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Acceptance of energy transitions and policies: Public conceptualisations of energy as a need and basic right in the United Kingdom

Christina Demski*, Gareth Thomas, Sarah Becker, Darrick Evensen, Nick Pidgeon

Understanding Risk Research Group, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF103AT, UK

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ABSTRACT

Energy, and its use in society, can be understood and conceptualised in multiple different ways, emphasising different sets of values and attributes. In this paper, we examine how members of the public conceptualise energy, showing that a particularly salient frame is one of energy as a need and basic right. To orient our analysis we use the concept of framing, as rooted in sociological and psychological literature on framing effects and decision-making. The qualitative analysis draws from two UK datasets. The first consists of five focus groups (n = 37) examining public perceptions of energy transitions. The second dataset consists of four deliberative workshops (n = 46) exploring public perceptions of energy storage. We find that energy is explicitly discussed as a basic need because of its perceived role in ensuring survival, good health and a decent life. This is particularly salient when considering the wellbeing of vulnerable groups. We suggest that 'energy as a need' provides a framework for people's evaluation of proposed changes to the wider energy system including how energy is produced, consumed and governed, and discuss implications for policy and practitioners that seek to ensure low-carbon energy transitions are successful, inclusive and socially acceptable.

1. Introduction

Energy plays a critical role in societal and individual wellbeing, nonetheless we face significant challenges (e.g. climate change, fuel poverty, resource scarcity) that necessitate major changes to how energy is produced, consumed and governed in many countries. While the success of energy transitions aimed at addressing these challenges is dependent on numerous factors, public acceptance is certainly one. Consequently, an array of research examines perceptions and acceptance of supply and demand-side technologies at various scales, as well as practices and everyday behaviours [1,2]. In this paper, rather than focusing on public perceptions of a specific energy technology or of a particular form of energy use, we examine the broad frameworks in which energy is understood by the public and how this contrasts with other perspectives. While we have a UK focus, we argue that this approach is also applicable in other contexts especially those in which energy provision has been privatised.

We suggest that a particular salient public frame through which energy is understood is one of energy as a need and basic right. We draw out implications for public acceptance issues and energy policy more generally, stipulating that 'energy as a need' is a frame in which changes involving energy provision, consumption and governance will be understood and evaluated. Technologies, policies or changes that

threaten or do not account for this frame are unlikely to be evaluated favourably. This analysis and conclusion is embedded in the notion that energy has multiple socially constructed meanings which compete for attention [3].

1.1. Framing energy as a basic need

While energy might have specific meanings within scientific and engineering contexts (for example see [4]), the way energy is understood in society is more diverse. Indeed, it could be said that there is no single socially shared understanding of energy and its role in society but instead energy is conceptualised and framed in different ways across different domains or groups, each emphasising different values. For example Stern and Aronson (1984) pose that energy can be viewed as a commercial commodity, as an ecological resource, as a social necessity or as a strategic material.

Different conceptualisations can, of course, exist in parallel, but differing or even divergent framings of energy make it difficult to have socially shared ways of dealing with 'energy problems' (e.g. climate change, fuel poverty, energy security etc.) and finding solutions that address a wide set of values [5,6]. In this context, it is particularly important to engage with the plural meanings of energy to find acceptable and effective energy transition pathways [7]. This has

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: DemskiCC@cardiff.ac.uk (C. Demski).

implications for national energy policies, the key vehicle through which large-scale changes to the energy system are introduced and managed. Indeed a host of literature critically examines energy policy itself in terms of the framings and values that are embedded within it [8,9].

The concept of framing, as evoked in this literature, is rooted in sociological and psychological literature on framing effects in decision-making and communication [10–12]. It refers to the way policy is created around a set of assumptions and constructions about an issue that emphasise and link issues in certain ways and thus affect interpretation of a particular issue and its solutions. As such, frames serve the function of organising relevant information and beliefs, helping people make sense of an issue and acting as an interpretive lens. A particular frame might focus attention on particular problem definitions, considerations and solutions [10,11]. With regards to energy policy, there has been increasing academic focus on the need to examine the ‘services’ that energy provides, rather than thinking of energy purely in terms of commercial units of fuel or electricity [13]. In relation to this, the emergent energy justice scholarship has focused, in part, on access to these energy services. It is argued that being able to use energy services is often essential for securing basic needs and engaging in expected patterns of life. If people are denied such access, this may have serious consequences for physical and mental health as well as wider well-being [14,15], which is also discussed extensively in the literature on fuel poverty and vulnerability [16]. Furthermore, authors have argued that energy services could provide the basis for basic human rights claims. Such rights claims may be related to various issues including sufficiency (enough energy to maintain basic health and survival needs) or equity – enough energy to engage in those practices associated with having a decent life relative to the society in which one lives (enough to permit children to do homework or watch TV on a dark evening) [17]. Similar distinctions can be found elsewhere in public policy discourse, such as those often made between absolute and relative poverty. Reflecting not only competing policy prescriptions but also the wider discourses that mobilise popular support for them [18], both absolute and relativist conceptions assume that in a civilised society there is some level of welfare below which members should not be allowed to fall.

The framing of energy as a basic right on account of underlying health and economic advancement for people is something that existing energy policies often do not take account of sufficiently (e.g. [19,20]). In addition, the increased marketisation of energy and the delivery of energy policy through market measures in the UK (but also elsewhere, e.g. [21].) has been called into question especially in terms of addressing energy justice concerns. While much of this discussion is around distributional components of energy justice (i.e. equal access to reliable and affordable energy services), the importance of procedural and recognition justice has also gained attention [16]. This is particularly relevant in the context of energy transitions where policies to decarbonise the energy system might raise additional justice concerns, for example by placing unfair burdens on vulnerable groups (i.e. not recognising their needs and circumstances) through new technologies and requirements, for example smart energy systems [22], or financing energy transitions through regressive levies on energy bills [23,24]. Similarly, certain groups, particularly households in fuel poverty, may lack the ability and time to participate in energy policy decision-making or accessing opportunities such as energy efficiency programmes that are designed to ensure energy needs are met [25].

These more general concerns about energy justice have also been raised more specifically in relation to UK policy. While the UK has been in the vanguard of both energy market liberalisation and climate change legislation, it has been less successful in terms of energy affordability [26]. Indeed, from 2004 to 2012 household electricity and gas prices have increased by over 75 and 122 per cent respectively [26]. This is particularly concerning trend for those on low incomes and/or dependent on welfare, especially in light of recent cuts to social security benefits [9]. Fuel poverty has therefore become an ever-increasing

concern, which has been addressed in arguably limited ways. For example, existing programmes that are designed to help people meet their energy needs have focused heavily on older people¹ and heating needs (e.g. through the Winter Fuel Payment² or Cold Weather Payment³) with very limited ability to account for the needs of other groups (e.g. disabled) and other types of energy needs (e.g. light, communication, mobility) [9,17]. Similarly, while some programmes to improve the poorly insulate UK housing stock, such as the Warm Front Program⁴, have been successful (e.g. in terms of satisfaction and uptake levels), they have also had inadequate reach in the context of rising energy prices and resulting rising levels of fuel poverty [27]. The UK regulator Ofgem expects that an increasing number of people are at risk of fuel poverty if energy bills do not fall in real terms and there is continued slow wage growth [28].

1.2. Public conceptualisations/framings of energy

The discussions on energy policy and energy justice provide the context in which our current analysis should be considered. However, we do not make claims about how energy policy should be framed but rather what implications public understandings and framings of energy have for the communication of, and engagement with, energy policy. Because energy can take on multiple meanings and be framed in different ways, it is prudent to understand how these frames are used, and in particular who is using them. This is not to say that different frames, e.g. energy as a necessity or energy as a commodity, are mutually exclusive, but that they emphasise different values and aspects. If a particular frame that is used by one group does not resonate or is even rejected by another group, this might be problematic for cooperation. With this in mind we examine public conceptualisations of energy and examine how certain frames, or interpretive lenses, are used to understand and make sense of energy issues and the role energy plays in society. This in turn is important for policies that seek to communicate and engage people with these policies, for example actively by encouraging uptake of technologies and programmes, or passively by ensuring opposition does not ensue. As such, we seek to further literature on public perception and acceptance of energy transitions including on the various changes and related processes that are inherent in transitioning. We argue that analysing the frames salient to the public when discussing energy issues is an important tool for understanding public responses and engagement with energy.

In particular, we posit that a particular salient way of thinking about energy, among the UK public, is that of energy as a need and basic right. As such, we expect public framings of energy to align closely with the framing delineated in the energy justice literature. This is also in line with prior empirical research on public perceptions of energy transitions, which has examined aspects of people’s relationship with energy. For example, we find that people believe energy will and should be made accessible and affordable for all [5,29], thereby asserting the importance of justice and fairness within energy systems. Public perceptions research

¹ We note, however, that the recent Affordable Warmth Obligation (as part of the Energy Companies Obligation) is an exception to this. Under this scheme, energy companies are legally required to improve energy efficiency of households of those on low incomes or on certain social security benefits, for example through new boilers and insulation.

² The Winter Fuel Payment is a non means tested, tax-except, payment (£100–300) provided to all UK citizens older than 63 or in receipt of a State pension or other social security benefit.

³ The Cold Weather Payment is a payment (£25 per affected week) given to those in receipt of certain benefits if the average temperature in their area is recorded as, or expected to be, zero degrees Celsius or below for 7 consecutive days.

⁴ The Warm Front Program (2000–2013) provided grants to householders for insulating houses and improving heating measures. See Sovacool (2015) for further details.

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