Who’s Leading Who? Household Efforts to Improve the Environmental Performance of Housing: Implications for Policy & Programmes

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Introduction

• Houses are now modified more frequently due to changing expectations, aspirations & opportunities
  – Integral part of homemaking

• In Australia:
  – 70% population own their home/have a mortgage
  – Scale of activity = opportunity for policy makers aiming to reduce green house gas emissions of dwellings
Introduction

• Households need to take responsibility for environmental issues by changing consumption habits + behaviour in the home (according to governments & NGOs)

• Programs fall into two categories:
  – Retrofitting: improve housings’ efficiency (e.g. solar H2o, insulation)
  – Behaviour change: encourage households to modify behaviour to improve reduce environmental impact.
Policy & theory context

- Retrofitting
  - Rebates & other incentives to encourage uptake
  - Ecological modernisation theory, posits sustainable consumption can be achieved by improving efficiency, incorporating green technologies, & recognising consumer agency in purchasing

- Behaviour change
  - Behaviour framed psychologically: motivations, barriers, opportunities
  - Change occurs through personal contact, commitment, community engagement
Policy & theory context

• Along with other market mechanisms & rational response incentives, these programs form basis of most policy & program solutions

  = ‘rationalisation discourse of sustainable consumption’ (Hobson, 2002) (hereafter ‘RD’)

• Growing awareness of climate change, nearly every household expresses concern for the environment
  – How do they respond to energy & water saving discourses, & do these concerns translate to daily life?
Approach, definitions & method

• Policies & programs based on notion that households can be persuaded to modify their home
  
  3 Assumptions
  
  1. Households undertake retrofits & other home improvements (HIs) to update their home & to improve resale value, & new ‘environmental’ improvements can be added to existing plans
  
  2. Householders have internalised information about the problem, have a sense of personal responsibility, & express this through housing consumption &

  3. Ongoing household practice & associated consumption (within & beyond retrofits & HIs) will be ‘contained’ within environmental limits
Questions, outline

• Questions addressed:
  – What are the motivations of households who undertake HIs & how are notions of environmental efficiency incorporated into their activities?
  – Do their activities reflect the rationalisation discourse of sustainable consumption?

• Report on 2 related projects

• Discuss implications for policy making & future research
Study 1: ‘Green renovators’

- Growing # households interested in ‘green’ HIs & retrofits
- ‘Accepted Assumptions 1 & 2 to be largely true
- Green renovator’ = homeowner who had undertaken HIs that included 2 or > sustainable features or technologies
- Research Question:
  - Why do green renovators undertake a range of home improvement activities & how do these activities relate, or not, to environmental concerns & everyday practice?
Study 1: ‘Green renovators’

- Snowball sampling, 16 interviews in renovators’ homes in Melbourne, Australia
- Questions about: motivations, relationships, barriers, opportunities
Study 1: ‘Green renovators’

• As well as green features, most extended home, upgraded or added kitchens/bathrooms

• Motivations: comfort (space, thermal, light); moral/green imperative (ecological/social justice); repair or update

• All had genuine intentions, cared deeply about trying to reduce household’s environmental impact
  – But not *why* they improved their home
  – Increases in comfort consciously sought

• *Not motivated* by saving $$
  – Motivated by saving energy & H2o
Reflections about Study 1

• ‘Motivations’ didn’t satisfactorily explain why home owners undertook renovation
  – Multiple, overlapping, varying prioritisation, potentially conflicting (e.g. comfort vs. green)
  – Dominance of comfort (space, thermal, light)

• None undertook renovation for green purposes alone

• Noted: motivations in support of RD appeared to be absent
Reflections about Study 1

• Support for Assumption 2: new ‘green’ standards some feel compelled to meet to be good citizens (influenced perhaps by moral/green discourses)

• Who’s leading who: households, policy makers or industry?
Study 2: ‘Green’ & ‘other’ retrofitters

• 29 interviews with green & non-green, owner & renter home improver households around Australia

• Research question:
  – Why do Australian households undertake a range of home improvement activities and what sorts of incentives or information might encourage them to improve the environmental performance of their home?

• Questions about: motivations, values, attitudes towards environment, actions taken in the home (e.g. to save energy or water)
Study 2: ‘Green’ & ‘other’ retrofitters

• All undertaken environmental retrofitting (e.g. light bulbs, insulation, water tanks, solar hot H2o)

• Virtually no difference between ‘green’ & ‘other’ in terms of current & future activities

• Motivations: comfort (space, thermal, light); save on running costs; moral/green imperative (ecological/social justice)
Reflections about Study 2

• Again, motivations concept didn’t satisfactorily explain why retrofitters undertook improvements
  – Multiple, overlapping, varying prioritisation, potentially conflicting (e.g. comfort vs. green)

• Noted: rationalisation discourse present, but not dominant

• Unexpected dominance of comfort (space, thermal, light)

• Evidence for multiple discourses: comfort, environmental, rationalisation, social & ecological justice

• No difference between ‘green’ and ‘other’
Returning to 3 assumptions of RD

1. Households undertake retrofits & other home improvements (HIs) to update their home & to improve resale value, & new ‘environmental’ improvements can be added to existing plans.

2. Householders have internalised information about the problem, have a sense of personal responsibility, & express this through housing consumption &

3. Ongoing household practice & associated consumption (within & beyond retrofits & HIs) will be ‘contained’ within environmental limits.
Returning to 3 assumptions of RD

1. Households undertake retrofits & other home improvements (HIs) to update their home & to improve resale value, & new ‘environmental’ improvements can be added to existing plans
   - Yes & no, dominance of comfort
   - Dependent on systems of provision, skills & competencies, actors encountered

2. Householders have internalised information about the problem, have a sense of personal responsibility, & express this through housing consumption &
   - Yes, internalised issue; no, not fully expressed in housing consumption
Returning to 3 assumptions of RD

3. Ongoing household practice & associated consumption (within & beyond retrofits & HIs) will be ‘contained’ within environmental limits
   – Unclear, but seems unlikely

➢ Changing *practices* & *expectations* relating to comfort, cleanliness & convenience necessary to reduce household consumption…
**A new approach: social practice theory**

- A practice approach requires moving away from ‘behaviour’ for understanding human action

  **‘Practice’**

  A routinised behaviour involving connected elements of bodily & mental activities, objects/materials & competencies, interconnected with other practices & occurring within wider political, economic, legal & cultural systems of provision (Reckwitz, 2002; Røpke 2009)

- E.g. practices of washing, cooking & cleaning

- Practices steer behaviour & shape, & shaped by the wider system of power relations, infrastructure, technologies & society (Giddens, 1984)
Discussion & implications

• Social practice theory offers more meaning, in-depth understanding of HIs than rationalisation
  — about comfort

• Also explains why green retrofitting appears to contradict other modifications designed to improve comfort

• Seeking rational explanations for HIs can only offer superficial interpretation of why homes modified
Discussion & implications

• Aspirations for HIs influenced by common understandings of cleanliness, comfort, convenience – overlayed by environmental citizenship

• Although households make use of env. technologies to reduce impact, can only have minimal effect

• But households not to blame…
  – Result of rationalisation of sustainable consumption offered as the solution

• To effect change, collective, resource-intensive lifestyles need to be challenged e.g. daily shower?
Conclusions

• Need to do more than encourage households to adopt env. friendly behaviour
  – doesn’t address domain of practice

• Further consideration in research, policy and programs needs to be given to conventions and practices embedded in daily routines

• Using social practice theory to understand routines offers explanation for why behaviour change & other tools of RD only go so far

• Grants, rebates etc. may generate interest & some action, as a basis for a policy agenda will only have incidental effect
Conclusions

• Need for more adventurous policy making
  – ‘Practice’ as opposed to ‘behaviour’ change
  – Requires understanding of how practices interact, how shaped by various elements, how they shift

• Which practices should be the target of change? Which elements of a practice should be changed to reach the desired outcome?

• Need a radical rethink of ways of living & configuration of systems within which household practice & HI activity take place

• Challenge the dominance of RD in policy making
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