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## Exploring the everyday energyscapes of rural dwellers in Wales: Putting relational space to work in research on everyday energy use

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## ABSTRACT

Rural dwellers face a series of considerable, inter-locking challenges in the coming transition to a low-carbon society. As the highest emitters of domestic carbon per head of capita in Britain, understanding how and why rural households use energy in the ways that they do, and how this changes through time, is critical to gaining an insight into the ways in which we might reduce domestic energy demand.

Although a plethora of conceptual approaches exists for enriching our understanding of the social drivers of energy use and demand, it is also important to better elucidate processes that give form to lives as lived in relational rural spaces. The article deploys complementary concepts of biography, practice and lived relational space, utilises them as part of a bespoke methodology for studying extended case narratives, and reports original analyses of more nuanced understandings of sense-making about dynamic changes in life processes and lived spaces. Insights are offered into difficult to resolve narrative tensions arising when expectations, uncertainties, aspirations and imaginaries work in a relational way to frame energy use in the present, and when socio-cultural ideals and identity-forming processes manifest in rural dwellers' energyscapes are involved in the making of the future present.

## 1. Introduction

As the highest emitters of domestic CO<sub>2</sub> per head of capita in Britain [1], rural dwellers face a series of considerable, inter-locking challenges in the coming transition to a low-carbon society. This 'distinct carbon emissions geography' [2] has been attributed to the legacy of an ageing and inefficient housing stock, the retraction of local services in favour of more centralised service provision, higher rates of car ownership and use, and the limited distribution of the gas network in rural areas [3]. This potent combination could affect the degree to which rural dwellers are willing to recognise, and accept the need for change, and indeed, whether they feel able to change at all. Indeed, it is important to remember that structural disadvantage can be exacerbated by personal circumstances [4], which vary across the life-course and which differ from household to household. Moreover, prevailing popular imaginaries of rurality – in which the countryside is regarded as a desirable and idyllic place to live – could play a significant role in whether rural dwellers are likely to undertake any 'transitional activities' to address these challenges [5].

There is a plethora of ways of conceptualising human action – and

domestic energy consumption – within the social sciences. These can be categorised into three broad perspectives, which are cognitive, contextual and practice-based.<sup>1</sup> Our paper takes a practice-based understanding of the dynamics of everyday energy use, as its strength lies in the insights it provides into the social drivers of domestic energy consumption. However, while a practice perspective reveals much about the social dynamics of energy consumption, geography – that is the where of social practice – is rarely taken into account. Indeed, when it comes to rural household energy consumption little attention has been paid to the personal circumstances, nor the everyday lives of rural households; whether their forms of dwelling, time geographies and cultural practices have any implications for the coming transition to a low-carbon society [6]. It is this concern that forms the foundation of this paper.

A detailed understanding of rural dwellers' everyday energyscapes is of great value to both the UK and devolved governments, given that a significant minority – 18% – of the British population reside in the countryside. In Wales, the proportion of rural dwellers rises considerably to 33.9%, which accounts for just over a million people; with one in every eight living in the sparsest context [7]. An understanding

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of the everyday lives of these people – as the highest domestic carbon emitters in Britain – is thus integral if Wales is to successfully reach its carbon reduction targets and contribute to the collective effort to transition to a low-carbon, secure and equitable energy system.

In this article, we draw upon relational thinking within geography and the wider social sciences to analyse the case-narratives of two very different individuals living in rural north-west Wales. In doing so, we wish to highlight how relationships in lived spaces are involved in the making of the future, by shaping everyday energy investments – both financial and emotional – in the present. By drawing on the complementary concepts of biography, practice and relational space, we understand energy use as something evolving out of dynamic relations between people, objects and places. As such, this paper explores how everyday energy practices are part of life processes that are context dependent, dynamic and always under construction. In the next section, we lay out the conceptual foundations of our integrated approach to understanding the relationships between biography, practice and taskscape- which we use in our analysis to put relational space to work before moving on to briefly discuss the research context and methodological approach that we adopted.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings for exploring the everyday energyscapes of rural dwellers

Understanding everyday energy consumption requires attending to the complex, multi-layered, and uneven processes that shape the development of various energy-consuming practices as well as the socio-technical systems upon which they rely. A practice-based perspective is a widely used theoretical approach for elucidating such systemic processes, as it highlights the existence of constraints that can limit how far individuals are able to change their own lives [8]. However, while structural constraints often limit what individuals are able to do or achieve, it does not necessarily mean that people are rendered helpless. Individuals often improvise and adapt to the conditions in which they find themselves, and in times of great personal change such as those encountered during life-course transitions, this can result in significant shifts in identity and its accompanying relational dynamics [9–13].

The study from which this paper has developed is connected to the wider Energy Biographies project at Cardiff University. Drawing upon a particular informative framework to capture more relational processes of embedding and entanglement [11,14], it brings together a biographical approach that is capable of engaging with questions of subjectivity [15] with an understanding of sociotechnical processes informed by practice theory. This framework helps to better understand continuity and change in terms of energy practices, not only at the societal level, but over individual lifetimes as well. Like the wider study, we have adopted a narrative way of conceptualising biography that brings into view the means by which identities and values are formed. In this sense, biography is not simply a pre-given, but rather is understood to be a process that is always in the making. This notion of biography brings with it the implication that our personal and collective identities are not predetermined or fixed, but as emerging in relationships with others (i.e. people and objects) through time and in place: we are therefore relational subjects [16]. Our relational approach to understanding everyday energy consumption thus not only recognises biography and practice, but also understands them as being emplaced.

Biographical or life-course approaches explore the interplay of personal dynamics and wider social and structural forces that reach backwards as well as forwards in time [17]. Such a perspective provides us with a platform to further develop an understanding of the dynamic relationship between individual and collective lives (e.g. networks of family and friends), as well as broader patterns of social change [18]. The strength of this approach is that it allows researchers to explore and understand the dynamics of change in specific spatio-temporal contexts.

Within life-course theorising, the concept of ‘linked lives’ [19]

allows us to explore the interdependencies between ourselves and others that unfold across space and time. Individuals and practices form a part of wider relational webs that span within as well as beyond the home. Our lives intersect and overlap with one another, and it is often only through positioning ourselves in relation to others that many of our practices can become apparent. As such, agency and identity should be understood relationally, which is often only possible to identify through a focus on our extended personal narratives [20]. Exploring how we change as a result of these relationships is thus a central concern for this study.

Relational theories of place and space reinforce how a life-course approach promotes understanding of how the lives of individuals are shaped by the historical and spatial contexts in which they find themselves. The reciprocal relation between the individual and the social as evident within both practice theory and life-course studies is one that is also shared by theories of place [21–23]. In this line of thinking, places are not understood as bounded containers of everyday life; rather, they are ‘a constellation of processes’ [21; 141] that are always in the making. Such a view of place thus promotes further thought on the ways in which local interactions, individual perceptions and embodied experiences are implicated in the constitution of lived spaces [23].

Another important set of conceptual insights are conveyed by the notion of ‘Taskscape’ [24,25], which offers us a grounded, processual way of conceptualising the relationship between people and place. Ingold defines Taskscape as ‘an array of related activities’ (2000; 195), and stressing the emergent nature of our lives, argues that life processes form the ‘landscapes in which people have lived’ (p. 189). As such, Taskscapes – from the micro-geographies of the home to places further afield – are part and parcel of dynamic change processes, as these lived spaces are always under construction.

In bringing these complementary relational insights together, we understand the concept of *everyday energyscape* to encapsulate an assortment of related energy consuming activities (i.e. practices) that are spatially and temporally distributed, giving form to the lived realities of individuals. We use the term *everyday energyscape* to inform the grounded study of energy consumption in a multi-scalar way: for the purposes of analysis, researchers can focus in on energy consuming activities at the micro-scale of a single room or an entire house, to a locality (meso), and beyond to the national/international scale (macro). While an *everyday energyscape*, like the notion of Taskscape [24,25], is a ‘socially constructed space of human activity’, for the purposes of analysis, it can be examined within spatial boundaries and delimitations [26; 2]. In this paper, we highlight the home as a relational space that leads us to explore practices beyond its boundaries, such as those related to transport for work and leisure, which in turn impacts the practices that take place within the home.

Our focus on assortments of related activities that are enabled by socio-technical systems serves to highlight the co-construction of *everyday energyscapes* and the spaces and places in which they are embedded. *Everyday energyscapes* are thus heterogeneous in that the available meanings (cultural conventions, expectations and socially shared meanings, e.g. idealised forms of living), materials (infrastructures, objects and tools) and skills (knowledge and embodied skills) that constitute them vary according to context – both spatially and temporally [8]. The notion offers a means of accounting for broader processes of social change, in addition to change over the life-course, as these bundles of related activities are affected by the events and roles that we encounter as we live out our lives. The central concern of *everyday energyscapes* is thus with the relationships that people make in the lived spaces of their everyday lives through the ‘doing’ of practice. As such, the notion allows us to engage with everyday energy consumption in a grounded and relational way.

## 3. Research context and method

This paper is based on in-depth narrative interview data collected in

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