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# Plugging the Gap Between Energy Policy and the Lived Experience of Energy Poverty: Five Principles for a Multidisciplinary Approach

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and Koen Straver*

**Abstract** In this chapter, we illustrate the value of a multidisciplinary approach to energy poverty policy, drawing on insights from research into the lived experience of energy poverty in three European countries. We argue that understanding the lived experience of energy poverty is critical in designing energy policies which are fair, effective and

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aligned with people's daily lives. In addition, we contend that bringing together a range of disciplines to examine dimensions of the lived experience of energy poverty (such as housing, employment, education, social policy, health, energy, etc.) is essential to give breadth to our understanding of this challenging and multifaceted condition. We propose five principles for policy design, informed by our multidisciplinary understanding of the lived experience. These principles can be applied at a range of scales (local, regional, national and European) to help ensure that the energy poor are both well served, and represented, by energy policy.

**Keywords** Energy poverty • Energy vulnerability • Lived experience • Multidisciplinary

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Energy poverty is a fast-developing policy agenda at both European and other international levels. The launch of the European Union Energy Poverty Observatory (EPOV) in January 2018 marked an important moment in the connection of this policy agenda with academic research, as it is designed to encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration between policymakers, practitioners and academics in this field (EPOV 2018). It also reveals that the way different nations are driving this agenda is uneven: while policy on energy poverty is well established in some nations (the UK) and has made a strong start in others (Ireland, France), many nations around the European Union have yet to instigate policy on this topic. This policy agenda sometimes emerges at the local level (Spain and the Netherlands), in the absence of national targets or support (Straver et al. 2017). The agenda is sometimes resisted, or contested, with energy poverty being characterised as a problem of unemployment or poverty more generally (Germany, Spain, Denmark).

We are four energy poverty researchers, with a variety of disciplinary influences (Sociology, Social Policy, Psychology, Development Studies, Environmental Politics, Sustainability Social Science, Critical Geography and Policy Studies), committed to understanding the daily lives of energy poor households and to using that understanding to inform

policy. The launch of EPOV, and the resulting attention being paid to the varied evolution of this agenda across the EU, gives us fresh impetus to argue for the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to energy poverty, and indeed energy policy more generally, based in a deep understanding of the lived experience.<sup>1</sup> Through our qualitative research and experiences in a number of European nations (the Netherlands, Spain, the UK), we have found that building a nuanced understanding of energy poverty, which takes into account the lived experience of fuel poor households, as well as how place and forms of vulnerability impact on those experiences, is essential in order to build meaningful policy and practice. In our work, we construct this broader picture by connecting research from disciplines active in researching the lived experience, with analysis of policy and practice on this topic. In doing so we make similar arguments to our colleagues writing in this volume about the importance of understanding daily life before attempting to intervene (Aberg et al., Chap. 4 in this collection). Here, we argue that integrating insights into the lived experience of energy poverty into policy and practice design is essential to ensure that action is meaningful and productive.

The growing body of academic research which aims to detail the lived experience of the energy poor (Day and Hitchings 2011; Middlemiss and Gillard 2015; Chard and Walker 2016; Butler and Sherriff 2017; Gillard et al. 2017; Pellicer-Sifres 2018) foregrounds a context-specific understanding of the varied challenges associated with a lack of access to energy services. Our own research on the lived experience of energy poverty in three European nations leads us to characterise this problem as multifaceted, and thus requiring a multidisciplinary response: it reaches into multiple domains of people's lives (housing, employment status, education, social relations, health, energy, etc.) and brings to light the interconnected nature of both these domains and the potential for vulnerability associated with these. These multiple dimensions of the problem, and the way they interact, are more likely to be unveiled by taking a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on lenses from different Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines.

As academics who research the lived experience, we frequently make alliances with practitioners whose work involves direct engagement with energy poor households. Based on these encounters with local activists, we are interested in ways of addressing the gap between the lived (local)

experience and the design and delivery of policy interventions. Energy poverty policy aims to impact on people's daily lives, alleviating the challenges that they face and increasing their access to energy services. In approaching this problem through the lived experience, we notice that policy at the national level is failing to substantively address this problem on the ground (Middlemiss and Gillard 2015; Pellicer-Sifres 2018). In England, for instance, the measurement and definition of the problem of energy poverty creates a narrow interpretation, which does not reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the lived experience (Middlemiss 2017). In our research in the Netherlands, local action and enthusiasm for this cross-cutting agenda has so far failed to stimulate a coordinated policy and investment schedule at a national level. Similarly, we find that in Spain, local policies willing to tackle energy poverty find resistance in national policies, which don't explicitly recognise the problem and therefore decline to modify laws and regulations. In each of these cases, a narrow understanding has produced technical and disconnected policy responses. Generally speaking, relying on just one or multiple aggregate indicators, such as income, demographic or geography, produces policies and schemes that are failing to meet the needs of households.

To remedy this, we call for a multidisciplinary approach that links the lived experience of the energy poor, to local, national or regional policy on the topic. To do that, we offer three vignettes (Boxes 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3) inspired by our empirical research in three different countries.<sup>2</sup> They show a range of life trajectories, allowing us to appreciate the complexity and the impact of different forms of vulnerability on the problem. In the vignettes, we show how energy poverty is linked to multiple dimensions of people's lives (housing quality, employment opportunities, health effects, etc.) and how existing policies either succeed or fail in tackling them. In Sect. 2.2, we reflect on the challenge of considering this complexity when designing and delivering policy, as well as the potential to address current policy shortcomings by interpreting these vignettes from a multidisciplinary perspective. In Sect. 2.3, we propose five principles for designing policy informed by the lived experience. These insights are also relevant to broader questions in energy policy about ensuring a fair transition to a low-carbon future, which we address in our conclusions.

**Box 2.1 Netherlands vignette**

*Suzanne lives in Amersfoort with her two children Eva (6) and Mark (4). She was divorced last year and recently found herself in debt. She was left responsible for the mortgage, the costs of taking care of the children, groceries, and so on. Suzanne worked part time; her husband used to make a salary that covered most expenses. With her small salary she was not able to pay all monthly bills, and within five months her first reminders for payment turned into debts. There might be services, websites or municipality aids available to her, but she does not know where to find them or how to make use of them. The stress of taking care of the children and working as much as she can makes it difficult to find the time to fill in these forms. She has debts with her energy provider, amongst others. She does not know how to pay these debts, or how to save energy. To her, it is a fact of life and one of the many problems she's meaning to fix once things are less hectic.*

*There is no national policy on energy poverty in the Netherlands, which results in local governments that recognise this problem acting independently to tackle it. Therefore interventions for energy poverty are dispersed and temporary, with a common tendency to 're-invent the wheel', usually through short-term projects with low budgets. National data on the number of people struggling with energy poverty, or a coordinated national plan to support these people, are non-existent. From the perspective of the municipalities, housing corporations and health workers it is clear that helping households with energy advice can prevent debts, reduce expenditures, save energy, enhance living conditions and in some cases even create jobs when unemployed people are trained to give energy advice.*

**Box 2.2 Spain vignette**

*Tania and Manuel and their two daughters (three and five years old), based in Barcelona, have recently occupied an empty building owned by an important bank, with four other families. Tania works as a cleaner in an office, and Manuel has been working as a taxi driver for the last 30 years, but six months ago he was declared unable to work due to a health problem. Now, the family's income has been drastically reduced,*

*and they just manage to buy food and pay their water and energy bills, but they are unable to pay rent or any other extra expenses. Although they have paid their electricity bills, recently their energy company (one of the five biggest in Spain) cut their supply, arguing that they were living illegally. Fortunately, the family, together with neighbours, belongs to a social organisation fighting against energy poverty. Together they arranged a new electricity contract with a local citizens' energy cooperative, which did not ask them about their ownership. Tania and Manuel would not be able to negotiate this on their own, but bargaining collectively makes them feel safer.*

*In the city of Barcelona, the local municipality is trying to provide housing alternatives for families at risk of social exclusion, like Tania and Manuel. The council is negotiating with banks and private companies in order to make them rent out (at accessible and protected prices) some of the huge numbers of empty houses they have accumulated during the Spanish financial crises as a result of repossession of properties. Some of these empty houses are already occupied, but there is a lack of national regulation regarding when the energy company can cut off the supply in these situations: while the big five energy companies (considered to have political alliances with the banks who own these properties) reclaim ownership in order to supply energy, other small energy cooperatives recognise the problem of those families and offer facilities and discounts. The local municipality works closely with activists fighting against energy poverty, since they best understand the problems of local people.*

### **Box 2.3 UK vignette**

*Clive is in his 50s and lives alone in an old terrace house in a small market town. After losing his job because of ill health, he was homeless for a long time. His house is rented, and it was the first one that the local council could offer him after being on a waiting list for many months. The house has draughty windows and doors, no wall or loft insulation and an inefficient heating system. Because he rents the property from the council, Clive has to wait for them to make any improvements to the*

*house, because he can't afford to do them himself. Because Clive's ill health has left him almost immobile, he is not able to work regularly or get out much to socialise. He works 'cash in hand' jobs whenever he is well enough, but this income is not enough to pay all the bills, so he has stopped using the central heating and now only heats—and lives in—one room in the house. Because his work patterns and health are unpredictable, Clive doesn't claim state benefits or seek help with energy efficiency improvements—he never knows whether he is eligible or not and would struggle to find the necessary paperwork to prove it. Due to his social isolation, community health workers are the only people who see his living conditions, and nobody is aware of his precarious work and income situation.*

*Social housing policy in the UK, at least where it is provided by local governments, is in such high demand that single adults without dependents have to wait a long time before they are eligible and have very limited choice. For someone like Clive, having to live in a poor-quality house in a relatively remote location is a major problem but it is his only option. Similarly, welfare support and energy efficiency policies are laden with conditions, leaving Clive confused and disinclined to investigate whether he is eligible for support. Ultimately, his current means of survival require him to work flexibly and cope with ill health almost on his own. Thankfully, the National Health Service in the UK provides community-based support, which means Clive gets to see health workers when he is ill. In this instance, there is an opportunity for the community health team to work across sectors and to provide Clive with additional advice and information, and to refer him to other means of support. Without this support, he would not receive the help he is entitled to.*

## 2.2 A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO PLUGGING THE GAP

Suzanne, Tania and Manuel, and Clive's stories show how vulnerabilities to energy poverty manifest themselves in a variety of ways. This reminds us of how complex an experience energy poverty is: it can intersect with challenges relating to health, social isolation, mobility, unemployment, education, housing, climate change, income, the energy market and energy regulations (and probably more). These intersecting dimensions result in

different solutions being appropriate in different contexts. In addition, they make it essential to draw on the insights of multiple disciplines, from those painting a picture of the lived experience and beyond.

Drawing on a range of disciplinary insights to design and implement policy responses to energy poverty allows us to obtain a deeper appreciation of the causes and consequences of the problem, since it is likely to capture a more holistic description of people's experiences. For example, when a health researcher talks to someone experiencing energy poverty, they will elicit a different kind of response to a psychologist, a sociologist, an activist or a housing or poverty researcher (to name just a few). Where a health researcher might explore energy poverty consequences on physical health, a psychologist would focus on mental health, a sociologist would find difference regarding the social roles and power relations inside the household and an activist would be interested in empowering vulnerable people. When these disciplines are brought into conversation, they are likely to represent the experiences of the energy poor in a more nuanced and complete way.

In the world of policy and politics, the combined application of a number of disciplines could produce both practical recommendations and emotive arguments for addressing energy poverty. Arguably, politics and policy are two sides of the same coin, but productive action is more likely to be forthcoming when both are pulling in the same direction. With regard to the practicalities of policy: health, social care, energy and education tend to take an interest in households that are also vulnerable to energy poverty and could certainly share best-practice experiences. With regard to political agendas: energy poverty can provide emotive and powerful arguments for developing coalitions and drawing attention to injustices. For example, in the Netherlands, the NGO Milieudefensie financed research on the affordability of energy, which showed that Dutch industry gets more government subsidy for its energy use than Dutch households do, and, in addition, low-income households pay more for energy than high-income households do (Schep and Vergeer 2018). Combining policy insights from different domains on how to engage with energy poor households, together with political claims about distributional fairness, allows us to address this problem in a rather holistic way.

Combining disciplinary insights also has analytical benefits. For instance, creating a picture of the multi-dimensional nature of energy poverty through different disciplinary insights enables us to reveal the

mismatches, overlaps and the unintended consequences of policies in different sectors. This is particularly important, given the complex nature of the unit of analysis (the household), at which the intersecting nature of many policies can be seen. In practice, engaging in multidisciplinary work on the lived experience also affords us opportunities to find ways of talking, and theorising, across disciplines. For instance, in our own work, we have used the concepts of energy justice, capabilities, social learning and social mobilisation to enrich our analysis and build collaborations with colleagues from different disciplines.

Such multidisciplinary and multi-sector work is often called for in public policy research and practice. For instance, ‘policy integration’ and ‘joined-up service delivery’ are common phrases in the literature, each stressing the potential benefits of cost savings, policy learning, multidisciplinary input, good governance, trust building and positive outcomes for the targets of policies (e.g. Entwistle and Martin 2005; Meijers and Stead 2004). Furthermore, valuing the lived experience and ‘bottom up perspective’ of practitioners is also a common feature in this literature. Research on distributional and procedural justice (Walker and Day 2012) within public policy makes a strong case for including the lived experience in all stages of the policy process: from agenda setting and policy formulation, right the way through to implementation and evaluation (Birkland 2015; Gillard et al. 2017).

### 2.3 FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE INFORMED BY THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

How might the understandings we can build from multidisciplinary work on the lived experience translate into policy at a national, subnational or supranational scale? In order to facilitate policy design which builds on the lived experience, we offer five guiding principles, each with a brief example evidencing their importance. These principles are based on our collective understanding of the possibilities for more integrated policy and practice, built on a combination of lived experience research, and thinking about the connection between multidisciplinary understandings and policy (see ‘Acknowledgements’ for a full account of the empirical work we are building on). These principles are intentionally broad and open to flexibility and future refinement, for example, there may be tensions between them

and some may be more practicable than others depending on context and level of policymaking. These principles should also resonate beyond public administration, having relevance for energy companies, non-government organisations and charities who all encounter and work with energy poor households.

1. **Consider opportunities for joined-up and integrated policy:** A multidisciplinary understanding of the lived experience of energy poverty necessitates a clear commitment to coordinated action across multiple policy domains. As we have seen, it is frequently difficult to separate out policy domains and the impact they have on people's lives. For instance, people face health challenges as a result of the cold which can lead to, and be exacerbated by, unemployment, social isolation and deteriorating housing conditions. In the UK, there is a growing emphasis on the cross-over between health and energy poverty policy goals. As such, policy support is increasingly targeted at households with long-term health conditions, and partnerships with the health sector are being developed to help avoid costs to the healthcare system because of energy poverty.

Given the privatised and liberalised nature of the energy industry in the UK, this also has to encompass non-state actors. Indeed, we see evidence of joined-up integrated action in practice when, for instance, private actors who service different domains attempt to coordinate their response to vulnerability (e.g. water, electricity and gas companies working together to share best-practice insights and to co-deliver support for vulnerable households such as the 'Stronger Together Coalition' in Wales).

2. **Building momentum through networks and partnerships:** The requirement for joined-up, integrated policy is always a challenge, given that governments and non-state actors might not have a history of working together on these matters. As a result, there is a need to build momentum through advocacy. This might include from below, such as in the Netherlands where the agenda is established at a local level, but less well recognised nationally. This can also be promoted by supply companies, as in the case of the Spanish citizen energy cooperative Som Energia, which has agreements with local councils from municipalities where Som Energia identifies defaults on bills. Once Som Energia identifies a household likely to

be energy vulnerable, it passes on this information to the department of social services in the city council. The cost of supply is shared by both Som Energia and social services, and an intervention on energy efficiency is led by local actors specialised in that domain. There are also opportunities to make alliances across nations, through transnational networks of local authorities and energy justice campaign groups, for instance. The current enthusiasm at the EU level is also helpful for this agenda, providing a top-down pressure for member states and policymakers to address the issue. Note that the purpose of advocacy here is to expose the multifaceted nature of this problem, and to engage a range of state and non-state actors in designing ways to address this problem which reflect the complexity of the lived experience.

3. **Expecting the unexpected:** Given that we know that this is a complex, and multifaceted, problem, policymakers and practitioners need to be alert to the possibility of intersecting challenges and unintended consequences. This requires flexible and reactive forms of governance, which incorporate opportunities for feedback, monitoring and evaluation. For example, many practitioners we have worked with report the co-occurrence of energy poverty and other social issues, such as mental health problems and social isolation, which presents unique challenges. Actors need to be equipped with the skills and resources to support households in the most appropriate ways. For example, service providers we have worked with in the UK noted that recognising—and responding to—the needs and expectations of energy poor households can sometimes require labour-intensive casework and ‘bending the rules’ of official policy frameworks, for example, around eligibility criteria. Often, organisations working on energy poverty find themselves dealing with complex mental health needs, helping households claim benefits they are entitled to or overlapping with social services in providing family support—all of which require significant amounts of personal skills, professional competence and resources.
4. **Measuring progress holistically:** Where national policy does exist, governments approach measurement of progress in a number of ways. Some governments are inclined towards a simple indicator for energy poverty (England), others opt for a ‘basket’ of indicators (France) and still others are more inclined towards an open approach

(Ireland). When informed by the lived experience, we argue that measurement must aim to capture the multifaceted nature of this problem: in practice this means drawing on multiple quantitative and qualitative indicators which relate to the various facets of energy poverty (e.g. income, housing, health, social isolation, mobility, climate change) to give a fuller picture of the problem and to allow unintended consequences to be observed. In addition, we should acknowledge the wider positive impacts of tackling energy poverty, such as improvements to infrastructure and housing, more community activity, local economic benefits and avoided costs to public services. In the city of Leeuwarden (the Netherlands), budget has been jointly allocated from the municipality and the province of Groningen for energy advisors to visit low-income households. The business case for this resource is made by summing up the saved CO<sub>2</sub> from the energy advice, the creation of jobs and the increase in income for households as a result of monthly savings.

5. **Just get on with it:** While our principles 1–4 suggest a slow and considered approach to this policy area, ensuring that we get to grips with its complexity and engage with its multiple facets, there is also much to be said for having a go and developing ideas through reflective practice. This might involve doing work in spite of the wider political and policy context, for example, advocating change and building capacity in local government networks and looking to international policy definitions and measurements to help build evidence. For example, in Spain, local government energy transition strategy often implies that deep changes in the political, economic and social arena are essential. This would mean removing power from dominant actors, and instigating public control. It would mean a clash with national government interests, which are focused on maintaining control of the energy market. Faced with this barrier, progressive initiatives must not stay paralysed, instead looking for alliances in new or powerful actors, such as the European Commission or a new body of energy cooperatives that have recently emerged. For instance, the three northern provinces of the Netherlands and 15 of their municipalities are currently producing an action plan to fight energy poverty in the region, as they see the multiple benefits of such a plan, and do not want to wait for national policy to be developed.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

Our principles for policy and practice informed by the lived experience are important in thinking about energy poverty, but also have a role in influencing the broader direction of energy policy in relation to low-carbon futures. Energy policies increasingly attempt to incorporate justice and equity principles in their design, aiming for a fair and efficient transition towards a low-carbon energy system. An understanding of the lived experience of the energy poor, and how this is impacted by wider social and energy policy objectives, is essential in order to achieve an equitable future. In our research in relatively wealthy societies, people regularly have to make life- and health-limiting decisions about their access to energy. People's decisions are frequently based on trade-offs between different domains of their lives: maintaining good health, eating, heating and washing. Our own research, and others cited in this chapter, illustrate how qualitative research methods and context-sensitive engagement with households can enrich our understandings of lived experiences. For policymakers and frontline organisations, these methods can be utilised to inform policy development and evaluate its implementation.

Given that we already see substantial differences in people's lives depending on their access to these resources, there is a risk of the Matthew effect (Merton 1995: where rich become richer and poor become poorer) taking hold as we attempt to decarbonise energy supply. Indeed, if we are to achieve any kind of distributional justice in the future, building on lived experience research to avoid further deprivation for energy poor households is vital. The energy transition has the potential to increase living standards for all, but also holds the risk of further degrading the lives of the energy poor if policies are not integrated across domains and built on understandings of everyday life.

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## NOTES

1. By 'lived experience', we mean qualitative, deep understandings of the daily lives of people who are categorised as experiencing energy poverty.
2. We built these vignettes at a workshop, following reflections on how lived experience research reveals the absence of adequate policy. The vignettes are based on real-life examples but are amalgamated characters designed to show the links between policy and everyday life.

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