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Original research article

## Rethinking energy demand governance: Exploring impact beyond ‘energy’ policy

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## ABSTRACT

The challenges of climate change and energy security, along with problems of fuel poverty and energy justice bring imperatives to create transitions in energy demand. Academic research and theory have begun to highlight the ways that government policies, strategies, and processes across wide-ranging areas of policy, from health to work and the economy, shape everyday practices with significant implications for energy demand. This brings focus on the role of governance in shaping energy demand far beyond what might traditionally be characterised as ‘energy’ policy. Situating these ideas in terms of relational geographical concepts of governance, this paper analyses qualitative interview data with actors involved in governing along with documentary material, to highlight four different ways in which non-energy related governance can have important implications for energy issues. The central contribution of the paper is to set out a distinctive analytic framework for making visible ‘non-energy’ policy impacts, which might otherwise be obscured within analysis. The article concludes reflecting on the implications of the analysis for rethinking the governance of energy demand to meet contemporary challenges.

## 1. Introduction

The burgeoning field of energy geographies has seen increasing engagement with the spatial dimensions of energy issues, with many articles reflecting wider trends in geographical thought towards the application and development of relational concepts of space (e.g. [1–4]). At the same time, analyses of governance have equally come to question the conceptualisation of space and spatial concepts such as scale, again moving toward relational approaches [5]. Such analyses highlight the ways that ‘space’ is an actively constituted category, rather than something that is pre-given, fixed, and singular, and direct thinking towards more critical engagement with the social constructions of space that often underlay analyses [6]. This paper seeks to engage with such relational approaches in order to develop a distinctive approach to analysis of energy demand governance. Using an empirical case study, the article advances an alternative approach toward the analysis of energy governance processes that are often treated in more static terms, such as notions of policy implementation across scales and policy impact.

Where there is a growing literature on global energy governance, which encompasses issues of energy demand, such as access to energy [7], in general issues of demand governance have been neglected both

in research and policy [8]. Additionally, many existing studies of governance tend to reproduce the categories and structures of government (e.g. between policy areas). The focus in research, as might be expected, has frequently been on areas of government that pertain in some clear or direct way to energy, such as departments and institutions with particular roles in energy infrastructure like solar PV or transport [9]. Where there is examination of wider processes (such as austerity) and non-energy policies, these tend to be treated as context, rather than a key factor in shaping energy systems and related energy issues [10]. Indeed, Cox et al. [10] identify this as a significant gap in the energy governance literature, highlighting the lack of research that examines the impacts of non-energy policy on energy systems *in an explicit way*, and arguing that this ‘makes the energy effects of non-energy policy invisible and hard to challenge’ (pp. 5).

In this context, relational approaches to understanding the social world and social action have begun to highlight how energy demand issues and energy needs are constituted in domains of governance far beyond what might be conceived as energy policy. Research that emphasises the complex relationships between materials and meanings in the constitution of social practices, has highlighted the importance of focusing not on energy *per se* but on what energy is used for, or how energy needs are made [11,12]. This directs us to think about how

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energy demand is in part a reflection of how governments shape objectives, investments and ways of providing and working across many different policy domains [12]. Aspects of existing studies begin to show how policies across multiple areas of governance, from health to economic policy, have implications for shaping everyday life with consequences for energy demand and energy issues (e.g. [13,14]).

For example, Hand et al. [13] show how government campaigns related to health influenced the construction of particular conceptions of cleanliness that formed part of the process of making-up daily showering as a widely performed practice. While Butler et al. [14] have shown how government policies encouraging flexible labour and working practices intersected with personal lives to shape long-term mobilities and the constitution of ‘lives lived at a distance’ (see also [15]). These analyses and others (e.g. see [16,17]) are suggestive of the influence of policy but also highlight how notions of implementation and impact, along with frequently embedded assumptions of cause and effect, are often illusory. The outcomes they depict were difficult to predict and not connected in straightforward linear ways to processes of policy making [11].

By examining policy and governance only in terms of the categories, classifications, and distinctions of existing government institutions, analysis can obscure these non-linear outcomes and wider forms of influence. This requires, then, a different approach to conceptualizing governance; what is needed are concepts that can recognize the inevitability and importance of policy and governed ‘interventions’ in practice, without ascribing a linear straight-forward notion of how such processes operate. Exploring wider governance agendas from a relational perspective allows for otherwise invisible impacts on energy issues to be brought into view and understood in terms of their interconnection with other social, environmental, and economic issues. This paper makes a core contribution to addressing this important gap within the existing literature on energy governance. It does so by presenting a novel analytic framework for examining the ways in which governance and policy, beyond energy policy, has implications for energy needs and issues, as well as the social and material possibilities for transitions.

The framework has been developed from empirical research on a specific area of UK policy; namely welfare and employment policy, selected as both a historically important area of UK governance, and a fast moving politically contentious area of contemporary policy, that is broadly seen as unrelated to energy systems.

Two categories of influence are identified and set out through the framework as a focus for analysis. These concern, first, *direct forms of influence* through; the impact of specific policies on energy needs and issues; and the implications of wider governance goals and cross-departmental agendas for energy demand. Second, they relate to *broader forms of influence* through; the impact of policies in shaping long-term trajectories of social and material change that affect what is possible or not within energy policy, as well as constituting needs for energy; and the implications of framing and agenda-setting in different areas of governance that shape what is conceived as possible in terms of energy policy and transitions.

The paper uses examples from research on welfare and employment policy to show how these ways of analysing governance in an area unrelated to energy, reveal and open up insight into the broader impacts of policy on energy systems and issues. The country case study approach adopted here allows for a level of detail important in understanding the implications of governance processes, as well as recognising the contingent and highly contextual nature of policy [8]. However, the analytic framework developed from the analysis and its implications for researching energy demand governance have strong potential to be applied to multiple other contexts beyond the current case.

## 2. Research methods and analysis

The data for this paper stems from a four-year (2015–2018) project examining the impacts of welfare policy on energy demand (in the UK) consisting of three interlinked work packages. First, a detailed analysis of key documentary materials developed by, or related to, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS – formerly the Department of Energy and Climate Change), was conducted, along with a review of literature and documents relating to the historical development of welfare and employment policy in the UK. Documents analysed included parliamentary speeches, political party election manifestos, reports, strategy documents, presentations, academic literature, and government department websites. The documents selected included those predating the start of the research project (January 2015) spanning back to the early 1980s but focused primarily on the time period since 2010 when a Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition Government was elected, and later a majority Conservative Government (elected mid-2015), and which saw the beginnings of major welfare reform. Due to the significant policy reforms currently occurring in the UK welfare policy landscape, this analysis is ongoing.

A second work package centres on in-depth interviews with key national stakeholders involved in various ways in shaping public debate, policy-making, and/or policy implementation in both energy and welfare policy areas ( $n = 21$ ). This included members of relevant policy teams across government departments, as well as policy stakeholders outside of government and those in positions of responsibility with regards to policy delivery (see Table 1 for a breakdown of the interviewees). Interviews were conducted from September 2015 to July 2016 and lasted between 1 and 3 h. For ethical purposes, the names of interviewees and their organisations have been withheld, and instead generic identifiers are used.

The final work package includes in-depth semi-structured interviews of local-level stakeholders, including representatives of relevant organisations, NGOs, and local government ( $n = 20$ ) and biographical interviews ( $n = 20$ ) with people directly affected by welfare and employment policies, in two UK locations. However, the analysis presented in this paper is based on the first (that is the policy documents analysis) and second (that is the interviews with national stakeholders) phases only.

The analysis method used was based on what has been termed ‘bricolage’ analysis, which entails the free interplay of a number of different analytic techniques [18]. For the research presented here, this involved applying qualitative interpretive analytical approaches in order to examine the content of documents, from which analytic narratives were created depicting impacts and implications for practices and energy demand issues. The interviews were analysed primarily using thematic analytic techniques, involving coding the data by selecting extracts from across the interviews relevant to particular themes and issues. However, narrative and discursive forms of analysis were also utilised to examine dominant framings and problematisations (e.g. see Section 4.2.2). In all cases, analytical lines of inquiry developed were both theoretically informed (from for example, governance, relational geographies, and practice literature) and empirically informed, that is from the words used within the documents and/or interviews

**Table 1**  
Number of interviewees per type of organisation.

Organisation Type	Interviewee total numbers
Government	6
Non-Governmental Organisation/Charity	5
National Agencies	6
Energy Industry	2
Academic	2

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