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# Tyrannies of thrift: Governmentality and older, low-income people's energy efficiency narratives in the Illawarra, Australia



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We critically investigate domestic energy use of older low-income people.
- We employ Foucault's concept of governmentality.
- Managing domestic energy use is discussed in terms of subjectivities.
- The tyrannies of thrift are identified.
- The implications of governmentality for energy programs are outlined.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 July 2015

Received in revised form

25 November 2015

Accepted 30 November 2015

### Keywords:

Domestic energy use  
Qualitative research  
Social Practice Theory  
Foucault  
Energy efficiency  
Policy  
Social marketing  
Programs

## ABSTRACT

Social scientists are arguing that energy policies should pay more attention to everyday life to address energy efficiency. Scholars are now positing that energy policy needs to move beyond essentialised understandings of people positioned as the problem and seek to involve household members as part of the solution. Joining this conversation, we explore the energy narratives of low-income people aged 60 years and over, living in private sector housing. Participants shared their energy efficiency stories during focus groups conducted in the Illawarra, Australia. The paper explores how Foucault's concept of governmentality may help inform energy efficiency programs by paying close attention to the way in which individual energy choices made under certain circumstances create who an individual becomes. Learning from participants, our governmentality analysis revealed the tyrannies of thrifty domestic energy conduct. We illustrate our argument drawing on the examples of practices relating to clothing and lighting. We outline how governmentality analysis can be used by researchers, policy makers and practitioners to assist people to safely negotiate energy efficiency in their domestic lives.

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## 1. Introduction

My fridge is so old it was before the star system came in. But what do you do? You've got a good fridge. It's working. You just don't get rid of it like the young ones do and get another one. We're that generation where we don't get rid of it. We keep going.

Lorelle's (70s, widow) narrative illustrates how a star rating education program operates to increase awareness and knowledge

of energy efficiency through circulating information and labelling. Yet, as noted by Geller et al. (2006) knowledge alone may not translate into changed consumer behaviour. Lorelle was not alone in expressing how living with a forty-year-old fridge affirmed generational difference, and struggled with policy advice to rid herself of a working household item.

Lorelle illustrates what we term 'the tyrannies of thrift' that refers to sets of ideas around making do with less, in productive yet problematic ways. For example, Lorelle points to how the social value of accommodating and making-do with an older, energy-inefficient fridge model at home is productive in sustaining a narrative of generational differentiation between an older, thrifty, responsible generation and a younger, affluent, 'throw away'

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generation. Lorelle taps into the discourse around the post-World War II rise of cultures of consumption and the depiction of a younger generation seduced by the reverence of the new and too ready to throw away useful 'stuff'. Furthermore, the older working domestic fridge is narrated as material evidence of her generations' endurance and strength. In Lorelle's words 'we keep going'. Throwing away working domestic appliances becomes problematic at home, regardless of the potential to use less energy with a new replacement. Currently, our understanding of the discursive shifts around energy use remains underdeveloped leading us to consider how energy narratives might play a role to inform energy policy through how they help constitute household subjectivities.

We argue that Foucault's (1991a) concept of governmentality offers a conceptual framework for interpreting household subjectivities to inform energy policy, and social marketing programs. Our paper is structured as follows. First we consider the rise of energy efficiency policy programs, and particularly those targeting lower, older income households. Unlike earlier forms of efficiency – based on fuel scarcity – contemporary reducing has emerged in direct relation to climate change debates and fuel poverty. We then provide an overview of the literature that advocates for citizen oriented programs rather than 'education' for behaviour change. Indeed, moving beyond education deficit campaigns that tend to focus solely on reducing bills and saving the planet, social scientists are responding to calls for more insightful and targeted campaigns by investigating how energy use sustains the practices, subjectivities and places of everyday domestic life (Day and Hitchings 2011; Hards 2013). To help answer this call we outline the key elements of Foucault's concept of governmentality to explore narratives of energy use as a crucial part of constituting subjectivities. Next we present our methods including recruitment, the questions explored in the focus groups and analytical technique. The subsequent section documents how most participants already shared great awareness of energy use to manage household budgets. 'Doing the right thing' and reducing household energy was integral to how many participants made sense of themselves in the context of home as thrifty consumers, carers, parents and grandparents rather than environmental citizens or rational economic subjects. The next section illustrates the tyrannies of thrift drawing on examples of clothing and domestic lighting. To conclude we offer policy and practice initiatives that employ energy narratives to help support older low-income people in achieving their energy consumption goals and to reduce potential risks in the processes of becoming a thrifty consumer.

## 2. Australian social and household energy policy

This [\$61.5 million Energy Efficiency Action Plan] is about being smarter and thriftier about energy use which in turn will provide NSW with a powerful and sustainable economic advantage. (New South Wales Premier Mike Baird, election campaign promise, Sunday 1 March 2015)

In Australia, population ageing, energy efficiency and vulnerable households are Commonwealth and State policy priorities. Planning for people to stay in their own homes as they grow older is one key policy response to an ageing population, where around 77 per cent of seniors are owner occupiers (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2015). A suite of various energy initiatives have emerged in Australia over recent years, in the midst of concerning social trends of rising energy costs, fuel poverty, and issues around energy efficiency.

The Australian statistics surrounding rising energy tariffs and fuel poverty are resounding. Simshauser et al. (2011) predict over the next 15 years electricity price increases between 96 per cent and 133 per cent in New South Wales. According to Simshauser et

al.'s (2011) projected hardship statistics, around 33 per cent of low-income households, or 6.6 per cent of all New South Wales households may face profound and enduring fuel poverty by the year 2026. Explanations for these predicted trends point towards a convergence of market trends. First, higher energy prices charged by Australian utilities are attributed to an increasingly globalised energy market (Simshauser et al., 2011). Second, the high costs associated with building network capacity to keep pace with increasing peak loads-driven by rising wealth and increases in domestic appliance use and floor-space (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008a). Third, the legislated transition in power generation from low cost coal to higher cost but lower greenhouse gas emitting renewable energies (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008b). Finally, there is a general lack of consideration given to energy efficiency in the majority of Australian housing stock built before legislative reform in 2004 that introduced the Building Sustainability Index (Newton et al., 2000; Hitchings et al., 2015).

Over the past 5–6 years a major discursive shift occurred in Australian household energy policies. Following the identification of fuel poverty as a major problem for the Commonwealth, alongside energy efficiency policies framed by discourses of the environmental calamity of a changing climate are that of vulnerable families and productivity, including the Low Income Energy Efficiency Program (Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism, 2012). In New South Wales, helping older low-income families improve housing energy efficiency is now an integral part of a suite of strategies to ensure age-friendly housing affordability and accessibility (Department of Family and Community Services 2012). Also in New South Wales, an example of the political effect of these discourses of fuel poverty was the 'Energy Efficiency Action Plan' (Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH), (2013)). With energy efficiency at the fore, the OEH provided a wealth of advice on the financial incentives, and environmental rewards for 'doing the smart thing' by purchasing domestic appliances with high energy star ratings and deploying energy-efficient practices at home including installing insulation, draught proofing, and changing incandescent light-globes with light emitting diodes (LED). Such strategies are premised on the idea that the provision of expert advice will help individuals to modify their energy use behaviours as they become aware of the cost savings and global environmental risks. However, such information and education based programmes do not necessarily integrate consumer oriented insights, practice analyses, and behaviour change strategies encouraged by other change approaches such as social marketing (French and Gordon, 2015). To help inform insight based and tailored approaches to policy we consider how the voices of older low-income people resident in privately owned property may be heard in a dialogue on energy efficiency policy. How might such a conversation inform energy efficiency strategies?

## 3. The investigation of energy use practices

While current trends across the social sciences to inform energy policy are towards recognising the importance of seemingly mundane socio-cultural dimensions of everyday life, the process of subjectification – that is, who we are, and what we are-remains under researched. In recent years, how energy is enrolled to sustain the socio-cultural dimensions of everyday domestic life is on the agenda of anthropologists (Pink and Leder-Mackley, 2012), sociologists (Guy and Shove 2000; Shove 2003; Halkier et al. 2011; Hards, 2013; Strengers and Maller 2011; Strengers 2013), social marketers and consumer researchers (Butler et al., 2016), and geographers (Day and Hitchings 2009; Gram-Hanssen 2010, 2011; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Hitchings and Day, 2011; Lovell, 2004). These scholars engage with the energy policy realm through a

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