

# **Disconnected Futures: Exploring notions of ethical responsibility in energy practices**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper aims to explore people's connections to or disconnections from the future and the implications of this for their perspectives on equity, justice and ethical issues related to energy consumption. Everything people do is embedded and extended in time across the modalities of past, present and future, making time an inescapable aspect of our existence, yet one that often remains invisible and intangible. Debates about energy and environmental equity have raised questions about the extent to which people today should bear responsibility for the consequences of their behaviour for future generations. Seemingly intractable difficulties have been identified, however, in people's abilities to connect their present actions with their potential future consequences and thus take on such responsibilities. Drawing on data from interviews about energy consumption practices, this paper explores whether people's living temporal extensions through younger generations of their families influence their views and practices around energy use in both the present and anticipated future. Through exploring these issues we offer a contribution to the ethical debate around responsibility for future generations.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Energy, Future, Parenting, Time

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## **Introduction**

Issues surrounding decarbonisation and environmental sustainability more widely have come to the fore in recent years as being of central concern for the social sciences. A key theme of research on this topic has been the significance of changes in everyday lives that are likely to be a necessary part of the response to these issues. In particular, reductions in energy use and the changes in practices required to achieve them have formed an important focus (e.g. Shove, 2004; Gram-Hansen, 2011). In this context analysts have pointed to the gulf that exists for most people between the familiar preoccupations of everyday life and an abstract future of climate chaos (Giddens, 2009). This gulf has been highlighted as potentially problematic as people struggle to maintain the ethical connections necessary to create imperatives for change. Subsequently, questions have been raised about how links can be forged across this gulf in order to support transformations in everyday practice. For example, if an abstract future is one people are disconnected from, can forging connections with future generations make ethical responsibility for futures more tangible and influence present action?

Drawing on an empirical dataset concerning people's views and practices in relation to energy, this is an issue we seek to explore in this paper. In taking this forward the paper connects a number of distinct but closely related themes in the existing literature that we introduce briefly in the following sections. Broadly, these themes relate to two overarching aspects of concern; problems of taking ethical responsibility for

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(un)sustainable futures, and issues related to making changes in energy practices with consequences for environmental sustainability.

### ***Ethical Responsibility and Sustainable Futures***

Whether people today have responsibility for future generations has long been an important ethical issue within environmental justice debates. For example, the 1987 Brundtland report 'Our Common Future' delineates a definition of sustainable development that centres on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. These sentiments were echoed in the 1992 Rio Declaration<sup>1</sup> and continue to be reflected in current UK government policy<sup>2</sup>. In the context of the recent economic crisis, the concept of intergenerational fairness has been increasingly highlighted in public media in a more general sense, as evidenced by recent books (e.g. Willetts, 2010), political discourse and media articles (e.g. Mulholland, 2012) drawing on the term. This contemporary prominence has made more salient existing critiques of dominant economic approaches to decision-making where the practice of discounting means that future consequences are weighted with less importance simply because they are in the future (see Urry, 2011 for discussion, also see the Stern Review, 2006). Some of the challenges related to taking responsibility for futures can thus be seen as inherently social, as they are embedded in institutional forms of practice that systematically value the present over the future.

Bauman, amongst others, has highlighted the significance of taking temporal responsibility into account as an important ethical dimension of inter-generational

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problems like climate change (Bauman, 1995, 2001; see also Jamieson, 2010). Highlighting this responsibility, some have invoked the notion of inheritance to suggest that current generations have a moral duty to protect natural resources in the interest of future generations (Vogt, 2008; Adam and Groves, 2007). However, there are recognised challenges to establishing ethical responsibility intergenerationally. For example, how can people relate ethically and politically to a far future if they are unable to meaningfully grasp it (Skrimshire, 2010) or attribute to it anything like the same significance as to lives and experiences in the present (Giddens, 2009)?

Some authors have considered how a link to future generations might be made through an ethic of care, with the motivation for environmental responsibility arising from concern for the potential futures of children or grandchildren (Lowe, 2008; Groves, 2010). Boulding (1990, p4) uses the term “the 200 year present” to indicate the span of living memory within families, with people able to reflect back on their grandparents’ lives and project forward into grandchildren’s potential futures. This provides a notion of the temporal horizons of individual comprehension, yet raises the question whether those without children and grandchildren make these same kinds of connections. Groves (2010, p124) explains how an ethic of global and intergenerational care “requires us to extend our circle of concern and connection out from our space and our time, to encompass those who we will never meet but whose fates are already inextricably bound up with our own”. It is developing this wider identification with unknown others that appears particularly challenging. However, failing to adequately consider the consequences of the temporal dispersion of our current actions creates a significant moral problem (see Gardiner, 2006). Forming and maintaining a sense of ethical

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responsibility to futures thus represent key difficulties in addressing issues of long term environmental sustainability.

### ***Energy Practices<sup>3</sup>, Family and Ethical Responsibility***

A further complication arises in connecting a sense of ethical responsibility with mundane everyday practices that relate to unsustainability. Whilst family connections may be an important way of forging relationships to future generations, the practicalities of family life can raise particular challenges to adopting more sustainable forms of practice. Several studies have explored the relationship between household size and energy consumption (e.g. Roberts, 2008), whilst Fritzsche's 1981 study suggests that it is not just the presence of children in the home but their age-related lifestyles and experiences which influence energy use. Based on an analysis of energy consumption patterns by stage of family life cycle, Fritzsche concludes that energy use increases throughout the childrearing years until children leave home, when energy consumption declines but remains above the level of the newly married stage. Subsequently he argues that households with children would need to be a prime target for reduction of energy demand because they are its largest consumers.

One suggested explanation as to why families may consume more energy is lack of time to engage in sustainable activities and practices. The issue of "time crunch" is identified as affecting people's capacity to act in "environmentally friendly" ways (Lowe, 2008).

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This is a particular issue for families with babies and young children, who often describe experiences of a “time squeeze” (Daly, 1996). This notion is also supported by assertions that a substantial reduction in the normal working week would be necessary to encourage most people to consume less and live more sustainably (Coote et al., 2010). Such an argument hints at the ways in which people’s everyday practices are embedded in and shaped by wider systemic processes (such as work), infrastructures (for instance homes and road structures) and technological forms. A wide-ranging literature has focused on examining the ways practices are shaped, shifted and stabilised in relation with such socio-technical processes (e.g. Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Within this literature, some studies have developed analyses centred on families. Gram-Hansen (2010), for example, shows how the domestic energy consumption for heating of different families living in identical houses can vary dramatically due to differences in how elements of practice were formulated. She unpacks four elements of practices – technologies, knowledge, habits and meanings – to interpret differences offering explanatory insights beyond family size or time pressure. Research in this area, however, has focused principally on timescales of the present and has yet to examine how family routines and behaviours might be shaped or shifted by anticipated future trajectories.

In light of these debates, our paper takes up the notion of ‘living links’ to describe connections that might be formed across time through links to younger generations (be it our own children or otherwise). The core aim is to explore the extent to which such living links with futures through attachments to children, grandchildren and so forth play a role in people’s ability to make temporal and ethical extensions into futures and

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form connections between these futures and daily practices involving energy usage. In this paper we present data from participants with children across different age groups, as well as those without children, to explore people's ability to make these ethical connections and the implications this has for views on reducing energy use.

### **Study and Analytical Background**

The data presented in this paper come from an in-depth qualitative interview study conducted in 2009 which focused on energy in everyday life<sup>4</sup>. The study was interdisciplinary, deploying a multi-method, reconvened approach, meaning that participants were interviewed on two separate occasions, giving them the opportunity to privately reflect upon the initial discussion<sup>5</sup>. Each interview explored themes of energy consumption, policy imperatives relating to energy (e.g. climate change, affordable energy and energy security), views on different modes of energy production, and the connections between these different aspects of energy systems.

The original study sought to explore whether interviewees made any connections between their energy practices and proximity to existing or proposed energy developments. For the purposes of this paper, proximity or place do not form the analytic focus, instead we consider the role of living links to the future through the presence or absence of children and the impact this has on views about energy usage. Importantly, discourses of ethics and equity mediated by the presence or absence of

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children were not initially a key research focus. Instead, our interest developed during the analytic process, beginning with discussions of emergent themes of interest and later through a more systematic interrogation of the dataset.

Participants were initially recruited by a professional recruitment agency in Aberthaw and through an existing participant database stemming from a previous study held by the principal investigator (Pidgeon), for Hinkley Point. Additional recruitment occurred through snowballing. Participants were selected using theoretical sampling aimed at ensuring a heterogeneous sample and spread of opinion through a variety of demographic criteria including: locality; age; gender; household tenure; length of residence; and power station affiliation (i.e. whether the participant or a family member had ever worked at the power station). Participants were not informed about the exact topic of the interviews and as such existing knowledge or beliefs about energy and environment did not form a basis for recruitment. In line with the aim of ensuring a diverse set of views and perspectives were represented, participants varied in their level of pre-existing knowledge or interest in such issues, though it is fair to say most had little prior knowledge. Familial circumstances including the presence or absence of children at a range of ages was not sampled for, nevertheless such a spread emerged as a demographic characteristic of our dataset. Though the interviews focused on energy and energy consuming practices, the participants' discourse included reference to actions associated with environmental sustainability that are not necessarily particularly relevant for energy consumption (e.g. recycling). However, we include discussion of these practices as they were salient for our interviewees and represented aspects of their daily lives that they saw as being related to energy and the environment.



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In total, 53 people participated; 30 women and 23 men aged between 23 and 77. 2 participants were parents of babies, 13 had young children, 3 had teenagers, 18 had adult children, 11 had adult children and grandchildren, and 6 participants had no children. Whilst the numbers in some of these groups are small, warranting caution in interpretation, we do not intend to make large-scale generalisations but highlight connections which we suggest warrant further research attention. However, we contend that the information-richness of qualitative cases and a systematic attempt to provide in-depth knowledge that can deepen understanding (Patton, 2002) means that studies like ours which foreground qualitative data make a central contribution to elucidating current debates.

In undertaking this analytical project as a mixed team we encounter some of the challenges more commonly associated with qualitative secondary analysis. For example, as the analysis concerns a subject which the initial study data had not explicitly intended to address, and whilst there is extensive detail on the topic in the dataset, some information is 'missing' (Hofferth, 2005). However, working as part of a team containing both new and original project researchers enables us to avoid many of the difficulties which can arise when analysing data collected by others (see Coltart et al. forthcoming, for a discussion of qualitative data re-use). The issue of context is often cited as one of the biggest barriers to re-using qualitative data, yet in our approach the original research team were able to provide information on the study and further insights from the interviews. In addition, involving researchers new to the dataset can offer different analytical lenses to consider the data in alternative ways, arguably

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fulfilling an obligation to mine data to its fullest extent (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, despite some challenges we suggest that our bespoke approach to qualitative data analysis (Henwood et al. 2010) affords new and important insights into the issues of energy use and ethical connections to futures.

### **Observations from the Data**

#### ***Babies – necessitating ‘constant’ energy use?***

Two participants in the study had babies. Whilst generally expressing concerns about climate change and noting their pre-parenthood efforts to reduce energy consumption, these participants described energy use as inevitably increasing because of the demands of parenting a young baby.

“We stick the heating on whenever we think we need it because we have a baby, so I haven't thought about it since having a baby at all maybe whereas before we had the baby I wouldn't necessarily use heating or electric if I didn't need it. I would put a couple more jumpers on and I wouldn't boil the kettle full and stuff. I just have to admit since having a baby I don't even think about it. I just use it constantly boiling the kettle, constantly putting the washing machine on, constantly using the tumble dryer and I know it's bad and I have said to my husband I must hang more stuff out on the line but when it is pouring with rain and you haven't got enough hours in the day the easy option is to put the tumble dryer on so yes I have got to be honest, I am a lot worse than I have ever, ever been... I should be

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thinking about it because obviously it is his future that it is going to affect, then I'm not Superman. I can't do it all." (Cara)

In this extract Cara describes an awareness of competing moral arguments; that energy should be saved and used wisely because it is a parent's duty to maintain the environment for their child's future, yet conversely that high energy demands and the time squeeze that is seen to necessitate them are an inevitable aspect of new parenthood. Indeed, it could be suggested that expectations of frequent washing, heating and cleaning are an integral part of constructions of good or moral parenthood (e.g. see Fox, 2009) and this has a powerful influence on energy usage. For example, a 2011 international survey by a hygiene company reported that 77% of women questioned viewed personal hygiene as the most important part of bringing up children (SCA, 2011); an issue subsequently raised in the national media (Ellis, 2011). In the extract above, Cara directly attributes the increase in washing and heating to having a baby and meeting its needs. It is likely that these pressures and expectations are particularly acute during the early months as the expectations of contemporary parenting culture have been described as pressurising during this period, especially for mothers (Shirani et al., 2012). Whilst Cara shows both an awareness of the environmental impacts of her current actions and a clear sense of connection felt through the living link her son provides to the future, this is juxtaposed with the wider pressures associated with parenting as a different morally charged aspect of daily life that runs counter to the expectations embedded in calls to more sustainable action. Cara's sense that to meet the demands of contemporary ethical responsibility a superhuman level of ability would be required is indicative of these deep contradictions between multiple aspects of social life

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and the imperatives to make changes toward less environmentally impactful ways of life.

The association of practices which necessitate increased energy consumption with good parenting is echoed in the next extract wherein the absence of energy is positioned as a potential source of shame (see Hards, this issue).

“It’s also quite embarrassing. I wouldn’t tell anyone I didn’t have gas for him, because obviously he’s a young baby, you think, “Oh my god, bad mother”, but it’s things that you do to survive. So I reckon that is more important to me as an individual. Sorry.” (Mel).

Here Mel reacts to a part of the interview discussion in which she was asked to consider the relative importance of the issues of fuel poverty, climate change and energy security, and apologises for putting her family’s ability to afford energy above wider national concerns. This response was common amongst participants, who suggested that immediate family needs were prioritised over more general environmental concerns, in part because the latter were seen to impact over a longer time span and therefore lacked the necessity of an immediate response. These differing temporalities of daily rhythms and longer-term environmental change can serve to rupture future connections, highlighting a disjuncture between practices that are seen as involved in providing immediate care for one’s children and those that are deemed necessary to meet moral responsibilities for more distant futures. Though these study participants with babies felt a sense of responsibility across generations, making and maintaining the connections

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between everyday actions as a source of potential future injustices remained inherently difficult.

### ***Young Children – sharing energy consciousness***

As with the parents of babies, participants with young children discussed how having children significantly increased a family's energy consumption (cf. Fritzche, 1981). However, the sense that the demanding nature of current life was too pressing to consider the longer-term future was less evident. Instead, these participants were more likely to discuss the importance of ensuring a positive future for their children in relation to energy and environment, whilst a more reciprocal relationship between parents and children in sharing information about energy also began to emerge.

“The children do projects at school and they come home and talk about it and you look at their books and they have got things in there and you think so that kind of opens your eyes to it a little bit ... so I think having children does make you a little bit more conscious of energy and how you use it. Also having children it makes you more conscious because you use a hell of a lot more of it. You do a lot more washing and things like that, drying and whatever and car journeys ... you do notice that your consumption and obviously the cost increases when you have children but again if you can do something to try and offset that in your mind then that is not a bad thing.” (Douglas).

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Like Douglas, many of those with young children indicated that children learning about energy and environment at school and subsequent discussions of this at home often led to changes in the way families thought about energy use. Whilst there were still comments about children increasing domestic energy consumption, this was seen as somewhat balanced through children's increased involvement in energy saving or environmental activities.

Discussions of new technologies or energy saving measures were often described in terms of the educational benefits they offered to children for both their present and future lives. For example, in a discussion of the potential construction of a Severn barrage, Lisa acknowledges the educational opportunities this could provide for her young children in terms of being something "interesting" for them to "experience" and "oversee". Similarly, Douglas suggests that issues around energy and waste will become more acute for future generations, highlighting the benefits of both recycling now and teaching children to continue these practices. Douglas's reflections also indicate some thought about the different future his children may face.

"I think ... having children it is good to do and for them to see us doing it (recycling) because ... it teaches them the right way around respecting things and understanding that we can't just waste resources ... I can see that when they are my age the need to recycle will be even more pressing than it is now so if we can get them into good habits and get them thinking about that now then that is only going to be good." (Douglas).

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Though in terms of energy consumption recycling is not a particularly significant activity, it was something our participants frequently discussed when asked to reflect on energy and related issues like climate change. This is a common finding in studies of public engagement with energy and environment more generally (e.g. see also Hards, 2011). It is likely that people refer to recycling in the context of such research because this is one of very few clearly identifiable activities that they undertake solely for environmental reasons, as opposed to other things like energy saving, which are often motivated as much by cost savings as environmental concern. The participants in this subgroup were the most likely in the sample to comment on their children's longer-term futures and the potential challenges related to energy practices and climate change that this might include. In some senses this led to a more optimistic understanding of futures and of the abilities for their children's generation to address environmental issues in the future. On other occasions, the potential for impacts to be felt in the future, either by their children or others, was a prompt for participants to take action in the present.

### ***Teenagers – worries about waste***

Unlike those with young children, discussion of school projects was somewhat muted in the accounts of those who were parents to teenagers and young adults; instead these participants talked about household energy use in a distinct way. Whilst young children leaving lights or appliances switched on was explained as a lack of understanding and something for parents to educate them about, similar behaviour amongst teenagers and young adults was seen as selfishness, indicating a lack of concern for the resources needed to support these “wasteful” amounts of energy usage.

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“Jo is as selfish as they come and doesn't think about anybody but herself. She will walk out the bedroom: she will leave the telly on, she will leave the light on, she will go in the bathroom leave the light on, leave those on. We say to her because we are thinking of our own expense here really “turn your television off, turn your light off” but ... because she hasn't really got to pay for it she is not actually getting the bill with her name on it she hasn't got to worry about it ... Of all the people really it is her generation perhaps that should be thinking more about it isn't it and telling us to turn the electric off and watch what we are doing but ... she doesn't think about her energy consumption at all.” (Sarah)

Here Sarah relates energy saving behaviour to financial consciousness, indicating that as her daughter does not pay for the household energy used there is no impetus not to waste it. Wider concerns about the future are also evident in her suggestion that some responsibility for reducing waste lies with younger generations who she infers are more likely to experience the negative implications of such practices.

For parents of teenage daughters, discussion of excess focussed on the energy that went into maintaining a particular appearance and lifestyle, as Debbie describes.

“Three girls, all they do is wash their hair and dry their hair so the amount of energy being used to keep them looking beautiful (laughs) the hairdryers getting burnt out regularly so they're getting replaced,



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so again they're in a generation where they couldn't not wash their hair every day... dirty is bad these days isn't it, everything's got to be washed to the nth degree ... and my generation sort of embraced this type of thing really well... there's nothing nicer than having a shower and there's nothing nicer than being clean, it's something that's acceptable and that everybody does really. I just can't imagine life without doing it ... we've got to keep generating huge amounts of electricity because that's what people expect and my daughters are very green but they've still got to shower. And recycling is great, and global warming and all that jazz on one hand but on the other hand you've still got to have a shower every day and dry your hair and straighten it, so it's all very well being green, but you've got to be clean as well as being green." (Debbie)

Debbie's extract illustrates the emergence of competing demands once again. In this instance, the demands of parenting are not the issue, rather the importance of maintaining what are seen as socially acceptable standards of cleanliness through showering daily contrast with imperatives toward "being green". This connects with previous research which suggests adolescents view frequent showering as important but express little concern in relation to energy and water consumption (Gram-Hanssen, 2007). Hand et al. (2005) detail how the practice of daily showering has emerged over time through a combination of shifts in infrastructures and technologies, shared meanings around cleanliness and the body, and temporal reorganisation that favours immediacy and convenience. In Debbie's account we find a depiction of these historical shifts in practice along with recognition of her own generation's role in the social

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production of such forms of practice. Though Debbie makes connections to the future, this is depicted as involving the inevitable continuation of high energy consuming lifestyles rather than more widespread change to lower impact ways of living.

### ***Grandchildren – facing the long-term future***

For some grandparents in our sample, the presence of grandchildren appeared to have an impact on levels of concern about issues such as climate change and energy security and their implications for future generations. It is in this subgroup that we find perhaps the greatest sense of concern about being unable to do anything to change or improve things and respond to the potential challenges of the future.

“From an absolutely personal point of view it probably doesn’t make any difference to me I’m 50 odd ... but then my grandchildren being like two years old and I fear for what would happen when they’re 50, the environment could be terrible if we don’t do something about it and nobody seems to want to do anything about it. So I would say yes I’m very concerned about it, but then it’s hard for me to know what I should do anything about it other than recycle a few bottles.”

(Matthew)

Matthew’s response indicates a sense of ethical extension into the future and deep concern about the state of the environment for his grandchildren’s generation; although this is accompanied with a sense of frustration about what he can do in response to ensure a better future (cf. Butler, 2010). For other grandparents the notion of being

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“long gone” by the time future impacts unfold, contributed to a weaker sense of concern about the future.

“If you want an honest answer I think by the time anything drastic happens I’ll be long gone anyway so on a purely selfish note, if you want a totally truthful answer... I mean obviously you worry for your children and your grandchildren but I think it’s going to take longer than my sort of immediate generation, my generation and the immediate generation before anything drastic happens.” (Annabel)

(add in point about uncertainty and ambiguity re: future – foresight report)

This sense of futurity in relation to energy security and climate change illustrated in Annabel’s extract is problematic according to MacGregor (2009), who argues that for many people in the global South the effects are being felt presently. However, previous work has highlighted that the spatial distance of these occurrences may prove as challenging as temporal distancing in terms of generating a sense of the imperatives for changing actions (Giddens, 1990).

Participants with children and grandchildren across the different age groups discussed in this paper suggested that although they were concerned about energy and the environment, these concerns are competing with other pressures, such as moral discourses surrounding good parenting. As discussed earlier, the apparent usurping of one moral discourse (environmental) by another (parenting) is not necessarily evidence of privileging *per se*, but could be a product of parenting often being located in the

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immediate temporality of the everyday. In this case, maintaining current lifestyles and socially acceptable standards of living – particularly in the context of strained financial circumstances – took priority because they are deemed more of an immediate imperative.

“As a nation you’re looking towards making it better for your grandchildren, your great grandchildren and following on. Looking at it from a ‘me’ point of view now at this moment it’s bills ... yes we’d love to save the Earth and that but money-wise people have just got to think about what they’re doing at the time rather than thinking what might happen in 5 years time.” (Sue)

Here Sue suggests that financial concerns (particularly pressing for many in light of the economic downturn) concentrate people’s attention on the present rather than considering anticipated futures for their own or subsequent generations.

Whilst some participants described making “green” efforts, adopting more significant changes towards less energy-consuming lifestyles was not an option many appeared to have considered. For others, being constructed as a consumer with electricity positioned as a product seemed to contribute toward an uneasy relationship with environmental concern.

“[w]e need electricity, we use a lot of electricity, more than we should do really I mean our carbon footprint must be off the scale but we’re paying for it so as far as I’m concerned I’m paying for it it’s nobody

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else's business. Although we try to cut down we are big electricity users, we must be one of their best customers" (Ray).

Although Ray suggests that as long as the energy is paid for, its consumption is a private business which does not warrant external intrusion into household practices, he also indicates awareness of environmental debates. In this sense two competing roles with regard to energy use are invoked – one that brings into view the subject as consumer with a contractual relationship to pay for the energy that is used and another that places an imperative on the subject to use less energy. For Ray, that he meets his responsibilities as a consumer by paying for his energy takes precedence over other demands. This highlights potential challenges for reducing energy consumption in the context of liberalised energy markets, where the person's role as consumer and citizen overlap to generate conflicting demands. (concerns over trust and state intrusion into private world)

### ***No Children – sustaining commitments to the future***

The notion of inheritance that has been drawn on in the debate around responsibility for longer-term futures (Vogt, 2008) comes into view when participants see themselves as responsible for ensuring a positive environment for future generations. For example, Douglas termed his generation “custodians of the future” and Ruth described feeling a “personal responsibility for the future generations to come”. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that those without children did not also express concerns about

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future generations. For example, Amanda engages with an imagined future in talking about the damaging impact of short-termism amongst those in positions of authority.

“I think it’s an outrage ... because what they’re doing is saying, “Well, we’re sorting that out tomorrow but we must do this.” Now the fact that what we’re doing is creating a problem for tomorrow, it isn’t going to worry the chap who’s in charge because he gets his big fat pension in a couple of years’ time and he can move to Cornwall so I don’t think the people who are making the decisions have the commitment to the future. They don’t care and I think that’s basically it. The people who should be caring, don’t care and they’re short-sighted in the way they think.” (Amanda)

Amanda’s comments infer a strong sense of the need for care about the future and for action to address long term issues. She thus indicates a sense of connection to the future but, as in many of the other extracts, this does not translate into a sense of personal action. Rather, Amanda’s concern is directed at people in power who in her terms “should be caring” but are not due a short-sightedness in their ways of thinking. In addition to this, some participants without children raised an issue related to energy demand and environmental sustainability that was not discussed by parents in the sample; overpopulation.

“Well we are overcrowded ...we have got to keep the population down which will cut down energy consumption which will cut down pollution. I’m a big believer in that this world is overpopulated ...

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there are more people eating, using and we have got far too many in this world. We are overpopulated.” (James)

James suggests that increasing population is putting too great a strain on the environment and that reducing the population would reduce energy consumption. However, we must emphasise that this more controversial argument was not widely raised across the sample. In addition, the lack of such discourse appearing in those with children does not necessarily mean parents did not feel overpopulation is an important contemporary issue. It would be inaccurate to suggest that concern for future generations only arises from the presence of a personal family link to the future. Indeed in some cases it may be that concern for the environment of future generations is a motivating factor behind the decision not to have children, an issue which warrants further exploration in future research.

### **Conclusions**

As part of acknowledging the enormity of the challenges posed by high and rising levels of energy consumption, this article has sought to engage with debates regarding ethical responsibility for future generations and the extent of connections to everyday practice. Our research has involved investigating how adults of different ages may be grappling with different moral imperatives while accounting for their own daily practices, elucidating ethical connections and temporal extensions in the process. The findings reported in this paper give important insights for understanding the role of children as

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living links to the future in shaping and influencing views on sustainable futures and action.

Our analysis suggests that ages and life stages of children may be significant in perceptions of energy practices and wider issues of environmental concern. In particular, the distinction between what is conceptualised as essential and wasteful energy use appeared to be intertwined with notions of agency and responsibility associated with different age groups. For example, when parents have total responsibility for a young baby then high levels of energy use are seen as essential, yet when more autonomous teenagers consume greater amounts of energy their usage was positioned as symbolic of their being irresponsible and wasteful. The age of children also appeared to influence people's ability to envisage longer-term futures (Henwood and Shirani, 2012) and act on connections between this and everyday practices. In particular, the intensive nature of caring for a baby and the consequent "time squeeze" this generated seemed to create difficulties in sustaining such connections. The parents of primary school-aged children appeared to be unusual in our sample as they were most likely to connect their concerns about their children's futures with more positive feelings about making changes in their current lifestyles. In addition to the insights brought to families via children's school projects, at this age parents are likely to be planning for and imagining their child's future, although it is sufficiently distant to remain an unknown. Conversely, it is possible that the temporal proximity of teenagers' adult futures may mean the sense of the future being an unknown with potentially dangerous possibilities is more muted, thus negating the impetus to make significant lifestyle changes in the present. Teenagers and young adults were also more



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independent, with greater autonomy for making decisions related to energy consumption, therefore any 'wasteful' behaviour in relation to energy was seen as a choice or lack of consideration, in contrast to younger children who could not be expected to realise the consequences of their actions in the same way.

Whilst expressing concern about energy and the environment, participants largely appeared to see climate change and energy security as issues for the future, with only one couple indicating that the effects were currently being felt in the global South. Although people may be motivated to act to improve their own family's futures, MacGregor (2009) argues that presenting climate change as a future event is a mistake, given that for many people the effects are being felt now. However, the distance from those in the West means this is often removed from people's daily lives (see also Hall, this issue). To overcome this, Krznaric (2010) suggests that it is important to create empathy across both time (future generations) and space (geographical). Given the arguments outlined in the introduction that people's motivation for environmental responsibility may arise out of living links to future generations through their own families, it is interesting to observe from this research that the difficulties lay not in *making* ethical links to future generations or in the creation of empathy, but in *maintaining* those links in the context of everyday pressures and other competing moral responsibilities.

Our research suggests that temporally immediate demands of ensuring wellbeing of families in the present take precedence over potential futures. In this context, the links between high energy consuming lifestyles and notions of good parenting arise as

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particularly problematic, producing direct competition between the moral demands of parenting and those of caring for futures through the adoption of more environmentally sustainable practices. In her analysis of families' housing decisions and their implications for sustainability, Jarvis points to a similar phenomenon in terms of competing pressures and suggests that the salient question in this context is "what gives?" (Jarvis, 2010, p240). The pressures associated with parenting – though they entail a sense of caring for an implied future – are located in the immediate present and formalised as part of wider patterns and routines (changing nappies, school runs). In contrast those moral pressures related to socio-environmental sustainability are located in the long-term future. This distinction in terms of differing temporalities can go some way in explaining why "what gives" are those actions associated with the long-term in favour of those that are viewed as immediate pressures. As we have illustrated, the locating of climate change and energy issues as future problems is something that arises out of personal accounts and engagements. However, it is also produced through political institutions, through modes and methods of decision-making, and through wider public discourse. In this wider sense, the difference between things positioned as immediate pressures and those positioned as future concerns also generates ongoing tendencies for the immediate to take precedence (cf. Butler and Pidgeon, 2011).

The difficulties that we find expressed throughout our data in acting on concern about issues located in futures are thus inherently social, woven into the fabric of daily life. Though in policy we find efforts to link individual actions to issues like climate change (e.g. Defra, 2008), this approach to engendering responsibility has been critiqued for lacking sufficient power to deliver significant change (see Butler, 2010; Webb, 2012).

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In these works, the focus has been on unpacking how such approaches to imputing responsibility are highly limited because they fail to grapple with questions of power and collective responsibility, and the wider systemic processes that shape, shift and stabilise practices (see Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). This implies a need for a broader level of change to enable actions that align with apparent abilities to connect with futures. The challenge, then, appears to lie in finding ways of keeping the future in focus amid a context of competing and temporally distinct pressures.

Adam and Groves (2007) draw on the concept of an extended present, suggesting that “keeping the future in focus” becomes difficult when our actions only gain meaning and significance with reference to the present. Their arguments imply the necessity for changes at a wider level and for reorienting governance away from short-term temporal scales and decisions that make sense only in relation to the present. Our findings suggest that research questions about families and households need to be integrated into approaches which appreciate how wider systems of thought and governance penetrate deep into the fabric of daily life. Recognising this brings into view a more diverse set of everyday concerns and lifecourse sensibilities within endeavours to create connections between action and concern about futures.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.unesco.org/pv\\_obj\\_cache/pv\\_obj\\_id\\_5153A80E5D000D9118833F33BE125378F1050100/filename/RIO\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_5153A80E5D000D9118833F33BE125378F1050100/filename/RIO_E.PDF).

<sup>2</sup> <http://sd.defra.gov.uk/what/principles/>

<sup>3</sup> We refer to energy practices in a broad sense to refer to the wide range of everyday actions which involve use of energy. The use of 'practices' infers a recognition that such actions are co-constituted through a combination of technological, social and cultural elements (for discussion see Shove, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The Study was funded by the Leverhulme Trust, PI Nick Pidgeon, interviews conducted by Karen Parkhill and Catherine Butler. See <http://psych.cf.ac.uk/understandingrisk/research/climate.html>

<sup>5</sup> To further facilitate reflection, within the gap between interviews, participants were encouraged to take photos of anything they saw which prompted thoughts related to the discussion of the first interview. These photos were used to elicit talk about issues related to energy. As such, although we feel it is important to transparently discuss the context of the original research, for the purposes of this analysis we have not treated the photos as data in and of themselves and have opted not to include them here.