



Introduction

Abstract This introductory chapter outlines the book’s central concern with energy poverty and sets the context for the arguments addressed and advanced through its pages. A significant existing literature has examined issues of energy poverty, with key interventions using concepts of energy vulnerability, precarity, and capabilities. But an equally large body of work has examined problems of reducing energy demand by focusing on the importance of reshaping and shifting practices. Though these two major literatures on energy demand issues occasionally intersect, they have rarely been brought into direct conversation with one another. The book examines issues of energy poverty with focus on advancing conceptual debates by engaging with ideas that span these two areas, principally those concerning capabilities, precarity, and practice. In doing so, it contributes to the frontiers of energy poverty research and responds to critiques of practice-informed analyses of energy demand that highlight the limited attention given to inequalities within such work.

Keywords Energy poverty · Capabilities · Practice theory · Invisible energy policy · Energy needs

ENERGY POVERTY, PRACTICE, AND (INVISIBLE ENERGY) POLICY

Energy poverty refers to issues that span access to energy, energy deprivation, and its under-use within daily life. Broadly, the central concern of research and policy in this space is with the negative outcomes that a lack of energy use has for wellbeing. Within the UK and many other global contexts, the focus has often been on those that cannot afford to heat their homes, with solutions posed as ones principally involving building efficiency and to a lesser extent affordability. Within the academic literature, however, there has been increasing recognition of the complex and multifaceted set of issues involved in both creating and addressing problems of energy poverty. This body of work has made key conceptual interventions that put forward important arguments about how energy poverty can, or even should be, understood. These concern centrally a shift beyond a focus on heat, efficiency, and affordability to take in a much wider range of issues, dimensions, and dynamics that are important in shaping energy poverty.

One such area of conceptual development has been in the move from understanding energy poverty as a static state that a person is either ‘in’ or not, to analysis of the conditions that shape or lead to such experiences—termed energy vulnerability (see Bouzarovski, 2018). Though this step within understanding has been extremely important, it has also been critiqued for displacing focus from the wider structural and social processes implicated in creating conditions of energy poverty. This is because vulnerabilities research tends to examine the characteristics and capacities of the person (such as whether someone is disabled, young, elderly, low income, and so forth), consequently individualising the causes of energy poverty (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015).

Moving beyond this, then, energy poverty scholars, such as Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015), Petrova (2018), Day et al. (2016), Simcock et al. (2016), and Middlemiss et al. (2019), have worked with concepts of energy services, precarity, and capabilities offering a stronger basis for analysis of the socio-political dynamics shaping experiences of energy poverty. This work marks several important shifts within understandings of energy poverty. First, Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015) have engaged the concept of energy services to bring focus on the benefits that people derive from using energy, such as mobility, lighting, cooking, and

so on, rather than the energy itself. This entails recognition of the ways that domestic energy poverty is only fully understood by looking across multiple energy services and their interconnections, as well as taking analysis beyond the confines of the home. It also brings focus on the ways that fulfilment of energy needs underpins many of the ‘functionings’ that enable people to have a (minimally) decent quality of life (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015, p. 34; see also Simcock et al., 2016).

This work highlights the importance of examining the driving forces of energy poverty in terms of the ways that abilities to meet energy service needs are affected by multiple factors. Such factors include vulnerabilities but also encompass the ‘concatenation of activities, infrastructures, and resources necessary to provide households with energy’ (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015, p. 35). A concern with provisioning thus brings into view the combination of social, economic, political, and infrastructural factors that contribute to people being in positions of energy poverty.

Second, a set of interventions have built on this to bring conceptual focus on the capabilities framework as a way to create a more sophisticated understanding of energy poverty (e.g. Day et al., 2016; Middlemiss et al., 2019). This draws centrally on the work of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) where ‘capabilities’ to support opportunities for functioning and achieving wellbeing are argued to be central to human development. Capabilities include things like the ability to secure healthy food, or to engage politically, or secure income. This framework, and its attendant concepts, has been advanced within the energy poverty literature as a key way to engage with more complex understandings of the issues. Central to this is recognition that many capabilities are underpinned by or related to various energy services. Starting from the capabilities that energy affords offers a conceptual approach that can draw in the wide range of human needs that energy is utilised in meeting and, therefore, the multiple social and political processes involved in the conditioning of energy poverty. Energy poverty analysis has, then, come a long way from a narrow focus on issues of heat, efficiency, and cost, moving towards approaches that emphasise *what energy is for* and recognise the complexities of the dynamics shaping both its causes and the nature of lived experiences.

Within these conceptual developments, which have come to shape debates about energy poverty, scholars make occasional references across to the major theoretical advances arising from a wider energy demand research agenda that is grounded in practice theory (e.g. Bouzarovski &

Petrova, 2015; Day et al., 2016). The practice theory-inspired literature has been primarily concerned with issues of environmental sustainability related to energy demand, mounting an important critique of behavioural or efficiency approaches within policy (e.g. Shove, 2010, 2017). This critique asserts that such approaches are highly limited because they fail to engage with more fundamental questions concerning how our particular requirements for energy are constructed and reproduced (e.g. see Shove, 2003; Shove et al., 2012).

Shove (2003), amongst others, has asserted that rather than focusing on improving the efficiency of technologies that support and engender particular kinds of practices, energies should be directed towards examining the specification of need and the processes by which various forms of demand come to be considered normal. Equally, to understand why people do or do not buy more efficient technologies or drive more frequently, the challenge becomes one of ‘understanding the collective transformation of convention and hence the dynamics of energy demand’ (Shove, 2004: 1055). This approach to thinking about energy demand gives cause to examine the ways that everyday practice is shaped and comes to be seen as normal. In this, analyses have demonstrated the role of government objectives, investments, and ways of working in shaping social practice and, in doing so, constituting the need for energy in the home, at work, and in moving around.

Indeed, an emerging area of practice theory-inspired energy research has sought to explicitly examine the role of government strategies, policies, and processes in shaping practices with implications both for how we understand problems of energy demand and for how we define the parameters of relevant governance (Butler et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2019; Gormally et al., 2019; Greene & Fahy, 2020; Royston et al., 2018). A central claim of this work is that requirements for energy are shaped, shifted, and constituted through a wide range of different intersecting policy areas, reaching far beyond energy policy *per se*. This body of emerging work has coined the terms ‘invisible’ or ‘non-energy’ policy as ways to characterise the analytic endeavour. A range of policy areas have been addressed under this remit, including education (Gormally et al., 2019; Royston, 2016), health (Blue, 2017), digital communications (Morley et al., 2018), and in my own work, welfare policy (Butler et al., 2018). These analyses have worked to show how different policy areas have implications for energy demand and related issues.

These key ideas from within practice theory-based energy research have been developed within multiple studies addressed at the environmental sustainability implications of energy demand, but rarely have they been used to think about energy poverty. Conversely, a key critique of practice theory-based analyses of energy demand cites the inadequacy of such approaches to account for inequality and power relations (Walker, 2013). Though not inherent to wider practice theory (cf. Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 1991), relations of power and inequality have been largely neglected within practice-inspired energy demand research. A few existing conceptual contributions advance some areas of overlap, exploring inequality in discussions of practice theory and energy (e.g. Shove, 2002; Shove et al., 2012; Walker, 2013). But beyond this, these issues still remain largely unaddressed.

Within the energy poverty literature, the existing engagement with practice theory or practices (e.g. Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015; Day et al., 2016; Petrova, 2018) has signalled some clear touchstones for the ways that practice-theory thinking can be relevant for understanding energy poverty. For example, it has been influential in discussions about the importance of focusing on the practices for which energy is used, rather than energy itself. But this has not entailed a more detailed analytic endeavour to look across practice-theory conceptual work or engage in a deeper conversation with the fields of inquiry it has inspired. Both literatures offer central ideas that I argue here could be taken much further to advance understanding of energy poverty, as well as open-up avenues for future practice-based energy research that can better attune to relations of inequality.

This book is ambitious in seeking to explore how these different distinctive areas of analysis can be further advanced through dialogue with one another, developing the conversation along key conceptual lines. These concern, first, an interest in the ways that the invisible energy policy agenda—as a nascent area of practice-inspired energy research—has potential for thinking about energy poverty. In particular, I argue it can have important application for advancing existing energy poverty work that aims to bring the social and political processes shaping energy deprivation into view (cf. Petrova, 2018; Middlemiss, 2016).

For example, research has looked at the ways that energy deprivation is institutionalised and normalised through policy and governance with important implications for political mobilisation (Petrova, 2018). Analysis has also been addressed at the ways that *subjects* of fuel poverty policy

are constituted in particular ways compared with other policy areas. For instance, Middlemiss (2016) highlights how fuel poverty subjects tend to be cast as vulnerable and worthy of support, contrasting this with subjects of welfare policy that are often situated as undeserving and as harbouring individual deficits. I argue here that these ideas can be brought into dialogue with those from invisible energy policy to advance the research agenda with power and inequal relations more firmly in view. Though the invisible energy policy agenda offers potential for greater consideration of power, such issues and related conditions of inequality have yet to form a focus. I assert, therefore, that bringing analytic attention within invisible energy policy work onto energy poverty offers distinctive possibilities for developing future analysis across both areas.

Second, I bring a focus on the constitution of need and social reproduction of practice arguing this offers novel routes to further understand how energy deprivation is created and how it might be addressed. Working with these conceptual ideas takes analysis beyond looking at how abilities to *meet needs* are affected by wider social and political dynamics, to consider the processes through which those needs are actively constituted in the first place. Importantly, this brings into view the implications of the advancing energy intensity of societies for energy deprivation. Further, I show how by exploring the constitution of need in relation to energy poverty, insights can be opened up into how relations of inequality and power shape processes of social reproduction with implications for practice theory-based energy research. Centrally, these insights concern the specific ways that power relations operate through governance to differentially shape people's agency to resist, negotiate, and enact practices.

The book thus draws a line from practice theory-inspired ideas, arising from work on transitions and invisible energy policy, through to energy poverty analysis, wherein debates about vulnerability, precarity, and capabilities are advanced. In addition to generating insights relevant to both these areas of conceptual and empirical analysis, the book also intersects with the wider theoretical traditions on which these literatures draw, centrally practice theory, wellbeing, and capabilities. Though these different conceptual areas are well worn within energy demand and energy poverty research respectively, they are rarely integrated. For example, wellbeing is already important in debates about energy poverty but has been less central to debates about the constitution of need that are core to practice theory-based analyses of energy. In threading these different

conceptual areas together and working through them with an empirical analysis, the book seeks to make a contribution to theory that has a wider relevance for those outside of energy research.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY: METHODS AND APPROACH

The contributions of this book are developed through engagement with an empirical study that looked at UK welfare policy as an area of invisible or non-energy policy (see also Butler et al., 2018). Welfare policy represents a core part of governance systems for many countries and territories. It has a long history as a part of governance arrangements in capitalist democracies and has often been contentious forming a focus for ideologically driven political battles. Centrally, these battles concern how societies should or should not tackle inequality and are underpinned by beliefs about what creates inequality in the first place. In the UK, in particular, welfare and employment policy represents one of the government's highest expenditure areas and is frequently the focus of public debate and media attention. The importance of this policy area combined with its distance from specific energy directives denotes this as an interesting empirical case for examining 'invisible energy policy' or 'non-energy policy' (Royston et al., 2018).

By focusing on an area of policy outside of energy, the locus of analysis is shifted and, I argue, a different way of looking at energy demand issues is revealed. Crucially, it takes analysis beyond definitions and categorisations of energy problems as they are currently formulated within existing governance structures. Here, I use this different orientation and starting point to provide distinctive insights into energy poverty and advance new lines of questioning concerning the processes by which energy demand is re/produced and created.

The three-year (2015–2018) project consisted of methods including document analysis, in-depth qualitative and biographical interviews, and workshops. Each method and the approach adopted within the project are explained here. The project involved detailed analysis of key documentary materials relevant to the project aims. This focused on documents related to contemporary welfare reforms and energy demand policy arising from the two UK government departments with responsibilities in this area—namely the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS—and

the former Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC]). Documents analysed included parliamentary speeches, political party election manifestos, reports, strategy documents, presentations, academic literature, and government department websites. The documents selected included ones predating the start of the research project in 2015, spanning back to the early 1980s. However, the focus for the document analysis was primarily on the time-period since 2010 when a Conservative led Government was elected in the UK. This time-period was selected as a focus because it marked the beginnings of major contemporary welfare reforms.

The interviews involved a total of 62 participants with people implicated in different ways in governance across energy and welfare policy. This spanned people involved in; (1) national policy, including civil servants, agencies, and NGOs; (2) those in professional governance roles at city scales, such as within local government, agencies, and charities; and (3) people directly affected by welfare policy within their everyday lives. The research thus takes in different actors implicated in processes of governance, looking far beyond the state. In-depth interviews lasting 1–3 hours were conducted between September 2015 and July 2017 in two phases. A first phase engaged with those in national roles, while a second phase moved to focus on two city case study areas interviewing people working in agencies and organisations implicated in welfare and/or energy policy, as well as those directly affected.

The city case study areas selected were, York in the North-East of England and Bristol in the South-West of England. The interviews with people across these two case study cities offered insight into the ways that national policies are made manifest and negotiated as part of professional roles and everyday lives. While more conventional in-depth qualitative interviewing techniques were employed for those in professional and stakeholder roles, biographical interview techniques were utilised for those directly affected by welfare policies. This approach to interviewing focuses discussion on people's lives and their experiences eliciting narratives that reach backward and forward in time. It can be useful for studies, such as this one, that are seeking to build insight into complexity and often non-linear processes of intersection; in this case between policies and everyday life experiences (see Butler et al., 2014). The relevance of experience-centred approaches to examining governance has been foreshadowed within the literature on non-energy policy and energy demand more generally (e.g. Butler et al., 2014, 2016; Greene & Fahy, 2020).

Such an approach offers insight into the ways that people integrate, respond to, and negotiate policy as part of their everyday lives, as well as bringing social differentiation and power relations more sharply into focus. By looking across these varied experiences and addressing different lines of questioning the project was able to build insight into the intersections between both the personal and political or the public and private, and different areas of policy that, while distinct at national scales, are intimately interwoven within the fabric of people's everyday lives. A final phase of the research involved three workshops (participant $n = 28$) with those working in roles related to welfare policy and/or energy to bring focus on possibilities for change that might arise out of considering invisible energy policy. These were held in 2018 across London, York, and Bristol engaging both national stakeholders and those from our city case sites. They offered further insight into the nature of policy intersections across welfare reform and energy poverty, as well as the potential openings, and constraints, for change.

The book does not develop a complete or exhaustive analysis of the data derived from the project. Rather, the empirical material is used in a more circumscribed way to draw together and engage with the core themes and ideas with which the book is concerned. This entails focus on the intersections of energy poverty and practice-based research, and on interweaving conceptual directions associated with capabilities, the constitution and specification of need, and invisible energy policy. The empirical analysis takes a first step towards realising insights that can be made visible by thinking across these different theoretical developments, and advances possibilities for future inquiry at the intersections. In this, greater focus is given to the biographical interviews with those directly affected by welfare policy in their everyday lives. However, the wider data and study inform and foreground the analysis, for example, by offering understanding of the core policy changes that are reflected in people's accounts of their life experiences.

For ethical purposes, the presentation of quotes as part of the empirical analysis does not attribute them using names of interviewees and/or their organisations. Instead, generic identifiers are used, with interview extracts labelled using the tags of 'biographical interviewee' and 'stakeholder interviewee' (either local or national), as well as the case site location and a participant number. These identifiers are not significant to the analysis *per se* but are used to distinguish between different interviewees.

THE BOOK'S STRUCTURE

Throughout the book, I develop several areas of contribution that emerge from both conceptual analysis and engagement with the empirical materials outlined above. These contributions are advanced through the book's chapters as follows.

The opening two chapters explore the conceptual lines from within energy demand research that are of central concern in the book, looking at *Poverty* (Chapter 2) and *Practice* (Chapter 3) literatures. Chapter 2 synthesises key conceptual debates at the cutting edge of energy poverty research and contributes to thinking about how a capabilities-based analysis can be taken forward. Chapter 3 discusses key ideas arising from practice theory-inspired work—including those relating to the constitution of demand and invisible energy policy. It reflects on the ways that inequality can be (and has been) thought about within practice-theory energy research, as well as on how bringing energy poverty concerns into focus raises distinctive possibilities and avenues for analysis.

Chapter 4 moves to focus on *Policy*. It reviews the policy landscape relating to energy demand, with focus on the ways that fuel poverty has been defined and addressed. It examines change and continuity in policy over time reviewing past and present initiatives and strategies, and reflects on the gulf that exists between contemporary policy definitions of fuel poverty and academic analysis in this space. It then introduces the welfare policy case, as an area of invisible energy policy, outlining key policy changes and developments within this area that are relevant to the empirical analysis, as well as discussing points of connection and disconnect across to energy policy within this sphere.

The next two chapters (5 & 6) use key examples from the empirical data to show how combining ideas across the energy poverty and practice-based energy demand literatures can be important in bringing to light insights and avenues for further research. Chapter 5 focuses on how the invisible energy policy agenda can be advanced in relation to issues of energy poverty by looking at the case of UK welfare policy and its role in shaping energy deprivation. Building from the capabilities-based understanding of energy poverty, discussed in Chapter 2, the analytic endeavour takes forward thinking on invisible energy policy by going beyond examination of the ways welfare policies more directly affect energy deprivation. Although such direct forms of policy impact are discussed, the analysis moves to look at how wider political discourses that pervade different

policy areas (cf. Middlemiss, 2016) are shaping experiences and manifestations of energy poverty in important ways. In particular, it offers insights regarding the normalisation and institutionalisation of energy precarity (see Petrova, 2018), looking at how such processes are intertwined with (non-energy) policy discourses and approaches.

Chapter 6 once again builds from a capabilities-based understanding of energy poverty, but the focus in this chapter is on ideas from practice theory that concern the constitution of need through (invisible energy) policy. It reflects on how arguments concerning the ways that needs come to be specified have relevance for energy poverty research by looking at how needs are created and imposed through welfare policy reform. Crucially, in this chapter focus is brought onto questions not only of whether people can meet needs, but also of how those needs are created, as well as how abilities to resist, negotiate, and constitute needs are also unequal. With emphasis on invisible energy policy, the analysis in the chapter develops deeper understanding of how power relations and inequality figure in the constitution of practices. It does so by making explicit the role of policy in processes of constitution and by highlighting how different policy areas act on their subjects in ways that reflect patterns of inequality. This suggests the importance, then, of a deeper analysis of inequality for practice-based understandings of social action. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the book with reflection on the implications for energy poverty research, for practice theory and invisible energy policy, and for wider contexts of policy and practice.

And finally... a note on key terms...

The terms fuel poverty and energy poverty are often used to denote problems of energy deprivation across Global North and Global South countries respectively (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015). Fuel poverty, as such, often refers more to issues of energy affordability—particularly that associated with heating and cooling—while energy poverty tends to be used in reference to issues of energy access associated with lack of infrastructure and technology. In this book, I use the term fuel poverty to refer to narrower definitions of energy deprivation (e.g. as related primarily to heat), while energy poverty is utilised to refer to wider understandings taking in multiple and diverse uses of energy, including mobility and domestic heating and non-heat uses (e.g. lighting, computing). I also use the terms energy vulnerability, energy precarity, and energy capabilities but these are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Other key terms

include *practice-based or inspired energy research* (also see Walker, 2013), which I use to refer to the body of energy research that arises primarily from Shove’s (e.g. 2003; with Pantzar and Watson, 2012) conceptual development of practice theory through application to environmental sustainability.

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