



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Research & Social Science

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/erss



Original research article

Living with fuel poverty in older age: Coping strategies and their problematic implications

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 July 2015

Received in revised form 2 March 2016

Accepted 7 March 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Fuel poverty

Coping strategies

Cold

Older people

ABSTRACT

Fuel poverty is a problem particularly associated with the lives and living conditions of older people, in part because of their vulnerability to health impacts. This article draws attention to the ways in which older people on low incomes cope with and adapt to problems of affording to keep warm at home. We present findings from interviews with 17 households during the winter of 2012–2013 in England. The importance of keeping warm was recognised across the interviews. Four particular categories of coping strategies were defined and used—responsively adjusting the length of time and parts of the home for which heating is kept on, using secondary heating sources; using additional layers that help to keep bodies warm; and adjusting daily routines. We found that it was rare for people themselves to problematize the ways in which they were coping day to day, they largely just saw this as what they did to get by and to control the size of their energy bills. Coping strategies raise questions about what are acceptable living conditions, how judgments are made and how assistance can be provided when householders do not themselves problematize their situation. Implications for action to tackle fuel poverty are considered.

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1. Introduction

The impact of rising energy costs on people's ability to 'keep warm' in their homes has been the subject of much recent debate in the UK [14]. The image often portrayed is of an older person struggling to keep warm, using inefficient or ineffective heating technology in a poorly insulated home. Policy measures have also to some degree prioritised older people over other groups in responding to what is generally termed 'fuel poverty'. As critical gerontology literature has emphasised we need to be very wary of stereotypes of what it means to be 'old' [31], with enormous diversity across the 'older' age group – in terms of income, health, mobility, aspirations, outlook and other factors – and how they consume energy [10]. However, it is still the case that older people, living in their own homes, outside of institutional accommodation and on low incomes, can be particularly susceptible to both struggling to afford their energy bills, as well as to the potential negative health and well-being consequences of living in a cold property. The negative impacts of low temperatures on health are primarily experienced by older people and the very young, and are particularly problematic where people have pre-existing health conditions

[28]. Older people are at higher risk of increased blood pressure and blood coagulation, both of which are exacerbated by low temperatures and can ultimately lead to cardiovascular and respiratory problems [24]. Excess winter deaths are mostly amongst older people and are routinely linked to fuel poverty and living at low temperatures [40]. It is suggested that 10 per cent of excess winter deaths could be attributed to fuel poverty directly, though some argue that this is too conservative an estimate [23]. Such evidence substantiates the relationship between the problem of fuel poverty and older age, as do UK fuel poverty statistics which estimate that nearly a quarter of fuel poor households have a resident who is over 60 and that just over 40 per cent of all fuel poor households had a resident 50 years or older in 2013 [15].

To-date, research on fuel poverty and older people has focused predominately on patterns of mortality and morbidity [22,40,49], but there is a growing body of work concerned with the perceptions and experience of older people themselves [20,29,33,48]. Listening to those directly experiencing various forms of hardship has been argued as important in giving validity to different voices and perspectives on the realities of living on a low income [5]. Our research follows this perspective in seeking to further investigate the experiential dimensions of fuel poverty and the complexities involved in developing appropriate and effective policy responses.

The challenge that this paper particularly focuses on is that, in practice, people often adapt to and attempt to cope with the

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situation they are in. They 'make do' through various means, appreciating the importance of staying warm but not necessarily recognising that they are in a situation that could be, and arguably should be, improved. Some existing research has examined the ways in which coping strategies are followed when people are trying to keep warm at home [3,7,19,20,39] including some work specifically on older people [11,25,33]. However, this research either has not focused on older people living on a low income, or has been undertaken some time ago and before the current energy price regime in the UK and the escalating energy bills this has generated.

The objective of this paper is therefore to reveal the ways in which older people on low incomes cope with and adapt to problems of affording to keep warm at home and to draw out implications that then follow. In pursuing this objective we take on two important considerations. First, many different factors contribute to the problem of affordable warmth and people's situations will be variable and diverse. This is not just because 'old age' is very heterogeneous, but also because fuel poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, produced through the coming together of different material, social and economic elements in particular settings. This has been highlighted in recent work that uses notions of assemblage [21] to convey how technologies, bodies, infrastructures, economic situations and structures, cultural expectations and climatic conditions all come together to produce situations of 'energy vulnerability' [6,13]. As they argue, the problems to be addressed can take on a different character from setting to setting, and also that being vulnerable can be temporally dynamic, coming and going as situations change, shift or evolve.

Secondly, we recognise the importance of being open to the different knowledges and rationalities that are embedded in the problem we are focused on. There is a statistical definition of being in a situation of 'fuel poverty' [23], and also health expertise makes a judgement what constitute harmful thermal conditions [28,35,37]. However, older people trying to stay warm may perceive questions of affordability or harm quite differently, drawing on other forms of knowledge and making judgements and evaluations in their own terms. In doing so, this paper responds to calls for further work on the complexities of mobilizing notions of justice and equity in energy research [42] given that addressing differential vulnerabilities and needs across population groups is a key justice principle [47]. As Walker [46] argues, it is not a straightforward matter to determine the normative status of different energy end uses, or from whose perspective that judgement can or should be made, and our paper contributes further reflections on these concerns.

Our discussion begins by saying more about the research methods that were employed and the empirical research that provides the core of the paper. The analysis of empirical material is then discussed, moving through an examination of how interviewees talked about warmth and the importance of keeping warm, before exploring four forms of coping actions that interviewees undertook. Finally conclusions are drawn that consider different ways of interpreting the empirical material and the implications for various aspects of policy and practice.

2. Methods

Our research objective to reveal the ways in which people cope with affording to keep warm at home means that we needed to directly investigate the experiences of older people living in their homes. Through a sequence of encounters and interviews with older residents, the research therefore set out to explore their everyday experiences through a winter period, including people living in a range of tenure types, occupancy arrangements and geographical locations.

For this reason, and in order to gain an in-depth understanding of a person's situation, we used an intensive qualitative research methodology, one that is able to reveal the meanings, explanations and reasonings that lie behind older people's coping actions. Whilst academic interest in fuel poverty and energy vulnerability is still extending across the disciplines [6], as noted earlier there is relatively little work using methods that engage with both householders and those delivering action on the ground. Studies that have looked at the everyday experience of fuel poverty have also used a qualitative approach, with household interviews the predominant method applied [7,8,11,20,29,33], though some have also used surveys and questionnaires in conjunction with subsequent interviews [3,34].

In order to find older residents struggling to afford to keep warm and to negotiate their participation in the research, a series of community organisations in England tackling fuel poverty were contacted. Three of these agreed to cooperate in the research and to allow one of the authors to observe their work, help in practical tasks and accompany them on home visits with their trained employees and volunteers over a two week period. These organisations are in three different locations in England, with differences in settlement type, housing type, urban/rural profile and density of connections to mains gas. All three organisations had fuel poverty as one of their main priorities and had worked on this for at least one year or more. The organisations were all locally run and managed rather than being part of a larger national organisation. Each of the organisations worked in their local area with other partners such as the council and social housing providers and were, at the time of the research, experiencing a period of transition as one set of national government schemes came to an end and new schemes came into operation [43].

With each organisation, most of the time was spent on home visits, accompanying energy advisors on visits to a wide range of households. The researcher's role as an independent observer from the organisation was made clear, before and during each of the visits. Those households that included people over 55 years old were asked if they would be involved in the research. Potential participants were given a handout explaining the project in full and given time to consider whether they would like to participate. This information made clear the independence of the researcher and that there was no onus on them to take part regardless of whether they received help from the local organisation. A telephone call was made to them a week later (without the involvement of the local organization) and out of those contacted, seventeen (across the three areas) agreed to participate further in the research.

Whether these residents would be defined as in fuel poverty according to the official statistical government definition was not ascertained for the sample selection. To do this would have required detailed information on building fabric and household income. The three organisations did not collect this information and it would not have been possible to calculate before approaching residents to take part in the research. However the organisations did aim to reach residents as being on restricted incomes and in need of help with aspects of their energy situation, so in more qualitative terms they can be classified as fuel poor.

Both a telephone interview and a semi-structured face-to-face home interview were conducted with each of the seventeen households before the end of winter 2012–2013. The telephone interview provided a chance to build rapport between the researcher and the resident in order to begin to develop a relationship [17]. This interview was brief, up to twenty minutes long, in order to leave plenty of space for in-depth discussion at a later date and not to cause any anxiety over the telephone, when efforts to quell these feelings would be challenging. Discussions were centred on how their situation may have changed and how local organisations may have been helping them since the initial visit.

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