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'We can't afford to be green' – experiences of energy vulnerability and innovation in the South Wales Valleys



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ERIN ROBERTS

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- 2016 PhD QL study involving households in rural Wales
- Linked to Energy Biographies
- Roberts, E. and Henwood, K. 2018. Exploring the everyday energyscapes of rural dwellers in Wales: putting relational space to work in research on everyday energy use. *Energy Research and Social Science* 36, pp. 44-51.
- Roberts, E. and Henwood, K. 2019. “It’s an old house and that’s how it works”: Living sufficiently well in inefficient homes. *Housing, Theory and Society* 36(4), pp. 469-488.
- Roberts, E. 2019. Sustainable behaviour and environmental practices. In: Davoudi, S. et al. eds. *The Routledge Companion to Environmental Planning*. London and New York: Routledge

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Insights from a QLL study in a Welsh Valleys community



Community is the site of a planned innovative district heating scheme



Residents experiences of fuel poverty



Illustrate the relevance of local place context for understanding fuel poverty



Relating to wider issues of climate change and sustainability



Highlight the benefits of a QLL approach

OVERVIEW

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ACADEMIC LITERATURE

- Fuel poverty arguably now represents a more salient research topic and pressing policy challenge than ever before (Ambrose and Marchand, 2017)
- Calls for qualitative research into fuel poverty and the nature of energy use in fuel poor households (Jenkins et al., 2011; Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015; Grey et al., 2017)
- Seeing fuel poverty as a technical problem to be solved ignores the lived experience of fuel poverty and the many factors that may contribute to it (Jenkins et al., 2011; Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015; Middlemiss, 2017)
- Concept of energy vulnerability (Bouzarovski et al., 2014) – *‘The propensity of an individual to become incapable of securing a materially and socially needed level of energy service in the home’*
- Vulnerability to fuel poverty depends not just on the fabric of home, but also on social relationships (such as those between tenants and landlords), health, and the prices charged for energy within energy markets

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CAERAU

- Population of around 4000, approx. 1850 homes
- Scores highly on a number of measures of deprivation (i.e. 48% children live in poverty)
- Caerau colliery closed in late 1970s
- Despite challenges, participants largely positive about sense of community
- Plans for an innovative district heating scheme using heat from water in disused mine workings



Figures from *Building Communities Trust Caerau Community Profile*



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RESEARCH

- Part of the Social Science element of the FLEXIS project. Some interviews conducted as part of Better Energy Futures
- Qualitative longitudinal interviews – visit annually to explore change over time, alongside technical development
- Interviews explore participants views on the mine water scheme as part of a broader discussion about life in the area, participants life histories and anticipated plans, current experiences and position in relation to energy vulnerability

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PARTICIPANTS

- 2017 24 participants aged early 20s – mid-70s
- 8 retired, 5 employed and 11 unemployed
- Most were home owners but 6 privately rented and 4 were in social housing
- Range of circumstances from solo occupants to multi-generational households
- 19 participant lived in energy vulnerable households
- 2018 – 22 participants re-interviewed
- 2019 – 19 participants re-interviewed



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EXPERIENCES OF FUEL POVERTY

- Food banks and widespread use of prepayment meters as evidence of fuel poverty as a problem
- A number of participants described experiences that indicated others in the community may be struggling with fuel poverty:

“You know they say that people, there are people who could get up in the morning, do I heat or eat, and I can’t see it happening around here somehow ... only once have it ever happened to me, it was somebody knocked the door, an acquaintance, and said ‘Len, I haven’t got enough money for the meter’ and then I just said ‘ah here you are’ like that.” (Len, 70s)

- Some participants had more direct experiences:

“I’ve been there where I’ve got no gas and no electric and I can’t wash my child ... when there’s no gas or electric, you’re stuck. You’ve got nothing, and that’s your life ... Whether it’s darkness, or whether it’s like at a certain of time, you know, when it’s pitch black in the winter, and what are you gonna do then? You’ve got no hot water to do anything, you can’t warm wash your dishes, you can’t have food.” (Stacey, 30s)



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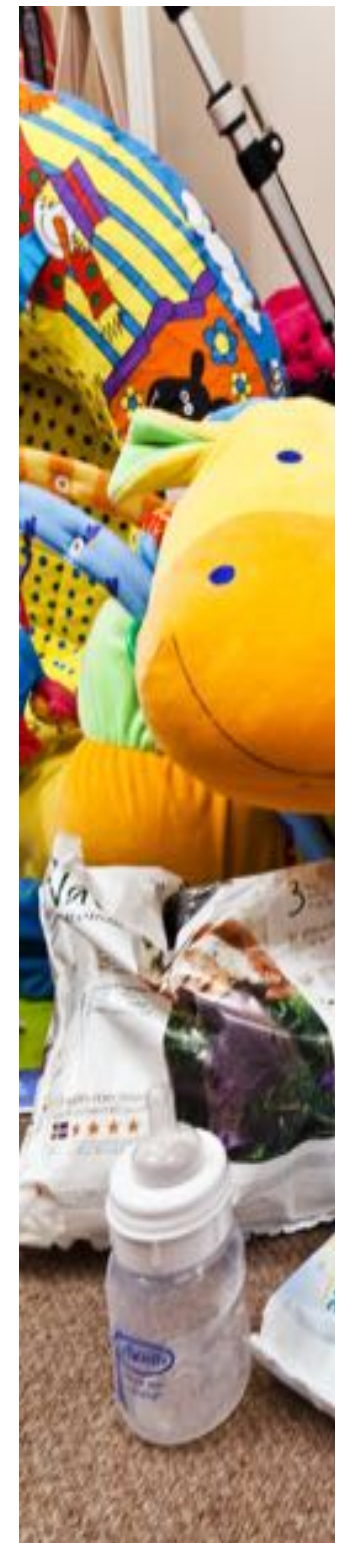
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CARE

- Participants spoke about lifecycle changes as influencing their energy use, particularly the transition to parenthood

“We’ve got four children, so when it was just me and husband to start with it was like just getting a jumper on when we couldn’t afford it, but when you’ve got children it’s my priority. As a parent you keep them warm and safe don’t you?” (Jessica, 20s)

- This was associated with care more widely, not just houses where children are resident
- Not just heating, may also be high electricity costs



‘WE MANAGE’

- Some participants identified as vulnerable, others were unwilling to do so:
“I wouldn’t see myself as vulnerable if I’m honest, because we manage. As a parent you obviously do the best for your children, so we are a family with a very low income so I know it does put us in a vulnerable way in that type of aspect ... personally I don’t see myself as vulnerable, but to others I would be.” (Jessica, 20s)
- One way in which people managed was use of food banks:
“like recently we’ve had to go without, for example, one food shop. And we didn’t have enough, we had too much going out, compared to what was coming in. So we had to pay the bills and we came here and had a food voucher. You know so we manage. But there has been on or two times where you have to buckle, you know really buckle up.” (Jessica, 20s)
- Food identified as an area of possible compromise, in contrast with energy bills, which were both essential and inflexible
- Inability to make savings, easily thrown off by an unexpected expense

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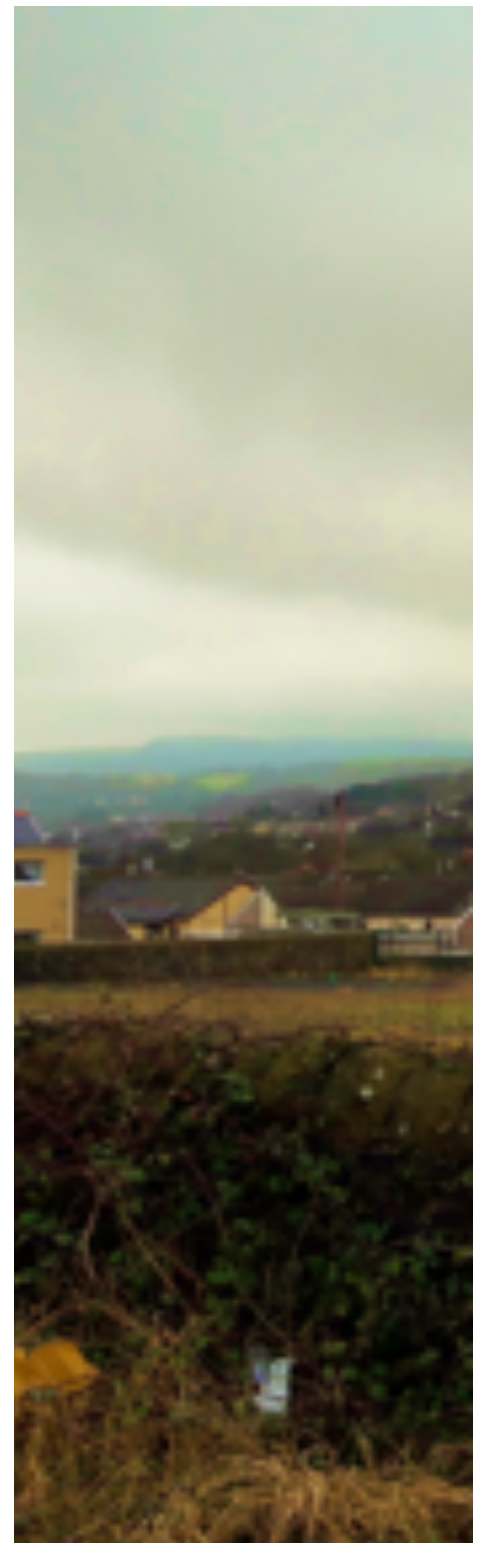
COMMUNITY

- Participants recounted stories of fuel sharing when the collieries were open
- Multiple accounts of sharing money, fuel and food:

“People look out for each other, help each other. I mean, we’ve always been the same up here, haven’t we, really? We don’t waste anything, if there’s food left over, neighbours have it. And neighbours do the same for us ... We won’t see anybody go without, if we can help it. You know food or heating, we try and help out each other.” (Terry, 60s, I2)

“It’s more vulnerable people up here because who cares about Valley people? It’s more cities and towns and all that. It’s just us people, we’re just back and beyond and people forget about us.” (Amanda, 30s, I2)

- Informal support was important in providing some level of resilience to fuel poverty



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TEMPORAL HORIZONS

- The wellbeing of future generations was a concern for all participants
- Some were willing to make sacrifices in the present if things could be improved for their children or grandchildren:

“Yeah, but you’ve gotta change with the times as well, haven’t you? It knocks onto like the ozone layer problem. Because it’s taking, it’s all self-efficient and know what I mean? It’s gonna come in any case, so you may as well go with it, rather than fight against it, innit? And when our grandchildren are that age, they should have healthier air and a cleaner living and stuff, so ... It don’t make a difference to me, but my kids and their kids and their kids will benefit from it like.” (Dawn, 40s)

- However, often cost in the present was the overriding concern
- For people in straightened circumstances who described living day-to-day or week-to-week, it could be difficult to make meaningful connections with issues perceived to be long-term, such as energy security or climate change:

“There’s worse things in life than climate change ... We don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow, do we?” (Stacey, 30s)



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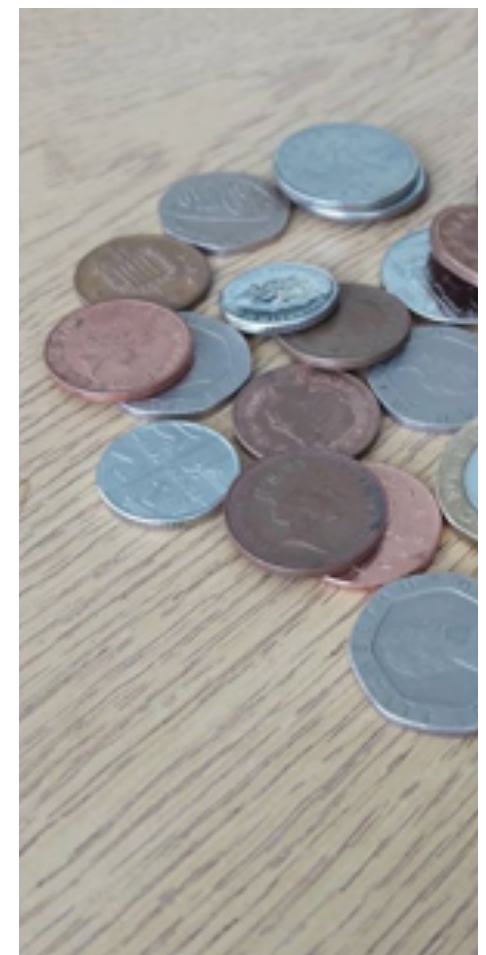
MONEY AND CHOICE

“When you’ve got money, you’ve got choice, if you haven’t got money, you haven’t no choice.” (Terry, 60s)

- Some participants feel trapped in ways of living that may be comparatively expensive or unsustainable
- Cannot assume that greater income would lead to more unsustainable behaviour

“we can’t afford to be green without being economical” (Jenna, 30s)

“You know you can get eco-washing powder and stuff? We just can’t afford it, so, we just use Fairy.” (Jenna, 30s)



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- Fuel poverty as a pressing issue for some Welsh households
- Relevance of accounting for local place characteristics and relationships
- People may be unwilling to identify as vulnerable if they are 'managing' or offer help to others
- Can be difficult to talk about under-consumption in a broader context of over-consumption
- May be difficult to motivate people in relation to perceived long-term concerns when life in the present is so challenging, or if they feel they have little choice
- Benefits of qualitative longitudinal research for elucidating dynamic nature of energy vulnerability

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REPORTS

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www.flexis.wales

www.energybiographies.org

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