



Original research article

We forgot half of the population! The significance of gender in Danish energy renovation projects

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 December 2015

Received in revised form 15 August 2016

Accepted 17 August 2016

Available online 19 September 2016

Keywords:

Energy renovation

Gender

Private household

Anthropology

Denmark

ABSTRACT

Energy renovations are considered to have great potential for reducing the problem of excessive energy consumption. Thus far, initiatives to increase the number of energy renovations have mostly consisted of financial incentives and technical home solutions. Such initiatives overlook the fact that the way people live their everyday lives plays a crucial role in understanding why they choose whether to perform an energy renovation. This study is based on an anthropological investigation of ten Danish families and their decision-making process while receiving free energy advice, which, in many cases, ended as an energy renovation project in the home. During the study, gender emerged as a significant factor in two ways. First, energy renovations were perceived differently by men and women as a consequence of their different everyday practices. Second, there was a cultural norm about the division between what men and women do in the home. This cultural norm placed energy renovation in the male sphere of interest. These findings call for new methods to increase the number of energy renovations that focus on the home, not only as a technical issue that can be improved but also as a living space that contains different gender practices and cultural influences.

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1. Introduction

High energy consumption is an on-going problem for the Danish government's climate plan, which is to have 50% of electrical power consumption come from wind turbines by 2020 and to make the country's energy supply fossil free by 2050 [12]. The responsibility for accomplishing the climate plan has partly been delegated to local energy companies, which are now obliged by law to reduce their customers' energy consumption [16]. Several other countries have similar climate/energy plans (see, for example, [24,23,9]), and with the global climate deal at UN's climate conference in Paris in 2015, binding global engagement in ambitious initiatives is expected in the near future [17].

An increasing focus for the Danish government as well as local energy companies is private households, which account for approximately 28% of the total energy consumption [11: p. 20]. On a European level, the household sector accounts for 29% of the energy consumption [18].

One of the greatest potential avenues for reducing energy consumption in private households lies in encouraging people to perform energy renovations for their homes [22,28]. The reason is that the effect of energy renovations is greater than that of behavioural changes, such as turning off lights and standby electricity [20]. Performing an energy renovation involves a one-time effort to improve the energy efficiency of a house, such as investing in insulation, new windows, or a solar panel system, in contrast to behavioural changes, which involve repetitive efforts to reduce energy consumption, such as remembering to turn off lights.

Several initiatives have been conducted throughout the country to increase the number of energy renovations. Most of these initiatives focus on financial incentives and technical home solutions to make it as easy, comfortable and economical as possible to choose an energy renovation [22]. Another common characteristic is that households are often categorized into types, making it possible to tailor marketing strategies to the different types of households. For example, one of the larger energy companies in Denmark recently conducted a segment study in which approximately 200,000 Danish households were divided into 8 segments so that the energy company could differentiate communication to the various target groups. This method is based on the idea that people will invest in more energy renovations if they receive more information about the benefits of such renovations.

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The existing initiatives are problematic for a number of reasons. A focus on technological home solutions and financial incentives overlooks the importance of understanding people's lives and the needs that emerge from their specific living situations [22,10,28,27]. Gram-Hanssen finds that the human dimension explains energy consumption at least as much as technological efficiency [21]. Furthermore, treating the lack of energy renovations as an information deficit neglects the importance of how decisions on energy consumption relate to everyday life [22,1,31]. Finally, categorizing households into different types overlooks the complexity *within* households. We need to recognize differences between household members and their processes of negotiation and compromise in order to understand domestic energy decisions [15,26,1,45,30].

Zooming in on the human dimension and life within the household, many theories emphasize that gender is an important factor within the household in the context of understanding energy consumption [26,45,7]. There has been a tendency to consider energy issues gender neutral [8], when in fact much research has shown that energy issues are heavily gendered. For example, it has been shown that an unequal representation of women and men exists in the energy sector [6,8,36] and that there are gender differences in the need for and use of energy [35]. There are also gender differences in environmental concern [8,47,14], and differences have been found to exist in the way men and women's everyday lives are impacted by energy conservation [7]. Knowledge about these gender differences has the potential to shed new light on how we develop efficient energy-reducing solutions for the future.

This paper investigates the significance of gender in private households for decisions on energy renovations. The paper is based on an anthropological fieldwork study of one energy advisor and ten families in the municipality of Sønderborg, a rural municipality with approximately 76,000 inhabitants in the south of Denmark. The families were followed during their decision-making while receiving free energy advice from the local energy company, which, in many cases, ended in an energy renovation project in the home. The significance of gender is investigated through a focus on the relationship between the homeowners on the one hand and the relationship between the homeowners and the energy advisor on the other hand. The paper begins by discussing the theoretical perspectives on gender and energy renovation that have guided this paper. Next, the qualitative methods of the paper are presented, followed by a description of the empirical setting of the energy advice. Afterwards, the qualitative results are presented and the findings of the existence of two different levels of gender differences are discussed. Finally, the practical implications of the findings are discussed in order to shed light on how we can develop more-efficient approaches to increasing investments in private energy renovations.

Although this paper draws on data collected in Denmark, it is likely to be relevant to the wider EU and international community. Denmark is relatively egalitarian and known for being one of the most gender equal countries in the world [43]. According to the latest gender equality index by the European institute for Gender Equality [19], Denmark ranks second on the list. If gender differences exist in a Danish context, they are most likely also an issue in less-egalitarian countries. While gender differences are cultural and vary by place and country, it is likely that gender differences will be stronger and more difficult to overcome in other countries compared with Denmark. The results presented in this paper suggest a background of gender differences, which can prove a useful starting point for investigating energy renovations and gender elsewhere.

2. A socio-cultural perspective on gender and energy renovation

In this paper, the term 'gender' is mainly used in West and Zimmerman's social constructivist sense of the word. Gender is not something we *have* or *are* from birth but something we *do* in human interactions [44]. An elaboration of this understanding is found in Butler's description of doing gender. Gender is an activity or practice that is constantly repeated and renegotiated [4]. The focus is hence on the socially constructed roles of men and women rather than biologically determined roles. However, this approach does not aim to create a dichotomy between the sociocultural concept of gender and the biological concept of sex. As Butler notes, we should not view these as real opposites but as constructed opposites [5]. This approach to gender as processes of doing, rather than built-in characteristics in individuals, represents a common tendency in international gender research (see, for example, Haraway [25], Lykke [32]).

Gender is, in this paper, investigated in the context of private households' decision-making about energy renovation. For this purpose, private households are not viewed as homogenous units. Rather, the households are viewed as individuals in complex relationships who discuss, argue and negotiate decisions about their home. In accordance with Levold and Aune [30], family members within the households are viewed as having different projects that they work towards realizing. Living together in a household is an act that only sometimes happens harmoniously—more often, it requires negotiations and discussions among family members [26]. Taking the differences and relations between family members as the theoretical starting point is the context within which this paper captures gender differences. However, as pointed out in the introduction, it is also in line with the identification of a general need to focus on the interactions among household members in order to understand domestic energy decisions [15,26,1,45,30].

As West and Zimmerman [44] point out, gender is closely connected to what we do. In this paper, I have chosen to take this connection in a very concrete manner and focus on how gender is connected to decisions about energy renovations through what people do in the house. Attention to what people do within the household thus becomes a link to understand gender differences. Instead of the term 'doing', I use the term 'practice', which is to be understood as people's daily household activities, such as cooking, doing the laundry, showering and fixing things. The concept of practice is used as a descriptive term rather than an analytical term with theoretical and abstract implications (See [34: p. 16]). It is, of course, important to be aware that differences in practices are not necessarily an expression of gender differences but might merely be an expression of differences between people regardless of gender.

In this paper, the term 'gender' is also understood as closely connected to socio-cultural norms. Gender differences are not perceived as individual free choices but as "produced" by societal structures [5]. There are cultural norms and ideas about what men and women are and do that affect the way we behave [39], and people are heavily influenced by cultural traditions and many years of doing gender [42,13]. People are affected by cultural messages about what it is to be a man and a woman [30]. Gender differences are particularly present in the context of the private household. The household is one of the most gendered spheres of society in most cultures, and despite many years of gender equality work, there is a significant marked gender division within the modern family home even in western contexts [33].

Another key concept in this paper is that of decision-making. In the context of this paper, decision-making is not seen as an isolated action performed by weighing different options against each other. Rather, decision-making is seen as a process embedded in people's

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