

# TACKLING THE AWARENESS ISSUE

## ENERGY EFFICIENCY, BEHAVIOUR AND THE ROLE OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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### INTRODUCTION

My presentation comes in six sections. In the first I look at the notion of home and what it means to us; then I will talk briefly about our reaction to climate change. I will mention some of the behavioural biases and also cultural and social influences. The fifth section will focus on barriers to domestic energy efficiency measures and then finally, I look at what can be done and I'll refer to my current research on community energy groups.

#### 1. 'HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS'

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, our physiological requirements are fundamental. For survival, we need food, water, air, sleep and warmth. We also need shelter, safety and security.

A house is crucial to these needs – it is far more than just a building with four walls and a roof, it is a home.

Home is where the heart is; home is where we hang our hats; and as Dorothy says in the Wizard of Oz – 'There's no place like home'.

It is the base from where we live our lives.

We gather at home to celebrate the good times, to entertain friends, to cook, to play, to love and to argue. It is where we hide when things go wrong, and where we lie when we're just too tired to keep going.

Our home is full of emotional memories – many of them happy, others challenging and poignant; it is where little Johnnie took his first steps, where we all came together when our mother turned 80, and it's where our beloved pet died.

As the contemporary philosopher, Alain de Botton puts it:

*'The house has grown into a knowledgeable witness. It has been party to early seductions, it has watched homework being written, it has observed swaddling babies freshly arrived from hospital, it*

*has been surprised in the middle of the night by whispered conferences in the kitchen.....It has provided us not only physical but psychological sanctuary. It has been a guardian of identity.'*<sup>1</sup>

Home is seen as a basic need and, in Ireland, we strive particularly hard to get one of our own.

Our homes not only house us - they also house our things. The anthropologist, Daniel Miller, makes the point that these objects are forms by which people have chosen to express themselves. *'They put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishings and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy; they made the room minimalist or crammed to the gills. These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of that person or household.'*<sup>2</sup>

So we need to remember that it is into this house, into this home, this shrine which holds our past experiences and future hopes, and which embraces and reflects our identity – it is into this that we are asking to delve with our deep retrofits.

Therefore, we must tread carefully...

## 2. IF I WERE YOU I WOULDN'T START FROM HERE...

While the topic of climate change is not a good dinner party conversation starter, whether we like it or not, as the recent Paris negotiations have so clearly demonstrated, climate change is an issue with which we all have to grapple.

However, this is easier said than done.

As Anthony Leiserowitz, Director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication (2012) put it:

*"You almost couldn't design a problem that is a worse fit with our underlying psychology"*

The politics of climate change has to cope with what sociologist, Anthony Giddens, calls *Giddens's Paradox*<sup>3</sup>:

*"Since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late."*

Giddens claims that this paradox affects almost every aspect of current reactions to climate change.

And therein lies the rub. The human mind has evolved to prioritise the present over the future; to worry about the known over the unknown; uncertainty puts us off; we can be unrealistically optimistic; and if something is too hard to take we are quick to slip into apathy or denial.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain de Botton; *The Architecture of Happiness*; Penguin (reprint edition 2014); p. 10

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Miller; *The Comfort of Things*; Polity Press 2009; p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Giddens, A. (2009) *The Politics of Climate Change*: Polity Press: p. 2

Yet, climate change is elusive and intangible. You can't touch, hear or feel it. It is uncertain and unpredictable, and one large step removed from people's day to day lives. Although some of its effects are playing out right now, it is mostly described as being something that will happen in the future. Its impact will be global and many say disastrous. While most scientists agree that it is caused by human activities, a vocal (but diminishing) minority disagree, and other people declare it isn't happening at all – and no-one can predict exactly how it will affect you.

It is now acknowledged that whole societies can slip into collective modes of denial. Without being told what to think, or being punished for knowing the wrong things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged. This is often reflected in mass media coverage of the issue. An entire language of denial can be constructed in order to avoid thinking about the unthinkable.

### 3. WE ARE WHAT WE ARE

We humans are a tricky species. We are not rational - our hearts rule our heads, and emotions trump reason. Mix humans with climate change and you get a perfect storm.....

Most of us dislike sacrifice and we hate losses. Roughly speaking, losing something makes us twice as unhappy as gaining the same thing makes us happy.

The status quo bias ensures that the loss of what we already have looms larger than the gain of an alternative option.

The “yeah whatever” heuristic means we continue what we're doing because of lethargy or lack of attention and so don't bother to make the required change. Sure, aren't we grand the way we are?

We are influenced by sunk costs - the more we invest, financially, emotionally, or socially in something, the less likely we are to give it up.

And the confirmation bias ensures that we screen what is seen and heard in a biased way that ensures our beliefs are 'proven' correct. We accept 'facts' that support our view while rejecting or ignoring information that conflicts with it.

Our actions can be influenced by addictions which give us short term pleasure and make us crave for more. Some of us are addicted to shopping, to gathering stuff, or travelling long distances to climb high mountains. George Bush reckoned we're addicted to oil. Addictions are hard to break.

Much of our day to day life is controlled by Habits – these are routine behaviours carried out almost unconsciously on a regular basis - like driving the car, leaving the lights on, or the tap running while washing our teeth. Habits are hard to break.

We can become habituated to a way of being - we get used to it, take it for granted and then find it hard to give up – and we continue to expect it to be like this, regardless. In the past, room temperatures were cold, we were fine huddling around the one open fire, with, if we were lucky, a storage heater in the hall – now we want to wear our T-shirts in every room.

Most of us are good adapters, although it can take a while for some – we are able to adjust to new information and experiences. We adopt new behaviours that allow us to cope with change. This is a good trait to have when facing future climate related difficulties or crises. However, it is not such a good attribute when it comes to cutting back on energy use. Just as addicts adapt to their drug, when we adapt to pleasurable experiences or things, we often want more.

We like to think that people will leap into action when the chips are down. But we're not so good at responding if no one else does. The bystander effect means that, when people are in a group, responsibility for acting is diffused - if no-one else is doing anything, we convince ourselves that the apparent problem isn't actually a problem.

We are hugely influenced by consumerism and fashion, which tap into base instincts to do with gathering (and hoarding) resources, and then showing them off to the neighbours. We live in a consumer culture, and continuing economic growth seems to require that we shop till we drop. If we waver, relentless advertising and rapidly changing fashion trends will bring us back on track. Within this context, asking people to consume less is a tall order.

Our behaviour around energy is also influenced by new technologies, and the trends that go with them – everyone now has to have their own mobile phone, each one being charged off the grid. We are tempted by large energy guzzling flat screen plasma TVs, and cars that have state of the art air conditioning.

Many of us, especially - dare I say it - women, suffer from some degree of technophobia – we're nervous of new technologies, and may be unwilling to adopt them, even if we know they will improve our quality of life, save money, or save the planet. So we can't presume that people will be interested, engaged or active monitors of smart meters – the screen alone may put them off.

#### 4. KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

How we respond to issues can be heavily influenced by our need to conform both socially and culturally.

We are social beings and have a deep need to belong and to be part of the group, so peer pressure is important to us. We don't want to be marked out as different and risk social ridicule, so keeping up with the Joneses is important and if the Joneses aren't doing anything about their energy use, why would we?

And we try to stick to social and cultural norms. Even though the rules aren't written down we know how we should act – we don't walk around naked or pick our noses in public - and if we break the rules we feel embarrassed, ashamed or guilty. It's a problem if those norms aren't climate or energy friendly, but a plus if they are.

Norms of fairness are important to us and we judge them in a relative way, usually in comparison with our peers or social equals. We don't want to do more than others. And we are even less likely to act if we believe that people are free-riding and benefitting from doing nothing.

Our social status is important to most of us, even though we might not like to admit it. It's an evolutionary trait which refers to the prestige attached to one's position in society, or to a rank held within a certain group.

Social practice is what people do to pursue a goal within certain settings. It is often determined by social norms or status – and can be seen as an outside force which determines what we do. For instance, kids need to be in clean clothes so on with the washing machine. Even if we live nearby, we drive them to school because of the heavy school books in the overweight school bags - we don't want to be seen as 'bad' parents.

## 5. MIND THE GAP

As we know, Ireland has pledged to reduce its household energy demand through energy efficiency measures by 20% by 2020.

Within energy efficiency, the two most important measures are retrofitting buildings so that they use less energy, and changing people's behaviour so that saving energy becomes a normal thing to do.

Ireland has already met half of the country's energy efficiency goal. However, about 75,000 homes and businesses will need to be upgraded every year between now and 2020. As a benchmark, 25,000 Irish homes and businesses availed of energy efficiency grants in 2014<sup>4</sup>.

Irish homes are generally considered to be relatively energy inefficient in comparison to many of our European neighbours, so we have our work cut out for us.....

But a trawl of the academic literature shows that we are not alone in our dilemma. Most western countries, even Germany, also seem to be grappling with what is called the 'energy efficiency gap', whereby people are not investing in upgrades even though, if they do, they will save money in the long run.

Economists and policy makers have mistakenly believed that this is because people don't have the appropriate information or knowledge. However, many studies now show that information *on its own* is not enough. Lack of information may be part of the problem but it's not the solution.

Neither do dire warnings or negative messages work – they can even be counterproductive by pushing people into apathy or denial.

To be blunt, for most people, cutting back on energy use is just not a priority.

This may be because energy has become invisible – gone are the days when we cut the tree, chopped the wood, hauled it into the house and fed the fire. Nowadays, at the flick of a switch, hey presto, on it comes – some appliances even seem to work away on their own.

Also, energy is relatively cheap – for many people it still only accounts for a minor part of their weekly expenditure.

When asked, people will usually say that they can't upgrade because they don't have the money. And Irish people are very reluctant, especially after the economic crash, to take on debt, so most of the upgrades are being carried out by people who have savings.

However, there are many other barriers to action, which include the following:

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<sup>4</sup> Ireland's Energy Targets Progress, Ambition & Impacts; Summary for Policy Makers; SEAI; April 2016; Jim Scheer, Matthew Clancy and Fiac Gaffney; p. 4

- We may be reluctant to invest as we don't know how long we will remain in our home
- We tend to overestimate how much an upgrade would cost, and we underestimate the benefit
- We may not trust what we are told by builders as we think they are just trying to extract more money out of us
- Most of us don't know how much each energy action costs, especially when it comes to heating water
- We may feel that we don't have the time to research the options, make the decisions, and choose the builders
- We are put off by the hassle factor of having builders in the house, and of having to clear the attic
- We worry that insulation will exacerbate damp problems or that the house will become stuffy
- Those of us who live in period homes may be concerned that the work will alter the character of the building
- We may be afraid that if we start retrofitting other, more costly, problems will be uncovered
- Some family members may not be so keen on the idea and any further discussion could involve a row, so is best avoided

## 6. THE WAY FORWARD

So if we are to realise the vision of *“a fully decarbonised built environment that delivers a better quality of life for all”* what can we do?

Firstly, be wary about getting rid of the retrofitting grants. People see the grant as a 'rebate' for 'doing the right thing'. If it is taken away, then that could send out a signal that the government no longer cares. If the demise of the UK Green Deal is anything to go by, people may be even more reluctant to take out a loan or invest in energy efficiency if the state does not appear to be helping.

A whole house retrofit, where windows, walls and all rooms are addressed at the same time, is a big ask. The UK Energy Trust<sup>5</sup> found that neither a grant of 30% or a 'Pay as You Save' option encouraged people to consider one. They now argue that including upgrades alongside other renovation projects on a room-by-room basis is a viable alternative, and one which may be more practical and appealing for householders.

They also recommend that focus should be placed on other key 'trigger points' in the life of the home. For instance, when a house is changing ownership, or when the children are getting bigger, or when they have fled the coop.

To date, a lot of research around retrofitting and energy efficiency has focused on the economic and information-deficit factors and how they influence individual households. However, this seems to be shifting and there is now a growing interest in community energy initiatives.

As we have seen, much of our behaviour is influenced by social norms, social practice, status and peer-to-peer comparison, so it is a logical step to work with people in groups, rather than focusing on individuals. Whether we admit it or not most of us follow the herd. We are influenced by our own

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<sup>5</sup> Trigger points: a Convenient Truth: Promoting energy efficiency in the home; The Energy Saving Trust 2011; p.15

peer group, and are more likely to accept messages and advice from people ‘like us’, from people we trust, particularly from friends, family, and others in our local area.

I am currently researching grassroots community energy groups within Ireland, some of whom are focusing on building retrofits and are beneficiaries of SEAI’s Better Energy Community grants. It is a small but expanding sector. Over the past six months, I have been very impressed by the dedication and tenacity of the people with whom I have met.

However, these organisations cannot emerge and thrive without funding, and practical and technical support, which I know SEAI is trying to address. The task at hand is a difficult one, and the groups that are doing well, like the Energy Communities Tipperary Co-op, are lucky enough to have very supportive help close at hand. Other areas are not so lucky.

Community projects will not thrive if they are expected to operate in a vacuum. Part of the problem with the energy transition is that many people don’t know it’s happening.

So, if there’s a lack of leadership and it seems like government ministers are doing nothing about climate change or energy, if we don’t hear about it in the media, down in the local pub, or the shops, why should we bother doing anything? Why should we jump first?

The early adopters, the risk-takers, have already retrofitted their homes, but the other two thirds of the population are more disconnected and risk averse so they need to realise that it is now time to hop on the bandwagon, otherwise they will be left behind – and no one likes that!

For more people to engage, being energy efficient needs to be seen as something that everyone is doing - the norm, an expected social practice. Rather than wondering whether they will do it, people will then be asking themselves why they aren’t doing it, and hopefully with the right supports they will make the shift.

For this change to happen, there needs to be a national narrative on the energy transition, with retrofit being pushed as one of the tangible things that people can do. Stories need to be told about what is already happening, the flagship projects like the Mansion House and Croke Park, what state bodies are doing, how national and local leaders and people of influence are retrofitting their own homes, how our neighbours are doing it, and how we’re doing it together – the narrative needs to come from top down and bottom up, involving groups like Tidy Towns, Muintir na Tire, the ICA, the churches and the GAA.

Rather than giving people doom and gloom warnings, and too many facts, the message could be something like this:

*The energy transition is happening (norm) – it is the right thing to do (appealing to people’s values) – here’s how you can play your part – and it’s worth it!*

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