Is it Time to Stop Talking about Behaviour Change?

Rosemary Randall, Independent Consultant

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1. INTRODUCTION

Behaviour change is increasingly the goal of those working on climate change mitigation. While it is encouraging to see people as well as technology and policy brought into play are we right to make this the central approach for involving individuals and families?

2. ARENAS FOR MITIGATION

Figure 1 shows three interlocking arenas for climate change mitigation: technology, policy and people. A strong relationship between policy and technology has the potential to deliver infrastructure change and develop new socio-technical systems while the involvement of individual citizens has the potential to influence policy, provide markets for new technologies and co-create new social and cultural systems across the varied domains of everyday life.
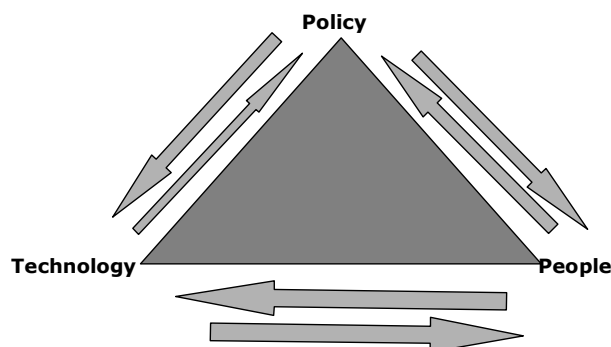

Figure 1: Arenas for mitigation

3. THE ROLE OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

The dominant approach to involving individuals and their families in mitigating climate change derives from theories of behavioural change. The approach focuses on ways of closing what is referred to as the 'attitude-behaviour' gap or 'values-action' gap: the fact that what people think is generally not matched by what they do. (See for example Kollmuss and Aygeman 2002).

Behaviour change theories then examine what they refer to as the drivers for and barriers to the desired behaviour, coming up with diagrams like the one in Figure 2 and approaches such as DEFRA's 'Engage, Enable, Encourage and Exemplify' model for intervention. (DEFRA 2008).
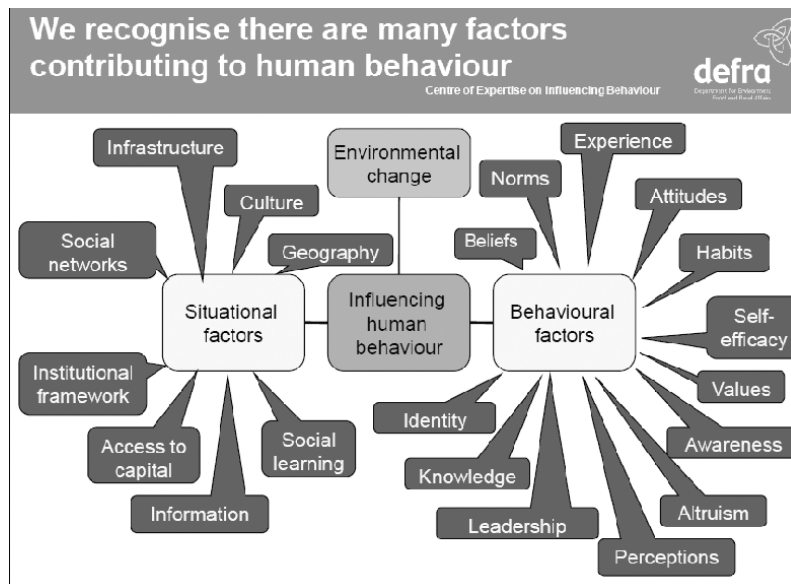
Figure 2. Slide from: DEFRA (2010) *The Sustainable Lifestyles Framework*.

4.CRITICISMS OF THE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE APPROACH

This approach has been criticised by social scientists like Elizabeth Shove (Shove 2010) for its inability to theorise the ways in which significant societal transformation takes place and for the incoherence of the theory of barriers and drivers which makes no analysis of the relationships between the various factors, nor examines their history or relative importance.

The approach has also been criticised by campaigners who object to the role of the citizen being restricted to that of a consumer who is encouraged to make better choices and who view government's emphasis on behaviour change as a strategy for avoiding difficult policy changes and infrastructure developments.

There is merit in both these viewpoints but my own criticisms derive from psychoanalysis and from my work supporting individuals and groups in the community to reduce carbon emissions. These criticisms focus on the inadequacy of the model of the individual that is used. While Shove argues that behaviour change theory ignores the complexity of social systems, my argument is that it also ignores the complexity of individual psychology. From a psychoanalytic perspective there is no expectation that values and behaviours will match up. Instead this perspective assumes that the individual psyche is a place of conflict, typified by competing desires, impulses and injunctions, a system with many parts in dynamic interplay. Behaviour is a surface phenomenon. Beneath it lie more complex motivations and meanings and the turmoil of emotion.

Psychoanalysis suggests that in general people try to live in ways which maximise the possibility of getting on with life creatively and enjoyably and which minimise uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anxiety or guilt. There are things which people prefer not to think about, aspects of their behaviour they feel ashamed or defensive about, topics that alarm and frighten them, subjects that make them feel powerless, vulnerable or angry. The human mind is equipped to defend against too much painful experience and most people unconsciously resist engaging with matters that will be too disturbing. When you ask people to undertake behavioural change, even those who are willing and eager in principle find themselves surprisingly resistant in practice or overwhelmed with uncomfortable feelings. Mitigating climate change has the capacity to upset, disturb and raise people's defences.

5. AN EXAMPLE OF COMPLEXITY

Consider, as an example, what can lie behind reluctance to undertake one simple, behavioural change – not overfilling the kettle. You might think that any intelligent person would easily adopt this behaviour but here are some explanations that have emerged in talking with people about why they don't. The examples are taken from participants in 'Carbon Conversations groups'.

- "It means I get a longer break – it makes staring out of the window and day-dreaming legitimate. If I put in the right amount I'd be in and out of the kitchen in seconds."
  This man uses the kettle to 'steal' a few more minutes from his employer. He doesn't have the status or perhaps the courage to take the break he feels he needs. Putting in just the right amount of water would remove his daydreaming time or leave him hanging around in the kitchen feeling anxious that he would be challenged.
- "What if there isn't enough for everyone? I'd feel awful if someone had to wait while I started again. It feels like meanness, being ungenerous." For this person the behaviour is deeply connected to her sense of herself as a generous, welcoming, loving person. Putting in just the right amount of water would make her feel she was being selfish.
- "What about the times I forgot? I'd just feel so guilty. I'd think about all that carbon dioxide whooshing up into the atmosphere."
- "Doing this kind of stuff makes me feel anxious – it makes me think about climate change and then I can feel that it's all hopeless. Frankly, if I'm truthful, I'd rather not think about it and constantly remembering to do things like not overfilling the kettle reminds me."

In these examples the seemingly simple behavioural change is inhibited by issues of status, powerlessness, identity, guilt and anxiety that push uncomfortably into consciousness. Other examples would add themes of despair, anger, vulnerability and frustration. The last two stories are particularly important as they point to how uncomfortable emotions about climate change lie closely beneath the surface and how paradoxically these can motivate people away from rather than towards change.

6. THE REBOUND EFFECT

Might it therefore be preferable to stay silent on climate change and offer people other inducements for pro-environmental behaviour? Money-saving is frequently offered as a candidate and features in many campaigns for behavioural change.

In psychotherapy one of the side-effects of vanquishing a symptom behaviour without addressing its underlying dynamics is that another symptom pops up to replace it. An example of this in carbon reduction work can be seen in the rebound effect. The money saved by insulating the loft and swapping out the light-bulbs results in the thermostat being turned up and the lights being left on for longer, or is blown on a flight to Barcelona. One damaging behaviour is dealt with but another appears in its place.

A psychoanalytic perspective argues that it is necessary to understand people at a more complex level than that of attitude and behaviour, to appreciate unconscious dynamics, complex and difficult emotions, and the defences people develop to protect themselves from bad news and painful feelings. In pursuing behavioural change it is essential that underlying conflicts are brought into consciousness where they can be talked about and worked through. Only then can a new behaviour be comfortably accepted and adopted.

7. WHAT HELPS?

Rather than focus on behaviours, barriers and drivers I suggest that it is more helpful to concentrate on the creation of 'safe spaces' where people feel free to explore the complex feelings and difficulties involved in adopting seemingly simple new behaviours, without fear of judgment. This working through of the underlying conflicts does not have to be a lengthy process. I am not proposing that the nation be invited to take part in 'climate psychotherapy' simply that more imaginative and personal responses are required in working with people to achieve change in their individual and family lives. Two examples from my own work are the 20 minute 'Carbon Footprint interview', and the 'Carbon Conversations' project. The first has been conducted with over 3000 people in Cambridge and is a non-judgmental, exploratory chat, based in techniques of 'Motivational Interviewing', about the relationship of lifestyle to global carbon emissions. The 'Carbon Conversations' project is used nationally by community groups and is a facilitated small group process which supports people in making major reductions to their carbon emissions by opening up the difficult emotional subjects, rather than closing them down.

Creating the space to talk openly can have a surprising effect. All the people I quote above did stop overfilling the kettle.

8. CONCLUSION

Creditable though the behaviour change approach is in involving individuals and families as important players in climate change mitigation, the approach divides people from the social systems they are part of, casts them primarily as consumers and fragments the complexity of their lives into atomised actions to be tackled piecemeal. An approach which responds with a more complex and integrated understanding of the personal dilemmas and experiences involved may have more chance of success.

9. REFERENCES

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