



Bringing the policy making perspective in: A political science approach to social acceptance



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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the concept of social acceptance, especially in the wake of the transition from non-renewable to renewable energy sources. Social acceptance is thereby studied from very different backgrounds and based on distinct conceptualizations. We argue that the reason for the great variety in the use of 'acceptance' is not mainly its interdisciplinary and multidimensionality, but a missing policy making perspective and its insights and knowledge about processes, actors and (in)formal decision-making.

This contribution proposes a framework to refine the concept of social acceptance. Taking into account that the stage and specificity of the policy making process heavily influence the response towards RET and the process triggered, we identify three steps that need to be addressed when defining a research design that includes social acceptance: the object and context under scrutiny, the relevant actors, and the roles they play. Our proposed framework thereby adopts a political science point of view and the main research interest deals with political actors deciding upon and implementing future policies.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the concept of social acceptance, especially in the wake of the transition from non-renewable to renewable energy sources (Tabi and Wüstenhagen, 2015). At the same time, it has repeatedly been argued that the notion of 'acceptance' is being used inconsistently in the context of renewable energy research (van Rijnsoever et al., 2015). One reason might be that many disciplines such as psychology, geography, economics and political science have been using the concept, meaning that 'acceptance' is studied from very different backgrounds and based on distinct conceptualizations. However, inconsistencies are also related to the fact that the notion of acceptance is used both as reference to a research perspective in renewable energy policy, and as reference to one among various actors' responses towards renewable energy technologies.

In the first and more general sense, Wüstenhagen et al. (2007: 2683) describe the notion 'social acceptance' and its breakdown into three dimensions as "one factor that can potentially be a powerful barrier to the achievement of renewable energy targets". This perspective emphasizes that the successful implementation of, e.g., a technology, has a "social side" (Batel et al., 2013: 1) which has to be considered scientifically but also practically. Hence, the notion 'social acceptance' denotes the *interest in and*

research area concentrating on understanding different potential responses to renewable energy policy, while it does not inform us about the actual manifestation of these reactions. This is where the second perspective comes in: In fact, regarding the more specific use of the word 'acceptance', several authors (e.g., Batel et al., 2013; Fast, 2013) characterize acceptance as *one among various reactions* towards renewable energy technologies, whereby opposition, preferences, and support are other such reactions.

Both perspectives have their strengths and weaknesses: The first, general perspective, and particularly the three-dimensional approach by Wüstenhagen et al. (2007), effectively guides the contextualization of (research) questions regarding social acceptance. However, this view is rather general or even unspecific regarding the processes, the actors, and their specific reactions towards renewable energy policy. The second, more actor-centered approach, can in contrast fill this latter gap. Research in this field contributes to a better understanding of these varying actors' reactions as well as the processes behind. An example is Gross' (2007) contribution on how a lack of perceived procedural justice can lead to opposition in communities towards a wind farm. This second perspective so far lacks a specification and theorization of the context in which actors' reactions towards renewable energy policy take place.

This is the starting point of this paper arguing that we need a

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framework that helps to *structure* these different perspectives on and aspects of social acceptance. We propose that a *policy making perspective* can serve as a foundation of such a framework. Our central argument is twofold:

First, we aim at integrating the strengths of both perspectives to propose a framework which guides researchers to create a precise research design in renewable energy research. We argue that the type of response towards RET under investigation is heavily dependent on what aspect of social acceptance we are looking at. Second, including the policy making perspective allows bringing in important knowledge about processes, actors and (in)formal decision-making. We emphasize that the context in which actors' reactions take place is strongly contingent also on the stage of the decision making process. The latter determines the role political actors play in a specific case under investigation (e.g., being a decision-maker or the target group; having the power to actively support a proposition or only stating preferences while lobbying for them), and thus their potential reactions (Batel et al., 2013).

In the following, we are going to illustrate that adopting this political science perspective can contribute substantially to a better definition, conceptualization, and finally empirical operationalization of the different processes and responses leading to social acceptance. In this vein, we will present in the third chapter three steps that need to be addressed when defining a research design that includes social acceptance: *the object of interest, the relevant actors, and their roles*.

While our framework integrates a political science approach to develop on the conceptualization of social acceptance and responses towards RET, this does not mean that all research on social acceptance needs to adopt a policy science perspective. Our main claim is that our framework can be applied to many different approaches and thereby helps researchers from different disciplines to specify their view on how a policy is implemented or a target reached. Conversely, it is important to note that previous research on renewable energy policy has actually integrated political (science) aspects. Most importantly, the role of policy design (van Rijnsoever et al., 2015), actor constellations (Kriesi and Jegen, 2001), or public attitudes and voting behavior (Bidwell, 2016a, 2016b; Bornstein and Lanz, 2008; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011; Thalmann, 2004) have been investigated. While this earlier work illustrates that varying actors' reactions are relevant in different political stages of the policy making process and regarding various aspects of the political sphere, we make this more explicit by systematizing the effect of the policy making perspective on social acceptance research in general, and the role actors assume when shaping or implementing policies in particular.

In this vein, the contribution and relevance of our framework is at least twofold. From a *scientific point of view*, our framework – based on the policy making perspective – structures the different existing views on social acceptance in renewable energy policy. Moreover, the framework helps to characterize various responses to RET, which in turn will be associated with varying definitions and research designs. Against this background, our framework augments the clarity and the comparability of results. Moreover, and from a *practical perspective*, a transparent conceptualization, taking into account the stage and specificity of the policy making process, is necessary in order to derive the correct practical implications from scientific research.

Our framework and this paper both focus on *policies*. We thereby adopt a broad understanding of what a policy refers to. In most general terms, a policy stands for decisions and rules by the political system, e.g., in the sense of a broader political program or strategy, but also a policy instrument or measure or a vote on a specific infrastructural project. The perspectives researchers might have on these various understandings of policies furthermore include not only the decisions about a specific policy itself, but could also focus on how a policy is formed, how a policy is implemented, the reaction towards a policy by stakeholders before/after its adoption, and also if the envisaged goals are fulfilled by the chosen solution.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: The next section provides a literature review about how 'social acceptance' and 'acceptance' have been defined and conceptualized in previous research. Section 3 then proposes our own framework by identifying three steps for researchers when preparing their research design. Next, to illustrate our arguments, we will use the case of energy policy and the related restructuring of the energy sector towards more renewable energy. Questions related to social acceptance are particularly relevant in the field of renewable energies, which also reflects in the broad application of the concept in this area of study. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and their implications.

2. Conceptualizing social acceptance – a literature overview

2.1. What social acceptance is about

In their introduction for a special issue on Social Acceptance of Renewable Energy Innovation, Wüstenhagen et al. (2007: 2684ff) propose an interdisciplinary and three-dimensional approach to social acceptance. First, socio-political acceptance is the most general level, referring to how policies and technologies are seen by political stakeholders and the broad public. Second, community acceptance is relevant when trying to build a power plant in a community, where local stakeholders and especially residents are asked not to oppose a certain project. Lastly, market acceptance builds on the economy, where new technologies have to be introduced by market players on the supply side and used on the demand side (e.g., the diffusion of innovation).

However, while these dimensions mostly guide researchers on the approach of their research and do not constitute fixed categories, research on responses towards RET, based amongst others on perspectives from geography, psychology and political science, have identified other aspects to be considered when researching reactions to RET. Most authors' thereby put an emphasis on factors at the actors' level that may help to achieve consent. Fast (2013), for instance, argues that *geographical concepts* including place, space and landscape should be considered in order to understand actors' responses to alternative energy technologies. Huijts et al. (2012) present a framework emphasizing *psychological factors* that influence how technologies are perceived. Moreover, van Rijnsoever et al. (2015) draw attention to the need of clearly conceptualizing the *roles* individuals can have in the different dimensions of social acceptance. Research on social acceptance, conclusively, can depart from varying starting points and may be based on various perspectives.

Despite this variety of arguments and conceptualizations, some common challenges can be identified. First, one crucial point refers to the question what the notion of 'acceptance' at the actors' level actually refers to. Batel et al. (2013: 2), in this vein, criticize that the notion of 'acceptance' normatively implies a top-down perspective on RET implementation, where actors' rather passive acceptance of a new technology or a project is considered sufficient. Hence, these authors ask for a multilateral and participatory approach to renewable energy technologies and policies, which involves citizens more actively, and eventually may lead to support for these projects. Moreover, a more differentiated wording regarding actors' reactions also prevents researchers from ignoring other types of responses to RET, for example support or uncertainty, resistance, or apathy (ibid.). Batel et al.'s (2013) argument points to the fact that the heterogeneity in how actors' acceptance is conceptualized actually concerns two levels: a) the conceptualization of acceptance either as attitude or behavior and b) what kind of actual (re)action we look at.

When reflecting on the difference between *attitude* and *behavior*, acceptance has been used to describe very different reactions of individuals towards a new technology (van Rijnsoever et al., 2015). The relevance of these different responses subsumed under acceptance, for example, stimulates the prominent discussion regarding the value-action gap and the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) syndrome. The value-

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