"Energy, Climate and Society: Insights from Early Career Researchers"

Thursday 18th April 2013, University of Westminster

This event, kindly sponsored by the BSA Climate Change Study Group, aimed to promote knowledge sharing between researchers and the policy community on the social dimensions of energy and climate change. Organised by two early career researchers, Dr Sarah Royston and Dr Tom Roberts, it was attended by 30 people, who were mainly early career researchers, but also included a representative of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), as well as three invited policy panellists.

After a welcome from Sarah Royston, delegates heard six early career researchers present recent findings, in two parallel sessions. One of these was loosely themed around community and collectivity, and the other around communication and understandings.

In the former session, Megan McMichael began by addressing the topic of "Social networks and adoption of household energy efficiency innovations in 3 case study communities". This research focused on the influence of social capital in the diffusion of energy-reducing innovations within UK communities. The results showed significant relationships between social capital and adoption, though only for some innovations, and results were not consistent across communities. The findings showed that standard mass communication campaigns may not be addressing up to one-third of information-seekers who would prefer to speak to people they know. Overall, Megan argued that tailoring campaigns to communities' communication channels is imperative for future community-based energy efficiency programmes. See the slides here.

On a similar theme, Rebecca Wallbridge presented on "The Role of Community-Based Initiatives in Energy Saving", drawing on a project at the University of Southampton. Unusually for community-based energy research, this project uses a field experiment which matches an intervention and control group in which both groups receive insulation upgrades; for the intervention group this is delivered as part of an ongoing community project promoting low-carbon lifestyles. The energy use of both groups is subject to longitudinal measurement, and this valuable quantitative data is complemented by regular surveys and selected semi-structured interviews. Rebecca drew out policy implications of this ongoing work, including the demands of working with community organisations, issues of time-scale of behaviour change, and the framing of energy saving and the impact this has on wider behaviours. See the slides here.

Finally, Will Eadson addressed a different aspect of community energy in his presentation, "Collective Switching: A tickle towards engaged action?". The talk explained the concept of collective switching and the policy context for this innovation. Essentially, collective energy switching potentially provides an attractive route into 'nudging' (or perhaps just "tickling"!) changes in energy behaviour and market engagement for local authorities at no/little cost (especially where central government grant funding is available) and with no apparent financial risk for local authorities or individuals. This presentation focussed on findings to date based on documentary review, and stakeholder and local authority interviews. Will raised some important questions about

the impacts of collective switching, especially around its potential as a way of engaging individuals with their energy use. See the slides here.

In the session around communication and understandings, Chris Shaw asked just what the "facts" of climate change are. He problematised the 2 degree dangerous limit and the idea of a safe endpoint for climate change (see also Anderson and Bows 2012). His interest was in making climate change policy more democratically accountable, and examining methods that might be deployed to 'open-up' important debates around how we should live. It was in this context that he welcomed the DECC 2050 carbon calculator. But Chris was keen to ask whether such tools, could ever be expanded and adapted to incorporate lifestyle choices as well as demonstrating real world impacts. He was also interested in the differences between individual and collective responses to the challenge. See a related article by Chris here: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/22/zombie-movies-climate-change-no-one-happy-ending

Rachel Howell then presented her recent work. Rachel had carried out narrative interviews and work that had examined responses to the film the Age of Stupid. Her subjects were largely CRAGRS (or carbon rationing action groupers). She picked up a lot of responses that focused on social justice as being an important motivator. She also demonstrated how these motivating factors changed with contexts, so in South Africa, social justice was even more pronounced as ostensibly the motivating factor behind CRAGers' membership. In such contexts solving problems through the prism of community was the answer. She also found that interest in frugality preceded action on climate change. The revulsion of waste as a motivating factor meant that you didn't have to be interested in or knowledgeable about climate change to be enthusiastic about leading a low carbon lifestyle. There was then an interesting disconnect between the purported biospheric values assumed to underpin low carbon lifestyles and the real motivations of those leading low carbon lifestyles, which were more often oriented around social justice issues. Rachel suggests that these insights are important in terms of better linking low carbon agendas with human rights groups, and opening up solutions that push a range of holistic positive visions for living low carbon lifestyles. See Rachel's paper on the subject at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2012.10.015 or download it here. The slides are accessible here.

Tom Roberts spoke about 'energy and folk quanta'. He argued that the way energy is measured, codified, and understood matters in terms of engaging publics on domestic energy reduction. The role of language was particularly important: what scientists understand by 'energy conservation' Tom suggested, differs greatly from what a civil servant or a member of the public understands by the term. Likewise, the meaningfulness of the units of energy used by householders – what has become known as 'folk units' (Kempton and Montgomery 1982) Tom argued, needs to be given greater recognition. Differing between domains of practice, these diverse units are often entirely at odds with the Kwh forms of measurement preferred by experts. Public engagement with energy Tom suggested, was however, highly contingent upon the greater recognition of these pre-existing and arguably more persuasive folk metrics. Thinking energy otherwise, from the perspective of the householder, Tom proposed a relational typology of energy and identified five categories: *corporeal energy* (energy experienced as comfort and heat), *kinaesthetic energy* – energy experienced as bodily motion, *affectual energy* – aspects of energy which householders feel they have some agency over, *fuel energy* – or the potential energy which can easily be understood as being stockpiled, and *vicarious energy* – or the energy experienced through labour saving technologies. Recognising these

different categories and understanding the folk units therein Tom suggested, may help to better inform more targeted campaigns as well prove to be instructive for design of smart metering technologies. Read more here.

Attendees then reconvened for a plenary session, with talks from three members of the policy community, all of whom are involved in highly relevant work: Matt Lipson from DECC, Robbie Craig from Defra and David Fell, founder-director of think-tank Brook Lyndhurst.

Robbie Craig

Robbie Craig (speaking personally, and not on behalf of Defra) discussed the importance of social science in his current work, including work on flooding (a current Defra priority). Robbie works in the operational side of flood risk and abatement within DEFRA on a flood community resilience pathfinder project. He mentioned how Defra are often looking for experts in academia to help with real world problems. Robbie commented that although he found some academic papers helpful, the jargon of journal papers was often a barrier to those in the civil service making best use of them. Civil servants and policymakers were looking for solutions whereas much of the academic literature was focusing rather more on framing the problems. Furthermore, if there were solutions, they were buried in jargon and not upfront in the abstract or introduction.

Robbie commented that a key feature of the civil service is that failure can often be more interesting and informative than success. He also mentioned that the civil service is inherently risk averse, and that Defra have strategy policy people and operational policy people. This division of labour was important in that the operational side was not interested in theory but brutal evidence based research that could be easily replicable.

He had some advice for ECRs:
1) Never assume that there is only one civil servant working on an issue, and that they know what others in their department do, and always contact a range of people in the institution. Actively ask to be referred.
2) Never assume that those in the civil service will have heard of your work, or other research work; access to journal articles is a challenge. Government departments tend to systematically forget things!
Robbie concluded with a plea to social scientists: Where is the 'social' in flood defence and abatement work? In other words, there is a real deficit in terms of understanding social issues associated with flooding, which extend beyond risk into health, work, finance etc.

Matt Lipson

Matt Lipson (speaking personally, and not on behalf of DECC) began by reflecting on the reasons why civil servants were so tight-lipped. He said that this coyness was needed as there was a very real danger of being seriously reprimanded for giving the wrong impression to the media and others and misrepresenting the department. Matt came up with a checklist of ideas for ECRs to bear in mind when thinking about communicating with civil servants:

1) Know who you're talking to! Analysts are interested in evidence. They differ from policymakers who are interested in strategy.
2) Be wary of turf wars. From the outside a government department may seem to be a cohesive unit. But there may be very real differences within the department, e.g. in staff's backgrounds and interests.
3) Contact named individuals and ask to be transferred. Part of a civil servants role is arguably to connect people! Try Adam Cooper in Social Science and Fiona Gruber who collates evidence (adam.cooper@decc.gsi.gov.uk, Fiona.gruber@decc.gsi.gov.uk).
4) Don't assume academic knowledge. The reality is that journal access is difficult and expensive within government, so don't be afraid to send relevant material to named individuals.
5) Make it relevant. Think how your research fits into what's new and what's the current prevailing political wind within the department you're liaising with.
6) Remember that Government departments, particularly in the wake of the economic crisis have had their communications budgets slashed or removed, so don't assume institutional learning or capacity to disseminate (that may be down to you!).
7) Remember there is a hierarchy in terms of the way civil servants look to social scientists. Economists are preferred because they look to provide familiar and tried and tested solutions, other social scientists are less favourable as they can seem obtuse, or raise problems rather than find solutions... Also the methods used by economists seem familiar to policymakers, they speak the same language and define things in clear and simple ways. They use tools such as Impact Assessment and Cost Benefit Analysis.
8) Energy efficiency is seen as 'gold' within DECC. It's a no brainer as it is about saving money and reducing climate change.
9) Government departments are politically fraught places and there are separate silos within them.
10) There are social capital benefits of working with and through communities, but while important, this isn't always seen by many in DECC as being relevant to their core agenda.
11) Remember that there are other thinktanks and departments which may be more relevant or have similar / overlapping interests. Some of these may, (depending on the financial year) have some budgetary capacity for research which they need to allocate before the financial year end.
12) As academic researchers – YOU *are* the experts. Too often academic researchers are too cautious about this. There is no harm in believing in your work and its value to the policy community.
13) Civil Servants are very busy. Don't misinterpret a lack of a timely response as being indicative of a lack of interest. Recognise that while your work is of value and is important, it might not be on the top of their intray...
14) Think about the longer term. It doesn't hurt to engage early on with policy officials, and thinking through with them how you might be able to assist one another by working collaboratively.
15) Finally, be Persistent, be Professional, and be Polite!

David Fell

David talked about motivations for researchers wanting to engage with policymakers. He characterised two ends of the spectrum for such motivations as being either borne out of wanting to seek some sort of 'immanent truth', or wanting to intervene and 'mess with people's heads'. He recognised that for most researchers, their real rationale was some sort of messy compromise between the two, but he suggested that it was important for researchers to be clear about their rationale, their hopes and their expectations when attempting to engage with those from the policy community.

David argued that it was important to recognise the almost rhetorical value that numbers play both within policy circles and within the public sphere. He referred to Dr Tom Robert's presentation on energy metrics and folk quanta and suggested that policy communities also have their own folk units which they use for themselves and to communicate to the public. For example, David said that we've all heard of the official units of waste such as an 'Albert Hall's worth', or 'a Wembley', or even 'an area the size of Wales...' He said that such notions of measurement were particularly pertinent to making the measurement of waste CO2 visible to people in everyday common parlance. He explained how helpful it had been in his own work to actually physically work out the dimensions of 1 tonne of CO2 which allowed him to explain what 1 tonne of CO2 looked like to people when asked.

David also discussed the importance of diffusion of behavioural / practice change through social systems. We are after all intervening in what are incredibly complex system problems. Particularly influential he suggested, were those whom people felt were like them, but deemed to be somehow better (linking to theories of homophily). Firemen he suggested were arguably the most influential group of people in terms of instigating changes in homes. They were, David argued, seen as being instinctively heroic. People saw firemen as people like them but a bit different, and their suggestions were seen as largely sensible and also benefitted from have the legal apparatus to back–up their recommendations.

Finally, David argued that, to make a difference, researchers need to know their audience, and the kind of evidence they will respond to (normally large scale quantitative studies). David also reminded researchers not to forget the local scale, where policymakers may be more identifiable and accessible.

Discussion:

In the final session, all delegates had the opportunity to share their insights and questions in an open discussion, and explored in more detail some of the ideas raised by panellists about impact and the best way to ensure research reaches the people that are best placed to act upon it. Knowledge exchange networks were identified as being important systems of learning and diffusion. The role of the Research Councils was also identified as being important in this capacity.

It was pointed out that within the civil service there are 5 year cycles of forgetting. Of the many projects that DEFRA had got involved, Robbie said that he could only really recall two as having a longer term impact. This was largely because these initiatives had had a life of their beyond DEFRA's involvement. They included the NUS student halls energy project, and a Groundwork project. He

pointed out that there is no real institutional capacity within government departments to assess impact, and that it wasn't that other projects had not had any impact, but that there was no system to collect and gauge this impact.

Communicating uncertainty was another area identified as being problematic both for academics and policymakers. It was important to note in this regard that civil servants and the bureaucratic apparatus of Whitehall is largely risk averse. This means that it needs to be abundantly clear both what the risks of taking a particular recommendation for a department might be, but it also means needing to have a pretty good idea of what the risks are of NOT taking on this recommendation ...

There were also political and spatial issues which needed to be brought into consideration when thinking about how to effectively disseminate academic research amongst the policy community.

Politically, the prevailing wind – who is in power and what they are looking for, is always important to bear in mind when framing communications to civil servants whose priorities may have had to change due to those political pressures. For example the city level was a more manageable scale than the national scale for Brook Lyndhurst to disseminate research outputs and recommendations.

A question was also asked of the audience regarding just who we see as making the changes. These may differ, but in whatever sector and scale, identifying the key players or change agents will always be a crucial part of any dissemination strategy.

To end the evening, Tom Hargreaves offered closing thoughts. One conclusion he drew from the day was that, contrary to popular belief in technocratic systems of knowledge transfer, the reality in the civil service was not so much about evidence-based policy, but about power defining rationality and framing research priorities. The psychology of policymaking in this regard was important and warranted greater recognition.

Feedback after the event was extremely positive, with many attendees expressing an interest in future events of this kind. In particular, attendees mentioned the constructive nature of the discussions, the frank and engaging approach of the three policy panellists, and the value of advice about impact from these policy insiders.

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