

Sustainable Consumption: How can consumers be motivated to change lifestyles and consumption patterns?

1. Project co-ordinator

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2. Objectives

For each attempt at changing consumer activities and lifestyles there is a need to better understand the determinants of consumer behaviour. Until now, most attempts to change consumer behaviour in an environmentally friendly direction have focused on isolated habits or groups of habits (like participation in a recycling programme, lowering the thermostat, or saving water) rather than on achieving sweeping changes in lifestyles. As a consequence, most research aimed at improving the basis for environmental policy has focused on providing insight in consumer behaviour -- and its causes -- within narrow sectors (waste, water, organic food products, etc.). This is apparent in Danish as well as foreign and international reviews of the literature (Gray, 1985; Ölander & Thøgersen, 1995; Thøgersen, 1995).

Based on a review of relevant research on specific and overall behaviour modification and through primary data collection, it is the objectives of this project to clarify the connections, similarities and dissimilarities between sector-specific and overall behaviour modification, to develop and test an economic-psychological model for the understanding and prediction of change to a sustainable consumption pattern, and to develop recommendations for policies that facilitates the change process.

3. Work content

Which of the following is the quickest road to sustainable consumption: the road of the small steps, where one hopes that one step leads to the next, or the detour via the main road of influencing general values and norms, where one hopes that the new values and norms lead to more reasoned lifestyle changes?

Currently, the behavioural sciences are not able to provide scientifically based answers as to which road is preferable. The main reason is that most research, as mentioned, has concentrated on studying consumer behaviour within narrowly defined sectors.

We even lack scientific knowledge about how individuals' propensities to behave in an environmentally friendly way in different domains or situations are related to each other. The international literature contains studies that report positive correlations between people's propensities to behave in an environmentally friendly way across domains (e.g., Berger, 1995) as well as studies that fail to find such correlations (e.g., De Kruijk & van Raaij, 1991; Stern &

Oskamp, 1987). We are only aware of a single, preliminary, study that investigates this issue on Danish data (Thøgersen, 1996).

There are good arguments both for and against a hypothesis about interrelated propensities to behave in an environmentally friendly way in different situations.

It is possible that environmentally friendly behaviour often requires knowledge or a willingness to seek information that are more prevalent in some people than in others. If this is true, these people would more often than others, everything else being equal, behave in an environmentally friendly way in any specific domain. A positive relationship across domains may also have causes of a psychological nature. The hypothesis that environmentally friendly behaviour has a tendency to "spill over" into other behavioural domains (Frey, 1993; Thøgersen, 1996) is backed by a group of psychological theories (especially Balance Theory and Dissonance Theory) that claim that we have a need to avoid inconsistencies in our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (for an overview, see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Bem's (1972) Self-Perception Theory of attitude formation gives additional support to this hypothesis. This theory predicts that if a person starts behaving environmentally friendly in one area (e.g., separating one's waste for recycling), that person's attitudes and self-image are likely to change in a way that increase his or her preparedness to behave environmentally friendly in other areas.

However, other arguments support the view that correlations between behaviours in different situations or domains are small, non-existing, or perhaps even negative. Environmentally friendly behaviour in specific settings is sometimes interpreted as an attempt at making amends (e.g., Wenke, 1993). It is claimed that people to some degree perform relatively easy environmentally friendly behaviours (like participation in a municipal recycling program) in order to make it easier to reject performing more demanding or costly behaviours (like biking to work instead of going by car) (Halkier, 1997). Some psychological theories also suggest mechanisms that may block the "spill over" between behavioural domains, for example Schwartz's (1977) Norm Activation Theory. This theory predicts that when the personal costs of behaving in a way that primarily benefits others or the society at large are perceived to be too high people tend, as a defence reaction, to post-rationalise the situation. People may neutralise the moral attitude or norm dictating pro-social behaviour by denying that continuing their current behaviour has any serious consequences or by denying their own responsibility for solving the problems produced by their current behaviour (Schwartz, 1968, 1973, 1977; Schwartz & Howard, 1980).

An important objective of this research project is to

(a) determine the circumstances, if any, under which psychological mechanisms like those mentioned above interact in a virtuous circle with environmentally friendly behaviours spreading to more and more areas of the consumption pattern, and the circumstances under which the virtuous circle gets broken.

If the virtuous circle is broken, the objective is to

(b) detect the causes of breakages and to find effective ways of dealing with these causes.

Additional objectives are to

(c) determine whether it is a necessary prerequisite for a virtuous circle to emerge and last that the individual possess certain general values or ethical norms

and, if this is the case,

(d) to investigate possibilities for furthering these values and norms by educational and informational means.

In order to reach these objectives, a research design that deviates from most previous studies of consumer behaviour in the environmental field is needed.

Since the research questions concern evolution through time (changes in attitudes and behaviour), a panel study is needed. In a panel study, a sample of consumers is interviewed several times.

By interviewing the same consumers several times (the plan is to perform three interviews, each separated by a year) it is possible to investigate whether consumers who behave environmentally friendly in area A today are more likely than others to behave environmentally friendly in area B tomorrow, which would indicate that a virtuous circle is operating. (A one year interval is assumed to be appropriate both for detectable behavioural changes to develop and for minimising interviewer effects.) A panel study also makes it possible to investigate whether changes in environmental values, norms, and attitudes precede environmentally friendly changes in behaviour or the other way round. Hence, it is possible to answer the questions implied by objectives (a) to (d) above.

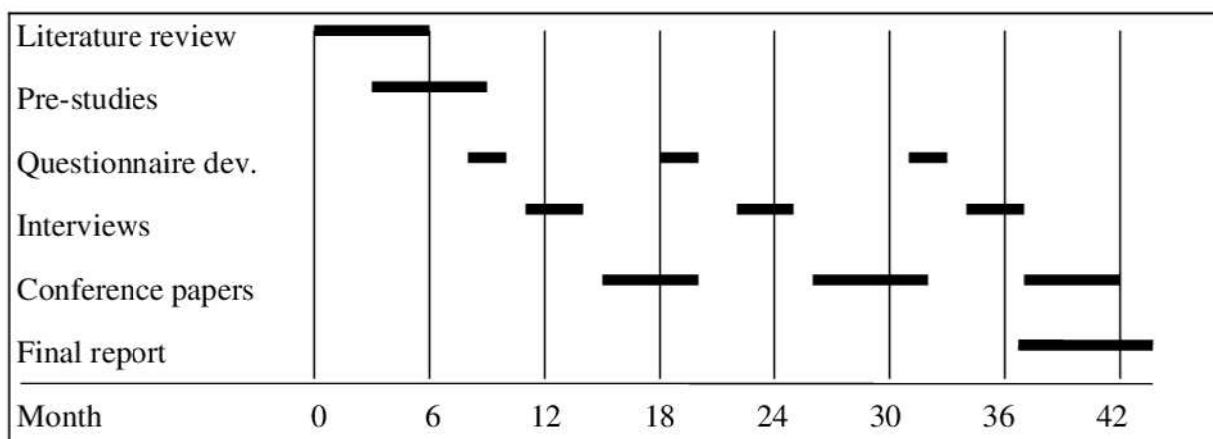
The data can be obtained by means of telephone interviews, but a large sample (at least 1,500) is needed for two reasons. (1) In a panel study, the initial sample inevitably gets reduced over time due to respondents dying or moving. (2) Some of the relationships that we are looking for may be weak (and even weaker in a survey than in "reality" due to inevitable deficiencies in the measurement instruments), but still important. Weak relationships can only be detected with statistical significance if the sample is large.

A number of pre-studies (focus group and individual open-ended interviews) are performed in order to detect areas with varying likelihood of "spill-over" and salient beliefs about the consequences of behaving in an environmentally friendly way (for inclusion in the survey).

Since the topic is relatively unexplored, researchwise, a broad and openminded approach is suitable which also makes it an excellent frame for a Ph.D. study. An attempt will be made to secure funds from other sources which will enable a Ph.D. student to be part of the project team.

4. Project milestones and deliverables

Figure 1: The project's time schedule



The main activities and their time schedule is illustrated in Figure 1, based on an assumed project start in July 1997. The activities will be reported in working papers and papers for international conferences (targeted for final publication in refereed journals). Working papers will be used to report literature reviews, results from pre-studies, and technicalities about the questionnaire and survey. Publication times are at the end of each activity (except questionnaire development) as indicated in Figure 1.

5. Benefits and strategic impacts

As emphasised in a recent Nature and Environment Policy Statement from the Danish Ministry of Environment and Energy, sustainability depends on radical changes in the total structure of production and consumption (Miljø- og Energiministeriet, 1995). Our short-sighted lifestyles are responsible for the depletion of scarce energy and material resources, pollution of air, water, and soil, and reduction in biodiversity, hence posing global and accelerating threats against future generations. The change to a sustainable consumption pattern is an enormous task the success of which--among other things--depends on the voluntary and willing participation of the consumers (Miljøverndepartementet, 1994). It is the responsibility of governments to develop and implement appropriate measures to strengthen consumer willingness to change consumption styles and to facilitate the transformation of this willingness into appropriate action.

For each attempt at changing consumer activities and lifestyles there is a need to better understand the determinants of consumer behaviour. Until now, most attempts to change consumer behaviour in an environmentally friendly direction have focused on isolated habits or groups of habits rather than on achieving sweeping changes in lifestyles. Most research aimed at im-

proving the basis for environmental policy has as well focused on providing insight in consumer behaviour -- and its causes -- within narrow sectors.

If we are to reach the ambitious goals summarised in the Danish Nature and Environment Policy Statement 1995 and in several similar statements from other governments and international organisations, strategy changes need to be considered both in policy and research. If the goal is to achieve more global and durable changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns, the effects of measures that are limited to an isolated sector and to closely specified behavioural changes within that sector (sorting glass and newspaper from the general waste, lowering thermostats, etc.) may be too limited as well. It seems reasonable to assume that the road to radical changes in the current consumption patterns goes through creating, in many consumers, a general norm, an ethical attitude that influences and determines the individual's action in a variety of consumption-related situations. However, it is also possible that the norms and values of Danish consumers are already ripe for behavioural changes, and that changes towards sustainable consumption primarily are blocked by other factors (e.g., lack of faith, knowledge, or opportunities).

The question of whether the road of the small steps, where one hopes that one step leads to the next, or the detour via influencing general values and norms, where one hopes that the new values and norms lead to more reasoned lifestyle changes, is the quickest road to sustainable consumption, is a fundamental question for those who want to facilitate the development towards a sustainable society: governments, public authorities, consumer organisations, and private companies relying on an environmental strategy. The choice, design and implementation of policy instruments (legal regulation, economic measures, information and attitude formation) are crucially dependent on one's expectations as to which of these roads leads most directly to the desired outcome.

We have made a first approach to the problem in our previous study financed by the Danish Environmental Research Programme (Thøgersen, 1996). The project suggested here takes off where our previous study ended and follows some of the most promising tracks ahead indicated by the earlier study.

6. Project management structure and project participants.

The project manager will be Associate Professor John Thøgersen. The scientific responsibility is shared equally between Thøgersen and Professor Folke Ölander.

John Thøgersen has a distinguished research and publication record and extensive project management experience (cf. his CV in the appendix). He is the author or co-author of 6 articles in refereed journals, 7 book chapters, and a large number of reports, working papers, and conference papers dealing with consumer behaviour and environment issues. Alone or as the leader of consortia of researchers, he has received larger grants (more than 1 Mill. DKK each) for research in the consumer behaviour and environment field from the Danish Social Science

Research Council, the Danish Food Research Programme, the Danish Transport Council, and the first Danish Environmental Research Programme. He has supervised two successfully completed Ph.D.-dissertations and a large number of master dissertations within the area. He is the co-ordinator of the Business and Environment Research theme at the Faculty of Business Administration, the Aarhus School of Business, and was a member of the board of the Centre for Social Science Research Concerning the Environment, CeSaM, during the period of the first Danish Environmental Research Programme. In 1993, he was a member of the Swedish Waste Research Council's programme development committee for research concerning the consumers' contribution to a sustainable Sweden.

Folke Ölander, Professor of Economic Psychology at the Aarhus School of Business, has published several books and articles dealing with consumer behaviour and consumer policy. Since 1992, part of his research has concerned the impact of consumer behaviour on the environment, and in 1995 he published a state-of-the-art review of the field in an international journal, in collaboration with John Thøgersen. Their joint research formed the basis of two keynote addresses presented by Ölander at two major international conferences in 1994 and 1995, in applied psychology and environment and society, respectively. In the first phase of the Danish Environmental Research Programme, his part of the Aarhus School of Business project dealt with overt consumer behaviour and "voicing" as different ways of expressing consumer concern for the environment. He has supervised one Ph.D.-dissertation and a number of masters' theses in the area. His work with environmental research also includes membership of two programme committees set up by the Norwegian Research Council in the fields of consumer research and sustainable production and consumption.

Professor Ölander is currently Editor of *Journal of Consumer Policy*, published by Kluwer Academic Publishers, and is past President of the International Association for Research in Economic Psychology (IAREP). He was a member of the Danish Social Science Research Council, 1976-1984, and Chairman of the Council, 1983-1984.

7. Relations to other SMP projects, international contacts and expected long-term impact

Besides interaction with other projects in this centre application, this project will benefit from interactions with foreign scholars in more and less formalised settings. It will also benefit from the project co-ordinators' close contacts with Danish and Nordic consumer research bodies, not least from a recent agreement with representatives from the National Consumer Agency of Denmark about future co-operation in the consumer-and-environment research area.

The applicants behind this application have discussed the project with colleagues from the Psychology Department at Gothenburg University during Professor Tommy Gärling's Visiting Professorship at our department in the fall of 1996 and during several shorter stays in

Gothenburg and Aarhus. As a consequence, some of our ideas have been integrated into Gärling's research plans in the transport field and in Associate Professor Anders Biel's current study of the demand for organic food products in Sweden. These contacts will be continued and intensified in the future.

John Thøgersen is the Danish collaborator in an international consortium behind the project "Consumer demand for eco-efficient products (CDEP) in nine EU countries and in Chile." (An application for support from the EU Environment and Climate programme is currently being reviewed.) The core of the project is a comparative survey aiming at uncovering consumer demand for eco-efficiency in durables. The project co-ordinator is Georgios Papastefanou, Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (ZUMA), Mannheim, Germany. Besides from Germany and Denmark, there are participating institutions from Italy, the Netherlands, UK, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Spain, and Chile.

An important source of international contacts and collaboration is international conferences. The applicants have a history of regularly presenting their work at esteemed conferences in the areas of applied psychology, economic psychology, consumer behaviour, and marketing. The editorial board of the Journal of Consumer Policy has asked the applicants to be co-organisers (together with a German scholar) of a conference in 1997 on consumer behaviour and environment with the aim of producing a special issue of the journal.

The study proposed here reflects a long-term commitment of the applicants and the Faculty of Business Administration of the Aarhus School of Business. Since 1987, John Thøgersen has focused most of his research effort on consumer behaviour and the environment and since 1992 it has also been a priority area in Folke Ölander's research. In recent years, environment and business research has evolved to a prioritised research area of the Faculty of Business Administration (see the School's web site at <http://www.hha.dk>) and environmental issues are getting increasing coverage in the Faculty's educational curricula as well, including several courses at the Master's level and a new part-time MBA specialisation in environmental management.

8. Financial information.

Budget 1997-2000, kDKK

Salary	1997	1998	1999	2000	1997-2000
(1) Senior researchers		191	200		391
(2) Ph.D. students					
(3) Administrative personnel	30	92	95	97	315
Total salary	30	283	295	97	705

Expenses					

(4) Ph.D. fee					
(5) Equipment					
(6) External services		500	335	300	1135
(7) Travel		40	40	50	130
(8) Other		10	10	10	30
Total expenses	0	550	385	360	1295

Total salary and expenses	30	833	680	457	2000
(6) Overhead, 20%	6	167	136	91	400
Total	36	999	816	549	2400

(1) Sabbatical.

(3) Secretary and student assistance.

(6) 3 x CATI interviews, first time 1,500 respondents à 30 min., next times a somewhat lower number à 20 min., Jysk Analyseinstitut.

9. Educational effect

Project results will be communicated to students in the senior researchers' regular teaching primarily at the master, MBA, and doctoral levels (courses in consumer behaviour and the environment, environmental consequences of economic activity, and "green marketing").

10. Dissemination plans

The primary dissemination channels for the results of this project will be scientific conferences and journals and lecturing to student and practical user audiences. The project will result in a minimum of three conference papers and three articles in refereed journals, besides a number of reports and working papers. Besides the regular courses mentioned above, the applicants have in the past frequently been asked to present their research results for academic and practical user audiences. We assume this to happen also in the future. The project coordinators' close contacts with the National Consumer Agency of Denmark and other Danish and Nordic consumer and environmental research and administrative bodies provide other important dissemination channels.

11. Ongoing projects and previous proposals.

This (or a similar) application has not been submitted to any other research programme.

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Appendix A: CV of project coordinator.

John Thøgersen
 Born 23 Juni 1955
 Married, four children

Work:

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Academic Education

M.Sc. (econ) Aalborg University 1980.

Ph.D. Aalborg University 1985. Thesis title: "Omstilling i tekstil- og beklædningsindustrien"
 (Structural change in the textile and clothing industry)

Scientific career

- 1995-1996 Visiting Scholar, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University.
- 1993-1995 Research Scholarship from the Faculty of Business Administration, the Aarhus School of Business (on leave from Associate Professorship).
- 1986-1993 Associate Professor, the Department of Marketing, the Aarhus School of Business.
 and 1996-
- 1981-1985 Research fellow, the Department of Production, Aalborg University, the Economics Department, the University of Copenhagen (6 months), and Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex (6 months).
- 1980-1981 Academic secretary for the Unemployment Research Initiative, the Danish Social Science Research Council.

Other positions

- 1994- Coordinator for the Business and Environment Research theme at the Economics Faculty, Aarhus School of Business

- 1993 Member of the Swedish Waste Research Council's programme development committee for research concerning the consumers' contribution to a sustainable Sweden.
- 1992- Member of the board of Centre for Social Science Research concerning the Environment, CeSaM.
- 1991- Censor, business economics, Odense University and the Business School of Southern Jutland.
- 1989- Censor, business economics, Aalborg University.
- 1987-1993 Member of the Council and the Section Council concerning the university sector of the Lawyers and Economists Union.
- 1987-1993 Representative for the research and teaching staff at the Economics Faculty, the Aarhus School of Business.
- 1987-1988 Member and chairman of the Pedagogical Committee of the Staff-Student Study Committee of the Economics Faculty, the Aarhus School of Business.
- 1986-1988 Member of the Staff-Student Study Committee of the Economics Faculty, the Aarhus School of Business.

Major research grants

- 1994 The Danish Transport Council, approx. 2,5 mill. DKK for project on regulation of transport behaviour.
- 1992 The Danish Environmental Research Programme, Det Strategiske Miljøforskningsprogram, approx. 2,5 mill. DKK for project on regulation of households' waste related behaviour, focusing on acquisition, use, and disposal. (Four applicants with John Thøgersen serving as coordinator.) The project is allocated in Centre for Social Science Research concerning the Environment, CeSaM.
- 1991 MD Foods, approx. 400.000 DKK for project on the importance of the packaging's environmental characteristics for German consumers' food choice. Cooperative project under the auspices of the Danish Food Research Programme. Allocated in the MAPP centre at the Aarhus School of Business.

- 1990 The Danish Food Research Programme, approx. 2 mio. DKK for project on the importance of the packaging's environmental characteristics for consumers' food choice. Allocated in the MAPP centre at the Aarhus School of Business.
- 1988 The Danish Social Science Research Council, approx. 1,5 mio. DKK for project on the regulation of waste disposal behaviour.
- 1986 The Danish Social Science Research Council, approx. 100.000 DKK for a 2 months stay at University of Sussex, Science Policy Research Unit.
- 1981 The Danish Social Science Research Council, approx. 1,2 mio. DKK for project on the employment consequences of technological and structural changes in industry.

Selected publications

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