

Why do individuals consume energy in a climate-friendly way? The case of Wadebridge

There are many ideas as to why an individual might consume energy in a climate-friendly way¹. Two in particular will be focussed on in this essay, they are: individuals as citizens, concerned more with a common good than self-interest, and motivated by intrinsic values; and individuals as consumers or, in other words, as rational economic actors. These two roles of the individual will be analysed in terms of the relationship between them, identifying both convergence and conflict in their interactions as well as the impact that this can have on behaviours. In order to achieve this, the concepts will be applied to empirical findings collected from Wadebridge, a medium-sized town in North Cornwall, and evaluated to determine their usefulness in providing an understanding of energy consumption practices and any underlying motivations. The conclusion shall be reached that despite some conflicts in the citizen-consumer relationship, there is a great deal of convergence where citizen values can determine, and are determined by consumer practices and consumption. A need is identified for further research into this complex relation, and for a change in governmental policy orientation from the current consumer focussed approach.

Theoretical debate

First of all, the role of consumer is to be discussed. As a consumer, an individual is assumed to be heavily motivated by self-interest and private preferences (Berglund and Matti, 2006). As a result, a consumer's behaviour is believed to be based on economic reasoning, factoring in monetary constraints and as being responsive to economic incentives for changing behaviours (Berglund and Matti, 2006). This assumption is supported by a report from the OECD (2008) which pointed to the limited impact of increasing and labelling energy efficiency standards on appliances, in terms of their influence on climate-friendly energy consumption. Instead, the report mentioned how accompanying changes in labelling and

standards with the introduction of an energy tax has resulted in the increased use of lower energy appliances in certain states. This demonstrates that fiscal incentives and policies (external motivations) might account for changes in individual energy consumption behaviours through the role of the consumer.

The role of external motivations can, however, be critiqued in the way that they fail to account for an individual's personal value system, within which economic 'values' may not necessarily be the most important ones (Sagoff, 2008). In fact, such motivations can undermine, rather than foster intrinsic values, ethics and morals by influencing individuals to act like the consumers they are assumed to be (Dobson, 2010; Berglund and Matti, 2006). In other words, the use of external motivations under the assumption of the rational economic consumer may 'crowd out' the values already held by individuals privately, as well as those which form the underlying principles of the fiscal policies in the first place (Dobson, 2010; Berglund and Matti, 2006). It is here where we see the conflict emerging between the dual role as values are a key part of what constitutes the citizen (Sagoff, 2008).

This is not to say that within the consumer role there does not exist an ethical or social dimension. On the contrary, consumption practices can produce certain identities or statuses for the individual consumer based upon their perceptions of self and others (OECD, 2008; Berglund and Matti, 2006), potentially influencing their behaviour through the want to appear 'green', if that is what is considered desirable². Furthermore, private consumption can have public impacts in terms of addressing responsibilities to others, such as commodity producers, through consumer choices, conscious or otherwise (Dobson, 2010). To put another way, despite tensions in the citizen-consumer relationship over motivations as has been discussed, the consumer role can fulfil some of the values held by that of the citizen, the role which is now to be considered in itself.

To put more emphasis on the citizen role, it should be becoming clear from the above that it entails an individual's intrinsic values and ethics, including notions of justice and of duties to others spatially and temporally (Sagoff, 2008; Berglund and Matti, 2006). These are perhaps best exemplified by the concept of 'environmental citizenship' (Dobson, 2010) which emphasises the horizontal relationship between citizens, based on shared rights and responsibilities to one another. Environmental citizens, it is thought, put the common good before individual self-interest in areas such as common pool resource management, thereby not acting as mere consumers (Dobson, 2010). It is also believed that, unlike external motivations, focussing more on appealing to intrinsic values and developing 'moral communities' (Kamminga, 2008:677) could lead to longer lasting behavioural change. To do so would involve the strengthening of social capital within (bonding capital) and between (bridging capital) communities in order to promote pro-environmental narratives¹ (Dobson, 2010; Wolf et al., 2010). However, studies have been conducted into the impact of strong bonding capital on influencing individual behaviours (Wolf et al., 2010). Within these studies, it was shown that bonding networks present narratives which can be detrimental, and provide barriers to positive behaviour (Wolf et al., 2010), perhaps also to climate-friendly energy usage. Such impacts can also feed back into individual consumption practices (Halkier, 1999), reintroducing the potential tensions between the consumer and the citizen roles.

In addition to this, Wolf et al. (2010) draw the conclusion that bonding capital narratives could be addressed by placing more emphasis on those produced by bridging and linking capital. The latter, it should be mentioned, involves the building of trust networks across different levels of authority (Wolf et al., 2010). This form of social capital therefore suggests more of a vertical, citizen-state relationship as opposed to the horizontal one favoured by the concept of the environmental citizen. This, it could be argued, poses difficulties to

approaching questions of energy consumption through the use of the (environmental) citizen role due to issues of social capital and interactions with the consumer element. To summarise therefore, the citizen-consumer relationship is a complicated one where there is the potential for conflict. This potential exists, for instance, in areas such as private consumption due to consumer choice in terms of economic consumer self-interest, but also as a moral or value-based decision with wider impacts beyond the individual themselves (Sagoff, 2008; Dobson, 2010). As a result of this intricate relationship and the need to consider empirical data from the case study, the consumer role is understood to be predominantly concerned with the reproduction of the individual, but can be influenced by the role of the citizen, concerned with the reproduction of the community and with the common good. The citizen is deemed to be found in the intrinsic values and ethics of individuals and their associated social capitals, particularly in the bonding form. It should be noted that the impact of these roles are considered to be potentially positive and negative with regard to climate-friendly energy consumption, given the discussions presented above.

Case study

The case of Wadebridge will now be examined. As mentioned previously, it is a medium-sized town in North Cornwall where face-to-face interviews were conducted with owners, managers and staff in ten local businesses³. Respondents were of a mix of ages, mainly female and all live in the local area. Although the questions asked did not specifically focus on their individual motivations, they were open-ended and 60 per cent of interviewees were found to talk about their reasons for (potentially) engaging in climate-friendly energy consumption. It is this group who will be referred to as the ‘respondents’ from this point.

Even with the understanding of the dual roles given above, organising respondents into the simple categories of ‘citizen’, ‘consumer’ and ‘citizen-consumer’, depending upon their

individual motivations, is considered to be of no real use given the complexities and overlap encountered in the findings. Instead, the recorded responses will be evaluated in aggregate.

First of all, the vast majority of respondents directly mentioned economic reasons for engaging in more climate-friendly energy consumption, domestically-speaking. This would support the assumption underlying the consumer role. However, a couple of the respondents who cited economic factors as their main or only motivation during interviews, also mentioned a want to benefit and promote the local community and businesses. This additional feature introduces a closer relation between the role of the consumer, in cheaper energy for the individual, with that of the citizen through the want to enhance the local economy as well as the status and identity of the town. Here we see a positive linkage between the two roles, with the reproduction of individual and community as key motivational factors for respondents. Thus it can perhaps be suggested that the presence of the citizen role within the consumer could be influenced by bonding social capital narratives within Wadebridge. Although, based on this being only a limited study, no concrete conclusions on this point can be reached without further research.

With regard to the citizen role, it is interesting to point out that despite many respondents highlighting the importance of climate-friendly energy practices, for the common good of the community and for wider environmental concerns, they admitted to not changing their behaviours. This poses questions about the plausibility of the citizen role in changing behaviours based on intrinsic values as, in some cases, it seems that they are not enough to change consumption behaviour on their own. It can be proposed therefore that there is a role for external motivations to provide 'rewards' as an incentive to draw out intrinsic motivations (Dobson, 2010). In other words, perhaps the idea of the citizen, and particularly that of environmental citizenship, are incomplete without a coupling with the idea of the consumer, which can help reinforce certain behaviours and values.

This case study would suggest that neither role is prominent in determining an individual's behaviour. It was found that there is an important relationship between the citizen and the consumer with regard to overlaps between wants for private, but also communal gain from climate-friendly energy consumption. Equally, the intrinsic values held by individuals are perhaps not always realised without some external motivation. However, too much focus on economic motivations may put the dual roles in conflict with each other, undermining personal values (Berglund and Matti, 2006; Dobson, 2010), as was discussed earlier. It is argued here that application of the citizen-consumer concept can provide a decent understanding of the case of Wadebridge in terms of individual motivations, and any subsequent (lack of) behaviour change. It must again be pointed out, however, that this is only a limited study, meaning that it may not be best suited to concept application. A more in-depth study of individual motivations and behaviours would result in an improved test case and theoretical debate.

Conclusions

To conclude, the concept of the dual role of individuals highlights the complexity in individual motivations behind certain behaviours. It challenges the notion that people are merely rational economic actors by emphasising the importance of intrinsic values and ethics which shape, and are shaped by consumer practices. There can exist tensions between the consumer and citizen roles in terms of consumer choices, but convergence as well. The idea of the environmental citizen could be criticised for its argument to strengthen social capital, following conclusions drawn from studies, yet not all narratives produced by bonding networks are negative. This is perhaps suggested by the case of Wadebridge, where not only can we see the two roles operating in tandem, but we see how the idea of the community is fostered within individuals' capacities as consumers, thereby signifying convergence. In other

words, individuals consume energy in a climate-friendly way as a result of their own personal values, be it with regard to the environment or others within or outside a community. This distinctly 'citizen' role can be and is incorporated into external motivations and private consumption practices, as embodied by the role of individuals as consumers. To further explore this dual role, its internal conflicts, convergences and its impacts upon behaviours, it is finally suggested that more empirical research needs to be conducted into whether or not a balance in the citizen-consumer relationship is possible, and, if so, how to incorporate it into a largely consumer-orientated governmental policy.

Notes

¹ By this what is meant is use of renewable energy sources and general reductions in energy usage, through more efficient appliances and lightbulbs, for example.

² By the same logic, wanting to appear wealthier, for instance, may result in higher consumption (OECD, 2008).

³ In other words, one respondent per business.

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