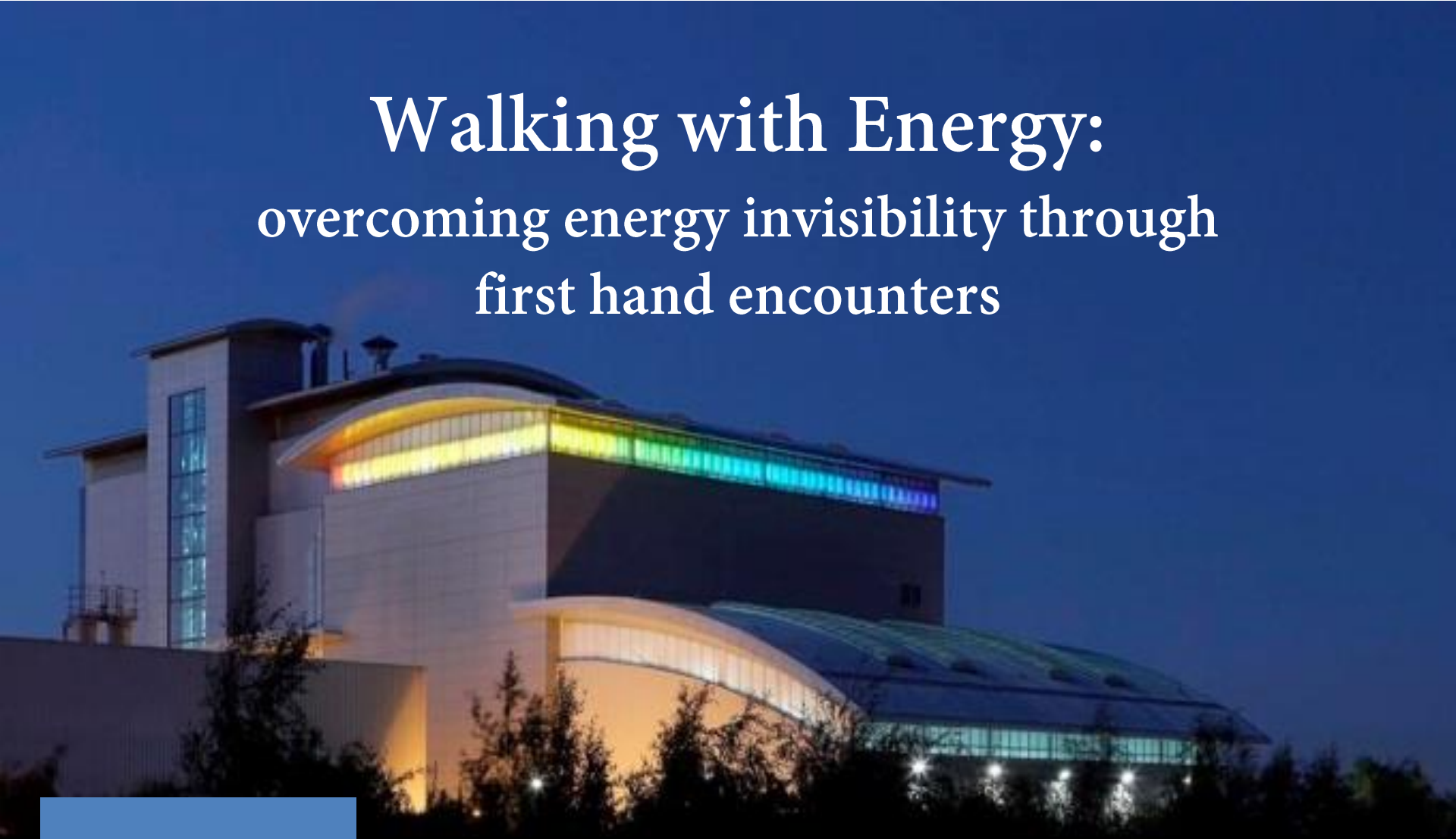
Walking with Energy:

overcoming energy invisibility through first hand encounters



Dr Aimee Ambrose
Reader in Energy Policy

Sheffield Hallam University | Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research

ESRC FESTIVAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

White Rose Social Sciences DTP

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Walking with Energy

- Since the shift away from burning solid fuels in the home, energy has become increasingly invisible in our daily lives and our contemporary relationship with energy is arguably characterised by complete dependency and almost complete ignorance.
- We developed a methodology for promoting a re-connection between citizens and energy and tested it through a pilot study.
- The pilot sought to better understand how our relationship with energy has evolved to become so distant and assess whether acts of research participation can promote a greater level of interest in and engagement with energy policies and decisions amongst 'ordinary' citizens by enabling immersive first hand encounters with energy generation.
- We hoped that these kinds of encounters might contribute to citizens being better positioned to engage more effectively with key decisions around our energy futures.
- And perhaps effect lasting changes in environmental citizenship? *[acting collectively and responsibly to protect and improve the environment.]*

(Ambrose, forthcoming)

Walking with Energy

- The Walking with Energy project draws on a number of bodies of literature to form a new research methodology that is social (offers opportunities for social learning), embedded (in the energy landscape), embodied (engages body and mind) and that is sensitive to the past.
- Using a case study of an Energy from Waste facility in Sheffield, where the city's refuse is burned to generate heat (distributed via a heat network) and electricity (exported to the grid).

(Ambrose, forthcoming)

Energy 'invisibility'?

- Relationship characterised by a 'double invisibility' - it can be no longer be seen nor connected to everyday actions*
- Distances us from our consumption and its consequences- a problem in the context of urgent pressure to consume more wisely
- Visibility may help connect our everyday actions to their resource implications?

* Burgess and Nye, 2008, Hargreaves et al, 2010

'Double invisibility'

- Energy invisibility has only been considered in relation to feedback technology (i.e. Smart Meter displays) ...we cannot rely on them alone.
- Heat is a particular concern accounting for ~ 83% of domestic energy use and 78% of non-transport energy consumption in the UK.*

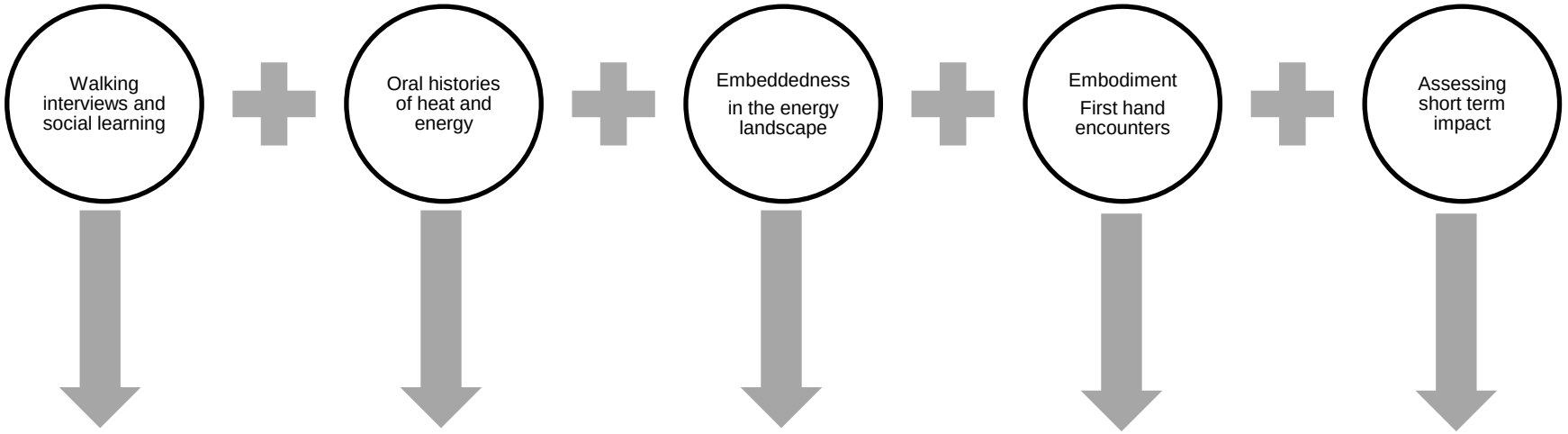
*Greenpeace 2018

Disengagement

- We are disengaged from decisions about how energy is generated in terms of modes of generation and types of fuel
- This engenders a sense that energy is something 'done to us' and breeds mistrust in relation to energy providers and controversy around energy projects (Corsini et al. 2018)."

Walking with Energy: the pilot study

Walking with energy: method



Walking the route of the district heating pipeline and talking in groups about our awareness of where energy comes from and our evolving relationship with home heating.

Touring the EfW facility.

Debrief

At the EfW facility

Broadening reach: media coverage

- https://markansell.blogspot.com/2019/01/incinerator.html

Reactions

"We're consuming more and more and I don't know how you tackle that but at least this way you can stop the waste building up and deal with usefully and keep it out of harms way." (M, 45)

"Personally seeing all the waste is quite a sobering thing coming face to face with the consequences of our over-consumption really isn't it, seeing our waste pouring into a pit like that." (F, 36)

Reactions

"You realise when you come here that it's all linked up. What we buy, what we waste, how we heat and how much we heat etc. So the more energy we demand, the more waste they need to collect. There's lots of focus on reducing waste but this is always looked at in isolation of its impact on energy. You can save energy by consuming less but systems like this rely on us consuming more or the same maybe. None of this had occurred to me before this evening." (F, 84)

Reactions

"It's made me think [...] I'm not happy with gas heating. I would prefer something renewable, more like this but it costs such a lot to convert it. It's not something you get a say in unless you have a lot of money. I would feel better if i was on the heat network as i would know that gas wasn't being extracted to heat my home." (M,45)

Concluding thoughts

- Should we care? If energy was affordable and production less damaging then maybe ignorance would be more justifiable.
- Brought members of the public face to face with energy generation processes .
- Different aspects of the tour fulfilled different purposes but the incinerator tour was the most powerful.
- Mind and body united in an act of 'social learning' that offers the greatest scope for us to re-evaluate embedded dispositions (Lave 1991).
- But can we foster lasting increases in environmental citizenship?
- There is a clear appetite for greater engagement but amongst which groups in society?