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Rendered invisible: institutional misrecognition and the reproduction of energy poverty

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Abstract
This paper makes the case that a lack of political and institutional recognition underpins the (re)production of domestic energy poverty. Previous research into the drivers of energy poverty has tended to focus on household-scale material and economic factors, with relatively little attention paid to the symbolic structures that act to legitimise deprivation. To evidence our argument, we draw on a case study of Poland during the period 2010-2015, conducted via in-depth interviews with high-level decision-makers and experts. We utilise Nancy Fraser's concept of 'misrecognition' to argue that during this period those suffering from energy poverty were discursively marginalised in two interlinked ways. First, 'non-recognition', in that the lived reality of energy poverty and the complexity of its causes were largely 'rendered invisible' in mainstream political and policy discourse. Second, 'disrespect', in that many dominant understandings of and responses to energy poverty were informed by narratives based on stigmatisation and othering. We demonstrate how these forms of misrecognition actively fed into policy design and operation at both national and local scales, ultimately contributing to the reproduction of energy poverty. We conclude by arguing that a progressive politics to address energy inequalities is predicated upon a symbolic strategy that involves raising awareness about the existence and prevalence of energy poverty, whilst also challenging narratives that frame disadvantaged groups as individually responsible for their own deprivation.

Key words
Energy poverty; fuel poverty; energy justice; misrecognition

1. Introduction

Researchers are increasingly analysing the underpinning drivers of energy poverty (also termed 'energy deprivation' or 'fuel poverty'), a specific form of material deprivation that occurs when a person is unable to attain a socially- and materially-required level of energy services in the home (Bouzarovski and Petrova, 2015). Affecting an estimated 44.5 million people in Europe alone (Thomson and Bouzarovski, 2018), the consequences of energy poverty can be significant, including serious harms to physical health and mental well-being (Liddell and Morris, 2010), and impairment of the capabilities that comprise a flourishing life (Day et al., 2016). Although related, energy poverty is not reducible to income poverty as it can occur even if a household is not income poor (Boardman, 2010; Buzar, 2007a).

Theoretically informed work into the drivers of energy deprivation remains in a relatively nascent phase (Hilbert and Werner, 2016). Boardman's (1991) highly influential early theorisation posits that energy deprivation results from the interaction between three factors: low household incomes, high energy costs, and poor domestic energy efficiency. This powerful framework continues to inform much research and policy action on energy poverty, although recent scholarship had built upon its foundations. In particular, the 'energy vulnerability' approach highlights the dynamic nature of energy poverty and how domestic energy needs influence the risk a household will suffer from energy poverty (Bouzarovski and Petrova, 2015; Day and Walker, 2013; Middlemiss and Gillard, 2015).

Petrova (2017) has argued that dominant perspectives towards the causes of energy poverty are predominantly concentrated on the household scale. As such, although valuable, these perspectives overlook broader systemic processes through which people are actually rendered 'vulnerable'. She argues, *inter alia,* that energy poverty scholarship needs to move beyond a focus only on 'vulnerable groups' or households, to consider the *institutional mechanisms and relations* through which vulnerability and marginality is produced and sustained. The small amount energy poverty research that has taken such an approach (Bouzarovski et al., 2017; Buzar, 2007b, 2007c; Großmann and Kahlheber, 2018; Hilbert and Werner, 2016) has demonstrated that energy poverty is embedded in multiple and shifting governance practices within the housing, energy and social policy domains.

However, an important research lacuna is the limited amount of attention paid to the role of symbolic and discursive structures – that is, the frameworks of belief, perception and valuation (Fraser, 1987; Wacquant, 2016) – in constituting institutional practices and ultimately contributing to the reproduction of energy deprivation. Critical researchers have long emphasised "the ways in which economic inequalities intersect with problems of culture and discourse" (Fraser and Naples, 2004, p. 375). In short, how inequalities are constructed, framed and valued has fundamental material consequences (Elwood et al., 2017; Lawson et al., 2008; Lawson and Elwood, 2018; Lister, 2015, 2004; Morrison, 2003; Young, 1997, 1990), but few studies have attempted to apply such insights to the issue of energy poverty (for exceptions see Cauvain and Bouzarovski, 2016; Walker and Day, 2012).

We seek to address this research gap. Utilising Nancy Fraser's (Fraser, 2007, 2000, 1995; Fraser and Honneth, 2003) concept of 'misrecognition', we contend that the discursive subordination of energy poverty and of the circumstances of those who encounter it plays an important role in the reproduction of the condition. Our argument draws upon a series of qualitative interviews with 'elite' actors (high-level decision-makers and experts) in Poland undertaken in 2014 and 2015. The overarching aim of the paper is twofold. First, we wish to advance debates on energy poverty and injustice (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017; Walker and Day, 2012), by strengthening our empirical understanding of the symbolic and institutional underpinnings of energy-related inequality. Second, and more broadly, we aim to contribute to debates on how material issues of maldistribution are entwined with symbolic dimensions of misrecognition.

The next section introduces the conceptual apparatus of misrecognition. The methodological approach is then discussed. The results section presents analysis of discourses of misrecognition among our interviewees, before tracing their connection with the design of energy poverty-relevant policies and practices. The paper concludes by highlighting the main theoretical and empirical advances of the paper.

2. Conceptualising misrecognition

The concept of 'misrecognition' emerged in the 1990s from feminist and post-structuralist critiques of dominant theories of social justice (Fraser, 1995; Honneth, 1995, 1992; Young, 1990). These works argued that most justice theory focused exclusively on the (un)fair distribution of material resources, and indeed attempted to conceptualise all social justice

struggles through the lens and logic of 'distribution'. They contended that this approach failed to adequately understand dimensions of injustice that concerned issues of disrespect, cultural devaluation and social subordination. It was claimed that such forms of inequity, relating to the improper 'recognition' of social groups, needed explicit attention in order to fully understand the lived reality of social and environmental injustice. There are a number of specific conceptualisations of misrecognition (see, for example, Honneth, 1995), but in this paper we particularly utilise the one developed by Nancy Fraser over a number of publications (Fraser, 2007, 2000, 1997, 1995; Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

For Fraser, misrecognition occurs when persons are devalued as less-than-equal members of society, a "relation of social subordination" (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). She asserts that this is fundamentally a 'symbolic' rather than socio-economic or 'distributional' form of injustice (Fraser, 1995). Essentially, misrecognition is rooted in discourses and value systems that constitute certain people and the characteristics associated with them as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem (Childs, 2014; Phillips, 2003). As Fraser describes:

> "[When] … institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of *misrecognition* and *status subordination*." (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 29, original emphasis)

Misrecognition can manifest in various ways, with Fraser making a useful distinction between 'cultural domination', 'disrespect' and 'non-recognition' (Fraser 1995). Cultural domination is defined as "being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own" (p.71). Disrespect occurs when a person or group is persistently denigrated, belittled and stereotyped in dominant discursive representations. It thus connects closely with concepts of stigma and stigmatisation explored in wider sociological and geographical literature (Goffman, 1963; Lister, 2004; Tyler, 2013). Finally, non-recognition refers to a situation in which groups of people are "rendered invisible" – they are not acknowledged, seen or 'counted' in the dominant discourses and value patterns of wider society. As Sennett (2004) describes, "lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen – as a full human being whose presence matters" (p.3).

Misrecognition is deleterious for at least two reasons. Fraser (1999) suggests that it prevents people from engaging equally in social and political life, when a just society should enable 'parity of participation' for all citizens; that is, the equal opportunity for everyone to participate in society and achieve self-esteem. Other authors have also emphasised the deep psychological and emotional harm faced by misrecognised individuals (Honneth, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000).

Secondly, and more crucial to our argument in this paper, misrecognition is deeply implicated in *material* forms of inequality, deprivation and injustice. Honneth (1995), for example, sees misrecognition as foundational to maldistribution, arguing that "even distributional injustices

must be understood as the institutional expression of social disrespect" (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.114). Fraser takes a more dialectical view, arguing that material inequalities and lack of recognition are co-constitutive, typically reinforcing one another in "a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination" (Fraser, 2007, 1995, p. 73). In both these perspectives, however, a shared and crucial point is that misrecognition is implicated in *causing* material inequities (Sayer, 2005; Schlosberg, 2007). Fraser argues that misrecognition becomes 'institutionalized' – that is, expressed and perpetuated "through the workings of social institutions that regulate interaction according to parity-impeding norms" (Fraser, 2000, p. 114). She explains that misrecognition is embedded within:

> "…a variety of institutional sites, and in qualitatively different modes. In some cases, misrecognition is juridified, expressly codified in formal law; in other cases, it is institutionalized via government policies, administrative codes or professional practice." (Fraser, 2000, p. 114)

In short, misrecognition has "repercussions on institutional operations" (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1272) in ways that can help generate and perpetuate material deprivation. For example, research demonstrates how the stigmatisation of disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods has motivated urban regeneration policies founded on gentrification and displacement, thus contributing to a cycle of uneven development (Kallin and Slater, 2014). Similarly, studies have shown how discourses of disrespect that frame low-income households as personally responsible for their own impoverishment have acted to justify punitive welfare sanctions and harsh penal policies (Tyler, 2013; Wacquant, 2009).

Only a handful of studies, all focused on the UK context, have explicitly applied misrecognition insights to the issue of energy poverty. In their seminal paper, Walker and Day (2012) argue that whilst energy poverty is fundamentally a problem of distributional injustice, it is underpinned by misrecognition in the form of a lack of societal and political acknowledgement of the complex needs and vulnerabilities of those most at risk of experiencing the condition (such as older people, children, and those with illnesses or disabilities). Snell et al (2015) and Gillard et al (2017) have subsequently utilised and built upon this theoretical framework. Although not stated explicitly, these three papers all centre on misrecognition that manifests as 'non-recognition' (i.e. the invisibility and lack of acknowledgement of the energy poor). Little attention has been paid to other forms of misrecognition, such as disrespect or cultural domination, that may also be implicated in the experience and reproduction of energy poverty. Work by Bouzarovski and Cauvain (2016) is an exception here; however, their discussion focuses more on the stigmatisation of particular types of housing tenancy via legal categorisations and policy practices, rather than on stigma directed at those experiencing energy poverty *per se*.

This section has laid out the conceptual apparatus of misrecognition and its entwinement with issues of material deprivation and inequality. Although there is presently a small amount of energy poverty research that utilises conceptual ideas of (mis)recognition, there is significant space for further theoretical refinement and empirical substantiation. This includes understanding how misrecognition operates as part of a wider socio-cultural and political

project, how practices of misrecognition underpin the reproduction of energy-related inequalities, and how such discourses and practices are linked to the stigmatisation and responsibilisation of the poor.

3. Method

The evidence base of this paper centres on a case study of Poland.[1] The relatively high rates of energy poverty in the country make it an appropriate case study. The study is based on fieldwork undertaken between November 2014 and February 2015, and analysis largely focuses on the 2010-2015 period. During this time, Poland was governed by a centre-right party espousing neoliberal ideology (see below), which following our research was later replaced by a socially conservative party after elections in 2015. The paper thus tells the story of a particular moment in time, and some specific policies may have changed since; however, as we note further in section 5, the main argument and conceptual points of the paper remain fully relevant today.

We undertook 30 semi-structured interviews with 49 experts and decision-makers (some interviews were with more than one person) active at different governance levels – from the local (urban) through regional to the national. Following Lawson et al (2008), we focus on such 'elite' actors as their understandings of energy poverty are influential in circuits of power, informing the design and implementation of policies with material consequences for households suffering from energy poverty.

The sample was purposive and included representatives of government ministries and agencies, regulatory bodies, energy company representative, think thanks, and advocacy groups. The interviews covered the energy poverty situation in Poland, how it is understood and portrayed by decision-makers, and any policy mechanisms in place to ameliorate the problem. This was supplemented by a document analysis, including of legal acts, policy strategies and reports. Interviews were conducted in Polish or English, depending on the preferences of the participant, transcribed (Polish interviews were translated into English), and along with the documentary evidence were analysed via the 'framework analysis' approach (Gale et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2013). This process began with a close reading of the interview transcripts by the lead author. During this close reading, it became clear that some of the salient themes in the interviews were relevant to Fraser's work on recognition (with which the lead author had prior familiarity). Following this, analysis proceeded alongside and 'in conversation' with a re-reading of relevant misrecognition literature. Interview transcripts and documentary evidence were coded using a deductive framework based on Fraser's different categories of misrecognition (non-recognition, disrespect, cultural domination), in order to elucidate how discursive representations and state policies explicitly or implicitly conveyed (mis)recognition toward energy poverty. At this stage, only the categories of 'non-recognition' and 'disrespect' emerged as relevant to our data. Following the framework

[1] The data discussed in this paper were collected as part of a larger research project that investigated the driving forces of energy poverty in Central and Eastern Europe.

analysis protocol, this coded data was then inserted into a matrix and synthesised before a further close reading to search for patterns and nuances.

In the text that follows, all interviewees have been ascribed pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

4. Results: institutional misrecognition and the reproduction of domestic energy deprivation

4.1 Energy poverty in Poland

Since the early 1990s Poland has undergone profound economic, social and political change. Along with other CEE states, the fall of communism in 1989 marked the beginning of period restructuring aimed at establishing a capitalist market economy. Economic, political and social transformations have been rapid and far-reaching, with previous forms of production, employment and ownership reconfigured in quite fundamental ways (Stenning, 2005a). It is well documented that "the transformation of Poland, as well as other economies of Central and Eastern Europe, has been underpinned by neoliberal policies" (Hardy, 2009, p. 2), with the imposition of private-property rights and the 'rule of the market' across many facets of society. In more concrete terms, post-socialist reforms have included the rise of labour 'flexibilisation' (ibid.), a shift from universal to highly conditional and means-tested welfare (Romano, 2014), fiscal austerity, and the unbundling, privatisation and liberalisation of most former state-owned enterprises and utilities (Bouzarovski and Thomson, 2018). Transformations in Poland's political economy have been accompanied by changes in the dominant symbolic and ideological frames expressed by state and media actors. New discourses promoting the virtues of individual responsibility and choice have circulated widely (Stenning, 2005a). Overall, these changes have had significant implications for the conduct and experience of everyday life (Stenning et al., 2010).

It is within the context of the post-communist transformation that Poland and other CEE states have seen substantial rises in rates of domestic energy deprivation since the mid-1990s. The rise of energy poverty in the region has also been attributed to the low energy efficiency of its housing stock, as well as significant increases in energy prices accompanied by the rise of income poverty and inequality. Studies have found that, depending on the indicator utilised, between a tenth and a quarter of Polish households are estimated to live in energy poverty – higher than the EU average and well above rates in Western Europe (Bouzarovski and Herrero, 2016; Jakub Sokołowski et al., 2020; Thomson and Snell, 2013).

Following pressure from 2009 European Union directives on vulnerable consumers,[2] Poland's first policies explicitly aimed at addressing problems with the affordability of domestic energy services began to emerge after 2010. Under these circumstances, in 2014 the country introduced the 'Energy Allowance': a nationwide and state-funded support

[2] EU directives on electricity and gas markets (2009/72/EC and 2009/73/EC), which require Member States to define, and develop support policies for, 'vulnerable consumers' (those at risk of being unable to afford sufficient energy services in a liberalised energy market).

programme providing a monthly financial payment to eligible households to assist with payment of electricity bills.

However, even if the allowance was branded as a benefit focused specifically on energy-related challenges, a closer examination uncovers several limitations. Funding for the Energy Allowance was restricted to 130 million Polish Złoty (PLN) per annum, with eligible households receiving only 11-18 PLN (2.5 – 4 EUR) per month – the equivalent to around 10% of a typical household electricity bill (PL18, local civil servant and welfare expert). Moreover, a legal mechanism was included that enabled the level of benefits received to be lowered if "too many" households applied (PL01, senior national civil servant). It is also likely that many households experiencing energy poverty were ineligible to receive any assistance via the Energy Allowance, because entitlement was based on whether a household was in receipt of housing benefit (which itself is determined by a combination of income and living space criteria). As a complex problem, vulnerability to energy poverty only partly overlaps with low incomes, and so any alleviation policy targeted purely through income-based criteria invariably misses many suffering and vulnerable households (Boardman, 2010). Finally, energy poverty problems mostly concern the inability to achieve adequate and affordable warmth, which in Poland is usually attained via solid fuels, natural gas or other sources rather than electricity.

More fundamentally, policies (like the Energy Allowance) that attempt to address energy poverty by increasing household income can only provide partial relief. Long-term amelioration requires significant and targeted infrastructural investment to improve the energy efficiency of homes, appliances and the wider built environment (Boardman, 2010), as well as transforming the underlying political-economic structures that produce inequalities (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017).

In Poland, the major national energy efficiency policy since 1990s has been based on the 'thermo-modernization fund', a loan distributed by the State Development Bank to help fund domestic energy efficiency retrofits. However, this was not designed as an energy poverty reduction initiative, and is not targeted as such. Several interviewees who worked as energy policy experts at national think-tanks (PL04, PL05, PL12, PL13) noted that the fund predominantly helped urban large apartment blocks housing relatively well-off families. They argued that many of those at greatest risk of energy poverty, such as households living in lower-income apartment buildings or in detached houses, face significant barriers to accessing the scheme. These programmes were in line with other market-oriented policies, promoting individual initiative and very modest state intervention in the housing sector.

At the local scale, some municipal and city authorities have developed policies that do aim to tackle the infrastructural and energy efficiency underpinnings of energy poverty. For example, some cities have introduced a programme of replacing coal heating stoves with more efficient alternatives, such as gas or district heating networks. However, our interviewees made clear that the existence of such infrastructural measures was highly uneven, with many local authorities completely lacking such policies. And, even when

nominally in place, their implementation can be highly problematic and exclusionary – for a range of reasons discussed below (in Section 4.3).

In sum, energy poverty was and remains a significant challenge in Poland, in institutional and infrastructural terms alike. Whilst policies to address the issue had begun to emerge by the time of our fieldwork, these remained limited in their reach and effectiveness. In the next two sections, we argue that these policy designs are symptomatic of institutional misrecognition – that is, patterns of cultural value that subordinate the needs and circumstances of energy poor households.

4.2 Discourses and policies of 'non-recognition'

Nearly 15 years ago, Buzar (2007a) released a comprehensive account of energy poverty in CEE states, including Poland. He argued that although the problem was widespread and severe across this region, it remained 'invisible' among the policy community. Thus, the existence of energy poverty was partly rooted in the failure of governing institutions to understand or acknowledge it as a distinct form of deprivation.

Almost ten years later, our interviews with policy-actors and other experts indicated that, in Poland, some progress had been made in this regard. Whereas Buzar's study found many policymakers completely unfamiliar with the very notion of 'energy poverty', all our interviewees had heard of the concept and were able to describe it in a way that broadly matched scientific definitions. This increasing profile was also reflected in the growing number of domestic third-sector organisations and think-tanks conducting research on problem. In short, 'energy poverty' to some degree entered the Polish political and policy lexicon in the period 2007 to 2015, with governing actors becoming more familiar with the concept.

However, a deeper analysis indicated that energy poverty nonetheless remained discursively marginal. Relevant official policy reports, such as the previous Polish Energy Policy, sectoral strategies and regional policy programmes rarely mentioned the issue and, when they did, it was typically in a perfunctory manner, with a lack of detailed or critical discussion of the challenge or possible mitigation tools. Several of our interviewees verified this point and suggested that, at a range of governance scales, there was also little *verbal* deliberation about the problem:

> *In the energy-related discussion the [energy poverty] problem has not been noticed. Eventually, in the latest [draft] of the Polish Energy Policy 2050 a few statements appeared in this topic. Energy poverty has appeared when discussing the protection activities for the market liberalization [...] In the drafts of Infrastructure and Environment Operational Programme 2014-2020 and Regional Operational Programmes energy poverty has not been mentioned at all.* (PL13, energy efficiency expert at national think-tank)

> *No. We haven't talked about energy poverty term during the preparation of Regional Strategic Programmes [...] We as the regional office don't engage in the discussion. Maybe Regional Welfare Centre Office a little.* (PL27b, regional politician)

> *During the discussion about the low emission in cities I haven't heard that someone was talking about energy poverty.* (PL30, expert in sustainable development at national NGO)

Explaining this relative silence, some NGO representatives suggested that it was due to continuing lack of awareness about energy poverty among many policy actors. PL13, for example, stated that "*The relevant Ministry could more be more active in this topic, but it seems they are not aware of the problem … Among local municipalities awareness about energy poverty is rather low*". Other accounts indicated that although most state officials had at least a basic understanding about energy poverty, it was often considered a somewhat minor, external, and even trivial problem within dominant institutional cultures. Consequently, concerted political and policy discussion and strategizing about the problem was seen as a low-priority issue. For example, two local representatives described their frustrations when attempting to raise the profile of energy poverty at the city level, explaining how "*Certainly energy issues are more important to us than for the president, who placed it at 186th place I think*" (PL26a, local politician; see also Przywojska et al., 2019). Or as PL02 (expert in energy policy at national think-tank) bluntly stated, "*Energy poverty is not seen as an important issue in the political debate*".

Such restricted discussion and debate is not conducive to the development of a thorough and critical knowledge of a 'complex problem' (Baker et al., 2018). Indeed, our analysis found a somewhat narrow and simplistic understanding of energy poverty's underlying causes within policy discourse. Several interviewees suggested that energy poverty resulted purely from low incomes; it was thus, in their eyes, indistinct from income poverty. For example, one official working on national infrastructure policy (PL09, senior national civil servant) described energy poverty as "*a typical financial issue*", whilst PL21b (city energy officer) stated that "*Energy poverty is not different than commonly understood concept of poverty - the same factor (low income) determines this situation.*" Such an understanding is reflected in the fact that, at the time of the fieldwork underpinning this paper, the main government departments with responsibilities relating to energy poverty were the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy. This conceptualization of energy poverty as a 'financial' issue occurred despite much scientific research arguing that the causes of problem cannot be reduced solely to low incomes; rather, it is instead a complex socio-technical issue that cuts across multiple sectors including housing, infrastructure, health, and energy, alongside economics and social policy. Yet despite this attribution of energy poverty as a problem of low-income, the government social policy department were nonetheless keen to pass-on responsibility for discussing and addressing the issue. As one person working for a third-sector organization told us:

PL05: *The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy do not want to tackle this issue [energy poverty]. We have tried to talk to them but haven't managed.*[3] *They want to pass it on to the Ministry of Economy.*
Interviewer: Why?
PL05: *Because it costs money, they already have problems with the current social services and they are happy if other ministry takes it over.*

In short, energy poverty did not seem to have a comfortable 'home' within the departmental structures of government – a problem that the above quote indicates was accentuated by fiscal austerity.

Furthermore, there was limited awareness of the kinds of people and places at risk of energy poverty. This was evident, for example, when we asked interviewees who they believed would be most vulnerable to experiencing the problem. Frequently mentioned were two particular groups: (i) those on low incomes receiving benefits from the social welfare system (reflecting the assertion that limited financial capacity was a prime cause of energy poverty); and (ii) older people. Although both these groups are indeed at increased risk of energy poverty, in Poland the most exposed groups include inhabitants of detached houses (65% of all energy poor households on some measures) and those living in rural areas (Lewandowski et al., 2018; Jakub Sokołowski et al., 2020), yet these vulnerabilities were not noted by our interviewees. The considerable geographical inequalities that exist in the prevalence of the condition, both within and between urban spaces (Bouzarovski and Thomson, 2018; Lis et al., 2018; J. Sokołowski et al., 2020), were also unacknowledged, as were the disadvantages experienced by those with disabilities or long-term illnesses (de Chavez, 2018). In short, the heightened precarity faced by many people appeared at this time to be unseen within dominant discourse, with policymakers drawing on assumptions and impressions rather than scientific evidence (which was admittedly still scant at the time of data collection).

Through the lens of Fraser's (1995; 2003; 2007) misrecognition theory, the discursive marginality of energy poverty can be understood as a form of *non-recognition*. Given that in discourse "silence is erasure" (Saint-Martin, 2017, p. 35), the lack of verbal or written acknowledgement or discussion around energy poverty means that the problem remained 'hidden' within policy and political discourse at this time. More particularly, the needs, circumstances and vulnerabilities of those most at risk of experiencing the problem were erased from view as a result of limitations in understandings of energy poverty's causes and its socio-spatial patterning. To use Fraser's terminology, the energy poor and vulnerable were effectively "rendered invisible".

As noted in Section 2, Fraser (2000) argues that misrecognition goes beyond the realm of discourse to become 'institutionalized' and expressed in state policy and practice. Indeed, the discursive marginality of domestic energy deprivation is echoed by the fact that in Poland in 2014/15 there was only a single national policy explicitly designed to tackle the problem (the aforementioned Energy Allowance). And, like most other EU states, Poland lacks an official

[3] During the fieldwork of this study, we had a similar experience when attempting to arrange interviews with other government departments.

state definition of energy poverty. This is significant because, as well as enabling the incidence of energy poverty to be monitored and responsibility for its amelioration to be allocated, an official definition has an important symbolic value by signifying that domestic energy deprivation is seen as a legitimate issue of concern.

Furthermore, our interviews indicated that 'non-recognition' of the driving causes of energy poverty had hindered the development of comprehensive and effective policies. In particular, the framing of energy poverty as predominantly the result of low incomes directly informed mitigation policies that aimed to boost incomes whilst marginalising more comprehensive strategies such as investment in housing or energy efficiency. Hence the emergence of the Energy Allowance, an income supplement, as the major energy poverty alleviation measure, and the problematic decision to base eligibility for this on income-based criteria. As one government official (PL01, senior national civil servant) working in economic policy stated: "*In my view, energy poverty is a matter for social policy rather than energy policy*". Other interviewees further suggested that the government ministry responsible for energy policy paid little attention to energy efficiency strategies to ameliorate energy poverty, as "*[energy poverty] is only considered a 'real' problem in the medium to long term*" (PL10a, energy poverty expert at national think-tank). Instead, supply-side issues, particularly security and reliability of supply, were valorised as the primary and 'proper' concern of energy policy. In sum, these policies were indicative of the non-recognition of energy poverty's driving causes, and of the circumstances and vulnerabilities faced by many households at risk of experiencing the problem.

4.3 Discourses and policies of 'disrespect'

Misrecognition of energy poverty also took the form of stigmatizing discourses of *disrespect*. Around half of our interviewees suggested that those experiencing energy poverty were at least partly responsible for their circumstances due to their 'wasteful' and 'irrational' energy consumption. For example, PL06 (expert in energy policy at national NGO) stated that a major cause of energy poverty was the "bad habits" of households, such as running appliances on stand-by, failing to turn off lights, and leaving chargers plugged in. Others suggested such 'wasteful' behaviours were the result of deficient knowledge among those experiencing energy poverty:

> *I also understand [energy poverty] is connected to awareness and levels of knowledge. People don't understand about their energy costs and how to reduce them. [There is a] very low level of knowledge in society and* ***among the poor specifically***. (PL04, expert in energy policy at environmental think-tank, emphasis added)

> *Energy poverty is associated with the fact that many people do not realize that the heat is also energy and we can save on it through rational investment activities … I think energy poverty can be caused by a lack of awareness that profit from sustainable thermo-modernization activities can occur quickly.* (PL23, regional civil servant)

In such accounts, energy poverty is constructed as a matter of *individual choices and failings.* Those experiencing the problem are ‘Othered’ (Lister, 2004) as distinct from and inferior to ‘rational’ households who don’t suffer energy poverty. Yet it is vital to state that there is little, if any, research evidence to support such assertions. On the contrary, qualitative and ethnographic studies have found that households suffering from energy poverty are typically extremely vigilant, rather than frivolous, regarding their energy usage (e.g. Longhurst and Hargreaves, 2019), carefully rationing and minimising their consumption and making affordable efficiency investments when possible (Anderson et al., 2012; Brunner et al., 2012; Chard and Walker, 2016; Willand et al., 2017). A recent study in the Polish context had very similar findings (Sokołowski and Frankowski, 2020). There is certainly scant, if any, evidence to indicate, let alone prove, that people suffering from energy poverty are any more ‘wasteful’ or ignorant compared to other households.

Alongside portrayals of waste and irrationality, some interviewees further suggested that those experiencing energy poverty were likely to be in some way deceitful and attempt to ‘cheat the system’ or the government in some way. Several suggested that it was common in Poland for ‘canny’ households to illegitimately claim social security they were not legally entitled to, and to become ‘dependent’ on state welfare rather than seeking employment (echoing Stenning, 2005b; Stenning et al., 2010). There was concern that similar practices would inevitably occur with the Energy Allowance policy. Furthermore, it was also suggested that a failure to pay energy bills in a timely manner was often the result of dishonesty rather than financial necessity, with such a practice seen as especially likely among residents of social housing.

Such representations of wastefulness, irrationality and deceitfulness can be interpreted as a clear example of misrecognition as *disrespect* (Fraser, 1995; 2003; 2007). Energy impoverished individuals are discredited as having various personal flaws that cause or contribute to their deprivation, and Other them as inferior to a normative group of ‘rational’, non-energy poor households. By definition, those in energy poverty are considered *less worthy of respect*. Importantly, this disrespect needs to be understood as embedded within a worldview that understands societies as comprising atomised persons making autonomous choices (Sayer, 2014). Neoliberal logics thus frame both deprivation and affluence as resulting from individual choice, with poverty thus a consequence of ‘chosen’ laziness, lack of work ethic, and immoral behaviour (Lawson et al., 2008; Tyler, 2013; Wacquant, 2016).[4] Indeed, after 1989 neoliberalism became Poland’s dominant political ideology, and low-income communities were increasingly stigmatised as “feckless, dependent and passive” (Stenning, 2005b, p. 984). The framing of energy poverty as resulting from individual waste and ignorance can be understood as a particular expression of this larger belief system and the broader stigmatisation of marginalised people and places that it generates.

Like the non-recognition discussed in Section 4.2, we also found evidence of how these discourses of disrespect were ‘institutionalised’, with repercussions for the design, delivery

[4] Indeed, for Tyler (2013), neoliberalism *depends* on the stigmatisation of poverty in order to justify entrenched inequality. The neoliberal period, she argues, has thus been characterised by the increasing prevalence of harsh state and media rhetoric toward the supposed ‘feckless underclass’.

and perceived legitimacy of energy poverty amelioration policy at both the national and local levels. Notably, several interviewees expressed support for measures that would attempt to 'correct' individual's wasteful energy-consumption practices or ignorance about energy efficiency. For example, PL24 (energy policy expert at national NGO) argued for an increase in energy prices "*because then people will learn how to save*". Several others asserted that there was a need for more education and information campaigns that would 'teach' households how to use energy 'correctly'. Although not concrete policy, it is nonetheless notable that such ideas were clearly circulating within networks of political influence. More concretely, a representative of the Ministry of Economy told us that the framing of energy poor households as 'dishonest' and likely to 'illegitimately' claim social welfare had directly informed the design of the Energy Allowance's application process. Specifically, they stated that the procedure this had been intentionally designed as stringent and complex in order to "*avoid cheating*" by applicants, dissuade illegitimate claimants and prevent "*too many*" people applying (PL01, senior national civil servant). It was further suggested that the very limited funding assigned to the Allowance (see Section 4.1) was partly attributable to wider concerns about recipients becoming 'dependent' and losing their 'work ethic', with the Ministry of Finance reluctant to award money to social policy measures for this reason – a policy in line with the austerity measures of many European states since the 2009-10 economic crisis.

Even more worrying accounts were provided by actors operating at the local scale. PL12 (a sustainable development expert at a national think-tank) recounted how local governments and private companies had been dissuaded from installing new district heating infrastructure (a measure that could provide more affordable warmth to residents) in social housing blocks out of fear that residents "*more rarely pay their energy bills*". A similar practice was reported by Bouzarovski et al (2018), and was also further confirmed during an interview we undertook with two urban municipal housing officers. They portrayed residents of social housing blocks as dishonest and used this framing to justify the decision not to connect such apartments to the district heating network. Their preferred alternative was, again, individualized 'educational' measures designed to change 'flawed' behaviours:

> PL21a: *For some reasons we do not want to connect the gas network and electric heating to municipality premises. The gas can cause an accident, especially in social premises, and some people simply steal electricity.*
> PL21b: *I would add that, in my previous work [in an energy company] collectors of payment in some quarters of [Neighbourhood X] were afraid of enforcing payments for electricity, and there were often uprooted meters…*
> PL21a: *They are parts of the city for which education is the only chance. The example of [Neighbourhood Y] shows that we can talk about success and a change of behavior - some residents appreciated the action of the city.*

Other officials explained how, although their city did have a policy of replacing ageing coal heating stoves more efficient alternatives, this was *intentionally* not advertised "*due to the fact that the demand is large, and the more money will be kept in the budget, the better is*" (PL26b, local politician). The subordination of anti-poverty measures to fiscal constraint, and

the disregard of many household needs, echoes 'undeserving poor' discourses. As Romano (2014) states, the design, targeting and implementation of social policy programmes is never neutral, but necessarily expresses ideas about what is important and who is 'deserving'.

5. Concluding discussion

This paper has unpacked the role that 'misrecognition' plays causing and sustaining energy poverty. It has built upon earlier work that investigates how energy poverty is embedded within and produced through households relations with wider social and state institutions (Buzar, 2007a, b, c; Petrova, 2017), whilst providing new insights into what Wacquant (2016) terms the 'symbolic structures' that shape and legitimise state policies and actions.

Our analysis found that, at the time of our fieldwork, households suffering from energy poverty in Poland faced a 'double misrecognition'. First, *non-recognition*, in that the lived reality of energy poverty, the complexity of its causes, and the particular vulnerabilities of the socio-demographic and locational groups most at risk of experiencing the condition were all largely erased and 'rendered invisible' in mainstream political and policy discourse. Although acknowledgement of the issue had improved since Buzar's 2007 publications, in the middle of 2010s we found that at both the national and local level the plight of energy poor households remained a marginalised issue that rarely featured in policy deliberations. This echoes previous academic work from the United Kingdom (Gillard et al., 2016; Snell et al., 2015; Walker and Day, 2012), Eastern Europe (Buzar, 2007a) and the United States (Bednar and Reames, 2020), suggesting that our findings are indicative of a much wider problem. Our analysis also builds on this previous work to suggest that the non-recognition of energy poverty and vulnerability can be attributed to a number of factors: a limited awareness of the underlying causes of energy poverty (and its distinctiveness from income poverty) and the populations at risk of experiencing the problem, institutional cultures that construct energy deprivation as relatively unworthy of state attention, and the somewhat 'messy', intersectoral nature of the problem creating uncertainty over where it fits within the departmental structures of government.

Second, we also found evidence of misrecognition as *disrespect*, in that understandings of and responses to energy poverty were sometimes informed by narratives based on stigmatisation and 'othering'. We argue that this can be understood as a particular expression of wider patterns of neoliberal stigmatisation that is tailored toward energy poverty as a specific form of material deprivation. Rather than focusing on alleged 'laziness' or lack of work ethic, as with the stigma directed at *income* poverty (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013), the stigmatisation of energy poverty focused on household energy practices and the assertion that these were in some way 'irrational', wasteful or excessive. Shared with more general poverty stigma, however, is the underlying belief that deprivation is primarily caused by the deficiencies and flawed choices of individuals and households. Overall, the discourses of disrespect we uncovered are an important finding because, unlike non-recognition, stigmatisation is not an issue that has been investigated or highlighted in many previous energy poverty studies. Our findings indicate that this is a potentially significant issue, and an area that warrants further investigation in other socio-political contexts.

We would also argue that it is important to see these two forms of misrecognition as mutually reinforcing rather than wholly discrete. On the one hand, non-recognition of energy poverty creates the conditions through which disrespect can emerge; that is, a lack of acknowledgement and critical discussion about the underlying causes of energy poverty leaves a vacuum that can be filled by simplistic explanations that suggest it is caused by individual deficiencies. On the other, the denigration of energy poor households acts to construct energy poverty as a 'low priority' issue, thus justifying its continued erasure from political discourse. This is an important conceptual contribution of the paper, because the relations between different forms of misrecognition have not previously been explored, with Fraser's (1995) own work under-theorised in this regard.

Fraser (1995) and Honneth (1995) also argue that misrecognition plays a consequential role in producing or perpetuating material or 'distributional' forms of inequality. Our findings support this, as we found clear evidence that a lack of recognition for energy poor households influenced the design and implementation of national and local policy. Non-recognition had hindered the development of the kind of thoughtful, carefully designed measures required to address a complex problem; instead, it underpinned a limited set of poorly targeted policies that predominantly addressed symptoms rather than underlying causes. At the same time, disrespect was shown to legitimise a highly conditional and bureaucratic welfare system, and, worryingly, the active avoidance of installing energy efficiency measures in some stigmatised households. This latter point has echoes of Wacquant's (2009) account of the 'penalization of poverty', in which the powerful respond to urban deprivation by attempting to discipline and 'correct' marginalised groups via harsh and highly conditional social policies. Our findings suggest that such a logic can find its way into the design and operation of energy poverty programmes.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that illustrates the interconnection between misrecognition and energy poverty, with the arrows indicating the direction of influence between the different elements of the model.

<Figure 1 about here>

Our case study is an analysis of a particular time period – the final years of a neoliberal policy regime and only limited recognition of energy poverty among government – and it is worth reflecting on what has changed since. Since 2014-15 there has been a new national government, and importantly a rise in local movements protesting poor air quality and advocating for energy efficiency interventions in Polish cities. As the analysis by Frankowski (2020) demonstrates, some of the main air quality policy stakeholders have shown an understanding of the connections between energy poverty and poor air quality, and have sought to raise the profile of both these problems and propose infrastructural and economic solutions. As a result, national level acknowledgement of energy poverty has also began to grow; for example, being mentioned in a speech by the Prime Minister, followed by new commitments on energy efficiency and clean generation. Therefore, since the fieldwork underpinning this paper was completed, there has been further progress in the wider recognition of energy poverty in Polish society. Nonetheless, critiques and challenges remain,

such as the aforementioned limitations of the Energy Allowance policy, the invisibility and stigmatisation of some marginalised groups, and little activity among some NGOs and local authorities. But the overall progress made further strengthens our fundamental point – that a lack of recognition of energy poverty contributes to insufficient or inadequate political action to alleviate it, and that greater recognition and respect can underpin more meaningful actions to address material inequality. It also lends support to Velicu and Kaika's (2017) assertion of recognition as something that emerges from bottom-up *struggle* and advocacy, rather than beginning from 'top-down' enlightenment.

We conclude by reflecting on the political and policy implications of our findings. We would argue that to fully confront the remaking of energy poverty requires addressing discourses of misrecognition and their role in shaping institutional arrangements. To challenge non-recognition, there needs to be a much greater awareness of the currently 'hidden' problem of energy poverty (Buzar, 2007a, b) within political and societal discourse. This includes a more comprehensive conceptualisation of the causes and consequences of the condition, its distinctiveness from income poverty, the uneven social and spatial profile of those at risk, and effective amelioration policies. Therefore, the continued activist and educational work of NGOs and grassroots organisations – such as the European Union Energy Poverty Observatory, the Right to Energy Coalition, and the many local organisations – to build bottom-up support networks and improve mainstream understandings of energy poverty remains vital. Recent interest at the EU-level in energy transitions and the associated push for member states to define, measure and monitor energy poverty also has an important role in encouraging the development of more effective amelioration strategies and policies, by enabling estimates of the number and profile of households affected by the condition. Indeed, in Poland research has recently developed energy poverty indicators that are consistent with those proposed at the EU-level (Sokołowski et al., 2020), suggesting that such efforts are beginning to have an impact (at least among NGO and academic researchers). At the same time, it is crucial that any definition and measurement indicator is carefully designed to ensure inequalities and vulnerabilities are revealed rather than obscured (Middlemiss, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018).

Addressing misrecognition as disrespect is arguably more challenging. Efforts to improve awareness of energy poverty, as described above, may help here if they contest narratives that frame energy poverty as resulting from flawed individual behaviour. The language used to discuss the issue is also important for confronting stereotypes and stigmatization (Lister, 2004), and so framing adequate energy services as a human right, and energy poverty as a contravention of these rights, is also helpful. However, we would argue that fully challenging discourses of disrespect necessitates going beyond 'energy' (poverty) policy, and indeed beyond surface-level, managerial issues of policy design and 'awareness raising'. It also requires more deeply political action, involving deconstructing and actively confronting dominant discourses and value systems (Bouzarovski and Simcock, 2017) – including, most notably, ideologies that conceptualise societies as a collection of discrete individuals who make wholly autonomous choices and are thus fully responsible for their circumstances. In

Fraser's (1995) terms, what is required is 'transformative' political change to the underlying symbolic structures of societies.

Whilst attaining greater respect for those suffering from energy poverty will not 'solve' the problem alone, we would suggest that recognition is nonetheless a *necessary*, if not *sufficient*, condition for a more emancipatory politics of energy justice.

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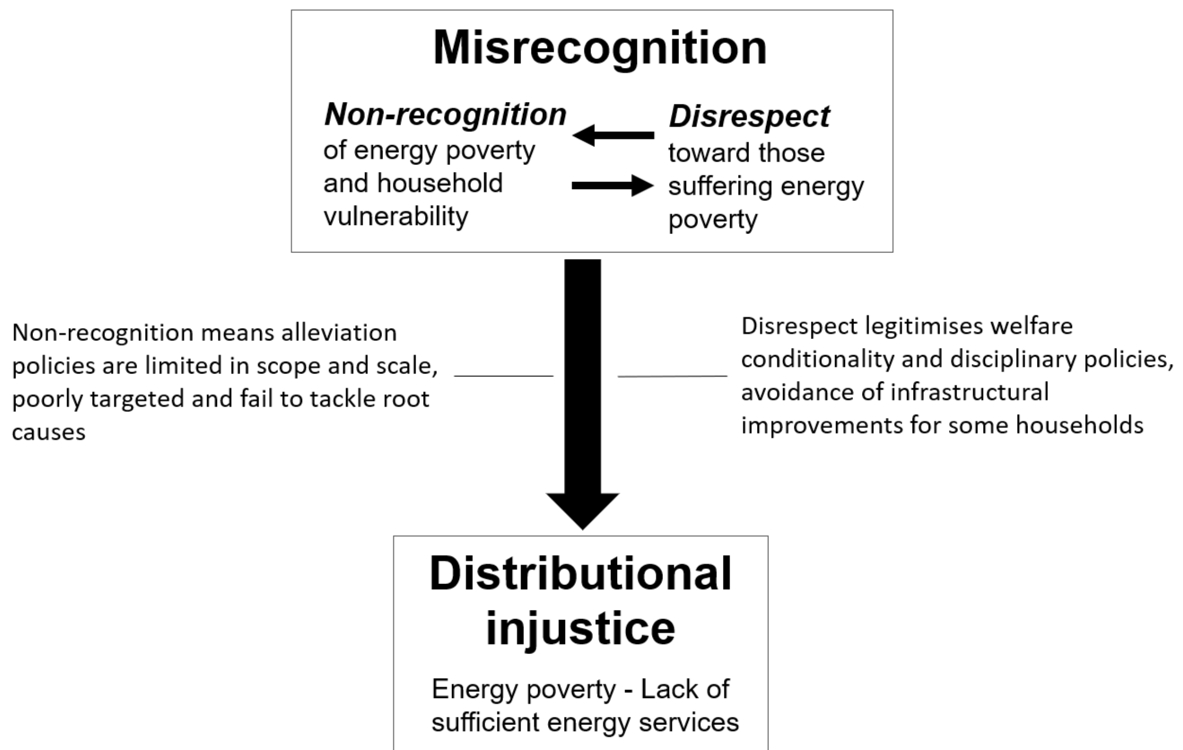

Figure 1: How misrecognition contributions to the (re)production of energy poverty