



Original research article

Quiet voices in the fracking debate: Ambivalence, nonmobilization, and individual action in two extractive communities (Saskatchewan and Pennsylvania)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 December 2015

Received in revised form 27 April 2016

Accepted 6 May 2016

Available online 1 June 2016

Keywords:

Shale oil and gas

Saskatchewan

Pennsylvania

Collective action

Ambivalence

Individualism

Powerlessness

ABSTRACT

In North America, regulations on unconventional oil and gas development are emerging and changing in response to growing public pressure from national environmental organizations and local, grassroots alliances. However, rural residents of many “fracked” regions have been quiet about their experiences with the oil and gas industry. What explains this absence of collective action, and what do discontented people do when their communities lack the conditions for mobilization? In southern Saskatchewan (Canada) and northeastern Pennsylvania (US), rural landowners rarely express opposition through collective actions such as demonstrations, petitions, or civil disobedience. The lack of collective mobilization in each case results from ambivalent perceptions of the oil and gas industry, combined with a paucity of organizational capacity and political opportunities. Yet in interviews, some residents express a wide range of grievances and describe their efforts, as individuals, to resist the negative impacts of the oil and gas industry on their lands and livelihoods. The results of this study suggest that nonmobilized communities should not necessarily be understood as sites of consent. Instead, the effects of powerlessness may propel residents to act on their grievances by individually confronting industry while otherwise remaining quiet.

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1. Introduction

Despite the global anti-fracking movement that has warded off development in communities in Romania, Poland and Canada and pressured legislators to institute bans in places like France and New York State, shale oil and gas development has proceeded relatively unchallenged in many rural communities in the US and Canada. In some of the affected communities, unconventional oil and gas development has caused deep social rifts [55,56]. In other communities, public opinion is less polarized, with many individuals feeling ambivalent about the changes they are experiencing, holding simultaneously positive and negative views of development [41,49]. Qualitative research shows that residents of fracked regions may recognize fracking as a double-edged sword, embracing the economic growth associated with shale oil and gas

development while lamenting the real and perceived health, environmental, and social impacts [19,26,28]. In this paper we focus on two communities where ambivalence prevails, probing the relationship between ambivalence about local energy development and collective action.

Our study focuses on how ambivalence is expressed and acted upon in two major unconventional oil and gas producing regions—Saskatchewan (Canada) and the Northern Tier region of Pennsylvania (USA). Saskatchewan is Canada’s second largest producer of shale oil and Pennsylvania rivals Texas as a top producer of shale gas in the US. In both places, state or provincial government has actively encouraged the growth of unconventional oil and gas production [10,54]. Using in-depth interviews with residents in these regions we address two questions. First, why has there been no collective mobilization to address the problems that are widely acknowledged to accompany unconventional oil and gas development in both places? Second, given that people are not mobilizing collectively, how do they act on their grievances with the oil and gas industry? Following Wright and Schaffer Boudet’s [60] research on community response to proposed energy infras-

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structure projects, we consider both how community context and framing affect *motivation* to mobilize, and how civic capacity and political opportunities affect *capability* to mobilize. We find that nonmobilized communities are not necessarily sites of consent. People remain quiet about their grievances with the unconventional oil and gas industry when they generally support community economic growth and sense that collective action is unlikely and ineffective. In this context, some of our participants exercised their opposition to the negative impacts of extraction through individual acts of protest and confrontation with industry, rather than visible collective actions.

We begin with a discussion of the literature on nonmobilization in communities impacted by fossil fuel development. Then we discuss our research methods and provide background on each case study. Next, we present our analysis in three parts: 1) ambivalent motivations to mobilize, 2) the perceived incapability to mobilize, 3) evidence that people are taking action individually in the absence of collective mobilization. In the conclusion, we consider the implications of our findings for social research on collective action, public policy, and environmental justice activism.

2. Why do people not protest?

The first question of this study is why there has been no collective mobilization to address the problems that are widely acknowledged to accompany unconventional oil and gas development in both Saskatchewan and Pennsylvania's Northern Tier. Our approach to this question is guided by previous research on mobilization and nonmobilization, particularly around oil and gas infrastructure development.

The social science literature on hydraulic fracturing is still in its infancy, with the majority of publications appearing after 2010. This literature has focused on the social, environmental, and economic impacts [11,25,40,48], the regulatory environment [12,39,53,57,58], and the mobilization and framing efforts of anti-fracking movements [22,29,35,46,51,52,59]. By now both the positive and negative health, environmental, social, and economic impacts of fracking are well documented, and we know that, in some places, collective campaigns have realized changes to regulations and local bans on fracking. Surveys conducted at both local and national scales suggest that there is considerable public concern about environmental impacts, but that there is also a great deal of public support for development [5–9,13,23,24,49]. What is less well-explored in the literature is the link between how people perceive and experience fracking's impacts and the actions they take to mitigate them. We turn to the wider literature on mobilization and non-mobilization for clues about this relationship.

Foundational to the study of nonmobilization is John Gaventa's [17] study of "quiescence and rebellion" in an Appalachian coal mining region. Gaventa examines why oppressed miners do not rebel against the mining industry and its supporters, despite decades of discontent. He finds that their "quietness" does not stem from "consent to their condition," as outside observers might assume [17]. Rather, "generalized discontent is present, but lies hidden and contained" (p. 252). Discontent is contained only rarely through overt suppression (such as violence and murder) but continuously through the construction of barriers to participation, which over time create a sense of powerlessness and susceptibility to misinformation about the situation. Gaventa concludes that "rebellion, to be successful, must both confront power and overcome the accumulated effects of powerlessness" (p. 258).

Gaventa's argument is relevant to many situations in which community members are discontented with fossil fuel development yet feel powerless to oppose it. However, subsequent, comparative studies of "nonmobilization" suggest a range of addi-

tional explanations for why communities accept new energy developments. Mobilization requires both *motivation* (attitudes about the movement goal) and *capability* (political opportunity and civic capacity) [60]. We consider each of these in turn.

2.1. Factors affecting motivation to mobilize

A review of the literature shows that historical land uses, community dependence on the oil and gas industry, and framing of the issues by both pro- and anti-development advocates are crucial factors affecting motivation to mobilize. In this section we explore the role of each factor.

Biophysical, historical and social factors shape a community's response to new energy projects, as seen in Freudenburg and Gramling's [16] comparison of the lack of opposition to offshore oil extraction in Louisiana versus the strong rejection and mobilization against the same industry in Northern California. Differences in existing land uses and livelihoods meant that in Louisiana, acceptance of offshore oil was high since local economies had already evolved around extractive land uses, while in California, locals placed significant importance on the aesthetic and economic value of the landscape for quality of life as well as for fishing and tourism industries. A similar finding was reached in a study involving 20 US communities subject to proposed new energy projects [30]. The study found that the presence of a similar industry, combined with economic hardship, contributed to acceptance of a project.

Prior experience, however, does not always lead to nonmobilization. The community response to new developments can depend upon whether past experiences with a similar industry were positive or negative [60]. Moreover, even when communities with no prior experience with similar industries anticipate negative impacts, they may not become motivated to mobilize. In communities where there is no prior experience with a similar industry and the residents are facing economic hardship, "residents will likely emphasize the economic benefits and underestimate or deemphasize the potential drawbacks. In this situation, while the community may recognize some threats, motivation to mobilize in opposition may be largely absent" ([60], p. 736).

In addition to the material factors reviewed above, framing can affect motivation. Activists frame issues in order to stimulate and sustain collective action [4]. Such frames have had an important role in mobilizing opposition to unconventional oil and gas development. The film *Gasland* successfully framed fracking as a public and environmental health threat, galvanizing opposition through community screenings [29,51,59]. In Australia, civil society groups offered alternatives to the neoliberalizing frames used by proponents of fracking [32]. And in Romania, anti-fracking groups were mobilized through frames emphasizing nationalism, political transparency and ecological risk [52].

On the other hand, framing can also contribute to nonmobilization. Studies show that dissent can be suppressed when elite opponents, corporations, and the state frame issues so as to legitimize and reinforce official narratives and vilify and stigmatize activists [3,33,44,45]. In these studies, frames gain legitimacy when they are repeated by credible sources such as news media, state agencies and committees, and credible experts, and when they accord with people's experiences.

In many places affected by fracking, elite and industry frames seem to prevail. In western Pennsylvania, there is often a lack of critical narratives about fracking's negative impacts that would be necessary to challenge the frames put forward by the fracking industry and the state [19,20]. One study of local newspaper coverage in Pennsylvania and New York found there is very little coverage of the social impacts of fracking [14]. Other studies indicate that many people have accepted the industry framing of fracking as patriotic (promoting US energy independence) [37]. Proponents of

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