample encompasses participants with diverse occupations and in varying economic circumstances.

All of the retirees were white British, 23 were male and 18 female. At the start of the project their ages ranged from 48 to 72; 23 were in full-time paid employment, 14 in part time paid employment and 3 had retired between recruitment and the first interview. The majority (85%) lived with a partner.

At the start of the project the new mothers ranged in age from 20 to 39 (average age 28). The majority were in paid employment prior to maternity leave and lived with a partner. Four were unemployed and 5 lived alone or with their parents. The majority were white British although there was some ethnic diversity amongst the London sample.

Our sample includes participants living in different geographical locations and with varying occupations, socio-economic positions, marital status, housing and tenure type. We briefly discuss the implications of such dimensions of difference for existing assumptions about transitions later, but a detailed discussion of how experiences varied for participants within our sample is beyond the scope of this paper. By glossing these dimensions of difference, we are not assuming they are unimportant, but our focus here is on drawing out some general elements of the experience of changes in everyday consumption through these periods.

Individuals participated in the research at three phases: prior to the birth of the baby/retirement; as soon as possible after the birth/retirement and again approximately 8 months later. This enabled insights into the experience of everyday life through transitions over a longer time frame than is typical in pre and post intervention research designs. Data collection involved in-depth interviews 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/retire. Subsequent interviews followed a similar format with participants reflecting on what had changed since the previous interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was facilitated by the use of NVivo and involved both the application of some deductive codes in order to focus on continuity and change over time in particular domains of consumption (e.g. driving, cooking, heating) and the generation of inductive codes to capture elements of the lived experience of transition.

This paper explores some of the key dimensions of change experienced by participants as they moved into the first months of these two distinct transitions: we focus on shifting social roles and aspirations; shifting routines and sense of temporality and economic changes. We illustrate how these aspects inform changes in everyday consumption practice, but emphasise how the experience of multiple transitions, the significance of linked lives and the situated nature of transitions means that shifts in consumption practice are varied, fluid and ongoing in character, militating against simple conclusions about the effect of transitions on consumption practices.

Shifting social roles and aspirations

Accounts of lifecourse transitions which emphasise them as a time of switching social role are theoretically distinct from those which see them as ‘fateful moments’ in which individuals reflect on the direction of their life. However, in practice, these two elements are intertwined- becoming a mother or retiring involves a change in social role and status which engenders reflection on identity and priorities.

All of the new mothers had stopped working by the second interview. Becoming a mother was often conceptualised as a change in entire outlook:

I don’t think you can ever anticipate really how it changes, how your life is focused around a baby now. (Samantha, London, Int. 2)

Thompson suggests that this is such a powerful ideology of gender and motherhood that: ‘it would constitute a social taboo for a woman with children not to place motherhood at the centre of her identity’ (1996: 398). This reorientation impacted patterns of purchase, with participants often describing how they had lost interest in buying things for themselves in favour of buying things for their baby:

I buy things when I see them. I’m a bit impulsive. It’s not so much buying for me anymore, it’s like, ‘Oh let’s get that for him (Polly, Scotland, Int. 2)

For new mothers, products work to establish the identity of appropriate mother both to themselves and to others. This does not just apply to the purchase of major conspicuous items but also to mundane items such as nappies and baby food (Taylor et al. 2004; Thomson et al. 2011). For some middle class mothers in particular, making ostensibly sustainable choices

(re-useable nappies, organic baby food) bolsters a particular construction of good motherhood. Here our longitudinal approach was particularly valuable in highlighting how such early intentions were often reassessed over time. Several of the middle class women had bought re-useable nappies while pregnant; this consumption choice was clearly tied to a particular construction of motherhood and achieved social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984):

We didn't see ourselves as those sort of people who use disposable nappies (Louisa, London Interview 3)

If our research had only been conducted at the first point in time we might have concluded that, for some women at least, the transition to motherhood was seen as an opportunity to pursue overtly sustainable consumption. However, by following participants longitudinally we saw that re-useable nappies were sometimes bought but never used:

Yes, we bought some and ... we had intentions that we might try and do all these real nappy things but that went by the wayside to be honest. ... I just realised how much work it was just doing normal things never mind trying to work out these nappies. (Fiona, London, Interview 2)

This provides a clear example of the disjunction between early aspirations for everyday consumption and the eventual reality. This leads us to question the extent to which reflections on 'how I want to live' made early on in transition periods should be taken as indicating the likely direction of future practice (see also Moffatt and Heaven 2016).

This disjunction between aspirations and lived experiences was also evident amongst the retirees. Gilleard and Higgs (2007) suggest that the current cohort approaching retirement have a uniquely consumerist 'generational habitus'. The opportunities for 'self-actualisation' via consumption in retirement have been capitalised upon by marketing companies and advertisers who see an emerging market in areas such as 'grey gap year' travelling, anti-ageing cosmetics, plastic surgery and food (Gunter 1998; Jones et al. 2008). This construction of retirement identity around consumption is potentially at odds with the demands of sustainable consumption. Our research indicates that retirees were often ambivalent and uncertain about the new phase of life they were entering. Those who had planned for their retirement were more likely to conceptualise it as a 'time for me' involving the desire to travel globally and consume widely.

The spectre of unknown future health and finances often led them to justify travelling while they could (see also Goodwin and O'Connor 2012):

The idea is that if we can do everything long haul before we're 70. Because [after that] the insurance starts flying up, and you may not have the energy to do that. (David, Scotland, Int. 1)

As we followed participants longitudinally it was clear, however, that such aspirations were often not met but were subsumed by caring responsibilities and/or the experience of ill-health, which led to changes both in everyday activities and expectations for the future. Shirley, one of the Scottish retirees, explained the impact of her husband's unexpected seizure on her own thoughts, plans and activities:

Well you realise that life is not forever... You think differently.... When it first happened I just cancelled my life. (Shirley, Scotland, Int. 3)

Household composition also fluctuated for some, with adult children or stepchildren returning home after relationship breakdowns or illnesses which impacted on family finances and domestic routines.

Not only did participants experience multiple transitions, it was clear that transitions in the lives of other family members also had profound effects for them. The reality of multiple transitions and the experience of linked lives challenges the idea that individuals are able to actively manage transitions as key points in their biography (Giddens 1991). While participants often reproduced a discourse of individual choice and planning, in practice much of what was envisaged proved unattainable at least within the confines of our research period.

For both retirees and new mothers, it was clear that consumption – of all sorts – was not simply a matter of individual choice, but was profoundly affected by the desires, needs and preferences of other family and household members. Participants talked of disagreements and compromises over such things as how grocery shopping is done, what is eaten, what car is owned and how much it is used, and how energy is used in the home. What individuals do is not simply about their own preferences but is often shaped by the desires or needs of others. This was clearly illustrated in relation to heating the home:

I'll put a jumper on whereas [wife] will turn the central heating on... if she is cold I will let her put the heating on. (Jerry, retiree, Lancaster, Int. 3)

Obviously, I've been in every day with the heating on for the last couple of months'.

Interviewer: 'Do you think you have to keep the place warmer because of the baby?'

'Oh yes, definitely yes. Yes, warmer than what we used to have it, yes. (Ellen, new mother, Kent, Int. 2)

Miller (1998) characterises grocery shopping as primarily an enactment of love for other family members rather than an indulgence of the individual shopper's desires. Lindsey and Maher (2013) extend this analysis to other areas of consumption suggesting that family negotiations around the consumption of goods, alcohol, media and sex might be characterised as primarily 'enactments of care'. It is worth considering the extent to which this also applies to 'ordinary consumption' (Gronow and Warde 2001) such as using the car, washing or using the heating. Rather than seeing these as acts of individual choice it makes more sense to consider negotiations about these acts of consumption as fundamentally about 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011).

Thus, while our research indicates that transitions are periods in which both new mothers and retirees reflect on their new social status and may aspire to new consumption practices, our longitudinal approach reveals the extent to which such early aspirations are often modified or abandoned. The reality of everyday life, the experience of unexpected additional 'transitions', and events in the lives of family and friends often derail ideas about how consumption will proceed.

Shifting temporality

Temporal change is significant for thinking about changes in consumption practices as much daily consumption is routine, and opportunities for the adoption of new practices may emerge from disruptions to established timetables (Shove et al. 2009). For both new mothers and retirees, daily routines changed dramatically when they stopped working and both emphasised the importance of instigating new routines.

Nearly all of the retirees had a sense of the need to remain busy and productive post retirement (Venn et al 2017). This was most forcefully expressed by those who had not planned to retire, who feared a loss of their

working identity and the structure of a working day. Here, Samuel who had worked as a security guard, reflects:

It took me a long time to settle down because I kept thinking I should be at work, I should be doing something...yeah, you have little feelings of guilt that ... you shouldn't be sitting on your arse, because it's alien, when I've been working for 50 years isn't it? (Samuel, London Interview 3)

However, initial concerns about how to fill the days were often dispelled as participants adjusted to retirement. Retirement offered opportunities for new activities to be considered, with several aspiring to volunteer:

My plan ... is to be retiring from paid work and doing voluntary work. I am not quite sure how that is going to work out yet, but that is the plan. (Victor, London, Int. 1)

However, as discussed above, such aspirations often remained unrealised. Jeannette who had retired from social work had been looking forward to being 'more relaxed' but her time had been spent caring for her mother, who subsequently died, and then sorting out the sale of her home:

It's not meant that I've got more time, I don't know where the time goes. As they say when you retire you wonder how you ... had time to work (Jeannette, Scotland, Int. 3)

New mothers often reported the arrival of the baby as a shock and felt unprepared for the disruption to their lives:

the thing I find the hardest was not being able to do what I had to do and not be able to just go out for a walk without having to come back and feed him...so that was the toughest part (Lucinda, Scotland, Int. 2)

For Lucinda and others, the establishment of routines of feeding and sleep times became anchoring points during the day around which other activities had to fit. For several participants, the routines established during maternity leave might be evaluated as looking positive in terms of sustainability. Participants often explained that they had more time to cook from scratch, were walking more locally and had become involved in local activities – all potentially components of a more sustainable lifestyle. However, at the same time they acknowledged that as they were at home with their baby they had their heating on more, used their washing machines more, and generated more waste (disposable nappies). Thus, any simple

evaluation of this phase as potentially a golden opportunity in terms of the take up of more sustainable practices should be treated critically.

Furthermore, maternity leave is a bounded period and participants commented on how their routines shifted again once they returned to work, with practices adopted during maternity leave subsequently abandoned. One of the mothers (focusing particularly on how much she used her car) concluded:

There were changes. I don't think the changes have been permanent, I think we've reverted back. (Charlotte, London, Int. 3)

Not only did the ordering and combination of daily practices shift over time, but perspectives on time shifted too. This was particularly notable for new mothers who reported an escalating sense of time squeeze (Southerton and Tomlinson 2005) with two peaks of time scarcity - immediately following the birth of their baby, and again on returning to work. It was not simply that participants felt that they had more to do, but- as Eve indicates here- that they felt busy and tired, and lacked capacity to think beyond the most immediate demands of everyday life with a baby:

I'm just too tired to have lunch sometimes. I'm too busy sorting her out that before I know it, it's like half three and I think there's no point having any lunch now. (Eve, Lancaster, Int. 2)

This sense of tiredness and lack of time was often used to explain why they had not engaged in activities which they aspired to in the first interview such as growing vegetables or using reusable nappies. Several interviewees reflected that the sense of time squeeze along with reorientation of identity around the baby, meant they had become more inward focusing and less aware of wider issues:

Since she's been born, crazy things have gone on around the world and I just haven't really noticed...So no, the outside world doesn't really creep in (June, Scotland, Int. 3.)

In effect new motherhood, which brought with it less time, energy and money, meant that other issues were 'squeezed out' and expectations for what could be achieved during the day, particularly when the baby was still very small, were much lower than anticipated during pregnancy.

Thus, while we might initially conclude that disruptions to established timetables at points of transition makes them key points for 'defection from'

and ‘recruitment to’ new practices, (Shove et al. 2012) our research illustrates that daily routines continued to shift for both groups of participants. Such ongoing changes lead us to caution against adoption of the terminology of a ‘moment of change’ and indicate the limitations of studies which seek to measure changes in everyday behaviours ‘before’ and ‘after’ a transition. In addition, for new mothers, the sense of constriction of time or ‘head space’ to think about ‘bigger issues’ does not bode well for any idea that this is a period during which new mothers might embrace interventions to facilitate more sustainable lifestyles.

Thrift, frugality and economic change through transition

When discussing both how everyday activities had changed and also their aspirations for the future, participants emphasised the fundamental role that money played in determining what was possible. Regardless of total household income, both new motherhood and retirement bring changes in income. In addition, particular financial difficulties were reported by some participants because of events in the lives of their partners or other family members. The most notable example for mothers was their partner losing or changing their job, and for retirees their partner becoming ill.

Despite significant variation in economic circumstances, almost all of the mothers’ income reduced, to an extent that impacted on consumption practices:

the fact that I’m not earning anymore has been quite difficult...I mean I get maternity pay but it’s hardly anything ... so having to sort of change...the financial upheaval has been quite strange (Louisa, London, Interview 2)

The most evident change was in modes of provisioning (De Vault 1991). Here reduced finances, along with a sense of the need to be organised, coalesced with moral ideas about ‘good’ shopping habits (Miller 1998) resulting in aspirations to reduce the amount spent on grocery shopping and shop with a list:

I never used to really budget our money ... because we both worked full time... but now that, obviously I’m on reduced wage ...you do have to be a bit more careful. (Lucy, Scotland, Interview 3)

Managing with a reduced income was also a concern for retirees. There was very little evidence of forward financial planning, (Moffatt and Heaven 2016)

and at the first interview most were unsure how much income they would have post-retirement. While for the mothers discourses of thrift often had new resonance, for the retirees these were more ingrained priorities. Moral codes surrounding careful consumption permeated their accounts with an emphasis on prudent spending, living within ones' means and avoiding waste:

I mean, I think that post-war era - being post-war babies - that had a lot of influence on our parents and how they brought us up. You know, waste not, want not, was the main, sort of, phrase in our household, really, you know. (Sally, Kent, Int. 3)

Evans (2011) points out that frugality has moral connotations about the right way to live, which is evident in avoiding extravagance and expenditure, while thrift essentially involves spending less in order to save. In practice thrift and frugality were closely interlinked for both retirees and new mothers, with being organised, saving money and avoiding food waste all valorised as part of 'good' provisioning. While we might see this as promising for sustainability in terms of carefulness about consumption, thrift behaviours potentially have negative rebound implications, releasing resources to spend elsewhere, for example on global travel (Druckman et al. 2011).

We have discussed above how shifts in household financial resources through transitions may impact consumption practices. It is important to acknowledge that some opportunities to engage in consumption practices which are deemed more sustainable are unequally available because of their expense. For instance, participants often commented that organic or local food was too expensive:

I've always been very aware of buying local and fresh produce and all that sort of stuff. You just can't... it sounds awful but... when you've got the choice of buying a pound of mince that's going to suit your family for like four days, for £3 from Tesco's or like ... half a pound from the farmer's market... that's £20 you know (Jenny, new mother, Scotland, int 3)

The ability to participate in sustainable practices is unequally distributed geographically as well as socially (Walker 2013). A significant part of the situation of transitions is material, with the physical infrastructure of housing and local services fundamentally shaping the practices individuals are able to adopt. In our study, the provision of local services (e.g. transport, recycling, shops) the infrastructure of homes (e.g. space to store recycling,

gardens in which to compost and grow vegetables) and tenure type (possibility of installing insulation, heating options etc.) all played a vital role in underpinning the possibility of sustainable modes of consumption.

Approaches which suggest that transitions potentially provide good points for intervention operate with the implicit assumption that they have elements which are experienced similarly for all. Not only are transitions differently experienced depending on the individual ‘situation’ (see Thomson et al. 2009), but longitudinal research reveals that the ability of individuals to shape their own life trajectories through transitions is socially structured (Holland and Thomson 2009; Moffatt and Heaven 2016). Both the character of ‘critical moments’ faced, and access to the economic, cultural and social resources which enable successful navigation of such ‘moments’, vary along lines of social inequality. Thus, the idea that transitions are moments of reflection in which the individual makes active choices about their life which they are then able to enact ignores the fact that the ability to do this is unequally distributed.

In conclusion, while reduced household incomes encouraged thrifty approaches we caution against the assumption that this would mean that consumption patterns became more ‘sustainable’. In addition, we emphasise the significance of considering the impacts which economic inequalities and characteristics of local infrastructures and services have on peoples’ ability to engage in more sustainable practices at times of transition.

Discussion

Our aim was to evaluate the proposition that transitions are significant ‘moments’ at which individuals’ everyday consumption might be redirected onto a more sustainable course. We found that both for new mothers and retirees, these were times of significant change during which they reflected on changed identity and constructed new everyday routines under new experiences of time and with reduced financial resources. However, we suggest there are four distinct characteristics of the experience of these transitions which militate against simple notions of them as ‘*moments of change*’ in everyday consumption: the ongoing nature of change; the multiple and intersecting character of transitions; the reality of linked lives; and the situated nature of transitions. We briefly discuss each of these and

draw out the implications for thinking about changes in everyday consumption through periods of transition.

Transitions are drawn out, fluid and experienced variably

The vocabulary of a 'moment of change' suggests a discrete point at which change occurs; our analysis indicates that transition is better conceptualised as a drawn out process of ongoing change.

For both retirement and motherhood, the transition point is unclear. While retirement might be conceptualised as a switch from paid to unpaid work and leisure, our study illustrates how prolonged and complex the transition can be. When we recruited participants they all anticipated retiring between the first and second interviews, however, fifteen were still working at the time of the second interview, and ten by the third interview. The different pathways that participants took to retirement influenced their expectations for and experiences in retirement, their perceived roles and identities, their financial status and their daily routines and structures, which together impacted on their everyday practices. Thus, the transition to retirement was not a single 'moment of change', but rather a fluid and changeable experience which varied considerably for individuals (see also Heaven et al. 2015).

Similarly, while the transition to motherhood might be assumed to start at the moment of giving birth; bodily changes, changes in identity and changes in diet and everyday activities all commence with pregnancy or even when planning conception. The role of motherhood continues to evolve with what is considered necessary to be a good mother to an infant differing from what is necessary for a toddler and a school age child - changes in identity and ideas about appropriate mothering are ongoing and daily routines continue to shift.

Our longitudinal research also highlights the provisional nature of aspirations for the future during transitions. While many participants talked in the first interview about their hopes and plans for their new phase of life, they often reflected later that these ideas had turned out to be unrealistic or impossible (see also Goodwin and O'Connor 2012).

Thus, while we observed considerable change in everyday practices through the period of our research, we are not necessarily witnessing new practices being adopted which will then stabilise. Rather everyday practice continues

to change in response to fluidity in identity, temporality and financial resources.

Transitions are multiple and intersecting

While we recruited participants on the basis that they were about to become mothers or to retire, for many this was not the only change they were facing. During the study not only were new mothers adjusting to parenthood, most were also adjusting to changes in their job status and additionally nine moved home, four of them because of relationship breakups. A number of the retirees were not only adjusting to leaving work but also to the experience of ill-health for themselves or their partners or fluctuations in household composition.

Individuals often experience concurrent or cascading transitions and have to adapt to changing circumstances on a regular basis (see Grenier 2012). Thus, it is difficult to isolate the experience and effect of one particular transition and to establish whether it underlies changes in everyday consumption. The ‘moments of change’ approach implicitly works with a model of cause and effect (transitions cause disruptions to everyday consumption habits) yet the reality of multiple transitions makes disentangling the effect of any one transition difficult.

It also reinforces challenges to the idea that individuals are able to actively manage transitions as key points in their biography (Giddens 1991). While our participants often reproduced a discourse of individual choice and planning, in practice much of what was envisaged proved unattainable.

The reality of linked lives

Transitions are often conceptualised as events, or ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens 1991) in an individual’s lifecourse but this overestimates the extent to which people plan or experience their lives as individual projects and underestimates the influence of their relationships with family and friends. It was clear that transitions in the lives of other family members had profound effects for participants. Grenier suggests that this: ‘challenge(s) the understanding of transitions as events that happen to and affect individuals...’ (2012: 137).

Not only are individuals affected by transitions in the lives of others, our research illustrates that all sorts of consumption practices are shaped by the needs and desire of others. Taken together these two observations indicate

the limitations of a model which both sees transitions as events within an individual's life and conceptualises consumption as an individual phenomenon. Not only are the forces which shape changes in consumption often located in the lives of others, but how, when and why particular modes of consumption are enacted is often explained within the context of enacting relationships. This indicates the need for more research which explores processes of everyday consumption and their implications for sustainability within family contexts and other forms of social connection.

The situated nature of transitions

In this project we focused on two commonly identified lifecourse transitions- new motherhood and retirement. Work which anticipates that transitions may be good points for intervention to enable more sustainable lifestyles often lists these alongside moving house, and leaving home/becoming a student (Thompson et al. 2011). This list may be too broad - It is worth considering both whether it makes sense to view all of these things as sharing important characteristics- or, alternatively, it may be too narrow – there are many other significant life events we could add to the list. Thus rather than talking about transitions in general we suggest that it is important to focus on the specific features of particular transitions, the ways in which these are experienced and how particular consumption practices are likely to be affected. In addition, the meaning and experience of any particular 'transition' is not universal but is profoundly informed by aspects of individual circumstances, social and material situation.

Conclusions

Our research indicates that the idea that transitions might provide optimal periods in which to re-direct consumption practices is based on overly simplistic assumptions about the nature of change through such transitions. However, it also illustrates the rich insights into stability and change in everyday consumption practices, priorities and dilemmas which can be gained by focusing on people moving through periods of transition. So, what are the important directions for future research in this area?

The ongoing nature of change through transitions, both in the temporal ordering of practices and in issues of identity and priorities, highlights the utility of qualitative longitudinal approaches. There a need for more

qualitative longitudinal research on everyday consumption and researchers should seek ways to follow up existing samples over longer time periods.

Policy enthusiasm that transitions might provide optimal intervention opportunities is informed by public health research which is not directly transferable to the domain of sustainable consumption. It is clearly framed within a paradigm of individual behaviour change and a neo liberal policy framework, with transitions conceptualised as potentially good points to 'nudge' people into taking responsibility for better behaviours thus achieving positive results at minimal cost to the state. This framing ignores the extent to which everyday consumption is situated both within immediate family contexts and broader infrastructural and socio-economic settings. Rather than conceptualising transitions as events which impact individual behaviour, further research is needed which explores negotiations around sustainable consumption within the context of family life for those in varied places and circumstances. In addition attention is needed to the infrastructures and services which enable sustainable modes of practice both to be adopted and to be maintained.

Following individuals as they navigate becoming a mother or retiring highlights how profound and significant these transitions can be. For those experiencing new motherhood it is often experienced as a priority project which leaves little space for other commitments. While orientations to retirement are often more ambivalent, the idea that retirement might free up time for engagement in community or environmental projects remained an aspiration for a minority of participants. So long as a sustainable lifestyle is viewed as requiring individual commitment it seems unlikely that people will prioritise this at points in their lives when they have overarching life projects to deal with. Unless sustainable lifestyles can be reconceived as in tune with the commitments and priorities of new mothers and retirees then it seems that these transitions are likely to be particularly bad points for any interventions to facilitate changes in everyday practice.

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