



Review

Energy justice: A conceptual review



Kirsten Jenkins^{a,*}, Darren McCauley^a, Raphael Heffron^b, Hannes Stephan^c,
Robert Rehner^a

^a University of St. Andrews, United Kingdom

^b Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom

^c University of Stirling, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Energy justice has emerged as a new crosscutting social science research agenda which seeks to apply justice principles to energy policy, energy production and systems, energy consumption, energy activism, energy security and climate change. A conceptual review is now required for the consolidation and logical extension of this field. Within this exploration, we give an account of its core tenets: distributional, recognition and procedural. Later we promote the application of this three-pronged approach across the energy system, within the global context of energy production and consumption. Thus, we offer both a conceptual review and a research agenda. Throughout, we explore the key dimensions of this new agenda – its evaluative and normative reach – demonstrating that energy justice offers, firstly, an opportunity to explore where injustices occur, developing new processes of avoidance and remediation and recognizing new sections of society. Secondly, we illustrate that energy justice provides a new stimulating framework for bridging existing and future research on energy production and consumption when whole energy systems approaches are integrated into research designs. In conclusion, we suggest three areas for future research: investigating the non-activist origins of energy justice, engaging with economics, and uniting systems of production and consumption.

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* Corresponding author at: School of Geography & Geosciences, Irvine Building, University of St. Andrews, North Street, St. Andrews, Fife, KY16 9AL Scotland, United Kingdom. Fax: +44 1334463949.

E-mail addresses: kj84@st-andrews.ac.uk (K. Jenkins), dam7@st-andrews.ac.uk (D. McCauley), r.heffron@qmul.ac.uk (R. Heffron), h.r.stephan@stir.ac.uk (H. Stephan), rwmr@st-andrews.ac.uk (R. Rehner).

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1. Introduction

Energy justice has recently emerged as a new cross-cutting social science research agenda, which seeks to apply justice principles to energy policy [65], energy production and systems [48], energy consumption [44]; [54], energy activism [36], energy security [87], the energy trilemma [49], political economy of energy [55] and climate change [9,84,86]. A conceptual review is now required for the consolidation and extension of this research agenda. With this in mind, this paper has two aims: firstly, sections 1–4 give a review of the literature to date and provide empirical examples of its applications, and secondly, Section 5 promotes new directions for its development. Thus, we offer a conceptual review and a research agenda, both consolidating the existing literature and providing suggestions for how the field of energy justice might be advanced. Throughout, we approach energy justice from an inter-disciplinary perspective, involving insights from business, geography, political science, legal studies, philosophy, and environmental studies to reflect the backgrounds of the authors.

Energy is a new centre of gravity for justice scholars. The ‘energy challenge’ is, of course, well documented. It can be summarized globally as resource scarcity and population growth in an increasingly unpredictable social and environmental climate. In a bid to explore and understand such phenomena, a range of conceptual frameworks have emerged. Each framework (which is inevitably contested) attracts a different emphasis on the content and purpose of energy research.

Energy security assesses (a) the security of supply and production, and (b) emergent insecurities (such as availability and pricing) with a view to promoting the safeguarding of energy supply and ‘indigenous’ production capabilities [3,60].

Fuel poverty scrutinizes (a) energy vulnerabilities in communities in order to (i) shed light on distributional unfairness, and (ii) reduce such inequity with regards to a person’s ability to access and consume energy [67].

Energy justice, our focus throughout, evaluates (a) where injustices emerge, (b) which affected sections of society are ignored, (c) which processes exist for their remediation in order to (i) reveal, and (ii) reduce such injustices.

Sovacool [85], in his review of current energy scholarship in the social sciences, identifies a need to move towards human-centred, social science explorations of energy developments. Sovacool identifies fourteen avenues of research and highlights the role of human-centred research methods and philosophy and ethics in energy studies. He promotes energy justice as a promising avenue for research, stating in particular because “energy justice . . . recognizes that energy needs to be included within the list of things we prize; how we distribute the benefits and burdens of energy systems is pre-eminently a concern for any society that aspires to be fair” ([85]: 15). This raises questions about how the costs and benefits of energy production and consumption should be distributed; and about whether we are being “fair to future generations in leaving a legacy of nuclear waste, the depletion of fossil fuels and the pollution of the atmosphere and climate?” (ibid.). Whilst we do not seek to answer these questions directly, we situate this paper within such key debates in the fields of energy studies and social science and the growing application of human-centred approaches to energy challenges.

Sovacool and Dworkin [86] provide the most comprehensive account of philosophical approaches to energy justice to

date. Within our exploration, however, we limit the philosophical groundings of energy justice to distributional, procedural and recognition-based tenets. We utilise the framework of Fuller and Bulkeley [37] who focus on the application of distributional and procedural justice considerations in energy justice, based on the works of Rawls [74], and, in line with McCauley et al. [65], add to this a ‘recognition-based’ approach from the works of Fraser [35]. Within, we choose to present each tenet of justice in the following order: distribution, recognition, and procedure. We do so on the understanding that if injustice is to be tackled you must (a) identify the concern – distribution, (b) identify who it affects – recognition, and only then (c) identify strategies for remediation – procedure. Thus, energy justice begins with questioning the ways in which benefits and ills are distributed, remediated and victims are recognized [49].

Specifically, we explore the key dimensions of the new energy justice agenda – its evaluative and normative reach – where energy justice researchers both assess injustices and make recommendations on how they should be approached. Jordan and Lenschow [56] similarly use this combined approach in their conceptual review of ‘environmental policy integration’ (EPI) as a new agenda in policy studies. As shown in Table 1 below, this approach allows the researcher to explore a number of agendas in relation to energy justice.

Distributional justice encourages researchers to investigate where energy injustices emerge in the world. The location of production facilities such as gas power stations has raised justice concerns among nearby communities [29,82]. Simultaneously, studies of energy poverty have questioned the distributional burden of rising energy prices [10,11]. In light of this, we use several empirical examples throughout this paper to demonstrate that energy justice seeks to explore both production and consumption.

Recognition-based justice moves researchers to consider which sections of society are ignored or misrepresented. Production-oriented research has sought to expose the unfair location of power plants in the vicinity of ethnic minorities or indigenous peoples, often cut adrift from decision-making [72]. Consumption-based research has equally revealed the struggles of ageing or disabled populations [11,59]. Here we explore the emergence of recognition-based justice through non-recognition and disrespect.

Procedural justice inspires researchers to explore the ways in which decision-makers have sought to engage with communities. Warren and McFadyen [95] demonstrate how fostering a sense of community ownership in wind farm development can create new processes of acceptance, for example. Thus, rather than classifying procedural injustices or unveiling mechanisms of exclusion as is classically the case [41], we consolidate and contribute to this literature by making explicit three mechanisms of inclusion: achieving

Table 1
The evaluative and normative contributions of energy justice.

| Tenets | Evaluative | Normative |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Distributional | Where are the injustices? | How should we solve them? |
| Recognition | Who is ignored? | How should we recognise? |
| Procedural | Is there fair process? | Which new processes? |

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