

Teenage consumption of cleanliness

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Abstract

Nine families with teenagers were interviewed in depth about their habits of showering and clothes washing. Environmental concern and statistics about energy and water consumption are introduced, but primarily this article is a description of norms and variations on the daily habits of cleanliness among teenagers. The analysis of the interviews are structured along a line of different questions known from discussions about theories of consumption, including questions of modern versus late-modern theories of lifestyle, conspicuous versus routine consumption as well as the influences of technological changes and fundamental symbolic systems of hygiene.

Introduction

Why do teenagers shower and put clothes to be washed, who and what mark their behaviour and practise in this area, how are their habits created and what variations are there on their behaviour? These are the main questions of this article. There may be several reasons for being interested in this subject including a cultural interest, as hygiene is strongly connected to cultural systems and beliefs, and environmental concern, as there is a huge consumption of energy and water as a result of these habits.

In this article, I start by developing the environmental argument and the background for why we should be concerned about the showering and clothes-washing habits of teenagers. Next the method and data of the study are presented, and the remainder of the article concentrates on presenting the findings from qualitative interviews with teenagers and their parents. The analysis and the presentation of the findings are inspired by recent discussions on consumer studies and on studies of hygiene and cleanliness.

From the major discussions on consumer theory, the question of modern versus late-modern understandings (Featherstone 1991) is relevant here. This is the question of to what degree habits and consumer choices should be interpreted as social markers of a class society that are handed down from parents to children in the unspoken language of habitus as Bourdieu describes it (Bourdieu 1984) or to what degree they should be interpreted as the way individuals construct their own biography as group identities are fading away (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992). Among teenagers the question of modern versus late-modern understandings may be even more relevant, as we are facing a group of consumers that are in the phase of their lives when in general they are torn between

the norms of their parents and the construction of their own identities in close relation to their peer groups.

Following the late-modern theories of especially Beck, another question that might be of relevance for habits of cleanliness is reflectivity and risk handling (Beck 1992). Historically a high level of hygiene has been connected with health whereas in late-modernity the cleanliness-health connection may be more ambivalent, because of allergic reactions to cleaning products and because of a more general environmental concern. In this article I discuss to what degree this kind of ambivalence and risk handling is relevant for teenagers' or their parents' habits regarding showering and clothes washing.

Another discussion of relevance from recent consumer theory concerns the relation between ordinary and conspicuous consumption (Gronow and Warde 2001). Here the strong focus on conspicuous consumption and the social symbols that most consumer studies focus on is questioned. Especially on the subject of cleanliness it could be argued that the daily habits of showering and changing clothes are far from the visibility and status symbols that consumption theory often deals with, and understandings of routines may be more appropriate. In line with this approach is also the discussion of how technological development interact in the construction of normality in daily habits of for instance cleanliness (Shove 2003).

The concept of clean and unclean, or purity and pollution, is yet another obvious focus in the understanding of teenagers' cleanliness habits. Dirt is essentially disorder, matter out of place, and cleaning in this understanding means to re-establish the order or the system (Douglas 1984). The understanding of what is clean and unclean is cultural. However generally the strongest taboos concerns the boundaries of the body, because the self has to define itself in contrast to the surroundings. This also means that substances secreted from the body such as sweat, blood and faeces stools are the most tabooed.

Environmental arguments for focusing on the cleanliness consumption of teenagers

Around one third of all energy (Energistyrelsen 2003) and water (Bechmann 1996) in Denmark is consumed directly in households and from an environmental point of view it is therefore very relevant to focus on this feature. Research documents that there are huge variations in the level of energy and water consumption between different kinds of households (Gram-Hanssen 2003, Gram-Hanssen 2002), and it is therefore important to describe what influences and determines the level of a household's consumption of energy and water. In Denmark we have quite reliable registers of both persons and buildings, and furthermore – being researchers - we are allowed to combine these registers with consumption data provided by the utilities. In this way a database with data from approximately 50,000 households in Aarhus, the second largest city in Denmark, was established. For each household it contains socio-economic and demographic data from the Danish personal data net (the Danish CPR register containing information on income, education, age, nationality etc. on every person living in Denmark). It also includes building data from the national building data net (the Danish BBR register containing information on the year a building was constructed, size and type etc. of all buildings in Denmark), combined with water, electricity and district heating delivered to the household¹.

Results from analysis of the database show that by using all available data approximately one third of the variations in electricity and water consumption and half of the variations of heat consumption can be explained. At the same time this means that quite a lot of the variations between the households cannot be described quantitatively but has to be understood in terms of qualitative descriptions. For water and electricity consumption, the number of persons living in the household is the single most significant variable, whereas for heating the living space is the most

significant factor. As an example of these analyses, Table 1 shows how the different variables affect electricity use in detached houses.

Concerning the age of the members of a household, teenagers are not a very important factor for explaining the overall variation of electricity consumption (change in $R^2=0.5\%$). A main reason for this low explanatory power may be that only 19% of the households in the detached houses included teenagers. However if there were teenagers in a household, the effect on electricity consumption was quite visible. As seen in Table 1, each person in a household on average entails 541 kWh of electricity, and if this person is a teenager it entails an extra 179 kWh. In the use of water, teenagers also have a significant effect, even though it is not as big as that concerning electricity consumption. For water, each extra person in a household on average consumes 26 m³, and if this person is a teenager s/he consumes an additional 3.3 m³ (Petersen and Gram-Hanssen 2005).

Table 1: Detached Houses: Background Variables Effect on Electricity Use

<i>Background Variables</i>	<i>Effect on Electricity Use</i>	<i>Explanatory Power</i>
	kWh/year	Change in R^2 (%)
Constant	628	
Per person in the household	541	27.6
Per 100.000 DKK in gross income	90	5.8
Per 10 sq. meter floor area	95	2.5
Per age square ¹ of oldest person	-0.35	1.3
Per 0-6 year-old children	-158	
Per 13-19 year-old children	179	0.5

Based on analysis of the Aarhus database, n=8.573

The question of which of the teenagers' practices that actually entails the extra consumption of electricity, can be answered from another project. In Denmark, as well as in three other European countries, 100 households were measured during one month. For all appliances and all lamps, consumption was measured every 10 minutes (Sidler, Lebot and Pagliano 2002). In a follow-up project on the Danish data, the electricity measurements was combined with a socio-economic questionnaire and qualitative interviews and from this we learned how different end-uses vary with different background variables (Gram-Hanssen, Kofod, Nærvig Petersen 2004). If we here look explicitly at families with teenagers, we see that the two end-uses, which are higher than in other types of families, are electricity used for clothes washing and drying and for information and communication technologies. Families living in detached houses with teenagers have a higher total electricity consumption than others and use up to 15% of their total electricity consumption on laundering, whereas the average for all detached houses is about 12% (Kofod 2005).

Taken all together these kinds of data indicate that there are quantitative environmental arguments for being interested in the cleaning habits of teenagers. Furthermore, teenagers as consumers of cleanliness might be interesting, also because they are future adult consumers. A relevant question therefore might be, whether the cleanliness habits of teenagers belong to this

¹In the multiple regression analysis the actual age, and not only the age square is used, in order to follow "the hierarchical principle", the actual age however has no explanatory power.

particular age group and will change as they grow up, or if their cleanliness habits belong to this cohort and will follow them in their adult life too.

It is tempting to conclude that still higher expectation of cleanliness and hygiene is resulting in still higher consumption of water and energy. This is however too hasty a conclusion. In Denmark the water consumption in households actually declined by about 40% over the last 20 years (Statistikbanken 2004), whereas the energy consumption of households more or less stayed unchanged during the same period (Energistyrelsen 2003). For energy consumption we know that this same level of energy consumption covers two different developments each pulling in a different direction. On one hand we have got still larger houses and still more appliances, and on the other hand both houses and appliances have become ever more energy efficient (Gram-Hanssen 2003). Regarding water consumption, water saving devices have also become very widespread in the last 20 years, and may very well be part of the explanation of why water consumption has declined. In this way we see that there is no easy connection between level of cleanliness and level of water and energy consumption. Furthermore it could be argued that the idea of a level of cleanliness and a historical progress of this level must be rejected. With regard to laundering, for instance, we have seen a fall in the temperature of the water that clothes are washed in, while new materials and new washing products have emerged at the same time. It therefore makes no sense to argue whether the clothes today are more clean or less so (Shove 2003). Even though there is no simple historic line in a rising level of cleanliness and the growing consumption of energy and water, there is no doubt that concepts and practices of cleanliness are very relevant for understanding energy and water consumption.

Methods applied in this study

The analysis in this study is based on nine qualitative interviews with teenagers together with one of their parents. Six of the interviews were with boys and three with girls, all aged between 13 and 15 years. In most of the interviews the mother participated, but in one family it was mostly the father and the mother joined the interview only partly. In another family only the father was interviewed as he lived alone with his son after a divorce. All the families themselves decided which of the parents should take part in the interview. The contact procedure and selection of the families was as follows: three schools in three different types of neighbourhoods were asked to give the pupils in this age group a questionnaire with questions of a socio-economic nature and concerning energy and water consumption. The parents should fill in and return the questionnaire to us and should also indicate whether we were allowed to contact them. The three schools were selected so that one was located in a district with large houses and wealthy inhabitants, the second school was located in an area with middle-class detached houses and the third was located in an area with both detached houses and apartment blocks with poorer people. This procedure however resulted in no returned questionnaires from the school in the wealthiest district (maybe because the school never distributed them), and no returned questionnaires from families living in apartments. However, the returned questionnaires from the middle-class detached houses represented quite some variation in socio-economic status and in energy consumption, so within this material seven families were selected in order to get the widest possible variation in socio-economic representation. Another two families living in apartments were contacted through colleges.

The interviews lasted one to two hours. They were made as semi-structured interviews with an open interview guide, tape-recorded and transcribed. All interviews were in Danish and quotes appearing in this text have therefore all been translated. The interviews dealt with questions regarding the use and size of the house, on information and communication technologies (ICT), on showering habits and clothes washing and on attitudes towards consumption and environment. This

article only deals with the themes related to cleanliness, whereas another paper concentrates on the use of ICT (Gram-Hanssen 2005).

The strength of qualitative interviews is that you get in-depth information on meanings from individuals, who can formulate in their own language what they think about the subject in question. The interviews can be interpreted on several levels, including the level the person him/herself talks on, the way the interviewed persons talk about the subject, and include more theoretical understandings (Kvale 1996). The weakness of the qualitative interview is the limited number of persons that can be interviewed if you want to analyse in depth. This also means that the teenagers interviewed in this study in no way represented all teenagers in Denmark. And even though they were selected to represent a rather great variety in socio-economic terms and level of energy and water consumption, this did not mean that they represented different social classes or types of consumers. The variation in the selection is only to secure that we get as many different views as possible on the subject in the interviews.

In the following paragraph the general norms and habits as well as the variations on the interviews concerning habits and attitudes towards cleanliness are presented. Afterwards the interviews were interpreted from different theoretical angles.

Norms and variations on the habits of cleanliness

The nine interviews presented both some norms, which seemed very general, in the sense that they were not the subject for discussions or anything that you might do differently, and on the other hand there could also be found variations on the habits of showering and clothes washing. The general norm concerning both clothes washing and showering is strongly connected to the question of sweat and smell. No matter how often the teenagers and their parents shower, the strongest argument for their habits is not to smell of sweat. Furthermore the norm for changing clothes, which is that at least underwear, socks and T-shirts has to be changed every day, is based on an argument not to smell of sweat. While it was easy to find general norms for cleanliness in the interviewed families, it was easy at the same time to find differences in the practices.

The nine families could be divided into three groups according to their practice of hygiene. In two of the families the mothers were very focused on cleanliness, and both they themselves and their children showered at least once a day, and if they did any sport, it could be twice a day. In these families all members changed completely every day, and all clothes and towels were washed after each use, bed linen typically once a week. These two families washed five full loads of clothes per person every week, which meant that the machine ran at least twice every day. In one of these families the mother was alone with two boys, she had taken early retirement because of an accident, so she had time during the day to do all the laundry. However she still thought it was a big job, and she had just bought a tumble dryer to save some work on drying. She was also trying to change the habit of changing towels every day to changing them only every second day. However, as she said “we *have to* wash all the laundry”. The habit of washing all clothes after each day of use was not up for discussion! The other family with a very high focus on hygiene consisted of a mother, her son and her husband, who was her second husband and not the father of her son. Also in this family the mother thought that they washed quite a lot and she has thought about reducing the amount, but not the habit of changing everything every day. In this family the principle was that everybody over 15 years had to wash his/her own clothes as the mother believed that then you would act more responsibly and not wash completely clean clothes. The son however had not started yet, but his elder brother did his own laundry when he lived at home. Also in another way the mother thought of reducing the amount of clothes to be washed, as she had bought smaller and thinner towels that did not take up too much space in the washing machine. So also in this family the amount of

washing was somehow questioned, the habit of changing completely every day and wash everything however was not questioned.

One family, consisting of a mother with two teenage children and a new husband, who was not the father of her children, represented the other end of the scale of cleanliness, or at least the mother's view of cleanliness represented the other end of the scale. In this family the mother only showered two or three times a week and her teenage son every second day, the husband however, as the mother expressed it was "extremely cleanly": he showered every morning. A year ago the son also showered every day, but his mother told him, that if he had to shower that often, he would have to take shorter showers, as otherwise it was a waste of water. Also in this family the norm was to change underwear, socks and T-shirts every day, but trousers, shirt etc. were used several times before being washed, and towels and bed linen were used up till three weeks before being washed. In this family the mother took care of her own and her children's laundry, whereas her husband took care of his own. The amount of laundry generated by the mother and the children was less than one load of clothes per person per week, as she typically washed two loads in the weekend. She told her children what colour she was washing and they would then bring their clothes. So in this family, when the son was asked how many times he wore his trousers before putting them to be washed, his answer was, that it depended on when his mother was doing washing.

The rest of the families were in the range between these "extremes" concerning the level of cleanliness that the parents direct to their children. However the children themselves could have habits that were both more or less clean than those of the parent. In general the norm for showering seemed to be to shower every day, as most parents said they did, and as most of those who didn't, thought they had to explain why. Among the teenagers, however, four of the nine only showered 2-4 times a week, among them the boy described above and two other boys, who were young and maybe just had not reached the time yet when cleanliness becomes so very important. Many of the teenagers and their parents showered in the morning, but others showered in the evening or at different times from day to day. In the "middle group of cleanliness" in general, it seemed as if the parents controlled the shower and bathing habits of the children up to school age, and in these early childhood years one bath/shower a day was the norm. Then follows a period, when the child has to take care of his/her own cleanliness, and during this period it is not unusual that a child only showers once or twice a week. Parents will, however, comment on this and tell the child to shower more often. After this follows the period when most teenagers are themselves very concerned about showering often, independently of their parents' opinion.

In general sport activities entail more cleaning activities. Many, but not all, teenagers who practised sports also showered after sport, and for some of them this meant that they might shower twice a day several days a week. However, some of them explained that if they knew that they were going to shower after sport later in the day, then they would not shower in the morning, or they had showered in the evening after sport, they did not need to shower the next morning. Doing sport also requires you to wear special sports clothes. Some of the teenagers left all of their sports clothes to be washed after each use including the towel, whereas others could use some of their sports clothes again, but normally not T-shirt and socks. Practising sport could result in quite a lot of laundry. In "the middle group of cleanliness" one to three loads per person per week seemed to be the normal amount of laundry. In all of the interviewed families in this group, it was the mother, who was responsible for washing the clothes, except in one family where a father lived alone with his son. Here the father did the washing.

As we saw in both the families that were most - and the one that was less - focused on cleanliness, the amount of laundry and the number of showers were quite correlated. In the middle group of cleanliness however there were some teenagers that showered once or twice a day, without putting all their clothes to be washed all the time, and we found some that changed very often but

didn't shower every day. Regarding practices of cleanliness there seemed to be a difference between showering and clothes washing, as showering for all the respondents was only motivated by cleanliness, and a wish to get rid of sweat and smell. In contrast, apart from the reason being to get rid of dirt, sweat and smell, clothes washing could also be caused by laziness. Thus several parents described that in their opinion teenagers sometimes, or very often, put clothes to be washed, just because it was easier than folding them and return them to their place. So if clothes had left the wardrobe, the only way back was through the washing machine, even when the clothes had not been worn, but just came out together with something else or because the teenager was considering whether to wear it. Some teenagers disagreed with this description, whereas others admitted that it might happen.

In the following paragraphs the practices of cleanliness in the interviewed families are analysed from a great many different angles including the question of modern or late-modern consumption, routines or conspicuous consumption, influence from technology and cultural understandings of purity and pollution.

Habitus as a way of understanding how habits are passed down

How and to what extent are the habits of cleanliness passed down from parents to children? This is one of the main questions in this article and it could be answered both in the relation that exists between the interviewed parents and the teenagers and in the way the parents related their own childhood and practices of cleanliness. One way of understanding the way parents influence their children is through the notion of habitus from Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is a way of understanding how children through their childhood are influenced by their parents' way of acting and thinking. Not necessarily because the children are told how to act or think, but often much more indirectly they learn what is appropriate to do in all the many different fields that humans act in. The concept of habitus thus includes how human beings take in the structures of the field they are in and 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 becomes based on a pre-conscious and pre-verbal agreement. You do not necessarily know, why you behave and thinking as you do, you just do what you find normal and natural. People raised in other social environments however, may have learned other ways of behaving. According to Bourdieu, constitution of habitus is closely related to the social space, where one grows up, and thereby related to the cultural and economic capital of our parents. Habitus thus becomes a way of expressing and sustaining social status in society.

Now the question is to what extent the interviewed families and their cleanliness practices can be analysed within this understanding. On one hand we have the families where the mothers were very concerned about cleanliness. When their sons described their habits of cleanliness they seemed to be very little reflected about how and what they did. At the same time however they had strong verbal reactions against habits that were less focused on cleanliness than their own. Together this indicates that on one hand they were very little reflected about their habits and on the other hand very focused on that what they did was the right way of doing it and that this was important. In the family with the mother, who cared less about cleanliness than most others, the boy however was quite reflected about his habits, and also open concerning other ways of acting. The reason for this might be that this boy encountered a conflict, which he had to solve, between his mother's norms and those his friends. In some of the other families when the children were asked why they had the practices that they did, they answered that they had decided this themselves. However their parents

stated that if their cleanliness practices were not within the parents' norms then they would interfere.

The parents themselves seemed to be more aware that some of their practices dated back to their childhood and that that was something that they just couldn't get rid of. The father, who was alone with his son, was the strongest example of this. Several times during the interview he explained that he grew up in a rural area in a poor part of the country, and that he lived in one of the poorest families there. There wasn't too much of anything so he learned to save. This habitus of saving still followed him and one of the ways where it showed was in the realm of cleanliness in his bathroom. Here, he explained, there was no holder for the showerhead mounted on the wall. This, he further explained, was a very efficient way to teach both his son and their lodger to take short showers.

The notion of habitus from Bourdieu is strongly connected to social classes in society (Bourdieu 1984). Our habitus depends on the cultural and economic capital of our parents, and habitus thus becomes a way of expressing and sustaining social status in society. The higher social classes behave in a different way than that of the lower classes. If you have not learned this behaviour from childhood, you might not as adult be able to get on in the higher classes, even though you have a high education or earn a lot of money. Now the question is if this understanding of habitus as part of a class society is relevant regarding cleanliness. Historically there is no doubt that this may have been the case. Jonas Frykman has studied the question of hygiene among Swedish peasants and bourgeoisie at the beginning of last century, and even though he is not using the notion of habitus, there is no doubt about the differences in habits of cleanliness between these two social classes (Frykman and Löfgren 1979). In the interviews in this study however there was really nothing to indicate that differences in the levels of cleanliness was related to social classes. The father, who was alone with his son, came from a very poor childhood. He now worked as a factory worker, and he for instance was in the "middle group" regarding level of cleanliness. And in this middle group we also found the most well-educated couple among the interviewed. Furthermore none of the interviewed used expressions that indicated that cleanliness might be a way of distancing him/herself from lower social classes. Cleanliness may be a way of showing that you are within the range of normality, but no longer a way of showing that you are above others. And this should not surprise us, as almost all people in Denmark today have bathrooms and most have washing machines so consequently cleanliness is not a way for the higher social classes to distinguish themselves as was the case, when bathrooms were rare and clothes washing was done by hand.

Lifestyle, peer-groups and reflectivity as explanation

Teenagers are obviously influenced by their parents in their cleaning habits, however they are maybe even more influenced and aware of their friends and schoolmates and their opinion of cleanliness. The logic from Bourdieu's notion of habitus might thus be transferred from the relation of the status group of the parents to the teenagers' own peer-group, and here the distinction might relate more to the interpretation of for instance maturity versus childishness, rather than social class (Martens et al. 2004). The question of social classes in the understanding of consumption is also questioned by a number of late- and post-modern thinkers like Giddens, Beck and Bauman (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Bauman 1997). In different ways they describe how social classes are disappearing and as a result also the identity that was given through belonging to a social group. This means that the late modern individual is forced to create his/her own identity and that consumption becomes a choice about lifestyle, who we are and who we wish to be, and how we want to be interpreted by others. Thereby anxiety regarding making the right consumption choices

also becomes part of the decisions, as you may fear the social consequences of making the wrong choices (Warde 1994). Several authors comment on the fact that teenagers are in an age group where the process of self-construction and self-expression is especially important, and describe how the youngsters need permanent confirmation of their identity by their peers (Van Gorp and Mortelmans 2003, Campbell 1995). Here the question is how cleanliness forms part of the social interaction between the teenagers in their peer-group, and whether cleanliness is a matter of lifestyle and distinction or primarily a question of following a norm and staying within normality.

Most of the interviewed teenagers related stories of how there was a strong pressure towards cleanliness among their classmates and friends. One of the girls told how she was once told in school that she smelled badly, and as she said “then I decided to go home”. Since then she had been very keen not to smell and she took a shower at least every morning, “better late for school in the morning by 5 minutes, than not having had my shower” she declared. Another of the girls related that a girlfriend of hers only showered once a week, and how one of the other girls told this girl that she was “stupid” because of that, and since that episode the two girls had not been friends.

The boys interviewed did not have stories where cleanliness was that explicit an issue. However most of them said that they would notice if some of their classmates did not change their clothes or shower often enough. One of the boys said, “I think it gives a bad impression...is a bit yukky, if someone doesn’t bother about himself by taking a shower and get clean”. The same boy thought that you ought to tell your friends if they smelled bad, both to help them and yourself to get rid of the smell. Another of the boys was of the same opinion, but both of them explained that everybody was so keen not to smell that it was not a problem.

In these interviews there was a tendency that the girls were more aware of and sensitive to the opinion of their peer-groups on cleanliness, or at least the girls seemed to be more expressive towards each other regarding cleanliness in their group. One of the girls also said that boys “need to be more dirty than girls”. However the material showed that it was also obvious that boys did indeed care greatly about cleanliness.

There seemed to be a quite strong pressure towards cleanliness among these teenagers, the question was however, whether you could express something about yourself through cleanliness or if this is just a question of a common norm you had to live up to. One of the girls related how she started to shower daily after having heard her friends talking about their morning shower. She realised that her parents and older sister showered every day and now also all friends, and as she explained, “then I realised that the time had come”. Also one of the boys connected the question of daily showering with being 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 this kind of statements it might be concluded that among young teenagers cleanliness was also a way of showing maturity to your friends.

Another question concerning lifestyle was whether you could show that you belonged to a special group of teenagers by your level of cleanliness, or if cleanliness was part of the signal from some subgroups. Historically this might have been the case for instance among the hippies of the 1960s and the 1970s, or among punkers and squatter of the 1980s. The empirical material of this study was, however, too limited to investigate this kind of subgroups of today’s teenagers. The only indication was that one of the girls told that all “normal” youngsters change clothes often. However she also said, “There are some, but that is because they are mixed up in something. If they smoke hashish for instance, then they may not change their clothes, if they have been up all night”. However whether this was a case of conscious consumption choice or as the girl indicated that it was just a case of not having the energy to behave in a socially accepted way was difficult to judge from this material.

Hedonism or risk handling in habits of cleanliness

Late-modern or post-modern theories of consumption have focused on other aspects of consumption than showing identity and group belonging, like for instance daydreaming and the pleasures of consumption (Featherstone 1991, Campbell 1987). However, according to these interviews cleanliness among youngsters was not driven by any kind of hedonism. One of the girls, who normally showered every day, explained that if she knew that she wasn't going to see anybody over the weekend, but would just stay at home lolling on the sofa watching the telly, then she wouldn't bother to shower. For her the pleasure seemed more connected with not showering. Some of the interviewed teenagers had access to bathtubs at home or at their grandparents', and said that they sometimes took a bath. This was for instance connected with returning after staying at a camp and becoming very dirty. In relation to bathing however, pleasure or hedonism did not seem to be a strong reason for cleanliness either. One of the girls thought that it was a bit boring just to be lying there, and she actually dreamt of having a television in the bathroom, which would make it much more fun to bathe.

A last aspect of late-modern theories that might be of interest is the question of reflectivity and risk handling (Beck 1992). Both the question of your own health, concerning dry skin and allergic reactions to cleaning products, and more general environmental concerns about energy and water consumption might be aspects of reflectivity and risk handling in connection with cleanliness. Among the teenagers environmental concern seemed to be very rare, at least in relation to energy and water consumption. Some of them had learned about this subject in school, but as one of the girls expressed it, "You just forget all about it when you leave school". Among the parents some thought about the environment in relation to energy and water consumption. However in none of the families it was crucial that this concern influenced their level of cleanliness. One of the families was very concerned about the environment, and this concern actually influenced a lot of their consumer behaviour. They bought mostly organic food, and they had chosen not to have a car and instead use bicycles. However, in this family consumption of both water and electricity was very high and from listening to their talk about daily practices it was obvious that their environmental concern did not influence these practices and consequently their consumption of electricity and water. The reason, as it could be extracted from the interview, was that buying organic food and not having a car were both visible and conscious acts and therefore easier to regulate through conviction than daily habits, which was something that you just did without thinking about. Furthermore the mother also explained that they actually thought that they did quite a lot for the environment, and she was afraid that initiating discussions about changing daily habits might cause quite some conflicts in the family.

In the interviews in general, environmental concern as well as concern for the cost of energy and water could be a reason for parents to ask their teenagers to take shorter showers, but not to shower with less frequency. Your own health was a slightly different question. Here 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, even though she would have liked to do it more often. 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 shampooing your hair every day was bad for you, so she only showered every second day. Furthermore some of the parents, when asked directly about health problems as a result of too much cleanliness, said that they themselves normally didn't use soap on most of the body and that they had taught their children the same. Clearly the risk handling that most closely resembled your own health, was the one that had the strongest influence on the habits of cleanliness.

Routines in everyday life consumption

Recent contributions to consumer studies include a criticism of the strong focus on visibility and conspicuous consumption that had been characteristic of most of the work in the field of consumption (Gronow and Warde 2001). Especially for energy and water consumption used for cleanliness, it is very relevant to suggest that the understanding has to focus rather on how habits and routines work as a subconscious background in everyday life. In the understanding of human practice one can distinguish between action and routines, where routines pass on un-reflected and based on practical knowledge, whereas actions are consciously chosen (Halkier 2001, Giddens 1984, Ilmonen 2001). Even though it is easy in this way to distinguish linguistically between actions and routines, in real life the lines between the two forms of practices are much more blurred. The theoretical descriptions of the forms of practice are connected with the discussion of structure-actor dualism, which both Bourdieu and Giddens has tried to overcome in their theories. For Bourdieu the notion of habitus is a way of describing how individuals take in social structures and unconsciously, in their behaviour reproduces the same structures. As discussed above, this description from Bourdieu may overemphasise the importance of social classes, and from Giddens we get another understanding of how actors and structures mutually and continuously create each other (Giddens 1984). In his understanding of the functions of routines in our everyday life, Giddens is inspired by psychology, and he explains that the routines are a way of creating security and safety. Routines help to reduce the ontological uncertainty, and therefore contribute to make everyday life more liveable. Routines reduce the complexity of decisions and they create a safe habitable world and a feeling of normality as well as they make our behaviour predictable and therefore reliable (Ilmonen 2001).

In the interviews neither the teenagers nor their parent used the words habits or routines very much, and they actually gave explanations, which indicated that they had reflected on why they acted like they did. This may however be due to the interview situation where I asked what, and why, they acted as they did. Despite of this it was rather easy to interpret many of the descriptions of their cleaning practices as routines as they described how they did the same every day (taking a shower and changing their clothes) or every week (changing the bed linen while they were cleaning the house).

Technology and change of habits

Everyday life and daily practices are not just influenced by social structures but also by the material structure of the technology that surrounds us and are an integrated part of our everyday life. STS studies have worked on how technology and society mutually construct each other (Bijker, Huges and Pinch 1987) and these thoughts are also carried into the theories of consumption. Elisabeth Shove has combined theories of consumption and technology to understand the nature of development in the standards of cleanliness, comfort and convenience – developments that have a huge impact on the use of energy and water (Shove 2003). In this understanding there is no simple correlation between technology, norms and habits. Related to cleanliness for instance, the case of showering and the case of clothes washing form two different stories. The habits of both clothes washing and of cleaning the body have changed rather dramatically over the last century. The technology of bathing, the bathroom, has not changed very much however, whereas the technology of clothes washing both concerning washing machines and washing products has undertaken quite huge developments (Shove 2003).

Even though the design of this study was not supposed to focus on how habits and technology has changed historically, many of the interviews included stories of either changes or continuities in cleanliness from the childhood of the parents and until today. In some of the families, including one of the families where the mother was very focused on cleanliness, the mothers explained that they

did just as *their* mother had done. In other families, including the other of the mothers being very focused on cleanliness, there has been a conscious change of habits. This woman explained how in her childhood the children would take turns using the same water in a tub or they washed themselves with a flannel at the sink as their mother did. She really disliked this and as a teenager she herself had changed habits and started to shower. So her story showed how the different members of the family would use the same bathroom in quite different ways. In one of the other families, the father, who grew up in a poor family in a rural area, related that during his very early childhood they had to fetch water from a well outside and that this still influenced his habits. In this family consisting of father, son and a lodger, they only used 40 cubic meters of water per year, where the normal level for this size of family would be 120 cubic meters. However, for most of the other interviewed parents the bathroom in their childhood and now, was more or less alike, and many of them actually did not remember much regarding their cleanliness habits during childhood, and they believed that it was just about the same. If we would really like to focus on the historical changes in habits of showering and bathing, we would also have to include the grandparents of today's teenagers, as many of the big changes in these habits happened more than forty years ago.

Bathrooms half centuries ago looked more or less the same as now and were almost as widespread, but now there have been more changes in washing technology. Today the biggest difference between families with regard to technology of cleanliness is the use and ownership of a tumble dryer. Three of the interviewed families did not have a tumble dryer and one of the families had just bought one. Those who did not have a tumble dryer argued that they did not think it was necessary and two of them also saw it as a complete waste of energy and money. Many of those who owned a tumble dryer only used it for some of the laundry, as they believed it wore out the clothes. It was difficult to tell if there was a correlation between the amount of laundry and the use of a tumble dryer. The family with most laundry had only very recently bought a dryer, so in their case the consumption came before the technology, on the other hand the three families without a tumble dryer, who did not want one, were also the families with the lowest amount of laundry.

Cultural understandings of clean and unclean

In the words of Mary Douglas "There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists only in the eye of the beholder" (Douglas 1984, p. 2). In this understanding, dirt is essentially disorder, or matter out of place. In her study Douglas primarily refers to what she calls primitive societies, however in her opinion the primitive and the modern world share the same kind of basic structures regarding how hygiene can be interpreted. What characterises the modern **developed** world compared with primitive societies is a higher degree of division of labour and that we have an idea about objective knowledge, which in relation to hygiene is the theories of bacteriology and disease (Douglas 1984). Taboos in primitive societies, which for instance separate excrements from drinking water, may be interpreted as some kind of natural wisdom that includes bacteriological knowledge. To Douglas this interpretation is okay as long as it is not taken as the primary explanation of the taboos. Also in modern societies she holds that bacteriological knowledge and natural science is not the basis that can explain our hygiene behaviour and taboos, as this draws on cultural-historical lines. These lines are much older than modern science and built on symbolic systems of dirt in the same way as in primitive societies. What is common to all humans is the way the individual has to learn to distinguish him/herself from his/her surroundings in early childhood. During this process the physical boundaries between the self and the surroundings, which is the body, becomes very important and thereby also the orifices of the body. However, the way in which the body and its orifices become important varies between different cultures. Douglas writes:

”We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual’s attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience, any more than for his cultural and social experience.” (Douglas 1984, p.122).

When all the teenagers interviewed seemed to be very concerned about not smelling of sweat, this understanding of clean and unclean seemed much more appropriate than some kind of bacteriological understanding of hygiene. Sweat is really disgusting and something that you have to get rid of and this seems to be a general norm, which is absolutely not up for discussion.

Regarding clothes washing there might also be links to how different kinds of clothes belong to different categories that should not be mixed in order to avoid that they pollute each other. A Brazilian case study on clothes washing very much follow this line of thought and describes how there are clear systems of which categories of clothes that should be washed together and which should not; for instance female underwear should be washed separately (Neves 2004). In the Danish interviews quite a few stated that some of the laundry wasn’t really dirty and in these families it also seemed that the rules concerning handling laundry were quite weak. The strongest feelings about dirty laundry were expressed concerning sports socks, especially if they were put in a sports bag together with other sports-clothes and towels after use. Here they were able to pollute all the rest of the clothes so that everything had to be washed. When in general socks, underwear and T-shirts were the clothes that had to be changed most often, we found that the clothes worn closest to the body, and to the part of the body from where fluids exit the body, were the clothes changed most often. So dirt seemed to come more from inside the body than from outside.

Conclusion

The point of departure for this article was that teenagers’ consumption of cleanliness was interesting for both cultural and environmental reasons. Through analysis of interviews, norms and variations on the daily habits of showering and changing clothes among teenagers are described. There was widespread agreement that the reasoning for both showering and changing clothes was not to smell of sweat. All the teenagers (and their parents too) used strong verbal expressions like yukky to state their opinion of people who smell of sweat. Regarding showering there seemed to be a widespread norm about showering once a day. Not because all interviewed showered once a day, but because both those who showered more often, and those who showered less, somehow in the interview referred to why they did differently from showering once a day. The argumentation for showering was almost solely about sweat and cleanliness, whereas arguments like hedonism and waking up in the morning were almost absent. The norm related to changing clothes was found to be that at least T-shirt, underwear and socks had to be changed every day, in some families however all clothes including towels were changed and washed after each use. Where cleanliness seemed to be the only reason for showering, there was a further reason for clothes to be washed, which was that teenagers might find it easier to put the clothes to be washed than to fold them and return them to the wardrobe.

In the understanding of norms and variations of teenagers’ cleanliness habits, inspiration can be found in several different concepts and ideas from theories of consumption. The notion of habitus as the un-reflected habits that are passed down from parent to child and embedded in the body from childhood makes sense in the understanding of most of the interviewee’s showering

habits. The understanding of how habitus works to sustain the hierarchy in a class society however was very difficult to find in this material, whereas understandings of routines as a way of making a secure and liveable world seemed more appropriate. Inculcating norms of cleanliness in teenagers came not only from parents, but also from the peer-group of the youngsters who put strong pressure on each other regarding cleanliness. Late- or post-modern tendencies such as hedonism, self-producing or risk handling did not hold a prominent place in these interviews, whereas understandings of hygiene that draws on basic understandings of cleanliness crossing pre-modern and modern worlds had more to offer.

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ⁱ The database and its results concerning electricity consumption are further described in (Gram-Hanssen, Kofod and Petersen 2004). The full detailed statistical analysis are described in a Danish report (Petersen and Gram-Hanssen 2005).