

Researching Energy in the Everyday: Methods and theory for capturing complexity

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Within the social sciences we find a diverse range of methods and concepts for researching and thinking the everyday. Such research is recognised to present particular challenges in ensuring that we are able to capture and represent the complex nature of everyday life and its extensions in to pasts and futures.

For researching energy consumption in particular there are added difficulties connected to the invisible and intangible nature of energy, as well as the fact that energy usage is an embedded, often taken-for-granted part of the routine accomplishment of habitual practices (Shove, 2003; Hargreaves et al, 2010; Butler, 2010). Energy, particularly electricity, is an invisible, intangible force entering our homes through hidden wired networks, and energy consuming activities are part of inconspicuous routines and habits making it difficult to connect practice with the energy consumption involved (ibid.). Finding ways to forge links important for instigating reflection on everyday practice can be particularly difficult, then, in researching energy consumption.

In the context of these difficulties the energy biographies project methodological approach is designed to facilitate engagement with the kinds of complex configurations that characterise everyday life, tracing the ways that energy usage plays into multiple aspects of such configurations. We aim therefore to develop a set of research materials that will deliver analytic insight into biographical experiences both as routine, mundane activity and as lived transitional processes, as a route to better understanding of energy consuming practice and processes of intervention for reduced energy usage.

Our methods as tools for researching energy in the everyday

Our narrative or biographical interviews offer means for eliciting talk about everyday mundane activities as well as wider life transitions. The questions we ask through our interviews are designed to evoke extensions into pasts and futures (Henwood and Shirani, 2012) and engage participants in reflection on how their lives shape and are shaped by their energy usage. For this, in our first wave of interviews, we use a semi-structured interview format. This involves an interview schedule structured around three broad thematic areas – community and context, daily routine, and life transitions. Each theme is developed through a series of ‘conversation starter’ questions and prompts created to instigate talk about different aspects of the themes. The interview schedule is designed to allow talk to flow as naturally as possible with the interviewer prompting and probing as themes of interest arise, rather than working through the schedule in a linear fashion. The idea is that the interview schedule reflects the more dynamic nature of semi-structured interviewing, facilitating movement between different areas of questioning. The aim of the schedule is thus to act as a guide for the interviewer to ensure they have covered all themes relevant to the particular interviewee without necessarily asking all of the same questions every time. This helps to enhance the potential for freely emerging conversation, to allow flow to be maintained, and to better reflect the dynamism inherent in qualitative interviewing.

We are using a longitudinal design comprising a further two waves of interviews and a range of additional methods. Visual and sensory methods, in particular, offer a means of engaging participants throughout the longitudinal aspects of our work, and of generating reflection on energy use both as part of daily life and as a

feature of transitions. Our planned approaches are: Photo-shots (Mountain et al, 2011); life maps (Worth, 2011); visual tasks (involving, for example, asking participants to change routines and take pictures of things that reflect thoughts arising out of the process); and, exploring futures (for example, using ‘tomorrow’s world’ news features along with interviews to explore: First, how future change documented in the news features could unfold in everyday life; second, how participants feel about such changes; and third, how they envisage the intersection between such changes and their personal lives). These methods will provide materials for analysis in their own right but will also form the basis for the longitudinal interviews, allowing participants greater roles in leading the interview discussions and the potential for different interview contexts to emerge.

Through the use of these varied methods we can develop insight into the complex configurations of daily life that are made up through and in very different lives and contexts. The biographical lens places the focus on lived lives, rather than energy *per se* helping to bring into view the formation of those practices in which energy consumption is embedded. Underlying this is an understanding that what we are seeking to change are these practices which are embedded in our biographical circumstance, not energy usage *per se*. This stands in contrast to a notion that energy consumption is the focus of change, and in some cases that this does not require changes to the ways in which we live.

Our theoretical ideas for researching energy in the everyday

Social theoretical work has produced a diverse range of concepts for thinking about the everyday. We find notions of embodiment, habits, rituals, routines, social reproduction, representation, behavioural theories, narrative, rational action, subjectivity, affect and so on. For our research we take up three interrelated theoretical strands to as a basis for the energy biographies framework that we are developing and reflexively adapting as the research progresses. In this way we aim to advance theory through critically examining the extent to which there are resonances with the empirical, as much as we use the theory as a conceptual basis for making sense of the empirical.

The framework combines ideas from practice oriented theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998; De Certeau, 1984), along with concepts from the biographical turn within the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al, 2000), and theories that help to illuminate the temporal and the spatial (Adam, 1998, 2007 with Groves; Massey, 2005). A practice theoretical perspective of the kind offered by Bourdieu (1998) encompasses an understanding of social action as embodied, pre-reflective and (mostly) habitual. It further situates subjectivity as arising from inter-subjectivity (referring to shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other and used as an everyday resource to interpret the meaning of elements of social and cultural life). This means that, from a practice theoretical perspective, the subjective meanings which allow us to understand the world are derived from embodied practice and relations with others, and are located in the public realm not held within our minds. As a theoretical lens practice theory opens up particular ways of seeing and analysing social phenomena as socially constructed, fluid, negotiated and contextual. This conceptual approach stands in opposition to what has been described as the ‘hyperrational and intellectualised’ picture of human agency as existing outside of practice; as either systems of unconscious mental categories or as intentional streams of individual consciousness (Reckwitz 2002, page 259). The implications as far as understanding energy consumption goes are that practices which involve energy consumption (e.g. commuting, dining, showering, holidaying) develop in conjunction and involvement with ‘others’ – other things (water systems, heating, technology of showers), other wider structural developments (cheap freely available energy), other people

(friends, family, colleagues), and so forth. This brings us to view much of what we do and what we conceive to be normal as socially reproduced through a wider set of social arrangements. That is, the world which we encounter in our everyday life disciplines and shapes what we do and this includes the material world of infrastructures and things but also the social (for example, when we act in unusual ways people may stare, make expressions or verbally respond in ways that discipline our action). Shove (2003) in particular, suggests that a practice theoretical approach to thinking about energy usage raises more penetrating questions about the specification of service itself; about the ways in which conventions become normal and about the consequences of *new* conventions for sustainability. The implication of these theoretical ideas, then, is to shift focus onto questions of how and why conventions, habits and routines evolve as they do, how they are maintained and crucially, for our purposes, how they are changed. The answers from this perspective lay in examining the interconnections between our routine accomplishment of daily life and the sets of wider institutions, processes and structures with which they are intertwined.

These theoretical notions combine with our second strand of conceptual ideas derived from biographical and life course research. This line of thought takes up ideas posed in practice theoretical conceptions regarding the relations between the personal and the social but seeks to root these notions more firmly in the 'bedrock reality' of everyday life (Crook, 1998; Chamberlayne et al, 2000). Chamberlayne et al explain; 'biographies are rooted in an analysis of social history and the wellsprings of individual personality, [they] reach backward and forward in time, documenting processes and experiences of social change' (2000, page 2). In this sense biographical methods and research provide 'a sophisticated stock of interpretive procedures for relating the personal and the social' (ibid.). This line of thinking highlights the way that 'life-course arrangements are becoming more dynamic, less standardised and more self-directed' (Heinz and Kruger, 2001, page 29), but also employs notions such as 'life chances', which are viewed as linked to personal historical circumstance as well as to social institutions (family, education, economy), that play major roles in enabling or restricting lifecourse continuity and change (ibid.). Combining these ideas and those derived from practice theoretically oriented work offers a strong potential for connecting social and personal change and thus for developing understanding of how transitions toward forms of provisioning less reliant on high levels of energy consumption might be instigated, as well as of the associated challenges.

Finally, theoretical ideas about space and time can be usefully combined with these theoretical ideas arising from practice and biographical theories to bring a further dimension to how we understand continuity and change in the context of energy usage. Conceptualisations of time and temporality have been used to explore the ways in which people's present conduct toward the environment requires an understanding of their orientations toward both the past and the future (Adam and Groves, 2007). Such work draws attention to the importance of the 'timescapes', temporal vistas, or lenses that bring hitherto invisible processes and imminent (present) futures into view (Adam, 1998). From this perspective practice is seen as contingent upon, and produced within, historical processes that also provide the conditions of possibility for future continuities and changes (e.g. Finn and Henwood, 2009).

An interest in the roles that communities play in low carbon transitions has become key to contemporary debates. That transitional processes play out in particular places and through different forms of community is increasingly recognised in work on sustainable futures (Lawhon and Murphy, 2011; Truffer and Cohen, 2012). Our approach in this regard pays attention not only to the interconnections between personal and social processes at global and national scales but also at more localised scales. In particular, we focus on the

importance of social constructions of place as interacting with the temporal and biographical and helping to socially regulate (in)action (Parkhill, 2007). In addition, we take up the more fluid conceptions of community implied in notions of networks that involve focusing on relationships which connect different spaces and times (Massey, 2005).

These conceptual ideas help us to interpret and understand findings that emerge through researching social worlds, as well as informing how we do research, the methods we choose and the approaches we are taking (Mason, 2002). In this respect the theoretical ideas we employ place emphasis on social action as involving processes of meaning making, thus offering a conception of the world and of social action that is more amenable to investigation through the kinds of qualitative methods we are developing in the study.

Our methods, theory and research outcomes

The combination of these theoretical threads make us alert to the multiple ways in which the personal is always connected with and embedded in sets of wider social and historical arrangements. Our interview, visual and longitudinal/temporal methods and methodological approaches are designed to bring such interconnections – always already at play – into view. The importance of the biographical approach as a lens for achieving our aims is tied to the imperative we see to ensure that the ‘lived’ nature of major transitions is kept firmly in sight so that our findings resonate with the realities and strategies of everyday life. This is of particular significance for delivering research insights intended to enable the development of a closer alignment between policies and such everyday experiences.

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