



“Why can’t we all get along?” A conceptual analysis and case study of contentious energy problems



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Energy policy research spans multiple objectives, disciplines, methodologies, and data sets.
- Resolving differences among researchers requires painstaking research and debate.
- A framework and policy implications proffered to help identify and reduce differences.

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ABSTRACT

Energy policy and research span multiple objectives, disciplines, methodologies, and data sets. This breadth of research results in conflicting analyses and proposals, which enable various parties to leverage these conflicts to further their vested interests. This paper explores these issues caused by differing research methodologies. It examines a recent proposal to search for common ground regarding contentious energy problems that emphasizes the use of different analytical frames as major sources of disagreement, and a case study regarding a dispute on how to conduct cost-benefit analyses of energy efficiency programs. Resolving differences among the research community and energy analysts requires a collaborative effort of painstaking research and debate. This paper articulates four policy implications. First, energy analysts should not be inexorably bound to their analytical frames. Second, analysts should not encroach on the role of policymakers by being asked to resolve questions that involve tradeoffs among fundamental values. Third, analysts have an important role helping to inform policymakers of the implications and limitations of various types of analyses of energy and environmental issues. Fourth, analysts need to develop a research program that is able to answer particular questions from multiple research frames in order to assess the robustness of their findings.

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1. Introduction

The world is currently facing large and complex energy problems that are further magnified by the contentiousness within energy policy. It is absolutely critical to analyze the causes of this divisiveness and propose ways to improve the analysis of, and possible solutions for, global energy problems. This is required if society is to avoid substantial energy security, economic, and environmental challenges while providing expanding access to energy to the world's poor and rising middle classes.

This paper explores the causes and possible means to reduce contentiousness in energy research. It conceptually evaluates a recent proposal to address this problem. [Sovacool and Brown](#)

(2015) proffer their diagnosis and treatment in order to further energy research. In [Section 2](#), this paper evaluates their analysis and findings in detail to provide a solid foundation for extending their work. Then in [Section 3](#), this paper uses a case study of energy efficiency evaluation, an area that has been studied for many years, which has a substantial amount of agreement but nonetheless contains numerous disputed and seemingly intractable issues. It attempts to demonstrate how careful and consistent analysis can help identify sources of differences among researchers and help reduce those differences, provided researchers are within the same analytical framework. The anticipated advantage of combining a conceptual approach with a concrete example is to elucidate multiple ideas that then can be tested against actual research practice. [Section 4](#) integrates the findings of the two approaches, discusses future research directions, and discusses four policy implications.

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2. A conceptual analysis of deconstructing facts and frames in energy research

2.1. Summary of the Sovacool and Brown analysis

At first glance, Sovacool and Brown (hereafter S&B) seem to offer a non-contentious analysis that serves as an important reminder to energy analysts and researchers (hereafter analysts). S&B draws upon a recent book, directed at non-academic audiences, that elaborates S&B's themes and conclusions (Sovacool et al., 2016). It uses the Hegelian approach of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to propose common ground regarding fifteen contentious energy policy questions, each in a separate chapter. For the purposes of this paper, S&B is treated as a standalone contribution, and readers are referred to Sovacool et al. for further information and to decide to what extent the book anticipates and addresses the following discussion.

In the S&B analysis, disputes are caused less by factual disagreements, and more by a clash of priorities among vested interests and competing epistemic frames. Their response to this contentiousness is to propose the practice of the following six maxims: information awareness, inclusivity, symmetry, reflexivity, prudence, and technological agnosticism. These six maxims can be questioned and refined along many lines, but if interpreted fairly and positively, they assist in furthering energy analysis, research, and perhaps even policymaking.

The S&B paper makes many more expansive claims that become less clear, less grounded, and less helpful to its goal of reducing contentiousness through building common ground (S&B, p. 41) and improving analysis. By expanding well beyond its initially advertised claims regarding the role of assumptions and values in energy analysis, the S&B analysis makes its own task more difficult. It does so by blurring important conceptual distinctions between research frames and political and social ideologies, as well as by conflating the analytical and research process with the policymaking process. Furthermore, the S&B analysis could benefit from a more detailed articulation of the categories of the types of disputes that do occur in the research literature. These categories include incomplete or inconsistent data, vested interests, and conflicting fundamental values. Also, its post-modern bent of the analysis undercuts the very common ground that S&B believe is necessary and their maxims aim to create. Finally, their proposed six maxims should be reassessed, particularly in the light of the academic peer review process.

2.2. The expansive analysis of the paper by Sovacool and Brown

If all the S&B analysis was trying to achieve is to observe that energy analysts should be on guard against self-interest and competing theories, and to propose some steps to protect the quality and integrity of work of analysts, there would be no need for an extensive review of it. The analysis would serve as a useful tutorial to new analysts and a friendly reminder to the more experienced. The S&B paper, however, quickly expands beyond the initial claims advertised in its title, abstract, and highlights. For example, it is first directed at analysts but then quickly expands to include various decision-makers including homemakers, business people, consumers, investors, and eventually reaches students in grade schools. Thus, the discussion covers the broad landscape of governance, stakeholder processes, and education.

Adding to this expansive scope, the S&B paper identifies a non-exhaustive list of eight energy frames (S&B, Table 1) informed by the fifteen analyses of contentious energy questions in Sovacool et al. The S&B frames are a mix of political and social ideologies intertwined with academic disciplines and issue politics, which should be subcategorized into these three areas. This would allow

the distinction between the discipline of economics and the ideology of free market libertarians, which is necessary since not all economists are free market libertarians any more than all scientists and engineers are technological optimists. Such an effort would also separate analytical disputes, either within or across disciplines, from policy disputes regarding the priorities of objectives and their underpinning values.

It is a challenge for social science to establish a clear and distinct taxonomy that is applicable to all situations, and one could continue with such a detailed analysis of S&B's eight energy frames, which would help flesh out and arrive at the root causes of the disagreements that arise out of employing different frames. For instance, both engineers and economists focus on "efficiency," but engineering efficiency and economic efficiency are distinctly different concepts. One could easily imagine confusion as a result of using the same term for different techniques. This confusion would be particularly amplified as their analyses are interpreted and used by broader audiences. The importance of clarifying terms is also evident in the case study presented below. For the purposes of analyzing S&B, however, such an extensive critique of all of the limitations of S&B's Table 1 would risk missing their primary point: there are multiple and competing frames such as "free market libertarians" and "neo-Marxists".

The S&B analysis continues its expansionary trek and argues that analysts who are bound to a particular frame develop a bias that blinds them to other perspectives (S&B, p. 38). Thus, energy analysis and policy proposals are contentious because they are committed to and blinded by conflicting frames. Although the importance of this "blindness" is not fully developed in S&B's paper, the set of terms they use suggest that it is significant and detrimental: "thought collectives," "paradigms," "worldviews," "invisible colleges," "epistemic cultures," "trained incapacity," "selective remembrance," and "occupational psychosis." In fact, the case study examined below supports S&B's claim about the importance of competing frames by considering disputes among analysts not only within an academic discipline, but also within a particular long-standing and well-established methodology. If under those conditions there are major disputes, it is reasonable to postulate that crossing frames would open up more, not fewer, disagreements.

According to the S&B paper, the consequences of these multiple frames are "subjective truths," (p. 36), a "combative, corrosive role in generation of objective energy analysis," (p. 36), "blurring the line between fact, fiction, and frames," (p. 38), "energy decisions [that] seem guided not by hard, objective Truth but a series of subjective, malleable truths," (p. 41), and "distorted, unrealistic representations" (p. 42). From this mire, the S&B paper concludes "energy and climate policy is often a domain of conflict" (p. 38) and "educated people can have opposing and conflicting views" (p. 41). Its tag line, provided in the paper's highlights, is "Assumptions and values can play a combative, corrosive role in the generation of objective energy analysis."

At this point, the logical question is: which frame is the S&B analysis using? Or is it arguing that it stands outside all frames? If the S&B analysis is arguing from within a frame (and there is some reason to believe this is the case), then its argument consumes itself. The S&B analysis concludes that the educational system "indoctrinates us all into a global capitalist system causing many of those problems facing society" (p. 39), which suggests a neo-Marxist frame, which is one of the eight identified by S&B. Assuming that S&B is within this or any other frame, there is no reason to take the S&B frame and therefore its findings any more or less seriously than any other frame and their findings. If, however, the S&B analysis claims to stand outside these frames, then it raises the question of how it can do so when all other analyses do not.

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