



## User perspectives in housing: the relevance of ‘habitus’

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### Abstract

During the past few years, the implementation of national carbon reduction targets in the UK has led to an enormous amount of research has been undertaken on the design and use of the home in relation to energy consumption, especially in relation to low energy homes. The aim of this paper is to show the relevance of concepts of habitus to sustainable (and unsustainable) patterns of consumption and in doing to call for more qualitative, interpretative research in this field. It is acknowledged that different approaches have different strengths and weaknesses and the demands of methodological pluralism requires that these be mixed together. However, a full understanding is only likely to arise if priority is given to qualitative understandings, at the very least as a framing device for subsequent quantitative studies.

The aim of this presentation is to show that a pragmatic interpretation of ‘habitus’, albeit one grounded in the history of the concept, can provide a way into understanding energy use in the home and other related aspects of sustainable housing and by extension sustainable planning. In particular, the aim is to show how habitus can help bridge the gap between different methodological approaches, for example those based on the individual and society and those based on quantitative and qualitative sources.

Planning is concerned, as we are repeatedly told, with sustainable development. However, sustainable development is unlikely to get very far without a parallel concern with sustainable consumption, that is to say, how people use the environment in which they live. Habitus starts with processes of consumption, though it has implications for development. Developers work on the basis of habit in organising their work (Binder 2012). In relation to consumption patters, however, habitus has the merit above all of dealing with the obvious characteristic of sustainable homes- their novelty. The scale of carbon reduction envisaged by current targets implies a new relation between people and

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the homes they live. Carbon reduction implies investment in the older housing stock, the adoption of new types of dwelling with new types of heating and ventilation systems and, in most cases a more self-conscious relationship between the occupants and their home so that they understand how best to manage these new systems

As a result, the promotion of low energy/ low carbon housing represents a departure in the conventional way in which people think about and act in relation to their homes. It involves a break with old habits. What then does the theory of social habits and habitus say about strategies to promote sustainable consumption?

### **1. Routinisation and habit**

Habitus is a mainstream concept in sociology, though one that is open to more than one interpretation. A common assumption in sociology is that, without shared, stable and generally taken for granted assumptions, our sense of social and personal identity begins to break down. Routines emerge from the every day life and from work and give a sense of structure to the world. Giddens (1984b xxiii) comments, for example: 'Routinization is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security is maintained in the daily activities of social life.' (xxiii) Ontological security means a sense that the world is as it should be on the basis of expectations. Routinization also involves taking reality for granted and therefore as unproblematic and unquestioned. It represents reality under normal circumstances (Schutz 1962, 220, 273).

Routines and routinization in turn imply habits and 'habitus', a bundle of habits. The term itself requires a brief explanation. Habitus, as understood in social theory in Britain is associated with Bourdieu and is considered predominantly as a theory that seeks to understand the impact of society on the individual. The term predates Bourdieu, however. It goes back at least to the late 19th and early 20th centuries and emerged from a specific school of philosophy called phenomenology- the study of phenomena as encountered. Phenomenology is literally the application of 'logos' (thoughtfulness and language) to any phenomenon (object, person or environment) precisely as it is given (encountered) or experienced (Giorgi 1997, 237: Van Manen, 1984 4). Put like this, phenomenology looks obvious, even trite. It is not. Whereas conventional Western philosophy separates the subject from the object and, in doing so, implicitly endorses a positivist philosophy of science, phenomenology insists on the unity of human experience as encompassing both the subject and the object.

As such, habitus has a more ambiguous, richer meaning than is offered merely by Bourdieu. Habitus encompasses both the individual, the concern of phenomenology and social structure, the concern of sociology

## **2. Habitus as biography and structure**

Phenomenology is concerned with human experience and how this interacts with the lived world, the world of everyday life. For Husserl ([1948] 1973, 122), the founder of phenomenology, previous experience does not disappear without trace. It continues '*in the form of a habitus*, ready at any time to be awakened anew by an active association' (italics in the original). Habitus as conceived by Husserl is therefore a product of a person's biography, their previous experience (Frère 2005). Bachelard ([1958] 1994, 14) uses similar language in analysing the house, above all the childhood house as a 'group of organic habits'. Equally, however, most interpretation of phenomenology do not exclude the possibility of conscious thinking reflecting on and either refining or changing habits and routines. Bachelard (1994, 67) comments, for example, 'consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions'. Finally, The treatment of perception by Merleau Ponty ([1945] 2002, 39) is similar. 'Perception is a "hypothesis" that the mind evolves to 'explain its impressions to itself..... It is an interpretation apparently immediate, but in reality gained from habit corrected by reasoning.' The crucial words are 'corrected by reasoning'. Habit, as the routine performance of actions influences perception but this is always also influenced by conscious decisions.

Later, the concept of habitus was taken up by Bourdieu to refer to the likely persistence of similar practices (or patterns of behaviour) amongst people in a similar socio-economic situation. Habitus, according to this latter definition, is 'a set of acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditions and which, for that reason, may be totally or partially common to people who have been the product of similar social conditions' (Bourdieu 2005, 45). Habitus so defined is a form of social space, moulded by the social conditions of which it is a product. It is based on a combination of cultural capital (for example educational levels) and economic capital, including status in the labour market and, in this latter respect, is generally considered an aspect of class. In addition, habitus is a 'classificatory device' (Bourdieu 1998: 8) that enables the identification of different groups according to different tastes and life-styles and that can be mapped in terms of 'real' physical space, for example through spatial variations.

Habitus as social space is distinct from habitat, an aspect of physical space, but in the work of Bourdieu ([1993] 1999, 128), habitat and habitus are assumed to reinforce one

another, for example through patterns of residential segregation. In this context, habitus has been understood, perhaps misleadingly as defining ‘sense of place’ (Hillier and Rooksby 2005). Habitus, the routines that people follow in their daily lives, define their sense of place and *vice versa*. Places and social practices interact with one another. Further different groups tend to live and congregate in different parts of a city, either because of constraints or of active choices within the market. Those with choice seek out places that best meets their aspirations and requirements for cultural capital, as reflected in the twin and sometimes conflicting aspects of an attractive urban amenities and good schools (Bridge 2006)

If, however, habitat and habitus are mutually reinforcing, where is the individual? In some interpretations, the answer is nowhere. The individual disappears, except as the performer of a set of previously determined behaviour patterns. Habitus involves no apparent conscious intention, as in the following paragraph, and change in habitus is likely to be slow. It is a ‘system of dispositions .... or a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) .... structures of perception, conception and action’ (Bourdieu, 2005, 43) (italics in the original). In other interpretations, in contrast, individual consciousness reappears. In the words of Bourdieu (1990, 64 and 81) ‘if one is to adapt to .. indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations’ .. habitus must be ‘a source of invention, but only within certain limits.’ Habitus can never be static, because society is not static. In any case, the multiplicity of different situations in contemporary society leads to the individual experiencing different social worlds at different stages in their life and multiple identities.

In other words, the earlier biographical concept of habitus, of habitus as being modified by experience and learning, remains, embedded within the socio-economic situation that the individual finds himself or herself (Frère 2005).

### **3. Understanding variations in consumption**

These two meanings of habitus, biographical habitus on one hand and structural habitus do not coexist with one another easily in terms of theoretical consistency. Full integration of the two meanings is probably impossible. Their value is to express the ambiguities of ‘real life’ situations and to offer alternative, complementary explanations and understandings of how people use buildings, spaces and places and of whether their use is sustainable or not.

Studies of energy use provide an example. Different people vary considerably in their use of energy in the home, even when building standards are similar. How might this be explained and understood?

A full answer would draw on both biographical and structural habitus. A biographical explanation and understanding would look at how expectations and routines have been developed over time, from the personal experience of particular users. It would also explore the processes through which individuals are able to learn routines and learn how to change those routines. Learning implies the potential for change. A structural explanation and understanding would point to the way in which different groups and types of individual, classified notably by age, income and life-style (ethnicity and educational level, for example) have different tastes, different ways of interacting with the world and, most importantly, differential access to good quality, easily heated housing. A structural explanation would also suggest that social distinctions are an essential part of consumption and life-styles, even if these change over time, for example as a result of technological innovation.

The distinction applies equally to theories of change in relation pro-environmental behaviour (or change in favour of sustainable consumption to use the language of practice theory). Biographical habitus is consistent with those theories of change that seek to prioritise the individual- through so-called nudging, manipulating the situation in which people find themselves and so changing the assumptions of daily life (Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Allcott and Mullainathan 2010). Nudging means using a series of behavioural levers or 'cues' to encourage consumers to consider sustainable life-styles and patterns of consumption. The 'cues' are potentially diverse and include the energy labelling of products; changing the default settings in domestic equipment and the introduction of smart meters for energy and water. (By definition, nudging excludes compulsion, and measures that involve significant changes in economic incentives.)

In contrast, structural habitus implies a concern with the range of products and technologies available in society at any given time and the historical evolution of those products in relation to mass consumption. It means the state driving forward promising energy saving products out of their specialist, experimental niches into the mainstream. Zero carbon homes provide the best example. Zero carbon homes were initially developed by innovative individuals and communities and then promoted in the mainstream by government through a mixture of experimental subsidies and the threat of regulation. Mainstreaming has not been completely successful, mainly owing to the cost implications, however (Goodchild and Walshaw 2011).

Finally, both individual and structural habitus imply a concern with an intermediate level of communities and voluntary work by communities. In this context, two further theories of change are available; namely

- community marketing, involving an assessment of which particular changes are most likely to be accepted, the identification of barriers that mitigate against their take-up and the use of moral pressure, personal contacts and promotion of personal and community targets (McKenzie-Mohr et al 2012)
- community development, involving individuals in voluntary activities on the assumption that this increases understanding of environmental issues, generates a commitment to local environmental campaigns and ‘spills over’ into other innovative action (Seyfang & Smith 2007).

Of these three levels of intervention, measures targeting the individual are the easiest to implement from a political viewpoint, as there are no apparent losers. Change proceeds through persuasion and a so-called ‘feelgood’ factor that is supported by an attitudes, behaviour choice or ‘ABC paradigm’. If only governments could change consumer preferences, sustainable patterns of consumption would emerge spontaneously. In the usual sociological approach, represented, for example by Shove 2010, views consumption patterns as being locked into a persistent socio-technical system involving relationships between life-styles, routines and dominant cultural assumptions.

The criticism is probably correct. A focus on the individual alone overestimates the ease of change, ignores the way in which the most obvious forms of consumer education have already been undertaken and also ignores historical precedents. historical studies of life-styles and technologies suggest that patterns of consumption change relatively slowly, over decades and are conditioned by a mutually supportive interaction between daily routines, largely taken-for-granted technology and infrastructure and dominant cultural conceptions of what is desirable and undesirable (Shove 2003; Owens and Driffill 2006). The replacement of horse drawn urban transport by motor vehicles (Geels 2005) or the replacement of open fires by central heating provide examples. In both cases, technology and life-styles changed together in a process of ‘coevolution’. The implication is that innovation has to incorporate both the users and the producers of goods, services and infrastructure (Geels 2004) and that, as a result, policies have to be long term and ambitious. Indeed, in some ways, policies for sustainable development involve more substantial change than those associated with the growth of motor vehicles or central heating, both of which emerged along with the grain of modernity- more speed of movement and more comfort in the home. Sustainable consumption in contrast seeks at least to reverse or qualify these tendencies.

However, it is wrong to suggest that the advocates of the ABC approach are unaware of the limitations. For example, P. Stern (2000), an advocate of psychological approaches, notes that the ABC approach only works when contextual factors are not too strong to override personal choices. Contextual factors include habits and routines, household economic constraints and the available infrastructure.

#### **4. Conclusions: Habitus and method**

Whatever the broad strategy, the choice of measures presupposes some process of selection and evaluation. In this a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is necessary. Habitus as a classificatory device implies statistical techniques to establish the main lines of division. Likewise studies of domestic energy consumption require the identification of variations in energy consumption for specific types of property. In this, research can draw on conventional surveys already undertaken, so long as these enable the identification of specific properties and households. Quantitative methods, subject to the availability of data, are also relevant in tracing progress over time.

However, the most distinctive aspect of habitus, irrespective of whether biographical or structural, is its use of qualitative methods. Habitus rests on routines and often taken for granted assumptions. Exactly for this reason, the assumptions of practice are not always revealed in the context of a conventional questionnaire, capable of simple quantifiable answers. Direct questioning risks generating misleading answers, 'don't know' or incredulity (Allen 2005; Flint 2011, 81-2). Extended discussion, for example in a focus group, indirect methods such as diary keeping and visual methods (using photographs to stimulate responses or giving respondents a camera may, nevertheless, be more fruitful in generating insights (Walshaw, Goodchild and O'Flaherty 2012). Visual methods are, in any case, particularly valuable in helping people express their views and feelings about places and landscapes (Knowles. & Sweetman 2004).

Further, habitus and by implication other similar approaches based on phenomenology (even indirectly) have another implication that requires qualitative interpretations to be given priority. The concept of habitus applies as much to researchers and planners as to the subjects of a research project or initiative. No-one escapes the tendency to think or to act according to routines and habits. This background of routines and habits cannot be ignored, but it can be controlled through an exposition of the traditions and theories within which the research and the researcher is operating.

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