



Original research article

# Winter cold in a summer place: Perceived norms of seasonal adaptation and cultures of home heating in Australia



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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that those hoping to influence domestic heat management might engage more directly with the perceived cultural geography of seasonal adaptation. It draws on a study from a coastal city in southeast Australia where winters are mild and summers increasingly hot. We begin with recent qualitative studies of how households around the world live with winter cold and what they tell us about the varied cultural features standing in the way of any attempts at encouraging alternative approaches. Then we turn to our own mixed method study involving interviews, domestic warmth diaries and ambient temperature monitoring within respondent homes. Analysis starts with a common respondent belief about how those living in the locality would downplay the discomforts of winter cold because the cultural focus there was squarely on summer. Then the three homes with the most extreme internal temperature regimes are detailed to show how a diversity of domestic warming strategies were rationalised in relation to perceived norms of local winter indifference. This leads to a broader argument about harnessing narratives of apparently local adaptation.

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## 1. Introduction

How Australians heat their homes during winter has been of recent policy interest. This is both because their ways of doing so have now been acknowledged as leading to significant greenhouse gas emissions [1] and because of anxieties about households becoming unable to afford heat as energy companies required to meet peak demand growth pass the costs of capital expenditure onto their customers [2]. The result has been the establishment of initiatives designed to reduce the carbon emissions associated with domestic heating and avoid the public health problems associated with colder homes. Our paper starts with two assumptions that can often be discerned within these initiatives. The first is about how Australians should live with seasonal cold at home and the second about how their actions are most effectively influenced.

First is the assumption that households should not let the ambient temperature in the rooms in which occupants spend their time during the day fall below 18 °C, drawing on World Health Organisation evidence that colder temperatures can lead to health risks, particularly for older people, children and those who are already sick [3]. Hence the Australian Government's 'Living Greener'

campaign advises those with thermostats to 'set them to heat the room to between 18 °C and 20 °C just for the times you're usually at home' [4]. Similarly the New South Wales Government's 'Save Power Kit' recommends ambient temperatures are kept between 18 °C and 21 °C [5]. In this way, government campaigns implicitly endorse the idea that Australians lack the capacity to handle colder domestic conditions without this leading to health problems.

Second is the assumption that, in line with a wider emphasis on economic benefit when hoping to influence heat management at home in Australia [6], cost cutting is the most likely stimulus for change. The National Strategy on Energy Efficiency [7], for example, justifies efficiency labelling in terms of helping households 'make rational choices having regard to likely operating costs'. The New South Wales Government's Energy Efficiency Community Awareness Programme [8] and the Commonwealth Government's Living Greener campaign [4] similarly both envisage rational consumers who, if given credible information about the financial implications of heating certain rooms at home, will likely change their ways since, as the 'Save Power Kit' also advises, 'every one degree increase in temperature can increase the heating component of your power bill by up to 15 per cent' [9]. In this way, the highlighting of financial gain is implicitly positioned as key to influencing the home heating choices of Australians.

Australian policy on domestic heat management is still in its infancy so it is unsurprising that, as for summer adaptation [10],

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messages are sometimes contradictory (more heat for health versus less heat for the environment). With a view to feeding into the development of this policy, the present study combined interviews, respondent diaries and ambient temperature monitoring in a sample of homes in Wollongong, New South Wales. Our aim was to question whether current initiatives were being framed correctly in view of what these households were already doing. Houses, after all, are not mere containers in which occupants regulate the ambient temperature with reference to economic incentives and health concerns alone. Rather they are 'homes' in which people prepare hot food and drinks, wear different combinations of clothing, and enlist the help of various other devices to keep sufficiently warm when they are there. All these actions sit alongside indoor climate control as potential responses to the arrival of winter cold at home. Our starting contention was that it was therefore worth exploring how certain warming strategies come to be socially defined as appropriate in particular cultural contexts.

Drawing on an emergent project finding, this paper is concerned with how domestic heat management practices are embedded within perceived norms of local seasonal adaptation. We begin with what recent qualitative studies reveal about geographical variation in ways of keeping warm at home during winter and how various cultural rationales may serve to compromise any attempts at encouraging alternative approaches. Here we make the case for examining how respondents would themselves characterise the winter response of those living around them and how this may feasibly influence their own actions. Then we turn to our own interview data and a common respondent belief about how those living in the locality would likely downplay the discomforts of winter cold since Wollongong was really about summer. This association also seemed to support the relatively wide range of winter temperatures we recorded inside their homes so we decided to explore this further. We discuss the results here with particular reference to the three sample homes exhibiting the most extreme internal temperature regimes. Though evidently living with winter cold in very different ways, all three rationalised their adaptations with reference to a perceived local approach typified by relative winter indifference.

Studies in this journal have already emphasised the importance of examining how cultural norms of domestic heat management can vary [11], the many skills people possess in terms of privately organising their winter warmth [12], and the significant energy use implications of how ideal domesticity is culturally defined [13]. Evidently there are many ways in which the social science of heat energy use at home might usefully move forward from this point. The aim of this paper is to add to the conversation by using the above finding to initiate a broader discussion about how policymakers and researchers interested in energy conservation and public health at home might respond to our study. With regard to the former, we consider how future campaigns might engage more directly with narratives of local adaptation. With regard to the latter, we argue that future researchers might benefit from asking their respondents to evaluate ways of living with local climates in a comparative cultural register.

## 2. Cultural variation in winter adaptation at home: recent qualitative insights

Motivated by similar public health and energy conservation concerns to those seen in Australia, there is a growing international interest in what qualitative research methods such as interviews, diary keeping and ethnography tell us about how and why households use heat energy during winter in the ways that they do. In terms of influencing behaviour, these studies underline how, far from being a straightforward matter of dispensing advice to

homeowners who will then act accordingly, a whole raft of cultural features will likely complicate this process. Drawing on this body of work, we are now in a position to compare what studies from Northern Europe, the United Kingdom, Mainland Europe and Australasia tell us about international variation.

Scandinavian projects have particularly emphasised the local importance of a 'cosy' home [14–16]. This concept appears to support various choices about kitchen size, lighting and ambient temperature across a range of rooms, but the net result is generally more energy use than sustainability campaigners would otherwise like. Then there are studies there concerned with the relations between keeping warm and domestic gender roles. Some Swedish women may, for example, be inclined to buy wood burners as a means of demonstrating love for the family by using comparatively limited disposable incomes to provide a comforting home environment [17]. Other women in these 'northern countries' may, however, worry about being burdened with the extra labour associated with wood burning in countries where most women also have paid work [18]. This takes us to the ways in which domestic wood burning is currently thought about in Northern Europe more generally. Is it an extra chore or does it reconnect people to cherished local traditions of home heating that are otherwise often on the wane – a practice akin to family berry picking trips [16]? Either way, the increased popularity of wood burning stoves in this part of the world has been shown by a series of qualitative studies to be about much more than providing the temperatures required for healthy thermal comfort. Rather domestic warmth practices there are tied to household economies, gendered homemaking practices, valued national traditions, senses of autonomy amongst those less reliant on national energy networks [19] and the wood burning 'rhythms' believed to characterise 'ideal' home life [20].

Likewise, comparable UK studies illustrate how ways of keeping warm at home are linked to past experiences and current pressures that may be partly associated with the national cultural context. For example, UK studies have shown how, in response to similar imperatives to those seen in Norway [21], older people feel obliged to prepare for guests by raising the temperature in certain rooms [22]. This is such that visiting family members may never know how well they are usually coping with winter cold in a country where older people are significantly more likely to die at this time [23]. Turning up the heat for guests may be felt especially important there since older housing stocks, the legacy of historical anxieties about enough ventilation during industrialisation, and persistent beliefs about the ease of coping with winter in a comparatively mild climate all mean that UK homes commonly record colder indoor conditions than countries where outdoor temperatures drop much further [24]. Certainly there is a precedent of relatively low internal temperatures in this country since, as early as the nineteenth century, Britons were unimpressed by the 'stifling' conditions found in the homes of their North American cousins who had, for reasons yet to be decided, come to stoke the wood burners and wear less clothing there [25,26]. Some older Britons have also retained warming skills from earlier times since, unlike Swedes who may prefer to make the most of their limited winter sunlight [18], they can become passionate about the virtues of using curtains to retain heat during winter [27]. This hints at matters of wider social judgement considered by others in terms of how some heating strategies bring status and others stigma [28,29] such that, in stark contrast to some of the North European findings where doing so may represent the domestic ideal, collecting wood for home burning in the UK potentially risks ridicule [29]. Finally there is interesting recent ethnographic work highlighting how current UK radiator usage may be as much about busy people drying clothes quickly as about personal warmth at home [30] and studies that show how some older Britons may value the 'glow' of certain domestic heating devices as much as the heat they actually produce [31].

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