

# Energy vulnerability and emotion

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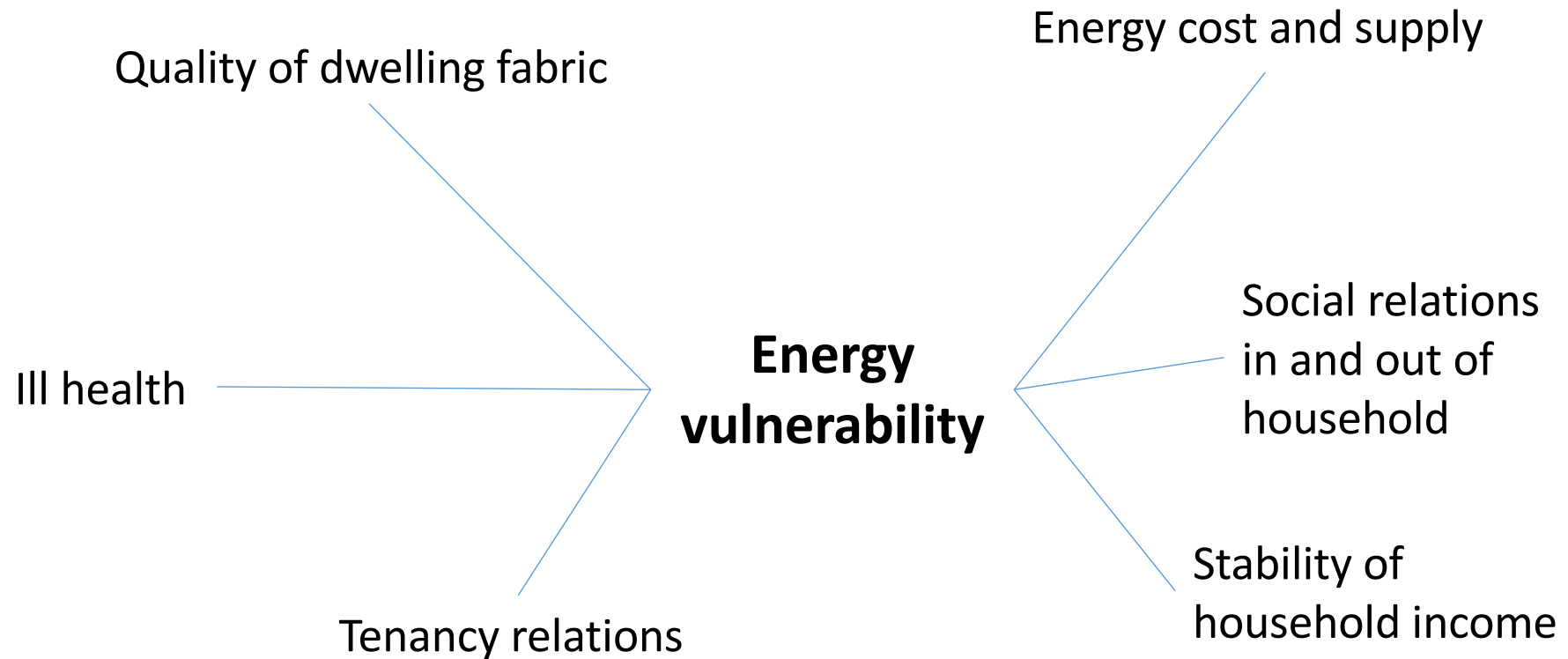
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# Fuel Poverty to Energy Vulnerability

- Many official definitions of fuel poverty see it resulting from: poor energy efficiency; low income; high energy costs.
- So, interventions focus on: improving efficiency; assisting households with costs; promoting supplier switching.
- These understandings are doubly-divorced from everyday life:
  - Isolate economic decision-making about energy, from wider everyday practices.
  - Adopt a narrow, technically-specified focus on energy efficiency as key problem, and ignore wide constellation of issues that render households vulnerable.

# Fuel Poverty to Energy Vulnerability



“...the likelihood of a household being subject to fuel poverty, the sensitivity of that household to fuel poverty, and the capacity that household has to adapt to changes in fuel poverty.” Middlemiss and Gillard (2015)

# Energy Vulnerability as Emotional Experience

- Lived experience studies have begun to recognize energy vulnerability as an emotional experience:
  - Fear, worry, anxiety, unhappiness, distress, embarrassment, stigma, isolation, lack of trust etc.
- BUT, emotions almost always seen as a consequence or side-effect of energy vulnerability
  - negative emotional experiences *result from* energy vulnerability.
- The role of emotions in energy vulnerability has rarely been given centre stage.

# Equity and justice in energy markets



Multidisciplinary project exploring interactions between retail energy markets and their distributional impacts on vulnerable and under-researched groups in the UK (2016-18)

## **RP7: Lived experience of energy vulnerability**

1. What is the lived experience of energy vulnerability for social housing tenants and in what ways do they express agency in relation to their energy usage?
2. What impacts do different kinds of intervention have on the lived experience of energy vulnerability?
3. What are the wider implications for the role of housing associations and other actors in tackling energy vulnerability?

## **Methods**

- 5 telephone interviews with expert stakeholders
- 15 semi-structured interviews with tenants
- 9 interviews with Housing Association staff

# Fear, worry and control...

Due to fear over bills, participants lives were marked by constant worry and active vigilance over their energy expenditure:

- *“If I’ve got my money coming then that’s alright, I can do all my washing over the next 3 days...Whereas [if] it’s like “I’ve got 2 weeks until I’ve got my money coming!”, my washing starts to pile up and stuff like that!” (Paulette)*

This led many to choose Pre-Payment Meters to manage risk and gain control:

- *“Why people go on the key is they’re worried of getting in big debt...if we hadn’t been on the key we probably would have done to be honest.” (Susan)*

# Relations of care...

Care relationships can both exacerbate or ameliorate energy vulnerability.

Using energy to care for others:

- *“If it was just me I’d probably have [the heating] switched off during the night, but at her age, she can’t keep herself warm.”* (Glenda, referring to her elderly cat)

Drawing on care relations for help with bills:

- *“Another single Mum....she’s got her nan always bailing her out...where I don’t have family that can do that for me, so we suffer!”* (Paulette)

Those with an absence of care relations seemed to be the worst cases, leading to both social isolation and self-disconnection.

# Stigma, embarrassment and trust...

Embarrassment and stigma prevented people asking for help...

- *“Even if I go to my Mum...and say “Mum, can I borrow £20 for some electric?” I find that embarrassing. So I try not to put myself in that situation.”* (Barbara)

Lack of trust in the market or support agencies prevented people from receiving potential help earlier:

- *“I just can’t see the point of swap, change, swap, change, keep trying to find the best deal...they’re [Energy companies] all basically the same. They’re all in it for the same reasons.”* (Annette and Pete)
- *“You’re asking someone to actually divulge information with a complete stranger. We explain we’re Tenancy Support, we’re not the rent officer...we are there to offer support, but even with that, they still see you as somebody in authority...you’ve got to chip that away and that takes ages.”* (Tenancy Support Officer)



# Summary and implications...

- Fuel poverty is predominantly understood as resulting from technical (and market) failures:
  - Energy efficiency and switching are thus positioned as core solutions.
- For tenants energy vulnerability is an intensely *emotional* experience, yet this has been neglected to date.
- Energy vulnerability shapes *and is shaped by* multiple emotions.

# Summary and implications...

Emotions can help cause energy vulnerability and hinder attempts to address it in 3 main ways:

- i. Fear, anxiety, worry shapes heating regimes and other energy-using practices.
- ii. Embarrassment, stigma and fear shape the kinds of support that is asked for and received.
- iii. Trust in suppliers and worry about costs shapes engagement in the retail energy market.

## Summary and implications...

- There is a need to better understand the role(s) of emotions in energy poverty and explore ways of building this into policy and practice.
- When intervening, time needs to be taken to create safe, shared spaces where trusting relationships, as well as financial and energy literacy, can be built.
- Energy poverty is a complex, dynamic and multi-faceted problem that requires ‘folk-first’ approaches (Baker et al 2018) that are developed and evaluated in the context of the lived experience.

# Thank you!

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# Emotional relations and practices

- Emotions historically seen as inferior to thought and reason; sources of bias that cloud vision and judgement; and thus to be excluded from research and policy.
- BUT, emotions increasingly understood as relational practices:
  - Emotions as generated by and expressive of wider social relations.
  - Emotional expressions as socially and culturally conditioned practices that generate effects.
- Key question: ‘What do emotions do?’ (Ahmed 2004, p4)
- Emotions recognized as central to economic decision-making and functioning of markets (e.g. housing market - Christie et al 2008)
- Energy itself not seen as an emotional object, but the practices it serves could be (Sahakian and Bertho 2018)