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THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF ENERGY POVERTY ON VULNERABLE POPULATIONS' BEHAVIOR; THE CASE OF TWO DEVELOPED COUNTRIES: FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Overview

Formerly considered as an issue restricted to developing countries, energy poverty is now represented as a growing phenomenon which also preoccupies developed states. Energy poverty can be defined as a condition wherein a household is unable to access energy services. The anxiety it generates can modify the consumption behavior of affected populations.

Method

This paper seeks to analyze the impact of energy poverty on the vulnerable populations' behavior, in France and in the United Kingdom. First, we examine the process that brings to vulnerability. Then we will focus on the behavior evolution in case of energy poverty by examining different possible reactions.

Results

The deterioration of economic conditions faced by developed countries, the rise of unemployment and the increase of energy prices, make a large part of the population vulnerable. Vulnerability can be defined as a process characterized by a sequence of negative events that can cause a destabilization of living conditions. Adverse factors may come from different situations such as economic context (job losses, cuts in social benefits, high debt levels etc.), social environment (divorces, deaths, isolation, etc.) and health conditions (diseases, hospitalization, disability, etc.). If these factors are combined with an increase of energy prices (electricity, gas and fuel), vulnerable populations might adopt new consumption patterns. The profile of these populations is poorly understood in France but it is recognized in the early 2000s in the United Kingdom under the name of "*precariat*". According to Guy Standing (2011), the "*precariat* is a *new dangerous social class*", mainly heterogeneous which faced economic insecurity and social isolation.

Although these factors disrupt living conditions, the combination of negative events is not synonymous with vulnerability. It will depend on each person's resources. Personal resources can be represented as a strength that could help to deal with a painful situation. It might include psychological resources but also physical, intellectual, cultural, financial, relational etc. Formerly considered as deprived from any resource and skills, the vulnerable consumer is now seen as a person able to implement new strategies to improve his living conditions and overcome a difficult situation (Gorge, Ozçaglar-Toulouse, 2013). He can change his habits and lifestyle by implementing coping strategies and arbitration mechanisms (Hamilton, Catterall, 2008; Hill, 2002). This approach is highlighted by the "*Transformative Consumer Research*" initiated by Mick (2006) which focuses on well-being and life quality.

In the case of energy poverty, vulnerable populations can react in different ways. According to Briseperre (2013) and Gibbons, Singler (2008), there are four major profiles of energy consumers. The first one is characterized by consumption patterns that remain unchanged whatever the evolution of energy prices. It is characterized for example, by the same use of the heating systems regardless price increases. These behaviors could be explained on the one hand, by energy bills (electricity and gas) that are established post-consumption and on the other hand, by the need for families with children including single-parent families, to have an adequate temperature at home. The second group of profile concerns populations which implement strategies without compromising their initial level of comfort. These behaviors correspond to the implementation of simple and inexpensive practices in order to reduce costs including energy costs, for example by changing clothing habits at home, having hot beverages, enjoying public areas' warmth, buying foods that are closed to their expiration date, putting in place temporary measures in order to better insulate the habitat, etc.. The third category of profile corresponds to a person who restricts his consumption despite comfort level. For example, some vulnerable populations turn off the heating systems during several hours or in some rooms. In the United Kingdom these behaviors are completed by the use of prepayment meters that reinforce the feeling of better control of consumption. The last profile, the most radical one consists in not consuming energy by stopping the heating system even if it may have serious health consequences (Evans & al. 2000; Gemmill, 2001). This

behavior is mostly implemented by seniors especially women which are in a logic of optimal budget management.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that, with the successive economic and financial crises and the rise of energy prices, energy poverty becomes a major problem in developed countries. Vulnerable populations facing this issue may modify their behavior, according to their resources and skills. It seems necessary to improve their competencies especially in energy saving matters, in order to help them to have a better access to energy services without restriction. On a large scale, the acquisition of new skills will help to reinforce their confidence and their integration into society.

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