

# Research group rethinks sustainability

- ★ Many of us work in air-conditioned offices, drive to supermarkets to buy our food and then store it in freezers, without thinking whether these practices could be organised in a more sustainable way.
- ★ **Professor Dale Southerton** of the ESRC, Defra and Scottish Government funded Sustainable Practices Research Group tells us about their research into how social practices emerge and how they can be changed.

Over the last century numerous innovations have made everyday life more comfortable and convenient, and along with those innovations novel social practices have evolved. Many of us work in air-conditioned offices, drive to supermarkets to buy our food and then store it in freezers, without thinking whether these practices could be organised in a more sustainable way. That's an issue which lies at the core of the Sustainable Practices Research Group's (SPRG) agenda. "Our main objectives are to understand how certain kinds of practices emerge, how they're reproduced, and how they may change or disappear,"

outlines Professor Dale Southerton, Director of the SPRG at the University of Manchester. The group is comprised of seven projects, all pursuing research into the issues around sustainability and sustainable consumption. The projects address diverse issues, such as why indoor temperatures are converging on 22°C worldwide, how eating habits change and understandings of Zero Carbon Housing. But they share a theoretical approach. "We're highly critical of the dominant ways of thinking around consumption that you currently find in public policy," continues Professor Southerton. "So, at the moment, in policy terms, consumption is usually thought about as 'consumer behaviour' – individuals making decisions to buy something. So, to change consumer behaviour, you either adjust the price of goods, or you give consumers information to inform those purchasing choices. Alternatively you address the impact of consumption through technological innovation."

## Using Resources

Professor Southerton says a new approach is needed to improve sustainability. "A social practices approach addresses the problem not in terms of individual behaviour, or technological innovation alone, but in terms of the shared social practices through which people use resources, such as doing the laundry, cooking or driving. The first point is that you have to focus on how things are used. The second is that you have to understand

cleanliness or convenience. And those standards change over time," he says. "The second is the kind of material resources that are available to people, things like freezers, fridges and also infrastructures like roads and out of town shopping centres. The third element is competence and know-how – this includes skills, like driving, but also cultural competence like knowing what's 'a proper meal.'"

The material resources available to people have changed significantly over the recent past, which has had a corresponding impact on everyday life. To take just one example, something like 3 per cent of UK households in 1969 had a freezer, which had grown to 97 per cent by 1980, leading to changes in eating patterns. "The freezer was first marketed to store seasonal gluts of home produce. But with more people having freezers a frozen food industry developed, which began to change the way we shopped, cooked and ate. About a third of supermarket space is now devoted to frozen food. That undermines the need to have local shops, butchers and so on," explains Professor Southerton. This has led to freezers becoming ever more essential to everyday life. "You could say



that people have a choice, but the infrastructure providing our food has made the practice of cooking from frozen food easy and pushed out other practices of shopping, storing food and cooking. And the freezer is one of the most resource-intensive devices in our homes," continues Professor Southerton. "So the point here is that the material infrastructures around freezers have developed in such a way that it's locked the whole population into particular practices of eating."



One SPRG project has investigated different understandings of zero carbon living.

The aim here is not to make a judgment on frozen food, but to analyse it as part of social practices – driving, shopping, cooking – rather than as part of individual behaviour and choices. The policy interventions that have been most successful in changing established social practices are those which simultaneously addressed material infrastructures, cultural understandings and the conventions or rules that guide how

practices are performed; Professor Southerton points to Japan's Cool Biz campaign as an example. "In 2005 the Japanese government set about reducing the amount of energy used by air conditioning," he outlines. Cool Biz addressed a range of issues, rather than just individual behaviour; Professor Southerton points to three key elements of the campaign. "They changed the setting of the thermostats in their government

buildings, so air conditioning came on at 28° and not 24°. Then they relaxed the dress code. Japan had very formal dress codes – they had to make it ok not to work in a traditional business suit, or people would simply get too hot. So a social marketing campaign was aimed at changing the cultural norms within the workplace, to make it acceptable for people to wear short sleeves and no jackets, for instance." In 2006, Cool Biz resulted in an estimated 1.14 million ton reduction in CO2 emissions, equivalent to the annual emissions associated with the average energy use of 85,000 US homes.

The SPRG's 'Keeping Cool' project has explored similar themes. The project has investigated the processes through which air conditioning has increasingly come to be a normal expectation in a variety of indoor environments in the UK, including hospitals, offices and hotels, by analysing practices such as nursing, IT design, office work and hospitality management. "We've found the 'need' for air conditioning in many cases was not to keep people cool, but rather to keep office and hospital technologies cool," says Professor Southerton. "So a standardised indoor temperature is being engineered into our built environment and, in doing so, is coming to shape a wide range of social practices as increasingly energy-intensive".

The group's research focuses primarily on resources and resource intensity, but issues like economic sustainability and cultural context are also important considerations. The SPRG project on Drinking Water looked at how water drinking practices have come to take on their particular form in different cultural contexts. "If you contrast India with the UK, the provision of bottled water should be a right in India not a luxury, because in some places they haven't got a reliable supply of clean tap water," points out Professor Southerton.

### Wider impact

The SPRG wrote a report for the Scottish government, in which they reviewed behaviour change initiatives across the world, and Professor Southerton says it is having an impact on policy. "The Scottish government took the ideas from the report and have created a toolkit for policy staff to follow when developing initiatives," he says. There has also been interest in the group's research from the commercial sector; however, Professor Southerton

says their ideas require collaboration between governments and businesses to really change behaviour. “We’re talking about how you would shift a whole range of practices that are connected together, how would you shift ways of life? You can’t do that in a piecemeal fashion, by a nice, simple campaign around charging 5p for a carrier bag. There’s a problem about the scales at which policy operates.”

## We're talking about how you would shift a whole range of practices that are connected together, how would you shift ways of life? You can't do that in a piecemeal fashion

“We’ve just released another SPRG report – Interventions in Practice – which takes quite a lot of these arguments about how we need to re-frame the kinds of questions that policy-makers ask, so we can find the right kind of evidence to deal more systematically with changes in our way of life,” says Professor Southerton. The SPRG is working to bring their findings to wider attention, through both research papers and events with government and commercial partners. “We’ve set out to engage with people in non-traditional academic ways,” explains Professor Southerton. The SPRG’s finale event in London in September 2013 brought together an invited audience of over a hundred policy makers, academics, business people and NGOs. The event combined an exhibition and a panel

discussion, with distinguished speakers in the field of policy and sustainability, including Lord Gus O’Donnell, the former Cabinet Secretary and head of the Civil Service. The SPRG Exhibition showcased individual project research findings and integrated programme insights through poster displays, a short film, video presentation, audio installation and interactive exhibits. The SPRG plans

further events with Unilever and the Scottish Government.

“The SPRG hasn’t attempted to find universal answers to the problems it addresses or produce a single model of change towards sustainability,” says Professor Southerton. “Rather we’ve identified the context-specific processes that result in resource-intensive patterns of everyday consumption. For example, the ‘Keeping Cool’ and ‘Zero Carbon Living’ projects explore processes of standardisation in different contexts. More generally, our research shows that a practice perspective helps dissect the complexity of everyday life by providing insights into the ways in which practices are connected. It is these connections that offer the greatest potential for transition to more sustainable ways of living.”

Changing habits is a big issue for sustainability. The SPRG investigated how eating habits are formed and changed.



### At a glance

#### Full Project Title

Sustainable Practices Research Group (SPRG)

#### Project Objectives

The SPRG is a major, three year (2010-13) research collaboration across eight UK universities, bringing together leading social scientists in the field of sustainable consumption in seven projects. It seeks to understand the dynamics of social practices, cultural conventions, institutional processes and infrastructures in order to inform transitions towards more sustainable ways of life. The SPRG report 'Interventions in Practice: Re-framing Policy Approaches to Consumer Behaviour' and other publications are available from [www.sprg.ac.uk](http://www.sprg.ac.uk).

#### Project Funding

The three year programme is funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, the Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, and the Scottish Government.

#### Contact Details

Katrina Farrugia  
PA to Professor Southerton  
Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI)  
The University of Manchester  
188 Waterloo Place, Oxford Road  
Manchester, United Kingdom M13 9PL  
T: +0161 275 0189  
E: [katrina.farrugia@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:katrina.farrugia@manchester.ac.uk)  
W: [www.sprg.ac.uk](http://www.sprg.ac.uk)

Professor Dale Southerton



Project Director

Professor Southerton is Director of the SPRG, he is also Director of the Sustainable Consumption Institute, SCI Professorial Research Fellow and Professor of Sociology at The University of Manchester. He has published extensively in the fields of consumption/consumer culture, time use, material culture and sustainability.

