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Homely social practices, uncanny electricity demands: Class, culture and material dynamics in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to address the gap in studies of energy consumption in developing countries from a social science perspective. The research uses Social Practice Theory (SPT) to gain better understanding of homeowners' practices and resulting electricity demand in middle-class households in Pakistan, with broader implications for other developing countries with similar climatic and socio-material contexts. Drawing on the works of Bourdieu (1984, 1997), Schatzki (2011) and Shove and Pantzar (2005), the study aims to unravel the connection between familiar domestic practices and the 'uncanny' electricity demand. Material and social constructs of 'homely' household practices related to comfort, lighting, cleanliness, cooking and ICT were studied in ten middle-class households in Lahore, Pakistan. The material arrays of the intermittent electricity provision system, modernistic prefigurations of spaces preferred by the middle-class and electrical appliances play an intrinsic role in shaping, and in turn being shaped by, everyday practices. Practices shaped by specific socio-cultural dimensions, such as social acceptance within the neighbourhood community, religious meanings, joint family structures, age disparities and gender segregation. The empirical study aims to further the conceptualisation of socially differentiated practices in domestic socio-material and cultural context of developing countries.

1. Introduction

Rapid urbanisation and economic growth of the emerging middle-class in the developing world has resulted in their energy consumption overtaking that of the developed world, while their energy-use is expected to increase [1,2]. Yet policies tend to focus on energy generation [3], negating demand reduction. Taking energy demand as a for-granted need, as input for a pre-defined output [4], limits understanding of how and why this demand arises and evolves. This results in perception of energy as an abstract entity where the demand is seen as unpredictable and intangible, as in Frued's [5] conception of the 'uncanny'.² Energy is an intrinsic part of the daily, familiar routines, but remains 'visibly invisible' and the demand uncertain, unfamiliar.

An argument has been made for a paradigm shift to look at energy practices as social construct rather than (rational) behaviour as in previously dominating theories building on economics and psychology, based on the attitude, behaviour and choice (ABC) model [6]. Research on everyday routines and practices in shaping household energy demand is well established in Western energy studies (see e.g. [6–11]). In

addition to its well-known applications in domestic energy use (e.g. [6,12,13]) theories of practice have been used to examine domestic DIY activities (e.g. [14–17]) and professional retrofit practices (e.g. [18]), in Western countries. The significance of materiality in the emergence, persistence and reproduction of everyday household practices has been empirically researched in consumption studies (e.g. [19–23]). Further, Shove [24] argues that a better understanding of energy use as a social construct could lead to more effective and legitimate policy-making.

However, most empirical work that makes use of theories of practice is limited to Western case studies, with a limited number of exceptions that are explored in the following section (e.g. [25–28]). This has led to two limitations; firstly, the pool of shared practices that the above-mentioned studies draw upon for their conceptualisation and understanding of practices are predominantly confined to Western countries. Secondly, the applicability of findings from this body of work in the context of developing world is limited by the fact that each developing country has its own unique, socially and materially structured set of inter-linking ideologies, cultural norms and pace of progress that shape the continuity and change of practices within the society [29]. There is

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E-mail addresses: rk538@cam.ac.uk, rihabkhalid_ad@hotmail.com (R. Khalid), mms45@cam.ac.uk (M. Sunikka-Blank).¹ Present/Permanent address: Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge, 1 Srooppe Terrace, Cambridge CB2 1PX, United Kingdom.² The term uncanny, with its varying nuances, has been linked with domestic spatiality and architecture in the works of Frued [5] and Vidler [62] respectively, depicting the transformation of something as homely and familiar as domestic architecture into something defamiliarised and strange by the spatial incursions of modernity. Although used for architecture, the essential but ever-changing, visibly invisible nature of energy probed us to link it to the energy discourse.

limited understanding of the materiality of the housing stock in developing countries, which for example for the middle-class households is increasingly inspired by Western lifestyles – and how that materiality responds to local climate and culture.

This paper aims to expand the understanding of how practice theories can conceptualise electricity demand and household practices in the socio-material context of developing countries, taking middle-class households in Lahore, Pakistan, as case-study. Based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews and observations in the households, the research aims to answer the following questions in the case study context: How do the material arrangements adapt to and shape everyday household practices and the resulting electricity consumption? What role do the socio-cultural dynamics play in structuring homeowners' daily practices and the resulting electricity consumption?

Literature review is presented in Section 2 and the empirical study is described in Section 3. Section 4 describes the findings and conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2. Theories of practice and energy use

Practice theories provide an integrated framework to conceptualise a duality of social structuring: structures condition human activity, which through their recursive reproduction through practices, reconstitute these very structures [30]. According to Giddens [30], practices are based on people's shared understandings (authoritative or allocative 'rules') of the world. The 'practice turn' in social theory led to conceptualisation of social practices as the central unit of analysis, taking practices as the site where 'understanding is structured and intelligibility articulated' ([31], p. 12). Compared to ideas dominating in disciplines like psychology or economics, practice theories divert attention away from individuals' (rational) decision-making towards wider societal structures. Practice theories suggest that our common practices are not shaped by a large number of individuals acting independently but are dictated by interconnected sets of social norms, infrastructure, embodied habits and understandings. The notions of 'practice theory' and 'practices' have several different meanings in social science but their use in energy research has been based on Schatzki [31,32] and Reckwitz [33] whose work has been introduced to energy studies by Warde [34] and Shove et al. [35] and applied and elaborated on by researchers like Gram-Hanssen [12,13]. While practice theories are applied to empirical studies, it should be noted that they have been primarily interested in the mechanisms of how a society works and not developed as a convenient framework for empirical studies in energy demand reduction. They can, therefore, be more useful as a heuristic rather than representational model [36].

To date, theories of practice consist of varied concepts and frameworks defined by authors of diverse disciplines (see e.g. [37,10] for summary of these definitions) but the models of Shove and Pantzar [38] and Gram-Hanssen [37] are most commonly used in energy studies. Material dimension associated with practices takes a central place in all energy consumption studies. Gram-Hanssen [37] focuses on technology as the material constituent of practices in societal transitions. Shove et al. [35] and Shove and Pantzar [38] adopt a wider definition and consider materiality as an all-encompassing whole and for this reason, the framework by Shove and Pantzar [38] was adopted in this research. Their conceptualisation presents practices as the interconnected relations between three elements: materials (including objects, infrastructures, built environments, tools, hardware and the body itself), meanings (representing the ethos, norms, aspirations, ideologies, symbolic significance, perceptions and the reasoning in carrying out practices) and competences (understanding, know-how, the learnt bodily and mental routines) ([35], p. 25).

Contrary to Giddens, Schatzki [39–41] whose approach Shove's model [38] is based on, sees habituated skills, practices, instead of 'rule'-following, as an explanation of human actions. For Schatzki, practices are organised through three dimensions: practical

understanding, explicit rules and teleoaffectivity while socio-economic aspects receive less attention, as also in the work of Reckwitz [33,42]. Consequently, cultural capital and socioeconomic factors, and how these influence the formation of practical consciousness, have not been at the core of practice theory studies in energy research. In order to include socio-economic aspects and their relation to practices (and compare rich and poor countries), this study also draws from the work of Bourdieu [43,44]. As one pioneer of practice theories, Bourdieu provided an understanding of practices within the context of the individuals' inherent disposition, 'habitus', available means or resources, 'capital' and the social arena, 'field'. For Bourdieu, social differentiation of practices is a key theme. In addition to dispositions formed by past experiences, individuals draw upon socio-economic and cultural resources, demarcated as 'capital'. The various forms of capital are both embodied and objectified in individuals' pursuit of class distinction and desirable social standing and together, these play a central role in defining their positioning and performance of practices in the social world. Bourdieu ([44], p. 101) defined practice as:

[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice

Using Bourdieu's conceptualisation helps to understand class as not just formed of economic capital, but also of cultural and social capacities. Bourdieu distinguishes between three forms of cultural capital: institutionalised, embodied and objectified [45]. The concept of how class registers cultural divisions continues to be applied in socio-cultural studies (see e.g. [47–49]). However, Bennett et al.'s [46] extensive work on cultural and class distinction in Britain warrants additional forms of capital to supplement these somewhat restrictive categories. Class and taste have been little studied in the context of developing countries and in this study, efforts were made to understand middle-class household preferences and aspirations in the interviews.

Social and cultural paradigms within which practices are undertaken 'constitute a site of resistance and challenge' ([8], p. 9) involving adjustment, interpretation and alteration – a concept that demands particular attention in studies of consumption in different contexts. Warde [37] contends that practices are internally differentiated as the practitioners in different situations carry out the same practice differently. Such differentiations are further compounded by the social differentiation of the same practices in different ethnic groups [50,51] and between different cultural dispositions [52–54] or even between cross-national contexts [46].

In addition, the individual acts as the 'intersection point' ([34], p. 144) of many different practices. The study of single practices negates the significance of the connections, conjunctions, alliances and conflicts that exist between simultaneously occurring or existing practices [55,54]. Study of such bundles of loosely knit or complexes of more tightly knit practices [35] or plenums [56] highlight the interlinking nature of everyday practices. According to Schatzki [56], social phenomena are slices of a plenum of linked arrangements and practices through five types of relations: causality, prefiguration, constitution, intentionality and intelligibility. The notion of prefiguration becomes particularly important in a unique socio-cultural and geographical context as it describes the role of the present (plenum of linked practices and arrangements) to changes in the future. Most studies of practices focus only on a single practice such as cooking (e.g. [50]) or laundering (e.g. [57]). However, to get a comprehensive understanding of overall energy demand, a deeper understanding of interlinking compound practices is required, with an acknowledgement that practices are taking place within a socio-spatial context, such as a household or work place. This study aims to understand the total electricity consumption within a household and therefore interlinking household practices (comfort, lighting, cooking, cleaning and ICT) are studied.

Socio-technical studies of electricity consumption, in particular from a practice-based perspective, in developing countries have been limited. Exceptions include Wilhite's [25] work on consumption and

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