



Original research article

## Exploring the anthropology of energy: Ethnography, energy and ethics

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## ABSTRACT

This Special Issue explores the anthropology of energy by highlighting the unique contributions an ethnographic perspective offers to understanding energy and ethics. We propose the term *energy ethics* to capture the ways in which people understand and ethically evaluate energy. The term encompasses the multiple and varied ways that people experience, conceptualize, and evaluate matters of energy. Out of the diversity of fieldsites, research methods, conceptual frameworks, and disciplinary backgrounds that characterize the articles in the special issue, three clear themes emerge. The first is that multiple, conflicting understandings of energy animate how people engage it in their everyday lives and work. The second is that diversity exists in how people make ethical judgments about the role of energy in the types of 'good societies' they imagine for themselves. Finally, the articles underscore the significance of government interests and public policy for shaping people's experiences of and ethical judgments about energy. These perspectives reveal the value of research that is attuned to the ways in which people view the world and the place of energy in it, opening up space to identify and reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions.

## 1. Introduction

The remarkable growth in global energy consumption has been accompanied by increasingly urgent questions about which energy sources ought to fuel the spiraling demand. Witness the recent controversy surrounding the North Dakota Access Pipeline, for example, in which activists joined forces with Native American groups in an attempt to halt the final phase of construction. News of the protests reached around the world, raising concern not just about Native American sovereignty and potential water and ground pollution of the transported oil, but also about the pipeline's facilitation of our more general continued reliance on fossil fuels that hasten climate change. Supporters of the pipeline pointed out that pipelines are safer than railroads for transporting the oil on which the US currently depends, and argued that the pipeline would bring economic benefits in the form of jobs and increased energy availability. The pipeline project thus became a flashpoint for much larger debates about the kinds of energy futures that people desire and how these impact the everyday lives of people along the paths of production, distribution, consumption, and waste (Figs. 1 and 2).

This Special Issue shows that debates about energy raise fundamental ethical questions that involve judgments about the kinds of lives we desire for ourselves and our others: What is the place of energy in human life? How do we make sense of the ways in which we produce, distribute, use and dispose of it? And how do such actions relate to what we consider to be right or good? The articles highlight the unique

contributions an ethnographic perspective offers to understanding how people themselves encounter energy and judge its place in their lives. Towards this end, we propose the term *energy ethics* to capture the ways in which people understand and ethically evaluate energy: how do people judge the ways in which energy can contribute to or imperil the kinds of lives, societies, and futures that they deem to be good or valuable? We emphasize that our approach takes seriously people's own ethical sensibilities in relation to energy, working from the ground up, rather than analyzing social life through pre-defined notions of ethics. Energy ethics illuminates the multiple and varied ways that people experience, conceptualize, and evaluate matters of energy in their lives.

Our approach to energy ethics is distinct but complementary to the growing literature on energy justice. Scholars working in this area define energy justice 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" ([1]: 4; see also [2,3]). The field is guided by ten principles: availability, affordability, due process, transparency and accountability, sustainability, intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, responsibility, resistance and intersectionality [4]. It is an "evaluative and normative" approach in which "energy justice researchers both assess injustices and make recommendations on how they should be approached" ([5]: 175). While these principles have been generative for inspiring research, policymaking and practice that seeks to make energy systems fairer in terms of these particular principles, they too are social constructions

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Fig. 1. Rally against the Dakota Access Pipeline in St. Paul, Minnesota. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License. Original source: Fibonacci Blue.



Fig. 2. Pro Dakota Access Pipeline demonstrators in North Dakota. Photo credit Dena Takruri @Dena.

that emerge from particular historical and cultural contexts [6]. The field is building on this insight, as evidenced by the call to include more non-western justice theorists [4] and research that identifies how actors themselves frame energy justice in their own activities [7].

In this Special Issue our focus on *energy ethics* takes a different approach. Rather than applying a preexisting framework to evaluate a particular context, we identify *how people themselves judge the rightness and wrongness of energy*. Starting from the ground up opens up analytic space to consider ethical sensibilities that inform how people understand and judge energy systems, but are not necessarily captured in the ten principles forming the basis of the energy justice literature.

Shedding light on the multiple energy ethics that emerge in culturally distinct places requires exploring how people understand energy. This task may initially seem straightforward, especially if “energy” is considered in abstract terms to be the fundamental ability to do work. Commonsense might even suggest that ‘energy’ accomplishes similar things for a variety of people irrespectively of their particular sociocultural, geographic or economic location; according to this logic, energy improves lives by allowing people transportation and mobility and opportunities to light homes, schools and businesses. Providing people access to these ‘basic’ or

‘universal’ energy needs animates many energy justice activities and global corporate advertisement campaigns. However, as this Special Issue demonstrates, once we begin to look more closely and consider the multiple and varied ways in which individual people encounter energy – and desire to encounter energy – the question of how they understand what energy actually is transforms into an invitation for transdisciplinary ethnographic scholarship. It becomes an opportunity to consider empirically how people live with energy and how energy may or may not contribute to their definition of a good life.

Admittedly ambitious in its scope, this Special Issue cuts across conventional analytical divisions that separate production, distribution, consumption and waste into distinct fields of inquiry. It also extends across wide-ranging geographical regions and, not least, it challenges scales that seek to isolate global concerns from local realities. Our authors come from a variety of disciplines, including American Studies, Sociocultural Anthropology, Forestry and Environmental Science, Literature, Philosophy, and Science and Technology Studies. This diversity reflects how ethnographic approaches to research have travelled across disciplines. Throughout, these diverse scholars show what qualitative methods, especially an ethnographic gaze, can bring to our understanding of energy expectations and practices.

Out of the diversity of fieldsites, research methods, and conceptual frameworks, three clear themes emerge. The first is that multiple, conflicting understandings of energy animate how people engage it in their everyday lives and work. The second is that great diversity exists in how people make ethical judgments about the role of energy in the types of “good lives” and “good societies” they imagine for themselves. Each of the papers troubles a normative ethical framework of fairness, showing that there is no singular set of values that are shared equally at all times by all actors.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the papers underscore the significance of government interests and public policy for shaping people’s experiences of and ethical judgments about energy. These perspectives reveal the value of research that is attuned to the ways in which people view the world and the place of energy in it, opening up space to identify and reflect on our taken-for-granted assumptions.

## 2. Why ethnography?

The term ethnography has come to be equated very broadly with qualitative research projects that seek to provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life. This broad conceptualization is captured in the term’s Greek etymology of *ἔθνος* *ethnos* ‘folk, people,’ and *γράφω* *grapho* ‘I write’. The authoritative collection by Taylor [8] exemplifies the enormous variety in ethnographic research, demonstrating various approaches to data gathering, data processing and project design. However, amidst the variety, some shared characteristics do appear. Whether it is a tightly scheduled research team or a single researcher engrossed in long-term data gathering, whether researchers draw on mostly discrete methods of formal data collection or open-ended informal interactions, ethnographic research, for Taylor, is characterized by its empirical approach. Through especially first-hand observation, ethnographers set out to study people and, what Taylor calls, their “social worlds” (2001:1).<sup>2</sup> Based on their observation, they produce texts that aim to be “full, nuanced and non-reductive” ([8]: 2). Alongside such observation, Hammersley and Atkinson [9] also emphasize the importance of first-hand participation. As they note:

Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting debate in relation to climate ethics and the (im)possibility of a universal notion of ‘justice’, see Gardiner and Weisbach [56].

<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic scholars refer to this also as “the human condition” ([10]: 2), “ways of life” ([57]: xi), “human experience” ([58]: 5).

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