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How Can Target-Group-Specific Strategies Contribute to the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption Patterns?

A German Example

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Abstract

In the decade following Agenda 21, numerous activities have taken place to make sustainable consumption more concrete. But a lack of implementation of strategies and of putting sustainable consumption patterns into practice is still evident. This is partially due to a continuing tendency to neglect the so-called “soft factors” of consumption in sustainability research by simply assuming that some value-shift will take place. And this despite the fact that the probability of changing these “soft factors” is very low: the “soft factors” have turned out to be very “hard factors” indeed.

Life-style research, by differentiating different groups of people according to their orientations and attitudes, provides a means of dealing with these “soft factors”. The present paper will show, on the basis of a study of sustainable consumption patterns carried out in Germany, how life-style oriented research can make a contribution towards the promotion of sustainable consumption patterns.



1. Life-style Research

At the beginning of the 1980ies societal change in Western European Countries made it clear that traditional models of describing social structure were no longer adequate for representing society. Traditional models broke down the population according to objective criteria, such as professional position or income, into social classes. But with the increase of social mobility among classes these categories began to lose their effectiveness as descriptions of social differences, at the same time there was a growing tendency of individualisation (cf. Beck 1986).

Life-style research presented a means to take these developments into account. On the one hand, life-style concepts emphasised the importance of socio-cultural criteria and attitudes for the classification of social segments (cf. Schultz/Weller 1997). By subdividing societies not only *vertically* (i.e. in upper, middle and lower classes), but also *horizontally* according to socio-cultural criteria an image of different milieus in the social sphere is created, each of which can be distinguished by its own life-style. Elements of life-styles demarcate the self-identity of a group, but they also distinguish the group vis-à-vis other groups, and, as such, they also demarcate the limits of social exclusion (Götz 2001).

Thus life-style research is able to map the pluralisation of societies. But on the other hand, life-style concepts represented an opposing position to the growing tendency of individualisation. Individualisation, according to some authors, would finally lead to an atomisation or even disintegration of societies (cf. Beck 1986). Life-styles can be understood as a mode of social integration that gives individuals the opportunity to be socially integrated while living in disparate and particularised surroundings (cf. Götz 2001).

Life-style research as a method of social structure analysis was developed within market research and science at about the same time. The most important scientific impulses came from Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1987). In the meantime numerous life-style approaches have been developed. Today, life style concepts are considered to be an extension and fulfilment of social structure analysis (Müller 1992:369).

2. Life-Styles and Sustainability

Since the middle of the 90ies life-style approaches in Germany have been a part of the environmental debate (cf. Reusswig 1994). It had become clear that polarities like “materialism” versus “post-materialism” or “environmentally oriented” versus “not environmentally oriented” were no adequate categories when it comes to promoting more sustainable behaviour, and that it was not sufficient, neither analytically nor strategically, to rely on average data and to concentrate on central trends. This led away from the demand to change our “Western life-style” (in singular) to the demand to change “life-styles” and to a stronger differentiation among different target groups in the area of environment.

In the meantime, the advantages of life-style approaches for sustainability discourse have been recognised in Germany. A group-specific analysis can identify social segments that can be used as target groups for information campaigns and marketing for products. Innovative approaches to different target groups can become visible, single groups can be understood in their specific rationality and potentials for changing behaviour can be identified and activated (Stiess/Götz 2001).

With the insight into different forms of life provided by life-style approaches it was possible, moreover, to open up the debate about the environment, and later the debate about sustainable consumption, to include new perspectives. The introduction of target group typologies thus contributed to a rethinking of frozen stand-points and to a movement away from dogmatic positions.

Moreover, with life-style based typologies it is possible to operationalize those influential factors that are generally considered “incalculable”: attitudes, orientations and motivational backgrounds. They can be treated at a manageable level.

The influence of these soft factors can even be measured in terms of actual behaviour. In life-style concepts orientations and attitudes are considered as decisive for actual behaviour. Therefore, behaviour is not described formally by social position (upper, middle and lower class behaviour), nor is it conceived as the behaviour of a homo oeconomicus; rather behaviour is understood as guided by motivation (Stieß/Götz 2001).

Since the “soft factors” that influence behaviour have proven to be, in fact, the truly “hard factors” as far as the possibility of changing them is concerned, typologies of different target groups contain invaluable potential for changing consumption patterns.

3. The “Social-Ecological Style Approach”

In addition to these potentials there are other important factors for the promotion of sustainable consumption that have been neglected by life-style research:

First of all, life-style research in general is not oriented towards environmental matters or sustainability and thus is not concentrated on attitudes or motivations that could promote sustainable consumption. In addition, existing behavioural patterns, i.e. the habits and routines of individuals, are not considered. Yet it is these routines that have to be changed in order to establish more sustainable consumption patterns.

Furthermore, life-style research predominantly sees human beings as individuals. These individuals are embedded in an abstract life-style but they are not seen as embedded in a concrete social context, in a family or a household. But this concrete embeddedness of individuals implies compromises and bargaining among the different household members, meaning that a change of behaviour towards a more sustainable behaviour pattern also depends on other household members.

To optimise the life-style concept for utilisation in the sustainability debate, the Institute for Social-Ecological Research (ISOE) has developed the so-called “social-ecological style-approach”. This approach analyses the three following dimensions and their relationships:

- the social background of households (social situation and household context)
- orientations:
 - life-style specific: general values, orientations in reference to work, leisure, consumption, the environment, health etc.
 - specific field of need: attitudes, emotions, preferences, dislikes etc. and
- indicators of actual consumption behaviour as practised daily.

From group-specific patterns of orientations, behaviour and social situation a social-ecological typology evolves that can be used as a target group model. According to the specific research interest, we call this typology consumption, mobility, leisure or nutrition styles. The identified styles can be analysed with regard to the three dimensions and can be used as target groups for the development of socially differentiated information, marketing and advice offers (cf. Empacher et al. 2002).

In addition to taking into account the household context and thereby giving more importance to the embeddedness of individuals, an important advantage of this approach is the inclusion of the behavioural dimension. This permits testing hypotheses concerning the extent to which orientation and motivational factors influence actual behaviour¹. Moreover, it also makes possible a consideration of the material dimension of consumption and thus allows this approach to link up with natural scientific studies of metabolic processes².

In the following, the results of a German study of sustainable consumption based on this social-ecological style approach are presented.

4. “Consumption Styles”: A German Example

The study entitled „Household Exploration of the Conditions, Opportunities and Limitations Pertaining to Sustainable Consumption Behaviour“³ had the goal of identifying a typology of consumption that could be used as a target group model for the promotion of sustainable consumption.

¹ In another study on mobility-styles it was shown that within different mobility styles there was a close coherence of mobility orientations and mobility behaviour (cf. City:mobil 1999).

² An environmental impact assessment of different consumption types was made for the first time in the field of leisure mobility (Götz et al. 2001).

³ The study was commissioned and published by the German Federal Environment Agency (cf. UBA 2002).

4.1 Proceedings of the Study

The study made use of a qualitative empirical survey of 100 German households. They were carefully pre-selected from a demographic, geographical and life-style-related standpoint to establish typical *consumption styles* within German households⁴. To this end, the lifestyle and orientations of respondents were ascertained using open interviews. In addition, use was made of a standardised questionnaire to record the key variables pertaining to the extent to which respondents were provided with consumer goods, together with indicators of their consumer behaviour relating to key areas of household consumption.

On the basis of these interviews different consumption orientations within the household were identified. These orientations were related in a particular way and displayed specific patterns. In a heuristic procedure these orientation patterns were collated with specific social situations and concrete behaviours, thereby developing a typology of *consumption styles*.

4.2 Consumption Types and Target Groups

At the beginning the consumption typology included 10 consumption types. Each consumption type represents something like an ideal type distilled from several interviews. In reality, a mixture of types will frequently be found.

- Type 1: Fully-managed eco-families
- Type 2: Childless professionals
- Type 3: Self-interested youngsters
- Type 4: Every day-life artists
- Type 5: People fed up with consumption
- Type 6: Rural traditionalists
- Type 7: Underprivileged who can't cope
- Type 8: Run-of-the-mill families
- Type 9: Active seniors
- Type 10: Status-orientated privileged families

This typology demonstrates typical patterns of consumer behaviour within German households, while at the same time the variability of user profiles becomes apparent. It therefore fulfils a heuristic function for working out strategies aiming at sustainable consumption.

These 10 consumption types were then combined according to similarity of key consumption patterns to form four key target groups in order to ensure operability when developing target-group specific strategies:

⁴ The aim of qualitative research is not to determine the frequency of social action but to find a set of relevant and typical action patterns in a social situation (cf. Lamnek 1993).



- environmentally oriented group (Type 1 and 4)
- group of people who can't cope (underprivileged) (Type 3, 5 and 7)
- group of ambivalent traditionalists (Type 6, 8 and 9)
- privileged group (Type 2 and 10).

For each of these groups, strategies for sustainable consumption were developed and finally tested in group discussions with members of the respective target group.

4.3 Some Exemplary Consumption Types

In the following, exemplary consumption types from each of the four target groups are considered more closely in order to provide an impression of the potential of life-style specific approaches. Type-specific enabling and hindering factors for sustainable consumption are pointed out, as well as some possible target-group-specific strategies for promoting sustainable consumption.

- *Fully-Managed Eco-Families*

As their name suggests, fully managed eco-families belong to the environmentally oriented target group. Both parents are practising a profession because realising equal rights for men and women is important for both partners. This is the basis for the good financial position of the household; however, it also results in an acute lack of time, and hence a strong orientation towards time-economising so-called "convenience" offers, and a strong need to co-ordinate and optimise the processes of the every-day life of all family members. At the same time these families show a clear orientation towards environmental matters, which nevertheless has to take second place when putting it into practice is too time-consuming. Furthermore, these families are distinguished by their openness towards novelties, an orientation towards social and ethical aspects, as well as a strong health orientation revolving around "naturalness"⁵. The family car is seen as indispensable for the maintenance of the family organisation.

This consumption type is clearly open towards sustainable consumption strategies. Hindering factors are above all a lack of time; although, on the other hand, there are enough financial resources to enable other sustainable behaviours, such as the purchase of organic food. Therefore, for this type, more eco-efficient services should be developed that are not too time-consuming. Furthermore, the type is particularly sensible to environmental aspects when chil-

⁵ This health orientation is based on the conviction that health comes from nature, natural behaviour and natural, unprocessed products. In contrast to this, there is the so-called „functional“ health orientation which centres around the conviction that health means a functioning body that can be supported by single isolated means, for example taking of vitamins, consumption of "functional food" etc.

dren are born, and this event can be a door opener for several sustainable strategies.

- *Underprivileged who can't cope*

This consumption type is the prototype example of the underprivileged target group and represents a contrast to the fully-managed eco-families in many ways. These underprivileged families lack financial as well as time resources, and often do not even dispose of a social net that can support them. There is neither time nor space left over for the environment or other social or ethical issues. But a lack of competence to master the every-day life, and a lack of knowledge about how to get information, is often also visible. Within this type one finds many jobless individuals, poor elderly people or single parents. Material goods are very important for this type, for they soften their societal descent. Therefore, an orientation towards cheap and short-lived products can be observed.

A change towards more sustainable consumption patterns can hardly be expected in this type as long as there are no time or financial resources. Sustainable strategies that would meet these needs, such as, for example, second hand goods, are unthinkable for this type, because, in their eyes, these symbolise social exclusion. Before demanding more sustainable behaviour from this type its competence in managing every-day life necessities must be strengthened.

- *Childless Professionals*

The childless professionals are part of the privileged target group. They are professionally successful singles or dinks (double income no kids) with a relatively high income. Due to their strong orientation towards their profession they lack time, leading to a strong orientation towards time-economising offers (convenience) and a tendency to call on external household services. On the other hand, this type spends their little free time on particularly exclusive consumption goods (expensive leisure activities), a big car and on long distance journeys. In addition, quality and service are very important for the childless professionals, and the women in particular are strongly oriented towards health. This type distances itself in its eyes from ideologically extreme "ecos," those wholly committed to an ecological lifestyle. But ethical orientations are perceptible, above all in the women.

The childless professionals, together with the status-oriented privileged families, represent to a certain extent the "winner type" within Western societies. They are particularly important because of their "model character" and leader function, and therefore it is necessary to make an effort to reach them for sustainable consumption. The factor hindering this the most is their rejection of the "ecos". On the other hand, they display certain orientations, for instance those toward ethics and health that could promote more sustainable consumption. To win over this type, the ideological "spin" on existing sustainable products (such

as organic food) has to be avoided. Sustainable products or offers must satisfy this type's needs for design and service.

- *The Rural Traditionalists*

The Rural Traditionalists belong to the ambivalent traditionalist target group. They include elderly married couples, or families who live in their own houses in rural surroundings or in small towns. They practice a traditional gender division of labour: women are responsible for house and garden; the men are employed. This type has a strong regional and social orientation and is embedded in the immediate social surroundings (neighbourhood, community). As for consumption, solid quality and the maintenance of possessions are important for the rural traditionalists.

Generally speaking, this consumption type displays several enabling factors for more sustainable consumption behaviour. Its orientation towards traditional values, such as the maintenance of material and immaterial goods and social cohesion, its rejection of any kind of waste in principle makes it a very sustainable type. Yet, one can make out a strong distrust in everything that is called "ecological" or "biological", because the rural traditionalists assume that those who offer these products simply want to take advantage of them. This is the root of the ambivalence of this type.

However, this ambivalence can be used in favour of more sustainable consumption. Once again, as for the childless professionals, sustainable behavioural offers must avoid ecological ideology. But for this type, it is important to overcome his distrust. This can be done by pointing out and explain concrete ecological advantages. Another way would be to appeal to their sense of social responsibility rather than to ecological responsibility (cf. Empacher et al. 2002:81ff).

4.4 Some General Results

In addition to an insight into different German consumption patterns, the study also contains some general results to be kept in mind when considering information or marketing campaigns to promote sustainable consumption.

A wide-spread rejection of products or service offers named „eco“ or „bio,“ and distrust concerning their viability, could be discerned in the interviews, although general orientations were not entirely anti-eco. Thus, in communication strategies, the generalised and unspecific use of the label „eco“ should be avoided.

Instead, strategies for sustainable consumption should target the consumption orientations of specific groups and try to build „motivational alliances“ that link up with consumption orientations such as quality orientation, health orientation, social orientation etc. to promote sustainable consumption offers.

Moreover, the study showed the general importance of the time variable within the households. A so-called "convenience orientation" and the purchase of con-

venience goods is wide-spread. Sustainability communication and sustainability strategies that fail to meet this need are not likely to be very successful.

5 Conclusions: The Contribution of Life-Style Research to the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption Patterns

As the example of the study on consumption styles has shown life-style approaches makes the different rationalities of diverse societal groups understandable and, consequently, reveals potentials for the promotion of sustainable consumption within different target groups.

The knowledge about different consumption types can be used by various societal actors to promote and support sustainable behaviour by immediately relating to the attitudes and specific needs of these groups.

In Germany, the consumer style typology has been used to evaluate the range of advice offered by a consumer advice agency (the North Rhine-Westphalia Consumer Advice Service) with regard to its target group accuracy. This evaluation initiated a reflection process on the current target groups of the consumer advice agency. In the meantime it has resulted in the optimisation of their advice policies and a more effective use of their small resources.

Thus, although the results of the study presented here are based on the German situation, the life-style specific approach is of importance beyond national borders as well and depicts important steps towards more sustainable consumption patterns.

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