

Lifecourse transitions: a critical engagement with the idea of 'moments of change'

Kate Burningham,
University of Surrey

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC PRACTICES AND THEIR
DYNAMICS ACROSS THE NEXUS

A workshop at the University of Sheffield, UK

15/10/15

Overview

- ❖ Why focus on life course transitions in context of sustainable domestic consumption practices?
- ❖ ELiCiT
- ❖ Transitions as times of significant change in aspects of everyday life which have consequences for domestic consumption
- ❖ **BUT** qualitative longitudinal work challenges simple reading of transitions as 'moments of change' or 'windows of opportunity' for interventions

Why focus on lifecourse transitions?

- ❖ Changing social role and status – implications for conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption
- ❖ Time of reflection:
‘The lifespan emerges as a trajectory which relates above all to the individual’s projects and plans... each phase of transition tends to become an identity crisis - and is often reflexively known to the individual as such’ (Giddens 1991: 147-8)
- ❖ Potentially periods of defection from established practices and adoption of new ones, and/or changes in how practices performed
- ❖ Habit discontinuity hypothesis (Verplanken) – Transitions as :
‘moments of disruption to peoples routines, which in turn can serve as ‘windows of opportunity’ in which to deliver interventions when people may be more able or willing to do things differently’ (Darnton et al 2011:7)

ELiCiT (Exploring Lifestyle Change in Transition)

- ❖ Transitions to motherhood and retirement - focusing on understanding continuity and change in everyday routines
- ❖ Longitudinal in 4 locations in UK
- ❖ 10 new mothers and 10 retirees in each location (80 participants)
- ❖ 3 interviews at 8 month intervals (n 240)
- ❖ Seven day reflexive journals following interviews
- ❖ Questionnaires after interviews 1 and 2

How is the transition experienced, and what implications does this for changes in domestic practices?



Transitions as periods of significant change

1: Identity

- ❖ Becoming a 'good' mother:

Every waking thought is her really and now we're a family it's changed all sorts of things. (New mother: Interview 1)

- ❖ Contested identities for retirees – 'it's time for me' versus caring for grandchildren or other relatives

I feel that I've done my bit and, ...yeah, before it [work] kills me or you know before I'm too old to do anything else. Yeah, no I actually feel now I deserve it [retirement] (Retiree: Interview 2)

- ❖ Significance of continuity of identity - especially marked for retirees

'the study of transitions and the life course...reveal an ongoing struggle between continuity and change. Explanations tend not to focus on how experiences of transition may be considered in relation to **both continuity and change**' (Grenier 2012:7)

Transitions as periods of significant change

2: Temporality

❖ Shifting Routines

it's just such a difference to what it was before because ... before it was almost like my routine was sort of set for me whereas now ... There is a routine, but it's almost like I don't actually ... do much and it can just go by the wayside and the whole day can just disappear really without feeling like much has happened... I do kind of miss my old routine. I guess because I just knew it inside out really, whereas now I'm kind of forging a new one, so it's like if I don't make the effort to, you know, to leave I literally could be in the house all of the time, you know? (New mother: Interview 2)

❖ perceptions of time squeeze (Southerton & Tomlinson 2005) :

I used to do a lot of shopping on my way home from work before we had her, but I now literally leave the office and race home and get to her just in time, so I don't really have time to do any after work shopping (New mother: Interview 3)

Transitions as periods of significant change

3: Shifting financial resources

the fact that I'm not earning anymore has been quite difficult...I mean I get maternity pay but it's hardly anything ... so having to sort of change...the financial upheaval has been quite strange (New mother: Interview 2)

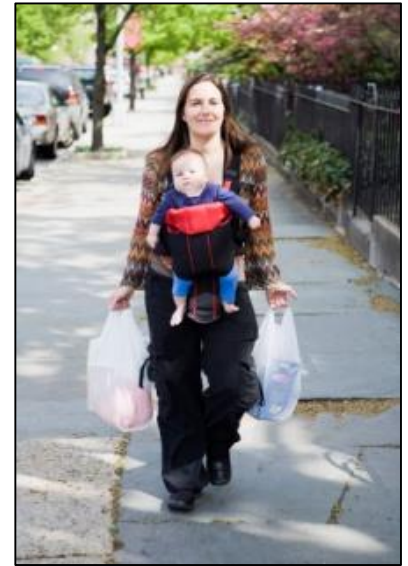
Yeah it was a bit worrying when you're leading up to it [retirement] and you're not quite sure how much you're going to get and is it going to be enough? (Retiree: Interview 2)

This is awful, you've heard from other conversations you've had with me, that I've always been very aware of buying local and fresh produce and all that sort of stuff. You just can't... it sounds awful but it's like, when you've got the choice of buying a pound of mince that's going to suit your family for like four days, for £3 from Tesco's or like ... half a pound from the farmer's market... that's £20 you know you just... you can't, it's just money... (New Mother: Interview 3)

The complex experience of transitions

1. Transitions are processes not 'moments' of change

- ❖ Becoming a parent and retiring both long processes with multiple phases - multiple 'moments' of change
- ❖ Characterised by shifts and readjustments in detail of everyday life
- ❖ Changes often transitory:



There were changes. I don't think the changes have been permanent, I think we've reverted back (New mother: Interview 3)

The complex experience of transitions

2. Transitions are often multiple & interacting

- ❖ Individuals often experience more than one transition
- ❖ Concurrent or cascading transitions:
 - ❖ Job status
 - ❖ Health changes
 - ❖ Moving home
 - ❖ Partnership changes
 - ❖ Fluctuating household composition
- ❖ Difficult to isolate experience and effect of discrete transitions on everyday consumption



The complex experience of transitions

3. Transitions are not experienced individually

- ❖ 'Individual' transitions affect other family members
- ❖ Household negotiation of everyday consumption
- ❖ Change or stability in 'individual' consumption practices often reflect others' preferences or needs

I'll put a jumper on whereas [wife] will turn the central heating on... if she is cold I will let her put the heating on (Retiree: Interview 3)

And you, you know, whereas if it was just us we might have, turn the heating off for a bit and just, kind of, I don't know, go to bed or something or put warmer clothes on. You can't really do that for him (New mother: Interview 3)

The complex experience of transitions

4. Transitions are socially, individually & materially situated

- ❖ Diversity of circumstances, routes into and meanings of transition
- ❖ Everyday activities fundamentally informed by available services and infrastructures (housing, transport, shops)

We've got no choice, we've got recycling bins (New mother: Interview 3)

I don't see myself using the car anymore, having a bus pass is just wonderful. (Retiree: Interview 3)

Conclusions

- ❖ All transitions are not the same
- ❖ Transitions **ARE** times of significant shifts in identity, resources of time and money and in social networks and leisure activities - and thus have implications for multiple aspects of everyday consumption
- ❖ **BUT** simplistic conceptions of transitions as identifiable individual 'moments of change' ignore ongoing change, multiple transitions, linked lives and situated nature of transitions - and thus overplay the potential for initiatives to facilitate 'switches' in practice at these times
- ❖ Transitions may be *bad* times for interventions specifically about sustainable living focused on individuals
- ❖ Where sustainable practices are adopted these are usually explained by recourse to priorities of thrift, health, or aspects of care which are integral to appropriate parenting or successful transition to retirement.



Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group



Contact: Kate Burningham
k.burningham@surrey.ac.uk

<http://www.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk/projects/change-processes/elicit>

+44 (0)1483 686689

