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## Schizophrenic Energy Users

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### Abstract

On the basis of qualitative interviews on 'Energibyen Frederikshavn' (Energy City Frederikshavn), the article reveals various rationales underlying modern consumers' often contradictory opinions and attitudes to climate change and energy consumption. It may seem hard to decide whether the interest in sustainable, alternative sources of energy is conditioned by the soaring price of oil or present threats of climate change. And does it really matter what the motivations are as long as behaviour is changed? The article will discuss the energy discourses produced by the people in the participating focus group in the light of three rather different, theoretical positions. And, finally, we will contextualize the findings with respect to risk society and media including political dilemmas in the case of Denmark.

**Keywords:** energy consumers, subject and situation orientation, risk society, media discourses, campaign

### Rationales for energy consumption

In investigating the residents' attitudes to Frederikshavn becoming an 'energy city' and thus entirely supplied by sustainable energy by 2015, we conducted three focus group interviews. We followed the energy project very closely for a period of six months and, besides the focus groups, we arranged a creative workshop with representatives from the 'creative class' of Frederikshavn. On the basis of the interviews, the workshop and close cooperation with the Information Officer of Frederikshavn Municipality, we created an information platform for "sustainable involvement" of the residents in 'Energibyen Frederikshavn'.

Conversations in the focus groups indicated that there are many conflicting and even contradictory opinions involved in energy consumption and the climate debate as such. In the article, we employ three different theories to test and illuminate the participants' different and, to some extent, conflicting statements: The universal culture theory of Mary Douglas', Kenneth Gergen's social constructionist individual theory and Gerhard Schultze's sociological experience theory.

Underlying all consumption is a rationale. British anthropologist Mary Douglas claims that we consume on the basis of fixed convictions and our view of the world. She sees cultural antagonism as a force residing in every choice and all consumption. Our consumption therefore occupies an important position in the lifestyle "showroom" where we present who and what we are.

Douglas operates with four distinct cultures: Isolationists, individualists, hierarchists and enclavists, engaged in a mutual, cultural conflict with each other. The groups have various myths about nature; myths which are based on the group's culture and their life circumstances in general.

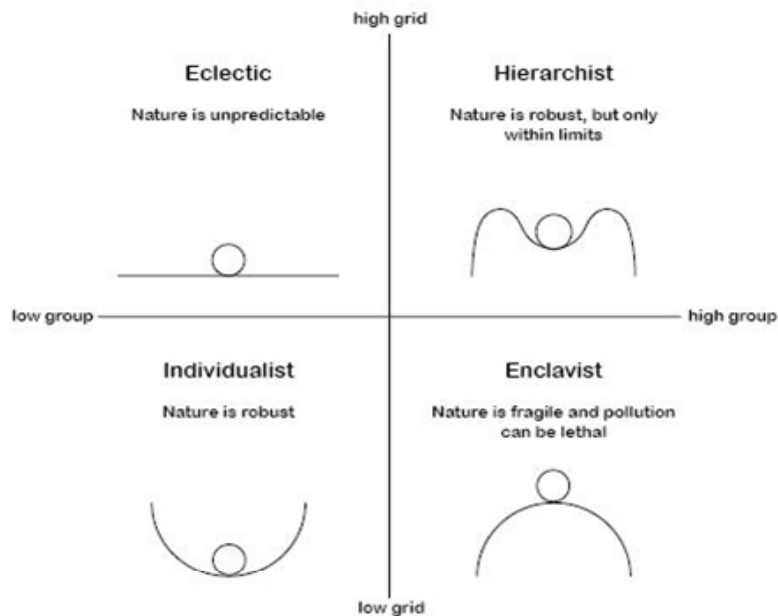


Figure 1

In the investigation of the energy consumption by residents of Frederikshavn and in their reflections on themselves, we identified a series of parallels to Douglas' culture theory. We identified a small group of citizens who cannot accept the overall premise for discussion of the climate and the environment and so there is no way they can empathize with the thought of saving energy from an environmental rationale:

"I don't believe in the CO<sub>2</sub> model. I am a fan of our good friend Lomborg (1). I believe in sunspots or that the sun is periodically more active [...] I don't seriously believe that we humans can release so much CO<sub>2</sub> that it will affect the climate." (Mikael, 25 years)

It is easy to understand the small group of citizens represented by the quotation above within the framework of the individualistic culture in which nature is regarded as robust and not influenced by external forces. Climate and environmental changes are thus not exclusively interpreted as having been caused by humans but are in contrast part of the Earth's natural cycle. Individualists employ this myth about nature to justify the contention that their free lifestyles will not have serious consequences for nature and therefore it is in many ways 'Mission Impossible' to motivate this

group to considerably use energy on the basis of arguments about the vulnerability of nature. It quite simply conflicts with their fundamental assumptions and rationale about the unlimited human exploitation of the natural resources.

The majority of local residents in focus groups may be placed within hierarchical lifestyles. As Douglas puts it, they regard nature as robust within certain limits and feel that nature can resist change so long as it does not involve massive exploitation and destruction. Our question is simply this: Does this group regard past and present use of nature's resources as exaggerated and damaging?

In many ways, the participants were worried about the condition of nature but their readiness to act foundered on the question of "whether it really makes a difference". In their view, Denmark is one of the countries in the world to do most for the environment - an argument used to distance oneself from moral responsibility. This is just one example of the readiness of hierarchists to act given that acting to conserve energy is conditional upon any input not involving great personal or financial costs. The hierarchical lifestyle is characterized by concerns about the financial aspects of energy consumption.

"I also think that we have to be honest about it all and say that to be successful, there needs to be a financial bait or reward, - and for all of us it should be primarily financial." (Jacob, 46 years)

"We bought a car a year ago [...]. Partly because we were interested in a car that was cheaper to drive but we also said that it was reasonable to take the environment and consumption into consideration." (Ole, 67 years)

The fact that the financial rationale weighs more heavily than the environmental appeared widespread in this large group of participants. The last group identified was the enclavists. They contrast sharply with the individualists because they fundamentally regard nature as vulnerable.

"...so I also think about how life will be for our children and grandchildren on this planet. I just think something or other needs to be done." (Camilla, 21 years)

"...I think there is probably something slightly neurotic about what we are doing with our planet." (Lars, 48 years)

Enclavists feel that we should do everything in our power to "save" nature and they have a moral impression that we should all take responsibility, also for our energy usage. Their motivation

for acting in an energy-conscious way is thus anchored in an environmental rationale and their discourse is characterized by emotional and even sentimental utterings about the future of their children and grandchildren.

We found no isolationists in the focus groups, a fact that probably stems from our recruitment procedure. The isolates are people who are at edge with society. They may be outcasts as for example alcoholics and homeless people and we felt from the start that this group might not have the proper resources for involving themselves in sustainable energy consumption. By the end of the project, however, we found that the discourses of this group may be important. We believe that they may have pointed to perspectives unknown to or oppressed by the dominant discourses of the other groups.

### **Chaos pilots**

But are we humans as uncomplicated as the above indicates? In many ways, it is too simple and simplistic to place humans in such universal and antagonistic boxes as suggested in Douglas' structuralistic theory. Our day-to-day lives are influenced by enormous volumes of advertising, offers, news mails and messages, all of which vie for our attention in the hope of influencing our behaviour. So today's consumer should, more than ever, be seen as a chaos pilot in a universe of different 'voices'. As a consequence, the thesis in psychologist Kenneth Gergen's theory is that in reacting to this stream of voices from the outside world, an individual should be regarded as a 'saturated self', providing a social harbour for other people's opinions, values and lifestyles. As the example below shows, ultimately, this harbouring and population of self becomes evidenced in a multiphrenic condition in which the contradictions become the result of the saturated self.

”What is right and what is wrong. Because you are two individuals, two different thought processes and what should you believe in? That is what I think is hard.” (Jacob, 46 years)

As a result of different information of which we are to some extent involuntary consumers, we become uncertain as to what we should put our trust in, just as expressed by Jacob. In this way, Jacob establishes attitudes, meaning and behavioural patterns on the basis of the voices by which he is confronted. Since the voices are by no means stable, unambiguous categorization of the individual, as in Douglas' theory, is pure utopia.

Modern consumers can be influenced; they are changeable, with a behavioural multiplicity that precludes conduct being clearly based on a fully characterized and fixed template. Douglas' structuralistic groupings accordingly serve better as an overview of the cultural types. On this basis,

it should not be taken for granted that consumers act consistently. The rationale for consumption is subject to constant negotiation in a complex universe of possibilities and choices.

### **The split consumer**

The fact that the modern consumer listens to countless internal, divergent voices is confirmed and shaded in many ways by German sociologist Gerhard Schulze's theory of subjective and situational thinking. His thesis is that when human conditions are poor, people tend to think situationally whereas their thinking is typically subjective when conditions are characterized by many options. There is much to indicate that, nowadays, we occupy ourselves with subjective and inner-oriented thinking in which consumption primarily serves to satisfy inner goals and fantasies.

But alongside subject-related thinking, ever more situationally-related groupings are also arising in which consumers' wishes are externally-oriented. We also see more and more "green" movements and NGOs around the world that are fighting for the environment against subject-oriented and materialistic dogmas. In fact, our investigation in Frederikshavn revealed that more and more people wish to restrict consumption and thus prevent the possible catastrophes to which consumption dependency could give rise. However, this acknowledgement would seem to be far removed from any real change in (energy) consumption since as noted above, this involves financial factors. Schulze points to this schism:

"Many consumers are in a state of moral schizophrenia. They continue to mobilize anything in the hope of feeling good, and they feel bad doing so." (Schulze 1997: 55-56)

In contrast to Douglas, Schulze talks of antagonism in one and the same individual. Our investigation substantially confirms that we are currently witnessing a confrontation between situational and subject-related thinking that is being played out in the universe of the voices within which individuals navigate. From this point of view, the modern energy consumer may be seen as schizophrenic, split between various voices and cultures. These consumers allow themselves to be affected and influenced but at the same time they are difficult to determine and predict when it comes to opinions, attitudes and actions.

### **National and personal responsibility**

Concerning personal responsibility, the focus group disagrees to a certain point: The enclavists want to take action themselves whereas the individualists and hierarchists seem to think that their effort matters very little on the grand scale.

“But we are so small (2), we must think about the big countries. I get irritated when we hear that the big countries do not want to join (ed.: the CO2 reductions). Such a discussion irritates me that we are so good in our little country and on the world scene it matters so little.” (Lone 52 years)

”You feel that it is a little wasted when you compare your effort with the big countries.” (Jens 55 years)

The big countries mean mainly USA and China. To a large degree, the Danish participants seem to have misunderstood the CO2 agenda concerning Denmark being such a “good” example: Each Dane releases 10 tons of CO2 each year while a Chinese for example only releases 4 tons.

Some years ago Denmark did have a strong profile concerning pollution and especially sustainable energy. Especially windmill production was supported both politically and economically and this meant that Denmark was a market leader in wind energy. The particular, “good” effort of Denmark concerning sustainable energy is by now a historical phenomenon but the Danes seem to adhere to this as a well functioning myth (Barthes 1972). It is a myth which is not contradicted by the present government or politicians and a lot of people use the myth to criticize other countries and maybe even rationalize that ‘we’ do not have to take action as Danish people because we are so “good”.

According to John Grant (2007), this myth seems to function in the UK as well. This fact may decontextualize the Danish element to some extent. On the basis of large workshops with (very) mainstream British consumers conducted by among others The National Consumer Council it was found that:

“....there was a tendency to shift the blame to others. Why bother when other countries are worse than the UK, they asked? Or, what difference could one individual make?” (Grant 2007: 2002)

When Grant is referring to the workshops and the unwillingness of the participants to make a personal effort, he makes the point that this resistance is a kind of “greenophobia”. We think that the phenomenon of shifting the blame to others or other things is a full grown and well functioning cross-national myth which legitimizes individual or even national passivity (1). Interestingly enough, the British participants are quoted for saying that some countries are “worse” than the UK whereas the Danish participants feel that Denmark is “good” or even “better” than everybody else. This part of the myth seems to be of a more national kind.

### **Risk society and the media**

Today, risk is a social and discursive phenomenon according to Ulrich Beck (2004). Climate change can be seen as an “answer” to industry and excessive consumption in the rich parts of the world, and the risks of industrial production today are more ‘invisible’ and difficult to understand than ever before. The risks of CO2 have been debated for some years as we saw it in Mikael’s mentioning of Björn Lomborg in the beginning of the article. As a matter of fact, we cannot judge for ourselves what is right and what is wrong in the mediated debate and discourses about climate change. Thomas expresses his frustration about not being “a professor”:

“I am not a professor and I am not qualified to estimate whether one or the other is right or wrong .”  
(Thomas 29 years)

One may say that we have become “incompetent” concerning the risks and their consequences for our lives (Beck 2004: 71) and we depend heavily on information from experts and media.

“The media bring it up – things that you have never thought about yourself. Dialogue comes up with different angels.” (Peter 59 years)

The many different perspectives and angles can be seen as a result of information overload produced by the highly competitive media industries which target their audiences by means of a conflict perspective where you have to confront two opposite views on a matter. For quite a lot of people, the result is confusion and frustration as we saw it earlier in Jacob’s uttering about being two persons and two discourses at one time.

Lars and Line believe that the media push too much information their way. It is involuntary information overload and the consequence may be that they feel powerless and “tied on hands and feet” as Lars expresses it:

“If you were to relate to all of the information being pushed through your door then you would be totally tied on hands and feet”. (Lars 48 years)

“Well it is really topical (ed.: climate change), so you will be confronted with it all the time whether you want or no “. (Line 34 years)



In Gergen's terms, you may say that the many different voices and discourses presented by the media are becoming part of the individual self as an involuntary recipient. The discourses of risk seem not only to be socially constructed but targeted as a conflicting matter and almost forced upon the media receivers who may in their turn become powerless and passive.

### **Concluding remarks**

Working with 'Energibyten Frederikshavn' has revealed a lot of voices by means of the focus group method. This method is especially good at assessing social discourse which has been our interest in the project of creating 'sustainable involvement' for the citizens of Frederikshavn. During the group discussions, we have witnessed that the participating people declare that they are worried, insecure, ambiguous and often unwilling recipients of conflicting media messages. This goes especially for the younger participants who are influenced both by the many mediated voices and by the other participants in the focus groups. In this respect, the focus group method was the perfect choice of method for the purpose of research.

We found that Mary Douglas' structuralistic and universal cultural theory was illuminating with respect to some of the problems in the focus group discourses but it has also become clear that most of the participants hold several opinions and conflicting meanings as individuals – not as antagonistic cultural groups. We have used the term 'skizofrenic' which is not a diagnosis of illness but of multifrenic postmodern risk communication.

We concluded our project with some recommendations for 'Energibyten Frederikshavn' suggesting that the citizens should be directly involved in the process of transforming the city into an energy city. Taking into consideration the necessary 'economic bait' for participation and involvement and the harsh resistance of the few but strong individualists, we decided to target the individualists and the hierarchists leaving the enclavists behind.

We think that the enclavists will understand and follow the sustainable energy campaign under all circumstances whereas the individualists will tend to be strong opinion leaders in their own networks as they are often business people and entrepreneurs. The campaign must target this strong and influential group and at the same time involve the hierarchists by means of economical as well as environmental arguments. We decided not to use emotional symbols and language which we found prominent in the discourses of the enclavists. Rhetorically, the campaign will concentrate on ethos and logos appeals and we suggest that the economic 'bait' should be the branding of Frederikshavn as an energy city.

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### **Notes**

- 1) The Bjørn Lomborg discourse has been very dominant in Denmark as he is of Danish nationality. His arguments have been supported by the Danish prime minister and parts of government until a couple of years ago which may be another reason for national passivity during the last years. This passivity is even more interesting as Denmark is going to host the next global climate conference in 2009. As Denmark is preparing for the conference we do see some new initiatives from the government.
- 2) The population of Denmark is around 5 million people.

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