

FIXED OR FLEXIBLE? HOUSEHOLD COORDINATION, EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES AND THE TIMING OF ENERGY DEMAND

Key points

- Coordinating activities in households involves the use of interrelated tools, ongoing improvisations, and negotiated understandings of which practices are fixed in time and location and which are more flexible.
- Practices such as shift working, childcare shared over multiple households and long-term disability management create patterns of fixity and flexibility in household activities that are not attributable to household demographics alone.
- Due to the interconnection of household practices, taking advantage of flexibility in one practice can have significant consequences for many others.
- Recognising variations in the fixity and flexibility of household coordination is important for designing effective energy demand interventions.

Introduction

How and when different practices are carried out in households matters for patterns of energy demand.¹ But too often differences between households are attributed to the demographics of occupants – their number, age, or socio-economic status – rather than to variations in the sets of practices in which people engage. This research focused on how households coordinate the timing and sequencing (what is done in what order) of everyday activities involving members of the household within and beyond the home. We were especially interested in understanding which activities are more fixed in time and/or in space, how household members coordinate day-to-day activities, and how these arrangements change. This research has implications for how household differences and the potential for change are thought about in the development of, for example, new heating technologies or control systems.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 households in an urban setting in England. Activity categories commonly recorded in Time Use Surveys were used to prompt a discussion about how sequences of practices vary and shift on weekdays (with a particular focus on the early evening period), and how households coordinate and manage such changes.



Questions

- Which everyday activities do members of the household identify as more fixed in timing and location?
- How do practices interact to affect varied patterns of fixity and flexibility in households?
- What methods are used to coordinate, adapt and fit in activities from day to day, and how do these vary?

Findings

Coordinating household practices involved a great number of tools and techniques – from calendars (analog or digital) and lists (paper or mental) to digital reminders, menu planners and text messages. While there was considerable variation in how frequently and rigidly households worked with such tools, they were valuable even to those who were very happy to identify as ‘not very organised’ or ‘quite spontaneous’. Equally, people with quite elaborate coordination practices, such as detailed meal planning and multiple shared calendars, admitted to improvising during weekday evenings.

Many participants identified work, evening leisure classes, and caring for children as practices that were particularly fixed in time and/or space. These fixed arrangements did not always follow a simple routine and could cut across weekdays and weekends. Households with shift work, multiple jobs, and blended families noted particular complexities, especially when work-free or child-free days did not align between different members of the household.

Another form of fixity related to the types of work or leisure practices undertaken. Households in which participants had to manage and adapt to long-term disabilities spoke about how this shaped what was possible – particularly in terms of available types and patterns of working, and needing the

flexibility to change plans suddenly if required. This shows that some households become 'fixed' in patterns that are themselves predicated upon the importance of being able to improvise and be flexible when needed.

Across the data, what is clear is that moving one practice in time or space has consequences for many other practices within a household. In particular, where sequences have been carefully coordinated, any change can cause significant disruption. Participants often spoke of the value of coordination and support beyond the household – from friends or family – enabling them to adapt to surprises and disruptions.

My work schedule is literally completely different from one week to the next, there is no regularity around when I'm working or where. That's the biggest challenge ... we're really lucky in that [my partner] ... can work around me more. (Louis)

[My son's] disability [autism] is something that takes a degree of organising and demands a huge degree of flexibility, in that I've got to drop everything at times, which is why I do the job I do. (Camille)

This work demonstrates the importance of thinking about households as not only collections of individuals but also as collections of practices. Practices such as shift working, shared childcare between blended families, and adaption in relation to long-term disabilities, shape how other household practices interrelate to form patterns of fixity and flexibility, regardless of the number or age of occupants.

Implications

The potential for change in households varies considerably and, as a result, 'manageable' change for one household might be 'unmanageable' for another. Given this variation, 'one size fits all' technologies and interventions are likely to have inconsistent and unforeseen outcomes. Multiple, varied strategies for intervening in household demand will be needed, with variations between households also reflected in model and scenario development.

These results help explain why significant life transitions such as cohabitation, moving house, having children, and changing jobs might be important moments for intervention. As well as involving changes in patterns of energy use, these are moments when methods of household coordination and management are likely to be in flux. There might be greater scope for modifying the timing of what people do, and of the energy demands that follow, when major reconfigurations of household practices are already underway.

Significance

These findings show that households are already routinely working around the fixities and flexibilities of their practices. Interventions to manage energy demand will therefore be encountering already nuanced and varied methods of household coordination. If, for example, new heating controllers are not easily adaptable to the changing fixities of irregular shift-working, then they may fail to fit in with these households' practices. Interventions such as smart meters and time of use tariffs, which seek to engage households in new forms of coordination and adaptation will need to find a place alongside existing calendars, lists and improvisations. They would also have knock-on effects for other aspects of daily life since the flexibility of one practice in time or space is always conditional upon the reconfiguration of others. How such interventions compete, or collaborate, with existing practices of household coordination is therefore important.

¹ DEMAND research insight No. 1 WHAT MAKES PEAK ELECTRICITY DEMAND? INSIGHTS FROM TIME USE ANALYSIS



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Further reading: www.demand.ac.uk

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