



Frame envy in energy policy ideology: A social constructivist framework for wicked energy problems



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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the nexus between energy policymaking and ideology. The article builds and expands upon a theoretical social constructivist analytical strategy, or framework, put forth for the purposes of conducting energy policy analysis. It then addresses criticism that this strategy constitutes “postmodern mush” that has no place in energy analysis before concluding with a review of why social constructivism has a significant role to play in building consensus and enhancing understanding between competing energy policy perspectives. The main contribution made by this paper stems from application of this ontological construct to the analysis of policies targeting wicked energy problems. The study cuts to the core about how energy problems are defined, interpreted, communicated, planned for, and potentially implemented via policy. Put another way, our study offers a timely critique or a call for reconceptualizing the process and practice of energy policy itself.

1. Introduction

A picture, it has been said, is worth a thousand words. Yet, ask 1000 people to summarize in words what a painting means to them and we will find ourselves confronted with 1000 distinctly different descriptions. Ontologically, to post-empiricists, analysis of energy policy - indeed analysis of any public policy challenge - shares an allegorical similarity with art appreciation. The art aficionado possesses an individualized worldview through which a work of art is judged. Similarly, the artist who has fashioned a work possesses an individualized worldview which he or she attempts to communicate to others. When the worldviews of the aficionado and the artist converge, a connection is made and a sense of appreciation arises in the viewer. When the worldviews clash, disconnect and perhaps even discontent occurs. In other words, beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder only because the vista that the beholder is viewing conflates with that person's perspective on beauty. The same can be said about energy policy analysis: two energy experts can be presented with the same data and derive opposing conclusions regarding how to contend with a given energy issue.

The inspiration for this article stems from a recent exchange concerning frames, ideology, and constructivism in energy policy research and interpretation. This basic premise - competing worldviews underpin clashing perspectives in energy policy analysis - provides the foundation of a work by Sovacool and Brown (2015).

Sovacool and Brown (2015) argued that “assumptions and values can play a combative, corrosive role in the generation of objective energy analysis.” In order to illustrate the types of conflicts that can occur, the authors introduced eight competing energy “frames”, which they contended represent dominant ideologies through which groups of people contest key energy issues. These illustrative frames were generated through an analysis of 15 conflicting energy issues as described in a broader monograph with Johns Hopkins University press by Sovacool, Brown and Valentine (2016). Both the book and the paper propose that conflicts could be attenuated by adopting six maxims that interested stakeholders could employ as a guide to better understand the drivers that underpin one's own perspectives on energy and the perspectives of others. Indeed, Sovacool et al. (2016) demonstrate how these maxims can be employed by analyzing competing perspectives on 15 essential energy questions.

In response to Sovacool and Brown's article, Felder offered a critique which concluded that Sovacool and Brown's paper makes “expansive claims that become less clear, less grounded and less helpful to its goal of reducing contentiousness through building common ground and improving analysis” (Felder, 2016, p. 712). In the conclusion to the critique, Felder took particular exception to the authors' introduction of ideological frames to illustrate how competing worldviews sire contention. Felder argued that frames are difficult to comprehensively catalogue and not necessarily the basis upon which energy decision makers carry out energy analyses. In turning to policy

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implications, Felder suggested that the main objective of the energy analyst should be to strive for empirically rational investigations and that analyses of competing values left to “philosophers in terms of substance and to political scientists in terms of process and governance” (Felder, 2016, p. 715).

In reading through Felder's critique, it became apparent to us that a response that extended beyond a simple communique was necessary to help avoid future misinterpretation of post-empiricist research by more carefully describing the sociological roots which underpin the analytical perspectives put forward by Sovacool, Brown and Valentine (herein referred to as the SBV social constructivist framework). More is at stake here than a mere disagreement between two studies, or disciplinary perspectives. Although the ensuing discussion does center on the literatures of Sovacool and Brown (2015), Sovacool et al. (2016), and Felder (2016), it cuts to the core about how energy problems are defined, interpreted, communicated, planned for, and potentially implemented via policy. Put another way, our study offers a timely critique or a call for reconceptualizing the process and practice of energy policy itself.

To make this case, our argument will be presented in the following manner. Section 2 will expand on the theoretical foundations underpinning the SBV social constructivist framework. Section 3 will then draw from this foundation to demonstrate how Felder's critique (and others like it) not only misses the mark, but also validates our perspective. Section 4 focuses policy implications, and Section 5 summarizes why the SBV social constructivist framework is valuable for seeking compromise in the face of wicked energy problems- that is problems, often intractable, that span across many agencies, organizations, and public members but also lack easily identified solutions (Weber and Khademian 2008).

2. Positivism, post-empiricism and public policy

Harold Laswell, who is considered to be one of the founders of public policy, envisaged a field which was “multidisciplinary and contextual in nature” (Torgerson, 1985), and as such, necessitated contributions from political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, statistics, mathematics and even in some cases the physical and natural sciences (Fischer, 2003). Policy analysis, which is a sub-field of public policy and represents the core theme of contention around which this article is based, has been defined by Dunn through a similar conceptual lens as “an applied social science discipline which uses multiple methods of inquiry and arguments to produce and transform policy-relevant information that may be utilized in political settings to resolve policy problems” (Dunn, 1981, p. 35). One of the key reasons cited for advocating multiple methods of inquiry were the limitations of individuals to comprehensively understand and respond to complex problems. Herbert Simon referred to these limitations as “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1982). In Simon's view, the impact of bounded rationality on the policymaking process was that it encouraged policymakers to prioritize. He called the quest to simply get the job done, *satisficing* (Simon, 1982). In many respects, this was understandable because in the 1950s, the process of rebuilding from the Second World War consumed policymakers in most western nations. Economies were booming and policymakers were struggling to keep up with an unprecedented expansion of social services.

In the 1960s and 1970s, policy scholars circled back to two policy themes. The first theme, catalyzed by the social movements of the time, arose in response to a need to quantify the *effectiveness* of a given policy. It was fine that policymakers were responding to emergent problems (satisficing) but, were these responses having the desired effect and improving aggregate societal welfare? The second avenue of inquiry, largely driven by concerns over financial austerity – stemming from the oil crises of the 1970s and corresponding economic downturns – highlighted the need to evaluate the *cost effectiveness* of a given policy initiative. In other words, efficiency became an important feature of policy analysis.

A group of scholars who advocated a competing positivist epistemological approach to policy analysis served as the vanguard for the efficiency movement. One quest of this group was to seek a method of empirical-scientific inquiry that could help attenuate institutional paralysis in the face of value-laden stakeholder disputes over desirable policy directions. The goal as Bernstein (1978) described it was to employ scientific principles to “downplay the subjective foundations of social understanding” (Fischer, 2003).

Economics became ensconced as the vanguard field within the positivist movement. Promoted as a pseudoscience by its advocates, theorists in this field began to turn their sights on developing methodologies to quantify what they call externalities - direct and indirect costs and benefits that a free market does not automatically internalize into the price of a product or service (Thampapillai, 2002). It was and still is the belief of many environmental economists that complete quantification of externalities represents the holy grail in terms of developing analyses which yield socially optimal solutions (Tietenberg, 2003). The seemingly obvious objection is that the calculation of externalities requires value judgments, thereby thrusting subjectivity into an otherwise objective analysis. As Frank Fisher notes in a critique of this position, “perhaps the main problem with modern-day neo-positivism, like its predecessors, is that it still deceptively offers an appearance of truth. It does so by assigning numbers to decision-making criteria and produces what can appear to be definitive answers to political questions” (Fischer, 2003).

This significant concern has not deterred politicians and policymakers from embracing economic theory as a dominant lens through which to analyze public problems. With good reason - economic theory has played an influential role in guiding economic development to higher levels of affluence, as seen through the metric of gross domestic product (Frank and Bernanke, 2007; Maddison, 2003). Yet as the human global population increases and resource consumption begins to diminish environmental carrying capacity (Valentine, 2010a), even experts indoctrinated initially into supporting the benefits of neo-classical economic theory began to realize that growth can be problematic in a world of finite resources and environmental sinks (Costanza et al., 1997; Daly, 1990; Stiglitz, 2002). These concerns have led some policy scholars back to the roots of policy analysis - roots that were firmly couched in sociological theory (Rochlin, 2014; Ryan et al., 2014). For some scholars returning to this conceptual homestead, one question stands out: Does a strategy exist which allows us to analyze social and environmental problems in a manner that does not devolve into a contest of competing values?

To answer this question, the notion of constructivism is essential. Constructivism posits that human beings “construct” understanding through a recursive process that involves comparing experiences (including interactions with others) with existing beliefs (Piaget, 1951). Social constructivism represents a subfield wherein scholars believe that worldviews are largely constructed through interactions with others. Under the social constructivist paradigm, the process of confirmation or disconfirmation of worldviews emerges as central to learning and sense making (Jonassen, 1999). Individuals acquire information or experiential knowledge through interactive cues (peer groups, schools, books, media etc.) and then over time, the aggregate body of cues serve to confirm or disconfirm understanding (Tam, 2000). This thus distinguishes constructivism or constructivist approaches from others summarized in Table 1 such as positivism, critical realism, and relativism (Geels et al., 2016).

It should be intuitively apparent from a social constructivist perspective that if individuals construct worldviews based on individual experiences and exposure to the perspective of others, no one can be expected to share the exact same worldview across all contexts. In other words, people differ in their constructs of how the world works and these differences give rise to unique value sets and ideologies that can at times clash.

This relativity in perceptions is not necessarily a negative. In social

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