Energy vulnerability in ageing cohorts: building resilience through social learning.

Supervisors: Dr. Rosie Day r.j.day@bham.ac.uk; Dr Dan van der Horst d.vanderhorst@bham.ac.uk

Abstract
This project will develop and test innovative ways of reducing energy vulnerability and increasing resilience among households of older people. The energy vulnerability of the growing number of older people is a pressing policy concern as energy prices rise, and it is well documented that older households are over-represented among the 'fuel poor'. Energy vulnerability and fuel poverty are directly related to health outcomes: an inability to afford heating in winter and cooling apparatus in summer contributes to the peaks in deaths in the UK that occur during cold and hot spells, and which are worse in older cohorts. Building on the most recent research in energy vulnerability, this project will explore how 'energy resilience' may be built among social networks of older people, through social learning. This would involve for example the sharing of experience, knowledge and practices; the examination of social norms around heating, cooling and related activities; and the co-design of material innovations and other interventions that would be appropriate for older households. The project methodology will concentrate on qualitative and participatory techniques. Study communities may be in the West Midlands or the project has the potential to be developed in further locations, including international.

Project Details
There is a lot of attention currently given in the UK and elsewhere to the issue of 'fuel poverty', or 'energy poverty', among older people, where households cannot afford enough power or fuel to keep adequately warm. Older people are readily characterised as a 'vulnerable' group with respect to energy and fuel poverty, largely due to the documented rise in deaths among older age groups during winter (ONS 2010), a tendency to spend more time in the home and therefore need more heating, and because they are normally on lowered incomes after retirement from work. Looking forward in the UK, and also even more so in other climatic contexts, there is concern that hotter weather, which again is documented as affecting older people in particular (e.g. Kovats et al 2004), will result in increased energy demand for cooling for example through air conditioning. Older households' energy vulnerability therefore may result in poor health outcomes through climatic stress from both cold and heat.

There are however important socio-cultural dimensions to the problem, for example conventions around how people keep warm and cool in the home; thermal comfort preferences; conventions about appropriate ways for older people to behave and live; and about the configuration of 'home' and domestic autonomy (e.g. Day and Hitchings 2009; Hitchings and Day 2011). Identities are important, as highlighted by recent research which finds that older people are reluctant to identity themselves as 'elderly ' or 'vulnerable' and therefore top down interventions that rely on them identifying themselves as at risk are not fully successful and may even be counterproductive (Day and Hitchings 2011; Wolf et al 2010). Our work has found that older people tend not to discuss their heating and thermal comfort practices with others and that such issues are kept private (Hitchings and Day 2011) but that nevertheless, if the topic is sensitively handled, social capital and social networks could hold potential for productive sharing of knowledge and practices, thus building resilience.

The proposed research would aim to explore and develop this potential, working in depth with communities and networks of older people (to be identified). Taking a participatory approach, the first objective would be to work with emerging reconceptualisations of energy vulnerability (e.g. Walker and Day, forthcoming) to identify and characterise the configuration of energy vulnerability among older person households. From there, the project would move on to facilitating processes of

mutual exchange and co-learning. This could involve for example discussing experiences, debating social norms, and sharing practices. A further objective would be for groups of older people to co-design interventions, which may be such things as material DIY home improvements, community learning and exchange fora, and / or suggestions for improved policy interventions. Some of the designs could be trialled, with the engagement of relevant organisations such as local authorities and Age UK.

Applicants should ideally have a background in a social science discipline or in environmental studies, and experience of, or an interest in, working with older people. Appropriate training in specific research methods can be provided as part of the doctoral programme. A CRB check (criminal record) is likely to be necessary before working with older people.

This project brief is flexible. Applicants will be asked to submit a project proposal; it may be based closely on this project brief or developed into other related areas.

References:

Day R, Hitchings R (2011). 'Only old ladies would do that': age stigma and older peoples strategies for dealing with winter cold. *Health and Place* 17, 885-894.

Day R, Hitchings R (2009). *Older people and their winter warmth behaviours: addressing the contextual dynamics*. School of Geography, Birmingham / Dept Geography, UCL.

Hitchings R, Day R (2011) How older people relate to the private winter warmth practices of their peers and why we should be interested. *Environment and Planning A*, in press.

Kovats RS, Hajat S, Wilkinson P (2004) Contrasting patterns of mortality and hospital admissions during hot weather and heat wave in Greater London, UK. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 61 893-898.

Office of National Statistics (2011) *Excess Winter Mortality in England and Wales.* ONS, London.

Wolf J, Adger WN, Lorenzoni I (2010) Heat waves and cold spells: an analysis of policy response and perceptions of vulnerable populations in the UK. *Environment and Planning A* 42, 2721-2734.