



Original research article

# Why mundane energy use matters: Energy biographies, attachment and identity



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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, debates about energy justice have become increasingly prominent. However, the question of what is at stake in claims about energy justice or injustice is a complex one. Signifying more than simply the fair distribution of quantities of energy, energy justice also implies issues of procedural justice (participation) and recognition (acknowledgement of diverse values constitutive of ways of life). It is argued that this requires an acknowledgement of why energy use matters in everyday life.

Data from the Energy Biographies project at Cardiff University is used to explore connections between the relational texture of everyday life and the ethical significance of energy. In particular, it is demonstrated that embodiment, attachment and narrative are features of sense-making that contribute significantly to everyday understandings of the ethical meanings of different ways of using energy. Using multimodal and biographical qualitative social science allows these implicit forms of evaluation to become more tangible, along with the relationships between them. Conceiving of energy consumers as subjects with biographies, with attachments, and as engaged bodily in energy consumption can open up, it is suggested, different ways of enacting the procedural and recognition aspects of energy justice.

## 1. Introduction

*Interviewer: And did you look at efficiency standards and things like that?*

*Lucy: Yeah, 'cos I've chosen all my appliances so I think everything, I think there was – what appliance would it have been? The tumble dryer I think, that literally hardly ever got above a B. But most of my things are like AAA or AA [...]*

In everyday life, energy matters – or so much research would suggest – chiefly as a costly resource to which many in developed as well as developing countries have inadequate access. Policy on energy consumption in developed countries has focused in recent years on the issue of fuel poverty, while in developing nations the issue of energy poverty has increasingly featured on development agendas [1]. In response to these issues, discussions have arisen around the multifaceted concept of energy justice in this journal and elsewhere. The ethics and politics of access to energy services has thus entered the foreground of scholarly attention. What we might call the everyday ethics of energy is, however, also about negotiating an increasingly tangled thicket of norms and imperatives. This is particularly the case in contexts where

responsibility is delegated to individuals for following norms of energy use that reflect the need, in response to the 'energy trilemma', to reduce energy use not only because of its costs but on climate change grounds also.

Such discourses of energy transition are increasingly interwoven with debates about energy justice. Moving from a fossil fuel-based to a low-carbon energy system raises multiple questions about energy and equity [2]. In this article, we explore how a particular qualitative sociological approach to what we define as the everyday ethics of energy can help understand how these questions are connected with 'thicker' meanings of energy consumption. In particular, we examine some of the complex ways in which energy consumption is experienced as contributing to lives felt to be good lives, lives worth living.

To explore this theme, we focus on a qualitative approach to understanding the place of energy consumption in everyday life which is both biographical and multimodal. It examines how the significance of energy consumption is bound up with personal lifecourse transitions, both experienced and anticipated. Lucy, who moved from London to a rural village in South Wales with her husband and young family for a better quality of life, identifies in the extract above how she has developed expertise in choosing the most energy-efficient appliances

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possible, mainly on grounds of cost, but also because avoiding ‘waste’ seems, environmentally speaking, the right thing to do. Having given up her highly-paid consultancy job to look after her children, she prides herself on managing the household’s energy use efficiently and responsibly. Yet at the same time, her descriptions of the house she is renovating with her husband manifest conflicting imperatives, later in the same interview.

*[...] we are getting a log fire and how actually they’re probably super inefficient aren’t they in heating a room? [...] we’ve put massive radiators in our new house cos its really Victorian, tall ceilings, and so we just don’t need a wood burner to be on at any point but actually it’ll sort of make the room [...].*

Here, it seems that Lucy has simply gone from talking about how much she cares about energy efficiency to saying things that make her earlier claim look like bad faith. So should we read Lucy’s apparently conflicting statements as evidence for how affluent lifestyles simply promote individual interests and preferences over the common good, whether the scale encompassed by this good is that of the family or the global community? In this article, we suggest that there is more to the ethics of everyday energy use than a clash between what might be called the non-ethical importance of energy (energy services which provide for preferences) and imperatives that might be taken to represent some aspect of an ethics of energy (e.g. oriented towards waste avoidance, or environmental sustainability).

Energy matters, we argue, as part of what Lambek [3] has called ‘ordinary ethics’. For Lambek, the ethical register is immanent within everyday life, an evaluative ‘should be’ that is implicit within everyday attitudes, emotions, statements and above all actions. The defining contribution of this register is the making of distinctions between suffering and flourishing, between lives well-lived according to determinate criteria and ones that are comparatively diminished (Sayer [48], pp. 8–9). At times, it becomes explicit, particularly where there are conflicts, tensions or interruptions to the flow of what is normatively agreed upon (cf. [4]). In this sense, it is of anthropological interest insofar as the ethical register is a key part of how subjects make sense of the world, both collectively and individually. This aspect of sense-making perspectives places tends to place subjects in evaluative and sometimes in critical dialogue with shared ways of seeing. What, analytically speaking, makes the ethical attitude distinct from an expression of mere preference, is the implication that what is being said or done is an attempt to give voice or expression to that which is right or good *in general*. In other words, that what is at issue is interpreted as something which is universally to be avoided or desired, whereas preferences are simply preferred. The key difference between the objects of ethical evaluations and mere preferences is that the rightness or goodness of ethical objects is open to argument and justification, whereas a stated preference takes an assertion of subjective will to be the final word. Ethical evaluation, whether implicit or explicit, holds open a space of reasons for desiring or avoiding something on the basis of its rightness or goodness.

Lucy’s statements about her commitments to energy efficiency, on the one hand, and to a particular style of rural living, on the other, could be seen as ‘mere preferences’. But what this misses about her statements is the way in which they help to articulate particular ethical evaluations of ways of life. Energy efficiency is not simply practically better, it is about not being wasteful, about aligning one’s behaviour with a compelling imperative. Reinstating wood fires is an aesthetic choice, but it is also part of achieving a valued way of life, in which what is good for Lucy, her husband, her children (and as, we shall see later, her friends) are bound up together. Lucy’s evaluations of what matters and of how she should act are connected to particular ways of using energy. They emerge from a backcloth of shared ideas about good lives and moral actions. Yet these ideas not just norms that determine both consciousness and behaviour. They are material ingredients of evaluations around which flow strong emotional and affective currents.

These evaluative judgements therefore take on great importance for her sense of who she is and what she can and should do. They are affirmed through action as well as belief, embodied in consumer goods and modes of conduct as well as discussed and justified. Energy consumption is not simply an instrumental means to an end (obtaining heat, light, enabling cooking, etc.). It can also be a constitutive [5] ingredient of valued ways of being in the world, of identities, and forms of agency.

It is this everyday ethics of energy, the ways in which energy is felt to matter ethically as part of the background and sometimes the foreground of everyday life, is the subject of this article. Using qualitative data from the *Energy Biographies* project, we show how the use of energy services is inseparable from the everyday, understood as an ‘ongoing flow of continual concrete evaluation’ (Sayer [48], p. 97). This demonstrates how the nuances and subtleties of everyday practice and talk about practice can reveal ethical tensions and conflicts that may have great significance for energy policy, particularly in relation to envisaged energy transitions.

We contend that the everyday ethics of energy can supply a thicker perspective on what matters that is highly significant when we consider ethical and political aspects of the envisaged energy transition that go beyond distributive justice. We argue here that everyday energy ethics can help deepen our understanding of the procedural and recognition [6] aspects of energy justice. It can do this by opening up questions over the viability and desirability of different forms of energy transition, and also about the new norms and imperatives that may be associated with them. What is more, the evolving entanglements of practices, technologies and identities explored by our biographical approach are evidence that participatory initiatives can face difficulties, as people’s emotional investments in everyday energy-consuming practices can help to constitute their identities.

## 2. Energy Biographies methodology

Much research on energy justice draws on quantitative data relating to access to energy services or energy poverty [1,28]. The role of qualitative methods in understanding ethical concerns about energy is less established. While ethnographic studies of how people use and make sense of energy are an established part of scholarship, particularly in relation to emerging energy transitions [7,8], tying such work into explicitly ethical debates comes up against a reluctance from qualitative social scientists to take steps into a territory typically claimed by philosophers [9]. It has been proposed, however ([10,246–252]), that qualitative sociological or anthropological research can help us enrich ideas articulated as thin concepts within ethics and political philosophy (good lives, suffering, respect and disrespect, dignity and indignity). In this way, qualitative social science can help subjects to articulate what matters to them, and to create opportunities for social actors (including the research subjects themselves) to respond to these interpretations as informed agents.

Funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), *Energy Biographies* was designed to examine how policies intended to drive reductions in energy demand at home and at work can face difficulties arising from the complexities of mundane energy use. In particular we wanted to explore the ways in which lifecourse transitions alter energy use, and how understanding these effects can help any transition to a low-carbon energy system. We undertook a programme of qualitative longitudinal and also multimodal research designed to make mundane energy use and its supporting socio-technical infrastructures tangible and visible [11], and to explore how people make sense of energy in their everyday lives. Typically, in studies of the moral meaning of consumption (ethical consumption etc.), specific consumer products and the ways in which they matter are studied [40]. But here our focus was not solely on objects that happen to consume energy, but on how practices that consume energy do or not themselves become objects of concern. The longitudinal approach served as a way of tracking lifecourse transitions which brought with them changes in how

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