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Defection, recruitment and social change in cooking practices: Energy poverty through a social practice lens

M.J. Herington[a,*], P.A. Lant[a], S. Smart[a], C. Greig[a], E. van de Fliert[a,b]

[a] Energy & Poverty Research Group, UQ Energy Initiative, The University of Queensland, St Lucia 4072, Queensland, Australia
[b] Centre for Communication and Social Change, School of Communication and Arts, The University of Queensland, St Lucia 4072, Queensland Australia

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, more than two thirds of the population persist with traditional cooking practices that are deeply embedded within cultural and social norms. This paper discusses insights from a qualitative study on how changes emerge and unfold in these socially embedded energy practices. The research draws on social practice theory to help make sense of the motivations and social processes behind shifting away from a traditional and social norm, and adopt alternative, modern energy practices. Insights are drawn from primary data collected across two study phases in 2015 and 2016 from the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, India. Findings suggest the importance of energy poverty interventions to integrate and consider both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, practice leadership and positive relations between communities and the institutions that provide support. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of these findings for the design of policies and interventions aiming to inspire a social change amongst the energy impoverished.

1. Introduction

The transition from traditional to modern energy practices is widely accepted as a critical enabler of positive change toward improved health, social and livelihood outcomes for marginalized populations living in poverty [1–3]. Energy poverty – a condition broadly describing insufficient access to affordable, safe and reliable energy services – deprives people of essential capabilities important for wellbeing and quality of life [4]. Recognising this, it has been several decades since developed economies transitioned to modern energy services such as electricity and gas [5]. Many households in developing countries, however, have yet to make the shift away from traditional energy practices. In particular, two thirds of the population in India continues to use traditional fuels such as woody biomass[1] (i.e. 'fuelwood') to achieve their cooking needs [6]. This dependence on fuelwood has a negative impact on the health and wellbeing, livelihoods and ecosystems for local communities who continue the practice [7,8].

Traditional cooking practices in developing countries, performed through daily and weekly routines involving the collection of fuelwood and use of traditional stoves, would appear deeply embedded within social norms and a difficult practice to transform. For example, several studies based in India have found that many people have no means, or choose not to abandon the traditional means of cooking [9–11], despite the recognised, potential benefits for making such a transition [12]. As the studies show, this choice may be influenced in part by any number of possible drivers that are context and situationally specific [13]. For example, ease of access to local fuelwood, relative costs of modern fuels, the availability of local materials for construction and maintenance of stoves, as well as flavour, taste, cooking style and other cultural preferences (see for example, review articles [14–17]) all contribute to the challenge of promoting a smooth and sustainable transition away from traditional cooking practices.

Investigating the conditions and mechanisms that contribute to change in cooking practices, however, requires a study that moves beyond the individual and household, and into the realm of social level interactions with energy systems. Several scholars have recently identified this type of social inquiry as a critical gap in energy research [18,19]. Practice theory serves to achieve this. Rather than over-emphasising the role of the individual in these change processes, or conflating all activity to structures and institutions that coerce and control, practice theory follows an ontology that positions practices at the front and centre as the basic unit of analysis. In other words, rather than treating energy itself, or energy consumers, as independent technical, institutional and economic systems [20], this research focuses on the 'practice' of cooking and understands this practice to be held together by linked elements involving the material world, skills, competencies

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: matthew.herington@uqconnect.edu.au, m.herington@uq.edu.au (M.J. Herington).

[1] Biomass refers to organic matter such as agricultural or forest crops and residues, animal waste and other plant and animal material used for fuel purposes.

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and meanings ascribed by people who perform certain tasks and actions [21]. The aim for this study, to which a social practice lens has been applied, was to understand how novel social practices such as cooking with modern fuels, spread throughout an energy impoverished community. Specifically, the research was designed to explore the conditions and mechanisms operating at the social level (i.e. interactions between individuals and institutions) that underpin various cooking practices, and how these practices change over time. Three research questions helped to guide the collection of research data:

(1) What social influences and mechanisms lead people to defect from normative traditional cooking practices and abandon the use of fuelwood?
(2) What are the patterns and social processes of recruitment (of 'practitioners') that contribute to the spread of innovations in cooking practices? and
(3) How do community leadership, trendsetters and supporting institutions influence the recruitment of practitioners?

The findings presented here are informed by a qualitative case study research design incorporating semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and focus group discussions. Such a design helps to gain rich insight into a selected case study of unique transformative change, and a greater understanding of the lived realities of the energy impoverished in rural India.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we present a typology of change in relation to energy poverty. Second, we provide an overview of the evolution of relevant theories of practice, positioned distinctly from alternative theories of change, and what this means for energy poverty research. We then describe the research process, before presenting and discussing the main findings from the case study. The findings section speaks directly to research questions one (regarding defection) and two (recruitment). The discussion section then outlines emerging themes that cut across and tie together all three research questions. We conclude with a comment about the implications of these insights for policy and program design, as well as further research in the field of energy poverty.

2. A typology of change processes in relation to energy poverty

Drawing from terminology found in adaptation [22] and social practice [21] literature, a typology of different change processes can be extracted: stability, incremental and transformational change (Fig. 1). Stability relates to practices that appear highly resistant to change, engaged in decision making processes that result in the reproduction of existing practices. Incremental change describes more obvious shifts in practice, however the strategy and process of the change is such that the essence and integrity of the incumbent practice is maintained [22]. Transformational change is represented by a fundamental shift in terms of both strategy and process. That is, a transformational shift is evident in terms of the motivations and drivers behind why people choose certain practices over another (i.e. strategy), and how people go about performing those practices (i.e. process).

Most transitions occurring amongst traditional energy users are haphazard, incremental and typically involve a practice of employing multiple stoves referred to as 'fuel stacking' [11,24]. Instead of substituting one stove with another, cooks will often use several cooking technologies in tandem, or operate modern stoves only on special occasions. For the energy impoverished, a transformational change in cooking practices may be represented by a complete shift away from traditional fuels and stoves and the adoption of modern energy solutions. Much of the research regarding this topic reported to date, including articles published in this journal [25–27], suggests a problem context where large scale changes will not be achieved easily.

Understanding this distinction between the different processes of change – stability, incremental or transformational change – occurring amongst the energy impoverished is important. For example, exploring the causal mechanisms and conditions that situate these various energy outcomes helps to deepen our understanding of influences that enable, or constrain, a positive social change among the energy impoverished. This paper focuses on the case of a community that has made a transformational shift to modern cooking practices. This enables the unravelling of two inter-linked social phenomena; (1) how traditional and normative practices desist and die out, and (2) how novel practices emerge and take hold in a community.

3. Emergent theories of practice

The structure-agency debate has been a central concern for social researchers for many years and remains relevant today [28]. The debate centres on different worldviews of the behaviour of people; the result of individuals acting as either free and independent 'agents', or as collective actions governed or dictated by powerful social 'structures'. These two distinct positions form the basis of the dominant classical social theories that has been referred to by Reckwitz as 'homo economicus' and 'homo sociologicus' [29]. The former of these two seemingly opposed positions corresponds best with a conventional economic or psychological tradition that typically focusses on the attitudes, interests, intentions and choices of individuals as a way of explaining the social world. The alternative, homo sociologicus perspective typically conflates individual action to social 'structures' – for example cultural norms, institutions, rules and social processes – that coerce and

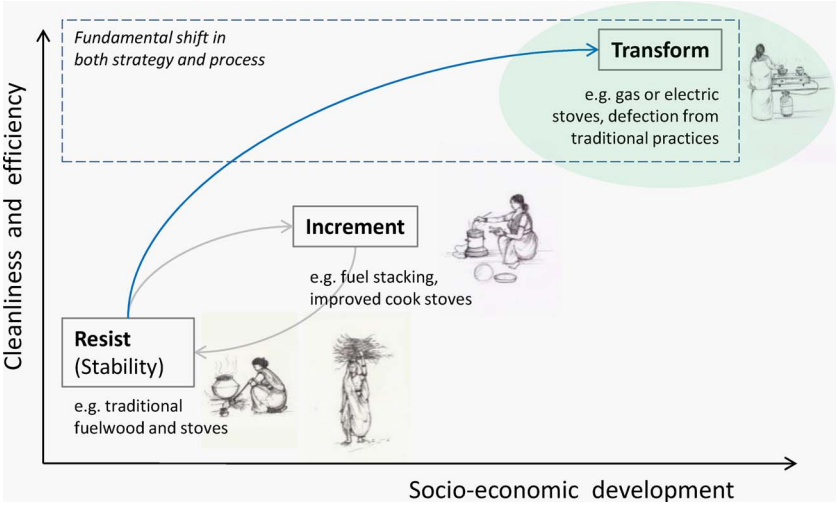

Fig 1. A change typology for energy poverty transitions. Adapted from the traditional energy ladder model, originally proposed by Hosier and Dowd [23].