

Acceptance studies in the field of land use—A critical and systematic review to advance the conceptualization of acceptance and acceptability



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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing importance of studies dealing with acceptance in the field of land use, few theoretical-conceptual reflections and reviews have been published. To address this gap, this paper offers a critical and systematic review of recent literature regarding acceptance and land use. Our aim is to synthesise the contributions of these publications in order to advance scientific debate on this topic. The data set consists of 132 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters and is dominated by empirical papers (mostly quantitative studies) and European case studies. Renewable energy appears as the most important thematic issue, followed by sustainable land use. In these studies, many researchers did not define acceptance or apply a theory. It seems to be perceived as an everyday term with a clear meaning. However, this review reveals that there is no common understanding of acceptance; instead, the given definitions and characteristics are sometimes even contradictory. Acceptance is often considered a positive and desirable outcome of planning projects. Only a few authors understand acceptance as a complex phenomenon. As a cross-sectoral research topic, it applies theories from different disciplines and research fields (psychology, sociology, and innovation research), even though the use of these theories within disciplines is not consistent. Most empirical studies address influencing factors with the aim of explaining decisions about acceptance. However, the theoretical foundation underlying the selection of factors is often weak. Therefore, we recommend that researchers engage in a thorough reflection of notions and concepts, suitable and sound identification of influencing factors. In concluding with our own theoretical-conceptual reflections, we support the idea that acceptance and acceptability should be distinguished to gain more clarity in the use of terms. Thus, acceptability encompasses actor-based and dynamic decision processes. The decisions are products of interactions among the actors, the object, and the context. They can be assigned to a particular degree (from rejection to acceptance or engagement) and made at the attitude, action, or utilization level. Finally, we believe that further research can benefit from this advanced concept of acceptability.

1. Introduction

When developing a successful planning, decision-making, and implementation process, it seems essential to consider the acceptance of innovations, measures, or projects (e.g., Stigka et al., 2014; Hitzeroth and Megerle, 2013). Consequently, acceptance has recently become an important issue in the research field of land use and sustainability science. The increasing importance of this issue is reflected in the growing number of publications concerning acceptance and land use in recent years. These publications are mainly empirical case studies with different foci covering a broad range of subjects (Schenk et al., 2007). Each publication contributes its specific aspects and perspectives to the application-related debate about acceptance. Only a few theoretical and conceptual reflections and reviews of acceptance have been published. Existing (bibliometric) reviews focus only on energy issues and do not

include other land use issues (e.g., Gaede and Rowlands, 2018; Rand and Hoen, 2017; Fournis and Fortin, 2017, p. 5). Furthermore, the terminological, ontological, and theoretical bases of studies are rarely analysed. To fill this research gap, a comprehensive and broad review of literature related to acceptance and land use is long overdue.

This paper offers a critical reflection on the current state of acceptance studies regarding land use changes that encompass a broad range of topics. It aims to reflect and synthesise publications' contributions to the theoretical-conceptual understanding of acceptance and their relation of those contributions to each other in order to advance the debate on acceptance. Therefore, we systematically reviewed scientific publications that address acceptance issues within the field of land use. We analyse and discuss their research topics and intentions, epistemological and ontological foundations and linkages (definitions, theories, and concepts), applied methods, and the role of factors in acceptance

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studies. We conclude with our own theoretical-conceptual reflections about acceptance.

In this review, we include the following questions:

- What are the main research topics and intentions?
- Is there a common understanding of acceptance? What definitions are used in publications?
- How are other frequently used concepts (acceptability, perception, attitudes, etc.) distinguished from the concept of acceptance in the literature?
- In which disciplines are acceptance studies based? Which disciplinary theories have been used to explain acceptance?
- What role do factors play in explaining the acceptance phenomena?

2. Methods

2.1. Systematic literature review

We systematically reviewed the peer-reviewed scientific literature that addresses acceptance issues within the field of land use. Systematic literature reviews seek “*comprehensively identify all relevant studies to answer a particular question, and assesses the validity (or ‘soundness’) of each study taking this into account when reaching conclusions*” (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006, p. 39). To deliver clear scientific communication and produce valid results, literature reviews must be systematic, explicit, transparent, and reproducible in their methods (Fink, 1998; Booth et al., 2012). Following these core principles, we designed and documented the methodological procedures that were used for this review, which we detail below.

2.2. Literature search and selection, framework for analysis

We performed an online literature search to identify publications on acceptance in the context of land use. First, we used the major digital bibliographic databases Web of Science (formerly ISI), Science Direct, and Springer Link to search for scientific peer-reviewed publications from 1995 to December 2017. We limited the literature search to English-language publications. In an advanced search, we used the following search terms in each database: “*acceptance*” AND “*land use*” / “*land management*” / “*sustainable land use*.” We checked the relevance of the articles by screening the titles, abstracts, and keywords. The publications identified as relevant were added to an Excel database. The publications were analysed quantitatively in terms of absolute and relative frequencies. They were also analysed qualitatively. The quantitative analysis criteria included the article type, land use type, year of publication, case study area, and frequencies of the use of definitions and theories. Additionally, the content of used definitions, the conceptual characterization of acceptance, the use of theories, and the role of acceptance factors were qualitatively analysed to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical-conceptual foundation of acceptance studies. When the study began, the analysis criteria were determined to provide an overview of the body of literature. After an initial analysis, the criteria were revised and refined based on the information provided in the articles.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Description of the data set

The data set consists of 132 publications, including articles in journals and book chapters. The vast majority of them are empirical papers with their own research data (102 papers,). The remaining publications are empirical plus conceptual (9), theoretical plus conceptual or viewpoint papers (short articles on opinions) (11), or thematic reviews regarding meta-studies (10). The results reveal that the field of scientific acceptance publications is strongly dominated by

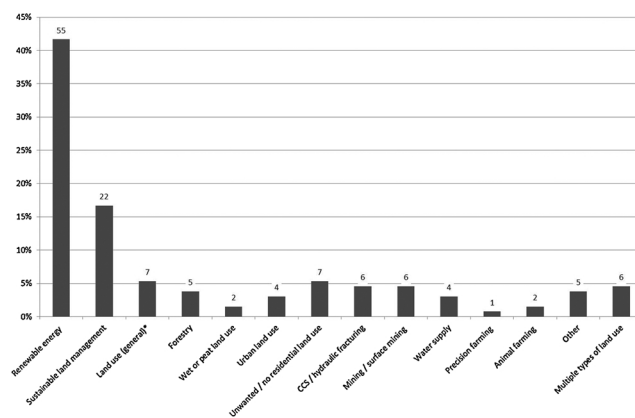


Fig. 1. Publications systemized according to thematic foci (n = 132).

* Land use (general) includes intensively used arable land, agricultural landscapes, land consolidation, and rural landscapes.

empirical studies with quantitative data generation and analysis. More than half (68 papers,) of the empirical papers (111 when the empirical plus conceptual papers are included) used quantitative methods, such as surveys, experiments, and modelling. Only 19 empirical papers () used qualitative methods in terms of interviews and group discussions. In all, 18 papers () applied a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, and 5 comparative case study analyses were carried out.

Analysing the geographical distribution of the case study areas reveals that most research was conducted in Europe (61 case studies,). Asia (19 case studies,), North America (17 case studies,), and Australia (13 case studies,) have roughly the same number of case studies. Little research data was gathered from Africa (6 case studies) or Latin America (3 case studies). The remaining studies were either inter-continental (6 case studies) or not locatable (7 case studies). We did not consider the geographic distribution of research institutions and authors.

Fig. 1 shows that the thematic focus of these studies is clearly related to renewable energy issues, such as projects wind turbines, bioenergy plantations, biofuel, biogas or geothermal power facilities, waste to energy, and photovoltaics. The second most important issue is sustainable land management, which includes research on landscape and nature conservation measures, the maintenance of ecosystem services (including biodiversity), agri-environmental schemes, soil and water conservation measures, and dry-land farming. Each of the remaining thematic categories only covers a very small number of publications (Fig. 1).

The range of specific issues within these topic categories is broad, but many of them can be subsumed under innovative technologies and land use and management practices. Regarding research intentions and priorities, the majority of publications aim to assess the degree of acceptance and to identify explanations for specific acceptance outcome in terms of fostering and inhibiting factors. These publications also seek to provide recommendations for increasing acceptance outcomes. In addition to these research intentions, some papers deal specifically with trade-offs between different land uses (e.g., Caporale and de Lucia, 2015) and affected actor groups (e.g., Tudor et al., 2015), acceptance type classifications (e.g., Wüstenhagen et al., 2007), specific links between selected acceptance factors (Wolff and Herzog, 2014), and the assessment of acceptance-enhancing measures (Anderson et al., 2012). The result of screening research intentions is congruent with the high number of empirical publications.

In the last 10 years, acceptance has received increasing attention, as depicted in the graph of chronologically ordered publication dates (Fig. 2). The vast majority of papers () have been published since 2010.

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