



Critical moments? Life transitions and energy biographies



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ABSTRACT

Family and youth research has highlighted the importance of lifecourse transitions, illustrating how they can have a substantial impact on people's everyday lives and anticipated futures. Given their apparent significance, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to life transitions – particularly unexpected ones – to explore how they can impact upon everyday energy use. This is a central concern of Energy Biographies project. The project's qualitative longitudinal design makes an original contribution, affording a detailed view of how transitions unfold and their significance for energy demand and environmental action. Central to elucidating these issues is the concept of 'linked lives', recognising that people live interdependently. In this paper, we explore the accounts of three participants who experienced one or more life transitions during the course of the project, in order to consider the impacts of these events (both planned and unanticipated) on their everyday energy use and environmental actions as part of their linked lives with others.

1. Introduction

Life transitions (such as leaving home, becoming a parent or retiring) have been a key focus of enquiry in families and youth research, where events have been considered for their significance in personal life trajectories (Gordon et al., 2005). In this paper, we seek to explore the experiences of life transitions in relation to energy use, drawing on the concept of 'linked lives'. A range of terms have been used to refer to life transitions and the opportunities for change they may present, as we explore in this introductory overview. For example, some have drawn on analytic concepts of critical or fateful moments. Giddens (1991) describes 'fateful moments' as times when an individual stands at a crossroads in existence, or when a person learns information with fateful consequences. Giddens' (1991: 113), notes that fateful moments can be both engineered or happenstance and are 'phases at which things are wrenched out of joint, where a given state of affairs is suddenly altered by a few key events'. Giddens' work has been revisited by Holland and Thomson (2009), who attempt to operationalise his concept by identifying narrative turning points (termed 'critical moments') in biographical accounts and evaluating whether these were 'fateful' or not, highlighting the difficulties of doing this in practice. Critical moments are described as being events understood (either by the

participant or the researcher) as having important consequences for the participant's life and identity, for example, moving house or bereavement. However, beyond major life events, more mundane changes can also have far-reaching implications for how participants live their everyday lives. In this paper we seek to move beyond a focus on these critical moments to explore the impact of both planned and unexpected life transitions, as well as everyday processes of change, on direct energy use (i.e. heating, electricity use) and environmental actions, by which we mean actions connected to energy use but less directly related (e.g. recycling, sustainable travel choices).

The relevance of exploring life transitions in relation to energy use has been indicated by Verplanken and Wood (2006) who suggest that interventions will be most effective when paired with environmental changes that disrupt existing habits, or applied during naturally occurring periods of change, such as moving house or changing job (see also Bone et al., 2011). This assertion is based on recognition of the wider significance of individual habits; that the small actions and decisions people make in everyday life have an impact beyond any single occurrences. Subsequent quantitative work has explored links between life events and changes in travel behaviour (Thomas et al., 2016) suggesting that residential relocation and changes in employment have the greatest impact on travel behaviour (Rau and Manton, 2016). Some

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authors have emphasised the role of life transitions as a ‘window of opportunity’ (i.e. an opportune moment for intervention) for changing consumption towards more sustainable patterns (Bamberg, 2006). In their mixed methods study, Schäfer et al. (2012) considered whether life transitions can be a starting point for sustainability interventions. They conclude that the period before the life event (or ‘preparation phase’) is crucial for such interventions. However, this raises a challenge for studying unexpected transitions, as we discuss further below.

A report by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) for the UK Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Thompson et al., 2011) provides a review of evidence on personal life events as ‘moments of change’. Moments of change have been described as when the circumstances of an individual’s life change considerably (Burningham et al., 2014) where existing habits and behavioural patterns are disrupted (Thompson et al., 2011), which may represent opportune moments for sustainability interventions (Hards, 2012a), thus showing similarity to the concept of ‘windows of opportunity’. Whilst the NEF report indicates evidence of everyday change as a result of these life transitions (such as changes in travel behaviour when moving house), the authors conclude that further evidence is needed in relation to ‘moments of change’. Qualitative work in this area is growing. For example, studies have explored the impact of life transitions – such as becoming a parent – for different aspects of everyday life that have environmental implications (Spinney, 2012; Burningham et al., 2014). Paddock (2015) suggests that changes in cooking practices are clearly linked to lifecycle events such as changing work patterns, cohabitation, and the arrival of a child. Related to such events are altered driving patterns, and the purchase of new domestic technologies such as tumble dryers or a large fridge/freezer, which clearly have implications for energy use. Retirement has also been considered as a lifecourse transition with repercussions for energy use and action towards sustainability, as changes to time use and available income may hold implications for consumption patterns (Venn et al., 2015). These studies have brought about important insights but have tended to focus on anticipated life transitions, whilst unexpected changes have received much less attention. However, as we have previously considered (Shirani and Henwood, 2011), unplanned transitions can have far-reaching impacts on lives and identities, including the ability to imagine and plan for the future. Consequently, this disruption to everyday life and longer-term planning could have significant implications for energy use. In this paper we avoid terminology that uses the word ‘moment’ as this invokes a fixed before and after time point. Instead, like Burningham et al. (2014) we recognise that the process of change is ongoing, and this is illuminated through a qualitative longitudinal approach.

The study of transitions is a central element of lifecourse perspectives, which take a temporally sensitive approach, exploring ‘the ways that the meaning of lives in progress is established in the give-and-take of daily living’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000:1). Holstein and Gubrium suggest that the lifecourse is not a given feature of human experience but a representational tool crafted and used in the process of interpreting personal experience through time. The lifecourse approach, described as the pre-eminent theoretical orientation in the study of lives (Elder et al., 2003), considers the significance of personal life transitions. Alongside the exploration of transitions and their impacts, the concept of ‘linked lives’ is central to lifecourse theory. This refers to the way that human lives are embedded in social relationships with kin and friends across the life span (Elder, 1994), acknowledging interdependency. Linked lives refers to the interaction between the individual’s social worlds, such as family, friends and co-workers, over the life span, therefore transitions in one person’s life can have implications for another (e.g. becoming a parent also means one’s own parents becoming grandparents). The concept of linked lives highlights the need to attend to the social relationships that individuals are embedded within. Considering sustainability, Gibson et al. (2011) argue that it is important to understand households as social assemblages where people are emotionally invested in bonds with others, which

would appear to be in line with the concept of linked lives in highlighting interconnectedness. Our previous work has explored how care for and meeting the needs of family members can be related to managing everyday energy consumption (Groves et al., 2016). Issues relating to care are therefore pertinent in discussion of linked lives and energy use and will be explored further in this analysis, particularly in relation to heat. There are myriad reasons why people manage domestic heat in the ways they currently do (Hitchings et al., 2015) and we suggest that linked lives and care for others are vital for understanding this.

In the following analysis we aim to show the impact of life transitions on energy-related practices, considering how the implications of these changes unfolded over the course of our longitudinal study. Rather than consider particular life transitions as moments of change, as much of the existing literature has, we explore processes of change as well as the impact of unplanned transitions. In detailing these cases, we highlight linked lives as an important concept for considering the impact of life changes on energy demand. In doing this we are aiming to follow the calls in recent work to recognise the importance of all household members and take family relationships more seriously (Burningham et al., 2014), to provide better understanding of the everyday socio-cultural contexts within which dynamic household decisions, experiences and practices are embedded (Waitt et al., 2012).

2. Methodological approach

Existing qualitative research in this area has highlighted the need for future studies to take more temporally-sensitive approaches, which consider whole biographies (Hards, 2012b; Butler et al., 2014) – i.e. to include past experiences and anticipated futures – and track the same people over time from before change occurs (Thompson et al., 2011). The qualitative longitudinal (hereafter QL) design of Energy Biographies allows us to address some of these issues, which we explore here in the context of individual case studies of life changes. Energy Biographies involved participants from four case site areas across Wales and England. Semi-structured interviews exploring themes such as everyday routines, significant life transitions, and energy use in the future were conducted on three occasions over a one-year period. In total, 74 people participated in first round interviews and a sub-sample of 36 took part in two further rounds of interviews. In the subsequent interviews participants were invited to reflect on the life changes they had experienced since the previous research encounter. Between interviews, participants were also involved in multimodal activities designed to evoke further insights into energy use through the lifecourse (for more detail on methodological approach and multimodal activities see Shirani et al., 2016). The interviews were transcribed and coded thematically using Nvivo software, in addition to undertaking narrative forms of analysis, where the narrative of the transcripts is retained and the participant accounts read as a whole to form case biographies (Butler et al., 2014). The analysis presented here is diachronic; looking at individual accounts at different points in time (Elliott et al., 2008), in order to explore the meaning of changes in everyday life across three participants’ accounts.

By revisiting people on multiple occasions, analysing change over time is the specific contribution of longitudinal methodology (Saldaña, 2003; Corden and Millar, 2007). As such, here we choose to focus on three individuals and their stories over time. This further enables us to consider how things that take place in personal life can have consequences that go beyond that sphere (Henderson et al., 2007). By purposefully selecting a few lives and offering detailed descriptions of their experiences, what emerges is the discovery of shared processes, or commonalities of experience, which have a broader significance than the lives of a small number of individuals (Smart, 2007). All participants experienced some changes over the course of the project. In this analysis our focus is on three female participants. Although some elements of their accounts have associations with typically gendered practices (e.g. caring), we have selected their accounts for the detailed

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