



Annex A – Studentship Application Form

<p>Title of proposed research – Politics pathway</p>
<p>A future worth pushing for: the role of developing positive future visions in taking environmental political action.</p>
<p>Your research proposal.</p> <p>IMPORTANT: There is a <u>strict</u> 1300-word limit, fully inclusive of everything except references. This includes all the written text, quotes, in-line citations, section headers, captions, the contents of tables and any foot-/endnotes. Each figure/graphic should be counted as equivalent to 200 words. Tables should be counted as the number of words they contain. Proposals that are found to be overlength will be rejected. Remember that if you are applying to one of our interdisciplinary programmes, a clearly articulated interdisciplinary approach should be evident.</p> <p>Insufficient UK climate change policy (IPPR 2020) means individual and household behaviour change alone cannot achieve the significant system change needed to address the climate and ecological crisis (IPCC 2018). Individuals must also take political action (defined as action to change systems beyond the individual or household)¹ (O'Brien 2018, Nielsen et al 2020, Vaughan 2021). A majority of the UK public consider radical change necessary to mitigate climate change (IET 2020, Steentjes et al 2020), but most are not acting for such change. This innovative interdisciplinary² project aims to demonstrate positive future visioning as a novel method of closing this prevalent value-action gap. I combine literatures on transformative change and wellbeing. The research contributes to UK policy focus on climate change adaptation and mitigation, and wellbeing of future generations.</p> <p>Research questions</p> <p>Main question: does envisioning positive futures support environmental political action?</p> <p>Sub-questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does such envisioning increase understanding, motivation, and agency in enacting social transformations for sustainability? • What is the relative importance in this of deliberative methodologies and emotional reflection? <p>Contribution to the literature</p> <p>Little research exists on behavioural impacts of visioning (Richter 2020). A focus on political behaviour is needed because psychology literature on pro-environmental behaviour focuses on consumer roles, excluding citizen roles (Nielsen et al 2020) and often fails to address structural factors including power relations, while socio-technical transitions theory largely ignores ordinary people's agency (Whitmarsh 2012, O'Brien 2019). Transformative change literature addresses these gaps, stating that future visioning can help individuals engage in system change through understanding alternative systems and links between systems and personal action; and reassessing their agency and roles (Fazey et al 2018a, Goldberg et al 2020).</p> <p>Transformative change literature and wellbeing literature both suggest that action for sustainability, and positive experience, support each other through intrinsic motivation (Fazey et al 2018b, Lertzman 2020, Parker et al 2020, Johnson Zawadzki et al 2020). Moving beyond an incremental/transformative change dichotomy (Büchs et al 2015), I combine these literatures to suggest positive visioning reveals the</p>

¹ Little research has distinguished different types of political action.

² Interdisciplinarity is required in environmental behaviour research (Nielsen et al 2020, Shrivastava et al 2020). The project draws on politics, social transformation research and psychology.



wellbeing benefits of action for sustainability and of a sustainable world, making required 'radical' changes desirable.

Deliberative methodologies are effective for envisioning system change, freeing participants' ideas from narrow political narratives (Niemeyer 2011). Deliberation helps surface participants' underlying values, which are often pro-environmental (Niemeyer 2004), highlighting sustainability-wellbeing links identified above. However there is little research on deliberation's impacts on behaviour (Batalha et al 2019) including via visioning.

Most deliberative processes do not explicitly examine emotions. Research on emotions in environmental action suggests deliberation may be more effective when combined with emotional reflection (Bentz and O'Brien 2019, Pooley and O'Connor 2000). In contrast to simply experiencing emotions (van Zomeren et al 2010), reflecting on them can help people connect with underlying values, restore agency, and move towards positive social change (Bentz and O'Brien 2019, Lertzman 2020) - similar to transformative aspects of deliberation (Curato et al 2017). Bentz and O'Brien (2019) combined discussion and emotional reflection but did not analyse their interactions; indeed there is little research on this. I will compare deliberation with deliberation-plus-reflection, to examine interactions.

Methodology

My qualitative experimental methodology involves an intervention engaging two diverse groups of 10 people in developing a future vision around a question like 'how could life look in 30 years if we had a sustainable local area and UK, with true wellbeing for everyone?'. They will be compared to a no-intervention control group. Small groups are effective in transformative change (Büchs et al 2015).

I will recruit participants using random stratified selection from respondents to an online questionnaire advertised via community groups, local businesses and social media. I will adhere to GDPR and principles of anonymisation, confidentiality and informed consent.

Intervention

Group 1 will first conduct a 2-3 hour emotional reflection on environmental futures, drawing on transformative learning (Bentz and O'Brien 2019, Lertzman 2020), and led by an experienced facilitator from [partner organisation].³

Groups 1 and 2 will then conduct a 2-day deliberative process (Curato et al 2017, Capstick et al 2020). On day 1 groups will hear 5-6, 20 minute presentations from expert and community witnesses covering wellbeing; environmental problems and diverse solutions; social transformation; relationships to the natural environment (e.g. consumer, citizen). Witnesses will be recruited from academia, non-governmental organisations, local government and community groups. Following each presentation, groups will discuss (in witnesses' absence) and then put questions to witnesses (Niemeyer 2004). On day 2, groups will shape their vision and conduct backcasting, a method which supports transformative thinking by working backwards from a defined desirable future to identify steps to achieve it, rather than assuming present systems will persist into the future as many visioning processes do (Holmberg and Robert 2000, Bentz and O'Brien 2019). Project partner [partner name] have suggested organisations experienced in deliberative methods to facilitate.

Throughout, facilitation will encourage participants to explore transformative possible features of the future and individuals' roles; question assumptions about wellbeing; and emphasise system change. Participants will not be steered towards political actions.

Research at intervention:

- pre and post semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, covering understanding of environmental problems and solutions; motivation and agency to act for system change; attitudes around political action; group efficacy; emotions about environmental change; consideration of future consequences.
- discourse analysis of intervention and vision content.

³ <https://www.climatechange coaches.com/>



Participants will keep reflective diaries to capture attitude and behaviour change between intervention and follow-up.

Longitudinal research on behaviour durability is sparse (Goldberg et al 2020). Nine to twelve months post-intervention, I will repeat semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, and interview participants about actual behaviour; and conduct questionnaires (by email to maximise response) with participants' social contacts to explore diffusion of attitudes and behaviours (Bentz and O'Brien 2019). I will mitigate longitudinal attrition risks through building a trusting relationship; clear communication of expectations; regular email contact (sharing research insights and diary prompts); and an incentive after the intervention (de Leeuw and Lugtig 2015). Attrition will be dealt with by attempting contact to understand reasons, impact on data and risk of attrition bias; then comparing analysis of remaining participants with an analysis assuming worst-case scenario for dropped-out participants (Bankhead et al 2017).

Timeline

- MRes year: literature review
- Year 1: co-develop visioning intervention with partners; ethical approval
- Year 2: pilot and conduct visioning intervention
- Year 3: longitudinal research; research with social contacts; writing up
- Year 4: writing up

Collaboration

Major research users are environmental campaign groups and local government. I have collaborative partnerships with [partner organisation names]. These users are enthusiastic and will:

- support embedding the research in [local] policy context;
- co-design the research, support recruitment and participate in the intervention as witnesses;
- use the research to inform public-facing activities and engagement with central government;
- disseminate findings to possible community users e.g. schools.

Possible challenges include:

- competing demands on partners' attention - I am emphasising that the project supports partners' own priorities.

Other knowledge exchange includes speaking events for research participants; media engagement and social media.

Strategic fit

The project fits the ESRC strategic priority on climate change, especially furthering understanding of links between individual and political dimensions. The project fits my chosen department's 'Comparative Political Behaviour & Institutions' cluster and my lead supervisor's interests in behaviour change and social movements.

Word count (please complete):

References (Bibliography) (not included in your Word count)

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