

The lived experience of energy vulnerability among social housing tenants: emotional and subjective engagements

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BACKGROUND

- Fuel poverty - the inability to afford / access energy services - has been recognised as a key policy problem since the early 1990s.
- Current UK fuel poverty policy positions energy efficiency measures as the primary solution.
- A growing body of work explores the lived experience of those vulnerable to fuel poverty, identifying a range of factors that extend beyond energy efficiency.
- Within this work little sustained attention has been paid to the emotional and subjective engagement of energy vulnerable households.

METHODOLOGY

- We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with social housing tenants.
- A further 10 interviews were conducted with employees of these tenants' housing association as well as a focus group of tenancy support staff.
- A thematic analysis focused on the role of emotions in experiences of energy vulnerability.

KEY FINDINGS

- Worry and fear about energy expenditure can lead energy vulnerable tenants to take steps, for example rationing energy, to gain control of energy use that may exacerbate the conditions of their vulnerability.
- Relationships of care with others can both exacerbate and help ameliorate energy vulnerability. For example, some tenants use extra energy to heat homes for children / pets, while others draw on relations of care to assist with energy bills.
- Attempts to ameliorate energy vulnerability can be hampered by stigma and embarrassment suffered by tenants, as well as a lack of trust in formal organisations, for example energy companies.
- For the first time we show that emotions are not merely a consequence of energy vulnerability but can also help to cause it.

POLICY ISSUES

- Steps should be taken to incorporate research on the lived experience into the fuel poverty policy making process, particularly the role of emotions.
- Measures to improve energy efficiency are, on their own, insufficient to address many cases of fuel poverty in social housing.
- Interventions to address fuel poverty need to recognise the importance of building trust with the energy vulnerable, and the time this can take. Efforts should be made to create

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safe spaces that enable energy vulnerable households to openly discuss their problems and therefore receive appropriate help.

- More broadly, discussions around fuel poverty need to be linked to the debate around minimum income standards and the extent to which households on low incomes fall below these.

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