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Unravelling the ‘ingredients’ of energy consumption: Exploring home-related practices in Belgium

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ABSTRACT

To look at energy consumption through a different lens, we have developed the conceptual framework of *habitual practices*. The objective of the present paper is to propose an empirical application of this framework, with the aim of unravelling the constitutive ‘ingredients’ of energy-consuming practices. Therefore, we investigate whether discussing the relationship of people with their homes could help circumventing the methodological difficulties that inevitably arise when trying to approach less tangible (albeit crucial) elements such as norms and attached meanings. The empirical material comes from group conversations where participants discussed the extent to which a home has to be practical, comfortable and convivial in connection with a series of elements. The results confirm that this methodological setting generated useful insights for a finer understanding of energy-consuming practices and their underlying drivers. A related crucial finding is the role of key appliances – those with more contrasted use and attached meanings – which appear to mediate the interplay between comfort, conviviality, and practicality. A promising avenue for future research would thus be to further investigate the role of those key appliances as potential markers of wider tendencies in energy consumption and useful for designing segmentation strategies.

1. Introduction

The practice of energy policy has largely focused on technological solutions for modifying consumption patterns, thereby enthroning the promotion of energy efficiency as an *end* in itself rather than as a *mean* towards the reduction of energy consumption (see also [1]). As argued by different scholars [2–6], energy consumption studies should instead ground the analysis on those practices that are meaningful to practitioners.

Spurred by this need to look at the issue of energy consumption through a different lens, we have developed the conceptual framework of *habitual practices* [7]. The general idea of this framework is to complement practice-based approaches with relevant insights from the literature on habits. Borrowing from the formulation in Shove [8: 415], the *habitual practices* framework seeks to enrich the understanding of both ‘how and why people act as they do’ and of ‘how practices emerge, persist and disappear’. The rationale of the framework is to provide a precise characterisation of household energy-consuming practices allowing for a good understanding of their constitutive ‘elements’ together with a picture of how they are formed and sustained over time. This characterisation could then potentially serve as a basis for

segmenting policies and hopefully increase their effectiveness as compared to one-size-fits-all instruments (see [7] for a more thorough discussion of both theoretical and policy-oriented aspects in relation to the framework of *habitual practices*).

The objective of the present paper is to go one step further and propose an empirical application of this framework and discuss its results and potential implications. However, conceiving an effective setting for field work is not straightforward: how can *habitual practices* be approached to allow for a useful characterisation knowing that not only this requires capturing different types of ‘ingredients’ – as Walker [9] puts it – which may involve intangible and private aspects but also that energy-consuming practices (e.g. cooking) are often closely related to a wider set of entangled practices (e.g. raising children)? This entanglement of practices does indeed pose methodological difficulties when it comes to delimitating the unit of observation [10].

The need to overcome these challenging obstacles together with our expertise of the field have led us to consider the relationship to home as a promising research avenue for approaching energy-consuming practices (see also [11,12]). The home could indeed provide the necessary arena for ‘empirical observations’ which, as recalled in Evans et al. [13:

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[18], can be different from the ‘units of conceptual explanation’ (i.e. that are the practices).

The ensuing research question – which constitutes the core of this paper – then is to verify whether discussing the relationship of people with their homes provides a ‘doorway’ to the world of energy-consuming *habitual practices* that is at the same time acceptable and operational. To test this hypothesis, group conversations were organised in Brussels in April 2012. They were conceived and designed so as to potentially make emerge those constitutive elements that are to be captured for providing policy-makers in the field with useful data (i.e. data that can serve for the purpose of segmentation, for instance).

The rest of the text is structured as follows. The following section outlines the theoretical underpinning of our approach. It discusses how the notion of home connects with and provides insights into energy-consuming practices together with the methodological challenges that it can help to overcome. Section 3 describes the methodological approach together with the data collected. The results are then presented in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper and discusses the implications of our approach from a policy perspective.

2. Conceptual background: habitual practices, home and energy

As many other practice-based studies on consumption (see for instance [2,13–18]), the framework of *habitual practices* builds on the path-breaking contribution from Andreas Reckwitz where a practice is defined as “a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another” [19: 249]. As explained in Maréchal and Holzemer [7], complementing practice-based studies with insights on habits is intended to focus on those mechanisms (e.g. temporal injunctions) through which some practices (and not others) become so deeply entrenched. This rests on the idea that while all habits are practices not every practice is a habit.² It echoes a discussion provided in Shove [20: 101] where habits are defined as “practices that are recurrently and relatively consistently reproduced” and which stresses the need to study “the characteristics of habit-demanding practices” [20: 102] as well as the processes involved to allow for unveiling “the forms of compulsion on which habits depend, and the types of ‘stickiness’ that ensue” [20: 108]. This constitutes the very rationale of the *habitual practices* framework which seeks to grasp both the factors ensuring the stability of constituent elements and the mechanisms at play behind the relatively faithful reproduction of the practice concerned [7: 230].³

Identifying the processes involved in making a practice become habitual serves to feed the reflection on the ‘grips’ (leverage points) that can be activated to potentially modify the course of how that very practice is performed. Capturing this type of elements could in turn be used to contribute to the conception of more efficient energy-saving instruments notably through emphasising dynamic aspects and the related need for instruments to align with the temporalities of everyday life (see also [21], where habits and practices are discussed in the light of temporalities).

However, the mundane nature of habitual practices makes that getting a grip on and adequately characterizing *habitual practices* does entail a series of difficulties (see [14,10,22]). Practices are indeed not easily approachable: studying practices means entering households’

² Interested readers can turn to Maréchal and Holzemer [7] for a more thorough discussion of the approach to habits that served for building the framework of *habitual practices* as well as of the ontological communality which underlies the very idea of combining that approach with insights from practice-based accounts. This approach is greatly indebted to Thorstein Veblen whose view of habits is tied to a broader reflection on cumulative causation, path-dependence, and lock-in phenomena (see [51]). Accordingly, it is useful for studying how habitual practices are formed and sustained over time.

³ In a recent paper, Galvin and Sunikka-Blank [52] point to some limitations in the usefulness of practice theory for energy studies and deplore that “representational descriptions of individual habit and action are often marginalized without serious engagement with their empirical and philosophical roots.” The theoretical underpinnings of the *habitual practices* framework together with its tentative operationalisation in this paper precisely aims to engage with such discussions.

private and intimate sphere; most practices are highly routinised and deeply ingrained; the normative content of practices as well as their importance within the organization of everyday life reinforce their tacit and taken-for-granted nature for practitioners.

In addition to these obstacles, dealing with energy-consuming practices is made even more difficult by the fact that the ‘product consumed’ is not visible and tangible to individuals. People do not ‘consume energy’ per se but for the services that it offers [23]. Burgess and Nye [24: 4454] judiciously speak of energy as being ‘doubly invisible’ as it is not only hidden in wires and cables but also embedded in the *habitual practices* performed in relation to those services.

It thus seems that, although practice-based approaches to energy consumption are appealing in intending to be more attuned with the everyday life of practitioners, this ontological stance does not warrant a straightforward research object for empirical enquiry. The resulting limited discursivity is often perceived as a weakness of the approach. For instance, Hitchings [25] provides ample evidence of studies that question the relevance of interviews because practices are not something that people can easily and spontaneously talk about. The author then empirically shows that it is in fact possible to make people talk about their practices through interviews provided they are ‘encouraged’ to do so [25: 66]. And as it will be shown in more detail in Section 3, encouraging people to talk about practices with the more specific objective of approaching underlying elements (e.g. such as attached meanings, norms, material arrangements, etc.) is precisely what has driven the choice made regarding the methodological approach adopted in this paper.

Another methodological difficulty is due to the unit of analysis (i.e. the practices) differing from the common unit of observation (i.e. individuals). The ontological primacy of practice arises from the fact that, in practice-based studies, it is the practice that recruits the practitioners [2]. The example of cooking shows how difficult it is to define the boundaries of a given practice. In this respect, Schatzki [26] has put forward the concept of ‘integrative practice’ to describe a set of combined practices aimed at a common teleoffective objective. Considering the practice of living at home as a sort of integrative practice could thus allow for delimitating the (system of) practices to be studied.

Grounding the analysis on the notion of home thus seems very promising for circumventing some of the methodological challenges associated with practice-based studies because it can help to delimitate a research object and increase its perceived tangibility for the surveyed individuals. It indeed makes the topic of energy more concrete and visible to people while it also allows for dealing with the intertwining of practices by defining an ‘empirical arena’ for studying them [15: 95].

The ensuing rationale is that by asking questions about tangible and concrete aspects (e.g. how a room is organized; where certain devices are positioned and why they are important to them, etc.) and then making people explain and express themselves about their home, it could encourage them to unveil parts of those underlying forces driving their energy-consuming practices. The notion of ‘home’ could thus provide a way of approaching the constitutive elements of energy-consuming practices because fostering the ontological passage from *house* to *home* allows for tapping onto less tangible explanatory factors of energy consumption such as norms and social expectations [11].

The sequence of argumentation is as follows. Using the reading grid provided in Maréchal and Holzemer [7], the house enters the picture of *habitual practices* through, at first glance, featuring within the material dimension. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.⁴

However, the house also means a lot more to people than its sole

⁴ As explained in more detail in Maréchal and Holzemer [7], there is no single typology of the ‘elements’ that contribute to hold a practice together (see [5] for a comparison of different understandings of practice elements). Beyond a different grouping of the most cited elements (see also), the framework of *habitual practices* explicitly acknowledges the importance of social interactions. This is in line with Halkier [53] and with the idea that everyday life experiences are not only made of the performance of practices but also of the social relations connected to them (see also the conclusions in Hargreaves).

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