Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Research & Social Science

Original research article

Policy implementation as practice? Using social practice theory to examine multi-level governance efforts to decarbonise transport in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Following the 'practice turn' in energy research, increasing attention is being paid to the practices of policy making. However, energy policy implementation remains under-researched. Using auto-ethnographic and extensive interview data, this paper provides a narrative account of 'Sustainable Routes': a project offering grants and advice to small business in the UK to reduce their transport-related emissions. The project exemplifies the model of Multi-Level Governance (MLG), implemented by a coalition of actors, across multiple scales.

Research data is analysed using practice theory. Building on recent debates over researching large-scale phenomena, the notion of connected situationalism is used to analyse policy implementation as a bundle of practices. 'Zooming in' on periods of disruption following project audits, findings trace how tension and conflict arose in the relationships between actors, played out through the changing constellation of meanings, materials and competences. They highlight for example, how the reinterpretation of policy documentation led material elements such as bicycles to become associated with meanings of risk and liability, requiring a new set of competences on behalf of the carriers of practice.

This empirical account demonstrates the value of practice theory for analysing multi-actor, multi-scalar research data, and indicates potential for future research on policy implementation.

1. Introduction

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 13% of global energy demand, but are diverse in size, sector, location and in their environmental impact [1]. As a result, developing energy and low carbon policy is a significant challenge. Facing strong resistance to 'hard levers' such as tax and regulation, the preferred approach in the EU to reducing emissions from SMEs is through incentives such as grants, loans and behaviour change projects [2]. Despite their significance, few studies have examined how these incentives are implemented [1,3]. This paper addresses this gap by developing an in-depth account of a European Union (EU) funded behaviour change project.

Sustainable Routes was a project running from 2009 to 2015, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), supporting SMEs in south-east England to reduce their transport related emissions by adopting new travel behaviours. The project was delivered by a range of institutional actors, including the European Commission, a UK central government department, a non-profit organisation, partners, evaluators and auditors. This project is typical of EU regional

development policy, where responsibility for implementation is shared amongst a coalition of actors operating at multiple-levels [4].

The implementation of projects designed using this model of multi-level governance (MLG) is characterised by complexity [5]. Project implementation involves a variety of organisations and individuals, each carrying different responsibilities and pressures and responding to internal institutional demands, and the activities of others. Beyond the individuals carrying responsibility for implementation there are broader political and economic circumstances, bureaucratic rules and changing expectations for transparency, which must be interpreted and navigated [6,7]. In addition, project implementation relies on material elements including policy documentation and guidance, technology and the physical objects associated with travel behaviour change such as bicycles [8].

Given this complex assemblage, telling the story of the implementation of Sustainable Routes requires some analytical assistance. Practice theory, with emphasis on distributed agency [9] and a flat ontological worldview [10], offers a suitable framework for interpreting and representing the coming together of these human and non-human elements. It highlights the interdependent relationships

between actors at different levels of governance, individually and collectively making sense of changing political and institutional environments [7]. Although practice theory has been used extensively within social scientific energy research [see 11,12, and a selection from this journal 13–16], there have been calls for greater engagement with energy policy discourse [17–20]. However, there is ongoing debate over how a practice perspective can be used to conduct research on large-scale phenomena [21,22]. Engaging with these live issues, this paper considers policy implementation as a bundle of practices [11], and applies analytical tools developed in practice theory to unearth a range of valuable insights.

The next section introduces the multi-level governance framework in the context of EU policy. It summarises social scientific energy research using practice theory, and reviews the limited attempts to apply this theory in a policy context. The third section describes the Sustainable Routes case study, and the fourth introduces the theoretical approach adopted by this paper. Section five outlines the methodological approach used for this research. Section six presents a narrative account, exploring how meanings, materials and competences changed over the course of the project's implementation [12]. Having identified the importance of discretion within implementation practice, section seven discusses its ontological status and policy implications. The final section reflects on the implications of considering policy implementation as a practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Multi-level governance

Multi-level governance is a term which has been used to describe contemporary forms of governance, with emphasis on EU policy design [5,23,24]. MLG differentiates between different 'styles' of governance, including conventional 'Type I' actors such as institutions of government whose jurisdictions are defined by geographical area or broad policy remits and where clear hierarchies exist between organisations. 'Type II' actors on the other hand operate in flexible coalitions, often focused on specific tasks or policies and acting with overlapping jurisdictions. This distinction has been used to describe ways in which governance is changing, particularly with reference to cities, the state and supranational bodies [23,25].

Marsden et al. [24] focus on four UK case studies of transport policy to describe a form of governance which is fragmented, incremental, and involves multiple actors beyond the conventional institutions of government [26]. Fig. 1 is the authors' representation of the different 'tiers' of governance typical of a multi-level project [5], ranging from the local (Level L-2) to the supranational (Level L). Bidirectional arrows depict the relationships which emerge between governmental, 'Type I' institutions (G) and non-governmental, Type II actors (NG). While the levels indicate the different scalar reach and remit of actors, the authors point out that these relationships are often non-hierarchical when it comes to sharing responsibility for policy implementation [24].

European SME policy exemplifies the model of multi-level governance, with Type I and Type II actors working in partnership. At the supranational level, the European Commission (EC) administers the European Structural and Investment Funds, which comprise a significant proportion of funding for SME energy policy across the EU. Worth roughly €1.8bn/year in the UK, these funds are overseen by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) at the national scale. Non-profit organisations design energy related projects and bid for allocations of funding at the regional level [27]. Commissioned projects such as Sustainable Routes then draw together multiple organisations with varying remits, including Chambers of Commerce, Municipalities, and micro networks of SMEs. Working together across these scales, these actors form task-oriented coalitions, sharing responsibility for implementing SME energy policy.

2.2. Practice theory and policy

Practice theory has become influential in social scientific research into energy demand. Proponents of the framework aim to develop analyses of energy consumption which move the unit of analysis away from the individual and their motivations, instead highlighting the ways in which energy is bound up in the broader 'doings and sayings' of everyday social life [12,28–30]. This framework has been employed to produce accounts of the lives of practices, including showering [31], or achieving comfort in the domestic setting [32,33]. While its analytical strengths are well established, there have been calls for more 'practicable' applications of practice theory, to engage with the processes and practices of policy making, with a view to potentially influencing the role of government to better 'steer' practices [17,20,34–37]. However, such calls tend to focus on higher levels of policy discourse as opposed to the practice of implementing existing energy policy [24,35,36]. This paper focuses on the latter of the two categories described by one policy advisor interviewed for this study: 'one is fluffy, one is the real world'.

Recent work exploring the linkages and barriers between practice theory and policy include Shove's [38] fictionalised conversation between a policy-maker and a social scientist adopting practice theory. For Shove, efforts to mould 'practice theory into some policy-amenable form' are fruitless because of the paradigmatic differences between practice perspectives and the models of behaviour change adopted by energy policy makers. Others however, have drawn on practice theory to offer insights into policy practices themselves. Watson for example, has argued for an appreciation of the limitations of policy makers' capacity to influence embedded systems of practice, emphasising the need to engage with the political dimensions of policy [22,34]. This is far from easy however, and there is debate within contemporary practice theory about how best to conduct research on large-scale phenomena, including institutions and public policy [21]. This is further discussed in section four, which also explains why practice theory offers a suitable framework for conceptualising multi-scalar implementation.

Despite Shove's reluctance to adapt practice theory for the sake of policy audiences, the 'three-element model' of practice theory [12,39] has proven to be a popular heuristic for a number of authors aiming to effect change in policy discourse and practice. Kuijer's 'bubble model' develops this diagrammatic approach, depicting connections between types of elements, and illustrating that some may be more significant than others in individual performances of practice. Recognising the comparatively greater influence of the numerical sciences for policy, Higginson et al. [40] follow Kuijer's vision [29; Fig. 2] in employing the model as a framework for quantifying practices. Their network maps of laundry illustrate how different elements are recruited to performances of practice, showing for example how the tumble-dryer competes with the washing line or clothes horse. These diagrams show how each performance involves a different configuration of the practice-assemblage, helping to trace how practices change over time as new technologies or social norms come to the fore.

One strength of the three-element model is that it gives prominence to elements of practice with different ontological status. It highlights the meanings and cultures associated with practices, as well as giving voice to non-human, material elements [39]. An attention to competences accommodates different forms of intellectual and embodied knowledge, recognising the central role played by the 'carrier' of practices, without reinstating the individual as the principal unit [39,42].

This brief review of two literatures highlights the different epistemic traditions of multi-level governance and practice theory. While both offer useful insights for understanding the nature of policy implementation, using them in combination is not straightforward. The theoretical approach adopted in this paper is discussed in section four, but first some background on the empirical case study is provided.