



Social acceptance revisited: gaps, questionable trends, and an auspicious perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Institutional change
Coproduction
Lock-in
Common pool
Innovation
Acceptance process
Polycentric governance
Multi-layered governance
Self-governance
Distributed energy systems

ABSTRACT

Recently the field of social acceptance research on energy was mapped by Gaede and Rowlands [1]. Some of their observations are worrying and need reflection. Two essential pivot points have not been recognized, and observed trends in current research practice that must be assessed as highly undesirable are associated with these unnoticed issues.

- Missing in the analysis is the start of social acceptance research in the 1980-ies, when the focus was mainly on acceptance by the public. The conceptualization in three process dimensions, each with different actors and objects of acceptance, reveals that public acceptance can never be a valid proxy for social acceptance. Many researchers continue to maintain this harmful conceptual confusion, and Gaede and Rowland's narrative conclusions seem to suggest we are dealing with a heavy relapse towards public instead of social acceptance.
- The crucial turn in 2000 concerning the object of social acceptance, towards institutional change is also missing. Hence, this recognition of institutions as the core object of acceptance research remains underexposed.

As the interpretation and labelling of most research fronts by Gaede and Rowlands is questionable, an alternative interpretation is paramount. This is done based on a conceptual elaboration, in which social acceptance is recognized as a bundle of dynamic processes instead of a set of actors positions. The object is 'energy innovation', which is also a process. Social acceptance research aims at understanding the transforming social-technological systems, and studies the complex, multi-level and polycentric processes of escaping our institutionally locked-in energy systems.

1. Introduction

Recently, Gaede and Rowlands [1] mapped the interrelations between publications of social acceptance research on energy issues. The transformation of our energy supply systems from the very local to the global level can only take place when crucial actors accept it. These processes revolve around acceptance of the essential elements of those new systems, of the choices needed to bring them about, and of the consequences of the transformation. Gaede and Rowlands (GR) described some conceptual developments, and tried to identify trends that might affect the direction of research in the near future. As such, any researcher of social acceptance should read this paper, as their methodology is illuminating, and the maps reveal some significant phenomena. However, the comments on the state-of-the-art do not go very deeply into the matter and several shortcomings in the field remain unexplored, partly due to some methodological starting points. Hence, although very valuable, this description of the state of the art urgently needs reflection and correction.

My comment starts with some observations on two sources of bias in GR's analysis. The first concerns some important choices and restrictions in the collection of data (Section 2). Second, Sections 2–5 discuss the ambiguities in the understanding of the concept of social acceptance, in GR's analysis as well as in the diverse research fronts they distinguished. Then in Sections 6 and 7 the multi-level and complex character of social acceptance is elaborated in accordance with the well-known three process dimensions (see Fig. 1). As will be explained, social acceptance should be understood as a bundle of processes of decision-making on issues concerning the promotion of – or counteraction against – new phenomena and new elements in the transformation of current energy systems. Combining this conceptualization of social acceptance with some observations resulting from GR's analysis (Section 8), we see several disturbing and dubious trends in the research that need to be discussed and must be challenged. Especially the observed relapse into restrictive, individualistic understandings of social acceptance processes is alarming considering the relevance of social science in transforming the energy domain. In Section 9 a promising

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.07.034>

Received 16 May 2018; Received in revised form 24 July 2018; Accepted 29 July 2018

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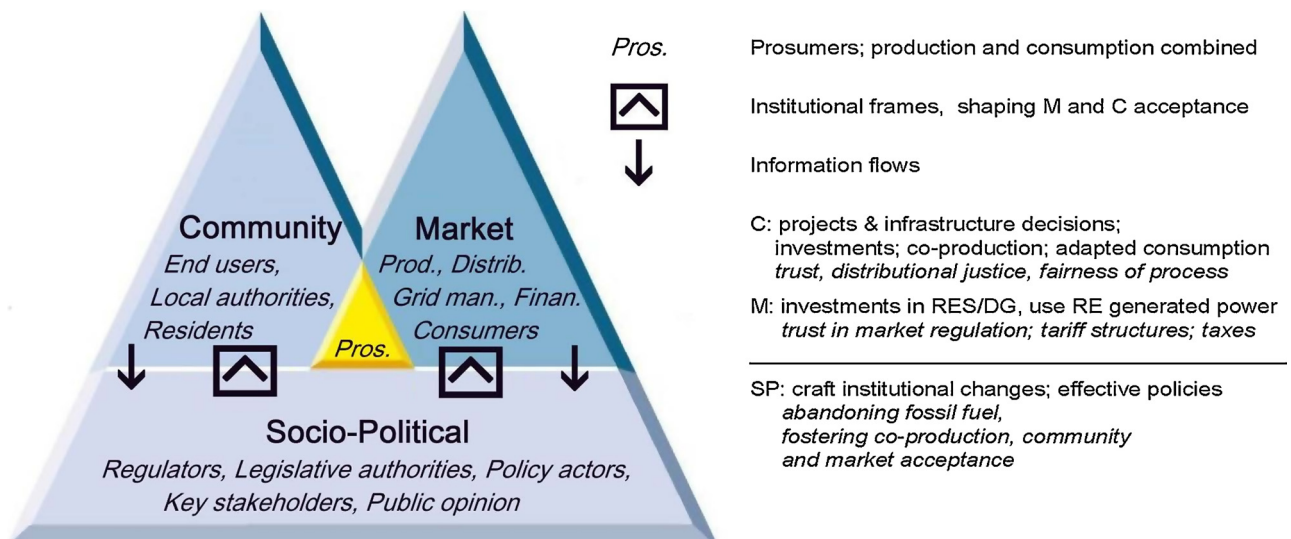


Fig. 1. Wüstenhagen et al.'s [19] three dimensions of social acceptance of renewables' innovation; advanced multi-layered conceptualization for STS based on coproduction [46], with characteristic actors, key objects, and major process influences.

perspective to escape from the disturbing trends is outlined.

2. Is the field mapped convincingly?

Crucial choices concerning Gaede and Rowland's (GR) method have affected their results. The way they defined the population of publications for sampling, resulted in omission of two important developments. Their maps were based on the oldest citation index, Web of Science, which some still consider as the most prestigious because it is used for calculating journal impact factors. However, the scope of the WoS is limited; its policy of inclusion of journals is not very transparent; and the database is known for its countless systematic errors.¹ The current alternative, Scopus, has a wider scope (particularly concerning social sciences),² contains more journals, and its author identification is much more reliable.

When compared to Scopus, the problem with WoS is that many journals are not included, and some very relevant only from a certain date onwards. For example, Journal of Environmental Planning and Management is included starting from 2007 onwards, so the most influential paper by Warren et al. [2] published in this journal is not archived.³ It coined the 'green-on-green' character of conflicts over wind power, but the paper only appears underestimated (very small) as one of the intellectual foundations in GR's research front 'wind-attitudes-nimby'. WoS has more than doubled its journal coverage during the last decade, so the conclusion that the bulk of the literature (90%) was published between 2006 and 2015 is not wrong, but it is partly an artefact.

More importantly, the take-off of social acceptance research was missed, along with the most significant conceptual turn in the field, about a decade later. From the take-off phase, two lines are still significant for our view today. First, one may argue that the real start of research on social acceptance of energy started with risk perception research, triggered by the contestation of nuclear power worldwide. The first publication in GR's original sample is about this topic [3], but

¹ Citations of Wüstenhagen, first author of the highest cited paper in the field [19] have misspelled author names over hundred times (e.g. Wilstenhagen: 26; Wiistenhagen: 29). Numerous misspelled journal names also exist.

² For example, the QS World University Rankings originally used a subset of the WoS. In 2007 it switched to Scopus, with the prime reason of broader journal coverage (QS indicator-citations-per-faculty).

³ As a result, citations are full of errors; at least six different indications exist.

it remained without any impact. Many countries struggled with the huge gap between socio-political acceptance of nuclear power among policymakers and energy companies on the one hand, and low community and general public acceptance, on the other hand. Highly relevant publications by Slovic and Renn [4,5] on risk perceptions and implications for decision-making are absent in GR's search in WoS that was limited to 'acceptance' but they have been crucial for our fundamental knowledge about the complexity of risk management of energy infrastructure.

Second, the stage on social acceptance of renewables was set by publications emerging in the second half of the 1980s, available in Scopus, but not indexed in WoS and absent in GR (their Fig. 1). Currently relevant topics were introduced between 1987 and 1989, mostly in journals that were added to WoS later:

- Pasqualetti and Butler [6] and Wolsink [7] first identified the emergence of land use/landscape issues combined with the actual majority support for wind projects in the community;
- The characteristics of the landscape and proper management of wind farms were recognized as crucial acceptance factors by Thayer and Freeman [8] in a journal indexed by WoS, but not included in GR's sample;
- Identification of community engagement as crucial for establishing wind projects, and the acceptance of household's demand response to wind generated power supply [9];
- The first study based on the developers' common sense view on acceptance (i.e. NIMBY) by Bosley and Bosley [10], and the first challenge of this label as being counterproductive in the same journal in the same journal [11].

3. Social acceptance instead of public acceptance

An important characteristic of the take-off phase was the focus on public perceptions and attitudes. Social acceptance research was initially characterized by its predominant attention on public acceptance, i.e. the aggregated degree of acceptance by individual citizens (attitudes, behaviour, tolerance). Moreover, the distinction between acceptance of technologies and acceptance of projects remained underdeveloped – and, this confusion still persists in many studies. Risk research developed rapidly, also covering risk assessments and risk management, which implies incorporation of risk perceptions in decision-making on project alternatives [5]. This significant move is hardly visible in the GR network, although authors representing this research

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