Teenage consumption of cleanliness: how to make it sustainable?

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One third of all water and energy in Denmark, and in many other developed countries, is consumed directly in households. A significant part of this usage is related to cleanliness practices that are steadily changing toward more frequent showers and clothes washing. These trends will inevitably lead to still greater water and energy consumption. This article analyzes a set of in-depth interviews with teenagers and their parents to shed light on the cultural and social processes that shape cleanliness practices in the transition from child to adult. The conceptual perspective of this work is primarily predicated upon consumer theory that encompass modern and late modern consumption, conspicuous and ordinary consumption, and risk handling and hedonism in everyday life. Analysis shows that cleanliness practices are handed down from parents to children and also are subject to strong peer-group influence. Furthermore, the practices may involve considerations about risk handling in everyday life related to health issues. However, broader notions of sustainability are seldom reflected. The conclusion relates these insights to several policy questions.

KEYWORDS: energy consumption, water use, cleaning behavior, hygiene, adolescents, social values, public policy, risk factors

Introduction

High and continuously rising energy consumption jeopardizes the global climate; furthermore, drinking water is scarce in a growing number of localities. The household components of water and energy consumption are of a recognizable size. For instance, in Denmark households directly constitute one third of total energy and water consumption and practices of cleanliness are an important part of this resource-utilization pattern (Bechmann, 1996; Danish Energy Authority, 2003). Laundering accounts for an average of 10% of the electricity consumption in Danish households (Gram-Hanssen et al. 2004) and showering represents an estimated 20% of total household heat consumption and 30% of total water consumption (Gram-Hanssen, 2003). There are thus sound quantitative arguments to focus on practices of cleanliness from an environmental perspective. Throughout the years, public authorities and utility companies have regularly embarked upon campaigns to inform people about how to conserve water and energy, for instance, by filling the washing machine before starting it and by taking shorter showers. However, research convincingly indicates that despite these programs, the frequency of showering and laundering has risen during the last couple of decades (Shove, 2003). The aim of this article is to develop an understanding of the cultural and social dynamics behind these cleanliness practices.

As I am not the first person to be interested in the cultural aspects of cleanliness practices, the following discussion provides a brief review of relevant research—a body of work that can be divided into two separate, but overlapping, parts. First, there is the cultural approach put forward by anthropologists and ethnologists with Kaufman’s (1998) work on couples serving as a prominent example. Kaufman uses household handling of laundry as a way to explain relations and dynamics between men and women when forming a couple and he points to the strong role that women occupy as guardians of the laundry. A Norwegian study by Klepp (2006) takes a cultural-historical approach in understanding laundering and explaining why today’s women launder. Neves’ (2004) research in Brazil explores the cultural norms of how to launder and states that the pride connected with this task is not easily changed by the introduction of new washing products or artifacts.

The second approach includes a stronger emphasis on how technologies and culture codevelop in forming new practices. With a focus on how new technologies and infrastructures entered homes during the last century, Cowan (1983) describes the irony that while these appliances were once thought of as lightening women’s work, in the end they created “more work for mother” (Cowan, 1983). Whereas Cowan takes a feminist approach to the rising standard of household expectations, Elizabeth Shove (2003) uses an environmental lens to examine
the same issue. Shove describes how, together with the introduction of new appliances in households, the norms of what is clean, convenient, or comfortable change, and the continuously rising level of these standards are the real challenges for sustainable development. Other researchers have also stressed that the structural aspects of practices related to cleanliness are more relevant than focusing on individual behavior, as is done in many policy areas (e.g., campaigns to save water). With the focus on showering, scholars have shown how new technologies, new images of the body, and new understandings of the rush of everyday life all support contemporary showering practices (Southerton et al. 2004).

This article follows the outline of these cultural and sociotechnical understandings of cleanliness with a specific focus on teenagers. There are at least two different reasons for concentrating especially on teenagers and their cleanliness practices. The first motivation stems from quantitative analysis suggesting that teenagers account for a significantly larger share of household electricity and water consumption than do adults (Petersen & Gram-Hanssen, 2005). The somewhat separable qualitative rationale is that by directing attention toward teenagers we are able to study how practices evolve over time and thus develop insight regarding the factors responsible for these changes. The teenagers who were interviewed for this study were at the transition between childhood and adulthood and their descriptions of how and why they change cleanliness practices can be useful in helping to reveal how norms of cleanliness are culturally and socially sustained and transferred.

The subsequent discussion first introduces the theoretical framework. The analysis and results section interprets the interviews under different headlines, each with its own question, such as: To what extent and how are the norms of cleanliness passed on from parents to children? To what extent and how does the peer group of teenagers take part in transferring the norms? And what types of reflective approaches to laundering and showering can be found in established practices? Finally, the conclusion takes stock of the various insights generated in the foregoing analysis and briefly relates these findings to policy efforts to make teenage consumption of cleanliness more sustainable.

**Theoretical Framework**

As described above, previous studies of cleanliness have primarily been based on cultural or sociotechnical perspectives. This article focuses on consumer theory, which can include both cultural and sociotechnical approaches and provide insight regarding how the norms of consumer practices are being transferred to the next generation. A short introduction of the relevant theories follows.

One of the main questions within consumer theory has been whether modern or late modern understandings give the most adequate descriptions of consumer practices (see, e.g., Featherstone, 1991; Gronow & Warde, 2001). This discussion relates to whether habits and consumer choices should be interpreted as social class markers handed down from parents to children in modern society as described by Bourdieu (1984) or as the way individuals construct their biographies as group identities fade away in late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). Among teenagers the question of modern versus late modern understandings may be even more relevant as we face a group of consumers at a life stage when they are torn between the norms of their parents and the construction of their own identities in close relation to peer groups.

However, following the discussion of modern and late modern theories, scholars have argued that these approaches are too strongly oriented toward conspicuous and extraordinary forms of consumption (and their social symbols) while the vast majority of consumption is actually mundane and based on routine (Gronow & Warde, 2001). Especially with respect to the subject of cleanliness, it could be argued that daily habits of showering and changing clothes are far removed from the realm of visibility and status that consumption theory tends to consider and work on routines is likely to be more appropriate. Most of the research on cleanliness that has been conducted from a sociotechnical standpoint has been within the purview of this approach (e.g., Shove, 2003).

Following the late modern theories of especially the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, other questions that might be relevant for cleanliness habits are reflexivity and risk handling in everyday life. Bente Halkier (2001a; 2001b) has worked on how contemporary consumers manage risks related to food within the context of their shopping practices and has described the ambivalence that characterizes these activities. This ambiguity is manifest in how to handle, on one hand, consumer information relating to

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1 These estimates of household energy and water consumption are based on statistical analysis of register data from 50,000 households. Household usage is strongly correlated with the type of housing and the number of household members; however, the age of the residents is not unimportant. In a model designed to include basic consumption for each type of housing and additional consumption per household member, the presence of a teenager is estimated to entail 10% higher levels of energy and water consumption than an adult.
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healthy and unhealthy food as well as on the incorporation of environmental considerations into shopping praxis (i.e., buy seasonal, organic and local food) and, on the other hand, the families’ desires for tasty food. A similar strategy might be relevant with respect to studies of cleanliness. In the 20th century health has been viewed as dependent upon a high level of personal hygiene, while in late modernity the connection between cleanliness and health may be less distinct due to concerns about both real and potential allergic reactions to cleaning products and the relationship between resource consumption and concern for the environment.

The last theoretical perspective that merits discussion here is the less frequently invoked work of Colin Campbell (1987) on hedonism and consumption. Campbell sought to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of dreams and images in the consumption process and he distinguishes between traditional hedonism (which is directed toward the satisfaction of needs) and modern hedonism (which is about pleasure). While traditional hedonism depends on physical consumption, modern hedonism can be related to dreams and fantasies as well as to products. When modern hedonism often leads to more physical consumption in spite of this predisposition, it is because pleasure, as opposed to needs, is in principle insatiable. One can dream of having or doing new things; however, actually having them does not necessarily give any satisfaction and new consumption dreams will inevitably arise and thus leading to an infinite spiral.

Methods

This study comprised qualitative interviews with nine teenagers (six boys and three girls) between 13 and 15 years of age together with their parents. Respondents were drawn from households with different socio-economic characteristics and varying levels of energy and water consumption. The selection process for the interviews included a survey instrument that was distributed to pupils of relevant age in two schools situated in two neighborhoods that varied in housing type and socio-economic background. A competition was organized and a reward was offered to the class that returned the largest number of questionnaires, motivating the pupils to ask their parents about household energy and water consumption and to return the requested information. The surveys also collected data on the income and education levels of household members. Respondents were additionally asked to indicate if they would agree to be interviewed. The questionnaire’s main objective was to select interviewees with wide variation in the selected parameters. The interviews lasted one to two hours, were conducted using a semi-structured format, recorded, and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Specific questions centered on the use and size of the house, showering habits, patterns of clothes washing, and attitudes toward consumption and environment.2

The strength of qualitative interviews is that it is possible to derive in-depth information about social practices and the meanings that respondents attach to them. Respondents are furthermore able to compose responses in their own language and to express what they think and feel about the subject in question. The interviews can be variously interpreted in terms of the level at which the interviewees talk, the way they communicate, and the manner in which they convey interpretations of abstract concepts (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Kvale, 1996). The weakness of qualitative interviews as a research methodology stems from the fact that a limited number of persons can reasonably be interviewed if the intent is to generate in-depth analysis. This downside also means that the teenagers interviewed for this study are by no means representative of all teenagers in Denmark. The variation in the selection procedure is only to ensure the assembly of as many different views as possible. Nonetheless, a relatively small number of well-executed interviews can be more valuable than a large quantitative database or an extensive number of more superficially conducted interviews because of the richness of the details and descriptions.

Analysis and Results

In the following paragraphs, the general norms and practices of cleanliness are presented and the variations described as they appeared in the interviews. The responses of the participants are subsequently interpreted from more theoretical angles in order to focus on the ways in which norms are passed from parents to children, the role of peer groups in influencing behavior, the importance of reflections on risk and environment, and the significance of pleasure in understanding how cleanliness practices become established.

Norms and Variations on the Habits of Cleanliness

The interviews disclosed norms that, on one hand, tended to be very general in the sense that they were not topics for overt discussion and all of the respondents seemed to subscribe to the same set of practices. On the other hand, there was considerable variation in respondents’ habits of showering and

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2 The same interviews also had a section on the use of information and communication technologies. This part of the study is reported in Gram-Hanssen (2005).
clothes laundering. The broader norms are strongly connected with questions of sweat and odor. Regardless of how often the teenagers and their parents showered, the strongest rationale for their customary routines derived from a desire to avoid smelling of sweat. Furthermore, the norm for changing clothes—one that suggests that it is necessary on a daily basis to put on a new pair of underwear, fresh socks, and a clean tee shirt—is based on concerns about the odor of perspiration. Another general feature that came out of the interviews is that none of the teenagers is familiar with the practice of washing oneself at a sink with a flannel washcloth. While the parents know about this cleanliness procedure (but do not use it anymore), this habit seems to belong to the grandparents’ generation.

Identifying general norms for cleanliness in the interviewed families was relatively straightforward, while finding differences was similarly unproblematic. Some families, and especially the mothers, were very focused on cleanliness and showered at least once a day and changed their clothes completely every day. All clothes and towels were washed after each use and bed linen was typically laundered once a week. These households washed five full loads of clothes per person each week. This amount of activity meant that the washing machine ran more than twice every day, and typically the mother spent quite a lot of time on the laundry. However, as one of these mothers remarked, “we have to wash all the laundry.” The habit of washing all articles of clothing after a single use was not up for discussion, even though some might view the allocation of such a considerable amount of effort as a problem.

Another family represented the opposite end of the cleanliness scale, or at least the mother’s view of cleanliness could be interpreted in such terms. In this family, the mother only showered two or three times a week because she believed greater frequency was unhealthy for her skin. Her teenage son showered every other day, though the husband, as the mother explained, was “extremely cleanly,” showering every morning. A year ago the son also started to express it, was “extremely cleanly,” showering every morning. A year ago the son also started to shower daily, but his mother advised him that if he had to shower that often, he would have to take shorter showers as long daily showers were a waste of water. In this family, trousers, shirts, and other clothing were worn several times before being washed, and towels and bed linen were used for up to three weeks before being washed.

From the interviews it was learned that in general parents controlled the shower and bathing habits of their children up to school age, and in these early childhood years one bath/shower a day was often the norm. This period was followed by a stage when the child was expected to take care of his/her own cleanliness and under such circumstances it was not unusual for a child to shower once or twice a week. Parents would, however, comment on this situation and instruct the child to shower more often. After this period followed a subsequent phase when most teenagers were themselves very concerned about showering frequently and these practices were typically carried out independently of parental opinion.

The interviews also revealed that sports activities entailed a higher order of personal cleanliness. Many of the teenagers that were active in sports showered twice a day several days a week and a number of them left all of their sports clothes to be washed after each use (including the towel). Furthermore, laziness seems to have the paradoxical effect of generating laundry. Several parents described that their teenagers sometimes deposited clothing in the laundry simply because it was easier than folding the item and returning it to storage in a dresser drawer or closet. If clothes had left the wardrobe, the only way back was through the washing machine, even when the clothes had not been worn or had come out along with another article or because the teenager was considering whether to wear them.

This introduction to the cleanliness habits of teenagers and their families has been principally descriptive and nothing has yet been said about the reasons for why they act as they do. The following discussion takes a more theoretical approach and outlines how and why the teenagers’ cleanliness practices have developed into their current form.

**Habitus as a Way of Understanding How Habits Are Passed Down**

How and to what extent are habits of cleanliness passed down from parents to children? This question can be approached both in terms of the relationship that exists between the interviewed parents and their teenage children and in the way the parents related to their own childhood and cleanliness practices. A particularly useful way to understand how parents influence their children is through Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus.

Habitus provides a way of ascertaining how children throughout their childhood are influenced by their parents’ way of acting and thinking. This process of generational transmission occurs not necessarily because children are told how to act or think, but often transpires much more indirectly as they learn what is appropriate to do in all the various fields in which humans act. The concept of habitus thus includes how human beings assimilate the structures of the field they are in; in this way habitus becomes a practical sense, an acquired system of preferences of how the world should be perceived and divided. Because habitus is built into the body, so to
speak, during childhood, the relation between agents and the social world comes to be based on precons-
cious and preverbal agreement. One does not neces-
sarily know why he or she behaves and thinks in a
particular way; it is just done because it seems nor-
mal and natural. However, people raised in other so-
cial environments may have learned other ways of
behaving. According to Bourdieu, the constitution of
habitus is closely related to the social space of child-
hood and hence to the cultural and economic capital
of one’s parents. Habitus thus becomes a way of ex-
pressing and sustaining social status in society.

The question then becomes to what extent the
interviewed families and their cleanliness practices
can be analyzed within this sort of framework. This
research project included families in which the moth-
ers were very concerned about cleanliness. When
their children described their habits of cleanliness,
they seemed to reflect very little on what they did and
how they did it. At the same time, these children had
strong verbal reactions to habits that were less fo-
cused on cleanliness than their own. In combination,
these findings suggest that, on one hand, the teen-
agers reflected very little on their habits. On the other
hand, they seemed to focus a great deal of attention
on whether what they did was appropriate. However,
in the family where the mother devoted less attention
to cleanliness than most of the others, the teenage
boy had reflected on his habits and other ways of
acting. The reason for this situation may reside in the
apparent fact that this young man encountered a con-
lict between his mother’s norms and those of his
friends. One way of solving this tension was for him
to change clothes so that he never wore the same
clothes two days in a row. However, he did not put
the clothes in the laundry, but rather folded them and
wore them again some days later. When the teenagers
in some of the other respondent households were
asked why they maintained specific practices, their
answer was that they had decided this for themselves.
However, the parents stated that if the cleanliness
practices of their teenage children were not consistent
with their own norms, they would interfere.

The parents themselves seemed to evince greater
awareness that some of their cleanliness practices
dated back to childhood and that they just could not
overturn these modes of behavior. A single father,
living with his son, was the strongest example of this
predisposition. Several times during the interview he
explained that he grew up in a rural area in a poor
part of Denmark and that his family was among the
community’s poorest. The family had few posses-
sions, so he learned to save. This habitus still fol-
lowed him and one of the ways in which it showed
was related to cleanliness in his bathroom. He de-
scribed how there was no holder for the showerhead
that was mounted on the wall. He further explained
that this was a very effective way to impress upon
both his son and a residential boarder to take short
showers.

Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus is strongly
connected with social class in society. Our habitus
depends on the cultural and economic capital of our
parents and thus becomes a way of expressing and
sustaining social status. The higher social classes be-
have in a different way than the lower classes. If one
has not learned this behavior during childhood, it is
difficult as an adult to move up in social rank even
when one possesses a high level of education or earns
a great deal of money. The question then becomes
whether this understanding of habitus as part of a
class society is relevant for cleanliness. Historically,
there is no doubt that this has been the case. Jonas
Frykman has studied the hygiene practices of both
Swedish bourgeoisie and peasants at the beginning of
the last century, and even though he does not use the
notion of habitus, it is clear that there were stark dif-
fferences in the cleanliness habits of people belonging
to the two social classes (Frykman & Löfgren, 1979).
During the interviews that were part of the current
study, however, there were few indications that dif-
fences in the levels of cleanliness were related to
social class. The single father discussed above had a
very poor childhood and this experience was a part of
his habitus. He was now employed as a factory
worker and could be regarded as occupying a posi-
tion in the “middle range” with regard to cleanliness.
Though, as described, he was very keen on saving
water, this sensibility did not affect the frequency of
his laundering and showering. Furthermore, none of
the respondents in this study used expressions to in-
dicate that cleanliness might be a way of distancing
him/herself from lower social classes. Cleanliness
may be a way of showing that one is within the range
of normality, but no longer is a way of demonstrating
social superiority. And, this should not be surprising,
as nearly all people in Denmark today have bath-
rooms and most households have washing machines.
Consequently cleanliness no longer provides a way
for the higher social classes to distinguish themselves
as was the case when bathrooms were rare and
clothes were washed manually.

Lifestyle and Peer Groups as Explanations

It is reasonably clear that teenagers are influ-
enced by their parents in their cleaning habits. How-
ever, adolescent cleanliness practices are perhaps
even more powerfully shaped by the routines of their
friends and schoolmates as well as the opinions con-
veyed by wider social networks. The logic of
Bourdieu’s notion of habitus might thus be trans-
ferred from the relation of the status group of the par-
ents to the teenagers’ own peer groups, and here the distinction might relate more to the interpretation of maturity versus immaturity rather than to social class (Martens et al. 2004). A number of later and postmodern thinkers, such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992), and Bauman (1997) also pose questions regarding the role of social class in consumption. In different ways, these authors describe the disappearance of social class and, as a result, the identities that were established through membership in a particular social group. Such observations suggest that the late modern individual is forced to create his or her own identity and consumption becomes a lifestyle choice. It is a matter of who we are, who we wish to be, and how we want to be interpreted by others. Under these circumstances, anxiety becomes part of consumption decisions as one comes to fear the social consequences of making the wrong choices (Warde, 1994). Several authors comment on the fact that teenagers are at a life stage when the process of self-construction and self-expression is especially important and they describe how the youngsters need permanent confirmation of their identities by their peers (see, e.g., Campbell, 1995; Van Gorp & Mortelmans, 2003). The issue then becomes how cleanliness forms part of the social interaction between teenagers in their peer group as well as whether cleanliness is a matter of lifestyle and distinction or primarily of following a norm and staying within normality.

Most of the teenage respondents related stories of how there was strong pressure toward cleanliness among their classmates and friends. One of the girls described how she was once told in school that she smelled badly and “then I decided to go home.” Since then she had been very careful not to smell and she took a shower at least every morning. She reported that it is “better [to be] late for school in the morning by five minutes than not having had my shower.” Another young woman in the study related that a girlfriend of hers only showered once a week and another female respondent explained that all “normal” youngsters change clothes often. However, she also said, “There are some who do not, but that is because they are mixed up in something. If they smoke hash, for instance, they may not change their clothes, if they have been up all night.” Whether this was a case of a conscious consumption choice or, as this respondent indicated, was just a matter of not having the energy to behave in a socially accepted way, was difficult to judge on the basis of the data on hand.

The male respondents did not relate any similar personal accounts where cleanliness was an explicit issue. However, most of them said that they would notice if any of their classmates did not change his or her clothes or shower often enough. One of the boys reported, “I think it gives a bad impression... is a bit yucky, if someone doesn’t bother about himself to take a shower and get clean.” The same interviewee thought that he had an obligation to inform his friends if they smelled bad, both to help them and to rid oneself of the smell. Another of the boys had the same opinion, but both of them explained that all of their peers were so careful not to smell that it was not a problem.

In these interviews, the female respondents tended to be more aware of and sensitive to peer-group opinion on cleanliness, or at least seemed more outspoken toward one another on cleanliness matters. One young woman also said that boys “need to be dirtier than girls.” However, the interviews also showed that the boys did indeed care a great deal about cleanliness.

There appears to be quite strong pressure with respect to cleanliness among these teenagers, but the question for current purposes is whether one is able to express something through cleanliness or if the current standard is just a common norm one has to maintain. One of the girls related how she started to shower daily after having heard her friends talking about their morning showers. She observed that her parents and older sister showered every day and now also all of her friends did as well. As she explained, “then I realized that the time had come.” One of the boys also connected the question of daily showering with becoming an adult. He explained that he thought all his friends showered every day, and he just said, “When you grow older, you do it every day!” From such statements it seems plausible that among young teenagers, cleanliness was also a way of showing maturity to friends.

Another question concerning lifestyle is whether one can demonstrate belonging to a special group of teenagers with a specific level of cleanliness or if cleanliness is part of the signal from some subgroups. Historically, this might have been the case among, say, the hippies of the 1960s and the 1970s or among punks and squatters of the 1980s. The empirical material from this study was, however, too limited to investigate similar contemporary subgroups. The only indication along these lines was that one of the female respondents explained that all “normal” youngsters change clothes often. However, she also said, “There are some who do not, but that is because they are mixed up in something. If they smoke hash, for instance, they may not change their clothes, if they have been up all night.” Whether this was a case of a conscious consumption choice or, as this respondent indicated, was just a matter of not having the energy to behave in a socially accepted way, was difficult to judge on the basis of the data on hand.

**Hedonism or Risk Handling In Habits of Cleanliness**

Late modern and postmodern theories have highlighted aspects of consumption other than identity and group belonging, and social practices such as daydreaming and the pleasures of consumption have been foci for consideration (Campbell 1987;
The interviews for this study, however, suggest that household-water use is not driven by any expressions of hedonism. One of the girls who normally showered every day explained that if she knew that she was not going to see anyone over the weekend and would be at home relaxing on the sofa and watching television, she would not bother to shower. For her the pleasure seemed more connected with not showering. Some of the teenagers had access to bathtubs at home or at their grandparents’ houses and reported that they sometimes took baths. This practice, however, seemed to be related to returning from periods at camp where they had become very dirty. But neither pleasure nor hedonism seemed to be a strong reason for cleanliness in relation to bathing. One of the girls thought that it was a bit boring just to be lying there and she actually dreamed of having a television in the bathroom. Other research, as well as advertisements for bathroom equipment, however, indicates that hedonism definitely is a part of showering and bathing habits (Jensen, 2001; Gram-Hanssen, 2003). It would appear that the hedonistic aspect of showering is something that these very young teenagers have yet to learn.

A last aspect of late modern theories of interest for current purposes relates to questions of reflectivity, environmental concern, and risk handling inherent in ordinary consumption. Are matters regarding individual health, like dry skin and allergic reactions to cleaning products, as well as concerns about energy and water consumption, important with respect to cleanliness practices? Among the teenage respondents in this study, environmental concern seemed to be very rare, at least in relation to energy and water consumption. Some had learned about this subject in school, but as one of the girls said, “you just forget all about it when you leave school.” Among the parents, there were indications that some of them thought about the environment in relation to energy and water consumption. However, in none of the families was this concern so apparent that it influenced the level of cleanliness. One of the families expressed considerable concern about the environment, and this sensibility actually influenced a great deal of its consumer behavior. Family members bought mostly organic food and they had chosen not to have a car and to use bicycles instead. However, this household’s consumption of both water and electricity was very high and it was obvious from listening to them describe their daily practices that environmental concern did not influence their usage practices. The reason for this paradox—to the extent that it could be deciphered from the interview—was that buying organic food and living without a car were both visible and conscious acts and therefore easier to regulate through conviction than daily habits that one just did without any conscious forethought. Furthermore, the mother also explained that as a family they actually regarded themselves as doing quite a lot for the environment and she was afraid that initiating discussions about changing daily household habits might cause considerable conflict with their teenage children.

In general, the interviews reflected that environmental concern or unease about the cost of energy and water could provide reason for parents to ask their teenagers to take shorter showers, but not to shower with less frequency. Respondents were apt to mention economy and the environment in the same sentence without actually reflecting on the relationship between the two. Such a conceptual connection indicates that they, on one hand, did not like “wasting” energy and water both for environmental and economic reasons; on the other hand, it was obvious that neither economy nor the environment had any real influence on cleanliness habits. Even for relatively poor people in Denmark, the cost of energy and water is not a crucial financial variable. In the current study, one of the families was comprised of a single, unemployed mother with two children who explained about her economic considerations related to buying computers and mobile telephones for her sons. However, she did not relate these same circumstances to the question of cleanliness and she was among the respondents who did the most laundering and showering.

Personal health was a slightly different matter than environmental concern. One of the mothers explained that her skin was unable to stand being washed every day so she only showered two or three times a week. Also, the showering habits of one of the girls were defined by her perception of risk. She had read on the Internet that it was unhealthy to shower every day, especially to shampoo her hair, so she only showered every second day. Furthermore, several of the parents, when asked directly about health problems attributable to too much cleanliness, said that they themselves normally did not use soap on most of the body and that they had taught their children the same practice. Clearly, when comparing risk handling in relation to environment and in relation to personal health, personal health had the strongest influence on cleanliness habits.

Conclusion

The point of departure for this article was that cleaning habits in everyday life are a relevant, but often ignored, part of an unsustainable practice. In the public discourse the issue of whether cleaning processes could be made more efficient is raised, but the level of cleanliness, as well as the move toward
more cleanliness with frequent showering and still more clothes washing, is not normally questioned. One reason for focusing on teenagers was that they are at a transitional life stage that makes it easier to examine the mechanisms of habit construction. Analysis of in-depth interviews has shown how cultural understandings and practices are transferred from parents to children and has furthermore demonstrated strong social norms among young people relating to cleanliness practices. The preceding analysis has relied heavily on discussions of modern or late modern consumption, even though practices of cleanliness obviously must be considered within the context of routine or ordinary consumption. However, since this article has focused on a period when habits are in flux, it is important to draw on theories that can explain such changes. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus would seem quite useful in this regard even though the class-based aspect of his work does not apply to the activities considered here.

In general, these types of insights can help us to understand how difficult it is to change cleanliness practices; however, the interviews also point toward openings with respect to altering extant practices. Perceptions of health risks related to excessive showering or the time use associated with growing household laundry may be the most effective arguments for changing individual practices. Furthermore, it is worth noting that contemporary teenagers are taught personal hygiene and cleanliness as part of the school curriculum, but here the link between too much cleanliness and unhealthy and unsustainable practices is not addressed.

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