

## An energetic approach

Patrick Devine-Wright talks to Jon Sutton about crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to tackle issues of sustainability

**H**as your professional path reflected personal passions, or has it been a fortuitous one?

A bit of both. When I finished my PhD studies, I nearly abandoned research entirely, thinking what I really wanted to do was become a full-time musician! I remember being offered my first job at the Institute of Energy and Sustainable Development, De Montfort University. I didn't hesitate to accept, even though there was also the offer of a social psychology lecturer post elsewhere. I have always been motivated to research environmental issues from a psychological perspective, but in a particular way, focusing upon policy- and practice-relevant questions. I don't have too much respect for conventional disciplinary boundaries.

**How have you straddled these boundaries throughout your career?**

I've chosen to work in institutional contexts already open to multidisciplinary working. Since I completed my PhD, I have worked in multidisciplinary research centres in two different universities, not in a conventional psychology department. I've also steered clear of the traditional academic model of the solitary researcher producing a single authored journal article or book every so often. That doesn't fit with the straddling of boundaries, which is typically a more collaborative enterprise. Whilst I have a team of excellent researchers working with me who have backgrounds in environmental and social psychology, I've also forged professional relationships with individuals in 'neighbouring' disciplines such as geography, planning, architecture, sociology and engineering. It is these individuals that I work with, both at the Manchester Architecture Research Centre and in multidisciplinary research consortia. For example, on the ESRC-funded 'Beyond Nimbyism' project I am currently leading [see [tinyurl.com/4hc24o](http://tinyurl.com/4hc24o)], the team of investigators comes from six disciplinary fields. I have been working with some of

these individuals since 2003 on energy related issues, and I think we make a good team because of that. In my experience, researcher-led consortia of this kind engender more genuine interdisciplinary collaboration in comparison to research consortia put together by a funding body.

**Do these other disciplines benefit from a psychological perspective as well?**

Yes, in a number of ways – introducing theoretical areas – e.g. place attachment and place identity, social representations theory, restoration theory – and advocating a rigorous empirical methodological approach. For example, my critical review of research on 'public perceptions' published by the journal *Wind Energy* in 2005 aimed to increase the coherence of a rapidly emerging field of applied social research, but in a way that ensured more conceptually grounded research, with a wider application of methodologies. Many of the readers of these journals are unlikely to be psychologists, but I am pretty sure they value a paper communicating psychological theory and method clearly to them in ways relevant to their research interests. After all, they are just not going to read psychology journals!

**How else do you get to different audiences?**

My work with charities, consultancies and government is an important means of straddling the boundary between research and practice. Consultancies are more exciting research organisations than universities in many ways – more rapid response, and closer to the practical application of knowledge. Take my work with Energy for Sustainable Development to review policy on community renewable energy, commissioned by DEFRA/DTI. This has led to providing advice directly to government.

The other important way to cross the research/practice boundary is through multiple forms of dissemination – for me

a good research project doesn't only produce journal articles, it reaches a wider audience of interested parties. The 'Beyond Nimbyism' project is due to conclude in May, and I have already begun the process of feeding back key research findings to government – Department of Energy and Climate Change – and of putting in place opportunities to present our findings to other policymakers (e.g. Welsh Assembly, DCLG), to industry (npower renewables, E.On renewables) and to the mass media. Ultimately, I would like the project team to feed back the results directly to the participants – the communities we have researched in our eight case studies around the UK. We could have public meetings in each place, but I suspect we have little direct incentive in the current academic system to do so.

**When it comes to sustainable developments such as renewable energy, how do you overcome 'nimbyism'?**

By avoiding the term entirely! It's a pejorative label that fails to capture the complexity of reasons people oppose developments, and serves only to alienate and antagonise those with grievances. More broadly, opposition can never be totally eradicated, and shouldn't be – protestors often have legitimate concerns about poorly planned projects. The 'Beyond Nimbyism' project points to a number of ways to manage uncertainties in planning renewable energy – moving beyond an 'information-deficit' model of publics, avoiding declaring that emotional responses are invalid, tailoring engagement to the characteristics of the place and community, engendering trust in the institutions involved, tackling scepticism about the fairness and transparency of planning procedures, and sharing the benefits with local people.

I am particularly interested in how the psychology of 'nimbyism' can be rethought, drawing on theories of place attachment and place identity. This is what I am currently working on, to explain emotional responses to proposed energy projects. Tracing this theoretical argument right through to its implications for industry practices and energy policy is a task I find particularly exciting.

**You have often advocated community approaches – moving from people as individual, passive consumers towards a more collective vision. Can you give an example of where this worked?**

Gamblesby in the Lake District. A small village up in the hills that achieved remarkable things by pulling together and drawing upon local knowledge and skills to install different forms of renewable energy.

So it seems that people can be the answer to what, in the case of global warming, appears to be a man-made problem. In that case, why haven't psychology and psychologists been more prominent in addressing it?

Three reasons – firstly, most psychologists follow research trajectories already well established, tweaking particular approaches or perspectives forged by previous researchers, rather than setting out on new directions. Secondly, the environment is neglected in most psychology theorising. There's an unfortunate tendency to reduce 'psychology' to something happening inside the body or even just the brain, making it easy to characterise everything on the 'outside' as being external to your perspective and to be accounted for by other disciplines – it's a kind of person–environment dualism that is strongly ingrained. Where environment is conceived, it tends to be narrowly interpreted as a social arena, treating the physical or natural environment as a mere backdrop, for example in social psychology. Thirdly, environmental problems, and the solutions to those problems, are complex. It takes several years to build up sufficient knowledge to design and conduct research studies on them, and most psychologists probably have neither the time nor the inclination to do this.

**If an interdisciplinary approach is the key, what advice would you give psychologists on forging such partnerships?**

Humility – you are only able to address a small piece of the pie, and that part is probably not the most significant. Openness – your work can benefit from learning how other disciplines approach common problems.

**Can a sustainable, 'green' lifestyle be a psychologically healthy one, or is it largely about self-sacrifice?**

I would argue that lifestyles embedded in materialist beliefs do not make for happiness, and I am sceptical of the views of social marketers that all we need to do is to persuade consumers to purchase 'greener' products. In fact, there is a deep fissure within the environmental movement as to whether sustainability requires forgoing material luxuries or not. I would tend to agree that much of what we currently take to be necessities are in fact luxuries we could and probably should do without. But at the same time, I think renouncing the positive benefits from possessing beautiful things is a step too far. I think people will always be attracted to new, glitzy possessions, and the sense of identity and social prestige that goes with them – even if these are

'green bling' such as hybrid vehicles or solar panels. I don't think sustainable development needs to be characterised as self-sacrifice at all – charities like Common Ground are adept at making environmental actions fun, sociable and meaningful.

**George Monibot responded to Julie Burchill's fury at 'green hypocrites' recently [see [tinyurl.com/5rkt6c](http://tinyurl.com/5rkt6c)] by saying that 'hypocrisy is the gap between your aspirations and your actions. Greens have high aspirations – they want to live more ethically – and they will always fall short. But the alternative to hypocrisy isn't moral purity – no one manages that – but cynicism.' How can psychology help in the struggle against cynicism?**

The presence of a gap between aspirations and actions cannot be attributed entirely to individuals, since understanding the 'gap' means facing up to important non-psychological influences upon behaviour.

Furthermore, labelling people hypocrites is no more useful than labelling wind farm protestors as 'nimby's'. As a society, we have systematically planned and designed environments that facilitate certain actions and obstruct others, for example the planning of out-of-town shopping centres favours, even

necessitates, car use and the planning of centralised electricity grids favours large-scale fossil-fuel power stations. These contexts are the reality people live their daily lives within and cannot be wished away by polemic. Until it is easier and cheaper to take public transport or to install renewable energy technologies, the gap is likely to persist.

**What psychological principle or theory have you drawn on in your work?**

There is no single theory I have drawn upon, but the nearest I have come is my recent work using theory of place – e.g. concepts of place attachment and place identity. Place theory is a perspective on the world that treats the environment as more than a backdrop to social and psychological

phenomena. It also offers a series of conceptual tools that are useful for understanding person–environment interactions.

**You've been so active in terms of research, but also more applied work such as consultancy and heading up an interdisciplinary consortium. Which do you enjoy the most? Which should take the priority at the moment?**

I enjoy it all, and don't see them as separate domains. Research for me only counts if it is useful in addressing problems we currently face.

**Which psychologist, past or present, do you most look up to?**

I have high regard for the American Paul Stern [see p.184] for what he has achieved in both theoretical and applied contexts. I also value the lead my teachers in environmental psychology at Surrey – e.g. David Canter and David Uzzell – have shown in applying psychology to real-world problems using unconventional methodologies.

**What are the personal and professional priorities for our readers, if they wish to lead and promote a sustainable life?**

There are loads of simple things each one of us can do. At home, insulating the loft is a good place to start – it makes much more of a difference than switching off a few lights and it's far more cost-effective than

installing renewable energy. For work, why not take advantage of the Cycle Scheme ([www.cyclescheme.co.uk](http://www.cyclescheme.co.uk)) through your university to buy a nice new bike at lower cost? I've had a Brompton folding bike for a few years now and it's a great way to integrate some gentle exercise in a day otherwise spent in front of a computer or at meetings. Beyond these, I would like academics more generally to challenge a culture where 'success' often equates with a high-carbon lifestyle of international travelling. The 'stars' of academia jet off to keynotes around the world demonstrating their international reputation, but at the cost of environmental damage. Is this really the model of success we want to hold up to the young researchers in the era of climate change?



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For more information see [tinyurl.com/4j682o](http://tinyurl.com/4j682o)