

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

### **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 circumstance 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.

### **Keywords**

**domestic energy use; qualitative research; Social Practice Theory, Foucault; energy efficiency, policy, social marketing, programs**

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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'. The concept of tyrannies of thrift refers to sets of ideas that constitute 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' 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 multiplicities of everyday practicalities around energy use remain underdeveloped leading us to consider

how can we think about energy narratives as something that play a role in the process of subjectification?

We argue that Foucault's (1991a) concept of governmentality offers a conceptual framework for interpreting household practices and the tyranny of thrift 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 energy efficiency 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 energy use at home 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 dangers in the processes of becoming a thrifty consumer.

## **2. Australian household energy policy**

This [\$6.1 million Energy Efficiency Action Plan] is about being smarter and thriftier about energy use which in turn will provide NSW will a powerful and sustainable economic advantage. (New South Wales Premier Mike Baird, 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 suit 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 within 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 (ABS 2008a). Third, the legislated

transition in power generation from low cost coal to higher cost but lower greenhouse gas emitting renewable energies (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).

Fuel poverty generated a major discursive shift occurred in Australian household energy policies with the identification of fuel poverty as a major problem for Commonwealth and State authorities. In 2010, State and Commonwealth household energy policy was connected to the problem of reducing greenhouse gasses by saving energy. For example, in 2010 the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage announced the 'NSW Energy Savers Scheme', and the 'Home Power Saving Program'. While, in 2011, the Commonwealth Government announced the four year \$50.5 million 'Home Energy Saver Scheme' as part of *Securing a Clean Energy Future*. Since 2012, the Australian Commonwealth government sought to implement energy efficiency policies framed by discourses of the environmental calamity of a changing climate and fuel poverty (Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism 2012). In 2011, the Low Income Energy Efficiency Program was launched as innovative trial of intervention strategies to support energy efficiency (Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, 2011).

In New South Wales, helping older low-income families improve housing energy efficiency is now an integral part of a suit 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 announced the 'Energy Efficiency Action Plan' (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 things' 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 an individual 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 the development of such insight based and tailored approaches to policy and intervention practice we consider here how might the voices of older low-income people resident in privately owned property be heard in any dialogue on energy efficiency policy? How might such a conversation affect 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 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, T., Nye, M and Burgess 2010, 2013;

Hitchings and Day, 2011; Lovell 2004). These scholars engage with the energy policy realm through a common concern about the assumption that provision of 'energy saving tips' and awareness of environmental calamity will together encourage moderation in energy use. Well established in the social-cultural literature is the argument that energy efficiency is more than education about kilowatts, costs and the environment (Abranhamse et al. 2005). While an educational approach may result in energy saving behaviour for some household practices, a growing body of evidence is pointing to the importance of social-cultural dimensions including ideals of domesticity, the varied skills of households, bodily comfort, and household composition (Shove and Walker, 2014). This literature suggests that most resistant to change is the sphere of household practices and relationships that configure domestic subjects like carer, parents, fathers and grandparents (Hargreaves et al. 2010).

One important strand of enquiry is the work of geographers and sociologists (see Day and Hitchings 2009; Gram-Hanssen 2010, 2013; Hitchings and Day, 2009); Shove 2003; Strengers and Maller 2011) who build upon Warde's (2005) interpretation of social practice theory as discussed by philosophers including Schatki (2002) and Reckwitz (2002) . Following the thinking of Warde (2005), 'Consumption occurs within and for the sake of practices. Items consumed are put to use in the course of engaging in particular practices' (Warde 2005: 146). A major achievement of social practice theory is to shift the focus from configuring energy consumptions as either an individual choice, or as configured within economic and social structures. Instead, social practice theory can help provides an account of household energy open to exploring the technologies, acts, and social norms (Guy and Shove 2000; Shove et al. 2008). Social practice theory understands energy use on participants' terms by drawing attention to the importance of shared social norms (Cupples et al. 2003; Shove 2003; Kjerulf Petersen 2008; Hitchings et al. 2015), discourses (Reckwitz, 2002), sociality

(Hitchings and Day, 2011), the multiplicity and everyday practicalities (Shove 2010), materialities (Strengers 2013; Shove et al. 2014), and embodiment (Chappells and Shove 2005; Gram-Hanssen 2010; Shove et al. 2008) in the performance of practices. In doing so, social practice theory prompted a rethink of energy consumption as an ends orientated behaviour. No longer is energy consumption conceived as something that may be planned in order to achieve some discrete good as evidenced in accounts that rely on rational subjects within economic models (see Greening et al. 2000) or social and environmental psychological frameworks (see Steg 2009). Instead, energy consumption is embedded within social practices that shape and reshape everyday life that have a cultural, material and embodied dimensions.

#### **4. Using Foucault's Governmentality to examine energy practices**

To help conceptualise and research the various dimensions of social practices, scholars have drawn on the ideas of a range of social theorists. For the present discussion, our starting point is Foucault's (1988) concept of governmentality to provide an alternative theoretical approach to inform energy policy. Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' is already well rehearsed in the social sciences literature (Kendall 2014). To abridge, governmentality, according to Foucault (1991a: 87) addresses, '[h]ow to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by who the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor.'" As Foucault (1982: 221) famously argues, governmentality concerns the "conduct of conduct", both the conduct of oneself, and the state. The difference between these two facets of governmentality is further clarified by Foucault's concepts of 'technologies of domination' and 'technologies of the self'. Foucault



understands technologies as working arrangements of spaces, bodies, ideas and things. Foucault conceives power not as the relationship between the oppressed and oppressor, but as something that brings about conduct in a particular context. Technologies of domination “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectising of the subject’ (Foucault, 1988: 18). In our case, we conceive of energy policies and the energy market as technologies of domination. Whereas, technologies of the self are customizing powers

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Foucault 1988: 18).

We therefore posit technologies of the self in regards to various narratives about domestic energy use that helps make sense of who they are at home. The term ‘self’ is used to refer to how we think about ourselves as subjects that are caught up in how we are shaped by, and shape, the circulations of sets of ideas that fashion everyday life, including energy use. Foucault (1988) argues that conduct of oneself is not an independent activity, but one that is governed by technologies of domination. Foucault therefore understands ‘the self’ or ‘the subject’ as always emergent, relational and constructed within discourses as they pertain to knowledge and power, and as distinct from conceptualisations of an autonomous, rational and essentialised self. Foucault (1991a) conceives governmentality as the convergence of technologies of domination and technologies of the self. We favour Foucault’s ideas of governmentality as the starting point for our analysis here because technologies of the self is about the potential for transformation of personal existence while remaining alert to the

connections with the totalising power the state and organisations exerts through legitimising particular knowledge.

Energy policy makers need to be aware of the technologies of power and technologies of the self that bring to bear on individuals and the effects they have in constituting the self. On the one hand, Foucault's ideas of governmentality encourage us to think about the ways that energy policies permeate into how individuals do everyday domestic energy practice. That is, while we all have individual agency, disciplinary powers, like energy markets, energy bills, and energy policies, have an important influence in governing our conduct of energy use. Foucault's (1991a) discussion of governmentality reminds us that everyday domestic energy use is one way we may constitute ourselves to reproduce or challenge social norms about home, gender, families, ageing, household management, hosting visitors, technologies and 'the environment'.

On the other hand, to inquire into the government of self and others, Foucault (1985: 29) positions technologies of the self as 'models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for deciphering the self by oneself, for the transformation one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object'. In Foucault's words, energy discourses may be conceived as components of 'an aesthetic of existence', that shape how individuals think about themselves through the revelation of 'truth' about their subjectivities as older energy consumers, mothers, carers, grandparents (Foucault 1985: 12). Through speaking, and the truth of pleasure, insights are provided to how an individual constitutes their self through energy discourses. In this context, pleasure is understood as derived from self-expressions; a collection of practices that shows how a person thinks about their 'true self'. Energy consumption may be

conceived as a performance - something that is to be 'done right'. Telling an energy narrative then is both an expressive and communicative act. For Foucault, energy narratives are autobiographical, compelling us to simultaneously rework the past in conversation with others to recreate ourselves, and at the same time seek truth about the self and our lives. Our interpretation was guided by two research questions: What domestic energy narratives did older low-income people tell to convey understandings of themselves and their relationships with others? And, what implications arise from these energy narratives?

### **5. Methodological approach: let's talk about energy efficiency**

The study featured qualitative focus group research with fifty five people - thirty five women and twenty men across 11 groups. All are aged over 60 years of age who are home-owners or private tenants in the Illawarra New South Wales, Australia, with personal disposable income below \$26,104 per annum (the Australian Bureau of Statistics' threshold for low-income). Our empirical focus was guided by statistics that in Australia suggest around an estimated 96 per cent of houses are privately owned (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Furthermore, at June 2012, 14 per cent of the total population in Australia was aged over 65 years of age (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013), and this was estimated to increase to 24 per cent by 2056 (ABS 2009). The focus groups were conducted to help inform a multidisciplinary project using home ethnographies, social marketing and engineering retrofits to address fuel poverty in an ageing Australian population.

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach where the researchers approached several known networks, including providers of independent living units in residential aged care villages. Eleven focus groups were then conducted in September and

October 2014 in participants' homes, community or university venues. Prior to the focus group, all potential participants who had expressed interest were provided with an information sheet, and written informed consent was obtained. We found that older low-income people who took part in the focus groups welcomed the opportunity, given energy efficiency is not a topic they normally talked with their family or friends. All focus groups were audio recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Focus groups averaged around an hour, though some lasted up to two hours. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant University ethics committee.

A semi-structured discussion guide ensured consistent starting points in conversations across focus groups including: energy efficiency, government policy, energy suppliers and everyday practices. We were interested in exploring with participants how they knew about energy efficiency, how they worked out to be energy efficient or not, and what the experience of being energy efficient was like for them. Questions to start conversations included: "What do you think are some of the major contributors to electricity use in your home?"; "How did you learn about energy efficiency?"; "Can you be energy efficient in a way that meets your needs?". Participants were encouraged to tell stories about topics of concern and themes that emerged in the conversation about energy use. Our semi-structured discussions coincided with an increase in domestic gas prices as the Australian market was exposed to international market demand through increased exports of liquefied natural gas. In contrast, electricity prices were assumed to fall following the abolition by the Commonwealth Coalition Government of the carbon pricing mechanism (Mascher and Hodgkinson 2013). Participants were presented with a \$50 gift voucher as recompense for their time.

Our interpretation was guided by Foucault's (1991a) discussion of governmentality.

Governmentality analysis allowed an interpretation of the relationship between dominant discourses and domestic subjectivities. Detailed and repeated reading allowed for the systematic coding under a number of themes (institutions, strategies, calculations, and reflections). Similarities and differences were noted in the topics discussed between participants and focus groups. In every focus group, discussion emerged around financial scarcity, entitlement, generational difference, thriftiness, waste, illness, independence and strength. This paper focuses on discourses of scarcity that made efficient energy use 'thinkable' as waste, and the pleasures narrating one's 'true' self as thrifty that help mask potential dangers at home. To give voice to these issues we quote at length from our participants. All are given pseudonyms.

## **6. The discourse and performances of thriftiness**

Cultures of energy consumption in the older low income households of our study were shaped by the problem of how to save money on energy bills to balance household budgets. Domestic energy consumption is therefore an anxious laden process, and thrift was the dominant discourse involved in enacting the performance of energy waste as a serious problem and in making energy efficiency 'thinkable'. As noted by Evans (2011: 551) thrift may be thought of as: 'the art of doing more (consumption) with less (money)'. The art of thrift puts a restraint on household expenditure rather than consumption. As Tess (70s, single) explains:

Tess: For me it's important not to waste energy because wasting energy costs me money and I'd rather use that money to do something else with.

As articulated by Tess, thrift is the simultaneous expenditure and saving of finite household financial resources. In response to scarcity, thrift moderates against excessive consumption that wastes financial resources.

As the following quotations demonstrate, when cultures of energy consumption are shaped by notions of thrift, household adeptness and waste, the problem of energy efficiency and questions of social responsibility orient closer to domestic subjectivities rather than global environmental citizenship. These discourses not only describe, but also help constitute domesticities and subjectivities.

Tom (60s, coupled household): Every bill is a concern. It's got to be. At the moment we get \$700 [a fortnight], sometimes it's \$800, but I borrowed a thousand dollars from Centrelink. \$750 I think it is I get a fortnight to live on, pay your rates for the house and the car, your electricity. This is why I have to be very careful because I can't afford big bills. I'm not even thinking about the rest of the world when I say that, I think of just me.

Callie (80s, widow): Really, that [energy efficiency] is a way of life with us. It's not feeling holy or anything.

As Foucault reminds us there is a performative attribute of discourse – the way discourse becomes embodied in doings and sayings about the self, and actively shapes the world. In articulating domestic energy practices the majority of participants do not readily connect with global or environmental citizenship. Instead, household financial scarcity, and the anxieties of ever-increasing cost of energy were caught up in household management practices of thrift, and in being and becoming thrifty.

Taking up Miller's (1998) argument that consumption may be understood as a medium of fashioning meaningful relations, thrifty practices may be understood as responsible management of household finances. This involves enacting the performative dimension of this energy efficiency discourse that is grounded in an ascetic critique of excess and a

category of moral judgment that positions excessive consumption as wasteful - that is an unproductive expenditure of money. As Luke (70s, coupled household) explains the 'truth' about the self as thrifty is narrated through the effect of receiving an energy bill.

When my bill is a bit smaller than it should be for the average for a couple of people I think: 'Good on you'. I think that's good. Obviously I'm not wasting it.

Important here is how Luke illustrates how the energy bill operates as a technology of domination through providing a comparative figure for an 'average household' to encourage energy consumers to be normal. Foucault (1991b: 184) argued that normalisation is 'one of the great instruments of power'. Energy bills are one example of the power of normalisation by how they simultaneously 'imposed homogeneity, but it individualises by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another' (1991b: 184). Through the energy bill each individual is subject to a panopticon gaze of normalising judgement (Foucault, 1991b: 178). At the same time, the receipt of an energy bill operates as a moment of self-reflection, as a technology of the self that reveals the 'truth' about how individuals think about themselves within cultures of domestic energy consumption. Luke conveys the shared sets of ideas among most participants of excessive energy consumption as a failure in household budget management, and sweeping moral condemnation of waste and conspicuous consumption.

Discourses about energy bills, overconsumption and waste were central to making energy efficiency visible as a household problem. These discourses, or speech acts, did not simply represent energy efficiency; they also made energy efficiency available for household action. In the processes of problematizing energy efficiency, participants also identified how to act and address energy efficiency that confirmed their 'true' sense of self as thrifty.

As Leigh and Jennifer tell:

Leigh (70s, single) It [energy efficiency] makes us feel pleased I think. If you're comfortable in your own environment with the amount of power you're consuming and if you're comfortable, you're happy. You're not got getting a bill of so many thousand dollars which some of them do get. That would certainly make you very unhappy.

Jennifer (70s, couple household): It's [energy efficiency] our own private comfort zones ... our comfort zone is we're happy where we are.

Attentive to the anxieties generated by energy bills, householder practices of thrifty domestic energy consumption – doing the right thing - was said to profoundly enhance a sense of comfort within that place. Energy efficiency for older low income householders is narrated as the normal way of managing households to both reduce waste and anxieties around financial scarcity.

On this note, it is helpful to consider the historical social context and cultural assumptions that underpin abounding notions of 'good' household management as thrift. Most participants gave accounts of how they came to know energy efficiency as moderation and avoiding wasting money as an unescapable influence of austerity messages and expectations exposed to during their childhoods. In response to the Great Depression and World War II, participants suggested that thrift was required of them growing-up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. At these times, cultures of energy efficiency were shaped by scarcity, and avoiding wasting money was the right thing to do (Lowenstein 1978). This prevalence existed to the extent that they were expected to avoid frivolous consumption, including domestic energy, and most continue to do so. For example, Nicola (80s, coupled household) said:



I think it's because of our age, we've always had to think, the way to save. We're conscious of saving money and not being extravagant, frivolous. Whereas, a lot of younger ones don't look at in that light. Flick a switch. Yeah.

Similarly, Matt (70s, coupled household) said:

We were post-war babies, and we came through an era where waste not want not. I certainly did so, we grew up with that mindset of being very careful. From the money aspect, as much as anything else. And, I think our age group still have that. I think you'll find in the older generation, number one, they've come up through the ages without all this luxury as the young ones – we perceive – it wasn't like that when we were there.

For Nicola, and Matt, their sense of self is based upon austerity that is non-negotiable. They bring discourses of thrift from a time when cultures of energy consumption centred on saving performances to help make-ends meet. Foucault reminds us how technologies of domination creates their own object, in this instance the idea of waste and ever increasing consumption as abhorrent.

At this juncture it is worth exploring the ways in which participants delineate the category of 'waste'. Overwhelmingly, wasted energy appears to belong to a moral judgement category that is aligned to the excess of global consumer capitalism and the passive consumption of wealth. For example, Kevin (80s, widower) explains that:

I think in many ways Australia has become a wasteful country ... We were brought up in a different age, when you had to be careful with water and think like that. My grandmother used a brick to put in the bed to warm us up, now we've got electric blankets. When I was a child out in Cobar they used to save the *Sydney Morning Herald* because they were bigger, and put that between the sheet and the blankets.

Kevin illustrates how thrift is narrated to sustain generational difference. Thrift is narrated against economic scarcity and the material home culture of care of making do. Like Kevin, Lesley (80s, coupled household), tells a story of how thrift is the guiding principle to manage the household economy born out of economic scarcity.

Our generation can go way back to when things were really tough... So you never wasted anything then, so you don't waste anything now. ... I don't like wastage of

any sort, if you've got the oven on you do multiple tasks with the oven. You don't just do one thing. When I make a cup of coffee I have enough water to do it.

Lesley tells how she makes a conscious decision not to waste anything, and the dominant discourse of her childhood, specifically discourses of domesticity and thrift. Likewise, Mary (70s, couple household) is immersed in the moralised discourses of thrift.

I know a lot of people just use it [energy] willy-nilly, but I don't think I could have it over my conscience. I think it's because they [younger generations] always had it [electricity]. Once again, we, we didn't grow up with it. We're more aware of the fact that this is something good, take care of it because heavens above it you can't have it, it's awful. We don't want to go backwards.

Mary is troubled by the use of energy 'willy-nilly'. The unifying features across these participants is that thrifty domestic energy practices help constitute the revelation of truth about themselves as 'good' household managers and members of a responsible generation, as distinct from the excessive consumption practices of those born in the 1960s onwards.

Many older lower-income participants spoke of moderation as a guiding principle to life, and recognised their collective generational difference from cultures of consumption and displays of excessive consumption since the 1960s. Hence, enacting a counter-performativity of energy efficiency was understood as a problem in some contexts. For example, as Moira (84 years of age, widow) said:

When we moved into our house the stove was the same, a huge big oven. When we moved in 30 years ago I thought if I want to heat one pie no way would I put it in there, I put it in the microwave or the little turbo thing I've got because I wouldn't heat up the whole oven. Now I think I am 84 – why am I worrying about heating up a pie in large oven? [Laughter] So I've gone on the reverse. It's [the pie] nice and crisp – it doesn't go soggy. So I'm afraid I go to the bottom of the class.

Moria's narrative about energy efficiency connects to discourses of ageing, managing household budgets and cooking. The political effects of Moria's discourses was how the

ageing-self emerged as a subject separate from the demands of energy efficiency. Moira points to the unpredictable ways in which technologies of power converge with technologies of the self.

Another key discourse involved in enacting the counter-performativity of domestic energy efficiency was ill-health. Wrapping up in blankets was 'unthinkable' in households when an older family member was ill. For example Dorothy (60s, extended household) tells of switching on heating appliances to care for her elderly father.

Personally, I would just put clothes on or wrap a quilt around me unless it was really cold, and then I would put it on. Because growing up I had four kids, and you're always conscious of your bill. If they were cold, put some more clothes on, and wrap a blanket around you. ... Here, with dad being elderly, it's a whole different situation and dynamic. He's cold and he's got very thin blood and he's not well. So he doesn't care. He doesn't care what the bill is. We'll pay it because he needs to be comfortable.

The effect of discourses of ageing bodies and ambient room temperatures is the removal of restrictions of energy use in the name of health and comfort. In this way, elderly bodies emerged as vulnerable to ambient room temperatures and strategies of rugging up in layers of clothes and blankets. Further, Emily (80s, single household) tells of the importance of energy use to maintain ambient room temperature for effective palliative care:

They had their air-conditioner on 24 hours a day and they had \$600 bills, but he was an elderly gentleman on his way to heaven and you think: 'Gee that's a big bill but he needed that at the end of his life. This was his choice, and you would say, that was good learning, this is what could happen to me. I think it's more that kind of thing. We don't think of them as being wasteful. So, it wasn't criticism. I've never heard anybody criticised because they had big bill, it was more being concerned for them.

These quotations illustrate how price is not taken into consideration as part of 'care work'.

As Emily suggests, increased energy consumption is not exposed to moral condemnation as part of cultures of care. The truth about the self as thrifty consumer is not lived as

contradictions through discourses of illness and dying but as an expression of individual and collective care for significant others. The next section explores how the tyrannies accompanying the subjectivity of thrifty through how discourses of energy efficiency intersect with scarcity and waste.

## **7. Tyrannies of thrift narrated through clothing and lighting story-lines**

In this section we illustrate the tyrannies of thrift by considering discourses around clothing and lighting. Our claim is that energy efficiency as understood by older low-income householders as reducing waste in a context of scarcity is productive in helping to constitute a thrifty subject as smart, sensible and independent; countering stigmatised discourses of ageing as rendering people dependent and 'in decline'. Discourses of thrift from pre-World War II are important to stabilise participants' understandings of themselves, and their generational difference at home. Yet, how narratives of domestic energy efficiency help to constitute a morally charged thrifty subject as an expression of participants' 'true self' may silence potential dangers to the householder. Here we pay particular attention to home-making narratives about clothing and lighting to illustrate the tyrannies of thrift.

### **7.1 Clothing**

Participants had quite different ideas about the ambient room conditions they required. Indeed, ambient room temperature often became a source of conflict in shared domestic space. Nevertheless, most participants appeared to accept a wide diversity of temperatures in their homes as relatively normal. Furthermore, clothing was a pivotal story-line to their domestic warming and cooling practices. For example, Simon (70s, coupled household) said:

I can remember when we were young our parents would be putting on warm woollen jumpers and sit and watch TV with a blanket around them, rather than putting on heating. We found ourselves doing that, if it's not particularly cold, and the air is cold and you're watching TV, you have a rug, and I wear woollen jumpers around the house all the time. I don't like being too hot. I don't like the chill either. I don't like the extremes. But we find it's actually quite effective to sit with a rug watching TV rather than heating up the whole room if it's not particularly cold. And, these are things our kids laugh when they come down and say: 'Put the heating on for heaven's sake'. But for us, it's actually just as comfortable to sit there with that [extra clothing and rug] on.

Simon is conscious that in winter the ambient room temperature in their home does not meet the normative temperature standards demanded by their children. Like Simon, many of our participants were aware of the social stigma discussed by Hards (2013) of layering clothes and wrapping up in rugs to keep warm. However, like Simon, wearing extra layers of clothing was narrated as the sensible choice. Overlooked in current energy programs is how in older low-income peoples' narratives, 'doing without' heaters and rugging up in blankets and wearing extra layers of clothing has constitutive powers to help stabilise generational difference as well as social status by customising an understanding of themselves as both thrifty and sensible.

Thermal hosting was a related storyline that revealed the stigma around thrifty energy practices (Day and Hitchings 2011). The discourse of hosting involved enacting a counter-performative of energy efficiency as a problem, and made energy consumption possible. Turning on heating and cooling appliances at homes is talked about as the sensible thing to do when hosting friends or family. As noted by Hitchings and Day (2011), through heating and cooling rooms, participants could transform themselves into 'good' hosts configured by the dominant discourses of aesthetics, hospitality, and social respectability.

Bridget (70s, couple household): I think you know, people coming in, influences ... you may be a bit more inclined to put the heater on. Not for our comfort, their comfort.

Sally (70s, couple household): I must admit when my grandchildren walk in the first thing they do is turn on the heater, and they're allowed to. If I know they're coming I turn it on before they get there. When they leave I turn it off and open the door.

Lauren (80s, widow) I always put the heater on Saturday afternoon when my daughter comes down, because she comes down in a summer dress with no sleeves on. And, you have to put the heater on because she's cold. But, I wouldn't put a heater on in the day time for anything.

While narratives about thermal hosting varied across participants, the plot remained constant through the study. Ambient room temperatures presented a problem, because their thermal dressing practices became open to scrutiny. As noted by Hards (2013) there are social risks SUCH AS?? of being found to have quite different ideas about ambient room temperature and energy practices. As Hitchings and Day (2011) argue, many older people's concerns for family members' and friends' thermal comfort works against them even knowing that participants were generally living with much colder and hotter ambient room temperatures. Immersed in energy cultures of thrift, by adopting layering clothing, participants were aware of the social stigma. At the same time, this energy practice affirmed social status by confirming understandings of themselves as belonging to a sensible generation. In turn, together these masked the potential physical health risks of prolonged periods of extreme hot and cold.

## **7.2 Lighting**

Eve: If I might tell this story. I did my apprenticeship with saving energy. I worked in London during the war. We had to go around every night at 11 o'clock, put the lights out, put everything out and same if you left a light on in your room ... so I did my apprenticeship with lights, I tell you that. So, I've still got that in me. I want, I just can't help turning out lights.

Eve (90s, coupled households) outlines how discourses of thrift from World War II became embodied over a life-course. Turning out lights are in part how Eve constitutes herself as a

responsible subject, shaped by notions of thrift, household efficiency, scarcity and safety. Our participants illustrate how for this generation, learning household energy efficiency through switching off lights is not only the 'right thing to do' but is part of their 'true' sense of self as thrifty. Eve was not alone in sharing stories of how not switching lights off when leaving a room is 'unthinkable'.

One common story in this respect that illustrates the tyranny of thrift was a reluctance to switch lights on to move about their house at night. Under constant pressure of financial scarcity, and constituting themselves as both thrifty and sensible by turning all lights off at night, older low-income people again jeopardise their health. For example, Janet (80s, couple household) told of using a torch:

My Ian, because he has been very ill and he also fell so I say to him: 'Ian take your torch, don't just walk out'. Because he got up and whether he got up very fast or bumped something but he hurt himself very badly because he fell in the toilet. So I say to put the torch on. It doesn't matter. Or put the light on your phone. But that's the safety reason. You must do that to feel comfortable.

Despite this version of knowledge – that safe homes need lighting to be comfortable – many participant stories revealed a culture of energy efficiency through a refusal to switch on lights at night. Their disciplined behaviour signified self-control. As Kay (70s, single household) explained:

If you're reading. It's that lamp that is closest to you, not the dining room light as well. I think it's a generational thing, we grew up in the same time so we're much more aware of the way we spend our money. I've been opening my blinds particularly in the living room area because there's a streetlight and I can walk around the house during the night. There's sufficient light coming in. It's great - get it from the streetlight.

Older low-income participants self-regulated energy use by turning off lights. Dominant discourses of thrift from World War II and before, coalesced around cultures of austerity. Alert to the waste of self-indulgent consumption, including energy consumption, turning off

lights, was a significant solution. Austerity was materially evident in dimly lit or dark houses. Furthermore, enacting the performativity of energy austerity was a solution to increasing energy bills and in confirming how the householder may constitute themselves as clever, sensible and independent. There is a tyranny to the intersecting discourses of domestic thriftiness, waste, scarcity and switching lights off through how they silence the dangers of moving around homes in the dark.

Yet, some participants were aware of the tyranny of thrift. For example, Julie (70s, couple household) explains how living with her vision-impaired husband made it impossible to switch off lights.

When my husband was at home I didn't worry about the electricity too much. He only had one eye too. He had a bit of a sight problem. I didn't mind. We had the hall light one, the lounge room and the kitchen. Even though it's only a unit we used to have a lot on so he didn't fall over.

Similarly, Ellen (70s, single household) warned:

I leave a light on all night because if I need to get – I have an en-suite to my bedroom but if I walk out to the lounge area there's no way I'll walk out there in the dark. Even though I know where the furniture is I'm likely to bump into something. As one of our members who is not here today did exactly that and is now at home with a broken rib, had a fall, I leave that light on.

Ellen illustrates the importance of sharing narratives and personal reflection to help change energy behaviours. Leaving a light on at night-light is not understood as wasteful but sensible when narrated in terms of the health implication of what may happen from walking around her home in the dark. Discourses of ageing and care were involved in enacting a counter-performativity of consuming energy that contradicted keeping lights turned on as a serious problem for the thrifty consumer.

## **8. Conclusions and Policy Implications**



To contribute to energy policy and practice this paper draws on Foucault's notion of governmentality to explore the ways in which energy use is embedded in shaping and reshaping the subjectivities of everyday home-life. How might thinking in domestic energy policy research be enriched in light of a Foucauldian perspective on the self as constituted by the convergence of technologies of domination and technologies of the self? In the language of our theoretical frame, it follows that the challenge for energy policy makers and practitioners is to better understand the performative dimension of energy efficiency discourses; that is how telling energy narratives not only describes domestic energy use, but also helps constitute homes and multiple domestic subjectivities.

In terms of our governmentality analysis, three key points emerge around the conduct of conduct and older low-income people's energy consumption. First, in the 2000s, political responses to fuel poverty and climate change science made energy efficiency into a field of governance. The rise of energy efficiency programs is an example of this. Yet, unlike contemporary energy policies, energy efficiency cultures of older low-income households were predominantly shaped by notions of thrift and scarcity from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Two key discourses were involved in telling and enacting the performativity of energy efficiency as thrift. The first discourse is around financial scarcity that is integral to understanding: how energy efficiency is understood in terms of not wasting; and creating a sense of anxiety around energy bills. Many of our participants narrated stories of energy consumption related anxieties. The second parallel discourse came from various government austerity policies from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s that emerged to contest the impacts of the Great Depression and World War II and the problem of scarcity. With many of the participants growing up in an era of austerity, the key political effects of this

discourse are illustrated by how participants speak of forms of participation in energy efficiency and constituting the thrifty subject. Telling thrifty domestic energy narratives that involve wrapping up in blankets, layering clothing, hanging on to old domestic appliances and switching off lights helped to stabilise subjectivities within the context of home as experts on energy efficiency. Furthermore, the discourse of thrift sustained generational difference by exposing a moral condemnation of 'the waster', prompted by the more recent rise of cultures of consumption and material abundance (Miller 1998). Without household management aligned to thrift, many participants would lose their sense of self as sensible, and generational difference.

Second, is the allied point that two key discourses, ageing and mortality, were involved in enacting the counter-performativity of energy use as wasteful. This means that the quantifiable act of consuming energy in kilowatt hours is not evidence of a lack of concern, knowledge or skills about energy efficiency; but may indicate householders are ill or dying.

Our third argument is the tyranny of thrift. Ageing in place may be life lengthening through how the home provide affirmation of the self (Williams 2002), but may also be life threatening. Thrifty domestic energy regimes enable many older low-income people to affirm themselves at home as independent and strong, rejecting the dominant language that stigmatises an older-aged identity in western society as vulnerable, weak and of lower social status. However, at the same time the pleasure of affirming one's sense of self as both expert and independent may mask the energy costs of hanging on to older domestic appliances and health and safety dangers of switching off lights and heaters/coolers at home.

Together, these three points suggest, first, that governmentality provides a framework to enhance and reflect on energy programs. Our governmentality analysis highlights the performative dimensions of discourse, and how financial restrictions on the household economy are imbricated in the working of how to organise life according to the principles of thrift rather than according to the neo-liberal market. This finding may suggest a departure from some energy policy that attends to the liberal subject and economy conceived as a self-organising and self-correcting system and point towards the importance of consumer insights.

Second, energy policy must remain alert to technologies of domination and of the self because discourses do not simply describe the world, but help constitute this world. This is the performative dimension of energy efficiency governmentality that requires paying attention to how discourses shape subjectivities, principles, performances and counter-performances. For example, we argue that one challenge for policy makers is to better understand the far-reaching and unplanned consequences of thrift in making energy efficiency 'thinkable'. Given some thrifty practices are potentially life threatening it suggests a move to incite greater reflection and debate among older low-income people in respect to how they constitute energy efficiency as waste. One productive way forward is energy efficiency programs that draw on discourses of comfort, wellbeing and safety alongside those of waste into conversations around the question: "What is energy efficiency?"

We propose that narratives of older low-income people as a complementary component of energy efficiency social marketing programs. We advocate a move away from simple information and education provision, to comprehensive, consumer oriented and insight based social marketing programs that not only provide energy efficiency tips, but that

incorporate collective stories of the target audiences' household management to encourage awareness of their energy practices, and self-reflection through web-based videos, newsletters and community education programs (see French and Gordon, 2015; Stead et al. 2013). The collective stories may be accompanied by an invitation to encourage people to open-up conversation with friends and relatives as well as to encourage self-reflection on what is the best and worst thing that could happen to them from: replacing old but working domestic appliances, installing solar power, pulling out plugs, turning off heaters when friends and family leave, and keeping a light switched on at night. Questions may include: "Am I safe financially, emotionally and physically?" Are other family members okay with what is happening? The aim of these narratives and questions is to engender a process of self-reflection in readers and to open up a conversation and debate in public of seemingly mundane practices. This approach steps back from those that tell older low income households what they should do, or those that advocate to 'nudge' or be an architect of changing people's behaviour (Dolan et al. 2010). Instead, a narrative approach informed by Foucault's notion of governmentality creates possibilities for a multiplicity of responses through working out within each household the potential challenges and confirmation to the social norms, practices and principles underpinning its culture of energy efficiency. While money and 'the environment' do matter they are always shaped through discourses that people understand themselves and their relationship with energy. Energy efficiency programs could productively focus on encouraging people to reflect on the type of person one aims to become through domestic energy use, and harness their agency by acknowledging the performative dimensions of discourse.

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