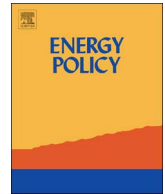




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Energy justice at the end of the wire: Enacting community energy and equity in Wales[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Energy justice has emerged as a useful lens for understanding and guiding energy decision-making. However, whilst calls for greater energy justice have grown, fleeting attention has been paid to the role and agency of the very people at the heart of this agenda. Clearly, given the increasing prevalence of local energy initiatives, such projects warrant more sustained focus both to explore how energy justice is constructed between settings and to prompt greater consideration of its associated outcomes. This paper seeks to address this gap by using energy justice to assess local ownership of small scale energy generation through a study of the community energy sector in Wales. In so doing, it aids greater understanding of the energy equity dimension, understood in terms of accessibility and affordability, of the energy trilemma. From a conceptual standpoint, the research examines how energy justice is negotiated and contested at community-scale through a focus on issues of distributive and procedural justice. From a policy standpoint, the research shows that community energy is often involved in a wide range of local objectives and directs attention to how best to support such initiatives to further stimulate local action and deliver more widespread equity gains.

1. Introduction

Energy justice has much to offer in helping to understand the complex trade-offs involved in the making of energy policy as expressed through the competing demands of energy security, energy equity and environmental sustainability – jointly known as the energy trilemma (Gunningham, 2013; World Energy Council, 2015; Heffron et al., 2016). With roots in environmental justice and climate justice (Walker, 2012; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014), energy justice has quickly gained traction and provides a critical perspective on issues of production and consumption across whole energy systems (Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012; McCauley et al., 2013; Bickerstaff et al., 2013; Sovacool et al., 2014; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). Across much of this agenda is an unashamedly normative bias for an energy-just world that ‘equitably shares both the benefits and burdens involved in the production and consumption of energy services, as well as one that is fair in how it treats people and communities in energy decision-making’ (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014: 5). Energy justice thus places renewed emphasis on the ‘human dimensions’ often marginalised in research into energy studies and global environmental change (Schlosberg, 2004; Sovacool, 2014; Castree et al., 2014).

In this paper, I follow this approach by using energy justice to assess local ownership of small scale energy generation through a study

of the community energy sector in Wales. The study aids greater understanding of the *energy equity* dimension, defined in terms of *accessibility* and *affordability* (World Energy Council, 2015), of the energy trilemma. This is achieved by examining local ownership as one aspect of accessibility. For therein lies the rub: energy justice scholarship has, for the largest part, paid limited attention to the ways in which people and communities might contribute towards an energy-just future from the ground-up. Whilst there is a long history of research that examines local participation in large-scale energy decision-making (Wynne, 1982; Davies, 1984; Kraft and Clary, 1991; Morton et al., 2009), this blind-spot neglects potentially ‘important insights into how alternative forms of what might constitute “energy justice” are being established’ (Fuller and Bulkeley, 2013: 70) through more local and community-based engagements with our energy systems (Smith, 2012). After all, there is no shortage of such projects, including: community energy schemes (Walker et al., 2007; Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008; Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2010; Jeong et al., 2012; Devine-Wright and Wiersma, 2013; Strachan et al., 2015), low-carbon communities (Heiskanen et al., 2010; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010), and the Transition Town movement (Hopkins, 2008; Aiken, 2012; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Grossmann and Creamer, 2017). This virtual absence of a bottom-up perspective risks diminishing the role of energy-using publics to one of consultation as mere

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recipients of energy justice; reifying the position of already privileged actors (Catney et al., 2013) and impeding scholarship from understanding the ways in which multiple justice perspectives may combine to achieve broadly similar goals (Cowell, 2016a; Markantoni, 2016).

Picking up Bickerstaff et al.'s (2013:7) claim that 'an energy justice agenda is, at present, only partially articulated', I argue for greater attention to the diverse and particular forms given to energy justices constructed *in situ* (Eden, 2017). This perspective inverts the conventional view in centralised energy systems of the space and people at the end of the transmission wire as simply the end-point of a system of flows and currents, providing scope for energy justice to be implemented at both ends of the wire. Such analyses not only can reveal new insights into the concept itself but also unlock potential for more nuanced policy measures to enhance energy justice and help balance the energy trilemma.

To develop the analysis, I use Sovacool and Dworkin's (2014) distinction between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches for the enactment of energy justice. Found in organisation theory, enactment is used to denote reflection and action on the environment in order to change it (Nicholson 1995; Weick, 2009). I apply this framework through the lens of community energy, using data gathered over a twelve-month period of research in the sector in Wales, linking insights from both the 'triumvirate of tenets' (McCauley et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016b) and the energy justice decision-making framework (Sovacool et al., 2016). From a conceptual standpoint, the research examines how energy justice is negotiated and contested at community-scale through a focus on issues of distributive and procedural justice. From a policy standpoint, the research emphasises the ways in which community energy is often involved in a wide range of local objectives and directs attention to how best to support such initiatives to further stimulate local action and deliver more widespread equity gains.

2. Theoretical context

2.1. Unpacking energy justice

Energy justice research seeks to offer a basis for guiding action with respect to energy decision-making for policy-makers and practitioners in order to 'provide all individuals, across all areas, with safe, affordable and sustainable energy' (McCauley et al., 2013: 107). Studies in energy justice thus complement research on energy transitions (Geels, 2002; Meadowcroft, 2009), the ongoing nature of which remain fairly weakly understood (Späth and Rohrer, 2012). These include issues across the whole energy system, such as: the politics of energy extraction and production (Butler and Simmons, 2013; McCauley et al., 2016; Sovacool and Scarpaci, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016a; Yenetti and Day, 2016; Yenetti et al., 2016), energy consumption (Hall, 2013; Hards, 2013; Shirani et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2016; Chatterton et al., 2016; Simcock and Mullen, 2016), fuel poverty (Sovacool, 2015; Chard and Walker, 2016; Day et al., 2016; Bednar et al., 2017), health (Liddell et al., 2016), and energy system governance (Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012; Heffron and McCauley, 2014). Such work aids understanding of how principles of justice, equity and fairness might be embedded in the context of energy system change, whilst also addressing the adverse impacts of already existing patterns of energy production and consumption (Eames and Hunt, 2013; Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Energy justice thus aims to understand, reshape and resolve the externalities linked to energy systems and energy practices. Such aims seek to minimise distribution of energy-related costs, maximise benefits, identify strategies for sharing benefits and burdens in a fair way, and ensure that energy decision-making is representative and consistent with due process, particularly with respect to vulnerable and marginalised groups (Bickerstaff et al., 2013; McCauley et al., 2013; Sovacool and Dworkin, 2014; Sovacool et al., 2016).

A central development of the field has been the emergence of a range of complementary frameworks to identify energy injustice(s) and guide energy decision-making. Three particular approaches have gained traction: (a) the repackaging of the classic trivalent approach of environmental justice (Schlosberg, 2004), under the auspices of the 'triumvirate of tenets' of distributive, procedural, and recognition justice (McCauley et al., 2013), to address energy-related issues across the whole energy system (Hammond and Pearson, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2016b), (b) a decision-making framework in the form of a range of eight principles – availability, affordability, due process, transparency and accountability, sustainability, intragenerational equity, intergenerational equity, and responsibility – to be applied by decision-makers to energy-related problems (Sovacool and Dworkin, 2015; Sovacool et al., 2016), and (c) an Energy Justice Metric adding a quantitative component to measure energy justice in order to engage more effectively with an energy policy-making environment perceived as dominated by economic logics (Heffron et al., 2015).

Within each approach, responsibilities for enacting energy justice are spread across a broad understanding of decision-makers as 'the more traditional notion of policymakers and regulators, but also ordinary students, jurists, homeowners, businesspersons, investors and consumers' (Sovacool et al., 2016: 1). Whilst this view accepts the potential of action on energy justice across a range of scales, in practice decision-makers higher up the tree are often privileged within such frameworks.¹ This issue limits the relevance of such approaches for energy-using publics to negotiate energy justice on their own terms and for privileged actors to enable them to do so through tailored policy-making. Thus, whilst it remains important to keep in view distinctions between frameworks developed for the purpose of critical analysis and those developed to aid decision makers in taking actions, it is nonetheless arguable that existing frameworks are less useful to actors at meso- and micro- scales and provide only partial scope for understanding and capturing the full range of ways in which energy systems – and the broader economies, societies, and lifestyles they support and underpin – might be made more just in practice. Indeed, as Chilvers and Longhurst (2016) and Walker et al. (2016) have recently shown, opening-up and extending understandings of participation with respect to energy decision-making and knowledge production, beyond mere consultative approaches, have a crucial part to play within the context of a just energy transition.

In what follows, the relevance of a more open perspective on the enactment of energy justice is discussed. There is a need for such an approach to aid greater understanding of the interaction, politics and contestation of energy justice solutions in particular settings and across the whole energy system.

2.2. Enacting energy justice

Interventions in the energy system are not restricted to the 'corridors of power' alone. As Heffron and McCauley (2014: 437) point out: 'energy justice is concerned with social responsibility by the private sector, the government and the public'. This view accepts space for research to engage with the various ways in which energy justice is enacted by actors across a range of scales. A more helpful starting point in this regard can be found in Sovacool and Dworkin's (2014: 358) call for the 'necessity of comprehensive action'. In this view, 'Regulators, policymakers, and parliamentarians can implement [energy justice solutions] ... from the "top-down", whereas individuals, families, and

¹ As one example, the 'Contemporary Applications' of the decision-making framework (Sovacool et al., 2016: 5) highlight such processes as UNFCCC with respect to responsibility, the United Nations Sustainable Energy for All initiative with respect to intragenerational equity, and The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative with respect to transparency and accountability – each highly valuable and relevant within their particular contexts but offering only partial scope for guiding or facilitating efforts to advance energy justice at meso- and micro- scales.

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