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The Social Practices of Change Agency in the Context of Community Energy Use

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Abstract: This paper investigates the social practices of Australian sustainability ‘change agents’ that are working to reduce community energy use. These change agents work to promote change for sustainability, often through leadership of specific projects or initiatives. Their practices are of interest because they influence the effectiveness of efforts to reduce energy consumption. The specific social practice framework employed in the paper draws on the work of Elizabeth Shove and colleagues. It contends that social practices integrate three types of element: materials, competences and meanings. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 28 change agents across Australia, the paper identifies the materials, competences and meanings held by the change agents and explores how those elements are integrated into practices. Observed competences included skills in co-learning or facilitated learning and the cultivation of positive agency. Change agents employed diverse materials, including new forms of media, and tailored their initiatives to the material context in which they were operating. In the realm of meanings, change agents drew on competing theories of change but were united in their focus on the individual as the locus of change. A social practice framework decentres the individual and may offer new opportunities to shift community consumption patterns.

Keywords: Change agents, social practice theory, energy use, household sustainability

1. Introduction

We live on a planet under pressure, where human practices increasingly interfere with the integrity of the Earth’s natural processes (Brito and Stafford Smith 2012). Human pressures on the Earth’s systems are having serious consequences and threatening critical global, regional and local thresholds (UNEP 2012). Humans have already overstepped three critical planetary boundaries by altering global climate, depleting global biodiversity and interfering in global nutrient cycles (Rockström *et al.* 2009). Meanwhile, global consumption patterns are deeply inequitable, with high consumption levels reserved for a rich minority (UNDP 2011). As the people of the majority world seek to emulate the high-consumption lifestyles of those in the minority world, the pressure on the Earth’s natural capital only increases.

Faced with this challenging global situation, diverse movements have emerged to challenge current consumption practices, including green marketing (Grant 2007), collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers 2010), voluntary simplicity (Shaw and Newholm 2002),

the slow movement (Honore 2005), transition towns (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012) and a vast array of behaviour change initiatives (Jackson 2005). While these movements and initiatives have achieved some limited and local successes, they have failed to halt the growth in global consumption. Sustainable consumption patterns remain elusive and identifying pathways towards sustainable consumption is a critical topic for research.

A common factor across these diverse sustainable consumption initiatives is the involvement of ‘sustainability change agents’. Sustainability change agents are people that dedicate their work or voluntary time to facilitating change for sustainability, often through leadership of specific projects or initiatives. In AtKisson’s (2011) eloquent words, sustainability change agents combine:

‘[A] burning desire to know and understand what’s actually happening in this extraordinary planetary pageant we call ‘Life on Earth,’ and an equally strong compulsion to do something to safeguard that pageant from catastrophic, avoidable dangers’ (AtKisson 2011).

Sustainability change agents are the driving force behind initiatives to promote sustainable consumption patterns. As such, the practices in which they are engaged are likely to have a strong influence on the effectiveness of such initiatives. In this paper, I investigate the practices in which Australian sustainability change agents are engaged. To make this a manageable task, I focus specifically on sustainability change agents that are involved with initiatives to reduce household and community energy use. My main data source is a set of semi-structured interviews with 28 change agents across Australia, supported by observation of other change agents, including reflection on my own work as a change agent.

I use a social practice framework (Shove *et al.* 2012) to characterize and draw out the elements of change agent practices. Like Shove (*et al.* 2012), I am particularly interested in the dynamics of social practice. I explore ways in which change agent practices could develop, and the potential impact on household consumption practices. In the next section, I justify the decision to use social practice theory as the analytical framework for this research and outline the way in which I apply it.

2. Framing the practice of change creation

There is a vast literature on how to engage households in sustainable practices and motivate sustainable consumption or pro-environmental behaviours (Darnton 2008, Jackson 2005). Change agents seeking to motivate change can look to literature from diverse fields including behavioural economics (eg. Ariely 2009, Dawdney and Shah 2005, Kahneman 2011), social marketing (eg. DEFRA 2008 and 2011, McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999), environmental psychology (eg. Geller 2002, Steg and Vlek 2009, Stern 2000), communications (eg. Futerra 2009 and 2011) and advocacy (eg. Crompton 2008 and 2010, Holmes *et al.* 2011). Making sense of this large and often contradictory literature is challenging, to say the least.

One of the most comprehensive and useful reviews of the literature on sustainable consumption and behaviour change is Tim Jackson’s (2005) report on ‘Motivating Sustainable Consumption.’ Jackson reviews numerous models of consumer behaviour and theories of behaviour change. He concludes that ‘making sense of behaviour inevitably requires a multi-dimensional view which incorporates both internal and external elements’ (Jackson 2005, p. x). Building on Stern (2000), he argues that a useful model of behaviour

needs to account for: ‘motivations, attitudes and values; contextual or situational factors; social influences; personal capabilities; and habits’ (Jackson 2005, p. x). This list gives a sense of the factors that change agents need to take into account when attempting to engage people in more sustainable consumption practices.

In its Sustainable Lifestyles Framework, the United Kingdom Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) presents a somewhat similar, albeit longer, list of the factors influencing behaviour (DEFRA 2011). DEFRA identifies two types of factors—situational factors and behavioural factors. Situational factors include infrastructure, culture, geography, social networks, institutional framework, access to capital, information and social learning. Behavioural factors include beliefs, norms, experience, attitudes, habits, self-efficacy, values, awareness, altruism, perceptions, leadership, knowledge and identity.

When I commenced my research with sustainability change agents, I approached it from the kind of integrative behaviour change paradigm outlined by Jackson (2005) and DEFRA (2011). That is, I saw the goal of sustainability change agents as manipulation of the various factors that influence individual behaviour in order to motivate individuals to change their consumption choices. However, when I began to analyze my interview data I found this behaviour change paradigm too limiting. I turned to social practice theory, as I found its account of the limitations of behaviour change frameworks compelling.

Social practice theorists argue that most behaviour change initiatives fail to take into account the full range of influences on behaviour identified above (Moloney *et al.* 2010). This failing is rectified in some of the more comprehensive and integrative theories of behaviour change, however, social practice theorists additionally argue that the focus on individual behaviours and choices is itself problematic (Moloney *et al.* 2010, Shove *et al.* 2012). They contend that behaviour change theories rest on a ‘narrow view of social change’ (Hargreaves 2011, p. 80) that is ‘excessively individualistic and fail[s] to appreciate the ways in which, variously, social relations, material infrastructures and context are intrinsic to the performance of social practices ... and not merely variables among many others within individuals’ decision-making processes’ (Hargreaves 2011, p. 82). Behaviour change theories assume that ‘new social arrangements result from an accumulation of millions of individual decisions’ (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 2). Behaviour ‘is taken to be a matter of choice, influenced by identifiable factors of which attitudes and beliefs are especially important’ (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 141). In contrast, theories of practice rest on Giddens’ structuration theory, which sees human agency and the structures that shape it as recursively related (Shove *et al.* 2012). According to Giddens (1986, p. 2), ‘the basic domain of study of the social sciences ... is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time.’

A social practice approach, therefore, takes the attention off individuals as agents and focuses on how both individuals and structures participate in everyday practices (Hargreaves 2011). Instead of being the central unit of analysis, individuals become ‘carriers or hosts of a practice’ (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 7). According to Reckwitz,

‘A “practice” ... is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge’ (2002, p. 249).

In their exploration of the dynamics of social practices, Shove (*et al.* 2012, p. 14) identify three types of elements of a practice:

- Materials: ‘including things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made’
- Competences: ‘which encompasses skill, know-how and technique’
- Meanings: ‘in which we include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations’

Shove (*et al.* 2012, p. 14) argues that ‘practices emerge, persist, shift and disappear when connections between elements of these three types are made, sustained or broken.’ While they recognize that this scheme is simplistic and potentially reductionist, it is nevertheless useful for exploring the dynamics of social practice. Given my focus on change creation, this scheme provided an appropriate framing for my research.

Before moving on, it is worth highlighting two other key elements of a practice theory framework. First, practices ‘exist as performances’ that integrate the elements identified above (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 7). They only exist to the extent that they are continually carried out and enacted in everyday life. Thus a social practice framework encourages attention to the practices of daily life—shopping, eating, bathing and so on. Second, practices are historically and culturally specific. While the elements of a practice may persist over time and across cultures, the way in which they are integrated is always unique to a particular time and place. This makes it difficult to transfer lessons from one context to another, a point I will take up again later in the paper.

It should now be clear that framing the role of a sustainability change agent from a behaviour change perspective or a social practice perspective brings very different results. From a behaviour change perspective, change agents operate as external influences on the factors and drivers of behaviour and assume clear causal relationships between their actions and the resulting behaviours. In contrast, from a practice perspective, change agents are embedded in the systems of practice they seek to influence and processes of change are emergent and unpredictable (Shove *et al.* 2012). Sustainability change agents can intervene to change the elements of a practice or the way in which elements are integrated through performance. However, the outcomes of such interventions will be necessarily uncertain. Social practices are complex systems that resist intervention by single change agents.

Further, and central to this research, change agents carry their own particular bundles of practices that can be studied and potentially altered to improve their effectiveness. Framing what change agents do as a bundle of practices delivered new insights for my research and provided a structuring mechanism for this paper. Specifically, I structure the discussion of themes from my interviews with change agents according to the three elements of a practice identified by Shove (*et al.* 2012). The next section provides more detail on the methods used in my research.

3. Method

A social practice framework lends itself to ethnographic methods, where the researcher follows practitioners as they engage in practices, and perhaps engages in those practices themselves. However, I embarked upon this research from a behaviour change paradigm

rather than a social practice paradigm. As such, my approach was to conduct semi-structured interviews with change agents across Australia that were working with households and communities to reduce their energy use.

I commenced by identifying as many Australian initiatives as I could that had at least a partial focus on reducing household or community energy use. This involved Internet searches and conversations with practitioners and change agents to build up a database of initiatives. I then sought to engage with a sample of change agents involved in those initiatives, chosen to be representative of the types of organizations involved in change agency and to give geographic coverage of mainland Australia. I interviewed 28 change agents from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory in a mix of urban, suburban and regional contexts. The change agents worked in state government departments (6), local governments (8), non-government organizations (4), energy utilities (5), research organizations (1) and consulting businesses (4).

Each change agent participated in a semi-structured interview for one to two hours. The interviews explored the objectives of the participant's organization, details of specific change initiatives they had designed or implemented and their practices as a change agent. I asked participants to critically reflect on their practices, explored their 'theories of change' (eg. how they think change happens and what prevents it) and prompted them to describe their visions for the future. The primary research objective was to identify ways in which change agents could be more effective in facilitating the emergence of more sustainable behaviours.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and descriptively coded (Saldaña 2009). Codes were aggregated into emergent themes for further analysis. It was at this point that social practice theory emerged as a preferable framework for investigating the practices of the participating change agents. Consequently, I undertook an additional round of theoretical coding to identify discussions of the materials, competences and meanings that constituted change agent practices.

The use of interviews instead of ethnographic methods inevitably leads to a stronger focus on the meanings held by change agents, as expressed through conversation during the interviews. While change agents did discuss materials and competences, these can arguably be more readily identified through ethnographic observation. I did observe some of the participating change agents as they went about their daily practices but this was a small part of the research. I also draw on observations of other change agents and reflection on my own practice as a sustainability change agent over the past 17 years. These observations complement the interview research, which remains the primary research method.

Below, I describe the competences, materials and meanings that emerged as elements of change agent practices.

4. Competence: The skills of change creation

The change agents interviewed for this research possessed diverse skills, practical knowledge and techniques for creating change. They included novice change agents who had been directed to run a behaviour change initiative for the first time, academic experts with deep theoretical knowledge of behaviour change and experienced practitioners that had built up impressive competence through practice and reflection. Sustainability change agents need

skills in fundraising and marketing to get projects off the ground, research skills to support program design, planning and organizing to successfully deliver projects and communications to reach out to participating households and communities. However, these skills are common to many people working in project-based settings. Here, I want to focus in on some skills that seemed to be particularly important to sustainability change agents: translation, facilitation and cultivation of agency.

4.1 Translation

Overwhelmingly, the change agents felt that most people are not engaged with issues like sustainability, climate change and energy use:

‘They come home; their world is their home, their job and their family. So us coming and saying you need to get interested and motivated and take some action around your carbon footprint; it’s like huh, what are you talking about man? How does this relate to my everyday life?’ (State Government representative).

An important competence that emerged from the interviews was that of translation—being able to find ways to connect messages about sustainable energy use to the everyday concerns of the audience:

‘The challenge for government, I think, is translating that down to a language and a level of—a package that people can actually latch on to and understand; see how it relates to them’ (State Government representative).

‘Because when it’s in a language that people understand or expressed in a way that they can relate to their life or they see someone else doing it, so all of those behaviour change approaches that have been talked about...it’s not so difficult I think’ (State Government representative).

‘So when we’re talking about electricity, instead of telling people about electricity, find metaphors for communication that are relevant to the people themselves’ (Local Government representative).

To do this work of translation, change agents need to interpret the values and desires of their audience and find ways to connect the change they are seeking with those values and desires. Change agents interpreted these values and desires in very different ways, leading to markedly different practices. For example, some saw people as primarily motivated by financial concerns, leading them to design change initiatives centred on financial incentives. Others saw people as having ecological motivations that just needed to be activated and sought to engage them in collaborative practices that would help to activate such values. In other words, the change agents held very different models of human behaviour and theories of change, which I will return to in *Section 6.2*.

4.2 Facilitation

A second skill that is particularly important to change agents is that of facilitation. Change agents need facilitation skills in a very practical sense to successfully facilitate meetings, workshops and community events that are central to change initiatives. Delivering a change initiative for households and communities mean engaging people and often bringing them

together in groups. Change agents need to facilitate these interactions so that they are more likely to lead to positive change.

More abstractly, many of the participating change agents sought to create spaces that facilitate change by supporting individual and collective learning. They did not try and impose particular changes but opened up the potential for people to discover their own motivations for change. This kind of approach recognizes that the world is always changing and change is not something that is created or destroyed. Rather, change can be harnessed or directed in more positive directions. It is a type of system-scale facilitation that requires change agents to take a holistic view of the systems in which they are trying to bring about change. For example, one change agent had worked at a landscape scale to insert physical prompts into the landscape that would encourage people who came across them to think about sustainability. The intention was not to direct them to take particular actions but to subtly create spaces where they might become self-motivated to make changes in their behaviours.

Another change agent used a coaching approach that focused on what the participant wanted to change, rather than what the change agent wanted to change:

‘We’re starting with what do you want to change, change one thing, that’s great. What do you want to change next?’ (State Government representative).

The intention is to facilitate a process in which the individual works out their own motivation for change rather than having it imposed upon them, which participating change agents argued is much more likely to result in lasting behavioural change.

The emphasis placed on facilitation skills seemed to reflect a desire to engage participants in more meaningful ways, moving beyond provision of information to genuinely involve people and collaborate with them in change processes. This meant:

‘Doing something that’s a bit more in line with contemporary thinking, that’s engaging audiences, that’s having two-way conversation, it’s creating a community’ (State Government representative).

4.3 Cultivating agency

Most of the change agents I spoke with were skilled in cultivating positive agency, in themselves and others. They had the ability to remain optimistic and positive about the potential to achieve change, despite ongoing setbacks and the reality of change initiatives often falling short of their ambitious goals. They did not seem to be in denial of the challenges associated with change agency. Rather, they seemed to have made conscious choices to adopt an optimistic and positive outlook as a stronger foundation for agency.

Consistent with advice from sustainability communications practitioners that sustainability is more likely to ‘sell’ if it draws on positive visions rather than messages of doom and gloom (eg. Futerra 2009), most of the change agents consciously sought to use positive messages to engage participants:

‘It’s not about trying to shame people for having three cars in the driveway and a huge house and all the rest of it. If they’re doing nothing more than doing a good

job of recycling, it's about, I suppose, supporting that and giving praise and encouragement, rather than the negative side of things' (State government representative).

'All our activities we try to make very positive and proactive I think so that we don't paralyze people' (NGO representative).

'I think you need to be able to paint a picture of, well you're going to move to here and that's going to make your life better or it's going to be an improvement for you in some way' (State Government representative).

The theory behind this approach was that participants are more likely to change their behaviour if engaged in a positive way that creates a sense of agency than if confronted with warnings about negative environmental trends. There is evidence that people can retreat to nihilism and fundamentalism rather than face their fears about environmental crises (Eckersley 2008). Creating a positive environment was seen as having the potential to support creativity and action.

5. Materials: The infrastructure of change creation

The things, technologies and physical stuff that constitute change agent practices include websites and the means to access them, telecommunications infrastructure, money, the homes of participants, physical energy infrastructure such as appliances, smart meters, solar panels, venues used for activities, specialized equipment used in the field and communication materials such as leaflets. For some, these material elements were central to their practice and the objective was to get particular materials out into the community to facilitate new practices. For example, some of the programs I engaged with were primarily about encouraging households to retrofit new materials into their homes, such as low-energy light bulbs or standby power switches. These programs were sometimes so focused on deployment of materials that they overlooked whether people had the competence to use the new materials and would draw meaning from doing so. It seemed that materials, due to their tangibility, could easily come to dominate strategies for change.

Here I want to highlight three material issues that emerged as important for the interview participants: the importance of the local material context, the potential of new social networking technologies and the need to make desirable behaviours tangible.

5.1 Localizing

Many of the participating change agents drew attention to the importance of adapting practices for the local context. This was often expressed in very material terms, for example, drawing attention to the constraints and opportunities posed by the local geography or infrastructure.

Climate change is a key driver for changes in energy use, but many of the change agents pointed out how intangible climate change feels to people. They argued that climate change feels distant in time and space and lacks a material presence in the local environment. This makes it more difficult to motivate communities to respond to climate change. As such, some change agents argued for practices that give climate change a local, material presence, such

as artistic interventions that show what a community will look like when the sea level increases. Others argued for focusing on local environmental issues and tangible local actions as a pathway towards ecological awareness:

‘I think...it’s very important to be contextually situated because our local environments are very localized—they’re very contextualized. So for people to be able to interact and develop an ecological consciousness, they have to know what’s happening in their locale. They have to develop a connection with it and you can’t come from the top down if you don’t know’ (NGO representative).

Being able to see the material traces of your actions in the local context emerged as an important motivator for action to improve sustainability. This ties in with the discussion in *Section 5.3*, on the role that materializing a desirable practice can play in shifting mainstream practices.

5.2 Social networking technologies

Surprisingly few of the change agents were making use of social networking and social media technologies to engage with their audiences. Most were using more traditional engagement through dedicated websites, telephone recruitment and face-to-face activities. However, many of the participants saw new media technologies as having great potential to assist with community engagement and behaviour change programs. They were just uncertain about how to make the best use of these technologies and wary of the resources they might require. Some also doubted their effectiveness:

‘It’s actually a limited group that actually really do engage in that way’
(Researcher).

Nevertheless, I would say that there was a clear desire amongst a majority of the participants to move beyond traditional marketing and information-based approaches to more interactive and engagement-based approaches. Social media was seen as a possible facilitator of this shift.

I raise this because it is an interesting example of the dynamic nature of social practices. The emergence of new material elements, such as social networking technology, is disrupting existing change agent practices and challenging change agents to develop new competence in social networking and new meanings around the role of social media in facilitating change. At this point, social media seemed to be on the fringe of change agent practices but the meanings participants expressed indicated that they are open to embracing it as part of their practice. It will be interesting to see how change agent practices evolve in the years ahead to incorporate social media.

5.3 Materializing desirable behaviours

One of the fundamental concepts of social psychology is that of social proof—that we look to others for how to behave (Cialdini 1993). Consistent with this theory, a common strategy mentioned in my conversations with change agents was to make desirable behaviours tangible and material so that others can see those behaviours in practice and become more likely to adopt them. Change agents discussed ‘normalizing’ behaviours by having normal or influential people model them. An example that several change agents mentioned

independently was Sustainable House Day (<http://www.sustainablehouseday.com>), where people that have built or renovated their home to improve its sustainability, open it up to visitors. Some of the change agents pointed out that people visit these homes and see that you can still have a great lifestyle in a sustainable home, and that the people who live in these homes are not just ‘hippies’.

‘We have presentations where we go and contact people in the local community who’ve done a sustainable retro fit or built a house from scratch and made it sustainable. People get really inspired by that because they see it happening in their community... You often find that the people who are up there presenting—they’re not what people think as sustainable—so they’re not dreadlocked—you know—smoking dope... Well here they’re actually getting their neighbour—the guy who lives two streets over from them. They’re seeing his house may look a bit different because they’ve got solar panels but they realize, oh...he’s not a hippie’ (NGO representative).

‘Look, from my experience, I think normalizing it and having that sort of neighbour looking across the fence type approach, or someone in the street seeing one of their neighbours doing something; the human psychology comes into it and they go, oh okay, and they start talking about what they’re actually doing; whether it be a water tank in their yard or a set of PV cells on the roof or solar hot water system. People start seeing it and it becomes almost like a normal thing that every house would have’ (State Government representative).

From a social practice perspective, materializing desirable practices is important because it helps to familiarize the community with new elements of a practice. As they become familiar with the material manifestation of a practice and see that it is not threatening, they may begin to develop new meanings that are more accepting of that practice. This can be a pathway towards a change in practices.

6. Meanings: The culture of change creation

The participants described diverse meanings, ideas and aspirations that they bring to their work as change agents. Indeed, the meanings expressed were so diverse that they undermine any concept of a unified practice of change agency. Rather, it is clear that there are multiple practices of change agency that are loosely bundled together and sometimes in conflict. This idea is picked up in more detail below. Here, I focus on three aspects of the meanings revealed by participants: their motivations for facilitating change, their theories of how change happens and their visions for the future.

6.1 What motivates change agents?

Being a change agent can be a difficult, thankless job that is associated with high levels of burnout. It is therefore interesting to look at what motivates change agents to try and facilitate change. For a few of the participants, pursuing behaviour change is something that they feel they have to do as part of their job. It is not necessarily something they are personally passionate about. Particularly in government organizations, some change agents had been given the job of running behaviour change programs as part of their role, rather than self-initiating them out of passion for the area. One of the participants from an energy utility

indicated that behaviour change and community engagement was something they felt obliged to do:

‘So we see it as something which we really should do as part of our social licence to operate’ (Energy Utility representative).

More commonly, change agents expressed a passion for social justice or environmental protection that led them to pursue work in behaviour change:

‘I guess my drive has always been around social justice issues and wanting to create a fairer and more just world, I guess. I sort of decided quite early on in my career that I wanted to work for an NGO or a charity. I didn’t have any interest in working in the corporate sector. I suppose, yeah, trying to put my life to good use or my working life to good use. Yeah and creating change for the better, so improving people’s lives’ (State Government representative).

‘I don’t care what I do as long as I’m doing something that I can go home and be proud of...and for me personally that’s the main driver that keeps me going...I am slowly changing the world or at least encouraging change’ (NGO representative).

If anything binds the participating change agents together, it is this sense of ethical satisfaction in the work that they do, even though it can be frustrating and disappointing at times. Even those who felt obliged to work on behaviour change expressed satisfaction that their work was contributing to the greater good.

6.2 Theories of change

A much more diverse set of meanings emerged when I asked participants about their ‘theories of change’—their beliefs about how individual and collective change happens and how best to facilitate change. Some drew on particular theoretical frameworks for sustainability communication and behaviour change, including community-based social marketing (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999), action conversations (Robinson 2010 and 2013), thematic communication (Ham 2013) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1997). Others drew primarily on their practical experience with facilitating behaviour change. Below I identify some of the key areas of common ground and divergence between the participants.

First, there was a degree of consistency in the responses when I asked participants to identify the main barriers to behaviour change. Most mentioned time, money and complexity (or information overload) as the key barriers that need to be overcome, with some variations. For example:

‘The programme was designed to get over three barriers. So one is cost... apathy and complexity or making it easy for people to engage in the programme’ (Local Government representative).

Second and partly related to the emphasis placed on each of these barriers; participants had quite different assumptions about what motivates people to change their behaviour. Most commonly, the change agents focused on appeals to financial incentives and self-interest to overcome cost barriers:

‘Well I think you try and sell it as an economic decision. Because when you’re selling it on the—I mean, it’s an economic and environmental decision. But the economics is what matters to people, when it comes down to it. That’s the thing’ (Local Government representative).

“‘What am I going to get out of it?’ I suppose, is always going to be the ultimate question and “is it going to be worth my time or effort changing?” I think for environmental behaviour change even for people that are really, really engaged, well from the research on this campaign, the environmental aspect hasn’t been number one. It’s always been a financial motivation’ (State Government representative).

At the time of the interviews, a context of rising electricity prices and public fatigue with climate change discussion had focused attention on the use of cost savings and the prospect of managing energy bills as a way of motivating behavioural change. For some of the change agents, this was a conscious strategy adopted to appeal to particular audience segments (see further discussion on audience segmentation below). For others, it was a worldview commitment, based on a belief that people in general (including themselves) are primarily driven by financial motivations.

Many change agents did not focus on financial motivations alone but also sought to overcome time and complexity barriers by making it as simple as possible to engage with their program. At one end of the spectrum, this was seen as ‘dumbing it down’ to appeal to the masses:

‘Yes, people tune out. So I think it needs to be dumbed down. Whatever is done it needs to be dumbed down and hit the lowest common denominator’ (State Government representative).

At the other end of the spectrum, offering a simple, guided approach was seen as a respectful and practical way to start people on a path to bigger changes and ecological consciousness.

Third, differing assumptions about audience motivations led change agents to segment their audiences in different ways. Some change agents saw their audience as relatively homogeneous and argued for a singular approach to change—such as getting the price signals right or getting the information out there. Others saw the need for a multi-faceted approach to reach different kinds of audience, recognizing that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to changing behaviour. They used different program elements and different communications to motivate different kinds of people:

‘I think you can only be really creative and really have a strong effect when you can pinpoint a specific audience that have certain values or relate to a certain way of communication, because it’s just much more effective’ (State Government representative).

For those that did segment their audience, there were very different approaches to defining or categorizing the audience diversity. Different change agents identified audience segments based on demographic characteristics, consumption levels (high, medium and low consumers), attitudes or values. Some change agents sought to design initiatives and messages to reach all of the identified audience segments simultaneously. Others had

abandoned any attempt to reach particular audience segments in order to focus scarce resources on the segments where they could actually make a difference:

‘Ultimately the campaign and the advertising aims to reach as many people in the state as possible. But within that you can say well there’s going to be a section of society that are just not going to engage with this. So who are the people that are—what’s the low hanging fruit?’ (State Government representative)

Finally, a common theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of activating social norms and using key influencers to communicate the need for change. Even those change agents who were primarily focused on delivering financial motivation recognized that messages would be more effective if delivered by people that their audience trusts and admires. Some change agents specifically argued that there is a strong social motivation for our behaviours and that this can be used to get people involved in behaviour change initiatives:

‘Often I think it’s the more popular social type things that people want to turn up to’ (Local Government representative).

The diverse theories of change expressed by the participants reflect the diverse models of human behaviour and behaviour change evident in the literature (see Jackson 2005). In general, the more experienced and successful change agents seemed to be familiar with a wider range of theories and to draw on elements of these when designing initiatives to facilitate change.

6.3 Visions for the future

When I asked participants about their visions for the future, they were largely positive, perhaps reflecting the skills at cultivating positive agency discussed earlier in the paper. They emphasized the need to have a positive vision of a desirable future. One common theme that emerged was a desire to move beyond approaches to behaviour change that take the current economic and consumer framework for granted. Participants questioned consumer culture and argued that, at some point, it would be necessary to open up broader conversations about sustainable consumption if we are to make further progress:

‘The way I see it is that we pay far too little. We value other things more than we should value the important things. I gave the example of a big screen TV compared to getting solar hot water service...I thought the global financial crisis also would maybe alter our view—reassess our priorities, but we haven’t really’ (Local Government representative).

‘I guess there’s a lot more discussion now about—well it’s not about stopping growth but it’s about slower growth or more sustainable growth. Some of those sort of had a few conversations about collaborative consumption which I think is really interesting as well, about sharing resources. You don’t need to have a car each; we could share a car, share a bike or share a lawn mower. I think that kind of conversation is great ‘cause it’s building community and going back to community’ (NGO representative).

‘That whole notion of consumption is completely different from what it was 50 years ago. I would love to see government play a role in that. I don’t know that they will. But I think it would be fabulous because it’s like it’s rolling down hill, the whole notion is rolling down hill and there is no brake on it in any way. So the people who can least afford it will have two or three TVs. It’s become an end in itself’ (State Government representative).

Some participants articulated how their short-term work on specific behaviour change initiatives could contribute towards their longer-term visions for a sustainable society:

‘So I think once it gets strong enough and they can’t just put you off as just hippies—just minorities—when you become the majority—the main stream—you have to be listened to’ (NGO representative).

While it often seemed that the change agents were very focused on their specific change initiatives it was clear that most saw their work as part of a bigger picture, contributing towards a long-term vision.

Conclusion: Communities of practice for a sustainable future

It is clear from my engagement with Australian change agents working to reduce community energy use that there is no unified practice of change agency in Australia. Participating change agents discussed diverse competences, materials and meanings that they integrate into their work, and these varied substantially from one practitioner to the next. This indicates that change agency is not a unified practice but a loosely connected bundle of interacting practices with many common elements.

The diverging practices of change agents become most apparent when we look at the motivations and meanings held by the participants. Change agents had markedly different theories about human behaviour, motivations for change and how individual and social change happens. These diverse meanings supported divergent program design, communication and evaluation practices. The diverse meanings and practices are consistent with the diversity of theoretical models of human behaviour and behaviour change in the literature (see Jackson 2005 for a review). There is no theoretical consensus on how best to facilitate change so it would be too much to expect consensus in practice.

While diversity can be a good thing, too much diversity makes communication between practitioners more difficult and impedes transfer of lessons from one context to another. An example that emerged during my research was the poor awareness that practitioners had of other similar programs. I identified three state government programs in different states that were working to support retailers to engage with the community at the point of sale, but none of the representatives of these programs were aware of the others. Similarly, several local governments were running workshops on installing solar panels and were unaware of the other programs. There is an untapped opportunity for change agents to engage with each other more to share lessons and develop improved practices.

As discussed by Shove (*et al.* 2012), current change creation practice tends to see the individual as central and behaviour change as a matter of choice, albeit subject to constraints posed by barriers to behaviour change. This is a pervasive meaning within current change

creation practices and it was evident from my interviews with change agents. This approach assumes that change agents exert an external, causal influence on behaviour that delivers clear, transferable lessons. The alternative view, grounded in social practice theory, is that change agents are in fact embedded in the systems of practice that they seek to influence and that outcomes are emergent, unpredictable and context-dependent (Shove *et al.* 2012). This new perspective necessitates a shift in the way change agents view their work, which was not yet evident in practice.

The question that arises is: what can be done to make change agent practices more effective? My primary suggestion is to consciously build communities of practice that can share successes and failures and support a more coherent bundle of change agent practices, while retaining necessary diversity. These communities of practice could focus on sharing and building skills for facilitating change, experimenting with new materials for making change tangible and discussing diverse theories of change to broaden the palette of change interventions available to practitioners. The intention would not be to develop a single, shared practice but to create a more stable space for learning and exchanging meanings. This is particularly important if change agents take the implications of a social practice framework seriously. Specifically, if change is an emergent property of the systems of practice in which change agents are engaged, then we need innovative, flexible and collaborative processes of conscious experimentation and testing in diverse contexts to arrive at strategies with a higher probability of success (APSC 2007). Social practice theory provides a language to support engagement between practitioners, so a secondary suggestion is for more change agents to become familiar with social practice theory and move beyond simplistic behaviour change models, as recommended by Shove (2010).

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