



Original research article

Advancing an energy justice perspective of fuel poverty: Household vulnerability and domestic retrofit policy in the United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

The concept of energy justice has brought philosophies of ethics and principles of social justice to bear on a range of contemporary energy issues. More inter-disciplinary and applied endeavours are now needed to take this field forward. One such application is to the issue of fuel poverty and the challenge of retrofitting inefficient housing stock. An energy justice perspective sees fuel poverty as a fundamentally socio-political injustice, not just one of uneven distribution. Starting from this premise, we highlight the multiple injustices faced by two groups who are regarded by policymakers as being particularly vulnerable to fuel poverty: disabled people and low-income families. In the UK, these groups are nominally prioritised within fuel poverty policy, but their complex situations are not always fully appreciated. Building on the theoretical foundations of energy justice, we present an inter-disciplinary dialogue that connects this approach with wider vulnerability research and domestic energy efficiency policy. Specifically, we discuss ‘within group’ heterogeneity (recognition justice), stakeholder engagement in policy and governance (procedural justice) and the overlap of multiple structural inequalities (distributional justice). In each section we illustrate the added value of combining justice and vulnerability conceptualisations by linking them to domestic energy efficiency schemes.

1. Introduction: understanding vulnerability to fuel poverty from a justice perspective

A number of academic books, journal issues and articles have sought to elaborate a history of, and future for, the notion of energy justice (e.g. [1]). Drawing on the more established traditions of social and environmental justice, they apply a range of philosophical principles and social science concepts to analyse contemporary issues related to energy systems, applying them to specific scales of governance and to the global political economy of energy as a whole [2–5]. Recent meta-reviews of this emerging field of research call for even greater synthesis across nations, and a whole systems approach [6,7], whilst others focus on household and community level issues [8–10]. Aligning more with the latter, our contribution brings the energy justice literature into dialogue with the broad notion of ‘vulnerability’ to offer some specific policy recommendations with regards to domestic energy efficiency.

Recent fuel poverty research has sought to engage with a more dynamic notion of ‘energy vulnerability’ in order to consider the social and political – in addition to the technical and economic – drivers of energy inequalities [11,12]. In social policy studies the concept of

vulnerability is used to understand systemic drivers, and household level experiences, of deprivation. By drawing on this literature we open up another avenue of interdisciplinary work for the energy vulnerability concept, encouraging more consideration of the social and political drivers of certain groups’ vulnerability to the experience of fuel poverty. Broadly, this work cuts across all four levels of energy social science set out by Spreng [13]: linking values and norms with pragmatic questions about the empirical reality of fuel poverty and inefficient housing. Specifically, we seek to extend reading of fuel poverty as injustice – first set out by Walker and Day [14] – by drawing on social policy insights about the nature of vulnerability and applying this to two groups that are disproportionately represented in fuel poverty statistics, but under-represented in research.

The rationale for focussing on disabled people and low-income families comes from both policy and research. In the UK’s fuel poverty strategies, these two groups – along with older people – are officially recognised as being the most vulnerable [15,16]. This was reflected in the adoption of more stringent targets for eradicating fuel poverty among these groups,¹ as well as in the design of specific policy instruments. However, historically, the dominant political and public

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¹ Previously the target was to eradicate fuel poverty among these groups sooner than in the general population. Although this target was abandoned in 2015, targeting the most severely fuel poor and vulnerable is still an explicit ‘guiding principle’ for policymakers.

discourse of fuel poverty has focussed on older people, resulting in relatively more policy instruments targeted at this group and a narrow stereotype equating fuel poverty with images of the ‘old and cold’ [17]. As Snell et al. [18] and Guertler and Royston [19] have already shown, disabled people and low-income families tend to be under-represented in these debates and in policy decisions, sometimes worsening the inequalities they face. As such, this review article contributes to achieving greater parity for these groups.

Disabilities studies and the literature on child poverty have a rich history of analysing injustice and vulnerability. They share a number of key concerns with regards to the causes and impacts of multiple forms of deprivation. The prevalence of poverty, and also fuel poverty, among disabled people is high due to various socio-economic barriers and is exacerbated by limitations around finding adequate housing and energy services [18,20,21]. Similarly many low-income families facing financial constraints live in poor quality housing, which has negative consequences for their children’s well-being, psychological development and social mobility [22,23].

In the UK, economic austerity has hit both groups particularly hard. Both have seen significant cuts to their welfare provision as part of the government’s agenda to ‘get people off benefits and into work’ [24]. However, this has led to thousands of disabled people being inappropriately declared ‘fit for work’ and suffering severe health consequences [25], and two thirds of children living in poverty continue to come from households where someone is employed in precarious or low-pay work [26,27]. These sorts of macro level pressures on income cross over with household level pressures (e.g. energy needs) to produce high levels of fuel poverty. Clearly then, a much more detailed understanding of the multiple drivers of these groups’ vulnerability is needed in order to inform multiple policy agendas that have the potential to mitigate the pressures they face.

Following theories of social and environmental justice, energy justice is usually conceptualised as incorporating three distinct but interrelated forms of inequality: distribution (of goods and services among groups), procedure (for determining and contesting distribution), and recognition (of different groups’ needs and rights) [5]. Each refers to specific aspects of injustice, but they are often co-extant and mutually reinforcing; or in Schlosberg’s words ‘one cannot simply talk of one aspect of justice without it leading to another’ ([28]: 527). Illustrating this, Walker and Day [14] apply them to the issue of fuel poverty (see Fig. 1), arguing for greater consideration of recognition and procedural issues in order to remedy the fundamental distributional inequalities that typically define fuel poverty i.e. low income, high-energy costs, and inefficient dwellings [29]. Such an integrated view of justice raises questions about how differing levels of energy needs are recognised and addressed in society.

Beginning from the same basic assumption of interrelatedness, that meaningful recognition and fair procedures are prerequisites to distributional justice, we set out to enhance the energy justice perspective of what makes fuel poor households vulnerable and to apply this understanding to the policy challenge of improving their dwellings’ energy efficiency. First, we focus on the issue of heterogeneity within groups, arguing for a more nuanced *recognition* of energy needs and their link to vulnerability. Then, with regards to due process in *procedural* issues, we note the various barriers to participation faced by some households, highlighting tensions between prominent policy discourses of vulnerability and self-reliance. Lastly, we explore the prevalence of the main *distributional* inequalities of fuel poverty (income, energy costs and efficiency) among the two groups, considering the way they overlap with other structural drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation.

At the end of each section we link the theoretical discussion to government policies intended to address fuel poverty in the UK. Given the UK Government’s prioritisation of domestic energy efficiency as the primary solution to fuel poverty [30,31], this is where we focus our attention. On the one hand these policy instruments are increasingly attractive to governments because of their potential co-benefits e.g. reducing greenhouse gas emissions and creating jobs [32,33]. On the other hand, they often struggle to reach the most vulnerable households, raising fundamental questions about who pays for, and who benefits from, these policies [34,35]. This analysis offers valuable insights for the UK, where energy efficiency policy is currently being revised, and also for other countries seeking to address inequalities in their energy systems. As Sovacool et al. [36] and Heffron and McCauley [37] have recently argued, clearly articulated energy justice principles are essential for enabling policymakers and planners to create fairer systems that protect the most vulnerable now and in the future.

2. Recognising the links between energy needs and vulnerability

Recognition justice acknowledges the various needs, rights and experiences of different groups, often setting out a rationale for social and political action. As Silvers ([38]: 254) explains ‘to differ from the majority—that is, to be in the minority—is not itself sufficient to justify the imposition of social disadvantage, nor does their benefiting the majority excuse public policies that cause minorities to be worse off’. Therefore, justice based policies ought to do the opposite; redress disadvantage to provide a level playing field. This principle is at the heart of the social contract philosophy of Rawls [39] and in the capabilities approach of Sen [40] and Nussbaum [41]. Drawing on recent debates around the politics of recognition, we build on these fundamental ethical principles to advance a critique of fuel poverty as an instance of recognition injustice.

Justice theorists in the social contract tradition of Rawls and the welfare economics of Sen, seek to articulate, and base policy on, a set of entitlements and capabilities that underpin a fulfilling life. Among the widely cited list of ten ‘central capabilities’ with universal appeal put forward by Nussbaum [41], energy plays an important role in at least five, including: bodily health and integrity, social affiliation, play, and political participation. This link has been picked up by energy justice scholars and applied to multiple contexts. In designing energy systems, Sovacool et al. [4] claim that energy services should be considered a right if they are instrumental in ensuring access to the basic goods people are entitled to under universal human rights frameworks (such as clean water, food and shelter). At the household level, Walker et al. [42] and Davis et al. [43] have provided qualitative and quantitative accounts of what such a ‘minimum standard’ of energy services should be, as well as the negative consequences of not attaining it.

Energy can be described as an ‘instrumental good’, inasmuch as it enables the fulfilment of services such as thermal comfort, indoor lighting, cooking and washing. However, the amount of energy needed by any one person or household to achieve the same level of services

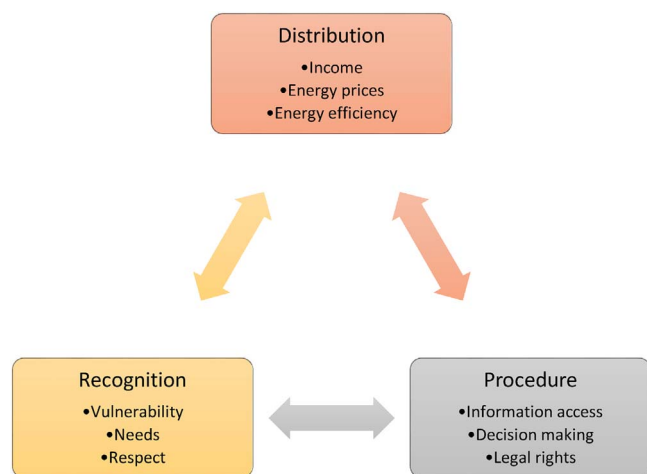


Fig. 1. Fuel poverty as three types of interrelated energy justice (based on [14]).

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