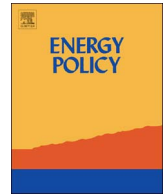




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New frontiers and conceptual frameworks for energy justice

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how concepts from justice and ethics can inform energy decision-making and highlight the moral and equity dimensions of energy production and use. It defines “energy justice” as a global energy system that fairly distributes both the benefits and burdens of energy services, and one that contributes to more representative and inclusive energy decision-making. The primary contribution of the article is its focus on six new frontiers of future energy justice research. First is making the case for the involvement of non-Western justice theorists. Second is expanding beyond humans to look at the Rights of Nature or non-anthropocentric notions of justice. Third is focusing on cross-scalar issues of justice such as embodied emissions. Fourth is identifying business models and the co-benefits of justice. Fifth is better understanding the tradeoffs within energy justice principles. Sixth is exposing unjust discourses. In doing so, the article presents an agenda constituted by 30 research questions as well as an amended conceptual framework consisting of ten principles. The article argues in favor of “justice-aware” energy planning and policymaking, and it hopes that its (reconsidered) energy justice conceptual framework offers a critical tool to inform decision-making.

1. Introduction

Many features of energy production and use have significant impacts on fairness and justice (Jones et al., 2015). For instance, the costs of climate change will disproportionately befall the weakest and least developed countries as well as the poorest in developed nations while any benefits, if there are any, will likely accrue to the rich and powerful (Smith et al., 2013). Wilkinson et al. (2007) note that some serious environmental and social burdens result from having too much energy – from waste, over-consumption, and pollution. Others, however, result from not having enough energy – from lack of access to modern forms of energy services, under-consumption, and poverty. And yet many consumers of energy and even planners and policy-makers confront and frame such climate and energy risks within a moral vacuum. Markowitz and Shariff (2012) argue that our moral systems are ill equipped to handle the complexity and expansiveness of modern day energy and climate problems. Stoknes (2014) found that individuals will work to avoid feelings of responsibility for climate change or energy consumption; some will even have optimistic biases, downgrading any negative information they receive and counterbalancing it with almost irrational exuberance.

Clearly, we need new ways of thinking about, and approaching, the

world's energy dilemmas. The concept of energy justice has therefore been defined as a global energy system that fairly disseminates both the benefits and costs of energy services, and one that has representative and impartial energy decision-making (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014; Sovacool, 2013). In very simple terms: it attempts to apply principles and concepts from social justice to the global energy system in its broadest sense. The conceptual framework of energy justice therefore involves burdens, or how the hazards, costs and externalities of the energy system are disseminated throughout society; benefits, or how access to modern energy systems and services is distributed throughout society; procedures or ensuring that energy decision-making respects due process and representation; and recognition, that the marginalized or vulnerable have special consideration (Jenkins et al., 2016a). Sovacool and Dworkin (2015) posit that energy justice can be a *conceptual tool* for that better integrates usually distinct distributive, procedural, cosmopolitan, and recognition justice concerns. It can be an *analytical tool* for energy researchers striving to understand how values get built or marginalized into energy systems or to resolve common energy problems. It can lastly offer a *decision-making tool* that can assist energy planners and consumers in making more informed energy choices.

Although we maintain that previous energy justice work has great

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Table 1
Philosophical concepts and influences for global energy justice.

Topic	Concept (s)	Major philosophical influence (s)
Energy efficiency	Virtue	Plato and Aristotle
Energy externalities	Utility	Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick
Human Rights and Social Conflict	Human rights	Immanuel Kant
Energy and due process	Procedural justice	Edward Coke, Thomas Jefferson, Jürgen Habermas
Energy poverty	Welfare and happiness	John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum
Energy subsidies	Freedom	Robert Nozick, Milton Friedman
Energy resources	Posterity	Ronald Dworkin, Brian Barry, Edith Brown Weiss
Climate change	Fairness, responsibility, and capacity	Peter Singer, Henry Shue, Paul Baer, Stephen M. Gardiner, Dale Jamieson, Simon Caney

merit, some notable shortcomings do exist. Western theorists and anthropocentric concepts have tended to dominate the discourse on jurisprudence, particularly in contemporary settings, and especially related to energy justice. When Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) discussed the philosophical underpinnings of “global energy justice,” they relied almost exclusively on Western philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Robert Nozick shown in Table 1. Similarly, the justice as recognition dimensions articulated by Walker (2012) and Jenkins et al. (2016a) draw heavily from the work of Nany Fraser, an American feminist and critical theorist whose work examines “participatory parity” for vulnerable groups. Energy justice concepts also have a strong anthropocentric bias, perhaps understandable given that modern energy systems have been built to serve the needs of humans. Thus the field of energy justice has overwhelmingly been defined by concerns with ethics and morality among and between humans. This human-centered or anthropocentric perspective is expressed explicitly in energy justice scholarship as justice among “the social” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 417) and members of society (McCauley et al., 2013), fairness among people and communities (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015), and awareness of human needs (Jenkins et al., 2016b). An anthropocentric focus is also implicit to significant themes within the field that commonly fail to consider nonhumans when it discusses the interests of marginalized groups, promotion of welfare, relations between producers and consumers, participation of stakeholders, intergenerational impacts, and forms of distributive, procedural and recognition justice. As but one illustrative example of this anthropocentric bias, McCauley et al. (2013: 2–3) call for a distributional justice that would include “the distribution of benefits and ills on all members of society regardless of income, race, etc.”, and a recognition justice that would “recognize the divergent perspectives rooted in social, cultural, ethnic, racial and gender differences”.

Energy justice, therefore, has some imperfections. Left unexamined is whether or how models of justice could tap into the rich insights offered by non-Western justice theorists, and also allow for an extended membership regardless of species and recognize perspectives rooted in nonhuman differences as well. To explore this theme, in this article we argue that energy justice does give us a way to better assess and resolve energy and climate related conundrums, but that new conceptions and research question need brought into the fold. The core of the article focuses on six new frontiers—fruitful areas of future research—divided into the categories of strengthening energy justice theory and revealing opportunities and tensions for energy justice in practice. It also presents a research agenda populated by 30 questions raised throughout the article. These questions are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, and they are intended to facilitate and open up discussion rather than close it down. In laying out a series of questions rather than offering predetermined or definitive answers, the article is meant to both be ponderously self-reflective (the authors don’t believe they *have* all of the answers) and to spur the research community towards promising areas of inquiry. In short: we need justice-aware energy policy and research, meaning energy policies and research agendas that explicitly engage with our new frontiers and

consider a set of reformulated energy justice principles.

2. Proposing six energy justice research frontiers

Although the field of energy justice is indeed dynamic and rapidly evolving, more can be done to advance justice-aware energy policy. We maintain that at least six fields of inquiry are deserving of more attention: new theoretical approaches from beyond classical Western theorists, moral consideration of the non-human world, embodied emissions and the spatial or scalar implications of justice, business models and co-benefits for justice, tradeoffs and tensions within and across justice principles, and utopianism and discursive discontinuity. These fields of inquiry fall roughly into two categories: strengthening energy justice theory, and opportunities and tensions for energy justice in practice.

2.1. Strengthening energy justice theory

Non-Western or non-human-centered notions of ethics and justice present challenges for engaging with the existing energy justice scholarship (Cline, 2014; Murphy and Weber, 2016). The only exception to our mind is Guruswamy (2016), who briefly explored the jurisprudential lineages of justice within Western, Islamic, Buddhist and Confucian traditions, but limited itself to legal aspects.

Given the rich, ancient and diverse traditions of non-Western ethics, as well as the complexities of translation and comparison, this section necessarily offers only a minimal introduction as a step towards a much deeper engagement of non-Western and non-human-centered theories of ethics and justice.

2.1.1. Non-western theorists

2.1.1.1. Ubuntu of Africa South of the Sahara. Common to the people of Africa south of the Sahara, *Ubuntu* signifies a relational culture and worldview that values human dignity as realized through communal relationships in the context of social harmony (Metz, 2011). Humans are viewed as a part of society, which in turn exists within the biosphere and the cosmos, implying responsibility to others and care for the integrity of the natural world (Chuwa, 2014). The ultimate moral obligation is to achieve complete personhood and obtain Ubuntu by increasingly entering into community with others, meaning that personal maturity and humanity is measured by the quality of one’s relationship to other human beings (Metz, 2011; Chuwa, 2014). While upholding basic human rights, Ubuntu is understood as communitarian because of its “other-oriented” worldview as expressed by the phrase *cognatus sum, ergo sumus* (I am known, therefore we are) or through the maxim “a person is a person through other persons” (Chuwa, 2014). The interdependent community and the individual members survive and flourish together, with the implication that “actions are wrong not merely insofar as they harm people (utilitarianism) or degrade an individual’s autonomy (Kantianism), but rather just to the extent that they... fail to respect friendship or the capacity for it” (Metz, 2011). Interdependence additionally underscores

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