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Storytelling as oral history: Revealing the changing experience of home heating in England



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ABSTRACT

Oral history provides a means of understanding heating behaviour through encouraging respondents to articulate the past in terms of stories. Unlike other qualitative methods, oral history foregrounds the ontology of personal experiences in a way that is well suited to revealing previously undocumented phenomena in the private world of the home. Three types of change may be distinguished: long term historical change, change associated with the life-cycle stage of the individual and sudden change. A sample of eight in-depth interviews is used to demonstrate the potential of oral history in the study of home heating. The themes to emerge from the interviews include early memories of the home, the financial struggle to heat the home, the influence of childhood experiences in adulthood and the association between warmth and comfort. For the future, domestic comfort, energy conservation and carbon reduction need to be reconciled with one another.

1. Introduction

A distinction may be drawn between three, complementary types of storytelling. Throgmorton [1] and Rotmann et al. [2] amongst others have advocated various forms of persuasive storytelling that help communicate policies to others and, in doing so, generate a consensus for action. In the evaluation of new build and energy retrofit schemes, Janda and Topouzi [3] and Topouzi [4] have argued for ‘learning stories’ that might draw on examples of success and avoid mistakes. Finally, a third type – and this is the interest here – comprises the personal stories of individuals that may be collected to create oral history.

The aim is to provide a ‘proof of concept’ of oral history in energy research, that is to say a demonstration of its feasibility, validity and usefulness. The aim is, therefore, not just to demonstrate the methodology, but to show how oral history can be used to illuminate issues.

The story extracts relayed here relate to the experience of home heating in England and more broadly the United Kingdom. Heating is a basic necessity of life in the UK and the other countries of northern Europe. Heating, and specifically space heating, also accounts for ‘by far the biggest slice of UK household energy use’, between about 60 and 68% in recent years, depending on the severity of the winter ([5], 35). Oral history methods and their analytical frameworks are, nevertheless,

of potential international relevance and may, in principle, be applied to domestic energy use in other countries, including those with a warm or hot climate. The themes in the stories may well be different, but the method can still be applied.

Other researchers are, at present, using oral storytelling methods to illustrate and engage the public in histories of the use and exploitation of energy by local communities in the UK.¹ ‘Coal fires, steel houses and the man in the moon’, by Darby [6], published in this same special edition, has a similar theme in revealing the story of a local experience of energy transition. In addition, public engagement is a theme in large-scale storytelling exercises undertaken by the mass media, for example by the US National Public Radio² and the British Broadcasting Corporation.³ However, searches undertaken by the paper’s authors have not identified any comparable study, in the UK or elsewhere, using storytelling and specifically the methods of oral history to investigate heating as an aspect of the history of the home.

The paper is divided into three main sections:

First: an explanation of the advantages and distinctiveness of oral history;

Secondly, a review of the themes that might be expected to arise in the stories of respondents; and

Finally an analysis of the accounts given by eight respondents.

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¹ <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchcentres/osrc/research/projects/stories-of-change> (consulted August 2016).

² <http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps> (consulted December 2016).

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/> (consulted December 2016).

2. Why storytelling as oral history?

Oral history is an extension of various qualitative and survey research methods that seek to capture previously undocumented phenomena in the private world of the house and home—a world that technologists, designers and energy researchers can struggle to access [7]. However, unlike other studies that have used qualitative interviews or quantitative survey methods to assess people's perceptions of their fuel consumption [8,9], storytelling foregrounds explicitly the ontology of personal experiences. The first person narrative form is intended to allow the interviewee to frame his or her unique and personal account of past events free from any prescription imposed by the researcher.

Moreover, the relational and temporal nature of oral testimony awards a voice to those whose accounts of events that have become marginalised over space, place and time [10–12]. Oral history gives a voice to those who are otherwise not heard and has the potential to reveal undisclosed individual, cultural and subcultural memories relevant to fuel, energy and temperature within the domestic realm. Oral histories are not intended to provide a replacement for stories of global climate change or stories of policy and technological innovation. Oral history is a means of providing subjective, personal narratives as a complement to other histories and to other sources that deal with 'facts' [13]. Oral histories provide a rich data source that enables reconstructions of personal and local impact to rise to the foreground, so allowing for individual idiosyncrasy and social diversity. Most likely a combination of methods is necessary to tackle the major policy issues in energy.

In pursuing a combination of methods, the researcher may therefore still triangulate accounts of recounted past experiences with other sources, other types of history and other methods of survey research. But most significantly, the method of oral history allows the researcher to consider why the story was reconstructed and indeed 're-presented' by the interviewee in that particular way [14]. Gadamer's ([15], 302) characterisation of oral history as a 'hermeneutic conversation' is instructive in this context in that it reiterates the proposition that it is the intended meaning which lies behind the words which merit our attention as much as the actual words themselves. In a storytelling interview, through dialogicality, both interviewer and interviewee create what Frisch [16] describes as a 'shared authority' of previous events (in effect a newly constructed representation of the past) from which new insights regarding individual and collective memory may be construed.

The experiential aspect of storytelling means, in addition, that it is well-suited to reveal both sense of place [17] and architecture. The home, like other forms of building, offers a sensory space [18]. The methods of heating in the home create, moreover, a specific set of sensations that are commonly incorporated into enduring memories within the domestic sphere. The aroma of coal fires in the UK [19] or in other European countries of turf, peat or wood serves to stimulate a 'Proustian' rush of involuntary memories [20,21] and so helps stimulate unique representations of time and place ([22], 228). Likewise, memories of dampness and cold may serve to summarise the experience of living in poor quality accommodation at particular times in a person's life.

Memory is a basis for perception, but is commonly taken for granted. In the words of Merleau-Ponty ([23], 23): 'No sooner is the recollection of memories made possible than it becomes superfluous'. Oral history enables the reconstruction of memory. The narrator, in the role of protagonist, becomes what Seremetakis ([24], 14) characterises as a 'sense witness' and, by recounting his/her story, is empowered to reunite and reflect upon fragments of the past.

Furthermore, the benefits of storytelling are far from abstract. Given its inherent and universal capacity to provide 'strategies to deal with situations', storytelling is, in the characterisation of Burke ([25], 293) an 'instrument for living'. Learning how people have coped and adapted in a given situation reveals possibilities for others seeking to negotiate similar scenarios.

Some care is necessary, as historians disagree whether history allows either firm, contemporary lessons or predictions about future. Elton ([26], 22), for example, suggests that the study of history is 'to free minds from the bondages' of so-called scientific behavioural laws and that this necessarily means breaking from views of history as providing distinct lessons. Elton's objection to history as learning is only applicable if the story amounts to an end point. The objection disappears if storytelling is treated as the start of an open-ended learning process, itself triggering further learning and analysis.

3. Storytelling, heating and the home

The memories incorporated in oral history appear as moments of stability. They are timeless and absolute, whilst history is about relative differences [27]. However, the typical contrast between past and present also allows the accounts of respondents to unfold events over time and to explain how and why life changes. Much depends, in this context, on timescales and the character of change. Three overlapping types may be distinguished in relation to heating and more broadly to energy use. These are:

- long term generational change;
- life cycle change; and finally
- sudden change.

3.1. Long-term historical change

In a country with a relatively cold climate such as the UK, the long-term driving force for change can be summarised as a desire for more comfort in the home, with more rooms being heated to higher room temperatures in the winter. Technological innovations such as the adoption of central heating systems [28] and the use of better quality, more insulated and air-tight building elements [29], were led by domestic engineers, builders and manufacturers rather than by either consumers or architects. Gas fired central heating, in particular, was instrumental in allowing and encouraging whole house heating rather than the heating of specific rooms [30]. However, popular demand was itself a stimulus to innovation and responsible for the subsequent widespread diffusion of modern technologies of all types, as has been shown by Rybczynski [31]. Moreover, the trend towards higher temperatures is still continuing in the context of hard-to-heat properties. Improving the energy efficiency of the homes of lower income households triggers a so-called 'rebound effect' as the occupants find that they can afford a warmer home for the same outgoings in fuel payments [29].

Homes have gradually become easier to heat, so long as funds are available and for reasons that go beyond the immediate experience of the individual. For this reason, oral histories have to be supplemented by other, contextual accounts such as histories of architecture and technology. Equally, however, the contrast between the cold homes of the past and the warmer homes of the present are likely to both feature in personal accounts and inform the accounts of different generations. The memories of older people and the contemporary experiences of their children and grandchildren are a case in point.

Thermal comfort, the physical sensation of hot and cold is only one aspect, of comfort, however. Comfort is best considered as a generalised package of factors that exist as a whole as well as in relation to the parts ([31], 217–32). Comfort extends to ease of use, convenience and the provision of adequate, useable space. Moreover, the introduction of central heating served to promote these other aspects of comfort. Central heating enabled the use of all rooms in a house throughout the year, as was the main reason for its introduction into social housing in the 1960s ([32], 3). In addition, being gas fuelled, central heating was a labour saving device, enabling the elimination of the dirty and sometimes heavy work associated with coal fires. Memories of the routines of making fires and of cleaning up the ashes afterwards are therefore likely

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