Journal of Consumer Behaviour
J. Consumer Behav. **9**: 454–469 (2010)
Published online in Wiley Online Library
(wileyonlinelibrary.com) **DOI:** 10.1002/cb.336

On conflicted Swedish consumers, the effort to stop shopping and neoliberal environmental governance

Cindy Isenhour*
Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky, 211 Lafferty Hall, Lexington, KY 40506, USA

- *Drawing on 14 months of in-depth ethnographic research, this paper explores the difficulties and barriers that Swedish citizen-consumers face in their attempts to reduce their environmental and social impacts. The research reveals that while many find it quite easy to turn off their lights, ride their bike to work, or buy organic apples, generalized anti-consumption proves to be much more difficult – even for the aware, interested, and committed men and women participating in this research. Contrary to the contemporary dominance of theories which link sustainable action to awareness, I argue that in the Swedish context the most significant barrier is not lack of information but rather concerns with conformity, equality, and fairness – suggesting that efforts to encourage sustainable living depend not only on appeals to reflexive and rational consumers or the promise of alternative identities, but also on structural changes that require political and industrial leadership. The research, therefore, raises questions about the effectiveness of neoliberal environmental governance and the contemporary focus on consumer responsibility in sustainability policy.*

Introduction

On a dark December afternoon in 2007, several hundred Swedes gathered in the heart of Stockholm to join a climate demonstration. The crisp winter air was full of anticipation as people milled around waiting for the approaching marchers. Momentum for the sustainability movement had been growing over the past several years in Sweden, bolstered by the release of the Stern Report, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's fourth assessment. By the time of the demonstration – the end of 2007 – coverage of environmental issues in Swedish daily newspapers had more than double their 2005 levels (Jagers and Martinsson, 2007). In this context, many Swedes concerned about sustainability spoke of a significant, almost palpable, momentum for the movement, centered on climate change. Although many Swedes like to joke that a rise in global temperatures would be a nice antidote for their frigid winters, there is a strong political and scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change in Sweden.

*Correspondence to: Cindy Isenhour, PhD, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky, 211 Lafferty Hall, Lexington, KY 40506, USA.
E-mail: cynthia.isenhour@uky.edu

According to the Environmental Protection Agency's most recent study, 89 per cent of Swedes consider themselves climate conscious and 84 per cent report that they have taken at least one measure to reduce their climate impact in the last 2 years (Naturvårdsverket, 2009).

The flashing lights of the police escorts came into view and the chants of the organizers grew audible as the climate march approached Sergel's Torg, the center of Stockholm's shopping district. Soon a sea of people came into view, preceded by a large banner which read, ''Change Lifestyles, Not the Climate.'' Just behind the banner were several smaller signs bobbing up and down with the advancing crowd. In a subversion of WWII posters designed to urge women to support the economy by shopping, the signs featured a retro-styled woman and the message ''Stop Shopping.''

While there were certainly many diverse perspectives expressed by the signs within the crowd, many, like those leading the demonstration, were targeted toward fellow citizens and consumers rather than political decision makers or the industrial elite. These messages, focused on a change of lifestyles, are highly reflective of contemporary sustainability thought in Sweden, Europe, and Internationally.

This paper explores how some Swedes concerned about sustainability are attempting to reduce their consumption of non-renewable and resource intensive products – many of them by trying to do exactly what the protest signs urged – to ''stop shopping.'' The research suggests that for those trying to make a smaller environmental impact, one of the hardest things to do is buy less. The paper explores this difficulty and argues that despite the contemporary popularity of theories which link consumption (and anti-consumption) to individual identity construction (Binkley, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2009) and sustainable behavior to awareness and rational decision-making, concerns with conformity, equality, and fairness are often more salient in the Swedish context. The social nature of the barriers that confront even these aware, engaged, and committed Swedes suggests that efforts to encourage sustainability depend on both consumer choice *and* political and corporate leadership.

Reflexive modernization and environmental governance: a literature review

While the early sustainability ideology of the 1970s tended to place the blame for environmental problems on resource degradation and population growth in the developing nations, the last 40 years have brought a growing recognition that the world's wealthiest societies are making a much more substantial – and disproportionate – impact on the environment (Adams, 2001). In 1991, this realization was explicitly stated in the World Conservation Union's report *Caring for the Earth* which argued ''a concerted effort is needed to reduce energy and resource consumption by upper income countries'' (WCU, 1991:44). One year later at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, delegates wrote

> *While poverty results in certain kinds of environmental stress, the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances (UN, 1992: 4.3)*

Following Rio, many of the world's wealthiest nations made significant attempts to institute the recommendations set out by the Declaration. In Sweden, these programs were influenced almost exclusively by ecological modernization thought (Hajer, 1995; Mol, 1997; Spaargaren, 1997) and thus focused on large technological projects designed to improve production efficiencies and reduce pollution (Feichtinger and Pregernig, 2005; Baker and Eckerberg, 2007).

DOI: 10.1002/cb

Despite the noteworthy improvements achieved by ecological modernization projects in many national contexts, it soon became apparent that the gains achieved were quickly being outstripped by the effects of significant and continued growth in per capita consumption, particularly within the world's wealthiest societies (Carolan, 2004; OECD, 2004). With heightened recognition of the relationship between growing consumption rates and global environmental challenges, the last decade has been marked by an increased emphasis on consumer-based responsibility and lifestyle choices (Hobson, 2002; Matti, 2009). The 2010 State of the World report, for example, is entitled ''Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability'' and myriad multinational organizations from the UN to the EU have instituted programs designed to encourage sustainable living. This focus is also made evident by a growing number of social movements and individual consumers who attempt to reduce the environmental impacts of their lifestyles by boycotting, buycotting, buying ecolabeled goods, or by borrowing, reusing, repairing, or simply doing without.

Most social theorists link the emergence of this focus on sustainable lifestyles to a process of ''reflexive modernization'' in late modern risk society (Beck, 1992) – a rational response to the negative effects of globalization and a growing body of knowledge about the ''consequences of modernity'' (Giddens, 1990). Based on this widespread and dominant assumption, policies designed to encourage sustainable consumerism in Sweden have focused almost exclusively on informational and awareness campaigns (Isenhour, 2010). They place hope in the idea that, through additional education, rational citizen-consumers will exercise their preferences for sustainability on the free market.

Many scholars have also pointed out that pro-environmental behaviors are also linked to an expression of individual environmental values. Indeed, there has been a recent explosion of theory linking consumerism and anti-consumerism to identity construction (Binkley, 2008; Lee *et al*., 2009). Drawing on the post-modern approach to consumerism (Firat and Dholakia, 1998), these perspectives view consumption as a project of identity construction, a logical position in complex urban contexts where people are rarely recognized by kinship, geographical roots, or the products of their labor – but increasingly the products they buy. Binkley has argued, drawing on Bauman (2000), that anti-consumption can be seen as an effort to re-embed oneself in social relations, even if one attempts to do so by linking with distant and imagined others – and even if mediated by consumerism. Unfortunately, in its celebration of human creativity and agency, much of this literature is essentially neo-functionalist and neglects the important role that shared cultural logics play in the construction and mediation of individual identities.

Critical scholars have refuted these dominant theories on consumer behavior, arguing that the turn toward sustainable lifestyles also reflects the contemporary dominance of neoliberal forms of environmental governance (Hobson, 2002, 2006; Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Matti, 2005, 2009). With the spread of neoliberal ideology internationally (Garsten, 2004), governments have increasingly devolved responsibility to citizen-consumers. Indeed as Halkier observed, ''it has become increasingly common to call upon so-called ordinary consumers to solve a range of societal and political problems. Environmental policies and food policies are no exception to this pattern'' (2001a:205).

Drawing on foundational structuralist perspectives (Baudrillard, 1981; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2000; Galbraith, 2000), these critics question that consumers can effectively drive significant change given their small sphere of influence relative to the myriad capitalist interests with a stake in sustained consumption levels and continued economic growth. Certainly, the focus on consumer choice and market-based solutions makes perfect neoliberal and political sense (Hobson, 2002) since it does not restrict personal choice or the market and is not explicitly anti-consumption or anti-growth. As such, many

DOI: 10.1002/cb

critical theorists view the current emphasis on consumer-responsibility and lifestyle choices as a new manifestation of the existing system, a defense of unequal access and ultimately a strategy for the powerful to defend their ability to choose and, therefore, to resist the regulation of resource-intensive, polluting, or socially damaging products.

Each of these alternative perspectives on sustainable consumerism has different implications. While reflexive modernization views sustainable consumerism as a rational response to perceived risk and thus proscribes educational and awareness campaigns, the post-modern inspired perspective implies that pro-environmental consumption behaviors are associated with the individual's attempts to create an alternative identity, suggesting the importance of marketing and advertising campaigns that can help individuals in this task. In contrast, structuralist perspectives question the efficacy of consumer- and market-based movements and, therefore, imply regulation and political leadership.

(Re)searching sustainability: methods

During 14 months of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork between July 2007 and August 2008, these debates were explored in Sweden – a nation well suited to such study given its unique combination of a thriving consumer culture, a strong and mainstream environmental ethic, and the nation's official and proactive focus on encouraging sustainable living. The research focused on Swedish citizen-consumers who were trying to reduce the negative ecological and social impacts of their lifestyles – many through anti-consumption. To contextualize their stories and actions, the research began with institutional interviews with 31 representatives from 24 governmental, non-governmental, and research organizations working on issues related to sustainability. This research was designed to provide insight into the assumptions that underlie dominant sustainability discourse, policy, and programs.

The next stage of the research aimed to understand both alternative consumer motivation and barriers to sustainability by focusing on Swedes who had made changes in their consumption behaviors and lifestyles in an effort to reduce their environmental impact. Because the population of these consumers was unknown, Haraway's (1991) concept of ''affinities'' was used to identify groups with a common ''affiliation and shared views or interest'' (Rocheleau, 1995). A call for participants sent to five groups resulting in 9–14 volunteers from each. In total, 58 individuals took part in this segment of the research, completing semi-structured interviews which included free lists, pile sorts, and Likert scales as well as an in-depth informal interview on topics ranging from views on nature and risk to environmental philosophies, thoughts on the economy, and barriers to sustainable living. A small subset of this sample (12 families) also participated in consumption inventories and histories, observations during shopping trips, and a series of iterative interviews.

There was also a strong participatory component in this research. Participant observation was utilized during demonstrations, during the meetings of groups working on issues related to sustainability, and at special events including press conferences, seminars, and symposia. These observations helped to build an understanding of the shared cultural logics of sustainability ideology and practice. Finally, there was an autoethnographic component in the research design (Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Hackley, 2007). During our stay in Sweden, my family followed the most recent recommendations for sustainable living. As such we repaired our shoes, rode our bikes, ate our leftovers, learned the public transportation routes, and oriented ourselves using a Google Earth map we made of the city's second hand stores. This experience and its contradictions contributed to an understanding of the infrastructure in place for more sustainable living and how even environmentally aware, engaged, and interested people frequently run into barriers.

DOI: 10.1002/cb

In the sections to come the findings of the research are presented, including a discussion of how these environmentally concerned Swedish consumers define and practice ''sustainability,'' the relative importance they place on generalized anti-consumption and their efforts to ''stop shopping,'' and the barriers they confront in their attempts to reduce the environmental impacts of their lifestyles.

Defining sustainable living

A month or so after the climate demonstration and winter holidays, Erik arrived at his office for our interview. A graphic designer and environmental educator, Erik had significantly reduced his work hours to spend more time with his two young children. A downshifter by definition, Erik felt passionately that Swedish society is simply too productive – leading to burnt out people and the destruction of the environment. He argued eloquently that people are wearing themselves out to buy things when in reality what most want is more time for leisure, friends, and family – an observation well documented in Sweden and many other geographical and cultural contexts (Schor, 1992; Erickson, 1997; CNAD, 2005; Larsson, 2007). Erik said,

> *I have one statistic. In 1995 to this year, during that time we have in Sweden 31% more money to spend per person. And food and things during that time have been dropping by 30% too. So we have much more money to spend than we did in 1995... Could we choose different things?... Well we can work less or we can give the money back to the people who are producing our extremely cheap computers that we are buying.*

In fact, Erik often placed significant emphasis on consuming less when speaking about sustainability. To get a sense for how Erik and all the other research participants conceptualized sustainable living and acted on their concerns I asked each research participant to free list all of the actions that an individual could take to live more sustainably. To no surprise, Erik's list focused on working less, buying less, and re-evaluating one's needs and desires.

Across the sample, the free lists revealed significant diversity. While many research participants, like Erik, complicated popular categorizations of sustainability-minded consumers as either concerned about personal or collectivist objectives (Binkley, 2008; Lee *et al*., 2009), others clearly fit into this dichotomy. Some were most concerned about their family's health and thus purchased ''natural'' foods and eco-labeled goods on occasion (when available and convenient). Others worried about the economic and social impacts of peak oil and, thus, concentrated their efforts on energy efficiency, self-sufficiency, and alternative technologies. Within the sample there were those who could be considered simplifiers, market activists, political consumers, green consumers, and anti-consumption consumers (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Iyer and Muncy, 2009), existing at every point on the spectrum between deep and shallow ecology (Naess, 1973), and between deep and bright green environmentalism (Wissenburg, 1993).

In total, participants listed 151 unique actions that an individual could take to live a more sustainable life – ranging from the conceptual, such as ''think about the purpose of life,'' to the specific and pragmatic such as ''put electronics on standby'' or ''compost egg shells''. These actions were consolidated into 20 categories (see **Table 1**). Despite variability, the free lists revealed many shared conceptualizations of sustainable living.

The overwhelming majority of research participants listed activities related to more sustainable food consumption (88%) and transportation (86%) but most interesting in the context of this paper is that two-thirds of the people participating in the research listed actions in the category ''buy less stuff'' (66%). It thus appears that despite the global nature of contemporary production chains and the commodity fetishism that mystifies the labor

DOI: 10.1002/cb

Table 1. Categories of ''sustainable'' actions listed

Food (buy organic, local, less meat, sustainable fish, free range)	88%
Travel (fly and drive less, public transport, walk, bike)	86%
Buy less stuff (cut back consumption, less stuff)	66%
Improve home efficiency (short showers, full loads, light bulbs, lights out)	60%
Reduce Waste (less packaging, recycle, compost)	47%
Cooperate (cooperative living, borrow, trade services)	47%
Use alternative technologies (appliances, cars, alternative energy)	45%
Educate yourself (do research, read newspapers, attend conferences)	45%
Change values (prioritize, think about what is important)	38%
Advocate (educate children, friends, blog, etc)	33%
Citizenship (vote, demonstrate, communicate to leaders)	28%
Join groups (support, join, get active)	28%
Do it yourself (grow/cook your own food, make things)	28%
Avoid chemicals (fewer cleaners, eco-labeled products, lawn chemicals)	22%
Reuse/ Repair (make things last longer, use what you have, get creative)	22%
Buy used (second hand, vintage, retro)	21%
Buy quality (longer life, high price, fair labor)	17%
Demand alternatives (talk to retailers, producers)	10%
Work less (work fewer hours, less money, more time with family/friends)	9%
Invest green (invest in environmentally responsible businesses)	2%

and resources embodied in products, the majority of these Swedes clearly believe that sustainability is about more than reducing energy flows around the home or buying green. Indeed, like Erik, many of them argue that their impact is tied not only to what they buy, but also how much they buy.

A significant and growing body of research suggests that these sustainability-minded Swedes may be correct about the importance of buying less. As Erik mentioned, spending power has increased significantly in Sweden since the early 1990s (SCB, 2010). Although this increased affluence has been unevenly distributed, the Goteborg Center for Consumer Science reports that – as a whole – Sweden has experienced significant growth in several sectors of household consumption over approximately the same time period, most notably in discretionary spending categories such as clothing, home décor, and leisure (GCKS, 2008). So despite a strong and mainstream environmentalism in Sweden, it is a wealthy nation with the most competitive economy in the EU (World Economic Forum, 2010). Standards of living are exceptionally high and Swedish consumers have access to the world of goods. Ironically, during the same month of the climate protest, the nation hit an all-time record in holiday spending (DN, 2007). Yet popular holiday presents, such as clothing, footwear, and recreational equipment, all have significant indirect environmental costs (Carlsson-Kanyama *et al.*, 2002; Naturvårdsverket, 2010).

Further, research suggests that the contemporary emphasis on green consumerism might also be driving more consumption – as consumers replace existing and functional products with more energy efficient models. So while efficiencies might significantly reduce the environmental costs of ''green'' products in the long term, sustained increases in per-capita consumption have the potential to outweigh gains (Stø *et al.*, 2008). Further, scholars have warned of the ''rebound effect'' (Greening *et al.*, 2000). For example, even though cars may be more efficient, drivers often rationalize driving more often and farther because of these fuel-efficiencies, offsetting gains. The increasing affordability of energy efficient vehicles also drives demand for the resource extensive production of new cars, regardless of the functionality of existing automobiles or the absence of plans for their further use or safe disposal.

Yet despite a high level of awareness about these factors and the belief that sustainable living is connected to buying less overall, many of the aware, interested, and committed

DOI: 10.1002/cb

Swedes participating in this research reported that, of all the sustainable actions they listed, it is particularly difficult to ''stop shopping.'' I discuss this observation in the next section before turning to an analysis of the reasons for this difficulty.

Reconciling awareness and practice: self assessments

Katrin, a gerontologist and single mother in her early 30s sat in her kitchen drinking coffee as we looked over the free list of sustainable actions she had just created. Like all research participants, I asked Katrin to take a second look at the list and to assess how good she was at doing each of the things she had listed. Katrin looked at the paper on the table and read the first item, ''eat less meat'' aloud. She then moved her pen along the boxes printed to the right of the free list mumbling ''really good, good, okay, bad, really bad'' as she read. Katrin paused for a moment to consider her choice before placing an ''×'' on ''really good.'' ''I have only had one serving of meat over the past few weeks'' she explained, ''and then it was only because I was home with a friend and didn't want to offend her.'' Katrin continued down her list, indicating that she was ''really good'' or ''good'' at things like buying seasonal foods, walking and riding the bus, and buying organic and fair trade goods. But when Katrin came to the line where she had written ''buy fewer things'' she slid her pen to the far right of the scale and marked ''really bad.'' She explained,

> *It is really difficult...because I have a teenage daughter...I am comfortable with what I do but she is still developing that. I cannot be the one to tell her that she does not need the new clothes or the cool mobile. We have to make compromises...I know we should not buy so much.*

Katrin felt that, compared to the other actions she listed, it was particularly difficult to buy less and admitted that she was not very good at doing it. I will return to a discussion of why in the pages to come but it is first necessary to illustrate that Katrin was not alone in her negative self-assessment of her efforts to buy less. In order to understand which sustainable actions were most difficult in practice and why, the results of the individual self-assessments were aggregated. For the most part, people rated themselves positively on actions for which there had been a general consensus among participants, indicating that to at least some degree high levels of awareness influence practice or the inverse. For example, of the 32 people who listed ''drive less,'' all but four said they were ''good'' or ''really good'' at doing so. Similarly, only eight of the 46 people who listed ''buy/eat organic foods'' said they were not good at this practice. In contrast, while there was also a strong consensus and awareness surrounding about the impact of buying less, significantly fewer people felt they were good at doing it. Out of 25 people who said ''buy less,'' only four said they were ''very good.'' In contrast, the majority said they were either ''okay,'' ''bad,'' or ''really bad.'' While many of the other 151 unique actions mentioned did not receive significant consensus, those that ranked highest in negative self-assessments were linked to generalized anti-consumption. For example, while only six people listed ''buy fewer clothes'', five considered themselves either ''bad'' or ''really bad'' at doing so. In the section to follow, I explore why generalized anti-consumption is so difficult for consumers like Katrin who are aware, interested, and committed to living more sustainable lives.

On identity, sociality and conformity: barriers to anti-consumption

Understanding the barriers that consumers find difficult to overcome is instructive (Wilk and Wilhite 1984; Press and Arnould, 2009), leading to an improved understanding of both creative human agency and the constitutive power of existing societal and market structures. Further, these insights often suggest

DOI: 10.1002/cb

pragmatic solutions. I argue that an exploration of barriers to sustainable living is particularly salient when working with consumers who are already aware, interested, and engaged. Certainly policy makers and marketers cannot expect consumers to take on the responsibility of ensuring sustainability if there are barriers that even those who are educated and committed cannot overcome. **Table 2** outlines the categories of barriers mentioned by participants, sorted by frequency of mentions. While these groupings, by nature, require abstraction and some references could certainly be placed in multiple categories, references were open coded by the author and an assistant, based on the participant's words in context to ensure coding reliability (Schensul *et al.*, 1999). As the table reveals, concerns about lack of information were not nearly as important to research participants as is often assumed by reflexive modernization theorists. While policy makers and environmental experts often presuppose that a lack of information and awareness are paramount, research participants were much more likely to talk about sociality and the difficulty of breaking out of everyday habits, customs, and norms. This could be anticipated given that research participants were selected for this study due to their awareness of and engagement with issues of sustainability. For them, information was clearly not the primary problem. Further, given the high levels of press coverage and awareness of sustainability issues in Sweden, it is unlikely that informational barriers are

Table 2. Categories of barriers mentioned, sorted by number of code references

	No. of participants	Total code references
Total social barriers	**58**	**79**
Social barriers	21	27
Inter-household negotiations	8	19
Fashion/media influence	10	14
Fear of missionizing/appearing self-righteous	10	10
Fitting in	7	7
Peer pressure/fear of relative depravation	1	1
Social stigma with 2nd hand	1	1
Total lifestyle barriers	**53**	**65**
Habit, customs, norms	18	21
Time	15	20
Lack of interest, unwilling	11	14
Easy to say and not do	5	5
Egocentrism	4	5
Total economic system/market barriers	**47**	**58**
Price	16	20
Economic system/market barriers	10	13
Availability and supply	9	12
Defense of power	4	4
People have too much money	4	5
Substandard quality	3	3
Lack of trust in labels or eco-programs	1	1
Total informational barriers	**33**	**38**
Lack of information and awareness	18	20
Information is overwhelming/depressing	7	10
Not reflexive or thinking	8	8
Total political barriers	**18**	**22**
Low self-efficacy	6	8
Government inaction	4	5
Assumption that government will take care of it	4	4
Fairness and equality (not fair I do it and others don't)	3	3
Finger-pointing and blaming others	1	2

DOI: 10.1002/cb

significant for most. When speaking in reference to their own efforts to live more sustainably, participants spoke about too much information and how overwhelming it is to try and keep up with all of the latest information about what one should not eat and do, or the merits of the latest technological advancement. In the sub-sections to come I discuss these barriers.

Political barriers

Twenty-two references were grouped in the category ''political barriers.'' Related to perceptions of appropriate governance, responsibility, and individual efficacy, these conversations pointed to the helplessness that many people feel when they believe that their actions are insignificant given those of others (individuals, states, organizations, or industries), who do not seem to take responsibility.

Felicia, a woman in her mid-forties, looked out a rain speckled window in a cafe, visibly frustrated as she explained how overwhelming it can be to make good decisions about what products and services have the smallest environmental impact. She wrung her hands and said,

> *I think that today the politicians are trying to put way too much on the consumer, that we have to make all these choices but they don't do anything to stop the companies that produce dangerous and harmful things. They tell us it is our choice but still we have a hard time to find out, and we are so affected by everyone else around us.*

Many like Felicia welcomed government regulation to help limit choices by, for example, banning the production and sale of products with significant and harmful environmental impacts.

While many scholars have suggested that pro-environmental behaviors are often inspired by a lack of government action (Micheletti, 2003; Press and Arnould, 2009), the Swedish state has been relatively proactive on these issues and yet Swedish citizens rank first among European citizens who report boycotting or buycotting products for political reasons (Ferrer and Fraile, 2006). Still, this concern with governance makes sense in the Swedish context where a long history of social democracy and a strong welfare state have worked to emphasize solidarity, equality, and fairness. For many it seems unfair that, despite their convictions and passion for sustainability, they should have to forge a new social path without the support or acknowledgement of all Swedes, including industry and political leaders. They argued, as I will discuss in more detail momentarily, that it would be much easier to shop less if everyone others did so too.

Economic barriers

Economic and market barriers were even more common than those categorized as political, with 58 different references. These discussions most often centered on issues related to price, availability, or the substandard quality of environmental alternatives. While all the people participating in this research were located firmly within Sweden's middle class and could typically afford more expensive green products, some talked about a tipping point when, despite their desire to buy green, they simply did not feel they could justify the expense. During a shadow shopping trip to the grocery, a mother of three in her mid-forties Malin stood in front of the produce section for a confounding amount of time. She was looking back and forth between two signs, one for organic and the other for conventional cucumbers. When asked about the long delay, she explained ''usually I don't look... but I can't buy this (holding up the organic option) on principle...look at this (pointing to the sign with the cucumber)...it is more than two times the price!'' These barriers are much more significant for less privileged consumers, reminding us that the growth of markets for environmentally friendly alternatives is dependent on much more than rational individual choice. Nonetheless, Sweden is, in many ways, a very friendly place for consumers interested

DOI: 10.1002/cb

in green consumerism. Organic milk can be found in nearly every convenience store and the availability of ''green products'' continues to improve. Many thus feel, or are hopeful that barriers associated with price, availability, and quality are becoming less of an issue.

Lifestyle barriers

Despite the frequent mention of economic considerations, lifestyle barriers associated with overcoming routines, habits, and social norms were mentioned even more frequently. Research participants acknowledge that one must be interested in, think about, and care for sustainability in order to undertake the hard work of establishing new routines or to challenge existing societal habits and normative practices. Anders, for example, talked about the difficulty of breaking out of normal routines to look for alternative products. He said,

> *All I wanted was a chicken without all the additives and medicines. And to find it I had to bike all around the town after my work, it was not my usual way home. This is hard because it is so easy just to go to the Coop here – that is what I am used to and why not save the energy?*

As Frykman and Löfgren (1996) write, the ''force of habit'' is indeed a powerful psychological force. Our habits and routines are both comforting and necessary; they reduce whole series of potentially complex and mentally taxing decisions to effortless motion and help us to stay safely within the normative confines of the societies to which we belong. Yet the difficulty of changing one's lifestyle is not purely cognitive or psychological, Anders points out that at the most practical level it is a matter of time. Swedes talk often about the ''time crunch.'' As Elizabeth Shove insightfully argues, in today's society convenience and time-savings are absolutely crucial for people. Humans today work harder than ever and we are more productive as a global society than at any point in history, yet we have very little time for leisure (Schor, 1992; Sahlins, 2005; Shove *et al.*, 2009). Oftentimes, sustainable living is simply a matter of time and convenience.

Social barriers

Like Katrin, the single mother who found it so difficult to shop less due to her teenage daughter's needs to fit in, many research participants spoke about the social barriers associated with consuming less. Jacob, another research participant echoed Katrin's sentiments explaining,

> *You want your kids – not to be exactly in the mainstream of the culture you're living in because there are disadvantages. But, on the other hand, trying to raise your kids to be a little bit on the side, because it would be better for them, is also difficult because it's easiest for kids to be in the very middle when it comes to friendships.*

In fact, the largest number of barriers mentioned, and particularly in reference to anti-consumption and shopping less, can be classified as problems of sociality. This observation reminds us that consumption fulfills an important social function in our societies, helping us to signal belonging, mutual understanding, and adherence to shared societal norms and cultural logics. Today those of us living in complex post-industrial urban societies have little choice but to build our identities around symbolic objects that strangers can easily understand – possessions. Scholars have long studied material goods as tools for communication, signals of social status, group membership, and understanding of shared norms and values. While Katrin and Jacob talked about these social pressures on their children, adults too spoke of the pressure they feel to consume, to live like others, and to keep up with the latest trends. Some expressed concern that others would not understand them if they tried to lead by example and consume less. They worried that people would

DOI: 10.1002/cb

consider them missionaries, self-righteous, or living in bad taste.

Consider my discussion with Ebba, a student in her early 30s who felt considerable pressure to perform her own femininity through the consumption of the latest fashions. She said,

> *Well, 70% of all the clothes I buy are second hand, I don't buy anything new and sometimes I feel sorry for myself and ugly as a woman because I don't go into H&M and buy something.*

Yet Ebba is highly committed to the cause of sustainable living and while she worries that others may not understand why she does not wear the most fashionable clothing, and often experiences cognitive dissonance about her decisions, she is resolute.

Similarly, Thomas explained his decision to decorate his apartment in expensive but highly fashionable vintage mid-century Swedish modern design – a sustainable solution since it significantly reduced his demand for new goods. He said,

> *Sometimes people that don't know you very well don't understand if you're not buying anything new. They think that you are poor or that you're not well educated, that you don't have nice taste or that you are not successful. It is not that I really care what people think about me... I am secure...I know what I like, and I have always been interested in Swedish design.*

Ethnographers and citizens alike have long noted Sweden's strong culture of conformity – one likely rising out of a history of ethnic homogeneity and bolstered more recently by the legacy of a social welfare state has which long emphasized equality, fairness, and solidarity. An ''egalitarian ethos'' has emerged in Scandinavian culture as the result of this legacy (Gullestad, 1989). While Swedes like to say that they do not care what others think, their conformity to even the most informal social norms (e.g., standing in queues or the frequent utilization of the honors system) suggest otherwise.

Indeed many Swedes find it stressful to imagine living in a manner significantly different from their social peers, regardless of how much they adhere to environmentalist values. They suggest that it is simply too hard to go against the grain of Sweden's social logics, ignoring shared definitions of an adequate standard of living, necessary conveniences, and notions of good taste. Erickson's (1997) study of consumption in Sweden validates this finding illustrating that when priorities conflict Swedes typically place more emphasis on social considerations than those related to sustainability, despite awareness (see also Shove, 2004).

It is in this context that many Swedes trying to reduce their environmental impact find it difficult to stop shopping, not because they are unaware, but because successful communication in complex societies like Sweden's requires shared symbols and meanings. As Binkley notes there has been a recent explosion of theory linking consumerism and anti-consumerism to identity construction. While it is, in essence, often fairly easy to create a green identity with hemp clothing, organic wine, and a fuel efficient car, generalized anti-consumption presents much more of a challenge since material goods are key symbolic markers of identity.

Unfortunately identity-based approaches to consumption too often replicate the rhetoric of the individual whose decisions and identity performance are solely the product of personal values and preferences. We must remind ourselves, as Binkley writes, that there is an

> *''irreducible human need for both autonomy in one's free choices and embeddedness within the affirming limits of a human community...identity requires both freedom and security – freedom of the will to make choices unique to their own predicaments without undue constraint, yet security that the individual will not crumble under the weight of such freedom, that freely made choices will*

DOI: 10.1002/cb

ultimately cohere with norms shared by a larger group'' (2008:609).

Similarly, Douglas writes that

''Instead of starting from the individual confronting his own basic needs, cultural theory starts from a system in which a consumer knows that he is expected to play some part or he will not get any income. Everything that he chooses to do or to buy is part of a project to choose other people-. . .the forms of consumption which he prefers are those that maintain the kind of collectivity he likes to be in'' (2004:145).

Indeed, scholars from many different disciplines have long pointed to the social nature of consumption (Orlove and Rutz, 1989; Wilk, 1993; Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 2008) and the growing importance of cultural perspectives in consumption theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Most recently Miller (2010) has argued, drawing on his global denim project, that jeans are often not so much about the creation of a unique identity, but rather demonstrate the social value placed on fitting in and simply being ''ordinary''.

A normally soft spoken research assistant in his late 20s, Matts spoke about many barriers that prevent him from living as he would like, but grew markedly louder and more passionately as he described the lack of social understanding for his type of anti-consumption behaviors. He said,

Well it's very difficult to live as I would like,. . . socially, that's a big problem. . .not having certain things like a mobile phone, it's not accepted. People think you are really weird, (they say) 'why are you doing this?' – they just simply can't understand and find it somehow offensive and a huge inconvenience. Even not having a driver's license,. . . it's not a problem for me but it's questioned socially.

While generalized anti-consumption can certainly signal individual identity and group belonging, it does not function well as a shared symbol in Sweden's consumer society. Many of those most committed to generalized anti-consumption are attempting to create new meanings, and new sub-cultures are certainly emerging around high profile anti-consumption activists like those associated with ''The Compact'' and the ''No Impact Man'' in the US or with ''*Köpstopp*'' (buy nothing) in Sweden. Regardless the practice is not mainstream leading some, like Thomas, to fear that their anti-consumption will be mistaken for poverty or lack of taste.

Many of the research participants – in the context of Sweden's conformist culture and strong emphasis on equality, solidarity, and fairness – thus feel that sustainable living efforts cannot succeed without political leadership to help those consumers who are not as interested to become engaged. Erik alluded to this sentiment during the final moments of our meeting saying,

In the last years I realized that I am depending on politicians and political questions. . .the global future is depending on big political questions and decisions. I really realize that it is. . . important that I and my family. . . are going forward, that we are in the front of these things and talking about it and showing how (others) could do it. But it is not enough. It is important, but it is not enough. You have to help people that are not interested and aware of these things as I am.

Conclusion: engaged governance and addressing barriers beyond awareness

The recent turn toward sustainable lifestyles and consumer-based responsibility is certainly a positive development in many ways. Indeed, many of the world's most prolific consumers remain unaware of the connections between, for example, their summer driving tour and the BP Oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or their new

DOI: 10.1002/cb

shirt and the water required from a thirsty Bangladeshi village to produce it. My intent here is not to argue that informational, awareness, or social marketing campaigns are not important. Certainly they are extremely important. It is imperative that citizens of the global north significantly reduce consumption levels – ensuring a reduction in emissions, the conservation of natural resources, and the capacity for humans in developing economies to benefit from their fair share of the world's resources. This case study about Swedes who are concerned with sustainability is, instead, intended to demonstrate that while awareness is important, there are significant barriers that knowledge and awareness cannot confront. If indeed sustainability requires the world's most privileged and practiced consumers to consume less, this research suggests that consumer demand may not be enough to influence this change.

Sweden's political and cultural history have worked to emphasize fairness and equality. As such many Swedes consider their efforts to consume less part of a larger project to ensure a fair distribution of resources globally (Isenhour, 2010). But at the same time this egalitarian ethos and focus on solidarity within Sweden means that many Swedes are hesitant to separate themselves from the comfort of mainstream consumerism and to abandon the safety of Swedish cultural symbols and normative frameworks. In order to encourage reduced consumption of tangible goods and services, and to move beyond the current focus on more efficient products or the reduction of energy flows, it is unlikely that a small but committed group of consumers can influence significant change. These barriers, already difficult for those aware and interested are likely insurmountable for those with less interest. Further, the current focus on consumer choice and sustainable lifestyles is not as democratic as it might appear. Not all consumers are equal in their ability to mediate their identities and link to new forms of sociality through their consumer behaviors.

This raises questions about whether the recent focus on consumer responsibility and choice can deliver more sustainable consumption patterns and lifestyles. The research presented here suggests that no matter how aware, reflexive, concerned about sustainability, and committed to making a smaller environmental impact, the men and women participating in this study confront significant barriers as they try to live more sustainably. Their attitudes, behaviors, and actions are not solely the product of their own personal values, interests, and agency. Humans are social creatures and we are all governed by the societies in which we live. It is imperative that we recognize that ''consumer culture'' is more complex than aggregated individual choice. Our cultures are products of history and context. They rise out of, reflect, and simultaneously structure our material realities, productive systems, methods of exchange, social organizations, and political structures. To assume that consumer education and behavior modification can alter the culture of consumption without a simultaneous change in these deeply embedded structures is at best overly optimistic and at worst simply naïve. This is not to say that significant change requires a complete upheaval of all contemporary human creations. At the very least, consumer responsibility and choice must be complimented by corporate leadership to develop less damaging products, more accurate systems of valuation, and more efficient distribution channels. Further, public policies and programs must also be implemented to encourage this process, remove barriers to sustainable living, and ensure a more equitable distribution of natural resources and environmental risks. Without mutual cooperation, the contemporary focus on consumer responsibility and choice is not likely to result in significant long-term change – no matter how many people change their light bulbs or buy ecolabeled laundry detergent.

Acknowledgements

The research was sponsored by the US Fulbright Program, the American-Scandinavian Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for

DOI: 10.1002/cb

Anthropological Research, and the University of Kentucky Graduate School.

Biographical notes

Cindy Isenhour received her PhD from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kentucky in August 2010. She is currently teaching at the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Her research interests are located at the intersection of political ecology, economic anthropology, and consumption theory. With support from the Fulbright Program, the American-Scandinavian Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the University of Kentucky Graduate School, Isenhour has most recently conducted dissertation research on sustainability policy and practice in Sweden.

References

Adams WM. 2001. *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in the Third World*. Routledge: New York.

Adorno TW, Horkheimer M. 2000. The culture industry: enlightenment as mass deception. In *The Consumer Society Reader*, Schor JB, Holt DB (eds). New York Press: New York; 3–19.

Arnould EJ, Thompson CJ. 2005. Consumer culture theory: twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research* **31**: 868–882.

Baker S, Eckerberg K (ed.). 2007. *Pursuit of Sustainable Development: New Governance Practices at the Sub-National Level In Europe*. ECPR Studies in European Political Science. Routledge: New York.

Baudrillard J. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Signs*. Telos Press: St Louis.

Bauman Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

Beck U. 1992. *Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage: New Delhi.

Binkley S. 2008. Liquid consumption: anti-consumerism and the fetishized de-fetishization of commodities. *Cultural Studies* **22**(5): 599–623.

Bochner AP, Ellis C. 2002. *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*. Alta Mira Press: Walnut Creek.

Bryant RL, Goodman MK. 2004. Consuming narratives: the political ecology of alternative consumption. *Transcripts of the Institute for British Geographers* **29**: 344–366.

Carlsson-Kanyama A, Pipping Ekström M, Shanahan H. 2002. Urban households and consumption related resource-use. In *Changes in the Other End of the Chain*, Butijn CAA, Groot-Marcus JP, Van der Linden M, Steenbekkers LPA, Terpstra PMJ (eds). Shaker Publishing: The Netherlands; 317–325.

Carolan MS. 2004. Ecological modernization theory: what about consumption? *Society and Natural Resources* **17**: 247–260.

Center for the New American Dream (CNAD). 2005. New American Dream Public Opinion Poll. Available at http://www.newdream.org

Dagens Nyheterr. 2007. Julhandeln Mot Nytt Rekord. November 18, 2007.

Douglas M. 2004. Consumers revolt. In *The Consumption Reader*, Clarke DB, Doel MA, Housiaux KML (eds). Routledge: New York.

Douglas M, Isherwood B. 1996. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (revised edn). Routledge: London.

Erickson RJ. 1997. *Paper or Plastic: Energy, Environment and Consumerism in Sweden and America*. Praeger: Westport, Connecticut.

Feichtinger J, Pregernig M. 2005. Imagined citizens and participation: local Agenda 21 in two communities in Sweden and Australia. *Local Environment* **10**(3): 229–242.

Ferrer M, Fraile M. 2006. Exploring the Social Determinants of Political Consumerism in Western Europe. *Working Papers Online Series 57/2006*. Available at: http://portal.uam.es [2nd December]

Firat AF, Dholakia N. 1998. *Consuming People: From Political Economy to Theaters of Consumption*. Routledge: London.

Frykman J, Löfgren O. 1996. *Force of Habit: Exploring Everyday Culture in Sweden*. Lund University Press: Lund.

Galbraith JK. 2000. The dependence effect. In *The Consumer Society Reader*, Schor JB, Holt DB (eds). New York Press: New York; 20–25.

Garsten C. 2004. 'Be a Gumby': the political technologies of employability in the temporary staff-

DOI: 10.1002/cb

ing business. In *Learning to be Employable: New Agendas on Work, Responsibility, and Learning in a Globalizing World*, Garsten C, Jacobsson K (eds). Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.

Göteborg Center for Consumer Science (GCKS). 2008. *Konsumptionsrapporten 2008*. Handelshögskolan vid Göteborg Universitet.

Giddens A. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

Greening LA, Greene DL, Difiglio C. 2000. Energy efficiency and consumption—the rebound effect—A Survey. *Energy Policy* **28**(6/7): 389–401.

Gullestad M. 1989. Nature and everyday life in Scandinavia. *Folk* **31**: 171–181.

Hackley C. 2007. Auto-ethnographic consumer research and creative non-fiction: exploring connections and contrasts from a literary perspective. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* **10**(1): 98–108.

Hajer M. 1995. *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.

Halkier B. 2001. Consuming ambivalences: consumer handling of environmentally related risks in food. *Journal of Consumer Culture* **1**(2): 205–224.

Haraway D. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge: New York.

Hobson K. 2002. Competing discourses of sustainable consumption: does the 'rationalization of lifestyles' make sense? *Environmental Politics* **11**(2): 95–120.

Hobson K. 2006. Bins, bulbs, and shower timers: on the 'techno-ethics' of sustainable living. *Ethics, Place and Environment* **9**(3): 317–336.

Isenhour C. 2010. Building sustainable societies: a Swedish case study on the limits of reflexive modernization. *American Ethnologist* **37**(3): 511–525.

Iyer R, Muncy JA. 2009. Purpose and object of anti-consumption. *Journal of Business Research* **62**(2): 160–168.

Jagers S, Martinsson J. 2007. *Svensk Opinion i Klimat- och Havsmiljofagor: Nya Siffor fran SOM-Institutet*. Goteborgs Universitet, SOM Institutet.

Larsson J. 2007. *Om Föräldrars Tidpress: Orsaker och Förändringsmöjligheter*. Forskningsrapport nr 139, Sociologiska Institutionen, Göteborgs Universitet.

Lee MSW, Fernandez KV, Hyman MR. 2009. Anti-consumption: an overview and research agenda. *Journal of Business Research* **62**(2): 145–147.

Matti S. 2005. A Swedish environmental norm? Exploring the normative foundations of Swedish Environmental Policy. *SHARP Working Paper 3*, SHARP Research Progamme.

Matti S. 2009. Exploring public policy legitimacy: a study of belief-system correspondence in Swedish Environmental Policy. *Doctoral Thesis*, Luleå Tekniska Universitet, Luleå.

Micheletti M. 2003. *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*. Palgrave Macmillan: New York.

Miller D. 2008. *The Comfort of Things*. Polity: London.

Miller D. 2010. Anthropology in blue jeans. *American Ethnologist* **37**(3): 415–428.

Mol A. 1997. Ecological modernization: industrial transformations and environmental reform. In *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, Redclift M, Woodgate G (eds). Edward Elgar: London; 138–149.

Naess A. 1973. The shallow and the deep, long range ecology movements: a summary. *Inquiry* **16**: 95–100.

Naturvårdsverket (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency). 2009. *Allmänheten och klimatförändringen 2009, Rapport 6311*, Stockholm, Sweden.

Naturvårdsverket (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency). 2010. The Climate Impact of Swedish Consumption. Electronic document. Available at: www.naturvardsverket.se [20 April 2010]

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development OECD. 2004. *Towards Sustainable Household Consumption: Trends and Policies in OECD Countries*. OECD Publishing: Paris.

Orlove BS, Rutz. HJ. 1989. *The Social Economy of Consumption*. University Press of America: New York.

Press M, Arnould EJ. 2009. Constraints on sustainable energy consumption: market system and public policy challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, **28**(1): 102–113.

DOI: 10.1002/cb

Rocheleau D. 1995. Maps, numbers, text and context: mixing methods in feminist political ecology. *Professional Geographer* **47**(4): 458–466.

Sahlins M. 2005. *Stone Age Economics*. Routledge: London.

SCB Statistica Centralbyran. 2010. Income Gap Widens. Electronic document. Available at: http://www.scb.se/Pages/PressRelease____163535.aspx [19 April 2010].

Schensul S, Schensul JJ, LeCompte MD. 1999. *Essential Ethnographic Methods*. Alta Mira Press: Walnut Creek.

Schor JB. 1992. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. Basic Books: New York.

Shove E. 2004. *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*. Berg: London.

Shove E, Trentmann E, Wilk R (eds). 2009. *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*. Berg: London.

Spaargaren G. 1997. *The Ecological Modernization of Production and Consumption: Essays in Environmental Sociology*. Thesis Landbouw Universiteit: Wageningen.

Stø E, Throne-Holst H, Strandbakken P, Vittersø G. 2008. Review: a multi-dimensional approach to the study of consumption in modern societies and the potential for radical sustainable changes. In *System Innovation for Sustainability: Perspectives*, Tukker A, Charter M, Vezzoli C, Stø E, Andersen MM (eds). Greenleaf Publishing: Sheffield, UK; 234–254.

United Nations. 1992. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development Document A/CONF.151/26* (Vol. I).

World Conservation Union (WCU). 1991. Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living. Gland, Switzerland.

Wilk R. 1993. Altruism and self-interest: towards an anthropological theory of decision making. *In Research in Economic Anthropology* **14**: 191–212.

Wilk R, Wilhite H. 1984. Household energy decision making. In *Families and Energy, Coping With Uncertainty*, Kempton W, Morrison B (eds). Michigan State University: Lansing; 449–459.

Wissenburg M. 1993. The idea of nature and the nature of distributive justice. In *The Politics of Nature*, Dobson A, Lucardie P (eds). Routledge: London; 3–20.

World Economic Forum. 2010. *Lisbon Review 2010: Toward a More Competitive Europe*. World Economic Forum: Geneva, Switzerland.

DOI: 10.1002/cb