

Title: The role of values in grassroots social innovation: insight from the sharing economy

Authors: Chris J. Martin¹, Paul Upham^{2,3}

Affiliations

¹ Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University Business School, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

² The Sustainability Research Institute, School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

³ The Energy Research Institute, School of Chemical and Process Engineering, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

There is growing interest in, and controversy around, the emergence of the so-called sharing economy and collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). In practice these terms tend to be used interchangeably to refer to a diverse field of innovation, which can be loosely defined as an Internet mediated "economic model based on sharing, swapping, trading, or renting products and services, enabling access over ownership" (Botsman, 2013). In this abstract we focus on forms of collaborative consumption, viewed as social innovations with the potential to play a role in the transition to a more sustainable society. In particular, we focus on the case of online free reuse groups (e.g. Freecycle and Freegle groups)¹, as one of the largest and most established innovations in collaborative consumption. These groups have millions of members across the UK (Freecycle, 2015, Freegle, 2015), and are run by grassroots networks of community activists and non-profit organisations. Hence, in this abstract we consider free reuse groups as an example of a grassroots social innovation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) emerging from civil society.

Seyfang and Smith (2007: 585) "use the term 'grassroots innovations' to describe networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved". Research on grassroots innovations to date has tended to apply the theoretical frameworks of sustainability transitions (Markard et al., 2012, Smith et al., 2010) to explore the development of social innovations including: community currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013), community energy projects (Seyfang et al., 2014), cohousing provision (Boyer, 2014) and community digital fabrication (Smith et al., 2013). The 'alternative' values of activists are theorised to play a central role in shaping the objectives of, and restricting the potential diffusion of, grassroots innovation (e.g. Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012, Seyfang and Smith, 2007). However, the role of values in grassroots innovations remains to be explicitly conceptualised and as Seyfang and Smith (2007: 599) suggest "Much work needs to be done regarding 'whose' alternative values are being mobilised in niches " of grassroots innovation. Furthermore, we also argue that new tools are needed, within socio-technical transitions theory, to explain the role of values in the development, diffusion and

¹ Free reuse groups provide an online platform for people to freely and directly give unwanted (i.e. underutilised) items to others in their local area (rather than sending them to their local authority waste system).

impacts of grassroots innovations. Hence, in our current research we pose the questions: what role do activists' values play in shaping grassroots innovations? And, to what extent are psychological and sociological theories helpful in explaining the role of activists' values in grassroots innovations?

To address these interconnected research questions we are developing a conceptual model of the role of values in grassroots innovation by integrating theory from:

- social psychology on the role of values in collective action (Schwartz et al., 2012, Stern et al., 1999);
- sociology on the collective enactment of values (Chen et al., 2013);
- and, sustainability transitions on the socio-technical structures of society and the dynamics of innovation (Geels, 2005).

In particular, we seek to extend the Multi-level Perspective (MLP) (Geels, 2005); a prominent theoretical model within the field of sustainability transition. The MLP conceptualises innovation dynamics as interactions between the multi-level socio-technical structures that constitute society. Three conceptually distinct levels are identified: the *landscape* – the structures deeply embedded within the fabric of society including culture, societal values, economic paradigms and institutional logics; the *regime* – the prevailing socio-technical systems that serve societal needs including the energy, waste, water and transport systems; and the *niche* - the protective space from which technological and grassroots innovations emerge with the potential to transform the regime and the landscape (Smith and Raven, 2012).

Our conceptual model (shown in Figure 1) posits that activists' values are drawn from and shaped by culture and cultural values (*the landscape*), and that activists' values are marginalised by the prevailing unsustainable socio-technical *regimes*. The marginalisation of their values motivates activists to engage in grassroots innovation (*within a niche*); in the hope or expectation that such marginalisation can be resisted or potentially overcome. So, grassroots innovations become an arena in which activists collectively enact, and seek to propagate, marginalised values. Furthermore, given the likely diversity of activists' individual values there is an ongoing process of interplay and alignment between the values of the individuals and the collective. We also hypothesise that the collective enactment of marginalised values shapes the objectives of, and the action repertoires employed by, grassroots innovations. In particular, we suggest that collectives of activists draw action repertoires from culture - "a tool kit of possible actions supported by institutional logics" (Chen et al., 2013: 855) - which are aligned with their marginalised values. Hence, grassroots innovations rely upon 'marginalised' action repertoires - including democratic forms of organisation, the voluntary practices of association and the tactics of protest of the disempowered - which in turn shape the dynamics of grassroots innovation.

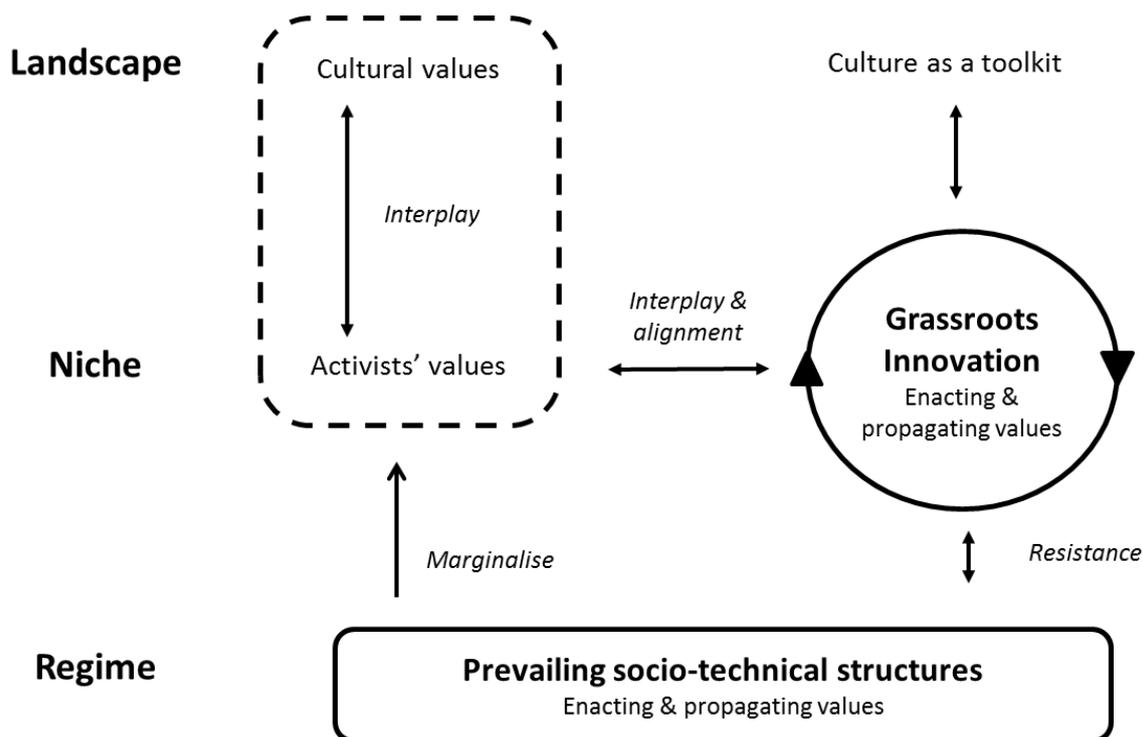


Figure 1: A conceptual model of the role of values in grassroots innovation

We are in the process of applying and evaluating this conceptual model through a case study exploring the role of values in communities of online free reuse group activists. Our mixed methods approach integrates two parallel strands of research activity: (1) a survey measuring the values of free reuse group activists; and, (2) an ethnographic study of the action repertoires employed by communities of online free reuse activists. We are currently in the process of analysing the data collected. If this abstract is accepted for the First International Workshop on the Sharing Economy, we would welcome the opportunity to report, and seek feedback on, the research design, results and conclusions. In particular, we hope to share and discuss the implications of our conceptual model and case study for the practice of grassroots innovation within the sharing economy and for grassroots innovation theory.

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