

**2009 AMSTERDAM CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: 'PEOPLE, PLACES AND THE PLANET'**

**Individual responsibility and voluntary action on climate change**

**Abstract**

In addressing climate change mitigation, matters of responsibility are core. It is widely acknowledged that individuals and households need to contribute to efforts to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to meet international reduction targets (Pachauri 2007; Stern 2007). However, the role of individual responsibility for climate change mitigation in policy, discourse and practice, concomitant with the State and international regimes, remains largely undertheorised. Thereby the mechanisms that determine in what ways individuals should reduce their emissions and how actions taken at the local level link to the global level are not fully understood.

Recent debate concerning the lack of provisions for voluntary measures by individuals and householders in the Australian Government's proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (which includes an emissions trading scheme) illustrates that voluntary mitigation efforts may be poorly integrated at the national and hence the international level. This has important implications for achieving the deep global cuts in greenhouse emissions required to avoid dangerous climate change.

Moreover individual responsibility for climate change implies that actors have authority not only over their "personal, private sphere" (Stern 2005) behaviour and lifestyles but that this authority extends to influence broader structural change.

This paper will consider individual responsibility for climate change mitigation as it is expressed through forms of voluntary action; how perceptions of agency may contribute to broader level change; and the implications for linking local level climate change action with the global level.

## Introduction

Climate change presents as a ‘diabolical’ problem (Garnaut 2008) and represents the greatest challenge to humanity of this century. According to Gardiner (2006), the problem of climate change is characterised by three key factors: its complexity, lack of causality and institutional inadequacy. Each of these contribute to what Gardiner describes as a “perfect moral storm” as they represent areas of ethical deliberation essential to resolving the climate change problem but for which existing ethical frameworks are inadequate.

Gardiner (2006) reasons that the complexity and longevity of the climatic impacts of anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is signified by the extension of climate change obligations both spatially, as a global issue, and temporally, as an intergenerational one. Who should bear the costs and burdens of climate change is thereby unclear as there is no single causal agent that can be identified as responsible for the problem. Climate change therefore demands an unprecedented level of global cooperation which calls into doubt the adequacy of existing institutions to address the problem. This positions climate change “as the moral challenge of our generation” (Ban Ki-Moon in UNEP 2009: ii) and throws up ethical contestations not only internationally between states but also between each nation and its citizens.

Responses to the climate change challenge remain largely within the province of international institutions that apply “top-down” strategies to be delivered by states through their national climate policies. However, governments often emphasise responsibility for climate change action at the individual and household level, that is, from the “bottom-up”. This assumes that the summation of local actions is (or can be) linked up to national efforts which will lead to global changes (Accountability and Consumers International 2007; WWF-UK 2008). How bottom up approaches, those necessary actions at the local level, translate into global level action has received little attention (Goldspink and Kay 2007; Lindseth 2004) and is symptomatic of the essential failure of states and their publics to negotiate their respective roles and responsibilities in countering climactic change (Bickerstaff and Walker 2002).

The emphasis on climate policy playing out on the international stage has also largely overridden the growing signs of dissent from civil society evident in an expanding grassroots climate movement. This movement displays deep concerns regarding the ability to achieve an effective international agreement with the urgency and social transformation required to deter the threat of catastrophic climate change (Hansen 2007). Over 5,200 local actions in 181 countries were held on a global day of action (see

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[www.350.org](http://www.350.org)) recently, calling for a safe target of 350 parts per million (ppm)<sup>1</sup> for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, whereas global negotiations and the majority of nations' target setting remain focused on higher levels (450 – 500 ppm) (IPCC 2007; Stern 2007; Garnaut 2008). This exposes the layers of contestation between institutions and civil society and the need for a better understanding of how local and global processes interrelate.

The aim of this paper is to call attention to the most local level of action for climate change abatement, the individual, and to assess what factors may create and restrain agency for voluntary action. I propose that there is an inherent emphasis in developed societies on locating responsibility for climate change, both in terms of its causes and effects, with individual actors. The expectation being that, through their “personal private-sphere” behaviours (Stern 2005), actors possess the authority to effectively reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This “individualization of responsibility” (Maniates 2002) for climate change mitigation lies within the context of a dominant neoliberal discourse that plays throughout the developed world (Harvey 2006; Matravers 2003; Maniates 2002) so that the political ideology of individualism now extends into each person's lifestyle choices and behaviours (Matravers 2007: 73). I will argue however that due to a range of constraints on personal level actions, individual agency is currently significantly thwarted. I will draw on recent empirical evidence to support this proposition and conclude with some recommendations for a way forward.

## **Individual responsibility as agency**

*"The self is not a passive entity, determined by external forces; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications" (Giddens 1991: 2)*

Taking individual responsibility for climate change infers that actors are able (and willing) to take mitigation actions, that they are *actors with authority* (Biermann *et al.* 2009), possessing the power to engage in practices that will effectively reduce carbon emissions. Individual agency in this sense should be distinguished from the “unintended consequences of everyday activities” (Pattberg and Stripple 2008: 8), such as the ‘simple and painless steps’ (WWF-UK 2008) of changing household lightbulbs and purchasing energy efficient appliances.

There is also an understanding that ‘reflexive’ individuals employ “active agency” which “connotes the capacity of human beings to reason self consciously, to be self-reflexive and to be self-determining” (Held 2005: 12). “Active agents” are also bestowed with “both opportunities and duties” (Held 2005: 12).

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<sup>1</sup> According to 350.org current levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere of 387 ppm need to be reduced to 350 ppm based on scientific evidence to avoid dangerous climate change (defined by the IPCC as a greater than 2 degree rise in atmospheric temperature).

They create opportunities to take action but also, concomitantly, have a duty that this action “does not curtail and infringe on the life chances and opportunities of others” (p. 13). Agency therefore implies a moral duty not only to act but to act without infringing the rights of others, thus expanding the notion of agency set out by Biermann *et al* (2009) to incorporate a fundamental moral dimension of agency in individual action for climate change abatement.

The role of agency also needs to be understood as being embedded in an association with structure (Biermann *et al* 2009; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), so that:

*“Modernization involves not only structural change, but a changing relationship between social structures and social agents. When modernization reaches a certain level agents tend to become more individualized, that is, decreasingly constrained by structures. In effect structural change forces social actors to become progressively more free from structure. And for modernization successfully to advance, these agents must release themselves from structural constraint and actively shape the modernization process.”* (Lash and Wynne 1992: 2 in Beck 1992)

The ability for individual actors to effect social change is thereby contained within the understanding of the agent-structure relationship. Reflexive individuals are not simply conceived as reactive to social conditions but they can also actively intervene to change prevailing structures. There is an acknowledgement, however, that those social actors are both free to act, but that their actions can be curtailed through institutional restraints. Moreover, as Pattberg and Stripple (2008) imply, individual action without critical reflection (such as ‘small and painless steps’) can simply prove to reinforce the prevailing social norm (Gregory 2000: 495).

## **Voluntary action as behaviour**

Voluntary individual/ household action to reduce carbon emissions is of particular interest to Western governments, as, reticent to prescribe regulatory provisions for their citizens’ behaviours and lifestyles, they expect their climate policy objectives (such as GHG emission reduction targets) will be voluntarily fulfilled through personal and household level behavior change<sup>2</sup> (Lorenzoni *et al* 2007). Perhaps, not surprisingly then, the voluntary action that people take around their lifestyles and homes, with particular emphasis on how an individual’s behaviour is motivated by their concern about climate change, has been the focus of much empirical research (Norgaard 2009; Whitmarsh 2009; Bickerstaff *et al* 2008; Lorenzoni *et al* 2007; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2008).

Whitmarsh (2009) describes individual voluntary action as behaviour with *intention*. This behaviour is understood to sit within a broader range of co-dependent influences (namely, cognition and affect).

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of climate change information campaigns targeted by governments at individual lifestyle and behaviour change include: “Be Climate Clever: I can do that” in Australia; in the UK, DEFRA’s “Are you doing your bit?”; and the European Commission’s “You Control Climate Change (see <http://www.climatechange.eu.com/>).

Voluntary action on climate change focuses on one aspect of this account – the behavioural - but with the understanding that in order to act people need “to know about climate change in order to be engaged; they also need to care about it, be motivated and able to take action.” (Lorenzoni *et al* 2007: 446) This action is dependent on a wide range of influences as individual behaviour is a “product of social and institutional contexts” (Lorenzoni *et al* 2007: 446) that create a complexity of motivations and constraints on voluntary action which has received little normative attention in relation to climate change. Whitmarsh (2009) further makes the distinction between intention and impact arguing that most research has focused on the *impact* of action (for example, by measuring how much a household’s energy costs have been reduced) rather than the *intent*. She captures the relevance of this distinction in three ways: noting that people may undertake actions with the intention of mitigating carbon emissions but that these may consist of “futile activities”; i.e. be ineffective; secondly, that intention can reveal the motivations underlying action; and thirdly, intention uncovers the harder to conceptualise range of values, beliefs and virtues that underscore pro-environmental behaviours.

Behavioural intention to mitigate climate change draws attention to the academic literature concerned with why people are failing to respond to the climate change threat through changes within their individual lifestyles (Norgaard 2009: 14). There is now widespread agreement that rationalist information deficit approaches (that is, that by providing information about climate change, voluntary changes in behaviour will follow) have firstly, proven largely defeatist or unsustainable, and, secondly fail to acknowledge the complex mix of behaviours, attitudes, values and social norms that undergird behavioural change. “The widespread lack of public reaction to scientific information regarding climate change” (Norgaard 2009: 3) and the “failure to integrate this knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action” (*ibid*: 29) becomes even more perplexing when placed within the context of people’s stated high levels of concern regarding the effects of climate change. At least in the developed world (where substantial impacts are yet to be felt), high levels of concern have been demonstrated along with an acknowledgement that individuals have a responsibility to take action to reduce their carbon emissions (Norgaard 2009; European Commission 2008; Pidgeon *et al* 2008; The Climate Institute 2007; Accountability and Consumers International 2007; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006).

### **Individual agency and the value: action gap**

Norgaard (2009) has noted the disparity between people’s concerns regarding climate change and the adoption of low carbon behaviours. The discrepancy between individuals’ stated intentions and their actions has been widely described as the “value-action” gap (Darnton 2006; Macnaghten 2003; Kollmus and Agyeman 2002; Blake 1999). There is a range of barriers proposed that contribute to the gap,

however, of most relevance here is that people feel they lack the sense of empowerment to undertake actions that will lead to a less carbon-intensive lifestyle.

Recent empirical research undertaken by Rätzkel and Uzzell (2009) expose why the value-action gap may be an artifact of the research process itself. Psycho-social research has focused on individual environmental behaviours which they argue, in turn, reinforces individualistic responses. Their argument is based on two core presumptions of individual responsibility and pro-environmental actions. Firstly, that people's concern is primarily focused on problems at the local level and, secondly, that they possess the power to do something about them. Rätzkel and Uzzell found that people display a spatial biasing in relation to their response to issues such as climate change, so that:

"Ironically, then, although people feel that they are responsible for the environment at the local level this is precisely the level at which they perceive minimal problems. The areal level which they perceive has the most serious environmental problems is the areal level about which they feel least personally responsible and powerless to influence or act."(p. 328)

Both the research and responses to action on climate change have remained centred on an individualistic causality and failed to take into account the broader social and political contexts (ibid). They argue that people's "sense of powerlessness might be a reflection of a larger issue, namely the reality of individualisation and competitiveness that govern society at large" (p. 333) and that the "reductionist individualism" evident in a focus on individual level responsibility and action might rightly dislocate people's ability to respond for the good of society as a whole. This "psycho-social dislocation" (p. 333) is constructed by an artificially created "dichotomy between individuals and society" and "the local and the global" (ibid).

According to some social theorists (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the individualization of responsibility is an extension of the modernizing processes themselves. Individuals are therefore both actively engaged in, and responsive to, the conditions of globalization that surround them, down to the very lifestyles they lead. So, where governments and global institutions state that any successful GHG emission mitigation strategy will require significant changes in lifestyles and behaviours (IPCC 2007b: 12; see also Stern 2007; Garnaut 2008) "'lifestyle' connotes *individual* responses to/ responsibility for social and environmental change" (Evans and Abrahamse 2009: 501, emphasis in original). This has important implications for the role of individual action in meeting climate change imperatives. In determining the efficacy of response, the nature of these voluntary acts, how they are enacted and the relationship between the actions of institutions (whether global, national or local) and individuals becomes critical. It is important then to determine which types of action undertaken at the

Individual responsibility and voluntary action on climate change personal and/or household level will contribute to the best outcome in terms of global environmental change. The following section outlines a preliminary typology of individual action to assist this task.

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## A Typology of Voluntary Action

There are a myriad of ways that individual actors can and do undertake voluntary action to reduce their carbon footprints.<sup>3</sup> I have constructed a typology of voluntary actions (see Table 1) which goes a little way in classifying the types of action choices individuals are presented with in contemporary, developed Western societies.

<b>Hierarchical</b>	<b>Individualist</b>	<b>Egalitarian</b>
<i>E.g. personal carbon trading</i>	<i>E.g. consumer-based actions</i>	<i>E.g. grassroots climate groups</i>
Compulsory scheme	Voluntary	Voluntary
Transfers responsibility from the state to the individual/household level	Responsibility shifts from ‘citizens’ to ‘consumers’. (Maniates 2002; Spaargaren & Moll 2008; Scerri 2009)	Responsibility lies with the individual but is also shared with wider society (Garvey 2008; Harris 2008; Dobson 2006)
“Top down”	“Top down” and “bottom up”	“Bottom up”
Power remains with the state &/ or global institutions	Two potential avenues of power are revealed: 1. State power remains dominant (Maniates 2002; Scerri 2009) 2. State power is “hollowed out”, authority lies with consumers & global organisations (Spaargaren & Moll 2008)	Power is shared amongst citizens

**Table 1: Three types of voluntary action**

This typology draws on Douglas’s (1970) Cultural Theory which has been influential in classifying behavioural worldviews on climate change (Ney (2000) and Thompson (2000) in IPCC 2001b; Hulme 2009). Cultural theory sets out 4 distinct profiles that describe people’s different views of nature and society: hierarchical, egalitarian, individualist and fatalist. Each discourse expresses different concepts of responsibility and thereby provides a means to expose and track constructs of responsibility within contemporary climate change debate. Fatalists perceive nature as a lottery and climate change outcomes as a function of chance (consequently, fatalists do not engage in climate policy discussions nor do they believe that their individual actions will effect change); individualists perceive nature as resilient and rely

<sup>3</sup> Guidance for individuals and households in this matter has undertaken exponential growth in recent years but to detail these here is well beyond the scope of this discussion. See Accountability and Consumers International 2007 for a comprehensive listing within the UK and USA.

Individual responsibility and voluntary action on climate change on markets to respond to climate change ‘stimuli’; hierarchists perceive nature as manageable and prefer the use of regulation and technologically-based ‘solutions’; and egalitarians perceive nature as fragile and regard the engagement of deliberative processes and civil society as critical in a climate change response (O’Riordan and Jordan 1999: 86-7).

The typology attempts to offer a distinction between the types of voluntary actions available to actors based on their cultural preferences. In the table I represent these according to the cultural theory classifications of hierarchical, individualist and egalitarian (it is presumed that fatalists don’t engage in voluntary action). Contrary to how these preferences are delineated here, each of these three typologies does not imply a clearcut scope of action, rather, even though people favour a particular cultural worldview, their behaviour incorporates characteristics across all three domains. A brief outline of each typology follows.

In a top-down hierarchical approach to climate change mitigation, global agreements are incorporated into national policy which could be prescribed to the individual through compulsory personal carbon trading. Personal Carbon Allowances (PCAs) have been a focus of research and policy deliberation in the UK, where the government has considered a compulsory scheme where individual and household level carbon emissions would be budgeted to fulfill national targets. In brief, a PCA scheme would operate similar to an emissions cap and trade scheme, that is, a cap or limit is initially established and carbon trading on an individual level can occur up to the limit of the cap (Seyfang and Paavola 2008). Over time the cap is reduced so that the total amount of carbon allowed to be emitted is reduced over time. Individuals would have something like a carbon credit card to ‘swipe’ to surrender their allowances from their carbon allowance accounts (Roberts and Thumin 2006: 4). The principle of PCAs has been found appealing (Vandenbergh and Steinemann 2007) if not practical from an administrative perspective (Lane *et al* 2008). Voluntary community-based schemes have gained some traction with Carbon Rationing Action Groups (CRAGs) established in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and recently in China<sup>4</sup>.

Consumer-based actions have been widely critiqued in relation to pro-environmental behaviours, particularly climate change (Scerri 2009; Accountability, Net Balance Foundation and LRQA 2008; Spaargaren and Moll 2008; Accountability and Consumers International 2007; Maniates 2002). Voluntary consumer actions range widely from buying carbon offsets, for example, to offset a lifestyle choice such as an overseas holiday; to paying a premium to encourage renewable energy uptake (e.g. Greenpower)<sup>5</sup>; to investing in less energy intensive appliances (from washing machines to solar panels).

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.carbonrationing.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> See [www.greenpower.com.au](http://www.greenpower.com.au). Australian consumers can purchase Greenpower which is charged at a premium to allow the energy retailer to purchase power from renewable sources.

Voluntary actions that fall within the egalitarian typology involve engagement with civil society. Again these range in extent from participating in collective online advocacy (e.g. Get Up)<sup>6</sup> to taking part in voluntary activities through membership of an environmental organisation or a climate action group.<sup>7</sup>

Critical to this discussion is the role of individualistic responses to climate change abatement which fall within the purview of consumer-based action. According to my argument thus far, governments and other institutions emphasise voluntary individualistic forms of responsibility for climate change mitigation. Individuals, however, in perceiving the complexity and extent of the climate threat and sensing their lack of power to enact global level change, instead apply their agency through personal private sphere behaviours.

This leads to two potential pathways for individualistic action. The first pathway, critiqued by authors such as Scerri (2009) and Maniates (2002) positions consumer-based action as responsive to the prevailing forces of economic rationalism. In their critique the only pathway currently open to actors for pro-environmental behaviour is through their consumer acts. However this action, whilst appearing to empower actors within their personal spheres of authority (their homes and lifestyles), diverts individual attention away from challenging the “knotty issues of consumption, consumerism, power and responsibility” (Maniates 2002: 45). Individualisation for Maniates is symbolic of the wholesale decline in public engagement in democratic processes in the West which can only be “remade through collective citizen action as opposed to individual consumer behaviour” (p. 65). In the same way Scerri (2009) argues that personal actions deflect individuals from considering how these practices shared in common with other members of society have the potential to challenge or support societal values. So that “personal acts of consumption stand-in for citizen's ethico-political commitments. In the place of engaging in a regulating body-politic, individual citizens are called upon to take initiatives and shoulder responsibilities themselves” (p. 477).

Contrasting the view that the “individualization of responsibility”, endemic in “Western culture and ideology” (Scerri 2009: 469), is a disempowering force that funnels human behaviour down an economic development path, Spaargaren & Mol (2008) argue instead that individualisation leads to three forms of “citizen-consumer” power typified by ecological citizenship, political consumerism (for e.g. choosing fair trade products) and “lifestyle politics”. They define “lifestyle politics” as “primarily about civil-society actors and dynamics beyond state and market” and “about private, personal and individual morals,

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.getup.org.au](http://www.getup.org.au). Get Up is an online campaigning and advocacy organisation based in Australia with approximately 336,000 online members which campaigns on a range of environmental and social justice issues.

<sup>7</sup> There are about 150 local grassroots climate actions groups (CAGs) active throughout Australia.

commitments and responsibilities” (p. 357). They argue that the demise of the State allows the “citizen-consumer” to have an emerging role in environmental politics as connections are forged with global level institutions and processes through consumer practice. This conception of an empowered consumer base incorporates much from the egalitarian typology and opens the possibility for incorporating forms of consumer practice within egalitarian citizen action (one could think of consumer boycotts, for example). Consumerism for Spaargaren and Moll becomes an entry point for greater democratic involvement at both local and global scales (as State power is “hollowed-out” through the modernizing progression of globalisation), however, in saying this; they also delineate the form of individualism displayed in lifestyle politics as being distinct from the neoliberalist interpretation provided by Scerri and Maniates.

“..... lifestyle politics do not favour automatically or exclusively ‘individualist’ notions of politics and consumer-empowerment. They are ‘individualist’ policies in a very, specific, circumscribed way. The concept of lifestyle as it is used by Giddens (1991) refers to the cluster of habits and storylines that result from an individuals’ participation in a set of everyday life routines they share with others. Every citizen-consumer can be characterized by his or her unique combination of shared practices, the level of integration of these practices, and the storylines he or she connects to these practices. *Lifestyle politics then refer to the ways in which individuals at some points in time (especially when confronted with sudden changes, challenges or fatal moments) reflect on their everyday life*” (p. 357, my emphasis).

## What constrains individual agency?

The above section outlines some of the ways that individuals can act in order to reduce their greenhouse impact. But in what ways are the conditions for individual agency within modern society being constrained? Here I propose that the inhibition of individual agency for voluntary action on climate change abatement can be demonstrated in three distinct ways and will consider each in turn.

1. *Actors lack authority*; i.e. they are not empowered to take action.

Individual agency derives from a sense of personal empowerment which becomes the basis from which people are able to take action within their spheres of authority. Norgaard’s (2009) meta-analysis of psycho-social research on individual action in relation to climate change draws on several lines of empirical evidence to support the supposition that individuals in fact feel disempowered and ineffective. She notes Krosnic *et al*’s (2006) observation that, as there is no easy solution to climate change that people no longer take it seriously (p. 14). Immerwahr (1999) identifies the lack of a sense of efficacy as a barrier to action (p. 21). Kellstedt (2008) states that “increased levels of information about global warming have a negative effect on concern and sense of personal responsibility” (ibid), supporting Rätzl and Uzzell’s (2009) contention that people perceive less responsibility for those matters that are

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least under their personal control. Actors, in effect, are “choosing not to choose” (Macnaghten 2003) to engage with issues such as climate change. The global scale of the problem and the enormous power inequities evident at a personal level (compared to governments and corporations) deluge their ability to see themselves as “authoritative actors” (Biermann *et al* 2009: 32)

2. *Actors lack trust* in the very institutions (namely, governments) that they turn to for action on issues of global complexity and risk, such as climate change.

Whereas governments place confidence in their citizens to respond to the climate crisis through their individual behaviours, the public displace their personal sense of disempowerment through the desire for institutional accountability. In response what emerges is a type of “organised irresponsibility” (Beck 1992) where climate change becomes another ‘risk’ “for which people and organizations are certainly ‘responsible’ in a sense that they are its authors but where no one is held specifically accountable” (Giddens 1999: 9).

Calls for individual responsibility by governments and other institutions raise issues for the public of institutional trust, capability and duty of care (Pidgeon *et al.* 2008: 75; Bickerstaff *et al.* 2008; Macnaghten 2003; Bickerstaff & Walker 2002). Not only do people perceive an unacceptable level of action from governments on climate change mitigation but they also cynical that governments are willing to take action on climate change where it is contrary to governments’ or other powerful actors’ economic interests (Darnton 2006: 24). People are also alert to the uneven power relationships that operate between the individual and the state and other institutions (Bickerstaff *et al.* 2008; Maniates 2002).

3. *Actors lack reflexivity.*

The essential nature of reflexivity can be portrayed as breaking structural bonds in order to unleash individual agency (Gregory 2000; Beck 1992). If, on the other hand, individuals act “*without* questioning the norms of the wider society, the possibilities of change will be constrained by certain norms which are taken for granted” (Gregory 2000: 485). Setting up a “vicious circle” where actors in conducting their daily lives reinforce the social norms that in turn “circumscribe individual choice” (*ibid*). Scerri (2009) argues that actors in Western society display their individualism as “elemental particles of society” (Supiot 2007 :14 cited in Scerri 2009) whose actions are merely “an instrument of economic development” (p. 473). As consumers (rather than citizens) they fail to connect on an ethical level in order to create the “links between (private) morality and (collective) reasons for acting” (Scerri 2009: 470). Scerri argues that the “individualization of responsibility” (Maniates 2002) has shifted the emphasis of voluntary pro-environmental behaviour to the domain of the consumer. Any ethical considerations are thereby subverted into expressions of green consumerism, what Scerri describes as a type of “ethics-lite”.

The linkages between morality and reasons for acting (p. 470) are severed in this atomistic interpretation as actors no longer reflect on their private sphere behaviours in relation to broader societal values (p. 478). So in the same way as Rätzzel and Uzzell (2009) propose a “psycho-social dislocation”, Scerri argues that individualization creates a politico-ethical one.

*“In the contemporary West, possibilities for achieving sustainability fall foul of a way of life that, while free to exercise sovereign choices over a plethora of opportunities, is increasingly cut-off from political – that is, value- and so power-laden – commitments to inhabiting the ecosphere on ethical terms”* (Scerri 2009: 479).

## Activating Agency

Three key constraints have been argued here to the uptake of effective voluntary action at the individual scale. Firstly, actors in perceiving individual responsibility for climate change abatement, feel disempowered in the face of the complexity and enormity of climate change risk. Secondly, that in acknowledging their essential powerlessness, citizens turn to their governments to take responsibility for climate change mitigation. However governments are seen by their citizens to be equally incapable, ineffective or uncommitted to rise to the climate change challenge. Moreover governments increasingly expect that individuals will take voluntary action within their personal lifestyles but outside of a social contract that sets up the provisions for sharing responsibility - thus creating a sense of distrust. Thirdly, the structural conditions of modernity inhibit the ability for self-reflexive individuals to generate social change as much of their individual action operates to reinforce social norms, or worse, in the absence of reflexivity, the moral bases for voluntary action are subverted through consumerism.

These three constraints are embedded within two “dislocations”: a psycho-social dislocation that creates an artificial dichotomy between the individual and society, and the local and the global resulting in a type of hiatus in action through people “choosing not to choose”. The second politico-ethical dislocation separates individuals’ moral reasoning for taking voluntary action from broader social values. Both dislocations imply the need for deep reflection on the climate change *problematique* at both the personal and societal scale (Gregory 2000), and suggest the necessity for a re-balancing from individual responsibility to a shared one (Scerri 2009) along with a shift in power from governments and global institutions to civil society (Gregory 2000: 499).

Moreover these constraints also reveal the need to refocus social science research - to shift to “transforming behaviours” rather than trying to form solutions from existing patterns of individual behaviours (Rätzzel and Uzzell 2009). This has important implications for the way that climate change solutions are constructed between agents and institutions – implying a much greater involvement in democratic deliberations between nations and their publics, as well as ways of communicating the threat

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of climate change that creates transformative responses. Rather than investigating how individuals' actions influence their lifestyles and behaviours, research needs to address how individuals aim to solve environmental problems collectively (Rathzel & Uzzell 2009).

## **Conclusion**

To address the moral challenge of climate change it is widely accepted that responsibility needs to be shared between states and their citizens. Significant cuts in carbon emissions are required to prevent catastrophic changes to the Earth's climate systems. These cuts will need to come, in particular, from the developed world from changes in individuals' carbon-intensive lifestyles and behaviours. In the absence of prescriptive forms of enforcing personal and household carbon budgets, global treaties will need to be enacted through States and the voluntary actions of their publics.

However when considering both the psycho-social and politico-ethical bases for climate change, the interests of individuals and states diverge, requiring a restructuring of the social contract (between nations and their citizens) before effective climate change solutions can emerge. There remains one way for this contract to be re-negotiated and that is by individuals "*joining forces with others*" (Gregory 2000: 490) through social movements in order to create social change.

## **Acknowledgements**

This research has been undertaken as part of a PhD supported through an Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) funded by the Australian Government. Travel to the conference has been funded through a UTS Vice Chancellors Fund Travelling Scholarship and the Institute for Sustainable Futures.

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