Multifrenic Climate Discourses

Rasmussen, Tove Arendt; Andersen, Maria Wael; Halgaard Nielsen, Marie

Paper for Sunrise Conference, RUC 20 – 22 April 2010
"Multifrenic Climate Discourses"

Authors:
Tove Arendt Rasmussen, Associate Professor, Ph.d., Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Maria Wael & Marie Halgaard Nielsen, MA's in Communication
Mail Contact: tover@hum.aau.dk

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. The paper 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.

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

Introduction
In investigating the residents' attitudes to Frederikshavn becoming an "energy city" and thus entirely supplied by sustainable energy by 2015, we followed the energy project very closely for a period of six months and besides three 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 "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.

A large amount of international research within the fields of political, sustainable, ecological, ethical, environmental, moral, fair, responsible and social consumption has been published. The majority of research within the area is psychologically oriented and many sources are based on theory about decision making hierarchies such as Ajezen & Fishbein (for a critical approach, see Caruna 2007:291). A series of results particularly related to the consumer's motivations for acting on the basis of values have been obtained within this tradition (Shaw 2003, Antil 1984, Fraj 2006 (a), Fraj 2006(b), Freestone 2008, Beckmann et al. 2001). This research is mainly functionalistic (Andersen 2005) and focuses especially on the individual consumer and her cognitive capacity to make informed decisions on the market. The goal is often directed towards planning or improving communication efforts on the market. Technical and management oriented research is - like the functionalistic market research - very comprehensive and there are periodicals such as *Journal of Environmental management* and *Global Environmental Change* within the area.

Humanistic and to some degree also interdisciplinary research are based on theory on the everyday (Halkier 1999), sociological (Caruana 2007), symbolical (Campbell 1987) and discoursive (Philips ????, Lassen ????, Carvalho 2008) character of consumption. All in all, the area as such is dominated by functionalistic, quantitative research which may explain the decision making processes and the technical aspects of the value based consumption while other aspects such as the multiple ambivalent, complex and situational consumption situations and the emotionally loaded and symbolical experience-oriented consumption is understood through qualitative case studies of the consumers' discourses and practices. (Halkier 1999, Connolly 2008, Young et al. 2009).

The impact of media on value-based consumption is often seen in relation to news and the ways in which the environment and climate appear as news in newspapers and on TV (Petersen 2007, Hansen 2010, Carvalho 2007), just as the theory about the risk-society recognizes the

importance of the information flow on the individual's experience of invisible and immediate dangers to the environment or climate (Beck 1997). In addition to the mentioned functionalistic studies of the consumers' motivations in value-based consumption, market research has also lately been occupied with a more overall strategic implementation of environmental and sustainable market communication (Grant 2007, Laljani 2009). In this connection, it is also worth mentioning the strong attention to the phenomenon *green-wash*, which is about companies branding themselves and their products as "green" (Grant 2007:9).

Rationales for Energy consumption

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.
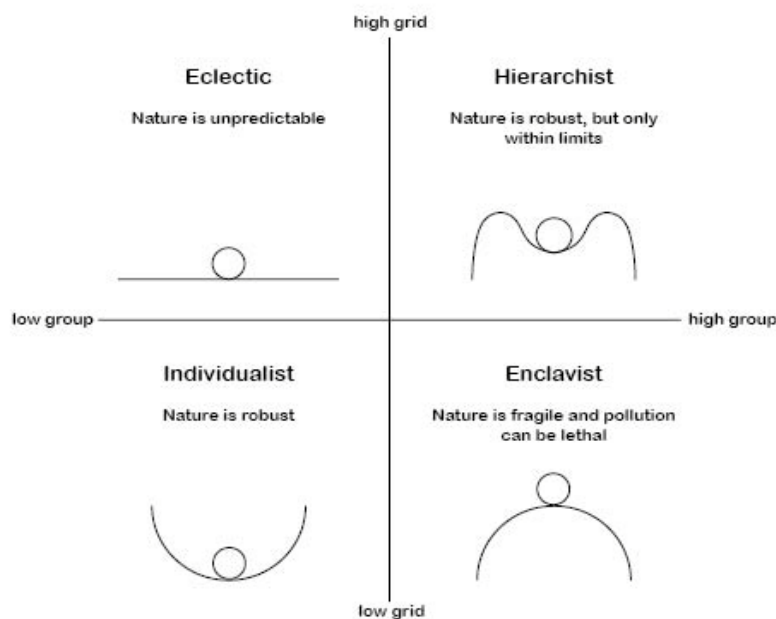

Figure 1 Myths of Nature (Douglas 1996, 88)

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_2 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_2 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 take action against climate change 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.

As such, the individualists are culturally "determined" to be critical and sceptical towards the whole idea of climate change. They will keep on disputing the majority of scientific facts as long as possible and by doing this they construct both personal identity and cultural bonds. They may even become some sort of new environmental "rebels" as parts of the old green NGO's oppositional ideologies become main stream. Giddens (2009) touches upon the same problem but he draws another political conclusion, namely that the traditional red-green alliances should be abandoned because coping with climate change moves beyond political ideology.

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.

"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)

In many ways, the participants were worried about the condition of nature and environment but their readiness to act is foundered on the question of the financial aspects of energy consumption. The fact that the financial rationale weighs more heavily than the environmental appear widespread in this group of participants. 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 financial or personal costs. The unwillingness to bring about personal action here and now may also be explained by the so called *Giddens Paradox* which states "…that 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 noting of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to action will, by definition be too late" (Giddens 2009:2).

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 compete 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 the 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 of all this? 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, may be regarded as 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 may serve best as a grouping of cultural discourses. 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 schizophrenic 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, which fight for the environment against subject-oriented and materialistic dogmas. In fact, our investigation in Frederikshavn revealed that people "wish in their heart" to restrict consumption and thus prevent the possible catastrophes to which consumption dependency could give rise. However, this whish would seem to be far removed from any real change in (energy) consumption since as noted above, this involves financial factors and personal engagement. 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 enclavist discourse expresses a wish to take action personally whereas the individualist and hierarchiest discourses claim 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 CO_2 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 CO_2 agenda concerning Denmark being such a "good" example: Each Dane releases 10 tons of CO_2 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 an early market leader in wind energy. The particular "good" effort of Denmark concerning sustainable energy is by now more 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 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 "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 in the name of "objectivity" have to confront two opposite views on a matter (Diriks and Gelders 2008, Hansen 2010). 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 Kenneth 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 'Energibyen 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 greatly 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 "schizophrenic" which is not a diagnosis of illness but of multifrenic postmodern risk communication in line with the thoughts of Kenneth Gergen and Gerhard Schulze.

We concluded our project with some recommendations for 'Energibyen Frederikshavn' suggesting that they should take into consideration both the necessary 'economic bait' for involvement on the part of the hierarkists and the harsh resistance of the few but socially important individualists. Accordingly 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 entrepreneurs and business people. The campaign must target this strong and influential group and at the same time involve the hiearchists by means of economical as well as environmental discourses. We decided not to use emotional symbols and language which we found mostly prominent in the discourses of the enclavists. Rhetorically, the campaign will concentrate on ethos and logos appeals and we suggest that the economic "bait" and common denominator should be on the branding of Frederikshavn as an energy city.

Notes

1) The "Bjørn Lomborg discourse" has been very prominent 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.

2) The population of Denmark is around 5 million people.

Literature

Barthes, Roland. 1972.*Mythologies*. Hill & Wang Publishers.

Beck, Ulrich. 2004. *Risk Society, Towards a new Modernity*. Sage Publications.

Carvalho, Anabela (2008): Communication Climate Change – Discourses, Mediations and Perceptions, Publisher: Centro de Estudos de Communicacao e Sociedade, Universidade do Minho, E-book available from: http://www.lasics.uminho.pt/ojs/index.php/cilmate-change.

Diriks, Astrid and Dane Gelders (2008): "Newspaper on global warming –different approaches in the US and the EU" in *Communication Climate Change*, ed. Anabela Carvalho.

Douglas, Mary. 1996.*Thought Styles*. 1996. Sage Publications.

Gergen, Kenneth J.. 2006. The Saturated Self – Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life. Psychological Press.

Gergen, Kenneth J.. 2005. 2nd Edition. Realities and Relationships. Soundings in Social Construction. Psychological Press.

Giddens, Anthony (2009): *The Politics of Climate Change*, Polity Press.

Grant, John. 2007. *The Green Marketing Manifesto*. John Wiley & Sons.

Halgaard, Marie and Maria Wael. 2008. *Sustainable Involvement*. Masters Thesis, Aalborg University 2008 (www.skabdig.com).

Hansen. Anders (2010): *Environment, Media and Communication*, Routledge.

Schulze, Gerhard. 1997. From Situations to Subjects: Moral Discourse in Transition. In Pekka Sulkunen et. al. (ed). *Constructing the New Consumer Society*. St. Martin's Press.