P5.1-1 Can Sustainable Lifestyles `Trickle Up´?

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Evidence shows that although people who live sustainable lifestyles tend to be generally happier and more satisfied with life, they find it difficult to keep on living sustainably, as they often find themselves going against mainstream values, norms and institutions. People who try to behave differently are often subjected to social rejection, which is felt in the same way / same part of the brain as physical pain – fitting into a social group by doing what is normal and socially acceptable is on some level a real need if we are to avoid the pain of rejection. This is just one example of the way in which the structures and values of society significantly influence how easy or difficult it is for people to live sustainably. Therefore, there is a need for policy-makers to review and influence existing overarching social paradigms, in order to make it easier to adopt sustainable lifestyles.

Although some sustainable behaviour has been already widely promoted and accepted, such as recycling or reducing household energy consumption, it can also lead to some sort of motivational rebound effect where people feel they have 'done their bit' , and use this to justify other behaviour s, such as flying or driving, that they know are unsustainable.

One of the central questions is how people can promote sustainable behaviours and lifestyles, through changing public perceptions? Policy plays an important role in changing behaviours, both by responding to changes in attitudes and values (and reinforcing them), and by proactively driving them further. For example, the smoking ban in the UK that was implemented in 2006 demonstrates how policy interventions, in combination with public debate and promotion of scientific evidence, can influence public attitudes and values towards smoking and proactively drive cultural change. The key lesson from the smoking ban experience was that political leadership that is implemented at the right time, when public perceptions are shifting, could lead a transformation of a social norm within a relatively short span of time. When potential policies to promote sustainable consumption are debated, there is often fear amongst policy-makers that ideas will seem too radical, that people will never accept the necessary changes, or that they are too difficult to implement. However, the smoking ban example (and many others) shows that it is possible to transform public perceptions and behaviours: policy-makers can afford to be braver and more optimistic in promoting sustainability.