

Motivating Sustainable Consumption

a review of evidence on consumer
behaviour and behavioural change

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Sustainable Consumption



'what goes around...'

- 'Sustainable consumption is a balancing act. It is about consuming in such a way as to protect the environment, use natural resources wisely and promote quality of life now, while not spoiling the lives of future consumers.'

National Consumer Council 2004

Terms of Reference



- what does research tell us about the behaviour of 'mainstream' consumers?
- what does research tell us about 'pro-environmental' consumer behaviours?
- what does research tell us about achieving pro-environmental change in mainstream consumer behaviours?



Motivating Sustainable Consumption



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a review of evidence on consumer
behaviour and behavioural change

a report to the Sustainable Development Research Network

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www.sd-research.org.uk/researchreviews/documents/MotivatingSCfinal.pdf



Part 1 Framing the Debate

1. Towards Evidence-Based Policy
2. Consumption: the 'vanguard of history'

Part 2 Models of Consumer Behaviour

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Part 3 Towards Behavioural Change

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12. Policy Options and Opportunities

Consumption: the ‘vanguard of history’



‘cathedrals of consumption?’

The literature suggests a huge variety of different roles for consumption in modern society, including:

- needs-satisfaction;
- identity formation;
- status and distinction;
- conspicuous consumption;
- social/sexual selection;
- social practice and routine;
- social cohesion and belonging;
- dreaming and hedonic desire;
- negotiating the sacred and the profane;
- the pursuit of meaning

Consumption: Key Lessons (1)



'can't buy me love?'

Evidence suggests that material goods are important to us, not just for their functional uses, but because they play vital symbolic roles in our lives.

This **symbolic role of consumer goods** facilitates a range of complex, deeply engrained 'social conversations' about status, identity, social cohesion, group norms and the pursuit of personal and cultural meaning.

'An individual's main objective in consumption is to help create the social world and to find a credible place in it.'

Mary Douglas 1976

Consumption: Key Lessons (2)



'inconspicuous consumption?'

Evidence suggests that, far from being able to exercise deliberative choice about what to consume and what not to consume, for much of the time people find themselves locked in to unsustainable consumption patterns.

Consumer 'lock-in' occurs in part through economic constraints, institutional barriers, inequalities in access, and restricted choice. But it also flows from habits, routines, social norms and expectations and dominant cultural values.

Rational Choice



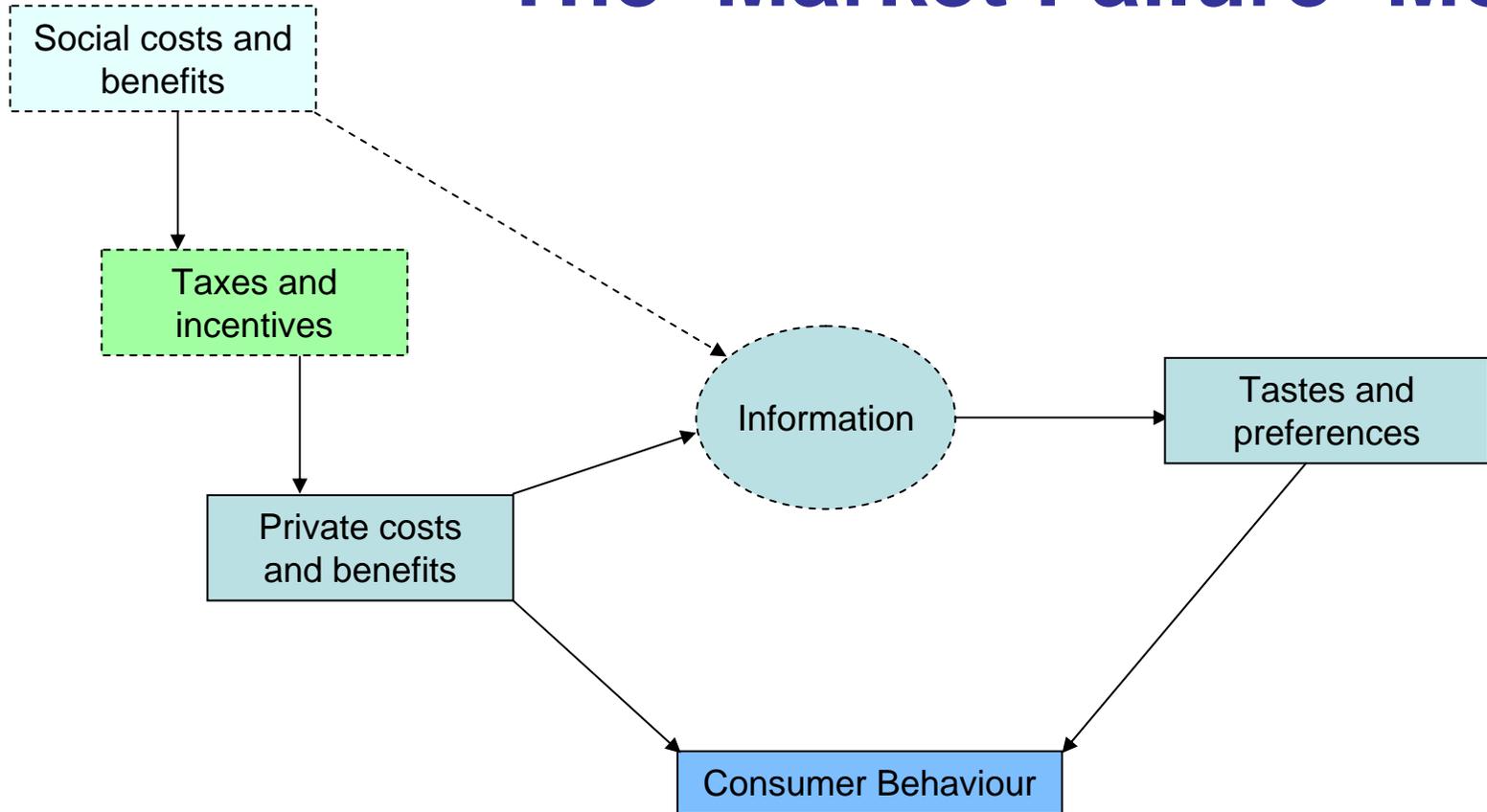
'Rational utility self-maximisers?'

The **rational choice model** contends that consumers make decisions by calculating the individual costs and benefits of different options and choosing the option that maximises their expected net benefits.

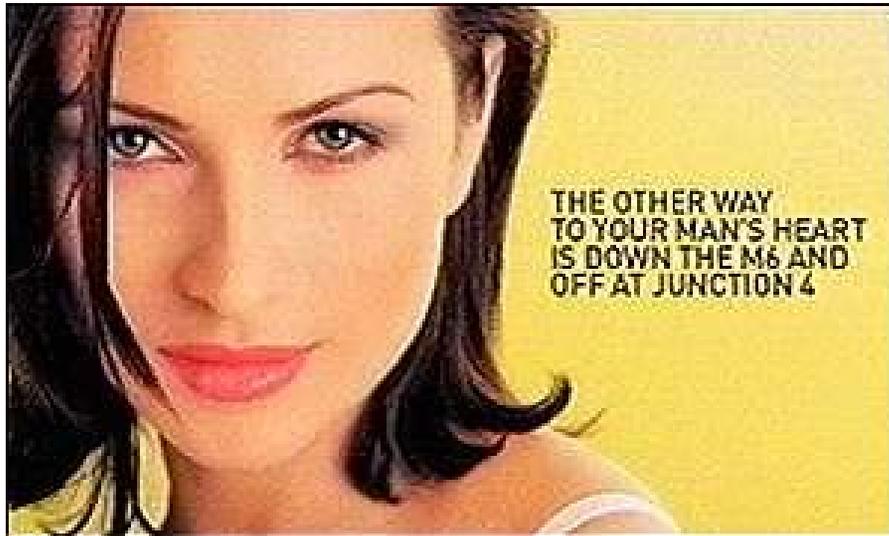
Several key assumptions underlie the model, namely that:

- **individual decisions** are the appropriate framework for understanding behaviour;
- 'rational' behaviour is the result of **cognitive deliberation**;
- **self-interest** is the main driver of behaviour;
- **preferences are exogenous** to the model, individual and absolute.

The 'Market Failure' Model



Beyond Rational Choice

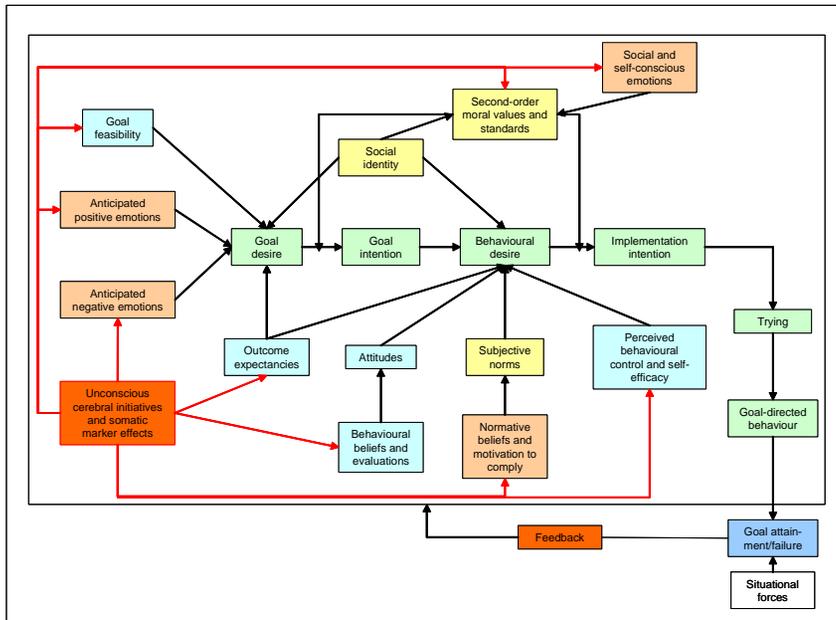


'The heart has reasons, reason does not know of.'

Pascal 1670

- habits and routines (**procedural rationality**) bypass cognitive deliberation;
- **moral influences** can over-ride self-interest and the 'cost-benefit calculus';
- **social factors** shape and constrain individual preference;
- emotional responses (**expressive rationality**) confound cognitive deliberation;
- **evolutionary rationality** suggests that emotion *precedes* cognition.

Integrative Theories

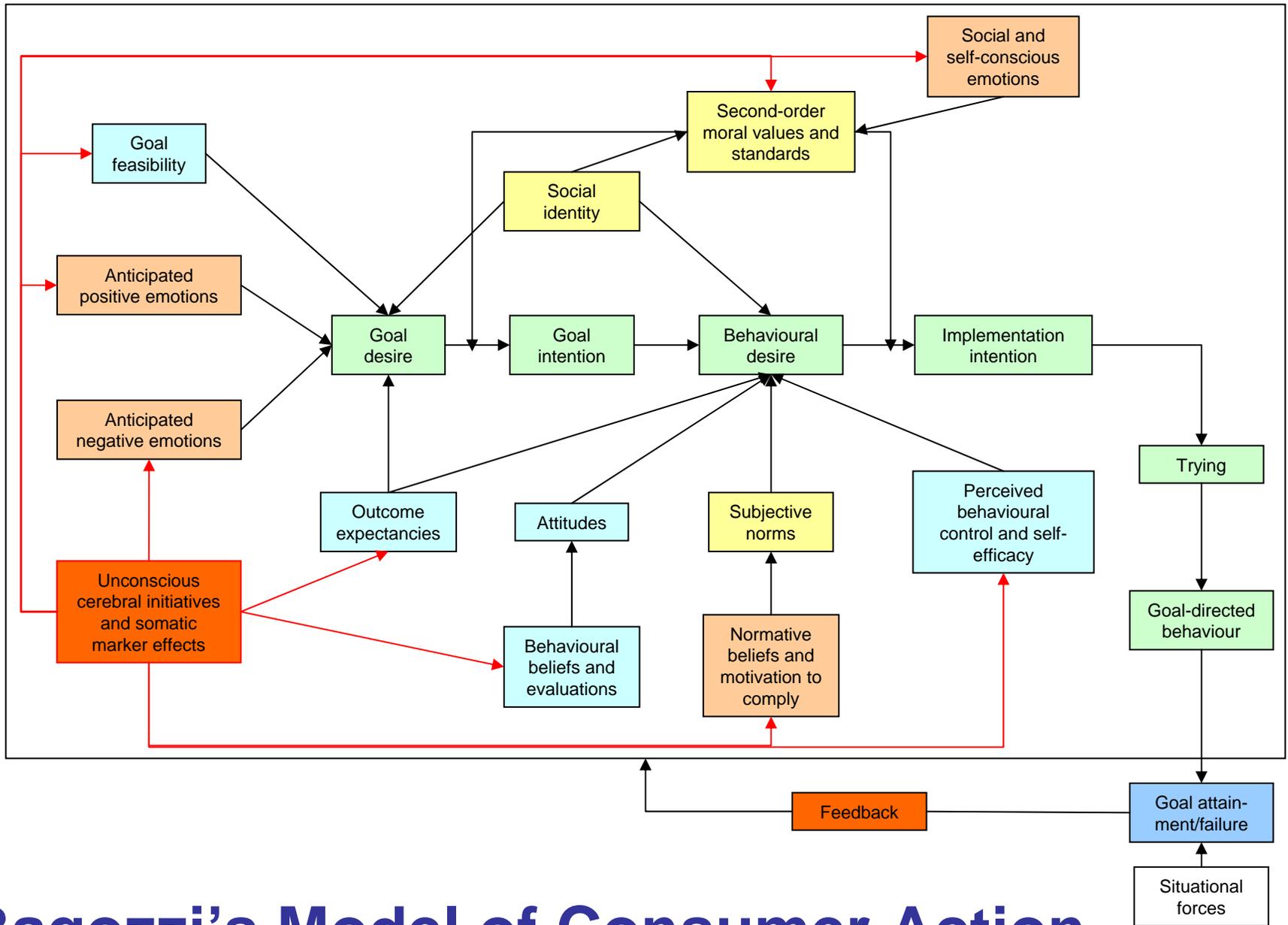


The Grand Unified Theory of everything?

Some models of consumer behaviour focus on internal antecedents of behaviour (values, attitudes, intentions); others focus more on external factors (incentives, norms, constraints).

Making sense of behaviour inevitably requires a multi-dimensional view which incorporates both internal and external elements. In particular, a useful model has to account for:

- motivations and attitudes;
- contextual factors;
- social influences;
- personal capabilities; and
- habits.



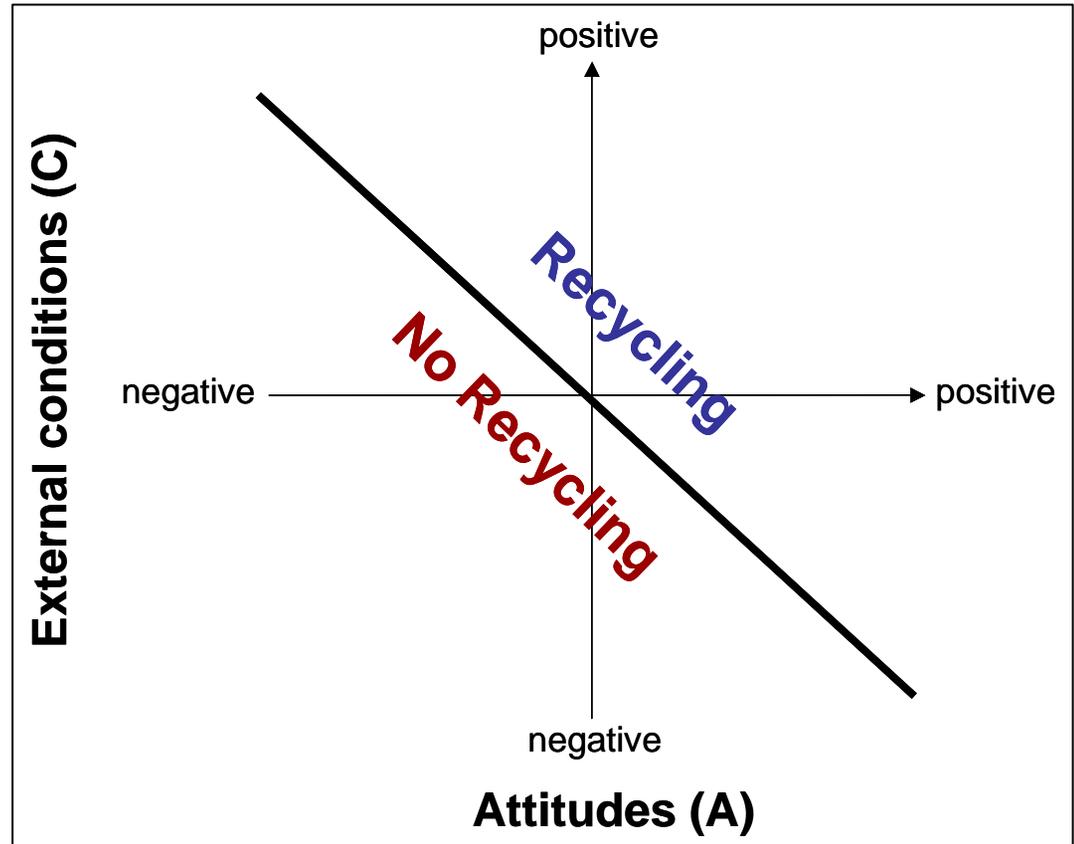
Bagozzi's Model of Consumer Action

Stern's ABC Model

One such integrative model is the Attitude-Behaviour-Constraint (ABC) Model of Paul Stern (2000) and his colleagues.

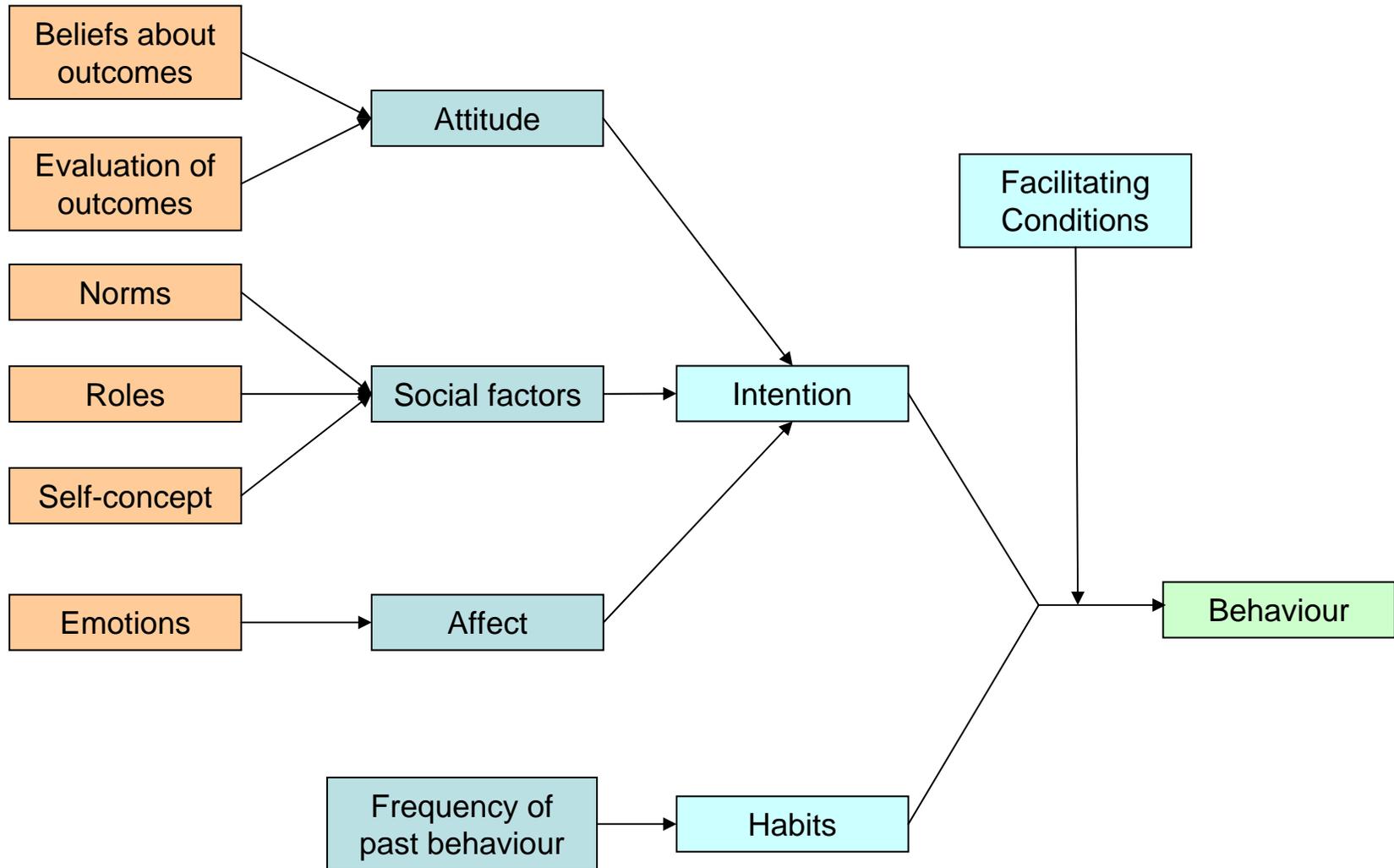
When people have very positive attitudes towards recycling (eg) they will probably recycle even when external constraints are high. Conversely, when external facilitating conditions are very positive, even those with negative attitudes tend to recycle.

This kind of model allows policy-makers to understand when and where facilitating conditions need to be improved.

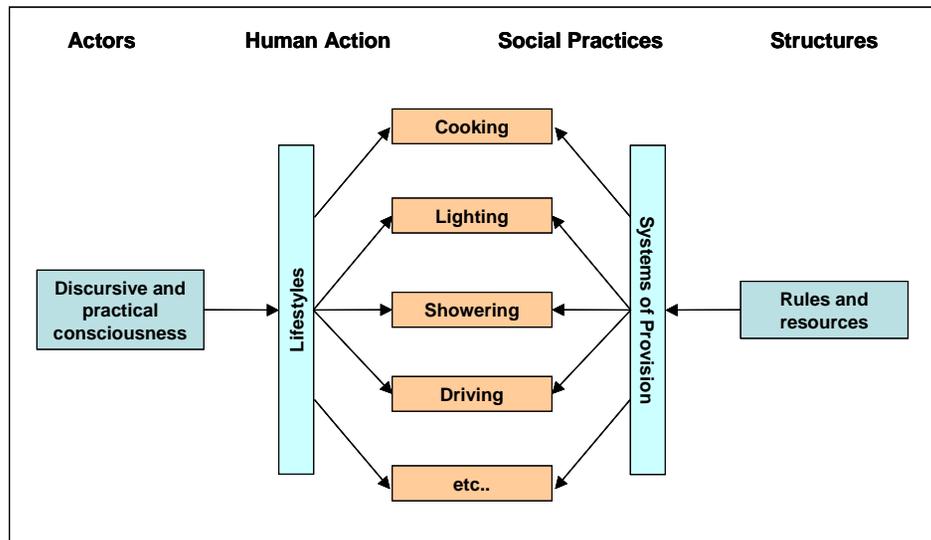


To recycle or not to recycle?

A Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour



Consumption as Social Practice



Consumption as social practice

A long debate in the social sciences about the relative influence of human agency and social structure culminated in the development of Giddens' (1984) **structuration theory** which attempts to show how agency and structure relate to each other.

This model has provided the basis for a view of consumption as a set of social practices, influenced on the one hand by social norms and lifestyle choices and on the other by the institutions and structures of society.

Policy Lessons (1)



Looking through the lens of consumer behaviour reveals a complex and apparently intractable policy terrain for two (related) reasons:

- consumption as ‘social conversation’
- the problem of consumer lock-in.

The rhetoric of consumer sovereignty is inaccurate and unhelpful in steering behavioural change, in particular because it regards choice as entirely individualistic and because it fails to unravel the social and psychological influences on behaviour.

Delving into this complexity is essential if behaviour change initiatives are to address key problem areas in consumer behaviour:

- the influence of the social fabric
- habit, routine and lock-in.

Policy Lessons (2)



Despite the ‘hands-off’ rhetoric of modern governance, policy intervenes continually in the behaviour of individuals, both directly and (more importantly) through its influence over the social and institutional context within which consumer behaviours are negotiated.

This view opens out a range of vital avenues for policy intervention, in particular through the influence of government on:

- facilitating conditions (markets, access etc)
- institutional context (product, media, trading standards etc);
- business practices;
- social and cultural context;
- community-based social change; and
- its own example.

Motivating UK Policy

 HM Government

Securing the future
delivering UK sustainable development strategy



- Taking it on: UK SD strategy review;
- Workshops and Consultations
- Securing the future:
 - behaviour change model
 - Community Action 2020
 - leading by example
- UK Round Table on Sustainable Consumption.



Sustainable
Development Commission

People • Planet • Prosperity

***Approach evolves
as attitudes and
behaviours
change over time***

- Remove barriers
- Give information
- Provide facilities
- Provide viable alternatives
- Educate/ train/ provide skills
- Provide capacity

Enable

Catalyse

is the package enough to
break a habit and kick start
change?

Encourage

Engage

- Tax system
- Expenditure - grants
- Reward schemes
- Recognition/social pressure – leagues tables
- Penalties, fines & enforcement action

- Community action
- Co-production
- Deliberative fora
- Personal contacts/ enthusiasts
- Media campaigns/ opinion formers
- Use networks

Exemplify

- Leading by example
- Achieving consistency in policies

**Changing
Behaviours**

Concluding Remarks



'Open on Sundays?'

- leading by example
- facilitation and context setting
- from deliberation to elaboration: community-based social change
- the nature of the evidence base
- the need to 'consumer-proof' policy
- understanding resistance to change
- towards supportive communities..
- ..and meaningful lives.