

Coping strategies: behavioural responses to fuel poverty and energy inefficiency

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The complexity of energy consumption

- Energy consumption influenced by manifold factors (selection)

Income,
Gender,
Education,
Household
etc.

Dwellings,
Buildings

Discourses,
„societal
climate“

Infrastructures

Values,
Attitudes,
Cultural &
Social
Norms

Routines,
everyday life
patterns

Regulations
and Policies

Technologies
and their use

Societal
trends

Energy
markets
and prices

The complexity of energy consumption

- **Diversity and variability of energy practices (even within income groups)**
- **Energy is a social issue: socially mediated nature of energy consumption and its sociotechnical and infrastructural embeddedness**
- **Energy consumption is not a „stimulus-response“ sort of thing; people are not „determined“ by factors, but active, knowledgeable social agents who try to make their home as comfortable as possible, even under restricted circumstances**

Research project on coping strategies

- **Qualitative research project investigated the living conditions and daily energy practices of low-income households in Vienna**
 - **2008-2011**
 - **Financed by the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund**
 - **50 qualitative interviews in low-income households, 10 interviews in better-off households**
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Selected results: „Energy burdens and coping strategies“

Habitus of modesty: Coping with living and housing conditions:

- a large number of households live in deprived conditions, carrying multiple burdens
 - Economizing as a way of life
 - Many households react to the burdens with a clear lowering of their living standards
 - Majority of households live in energy-inefficient dwellings
 - In general, these households are quite creative to make their apartments as homely as possible („second hand cultures“)
 - Household appliances often energy-intensive and source of hazards
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Selected results: „Energy burdens and coping strategies“

Affordable warmth: coping with cold homes

- **Different coping strategies regarding heating practices**
 - **Strategies characterized by low necessity for investment (efficiency and sufficiency)**
 - **Sufficiency strategies: actions geared towards reducing energy consumption through cutbacks and sacrifices (heating only one room of the flat; putting on various layers of clothing; slipping under the covers)**
 - **Many households adopt one or more of these strategic options**
 - **Economizing in other areas of consumption**
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Selected results: „Energy burdens and coping strategies“

Modest illumination: coping with low lights

- Sufficiency strategies regarding lighting (e.g. using sources of light only selectively or not at all; lighting only one room)
- In many households, the light emission of the TV set serves as the only source of illumination
- Some households use candles instead of electricity
- Efficiency strategies: relatively high tendency towards saving energy through affordable investments

Selected results: „Energy burdens and coping strategies“

The looming energy bill: coping with energy costs

- **Two third of the interviewees perceive their energy expenses to be a burden**
 - **Differences in financial management**
 - **More than a quarter of the interviewees already had to accept one or more cut-offs due to non-payment of arrears**
 - **Reluctance to change energy providers**
 - **Austrian energy market: high market concentration, lack of competition, poor product diversity**
 - **2009: 1.2% of Austrians switched providers**
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New project: „Pilo-project against fuel poverty“

Provisional data from 100 households in Vienna:

- 70% of the buildings were erected before 1945
 - In 71% of households mould has been identified
 - Leaky doors (56%) and windows (52%)
 - Worry about being able to pay the energy bills (95%)
 - At least one power cut in the past 2 years (11%)
 - Heating fewer rooms than they would like (60%)
 - Limiting hot water consumption (54%)
 - Curtail lighting (35%)
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Policy recommendations

1. Taking into account the range of behaviours of people when designing and evaluating energy efficiency policies
 2. Energy efficiency measures alone cannot tackle those who under-consume energy with potential negative health consequences (combining energy efficiency with health promotion)
 3. Giving priority to those living in „severe fuel poverty“ (e.g. through community-based approaches)
 4. Even small energy efficiency improvements can have positive impacts on physical as well as mental well-being
 5. Energy consumption is not only an economic and technical issue, but also a social issue: Tackling fuel poverty should be a cross-governmental task!
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