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# Do consumers' awareness and information work?

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# Scope and objective

- Focus: lay-persons and every-day consumption
  - Question
    - The paradigm of rational actors
    - The central role given to information and persuasion as main policy tools
  - Propose alternative hypotheses on openness to environmental information
  - Translate results obtained into policy options
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# Method and 'data'

- Part of the 'Serec' project (Belgium & DK)
  - Combining engineers and sociologists
  - Combining different approaches, at each stage of the research – for Belgium:
    - Energy and electricity assessment of 40 volunteering dwellers
    - Qualitative in-depth interviews with dwellers having volunteered and received a full energy assessment of their dwelling
    - A quantitative phone survey on energy-related practices and representations on a representative sample of households (n=1000)
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# Conceptual framework

- The rational-actor assumption
    - Information → concern → behavioural change
    - Derived from economics
    - Used in social psychology (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980)
    - Focus on rational calculation, personal preferences, choice, consumers' freedom
    - Information = main policy tool
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# Conceptual framework (2)

- When is information effective to change behaviours in a more sustainable way?
  - Not often! (Ex. In UK, indoors temperature, Shove et al.)
  - Toward a social theory of social practices
  - Normalised ways for not adopting 'green' practices:
    - 'Moods', 'États d'Âme' (Martucelli)
    - Practice and social networks compartmentalisation:
      - Ex. (grocery shopping, energy use, ...)
      - To signal social normality (Halkier, 2001)
      - To avoid adding to oneself a new identity dimension and supplementary zapping
      - Societal self-defence mechanism for avoiding to question our 'world socialisation scheme' (predation)
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# Knowledge on energy consumption and related practices

## ■ Standby

- Good general knowledge (81%), less detailed knowledge (computers, nuclear energy, ...)
  - Frequent use (17% often, 37% always)
  - “[We should] probably [try to] pay more attention, even more attention”: knowledge does not bring about appropriate practices by itself : 1/3 who knows about standby always use it
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# Knowledge on energy consumption and related practices

## ■ Bathing and showering

- No ≠ knowledge on climate change for bathing
- + knowledge on climate change if + showering

## ■ Heating practices

- + knowledge if ↓ temperature (night, long absence)
  - No ≠ knowledge if ↓ temperature (airing)
  - No ≠ knowledge with ≠ estimated temperature
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# Knowledge on energy consumption and related practices: Appliances' use

- + knowledge on climate change if
    - + large appliances
    - + frequent use of washing machine & dishwasher
  - No ≠ knowledge on climate change for
    - Switching off the light
    - Having CFLs (“saving lamps”)
    - Having labeled appliance
    - Use of the dryer /week \* person
    - TV in stand-by mode
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# Knowledge on energy consumption and related practices

- On the whole, no clear association between energy-saving practices and
    - knowledge on climate change
    - Knowledge on renewable energies
  - Importance of social norms on comfort, convenience and cleanliness (Shove, 2003)
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# Customised knowledge on energy consumption and related practices

- 40 households received an energy assessment
  - 11% of recommendations applied after 1 year
  - In-depth interviews
    - 12 households
    - After 2-3 months (3 after 1 year)
    - Compared with similar interviews in Denmark
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# Customised knowledge and few action: why?

- Need of discursive consciousness
    - Practical and detailed information needed (insulation)
    - Practical consciousness, context important
    - *Importance of perceptions: “We do not feel any discomfort” / “The usefulness of insulation, you feel it”*
    - → Hypothesis (household-waste sorting policies in '90s)  
Perceived obligation, a modality of discursive consciousness
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# Customised knowledge and few action: why?

- Need of consistent information
    - With intermediaries (heating installer, architect, ...)
    - With trusted family members, friends, ...
    - With self-gathered information (internet, ...)
    - Already heard before
    - → hypothesis: social comparison, a modality of discursive consciousness
  - No mistrust in experts (Belgium/Denmark)
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# Customised knowledge, few action: why?

- Need of social support
    - Saving lamps → candles?
    - Need of socially legitimated rationales for saving energy (≠ economy and environment)
    - Saving energy seems incompatible with status showing (spec. if rapid upward social mobility)
    - Need of family-members support (spouse, father,...)
  - Enhanced self-esteem
    - Make the recommendation his own project
    - In line with previous investments
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# Conclusion (1)

- Conditions to compensate for moods and practices compartmentalisation :
    - Convergence of information (Goldblatt, 2003): energy advice must be corroborated and supported by previous conversation (Bartiaux, forth in JCP)
    - Social support (Gram-Hanssen *et al.*, 2007) from persons or networks individual consumers value the most for their (one?) energy-saving work(s) (heater, father-in-law, NGO colleagues, friends...) for achieving social normality in valued networks
    - Bringing new knowledge to practical and to discursive consciousness (Hobson, 2003): importance of socio-technical context and of policies
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# Conclusion (2)

- Question the central role given to information as main policy tool: neither general nor customised knowledge brings about environmentally friendlier action
  - The higher the income, the higher energy consumption
  - To de-compartmentalise practices: PCA or PCT
  - Policies for sustainable energy consumption provide
    - Discursive consciousness (via perceived obligation)
    - Social support and social legitimacy
    - Relief from making individual choice that would be conflicting with social normality, as contextually defined
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**Thank you!**

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