Energy biographies: narrative genres, lifecourse transitions and practice change

Christopher Groves[1], Karen Henwood*[1], Fiona Shirani[1], Catherine Butler[2], Karen Parkhill[3], and Nick Pidgeon[4]

*Corresponding author, henwoodk@cardiff.ac.uk

[1] Department of Social Sciences and Understanding Risk Group
Cardiff University
51a Park Place
Cardiff University
Cardiff
CF10 3AT
UK

[2] Geography Department
College of Life and Environmental Sciences
University of Exeter
Amory Building
Rennes Drive
Exeter
EX4 4RJ

[3] Environment Department
University of York
Heslington
York
YO10 5DD

[4] Understanding Risk Group
Department of Psychology
Cardiff University
70 Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3AT
UK

Abstract

The problem of how to make the transition to a more environmentally and socially

sustainable society poses questions about how such far-reaching social change can be brought

about. In recent years, lifecourse transitions have been identified by a range of researchers as

opportunities for policy and other actors to intervene to change how individuals use energy,

taking advantage of such disruptive transitions to encourage individuals to be reflexive

towards their lifestyles and how they use the technological infrastructures on which they rely.

Such identifications, however, employ narratives of voluntary change that take an overly optimistic view of how individuals experience lifecourse transitions, and ignore effects of experiences of unresolved or unsuccessful transitions. Drawing on interview data from the *Energy Biographies* project at Cardiff University, we explore three case studies where the effects of such unresolved transitions are significant. Using the concept of liminal transition as developed by Victor Turner, we examine instances where 'progressive' narratives of energy use reduction clash with other 'narrative genres' used to make sense of change. Such clashes show how narratives that view lifecourse transitions as opportunities ignore the challenges that such transitions may pose to efforts to construct or sustain identities.

Keywords

Energy demand reduction, lifecourse transitions, liminality, narrative, social practices

Introduction

In response to the problem of how to make the transition to a more environmentally and socially sustainable society, a growing body of work has identified lifecourse transitions as 'moments' in which practices may undergo transformation (Hards, 2011, 2012; Maller & Strengers, 2013). It has been proposed that the impact of such interventions may be more significant at such times because they are taking place amidst a general disruption of habits and practices (Schäfer, Jaeger-Erben, & Bamberg, 2012).

However, questions remain about whether lifecourse transitions should be treated homogeneously as opportunities, and about whether some kinds of transition may actually constitute obstacles to change. Such questions may be approached from different angles. One could undertake, for example, a factors-based analysis of conditions that may facilitate or obstruct further change. Alternatively, from a qualitative social science perspective, one could examine how the ways in which people interpret experiences of change shape the

potential contained within transitions. In this paper, we adopt the latter approach, drawing on both psychosocial and anthropological perspectives to examine the identity-creating role of narrative and how people – construed as meaning-making subjects - make sense of transitions (Henwood, Pidgeon and Parkhill, 2015).

Narratives provide us with important resources for sense making. Everyday life, public policy, and academic research are replete with instances where a narrative ordering of events is used to explain change. A traditional linear narrative structure, with a beginning, a middle that develops tensions implicit in the beginning, and a resolution of some kind, is often but not always encountered in such uses of narrative. In policy narratives, the resolution is often promised or projected, ahead of a beginning that is identified with the present and expected to succeed subsequent dramatic tensions created by projected actions. Such narratives help to coordinate and justify action in the present (Moezzi & Janda, 2014), but also to establish definitions of the identity of the protagonists of the story and what actions may be expected of them. These functions also operate in more everyday uses of narrative.

Recent examples of policy narratives around sustainable transitions focus on the need to reduce energy consumption and identify behavior as an appropriate focus for change initiatives (Moezzi & Janda, 2014). Most often, these describe a present in which domestic consumers waste too much energy. Agents of change are thus identified as individual, reflexive, and rational consumers concerned with costs and benefits and thus able to alter how they consume energy – Strengers' (2013) 'resource men' – along with technologists who can develop devices such as smart meters that can provide individuals with the information they need to alter how they use energy. In contesting the explanatory value of such behavior-focused theories of change, practice theory has offered alternative narratives in which different protagonists (i.e. practices themselves together with policymakers) are identified as

agents of change. This approach brings with it a different politics of transitions, in which individuals are no longer summoned to bear primary responsibility (Shove et al. 2012: 163-64).

In both instances, however, narratives are offered that belong to a particular genre (Mulvey, 1987), one of linear stories of progress – leading from a 'lower state' (wastefulness), thanks to the employment of technical expertise, to a 'higher state' in which difficulties are resolved or at least lessened. Even though practice theory, in some of its most recent iterations, stresses the unpredictability and non-linearity of how practices emerge, it still aims at creating interventions that are more technically-effective in achieving given policy goals than other approaches – by making practices rather than individual behavior the 'target' of intervention (Shove et al. 2012: 18). This genre has been seen as characteristic of temporal orientations and modes of explanation widely encountered within 'rationalized' or 'post-traditional' societies (Adam & Groves, 2007; Layne, 2000). However, the narrative forms individual subjects use to make sense of their own affectively-laden experiences of transition may conflict explicitly with such normative 'master' genres, even though these genres are widely internalised as generally representative of experience (Andrews, 2002). Some commentators have noted that sociology has often ignored the affective dimensions of individual experience in understanding how people make sense of and construct social reality (e.g. Wilkinson, 2001). An example of this neglect is how sociological theories of change fail to notice how conflicts and tensions arising from within individual experiences of transition might not be resolvable in the ways typically prescribed by linear narratives of transformation. As a result, individuals may find themselves unable to reconcile their experiences with dominant linear narratives. Consequently, they may come to occupy subject positions that are not those valorized within such narratives. These may be liminal positions,

i.e. ones that cannot be made sense of within dominant genres (Layne, 1996, 2000), or abject ones, whose distance from the categories of identity valorized within dominant narratives may evoke strongly negative emotions such as disgust and self-disgust (Squire, 1999). The prevalent affective tenor of such experiences may, as a result, be anxiety – understood as a response to feeling one's identity to be threatened (Wilkinson, 2001: 22-5).

Narrative analysis in sociology has drawn attention to how individuals, such as women dealing with unsuccessful courses of in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) (Throsby, 2002) or making decisions over post-mastectomy breast reconstruction (Sandell, 2008) may construct counter-narratives in response to being positioned in this way by master genres, producing new identities as ways of dealing with anxiety through an emotional labour of meaning-making. Such responses are, however, conditional on the resources needed to create such counter-narratives being available (e.g. forms of valued identity not based on parenthood, in the case of unsuccessful IVF), and such narratives may be fragile if individuals find themselves cut off from groups for whom such resources are present. As Wilkinson (2001) and Smail (2005) have independently argued, the kinds of conflicts mentioned above and any accompanying anxiety are not purely individual phenomena, emotional 'troubles' which require a therapeutic response. Rather they bear an indexical relationship to social issues, such as inequalities in the capacities individuals possess, as members of groups, to make sense of and act upon their world.

In this paper, we explore the importance of clashes between dominant narratives and individual experiences for understanding practices of energy consumption. In doing so, we use an approach to narrative that draws on the concept of liminality developed by Victor Turner (1974). We develop this approach through analysis of qualitative data from narrative

interviews conducted as part of the *Energy Biographies* project at Cardiff University. Our analysis of lifecourse transitions evoked within personal narratives concerning changes in energy use shows how experiences of transition may contain difficult-to-address dimensions of conflict relating to identity. The presence of such dimensions demonstrates, we suggest, that experiences of transition may create barriers to sustainable transformations, rather than unproblematically offer opportunities for them.

Sense-making, narrative and liminality

The importance of narrative for making sense of change

It is widely recognised that narrative forms have an important function in sense-making: enabling the exploration of readily-available but also less-available meanings (Henwood, Pidgeon, Parkhill, & Simmons, 2011) in the search for plausible and coherent interpretations of the meaning of phenomena. Stories position the living present within the context of a biographical and historical past, but also help us make sense of future possibilities (Macintyre, 1981: 215) and provide an emotional scaffold for practical and interpretative capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001). They allow individuals with distinct viewpoints to coordinate action (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008), and help us understand our status in relation to others (Giddens, 1991). The cultural availability of particular narrative forms has been found to be particularly important to help people make sense of uncertainty, novelty or anomalous situations (Polletta, 1998).

In recent times, these functions of cultural narrative forms or genres have been linked to the contemporary phenomena of reflexivity and 'individualisation,' which scholars have interpreted as processes of change through which subjects are discursively positioned as individually responsible (Burchell, 1993) both for planning their own futures, and for shaping

their own identities - often in contravention of what were hitherto established social expectations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Institutional change within contemporary neoliberal societies is often seen as promoting such developments. Political rationalities or policy narratives, which seek to govern through risk management and place an emphasis on individual responsibility for risk, are also seen as having an influence (Rose, 1999). Theoretical positions on the centrality of individual reflexivity to identity in postmodern societies have therefore been interpreted as sharing central features with models of rational choice in economics and policy literature on behavior change (Adams, 2003: 222). Literature on individual experiences of risk across the lifecourse indicates, however, that narratives that tend to depict individual actors as rational, calculating managers of individual risk may clash with experiences that cannot be worked through within the frames provided by such narratives.

In healthcare, for example, the limits of reflexivity and narratives of life planning have been traced in lay people's representations of illness as a particular kind of lifecourse transition (Crawford, 2004). Moving beyond the sociology of health, Layne (2000) discusses how narrative genres of progressive, reflexive change (such as personal growth, choosing to have a child or career success) are challenged by traumatic events like stillbirth or unemployment. Here, a genre of narratives that normalises and valorizes reflexive individual agency runs aground on transitions that it cannot easily render coherent for the individual (e.g. death, loss, contingent vulnerability). Faced with the threats posed to constituted identities by such transitions, ideals of individual autonomy may, in fact, encourage defensive emotional reactions, including (for example) the narrated disavowal of vulnerability (Layton, 2014). Dealing with such clashes between culturally-dominant narrative forms and problematic experiences of contingency is, however, a key part of what anthropologists have identified as

the social function of a specific genre of narratives, which provide shared resources for negotiating and making sense of 'liminal' transitions in which individual identities – but also the symbolic order itself – face disruption.

Liminal transitions as narratives of change

'Rites of passage' are connected to transitions that are undergone by individuals but that are also seen as typical of the human condition by a given culture. Particularly in traditional societies, they embody a genre in the sense that they narrate the passage of the individual, at particular points of the lifecourse, through an ambiguous condition outside settled social categories that ends with him/her returning into society within a different category to the one s/he originally occupied.

If identity and agency are shaped by narratives, then narrative forms or genres may be seen as a condition of the 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991) of individuals. This condition is dependent upon more or less stable core expectations regarding one's environment, and therefore upon the practices one engages in and the emotional attachments one has to people and things within it (Marris, 1996). The purpose of rites of passage narratives is to manage disruptions to practices, attachments and expectations (and thereby to identity and agency) that are associated with lifecourse transitions. The idea that such transitions are *liminal* in nature, as articulated by van Gennep (1960) and later by Turner (1974), identifies them as times when individuals move outside the symbolic space within which a culture orders its world. As such, these transitions are, Turner insists, potential disruptions to the social order as well as to the individual's sense of self.[1]

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[1] Jackson (1989) stresses that the idea of a self in crisis need not mean an individual self in the sense defined within post-traditional societies.

Negotiating these difficult periods depends on the availability of narrative forms that allow both the breaking of attachments and migration between identity-defining practices to be made emotionally and symbolically meaningful, particularly by orchestrating experiences of re-attachment and initiation into new practices. Examples of such 'liminal transitions' in pre-traditional societies include childbirth, marriage, transition from childhood to adulthood, and death and/or mourning. In each case narrative forms tend to structure change in three phases that mirror those set out in classic theories of narrative (Mulvey, 1987): pre-transitional, liminal, and post-liminal/re-integrative. Demarcations between these phases are created by specific performative rituals. Following their symbolic or physical sequestration outside the social order, individuals in a liminal state undergo a progressive re-integration into society by e.g. re-naming, moving the place of habitation within a village, or re-identifying a dead individual as an impersonal 'ancestor' (Jackson, 1989). At the same time a new form of agency is assigned to them (as mother, hunter, ancestor etc.), a role to which specific practices and expectations are attached. Finally, the breaking of old attachments for living subjects is succeeded by re-attachment (e.g. moving from mother-son to comradely relationships among hunters). Successful transition therefore re-builds identity and agency.

Post-traditional societies also exhibit certain liminal forms of transition (childbirth, marriage, death etc.). Nonetheless, the reflexivity that characterises post-traditional societies may mean liminal transitions become less 'standardized' (Draper, 2003). At the same time, new liminal transitions are also created, establishing new narrative episodes and rituals that may become distinctive sub-genres (leaving school and entering the workplace, retirement).

Turner also identifies another genre of liminal transition, in which narratives and rituals become more explicitly reflexive towards traditional social categories and norms, concerned

with creating new forms of individual and collective identity, rather than just re-integrating individuals into already-established expectations, identities and forms of agency. Examples of such 'liminoid' transitions (Turner, 1974) typically arise from willed change, and might therefore include the efforts of individuals to reflexively manage their own 'life project' (moving house, taking up a new job and so on) but also more collective, socially experimental activities (drug-taking, protest). These may involve the creation of experimental spaces (music festivals, communes, occupations) in which practices and identities are to a greater or lesser extent 'up for grabs', with no pre-given, normative structures to move back into. Some forms of liminoid transition are, however, succeeded by re-integration and the re-formation of identity through a return to 'normal' life, through processes of breaking and re-forming attachments (e.g. moving house).

In post-traditional societies, both genres of transition narrative become reordered by expectations of reflexivity. Yet at the same time, reflexive construction of life-paths and identities in line with narratives of progress or growth may encounter obstacles, as the studies by Layne, Sandell and Throsby cited previously indicate. Their work suggests that, in an increasingly generalised condition of reflexivity, negotiating lifecourse transitions is increasingly framed as a matter of progressive, willed change, in which individuals as shapers of their own identities are the primary actors. But to negotiate liminal transitions, in Turner's strict sense of 'liminal', like adolescence, marriage, childbirth and death, is to encounter and deal with challenges to identity that are culturally acknowledged to be part of a shared 'human condition' born of uncertainty and contingency. Anthropologists have mapped how shared cultural resources enable people to acknowledge negativity, vulnerability, and incapacity within a shared interpretation of a human condition through liminal transitions. Such resources make it possible for subjects to deal with the anxieties that surround

transitional disruptions of identity, so that these disruptions become less intractable. They provide subjects with ways of being re-integrated into identities in which disruptions can be incorporated as meaningful episodes.

Post-traditional societies may therefore be characterised by tensions and even conflicts between the two genres of narrative introduced by Turner. Liminoid transitions tend to be individualised and privatised, and represent re-integration in progressive terms that reflect this individualisation (e.g. 'finding oneself'). While liminal transitions could be viewed as progressive too (e.g. adolescents are initiated into adulthood and leave behind childhood), the step forward here is within some broader social cycle of integration (the human lifecourse in general). The more open nature of liminoid transitions places on those who undertake them a greater burden, that of defining the terms of successful re-integration in order to deal with negative experiences when they occur.

An implication is that lifecourse transitions, whether liminal or liminoid in nature, have a more complex and ambiguous significance than is admitted by attempts to identify them as 'opportunities' for transforming practices. As Layne, Throsby and Sandell point out, such a reading may be at odds with the actual experiences of those who undergo them. In the analysis that follows, we explore examples of liminal and liminoid lifecourse transitions taken from *Energy Biographies* interview data. Our analysis sheds light on how tensions associated with such lifecourse transitions may emerge and manifest themselves in the personal narratives people use to make sense of their experiences. In particular, we consider narratives about changes in how people use energy. These are, on the one hand, stories about how individuals see lifecourse transitions as significant in shaping how they use energy, against a backdrop of increasingly culturally-dominant progress narratives about demand

reduction, cost-saving, and environmental responsibility. On the other, they are stories about difficulties individuals face in being reflexive towards the ways in which they use energy, and how these difficulties are related to disruptions to identity associated with lifecourse transitions.

Methods

The *Energy Biographies* project at Cardiff University has employed narrative and multimodal methods to examine biographical transitions through the lens of our reliance and dependence on energy infrastructure and consumption. Unlike more structured qualitative approaches, narrative methods enable interviewees to explore the affective and emotional content of biographical transitions, their experiential relevance, and how they are situated in specific times and places (Henwood et al, 2010). In particular, they allow the 'before,' 'during,' and 'after' of specific transitions, together with the connections between past transitions, present events and future possibilities to be explored (Henwood & Shirani, 2012).

Across four diverse case site areas in the UK, interviews were conducted with individuals on three occasions over a one-year period. In total, 74 people participated in first round interviews and a sub-sample of 36 took part in two subsequent rounds of interviews and multimodal activities. Participants lived in very different contexts across the UK, ranging from more rural locations (e.g. West Wales) to urban ones (e.g. London), and the sample contained people with a wide range of different social characteristics. Participants were asked to complete two photo tasks using a camera phone between subsequent rounds of interviews In the analysis we use interviews from three of our case sites to explore some of the structural characteristics of transitions narrated by interviewees. We then relate these to concepts of

liminality explored in the foregoing sections to examine in more detail the role of narrative and identity in sense-making.

Exploring personal narratives of transition

'We know it's bad but we're still going to use it'

When Lucy was first interviewed she had recently moved from London with her partner and young children to a house in Peterson-super-Ely, an affluent commuter village in South Wales near Cardiff, a region in which Lucy and her husband both had family roots (see also Groves et al, forthcoming). She presented this transition as motivated by a desire for an enhanced 'quality of life' that was felt impossible in London (though it was also evidently motivated by a desire to return nearer to the children's grandparents). To achieve this progress meant establishing a (re)new(ed) identity around the values she saw as embodied in her new home and in its rural surroundings, values that were at once aesthetic and ethical – 'ethical' in the sense of helping to identify a way of life that is not merely 'preferred' but implicitly represented as valuable and meaningful for people more universally (O'Neill, 1993).

These values expressed an aesthetic of homeliness and also the importance of hosting old friends from London and elsewhere to maintain significant relationships. Lucy's narrative of transition exposes, however, a tension between these aesthetic and ethical values and another, longer-established element of her identity. She had long prided herself on being able to manage energy use efficiently, and sees this efficiency (defined chiefly in terms of lowering costs of essential energy use) as a central organising value for the household, one that she suggests her husband sometimes subverts. At the same time, this value is primarily prudential rather than moral in nature:

I don't think I really feel guilty I just think I'm aware and it does make me cross when like Sean especially just is deliberately almost you know wasting it […]

Having moved into a larger, more expensive to heat house (especially during regular visits from friends and their families), she felt it was vital to reduce energy consumption: 'I never really wanted to waste money, energy but now I think it's just, when I got my last energy bill, I couldn't believe it.'

Nonetheless, she represented certain kinds of excess and waste as implicitly necessary to realise the aesthetic and ethical values she associates with a higher quality of life. For example, during the project's participant-led photo task, Lucy photographed her household's patio heaters, the 'wastefulness' of which she highlighted. Importantly, though, her seeing 'heating the outdoors' (Hitchings, 2007) as a source of waste was downplayed because a new threshold of comfort and enjoyment of life in the family's rural setting had become important to her.

… we do love our patio heater when it's a sunny evening but it gets a bit cold and dark and you can sit out and they're like probably the worst things aren't they? But we love it well we only use it about five times a year so it's OK.

She agreed with what had, in the UK, become a widely-shared view of the patio heater as a symbol of waste (Eccleston, 2007). But the meaning of the device and the practices associated with it lay for her but in how 'heating the outdoors' contributed to her identity, in

her new home, as a generous friend and hostess, extending the 'warmth' of the interior outside, making her home but also its rural surroundings more welcoming for friends:

> Cos we love being outside, we just love that you can you know go, we were sitting out there one evening … it was like midnight and you could have a drink outside still and it's so lovely here cos it's so quiet and everything so but you wouldn't have been able to do it without that […]. So that's our kind of, *we know it's really bad but we're still going to use it* (emphasis added).

She also photographed the wood the family burns on open fires, which had been reinstated in the renovated house because of their aesthetic association with 'homeliness':

> […] we have a log fire and we are getting a log fire and how actually they're probably super inefficient aren't they in heating a room? […] we've put massive radiators in our new house cos its really Victorian, tall ceilings, and so we just don't need a wood burner to be on at any point but actually it'll sort of make the room […].

The contribution of the fireplaces to household ambience had decisively shaped choices about heating and energy use in the face of pragmatic considerations. Together with the patio heaters, the open fireplaces embodied for Lucy a kind of congruence between (relocated) house and self (Giuliani, 1991), between a warm, welcoming home and the friend and hostess eager to re-affirm old relationships on the far side of a liminoid lifecourse transition.

The story Lucy tells is one in which 'higher' values are being realised through the planned remodelling of family life, a voluntary, liminoid transition that begins with leaving the city

and ends with a higher quality of life in the countryside. At the same time, this re-integrative phase appears unresolved, containing tensions created by the position of energy use practices in her narrative. The partially re-built individual identity she describes is one that focuses on the aesthetic and ethical values of homeliness and friendship (as opposed to, say, her perspective on her role within the family). But these values then come into conflict with certain of her more pragmatic and long-standing values. Higher energy use, Lucy insists, does not make her feel something like either guilt or shame.

On the one hand, she actively denies the presence of any moral conflict between her values of wise management and those of homeliness and 'quality of life,' despite the increasing cost of heating the house. On the other, she insists (while talking about her wood fires) that the household's level of consumption is effectively normative for the community: 'it's fairly typical, everyone's got a couple of cars, everyone's you know got wood burning stoves'.

Her attempts to resolve tensions within the story lead her back to emphasize her actively chosen vision of a 'good life,' the identity associated with it, and the practices of hospitality central to it. These have led the family to adopt practices that she finds hard to integrate with her sense of being a 'wise manager'. She acknowledges the existence of tensions between these identities in her final statement about the patio heater 'we know it's bad, but we're still gonna use it'. Here, she adds to her story of change a defensive disavowal that cuts through the Gordian knot of tensions at a stroke, providing a narrative resolution of a moral conflict that nonetheless preserves the tensions between practices and identities within it.

Graham, his partner Laura and school-age children moved in 2009 to the Lammas/Tir-y-Gafel ecovillage in Pembrokeshire. Ecovillage residents are living off-grid, have built their own homes, and have land-based livelihoods. The site is unique as the first of its kind in the UK to receive planning permission, on condition that residents meet 75% of their basic needs from the land within 5 years. The transition to living at Lammas is, like that undergone by Lucy's family, voluntary in nature and driven by the conscious assertion of particular values. The transition is also somewhat open-ended, with residents seeing the end (completion and purpose) of the transition period as achieving a stable way of life that is more sustainable than the 'mainstream'. The end of this period was expected to arrive with the achievement of particular milestones, such as the setting up of community hydropower. At the same time, a clearer endpoint is provided by the terms of planning permission (which set out the 75% demand).

Graham tells the story of his family's move from a city home to Lammas as a values-driven decision, based on long-shared visions of the future.

> I think we always intended to live in a country-sidey place, back in a cottage on top of a hill, except with loads of kids kind of thing. So we had this plan to do something and that the [city] 'thing' wasn't 'it'.

This vision was, he suggests, definitive for his wife and himself of what a better, and more sustainable life, would look like. Yet the move, Graham felt, was one in which his agency was limited ('I was just dragged along in the slipstream really. So Laura pioneered the move and I sort of followed'). In addition, he suggests that due to a long-established sense of being

an 'outsider', rooted in the 'oddness' of his childhood family (which followed a different religion to others in the local area, and was materially poor), he felt before the move a certain scepticism and distance to Lammas as a form of collective living. This scepticism, he reported, lasted through the transition itself.

As part of the drive to earn 75% of household income from the land, Graham started a business supplying food to restaurants. This experience, he reported, had allowed him to re-discover a sense of agency and associated feelings of guilt about the family's dependence on tax credits in the absence of income from employment: 'it feels a bit wrong to be getting more tax credits than you're earning really.'

Nonetheless, he also acknowledged other moral difficulties. Graham's commitment to sustainability was troubled by his feelings about how he had managed to express this commitment, but also about how he was taking care of other commitments. He expresses misgivings, for example, about whether moving to Lammas was the best thing for his children. He was unsure whether how the family is living is genuinely sustainable, and more radically, what would count as evidence for answering this question one way or the other. He represented his ideal of sustainable living as somewhat brittle, wedded to pursuit of consistency in thought and deed, and reported finding himself policing the deviations of his own household and of others from what practices that he took to symbolize low impact living. He found these deviations to be a source of guilt but also, more strongly, of outward-looking shame:

> Anything I feel embarrassed about is probably a good marker. So I'm embarrassed about the polytunnel, I'm embarrassed about the car, I'm embarrassed about any black

sheets of plastic around and I'm embarrassed by the pond liner. I'm embarrassed about

the insulation. Any sheets of plastic or plastic tubes we use in the house I'm

embarrassed by. […]

He also found himself policing his own 'judgemental' attitudes. Ultimately, he says, the

impossibility of not deviating from images of what Lammas should be have led him to adopt

a different perspective on his guilt and shame.

I've decided it's best to be confused. I always think there's the 'confused' and then

there's the 'deluded' who are confused but they think they're not! So they are confused, I

acknowledge the confusion and I don't know what I'm doing. But I do carry a lot of

guilt you know but at the same time I think, 'I'll just get on with it', just try your best.

This new 'identity' seems to have been adopted precisely to deal with the moral difficulties

and resultant feelings Graham associates with identifying too much with the goals and ideals

he takes to be central to Lammas. It is a dynamic condition that he identifies not with an end-

state, but with the achievement of 'balance':

It's not so much trajectory that starts off low and it aims higher. It's not supposed to be

on a trajectory of everlasting progress like we are supposed to be living on the land and

it just cycles along, and it is the same every year really.

To achieve this balance requires the sharing of practical expertise learnt by members of the

community through varied past experiences of permaculture, self-building and so on. As

such, practices adopted within the community represent imperfect 'traditions' formed in a

variety of places and communities which are applied, situated and adapted in the context of Lammas, and which provide for Graham a counterweight to his individualised concerns.

Graham's narrative is, like Lucy's, an example of a voluntary, liminoid transition, guided by actively chosen values. Here, however, the Lammas community is collectively suspended, to an extent, within a condition of liminality that is shared unevenly across the group. The stage of 'official' re-integration (represented by final assessment of the 75% target) remained in the future during the interviews, but other milestones (such as setting up the community's own micro-hydropower) were passed during this period. More generally, though, questions of collective and individual identity during the transition remain unsettled. Building attachment relationships through mutual assistance and group rituals of celebration (birthdays, solstice and 'beating the bounds' festivals) are represented by Graham and others as important for building identity, in addition to the sharing of knowledge about practices for low-impact living originating with other communities of self-builders. There remain, however, no fixed 'recipes' for transitioning to a low-impact individual, family or collective identity.

Amidst this ongoing uncertainty and its attendant effects, Graham finds within his experience what he represents as elements of an emerging identity. He describes the emergence of this liminal identity through an ironic narrative that remains unresolved, in which he sees himself as striving to live up to an ideal through practices that he cannot be sure are those appropriate to the desired, re-integrated identity of a resident of a low-impact community. He finds himself constantly asking whether he is 'doing the right thing,' but then also acknowledges that there is, ultimately, no way of knowing. Graham narrates the transition as a progressive odyssey whose future outcome remains uncertain, but which can be imagined as linked to

cyclical rhythms of inevitably imperfect practices. Participation in these practices establishes participation in a collective condition that, while still liminal and ongoing, is valued.

"I really don't know what the future is going to bring"

Christine is in her early fifties, and lives with her husband and youngest child (her other children having now left home) in a large house on the outskirts of Ely in Cardiff. The family moved to the house several years earlier, due to the need to find a larger property to accommodate one of their children's disabilities. They had recently put their house up for sale, given that most of their children had left, but were hoping to remain within the area as they has a strong attachment to it and the community. Before the first interview, Christine had recently become unemployed. During the course of the interviews, the death of her father-in-law, who had recently come to live with the family, occurred.

The multiple lifecourse transitions Christine described in her interviews had brought a variety of changes in how the family consumed energy. She had moved house several times as family circumstances have changed, e.g. splitting up with a former partner and then re-marrying, and most recently, moving in her father-in-law. This latter transition, for example, meant keeping the house warmer, at a more constant temperature. Nonetheless, she represented all these transitions as temporary disruptions. Her narrative centred, overall, on representations of herself as flexible, adaptive and capable. At the same time, she mentioned at several points throughout the interviews a sense of not being able to 'look into the future'.

Participation in particular home renovation practices appeared as a constant theme in her personal narrative, anchoring her descriptions of herself and her ability to care for her family. In her first marriage, she purchased 'a run-down property that myself and my first husband

renovated'. With her current partner, she has undertaken a series of house moves occasioned by family requirements: '[…] the idea was to convert the double garage into a unit specifically for [disabled son], so it was self-contained and that's what we did […]'). Her identity as adaptable and capable extends beyond this, however, as she affirms while recalling her life with her previous partner in the 1980s:

> I had the two eldest children and a low income. You just got by. It sounds really strange and it does sound very nostalgic saying, 'Well you just got by.' If you've got a choice and only X amount of money coming in and the choice is eat or to put petrol in your car or not so much petrol in your car but to run a car and there's public transport – and there was, at that time, it was a lot less expensive – then you just look for alternative things.

Despite multiple transitions, then, the impression she gave was of continuity of identity, of repeatedly re-integrating back into the position of mother but also re-builder. In contrast to Lucy's narrative of 'upward' progress, Christine narrated the series of transitions she has experienced as re-integrating her into new *cycles* of care: renovating houses after moving, saying goodbye to children who had left home, and welcoming them back after university terms or relationship break-ups, taking in aged parents, gaining and losing employment.

> Some are subtle changes that you don't realise until you think about 'oh okay!' our way of living is always like this. Like I said, right at the very beginning, kids leave, kids come back whether it's University or whether they move in with their friends or whether they move in with a partner, whether that relationship suffers and they come back, they always come back to mum.

Managing energy consumption was described a vital part of balancing the needs of family members in negotiating transitions. Reworking, recycling, re-using was also part of balancing needs, ranging from clothes ('I've always got charity bags in my cupboard') to heating systems ('that's my gas fire that I've got rid of') and home extensions. She represented settling into patterned family life on the other side of a transition as a kind of achieved, dynamic balance within the family and between the household and the social environment it is dependent on.

This pattern, in which transitions are resolved by returning to old cycles of care or beginning new ones, formed an underlying narrative structure for Christine's story, somewhat like a spiral. Her identification of herself as carer and builder, and her stories of her activities of caring and building/re-building, position her as subject to the vicissitudes of an embodied, relational and vulnerable existence, but also as actively and resiliently responding to uncertainty with partners and family. However, while this narrative form undoubtedly supports her sense of herself as adaptable and flexible in the face of what are seen as more universal troubles ('you just got by'), it may also sometimes be disruptive and problematic: 'Oh God, I literally, you just don't know what's around the corner […] so we don't look into the future as such.'

Participating in practices that support cycles of care may also make it harder to plan for the future, and even to think about it (Shirani et al. 2015). In addition, and against the background of these observations about the difficulty of planning for the future, the practices through which these cycles are re-established can even be de-stabilising. After the death of her father-in-law, Christine and her husband had begun to redecorate the house again, perhaps hastily: 'the first thing that I think of is just changing your environment.' This

decision was linked to several others relating to a plan to sell the house that turned out to have a temporary destabilising effect on the household. This episode led Christine to state 'never make a decision when you've just had bereavement.'

Christine thus narrates a series of liminoid transitions linked to family needs (such as moving house) but also liminal ones (in Turner's strict sense, such as unemployment, divorce, bereavement). Within this personal narrative about using practical capabilities to balance needs, saving money and being less wasteful with energy are constant concerns. She was aware of a range of energy saving measures, but at the same time, stories of how energy use has changed during and after the transitions she describes are tangled up with longer-term family narratives (children growing up, leaving home for university and new relationships) that include stories of decline or loss (unemployment, children splitting up with partners, the death of her father-in-law). Although her participation in a range of practices is essential to how she has managed change, these practices are focused on 'keeping afloat', reflecting financial circumstances but also a variety of contingent events. Adaptability here may also mean adapting one's perspective, focusing reflexively on a relatively narrow sphere of concerns, which may make it difficult to plan for thoroughgoing and durable changes in how energy is used, or indeed, in other areas of life: 'you just don't know what's around the corner'. Adopting an active stance of silence about the future – refusing to speak about it – displaces tensions originating from a persistent conflict between an attraction to reflexivity and the demands of 'keeping afloat'.

Discussion: Problematizing the 'Opportunity' of Transitions
Each case study in the foregoing section features different examples of personal narratives concerning lifecourse transitions which suggest that experiences of transitions tend to be

much more complex and multifaceted than policy narratives which talk of transitions as 'opportunities' would suggest. In each case, tensions emerge out of an individual's attempts to achieve re-integration into meaningful identities in the wake of transitions. These tensions indicate how narrative forms which centre on tropes of progress may, as in the examples from Layne, Throsby and Sandell discussed earlier, run aground on experiences which evoke anxiety around threats to identity.

Our analysis here therefore suggests, in line with a long tradition of work on narrative and identity, particularly within the sociology of health and medicine, that to understand the significance of reflexivity in social life we must also investigate the persistence of contingency, negativity and their affective complements and how they affect identity-making. For example, Frank (1955) argues that the significance of contingent and abject elements of illness experiences tends to be downplayed by dominant, progressive medical narratives with which clinicians frame treatment decisions. This makes it difficult for patients to deal with uncomfortable episodes of their illness and treatment. Further, in addition to the work of Layne, Throsby and Sandell on gender and health narratives already cited, other work on gender has explored the extent to which reflexivity towards traditional gender roles and family structures can deal with episodes of negativity or vulnerability (e.g. May 2004). While underlining the importance of themes present within these traditions of scholarship, our analysis also explores the conditions under which it is possible to become reflexive about (individualised) reflexivity, and which may be provided by shared experiences and cultural resources. Graham's narrative of a liminoid transition, for example, suggests that difficulties and threats to identity may be acknowledged and addressed in ways that enable reflexivity towards accepted practices and also to one's own feelings of responsibility to be sustained.

Adams (2003) argues that, within post-traditional societies, reflexivity itself, and its emphasis on individualised, progressive transformation, represents a determinate set of shared cultural expectations about how individuals should manage change in their lives. Liminoid transitions are thus increasingly normalised as ways of dealing with contingency. Yet Turner's analysis reminds us that reflexivity towards the particular cultural resources one inherits is a stance that cannot escape having to deal with a more universal challenge to the symbolic order, that of a human condition characterised both by mortality, and by uncertainty about a contingent future. As Layne and others have suggested, a clash between expectations of reflexivity and individual experiences of contingency may challenge assumptions about identity in ways that may bring troubling affects.

In previous analytical work on *Energy Biographies* (Groves et al, forthcoming), we have suggested, in line with Layne's work, that a psychosocial perspective on transition may be necessary to understand the tensions, feelings of insecurity and discomfort, and possibly deeper anxieties that may result from clashes between dominant expectations of reflexivity and individual experiences of insecurity or vulnerability. These tensions, feelings and affects, and any resultant anxieties about identity, may then be displaced from full acknowledgement within narratives by strategies such as active disavowal (as with Lucy's) or active silence (as in Christine's). Tensions within Lucy's narrative arise from conflicts between different values, which relate to perhaps incompatible desired identities. These tensions are then disavowed, in two ways: by projecting a normative 'wastefulness' into the community and its higher quality of life, and by explicitly disavowing negative emotions. By 'heating the outdoors' Lucy ranks a practice of luxury consumption that she judges to be 'really bad' above either pragmatic concerns with efficiency or shared moral norms. Her

acknowledgement of this is then immediately followed by a stated disavowal of guilt or shame.

For Christine, the future considered as an object of reflexive planning is transformed into an object that induces anxiety. She positions herself through her narrative as having steadily built, with successive partners, an identity constructed to some extent around reflexivity, supported by expectations, practices and routines of care for family and home. At the same time, the creativity she has exercised is focused on the near term and on improvising responses to contingent events. Her ingenuity and practical skill are a source of emotional as well as material security, but also point towards a background of insecurity and to the future as a topic on which she is largely silent: 'we don't look into the future as such'. Her awareness of this background insecurity is connected to the realities of cyclical care as well as to financial concerns.

Graham's narrative differs because it is concerned with a transition that is still underway, one in which the individual and group identity of 'low impact living' is in the process of being created. Whereas Lucy's narrative of transition disavows (yet thereby also preserves) tensions, Graham's explicitly sets out tensions between values and practices in an ironic mode, which distances him from having to pronounce finally on what 'low impact living' is to mean: it's pragmatically but also morally better to 'be confused.' At the same time, the reflexivity he sees embodied in the community promises a future of re-integration that can at least be imagined. Whereas Christine's transitions between cycles of care that re-integrate her adaptive and competent agency cloak the future with silence, Graham represents the future as the hoped-for attainment of a kind of dynamic balance, 'just cycling along.' In this way, he is able, by reflecting on his expectations of community life and upon the meaning of sustainable

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living as such, to live with uncertainty and anxiety, to find meaning in the tensions he experiences within the present. In liminal transitions, individual experiences are seen as examples of narrative genres that are universal within a culture. Although the Lammas transition is liminoid, the extent of the revisions of practice that are underway and the collective participation in these revisions introduces something of this universality, perhaps making uncertainty easier to handle.

While Graham maintains a kind of ironic distance to the community, he finds examples among the other residents of ways of dealing with normative uncertainties that encourage him to acknowledge his own confusion while also coming to trust his own competences, and create a living link between his family's past and the community's future. The suggestion here is that shared narrative forms that incorporate difficulties and tensions may make negativity, anxiety about identity and uncertainty more liveable.

Lucy and Christine's narratives contain examples of reflexivity that run up against negativity in forms which are, by contrast, harder for them to address. In Lucy's case, a progressive narrative of choice creates conflicts between different values around which identities are built. In Christine's case, a narrative of adaptability has as its obverse a story about the difficulty of planning in conditions where great individual responsibility is assumed, though accompanied by financial constraints. Where tensions are in Lucy's case disavowed and in Christine's case pushed aside as too difficult, Graham addresses directly the normative uncertainties that surround the 'reflexivity' embodied in Lammas. It becomes possible to talk about his anxieties, to narrate his ongoing state of liminality, of confusion.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have questioned progressive policy narratives that suggest that lifecourse transitions represent 'opportunities' for targeted behavior change initiatives. Having considered some existing empirical and critical social theory literature on reflexivity, our data has led us to consider some implications of Turner's distinction between liminal and liminoid transitions for the assumption that disruption offers an opening for more change. Reflexivity itself represents a genre of narrative for understanding social change, which rests on a set of particular expectations about individual agency. As is shown in our data by the experiences of transition inscribed within Christine and Lucy's narratives, these expectations may be undermined by contingencies that challenge expectations of individual reflexivity. In responding to such challenges, as we have seen, individuals may adopt defensive narrative strategies of various kinds that then obstruct further reflexivity towards existing practices – as exemplified by Lucy's disavowal and Christine's active silence. Here, reflexively questioning how a family uses energy comes to a halt. Yet as Wilkinson (2001) suggests, the link between reflexivity and emotions like anxiety is not straightforward. Reflexivity may generate anxiety at the possibility of disruption to identity – or as Graham's narrative shows, may prompt shame, or embarrassment at elements of who one is. But rather than anxiety always preventing reflexivity, in the right circumstances, it may be possible to live with it, and go on questioning – even questioning (individualised) reflexivity itself.

Layne (2000) suggests that progress, understood as a narrative genre that positions protagonists as largely autonomous individuals, creates difficulties for individuals when they are forced to try and make sense of experiences that undermine the expectations such narrative forms create. Both Lucy and Christine describe transitions that exhibit reflexivity of different kinds but also run into difficulties that are rooted in the identities created through

them and the threats to these identities posed by the experience of transition. Graham's narrative implicitly positions Lammas as providing a different space, one in which such difficulties and their associated anxieties may be addressed. Here, a more collective setting of extensive reflexive practice change eases the emphasis on responsibility and individual choice that individualistic framings of change produce, making negativity and conflict more bearable and enabling the creation of narrative forms which make such difficulties more discussable (which is not to say that such communities, including Lammas, are without intra-community conflict of various kinds).

What Layne (2000) calls a 'cultural fix,' i.e. ways of creating resources and arenas for meaning-making that render discussable hidden conflicts and the vulnerabilities in which they are rooted may offer ways of addressing the kinds of psychosocial conflicts we have found manifested in narratives about individualised, reflexive change. She writes that cultural fixes such as 'creating new narrative genres and story lines, changing the dominant model of personhood, and creating and gaining legitimacy for new rituals' may seem impractical from a policy point of view (2000: 510), but that examples of support and advocacy groups working around pregnancy loss, premature birth, and unemployment in the USA suggest that such resources to support the affective and emotional labor of meaning-making are, in fact, essential. Such groups may be thought of as opening up the possibility of a similar collective experience of reflexivity to that which, Graham's narrative seems to suggest, is offered by Lammas. Around energy, and the challenge changes in energy use present both to individualised narratives of responsibility and collective narratives of progress, similar spaces for 'difficult conversions' are being developed by initiatives such as Carbon Conversations (http://carbonconversations.org/) in the UK. Such efforts are explicit attempts to hold open the possibility of social transitions towards sustainability, by addressing the unspoken

troubles that obstruct and undermine the fit between narratives of change and the ways in which individuals make sense of their own lifecourse transitions.

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