# **Sustainability: Issues of Scale, Care and Consumption**

**Abstract**

This paper investigates how consumers interested in sustainability are affected by conflicts in caring and scale. Contrasting previous emphasis relating scale to production, the paper illustrates how scale influences consumption and social reproduction, including consumers’ more concrete preoccupations with caring about and for themselves, significant others and not least, the planet. The paper makes three contributions to the nascent management literature in this field. First, it illustrates how scalar logics at urban through to global levels, influence seemingly micro-social routine consumption decisions. Second, it develops an approach that emphasises the scale-sensitivity of consumer decision-making around sustainability and the conflicts inherent in caring. Third, it addresses critiques of current studies preoccupied with processes of production rather than social reproduction and illustrates the critical role that consumption plays in the social construction of scales. Based on these findings, we argue that policy promoting sustainability may be misplaced in that it does not sufficiently acknowledge how people’s consumption and caring decisions are nested in relational and spatial contexts.

**Keywords**

Sustainability, care, scale, consumption, sustainable consumption

**Introduction**

Sustainability is a critical issue in management having serious implications for the competitiveness and survival of organisations (e.g., Akhtar *et al.*, 2017; Lubin and Esty, 2010) and, ultimately, the survival of human and nonhuman life. A principle challenge to sustainability is overconsumption (e.g., Carley and Spapens, 2017; Gao and Tian, 2016; Rijsberman, 2017); what Petty *et al*. (2007) describe as “the consumption treadmill”. Some work has started to explore the potential of care in guiding a more sustained shift in consumption that will address individual, community and environmental needs (e.g., Shaw, *et al.*, 2017; Shaw, McMaster and Newhom, 2016; Sheth, Sethia and Srinivas, 2011). Such a shift has transformative potential across the multiple identities and contexts of the consumer both locally and globally. Current research, however, has largely focused on the level of the individual (e.g., Shaw, *et al*., 2016; Black and Cherrier, 2010), with some, but less, attention to familial relations (Heath, *et al*., 2016).

Related scholarship on scale has tended to focus on capital accumulation and production, while neglecting social reproduction and consumption (e.g., Marston, 2000). Sustainability is understood, experienced and shaped by social contexts at the level of the individual, home, urban and wider national and global society. Thus, social reproduction and consumption are critical to the positioning of care in sustainability. Understanding ‘who cares’ requires an understanding of differing political and sociocultural constructions and interpretations of care. Care in sustainable consumption choices may be subject to conflicting care relations across multiple levels (Shaw, *et al.*, 2017). Such conflicts have the potential to be transformative and can change the role and significance of specific scales, assert the significance of others and have the potential to generate new scales with an impact on power relations across multiple stakeholders (Swyngedouw, 1997).

Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews with consumers, we illustrate how ordinary consumption[[1]](#footnote-1) can be understood as a realm with conflicting landscapes of care or ‘caringscapes’ (Popke, 2006; Milligan and Wiles, 2010; Smith, 1998) that are both constituted by and constitutive of their scalar context. In doing so, our contribution is three-fold. First, we illustrate how the seemingly micro-social scale of ordinary sustainable consumption is fundamentally intertwined with scalar logics functioning at domestic, urban, national and global levels. Second, we corroborate a more nuanced, scale-sensitive approach to consumer agency and sustainable action that recognises both the structural constraints of ordinary consumption and its capacity to contribute towards, and transform, sustainability initiatives beyond the scale of the home and domesticity. Third, we elaborate on the social construction of scales within the realm of consumption.

The following section outlines the relationships between sustainability, care and scale. Subsequently, the paper details our methods and reports and discusses our findings, identifying distinctive scalar levels. We then conclude and outline managerial implications.

**Sustainability, Care and Scale**

While sustainability is a contested concept (Dobson, 1996), it is popularly defined in terms of balancing economic, social and environmental impacts (Elkington, 1997) with a view to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). With environmental problems, such as, global warming now dangerously close to agreed upper limits, climate change is one of the most serious threats to our lives (Mckie, 2016). Established evidence points to the role of human activity in depleting natural resources and causing environmental harm, creating long term and irreversible effects (Abraham, 2016). Despite the political and cultural complexity, much of the popular discourse on sustainability and climate change positions responsibility at the level of individual consumers charged with making more sustainable lifestyle choices (Jones, 2010).

Accordingly, significant research effort has gone into seeking to explain the gap between stated social and environmental concerns and behaviour (e.g., Caruana, Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2016). Similarly, research has sought to profile concerned consumers (e.g., Peattie, 2001; Straughan and Roberts, 1999), to identify the values salient to positive environmental actions (e.g., de Groot, Schubert, and Thøgersen, 2016; Sangroya and Nayak, 2017) which can be utilised in consumer awareness raising campaigns (e.g., Morrison and Beer, 2017) and the uptake of more sustainable market alternatives (e.g., Fuentes and Fuentes, 2017; Haucke, 2017; Spendrup, Hunter and Isgren, 2016). Implicit is that the impetus for change lies very much with the individual consumer. This can be challenged, as it assumes sovereign consumers and ignores the structural environment that can often constrain sustainable behaviours (e.g., Carrington, Zwick and Neville, 2016) and which arguably facilitates the failure of public policy to adequately address the environmental crisis (Black, Shaw and Trebeck, 2016). This includes well-documented examples of ‘greenwashing’ (e.g., Lane, 2016; Lyon and Montgomery, 2013; Nurse, 2016) which act as further barriers to positive action through consumer confusion and a breakdown in trust (e.g., Chen and Chang, 2013).

Despite this, consumers do have a central role and overconsumption is still cited as the greatest challenge to sustainability (Petty *et al*., 2007). Significant emphasis has been placed on the need to redirect consumer behaviour as a critical response to the environmental challenge (e.g., Carlisle and Hanlon, 2007; Schor, 2005; Sheth, Sethia and Srinivas, 2011; Soron, 2010). Brown (2009: 266) in proposing “what you and I can do” highlights the importance of individual agency, suggesting consumers should not underestimate what they can achieve at individual, political and global scales. This highlights the need to understand more deeply consumers and their activities not as separate, atomised and outright “individualist” (e.g., Miller, 2012) but in relation to the multiple scales they interact with when facing sustainability. After all, sustainability involves the activities of multiple stakeholders whose actions and logics impact the consumer landscape. In what follows we, firstly, argue that care provides the basis for an alternative viewpoint from which to explore sustainability. Distinct from traditional moral or ethical dimensions (e.g., Balabanis, 2013; Antonetti and Maclan, 2016), care provides opportunities to increase the intensity of attachment and connectivity in sustainability (Popke, 2006). Secondly, we reason that care is a means to transform our understanding of sustainability and the role that social reproduction and consumption have in scale-making.

*Sustainable Landscapes of Care*

The language of “care” is increasingly used across the literature exploring sustainability in management (e.g., Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Cherrier, Black and Lee, 2011; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch and Gruber, 2011; Prestin and Pearce, 2010; Walker and Kent, 2009). Despite this, care tends to be treated as a unidimensional concept, with limited consideration for the scope and potential of care to inform everyday sustainable practices (Shaw, McMaster and Newholm, 2016). Care is popularly defined:

“*As a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40; Tronto, 2013: 19, original emphasis).

Care, therefore, manifests at multiple levels and scales (Milligan and Wiles, 2010). While receiving some attention in other fields (e.g., Popke, 2006), the scalar dimension to care and consumption is under analysed in the management literature. This may be somewhat surprising, given that care is truly universal for humans; indeed, it is a fundamental feature of being human (Held, 2006; Popke, 2006). It emphasises our mutual dependency, and common vulnerability, especially in the face of climate change.

In analysing sustainability, we can think of relationships as embedded across consumers, producers, suppliers, retailers, non-government organisations, governments, etc, highlighting the complex sets of interrelationships across landscapes of care (Milligan and Wiles, 2010) and citizenship (Knijn and Kremer, 1997; Svenhuijsen, 1998). Brown (2003) goes further to argue for the transformative potential of care to provide an alternative approach to that of autonomous rights and responsibilities.

Care is frequently conceived in relation to ‘distance’ (e.g., Smith, 1998). Caring now routinely extends beyond geographical and psychological reaches (Silk, 2004) and, in terms of sustainability, our actions are increasingly having a profound influence on the lives of those geographically (e.g., Cherrier, 2009) and psychologically (e.g., Spence, Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2012) distant to us. From a care perspective should distance matter? Familiarity and identity are highly important in influencing the motivation to, and patterns of care and caring (Friedman, 1991). Milligan and Wiles (2010) argue, however, that even across physical distance both ‘care for’ (the performance of care giving) and ‘care about’ (emotional aspects of care) can be socially and emotionally proximate. A concerned consumer may perform both care for and about climate change impacts overseas through, for example, participation in campaigning, protesting, etc. that is aligned to an environmental organisation. As climate change challenges are global, caring applied to physically distant relationships is important as a means to respond to those challenges.

The literature is alert to the likelihood that there may be barriers to and failures in enacting care. Thus, there may be benevolence, ‘care about’, but this may not necessarily translate into beneficence, actions of ‘care for’ (Shaw *et al.*, 2017; Silk, 2004). Care needs can exceed the capacity to provide care, and tensions can exist in reconciling various care demands (Tronto, 2013). Decisions to care may consider a wide range of issues including need, familial relations, proximity, social norms, opportunity and resources including time, financial, etc. Consumers are embedded in complex relations often dictated by corporate strategies where neoliberal agendas dominate, producing structural barriers (Carrington, Zwick and Neville, 2016). Thus, while a caring attitude may exist, pertinent is conversion to care action which cannot be assumed.

Care in sustainability operates at the level of the individual and wider society as well as across both private and public domains. Understanding the landscape of care across micro and macro levels and the tensions across these relationships is critical to develop an alternative orientation towards sustainability. Care as currently interpreted as relational and, hence, occurring at a specific scale, understood through a series of phases (e.g., Tronto, 2013) and within single contexts (e.g., Noddings, 2003). This neglects to fully engage with these interacting processes of scale and scalar logics.

*Social Reproduction and Consumption in Scale*

Drawing on the rich body of geographical literature on scales (e.g., Smith, 1984; Taylor 1999), business and management scholars have begun to explore the potential of scale. Spicer (2006), for example, argues that organisational logics evolve as they move across different territories, ultimately being contested and transformed by distinct processes of capital accumulation, discourses and actions within and across each spatial scale.

Scale has been recognised as consisting of size, level and relation (Howitt, 1998), offering a means of interrogating the scalar aspects of policy initiatives and the “strategic development of scale” by various agents and bodies (MacKinnon, 2011). Following MacKinnon, we believe that engaging with care in sustainability requires an understanding of micro through to macro levels and the relations among these differing scales. Important is an understanding of the values and practices that shape these landscapes of care and the places and spaces of care across the individual and family, to corporate and urban structures, where experiences and practices of care in sustainability occur. Such an analysis will be vital in highlighting the tensions and unevenness of landscapes of care, providing insights into both the presence and absence of care in sustainability. Here no one scale commands priority, rather, it is the processes through which scales become (re)constituted and the relational aspect of scale that is important (Swyngedouw, 1997). The social reproduction of scale is central to understanding sustainability as care. What we understand and experience as sustainability is shaped by social contexts from the micro level of the individual through to the macro level of global society. Here the social becomes a critical site of care in sustainability. Indeed, Popke (2006) refers to a theorisation of social reproduction as a landscape of care.

Social reproduction and consumption have been largely ignored in scale in favour of capitalist production, focusing on the power of capital, labour and the state (Deckha, 2003; Marston, 2000). Marston *et al*. (2005: 427) argue that in neglecting social reproduction we “lose theoretical and practical purchase on the very places where ideas are formed, actions are produced and relationships are created and maintained”. Thus, social reproduction and consumption perform a theoretically critical role in the social construction of scale (Heynen, 2009; Merrett, 1999). Indeed, Heynen (2009) highlights in particular the importance of social reproduction in the exploration of everyday activities, including consumption. MacKinnon (2011) and MacKinnon, *et al*., (2009) recognise the importance of both capital accumulation and social reproduction, and their interaction in an evolutionary framework in a political economy of scale. Power relations outside the relations of capital and labour, such as those of domestic labour and collective consumption (Castells, 1997; Marston, 2000) also profoundly influence scale-making. In the current study understanding ‘who cares’ requires an understanding of differing political and sociocultural constructions and interpretations of care. Questions concerning the role and power relations of consumers in seeking to influence scale are critical. Such struggles have the potential to be transformative and can change the role and significance of specific scales as well as impacting power dynamics across human relations (Swyngedouw, 1997).

We observe that related consumer research has largely focused on the level of the individual (e.g., Shaw, *et al*., 2016; Black and Cherrier, 2010), with some, but less, attention to familial relations (Heath, *et al*., 2016). It has, therefore, neglected the intra and inter scalar complexities that may characterise accounts of contemporary caring consumers.

**Methods**

This paper explores care for sustainability across scalar logics. Participants were recruited in two stages. In the first stage (10 participants), we attempted to recruit participants likely to be concerned about sustainability and, therefore, placed invitations to participate in organic food outlets located in a large UK city, in areas with a mixed demographic profile. The nature of the research focus necessitated a population likely to be concerned about sustainability, albeit to varying degrees. In the second stage (12 participants), we employed “purposive” sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Through snowballing techniques we attempted to reach participants with maximum variation in terms of their approach to sustainability, including ordinary consumers, individuals identified as ‘ethical consumers’ and younger individuals identified as ‘activists’ (based in 3 large UK cities). Thus, while we achieved a good level of diversity in our sample, it did tend to skew more towards those who held some level of concern towards sustainability. Data collection stopped once theoretical saturation was reached - in terms of emergent themes and our research questions (e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 2009).

In both stages the interviews used visual elicitation techniques (e.g., Bell and Davison, 2012; Bolton, Pole and Mizen, 2001) which served to uncover and stimulate thought processes during the interview (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995), while also facilitating dialogue (Warren, 2012) in relation to sustainability. Participants were asked prior to the interview to collect 8-12 images (from magazines, newspapers, the internet, pieces of artwork, photographs or other sources) that represented their thoughts and feelings about the topic. As the images were selected by the participants, they benefited from being directed by their agenda rather than that of the researchers. The interviews were 1-2 hours in duration. Participants consisted of 15 females and 7 males, their age range varied by approximately 45 years (see table 1).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and participants were assured of anonymity. The qualitative approach encouraged participants to describe stories, examples and scenarios that illuminated the nature of their experiences of sustainability. The researcher sought to create an environment where participants felt at ease and as a result, the interviews were characterised by a conversational quality with the researcher that was circular in nature as researcher inventions flowed from the course of the conversation (Connolly and Prothero, 2003) seeking minimum intervention. Interview transcripts were systematically coded, sorted and analysed with the aim of identifying common patterns, themes and sub-themes within and across the interviews in a thematic analysis. Analysis was interactive and, following Miles and Huberman (1994) ‘marginal remarks’ were used to reveal, illuminate, reflect and query the data across the interviews. In this process, the authors moved back and forth between the emergent themes and extant literature in order to assess prior constructs’ capacity to reflect a reliable and authentic interpretation of our participants’ worlds (Spiggle, 1994). Iterations were open to and actively sought the identification of unexplored and unanticipated insights. We paid particular attention to participants’ logics and practices within each scale and then moved on to identify connections across scales, following a multi-level analysis (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). That is, we moved from specific accounts to more abstract and discursive configurations of each scale. Analysis was conducted first independently and then jointly between the authors to cross check for validity and reliability (Karmowska, Child and James, 2017).

Table 1. Participants

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | Age Group | Employment |
| Abigail | 45-50yrs | Full time, psychologist |
| Annie | 30-35yrs | Full time, teacher |
| Callie | 60-65yrs | Retired  |
| Caitlyn | 35-40yrs | Full time, academic |
| Maisie | 35-40yrs | Part time, public servant |
| Patrick | 40-45yrs | Full time, academic |
| Seren | 30-35yrs | Part time, artist |
| Sophia | 30-35yrs | Full time, mother |
| Theo | 40-45yrs | Unemployed |
| Verity | 30-35yrs | Full time, wardrobe supervisor |
| Amber | 40-45yrs | Part time, shop assistant  |
| Alec | 25-30yrs  | Full time, public servant |
| Christian  | 20-25yrs | Student |
| Charlotte | 35-40yrs | Full time, academic |
| Julia | 35-40yrs  | Full time, lawyer |
| Kyle | 40-45yrs | Full time, shop owner |
| Keira | 40-45yrs | Full time, academic |
| Max | 25-30yrs  | Student |
| Mia  | 25-30yrs | Part time, sales assistant |
| Nadeem  | 25-30yrs | Student |
| Paige | 40-45yrs | Part time, academic |
| Sienna | 45-50yrs | Full time, manager |

**Findings**

In what follows we examine care and sustainability across the scales of individual and body, home and domesticity, urban, national and global contexts to reveal responses, constraints and contradictions in relation to sustainability at each scalar level.

*Individuals and their Bodies*

Many descriptions of environmental degradation and (un)sustainability have attributed primary responsibility to individuals. Within this scale, care (or lack thereof) for the environment was largely the responsibility of individual consumers and their mentality of using more, using up and throwing away:

That it is now actually ok to be greedy and selfish, and to make as much money as you can. And to consume as much, and to change your furniture every year, and buy a new car every year. Even down to simple levels of selfishness, you know why is it alright to chuck your rubbish in the street instead of disposing it… (Callie)

In terms of care, Callie highlights the potential challenge of care for self and others. She argues that at an individual level too many people lack the capacities to care. Individual failure to care for the planet is viewed as at best, reflecting a lack of education and pro-environmental sensibilities (capacities) and at worst, reflecting greed and selfishness (when resources are available but are not employed). By contrast, pro-environmental consumers attempted to do their bit through various practices, from buying green, fair trade and organic certified products, to reducing food miles and using public transport to reusing and recycling as much as possible. Here, however, there was often a compromise between opposing those that facilitate individual greed and wanton materialism and seeking to “infiltrate” these structural forces from the inside:

Unfortunately, I probably would just shop at Tesco…where I live…there is other more independent places which will have some other stuff like this. So I would buy stuff from there. But I do feel like because most people are going to be buying stuff from the supermarket it’s at the supermarket level that these things need to be infiltrated into. Because it needs to get to the wider audience, it’s not going to get to the wider audience in something like Grassroots or Planet Organic; it needs to get to the consciousness of the majority of people. (Annie)

Such compromises echoed previous research noting the various identity conflicts experienced by consumers (Black and Cherrier, 2010) as well as accounts and rationalisations employed for failing to behave more sustainably (Devinney, Eckhardt and Belk, 2010). Accordingly, within this scale there was also acknowledgement of conflicting responsibilities and duties of “self-care”, rather than care for others and/or the planet, which limited participants’ capacity to act on their pro-environmental motivations. For example, Christian recognises his individual responsibility for social and environmental change but clarifies that he is currently in a particular phase in his life where he has to put himself – an apparently contradictive imperative – first:

On a personal level as well I’ve, I don’t know, the past year or two of my life has been like a very intense process of kind of getting to grips with a lot of the kind of different kind of coping strategies that I’ve had in my life, that were becoming quite dysfunctional…you have to be very kind of protected and focussed on yourself, which has its downsides as well I think. There’s been times where I have been outright selfish as a defence to protect that process, so yeah… (Christian)

Christian’s dilemma in privileging care for the self resonates with the inherent conflicts in care and caring (cf Black and Cherrier, 2010). Despite a recognition of our mutual dependency (Engster, 2005), individuals may not be capable of realising their perceived responsibilities to others. Thus, in Christian’s case, there is sensitivity to extending care, but there are barriers to translating this into care giving beyond his own needs.

*Scale of Home and Domesticity*

Another scale that frequently arose in our interviews was that of the home and domesticity, ranging from caring for one’s children to the intersection of urban gentrification with environmental degradation. Many of our participants, for instance, discussed how having children became the impetus for caring about sustainability and the kind of planet their children will end up living in:

When children come along it all changes…It's about priorities changing and it's also about knowledge, understanding more. And it's about me changing as a person because I’ve worked on myself so that my internal changes has changed everything on the outside as well…I feel so connected to everything around me I just feel I can’t pretend that I'm not connected, but it doesn't work like that all the time. (Charlotte)

Other times, however, domestic responsibilities did not seem as perfectly aligned with caring for the planet. Mia mentions how once she became a parent she stopped worrying as much about the environmental credentials of the products that she buys. In her juggling of family obligations into an already busy lifestyle, she outlines how her care for the environment cannot always be prioritised:

…because I want to nurture my family and feed them within a particular timescale so the needs vary a little bit. So it might be immediate needs just about me and my family, and hunger, and having to feed those kids, you know, at that time, or like I always buy organic milk but if there’s no organic milk I'll buy the non-organic stuff… (Mia)

This highlights the conflicting nature of partiality, proximal care and impartiality, distant care. Arguably for Mia, and others, it isn’t that the scope of partiality is not expanded, but rather that barriers, such as time and availability, impede beneficence and such an expansion. Sophia, however, sought to reconcile both partiality and impartiality with care for family. She actively engaged her children in sustainable choices and behaviours “to show that’s what we do and for them to take good habits”. For Sophia, beyond distance, the “environment is people, because that’s what you are living on. If you don’t have your environment you can’t live.” Indeed, we observe a range of sustainable behaviours responding to impartiality beyond consideration of consumption choices to include forms of protest including letter writing and signing petitions.

*Urban*

For some, questions of sustainability progressed swiftly from the scale of domesticity to the one of the city, addressing not only housing issues but also inter-related problems pertaining, for instance, to the ways in which local marketplaces allow effective consumer-producer coordination and the role played by actors such as local communities and urban planners. In talking about food waste, Christian blames local retailers’ staff for *not* caring about the environment in promoting what is in effect an unsustainable agenda. He makes a clear demarcation of we (consumers) versus they (producers, retailing staff), reinforcing the notion that individual willingness to act pro-environmentally is most often constrained and/or prohibited by actors other than the consumer. Correspondingly, he identifies the problem as a conflict of different scalar logics, that is the individual responsibility of consumers versus the logic of marketplace exchange, reinforced by retailers, their staff and other marketplace actors:

It's almost explicitly never a policy of the chain themselves to destroy the food. It's usually personal choice of the person who is managing or working that night to destroy the food. And how they would rather that food not be consumed by someone because they have not paid for it. They see their value system in terms of exchanges. It just really does not make any sense… but the amount of food, like the amount nutritious food actually that they waste every day is criminal. (Christian)

Christian sought, where possible, to ‘rescue’ food from the waste stream and reclaim its value as the source of a nutritious meal. In doing so he is acting against accepted norms and challenging notions of hygiene and cleanliness. Despite acting against dominant social norms, Christian’s attempts are supported in discourses around the circular economy (e.g., Lang and Heasman, 2015). The conflict between the logic of sustainability and the logic of commerce and exchange was also prevalent in other accounts. For instance, Max talks about the commodification of everyday city life and how this has meant that sustainable practices such as skipping[[2]](#footnote-2) now stand in the way of developing successful place brands:

In Madrid at the moment they have made skipping illegal so you can be arrested for taking food out of bins…So yes the mayor is saying it's not good for the city. It's basically saying it's not good for the image of the city because if they are going to try and boost tourism or something like that they are having like people who are not homeless appearing as sort of well dressed, or I guess your sort of everyday middle class person going through a bin on a street to get their food… (Max)

Therefore, paralleling Taylor’s (1982) understanding of the urban scale as the “scale of experience”, our participants employed this scale to illustrate how opportunities and services available for individual sustainable practices are ultimately provided to them (or not) by their daily urban system. Notwithstanding, not all participants agreed that it is the scale of the city through which most sustainability initiatives can be effectively enabled and/or constrained. For example, whereas Max remained sceptical and Christian ambivalent, Alec expressed a much more positive view. He talks about taking part in local protests against a power station and how this was the level within which his care for the environment was effectively addressed:

For me this form of activism is very, very much involved with care not just in the sort of moderately abstracted version of like if you care about people who are on the other side of the world. Or people who live in a very different class situation to you in your own country with whom you don't interact as much as you do people in your own class. It's that form of care but it's also that this particular political community and the kinds of communities that came out of it and still remain are ones that are very ethically aware… (Alec)

Undoubtedly, sustainability poses significant challenges for cities in managing climatic impacts amidst structures and systems not designed to support a sustainable society. For people like Alec, disbelief in the ability to mobilise change at such a level is by de facto reinforcing current neoliberal logics and practices.

*National*

Perhaps not surprisingly, discussions around local scalar logics progressed into national ones and vice versa. In relation to landfill waste, for example, Nadeem mentions how both urban and national actors are implicated in a system of uneven geographical expansion and environmental degradation:

I think on the most direct level landfill is like a problem in this country and also throwing things in the recycling bin as well, like there’s a lot of evidence to suggest that like there was a report done where some London boroughs and local authorities, that have the single recycling bag scheme, basically are just paying for it all to be shipped off to China to be dumped there – so it’s like even worse for the environment. So I’m very sceptical about stuff like that.… (Nadeem)

By implication, Nadeem’s account removes any responsibility on behalf of consumers. Logics of individual responsibility are in effect impeded by oppositional logics espoused by both local and national actors. This was common in many of our participant accounts, which often alluded to the logic of neoliberalism and national growth as overarching frameworks that were inherently contradictory to the idea of environmental preservation:

…that’s how I see it’s like this Britain at the time of kind of pioneered or rather kind of taken on itself to champion neo-liberalism and to champion the deregulation of global financial markets and so on, and for me that whole cluster, the whole development really epitomises that… (Max)

Relatedly, Keira views this as “moving the emphasis from care to efficiency” and the resultant effect is competitive greed and materialism. Despite what she describes as a national move to “short-termism”, Keira reflects:

You just have to do your best. My view is at the end of the day I have to sleep with myself and, therefore, I behave in a manner that I hope does not harm anybody, minimises harm. (Keira)

*Global*

International scalar logics also reflected conflicting attributions and accounts of responsibility, which were, however, reframed at an explicitly global level. On the one hand, various participants related their individual sense of a responsibility with a sense of being part of a global community and the related obligation to extend care across difference and distance. According to Sienna, for instance:

Yeah, definitely. I think like sharing things with people is just like a nice caring thing to do. I think if we lived in a world where people shared things more it would probably be a lot nicer and, so yeah. It’s nice, it’s pleasant, you know, I find… (Sienna)

Likewise, Mia talks about care across difference and distance as being irreducible to individual acts of care exhibited by one or two people:

It's care that is not reduced in the couple or in two people, or between two people. Foreign people or… I don't know - it's more we try together to do something to change something politically and economically… (Mia)

This sense of globalised care and trans-geographical communality was viewed once again, as in the case of urban and national logics, as contradictory to the logic of transnational organisations and globalised capital. For instance, according to Max, local or individual attempts to fight matters such as gentrification are doomed to fail exactly because of transnational super-structures:

…But the idea of like, you know, carbon off-setting and - I don’t know. Even like the recycled plastic bit – I mean 25% recycled plastic – what does that even fucking mean, you know? I don’t know what Water Aid is. But ultimately like the society that sells tiny little bottles of water can’t really be good for the environment can it really? I mean, you know, I don’t think capitalism has the capacity to be environmentally sustainable… (Max)

For some of our participants, therefore, it was the “scale that really matters”, echoing what Taylor (1982: 26) describes as “the scale of the reality”. We observe, however, a utopian ideal of a more just, sharing and circular economy imagined against the reality of a commercial dominant logic. It was clear within these accounts that any notions of sustainability were viewed as entirely contradictory to the logic of capitalism and the amount of economic growth it requires to keep reproducing itself as economically, rather than, socially or environmentally sustainable (e.g., Harvey, 2008). Sophia experiences both feelings of disempowerment and hope when facing the global scale of sustainability and the reality of opposing ideals:

Sometimes you can feel totally discouraged because you are out of place and at the same time feel you’d like to fight against this whole thing but you don’t know how…The problem is that behaving the way we are behaving will create war, because the resources will be scarcer and scarcer, and by not taking care of it now, that’s what we are heading for…The world instead of stopping is just becoming wider and it’s brilliant...it’s endless. Whereas the world we are creating at the moment has got an end, if we were to change our habits it would be endless, be full of surprise. (Sophia)

In table 2 below we offer further examples and illustrations of the different scales of consumer action.

Table 2: The Scales of Consumer Action

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Scale**  | **Care and Consumption: Illustrative Examples** |
| **Individuals and their bodies**Caring for the self*Main realm of action: individual decision-making*  | “I think maybe people should be more aware of the connection, I don’t think they are. We have not talked about food miles as well, but that’s important as well, and I think sometimes it can be difficult for consumers to consider all the issues” “Obviously you can’t support everything and you do what you can. I mean I’m living on a state pension…”  |
| **Home and Domesticity**Caring for one’s home, family members and partners*Main realm of action: family/household decision-making* | “At home instead of thinking this I want to get rid of and you just put everything in a plastic bag and put it in a bin and I don’t think about it as I think other people are going to deal with it. Or nature will absorb it or whatever, no you should just from the source, source things out.”“I think it would be healing for everyone if we knew that, you know you are born and growing, and part of a family… People know one another and taking care of one another and you are growing old but growing wiser people will come to you because they want to share something with you” |
| **Urban**Care channelled via the local marketplace, local policies and infrastructures*Main realm of action: from inaction to turning to regional movements* | “For a city like [research location], for example, if there were more recycling facilities with better labels for people to understand, where they can put it and what it is becoming after it is recycled as well. There is a site on this car park…where you have glass recycling but it would be nice to have inside the city, in the different neighbourhoods to have different areas which are quite safe as this one is on a car park which is quite dangerous actually if you go with your kids”“Buying local is more environmentally sound, and you do want to support local business and local industry” |
| **National** Care channelled via national and state policies*Main realm of action: from inaction to turning to national movements* | “What is needed for really fair trade is a record of distribution of the money in the chain that will only be achieved with a shift in power which requires political action”“**…**that’s how I see it’s like this Britain at the time of kind of pioneered or rather kind of taken on itself to champion neo-liberalism and to champion the deregulation of global financial markets and so on, and for me that whole cluster, the whole development really epitomises that…” |
| **Global** Care in an increasingly inter-connected and geographically uneven (capitalist) world*Main realm of action: from inaction or turning to global movements* | “…it comes down to political will, it does come down to changing the way the world is governed and run, and the economic system we have in place. It’s such an unequal world with all the power in the western developed world. We have a growing power in Asia through China and India who sadly are following a lot of the ways that we have adopted.”“It's care that is not reduced in the couple or in two people, or between two people. Foreign people or… I don't know - it's more we try together to do something to change something politically and economically…”  |

*Modes of Caring Across Scales*

Iterating between our emic understanding of the data and etic conceptualisations in the caring and scale literature(s), we were able to identify two archetypal modes of “caring across scales”. We represent these in figures 1 and 2, labelled as “incremental” and “overlapping” respectively.

Figure 1: Incremental Modes of Caring Across Scales

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Figure 2: Overlapping Modes of Caring Across Scales



The incremental model depicts instances where participants’ care progressed from one proximate scale to the next, subject to sufficient capacities and resources. For instance, Christian viewed self-care as his most prominent priority, although temporarily, and refused to engage with alternative scalar logics stating “ I needed to be in a situation where I literally just had to take care of myself and that was it.”

 Likewise, participants, such as, Mia swiftly moved from the scale of individual and their bodies to home and domesticity, focused primarily upon creating their own families, yet failed to extend their care to more distant scales. Conversely, Sophia refuses to acknowledge that her increased parental responsibilities are a valid reason for restraining her care for the environment and regularly engages with urban and pro-environmental national movements. Equating care with love, she articulates her life mantra as follows:

Love for your world, love for your planet, love for your fellow citizen, love for your family, love for the people that you know and respect who work locally in your community.

In all these cases, moving from one scale to the next was both enabled and restrained by participants’ caring capacities and resources, such as time, finances, convenience, physical and emotional energies. The underlying model of care is largely resonant with conventional understandings that see caring as proceeding outwards from the home to the local, to the national and into the global (e.g., Smith, 1998; Spence *et al*., 2012). This idea of caring as a “nested set of Russian dolls” (Massey, 2004) has been heavily criticised as neglecting the inter-relational and non-hierarchical understandings of scales (Kleine, 2016; Ariztia *et al*. 2016).

Although the incremental model largely applied to two thirds of our participants’ accounts, the scalar logics and practices of participants, such as, Max, Alec, Nadeem and Keira exhibited alternative modes of caring. For these participants, caring across scales was less subject to their capacities and resources and more aligned to the perceived significance of each scale vis-à-vis other scales. For example, whilst committed to various national and global movements, Alec engages with urban and community politics because of a perceived importance and confidence in his own ability to influence their scalar logics and practices. Likewise, although acknowledging that the scale “that really matters” is the global, Keira refuses to discount the significance of individual and community action stating, “Even though I have this anti-capitalist critique in my heart I still think of recycling as like nice Guardianista, good behaviour.” In contrast, Nadeem views such politics and actions as ultimately limited. For him, and to a lesser extent Max, uneven geographical expansion and environmental degradation are the result of “scaling from above” as opposed to “scaling from below” (Nielsen and Simonsen, 2003), thus, contradictions in global capitalism have little to do with his individual actions, even when framed within a collective urban context. Although this would echo assertions of the global scale as the “scale of the reality” (Taylor, 1982), relational critics would point, among others, to the economic determinism of such views. According to Brenner (2001: 605), “the meaning, function, history and dynamics of any one geographical scale can only be grasped relationally, in terms of its upwards, downwards and sidewards links to other geographical scales…”. Scales are, thus, continuously constructed through everyday discourses and practices and are not over-determined in a hierarchical fashion.

In sum, the dominant mode of caring across scales was incremental, that is care proceeded outwards from individuals and their bodies, homes, urban, national and into global scales subject to depletable capacities and resources. In contrast, some participants engaged with different scales in a more overlapping and unpredictable fashion, subject to their implicit assumptions about the significance, and their own ability to initiate change, within each scale. Accordingly, we observed both “scaling from below” (Alec and Keira) and “scaling from above” (Nadeem and Alex), ultimately challenging the incremental model of care.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to explore the potential of scale to increase our understanding of consumers’ engagement (or lack thereof) with climate change and broader questions of sustainability. In doing so, we have moved away from abstract models of ethics and social and environmental justice and into the more concrete consumer preoccupations with caring about and for themselves, important others and not least the planet and (more) distant others. Our contribution to the current literature on scales and sustainable consumption is three-fold.

First, we build on an emerging stream of consumer research (Heath, *et al*., 2016; Shaw, McMaster and Newholm, 2016) that has foregrounded care ethics as an improved framework for understanding the ways in which ordinary consumer decisions are gendered, relational and socio-culturally embedded. Our study illustrates that even within this stream (and the stream of care ethics more broadly; e.g., Tronto, 2013), however, the spatial and scalar context of caring decisions remains significantly under-explored and under-theorised. So far caring decisions have been examined only within one scalar context (e.g., the scale of home and domesticity; Heath, *et al*., 2016) or in terms of phases of caring commitment that remain within a relational setting and, hence, at a single scale (e.g., Shaw, McMaster and Newholm, 2016). Our study extends these contributions by explicitly articulating the scalar nature of caring dilemmas. As we illustrate above, caring about the planet and more abstract others is contingent upon urban, national and global scales that are bound by their own intra-scalar logics and practices. These are, at best, only loosely connected with people’s capacity to care for themselves and significant others across different scales. For instance, in the context of the urban scale, consumers think about food and waste as bounded within the ideological constitution of their everyday life, which is increasingly commoditised and, therefore, inconsistent with the logic and morality of “care” as other-regarding. Instead, the logic of exchange foregrounds instrumentality, the maximisation of self-interest and profit, often at the expense of the planet. It is the conflict of these logics, as opposed to those that underpin the scale of the body or family that ultimately determines whether people’s capacity to care for the planet materialise in their everyday lives.

This contrasts with what we describe as the “caring at a distance” assumption, and even related contributions by construal level theory (Schill and Shaw, 2016), that underpin current studies of care ethics and which assume that extending care is simply a matter of helping consumers visualise and come closer to what is otherwise perceived as too abstract and disconnected from their consumption decisions (e.g., Silk, 2004). Our study moves beyond a focus on conflicts experienced by consumers who have distinct – and often conflicting – identity projects (Black and Cherrier, 2010). Instead, as our data illustrates, caring also entails addressing the more specific constraints that are embedded within each scale and is dependent on distinct modes of caring across scales. A key assumption is that the logics and practices consumers employ also naturalise the problems, causes and their solutions at particular scales to the exclusion of others (Kurtz, 2003; Martin and Miller, 2003). By focusing mostly on the scales of individuals and their bodies, or that of home and domesticity, consumers (and academics alike) naturalise particular solutions to sustainability at the expense of others, ignoring the inherent challenges and politics involved in scaling up sustainability initiatives.

Second, by bringing the scale and care literatures together, our study corroborates a more nuanced, scale-sensitive model of consumer agency that recognises both the structural constraints of ordinary consumption and its capacity to contribute towards transformative policies and actions in favour of social and environmental change. On the one hand, our scalar approach undermines current psychological accounts of individual consumer choice and decision-making processes (see e.g., Bray, *et al*., 2011) that assume that individuals’ capacity to act on their concerns about the planet is the outcome of autonomous deliberation. Instead, we show how people’s caring decisions are ultimately embedded in relational and spatial settings that over-determine consumers’ ability to care. On the other hand, however, our study also challenges sociological accounts of sustainable consumption (see e.g., Caruana, Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2016), by showing that rather than lacking any agency, some consumers actively engage with the variety of scalar logics and contradictions underpinning the different spheres of their everyday lives. They often seek to resolve these contradictions and achieve compromising outcomes that allow the manifestation of care across difference and distance. Within the family scale, for instance, care for the planet is negotiated against family pressures for monetary saving and convenience whereas in the urban scale, consumers sometimes effect change by subverting the logic of the market and, more broadly, mobilising self both individually and collectively. Ultimately, individual and structural explanations for care in relation to sustainability are deployed differently across scales: as we illustrate, consumers who may feel systemically constrained within one scale, may feel agentic in another. Although a middle-ground approach is implied in the use of frameworks such as institutional theory (Scaraboto and Fisher, 2013), there is as yet no research recognising that consumer agency is subject to differing scales of action and modes of caring across scales.

Finally, by applying scale to the domain of sustainable consumption we also address critiques of current studies preoccupied with processes of production rather than social reproduction and consumption. We illustrate the critical role that consumption plays in the social construction of scales pertaining, not only to the body and domesticity (Marston, 2000; Marston et al. 2005), but also the urban, national and global. Scale-making takes place and is reflected both at the macro level of socio-economic structures and at the micro level of everyday life. Understanding the latter is crucial given the central role consumers play in supporting and transforming environmental sustainability initiatives. More evidently, consumers’ struggles for environmental justice and sustainability often take place, and find compromise, within the spheres of their bodies, homes and domesticity. As evidenced, consumers also actively engage with urban, national and global scales and attempt to initiate change by transforming or subverting their underpinning foundations; for example, by going against the logic of commerce in their daily urban encounters. This echoes what Smith (1992) terms “scale jumping”: “turning local into regional, national and global movements, escaping the traps of localism, parochialism, and particularism through an expansion of geographic and political reach” (Jones, *et al*., 2017: 6). More commonly, however, our consumers felt unable to effect change in the face of the commodification of everyday life and rampant national and global neoliberalism. Indirectly, by engaging within specific scales as opposed to turning to local, national and global movements, consumers solidify their role in individual and domestic spheres and leave current urban, national and global scales largely unchallenged. In sum, by both confronting and surrendering to existing scalar logics and practices consumers reproduce existing scales and (less commonly) generate new ones.

Our study offers a number of implications for policy-makers, managers and institutional actors invested in the successful implementation of sustainability programmes. First and foremost, our scalar approach challenges current sustainability initiatives that attempt to engage the consumer as a key and, often the most important, stakeholder in climate change. Existing social and pro-environmental marketing campaigns rest on the assumption that consumers are sovereign and able to embark on a range of pro-environmental behaviours so long as additional information is provided. At best, in addition to educational messages, such approaches also emphasise the need to appeal to the emotional and symbolic meanings of ordinary consumption (e.g., Peattie and Peattie, 2009) and/or additional positive reinforcements through techniques such as “nudging” (e.g., Demarque, *et al*., 2015). Instead, a scalar approach emphasises the need to identify, in the first instance, the scale within which consumer logics and practices in favour of sustainability are being reinforced or antagonised. For example, at an individual level, consumers’ failure to act more sustainably may not be due to ignoring pro-environmental messages but due to conflicting caring demands (e.g., for the self) that have yet to be reconciled through appropriate market offerings (e.g., “treat yourself” experiences combined with environmental credentials). Moving across scales, consumers face different logics and practices that hinder, and at times enable, their attempts to be more sustainable. For example, within the scale of the urban, the commoditisation of cities and communities was identified as a fundamental impediment to more sustainable action. From a public policy and/or managerial perspective, addressing sustainability within this scale would require engagement with consumer attempts to defy market logics through, among other things, their participation in alternative food networks and circular economies.

Furthermore, our analysis identifies two distinct modes of caring across scales, incremental and overlapping, which call for a two-pronged public policy and managerial approach. On the one hand, for most consumers’ engagement with urban, national and global scales is dependent upon their limited capacities and resources. Related rescaling initiatives (cf Spicer, 2006) should, therefore, address the material and infrastructural conditions of everyday lifestyles, such as long working hours, lack of childcare services, availability of local sustainability initiatives, to name a few. On the other hand, we concur with authors, such as, Massey (2004) arguing against conventional understandings of care as a “nested set of Russian dolls”. As such, we would argue that consumer education and public policy initiatives need to emphasise the transformative potential of overlapping modes of caring and rescaling, including “scale jumping” (Smith, 1992) and “downscaling” (Leitner, *et al*., 2007). At stake is the cultivation of new models of citizenship, ones sensitised to the inherent limitations and contradictions within each scale and the distinct potential of local, national and global movements. For instance, educational websites such as http://followthethings.com/ attempt to expose consumers to the plethora of (local, national and global) actors and conflicting logics involved in product supply-chains. Likewise, consumer-led movements such as “fashion revolution” (<http://fashionrevolution.org/>) invite consumers to turn into key actors in multi-scalar contexts that involve the co-ordination of large multinationals, local suppliers, national and transnational governing bodies. Conversely, “downscaling” and localising strategies may be more appropriate when it comes to cultivating pro-environmental imaginaries through social interactions and collective initiatives that are embedded in individuals’ everyday worlds; for example, in alternative shops and community gardens. This is also evident in various cases of “scaling from above” that have ignored the role of individuals, families and local communities in driving social change. The UK’s “Modern Slavery Act”, for instance, has been to a certain extent effective in driving corporate purchasing policies but has ignored the role of ordinary consumption. Consequently, cases of both domestic and distant modern slavery continue to be reported on a daily basis, with general inactivity and lack of sympathy by the general public being cited as key drivers (Grierson, 2017).

Put differently, some consumers are aware of the different challenges (both personal and ideological) they face as they move across different scales and yet current sustainability initiatives have remained focused on a single level of analysis or scale, namely, that of the consumer as an independent actor and less often as a family unit (e.g., Heath, *et al*., 2016). For future sustainability initiatives aiming to harness consumer support and mobilisation, a more scalar understanding of ordinary consumption is pertinent.

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1. By employing the term “ordinary consumption”, we refer to the more taken-for-granted and mundane, as opposed to the “more spectacular and visual aspects of contemporary consumer behaviour” that are often associated with postmodernism consumption (following Gronow and Warde, 2001: 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Skipping is a term given to the act of salvaging food that has been thrown out into a bin. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)