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Necessary energy uses and a minimum standard of living in the United Kingdom: Energy justice or escalating expectations?

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ABSTRACT

Access to affordable energy is a core dimension of energy justice, with recent work examining the relation between energy use and well-being in these terms. However, there has been relatively little examination of exactly which energy uses should be considered basic necessities within a given cultural context and so of concern for energy justice. We examine the inclusion of energy-using necessities within the outcomes of deliberative workshops within members of the public focused on defining a minimum-standard of living in the UK and repeated biannually over a six year period. Our secondary analysis shows that energy uses deemed to be necessities are diverse and plural, enabling access to multiple valued energy services, and that their profile has to some degree shifted from 2008 to 2014. The reasoning involved is multidimensional, ranging across questions of health, social participation, opportunity and practicality. We argue that public deliberations about necessities can be taken as legitimate grounding for defining minimum standards and therefore the scope of 'doing justice' in fuel poverty policy. However we set this in tension with how change over time reveals the escalation of norms of energy dependency in a society that on climate justice grounds must radically reduce carbon emissions.

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1. Introduction

Energy justice has recently emerged as a normative concept and frame for academic work focused on the relation between justice principles and energy concerns of many different forms, across different scales of analysis [2,21,63]. The scope and key ideas of energy justice have only begun to be laid out, with recent contributions making significant progress in proposing nascent definitions, core principles and frameworks for locating intersections between justice claims and energy systems [2,64,24,25,41], as well as investigating particular cases and applications of justice ideas [29,61,9]. A constant across this growing body of work has been to position access to and affordability of energy,¹ and the problems of energy or fuel poverty – that is, a situation 'in which a person or household is unable to achieve sufficient access to affordable and reliable energy services' ([15], p. 16) – as core energy justice concerns [27,36].

Bickerstaff et al. [2], for example, identify energy poverty and the politics of energy consumption as one of two main justice categories. Sovacool et al. ([64], p. 46) propose as one of their principles of energy justice, 'the affirmative principle', stating that 'if any of the basic goods to which every person is justly entitled can only be secured by means of energy services, then in that case there is a derivative right to the energy service'. They base this principle on a set of assumptions drawn out of bringing energy as an 'instrumental good' into articulation with a range of normative thinking, but particularly the capability approach [42,57]. These authors, and others [69,50,15], have thus put the relation between energy use and well-being firmly within a justice frame, and have begun to spell out this relation in theoretical terms.

One of the connected steps that this conceptual thinking demands, however, is to move from basic principles and frameworks to grounding these empirically in practice and in situ. This is especially the case when it is acknowledged that there is a necessary relativity involved in either specifying what material necessities are, in any given context [72], or in specifying the means through which more abstractly defined universal needs (or related notions) are to be satisfied [19]. In energy terms this means asking, within a given societal context, which energy uses matter and are essential for well-being and quality of life. As already noted

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¹ In the context of this paper, by 'energy' we are referring to electricity and other fuel sources that power devices and technologies in the home or that are used for private mobility outside of the home, such as petrol for a privately owned-car.

energy itself is only ever an instrumental good; it is what energy is for [60] and used to achieve that matters to well-being. Or, as in the 'affirmative principle' noted above [64], it is the services that energy provides (heat, light, mobility) that constitute the sensible focus of rights claims (see also Ref. [5]). What then does it mean for someone to have insufficient access to the energy services that they need, potentially to the degree that something 'should be done' to address this situation? Is it only the basics of survival that matter, or energy uses that have become customary and 'normal' in that societal time and place? Or in short, where exactly are the boundaries between 'necessities' and 'wants' and on what basis might these change? We argue that resolving these questions is not amenable simply to expert determination (or the musings of normative theorists), rather some evidence of shared social understandings is also required through which the specifics of needs and necessities within a given time and place can be articulated.

Our objective in this paper is to utilise an example of such evidence, produced through a participatory and consensual process, to consider critically what this can contribute to an 'in situ' understanding of energy use as a need, as well as to draw out implications for different notions and dimensions of energy justice. As we shall discuss, whilst on the one hand public deliberations about necessities can be taken as a legitimate grounding for defining minimum standards and therefore the scope of state policy for 'doing justice' in terms of energy or fuel poverty, it can also be revealing of the ongoing escalation of these standards and of norms of energy dependency in a society that on climate justice grounds must move away from an energy and carbon intensive condition [50,68,8]. Reconciling these outwardly competing interpretations and justice claims is possible, we shall argue, although not necessarily easy to achieve.

The particular source of empirical data that we draw on is the stream of 'Minimum Income Standards' (MIS) research outputs, produced by a team at Loughborough University [6,13]. Over the last eight years, the MIS research has used a series of deliberative workshops to ascertain the goods and services that members of the public consider to be the basic necessities that everyone in the UK should be able to afford and have present in their everyday lives. We use this secondary data to identify which energy using technologies and services are implicated in shared expectations of a minimally decent living standard in the UK, and also the reasoned grounds on which these judgements are being made. Energy use has not been the focus of analysis of the MIS outputs to-date, so our use of it has a novel character.

We chose to analyse the MIS outputs (rather than collect new primary data) for three related reasons. First, it comes from a carefully designed deliberative process stratified across 14 different types of household which gives the data substantial scale and depth. Second, it covers 4 repeated processes – in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 – providing a unique longitudinal dataset with the potential to reveal change over time (even if the timespan is not long in historical terms). Third, and significantly for our purposes, energy use per se is not the focus of the group discussions. This is a strength because of the instrumentality of energy use in relation to the achievement of socially valued outcomes. As such, group participants were considering only indirectly and implicitly what energy is for in everyday terms; how, through its powering of technologies of various forms, energy use supports contemporary ways of living. We are therefore able to see through this data how, where and for what reasons energy uses are implicated in people's expectations of a minimum standard of living, rather than explicitly deemed to be necessary in these terms. This gives the data a particular character that is distinct from studies where members of the public have been asked to engage directly with questions of energy, climate change or fuel poverty [76,47,20]. We discuss further the implications of different approaches at the end of the paper.

This data is rooted in the particular context of UK society over a particular period of time. This situatedness is important. The UK is a technologically advanced and economically prosperous country in which a multitude of energy uses have become part of everyday living, but in ways that cannot be presumed to be entirely shared with countries with similar technological or economic characteristics. The period from 2008 to 2014 spans the onset of a global and domestic economic crisis and coincides with a series of related austerity policies. During this time the incomes of many households fell in real terms [10] whilst average energy bills prices rose steeply [18]. Both total and per household domestic energy consumption also fell over this period [18,43], a trend which some attributed to rising energy bills and restricted incomes [1]. But it is also a time over which new technologies, cultural tropes and social expectations continued to evolve. The UK is also a country where the notion of 'fuel poverty' and of state actions to support people's access to affordable energy services, have become strongly embedded [3,69]. Whilst this policy context should not necessarily directly affect the public deliberations that we draw on (given that they do not focus explicitly on energy use), it does shape the implications that will be drawn out of our analysis.

We begin by outlining the underlying principles of the MIS approach, how the method has been applied and the outputs on which we draw. We then present a secondary analysis of the energy-using items that have been included in the MIS results across the 4 iterations of the method, and the reasoning in the deliberative workshops that has underpinned their inclusion. Following further discussion of the dynamics of change and the processes involved in these, we then draw out implications specifically for fuel poverty policy in the UK, but also more generally for energy demand reduction related to climate mitigation, and for further development of the participatory approach we have advocated.

2. The consensual approach and the MIS research

The Minimum Income Standard research is a body of work that is carried out by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University, funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), a charity that campaigns and researchers on poverty in the UK. The primary purpose of the MIS research is to define the annual incomes necessary for different family groups to be able to afford the items required for a minimum-acceptable living standard. It is also used by the JRF to determine an hourly 'living wage' that a family working full-time must be earning in order to achieve this annual minimum-income. The MIS is not utilised by the UK government in order to define poverty baselines, benefits levels, or the National Minimum Wage (recently rebranded as the 'National Living Wage'). The MIS research instead operates as a counter-narrative and competing process to the official approach used by government.

2.1. Underlying principles of the MIS process

The MIS process is based on an understanding of needs as the tangible and material goods and services that a person requires, at a minimum, in order to be able to participate in the society in which they live [39]. As Bradshaw et al. ([6], p. 14) explain:

"A minimum standard of living in Britain today includes, but is more than just, food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society".

This understanding of need is one informed by ideas of 'relative poverty' that resist the search for universal moral or objective resolutions (at least in terms of material needs). Pioneered by Peter Townsend in the 1970s and 80s, this approach argues that the

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