A Habermasian analysis of local renewable energy deliberations

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A B S T R A C T

This study pursues a Habermasian analysis of citizen discussions and of the local public sphere to shed light on renewable energy futures in rural east-central Canada. Using data from group discussions, it pursues an investigation of utterances, validity claims and of discourses. The analysis is supplemented by participant observation of publicly acting organizations, and together these form the evidence to arrive at some predictions for energy developments. This case study finds governance officials tended to negotiate solar, wind, biomass and small hydro projects with fact-claims, but citizens operated mainly with norm-claims and this along with other factors creates a distortion in communication and in social coordination with implications for the future of various energy types. More generally it also suggests the state’s strong reliance on market incentives may have long term costs in terms of diminished public reasoning over renewable energy. Working through Habermas’ concepts in this way also pointed towards potential contributions to the theories of communicative action and the public sphere.

1. Introduction

Planning for renewable energy is complicated. Despite general public support for alternatives to fossil fuels (Angus-Reid, 2007; EC, 2011), many areas experience social conflict over renewable energy implementation. Wind farm disputes are prominent in the literature (Burningham et al., 2006; Devine-Wright et al., 2009; van der Horst, 2007; Woods, 2003) but this does not indicate a general rule. Some wind developments proceed with little conflict (Brannstrom et al., 2011), and implementation of other renewable sources like biomass and solar experience equally mixed social responses (McCormick and Kaberger, 2005; Pasqualetti and Schwartz, 2011; Upham and Shackley, 2006). Opinion polling, economic modeling and other traditional socio-economic research methods are insufficient to explain opposition or to predict and plan for renewable energy pathways (Devine-Wright, 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009; Mårtensson and Westerberg, 2007). Researchers are increasingly turning to interpretive methods to gain deeper understandings of the positions of local actors. These include content and discourse analysis of texts (Barry et al., 2008; Hagget and Toke, 2006; Senger et al., 2010), case study comparisons (Mårtensson and Westerberg, 2007; McCormick and Kaberger, 2007), ranking exercises designed to encourage reflection by respondents such as Q-methodology (Brannstrom et al., 2011; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009) and multiple criteria analysis (Trutnevyte et al., 2011; Upham and Waterman, 2007). There is considerable interest in the development and application of additional research methods that are appropriate for the social and dynamic (not individual and static) nature of social responses to increased renewable energy implementation (Devine-Wright, 2010b; Walker et al., 2010).

A general prescription coming out of this stream of interpretive research is for dialogue between citizens, experts, developers and planners to help prevent and negotiate renewable energy disputes. Deliberation is widely assumed by political theorists to foster “green” choices, but as Lövbrand and Khan (2010) point out empirical evidence is limited. Authors are unsure if current planning practices can accommodate the value differences among the diverse set of stakeholders (Barry et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009). The tension between local interests and national/global interests may be too great. Here the instrumental challenge of meeting renewable energy targets meets more normative critiques that planning efforts should better incorporate the views of local citizens. Is consensus on renewable energy implementation possible or desirable? Should planning instead strive for an “agonism” model recognizing deep differences in values (Mouffe, 1999 cited by Ellis et al., 2007). These questions point to further knowledge gaps about processes of deliberation and of reaching consensus.

This study pursues both challenges. It brings a methodological contribution to what Fisher and Brown (2009) call the “discursive turn” in renewable energy planning studies and it explicitly engages the theoretical concepts of deliberative forms of decision.
making. It develops and applies tools from Habermas' communicative action theory to an empirical case of renewable energy planning in east-central Canada. The paper examines how citizens in ordinary rural communities identify, discuss and negotiate the prospect of renewable energy production in their territory. It pursues three main questions: (1) What are the conditions of the local public sphere that enable and/or limit deliberation around renewable energy issues? (2) What kinds of knowledge — specifically what claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness theorized by Habermas to be present in all discussions — underpin shared understandings? (3) What evidence exists for the coordinating role of communicative action as it is theorized by Habermas and others?

The paper proceeds in four steps. I begin by mapping out the elements of Habermas' social theory guiding the case study and then describe the case with special attention to the local public sphere. The next section lays out Habermasian discourse analysis as a method to analyze "talk". The third section gives results of this analyses and the final section pursues implication of findings for renewable energy futures in these communities, and the role of citizen deliberation in these issues more generally.

2. Introduction

2.1. Habermas' social theory

Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2004) seeks to explain how human activities are coordinated, especially how collective interests emerge and are legitimated through public use of reason. At the core of his understanding (Fig. 1) is the theory of communicative action which stresses the pragmatic function of language. When actors speak we unavoidably provide and evaluate reasons (this is the meaning of rationality). Actors use three types of reasons to support/explain their actions (1) "facts" grounded in the objective world providing reasons based on "truth", (2) norms grounded in the social world providing reasons based on "rightness" and (3) feelings and desires grounded in our subjective worlds providing reasons based on "sincerity" or "truthfulness.

Reasons come from the lifeworld — our shared set of taken-for-granted knowledge providing each individual the resources to interpret social situations and to evaluate the three types of claims. When two or more actors reach mutual understanding of a situation if forms the basis for communicative action. In modern society, the three forms of lifeworld knowledge accumulate and are transmitted via scientific theories (facts), legal and moral representations (norms) and art (truthfulness) but continue to rely on communicative encounters to be reproduced. Topics of communication become subject to rational argument and discourse (i.e., topics are consciously debated rather than evaluated via inherited reasons) when the background knowledge of the lifeworld differs slightly between individuals, or new information becomes available. Pseudo-rational strategic action occurs when two or more actors pursue individual goals through independent calculation of another's interests. Strategic action is more likely to involve deception and concealing of true intent but is also highly effective in meeting goals. It is the rationality of the coordinating systems of the modern world (the market economy and bureaucratic administration). With no communicative rationality checks these are open to abuse and act to colonize the lifeworld, disrupting communicative action and dehumanizing society. Habermas finds hope in the public sphere connecting the social coordinating function of language, through the rationalizing process of discourse into a modern political function. His theory of deliberative democracy argues that the testing and refining of norms through communicative action gives law their legitimacy. Fig. 1 maps out the connections between these concepts and serves as a guide for the remainder of the paper.

The significance of Habermas' theories for empirical studies is not obvious. His concepts are highly abstract and his use of ideal-types has attracted criticism for obscuring context. Three major critiques of the concepts of communicative action and public sphere should be highlighted. First, by focusing on serious speech acts and calm, reasoned discussion over humor, irony and wit, Habermas creates a false standard of transparency in communication (Dryzek, 2000; Gardiner, 2004; Thomassen, 2010). This leads into a separate critique that in presupposing a universal orientation for actors to search for agreement and consensual problem-solving he relies on an abstract faith that humans are rational when in fact what most often counts as "rational" is defined by power and the

![Fig. 1. Habermas' theoretical model (source, author).](image-url)
interests of those with power (Flybjerg, 1998; Martin and Rutagarama, 2012; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). A third critique is that his notion of the public sphere is not sufficiently sensitive to the contexts of place (Howell, 1994) or to what Nancy Fraser calls “sub-altern” publics (Fraser, 1992; Roberts and Crossley, 2004).

Yet, those who have attempted to operationalize Habermas’ core concept of communicative action have enjoyed some success in revealing the threats and strengths of planning practices (Dryzek, 1995; Forester, 1985, 2003; Kemp, 1985). Given the current emphasis on increasing public participation in renewable energy decision and “analytical-deliberative” planning (Devine-Wright, 2010a) is timely to re-examine these tools. Rural scholars are at the forefront of a renewed empirically-grounded critical examination of communicative rationality in the context of rural governance (Martin and Rutagarama, 2012; Taylor, 2010) and this study builds on that momentum.

2.2. Case study: renewable energy in the Eastern Ontario Highlands

In 2009 the province of Ontario, Canada established programs to develop renewable energy production. The overall policy goal is to “attract new investment, create new green economy jobs and better protect the climate” (Ontario, 2009). Under a “feed-in-tariff” (FIT) program the Province offers 20 year contracts paying high rates and guaranteed access (or a “feed-in”) to the electrical grid for any electricity produced from renewable sources (wind, solar, biomass, small hydro). It further promotes economic development by requiring that new projects have 50% of components made in Ontario (for more see Yatchew and Baziliauskas, 2011). A complementary program purchases and installs biomass boilers, solar panels and other “green” technologies in public schools (Ontario, 2011). The feed-in-tariff program is based on similar programs present in 19 of 27 EU countries. Ontario’s politicians proudly cited Al Gore’s description of the policy as “the single best green energy program on the North American continent” (Yuen, 2009). Yet, this technically elegant program has been marred by administrative problems in dealing with the 45,000 applications for contracts, critiques of green power subsidies from free market think tanks (Wood, 2011) and by a highly politicized backlash from some rural communities hosting wind farms. Advocacy groups somewhat credibly claim these concerns caused the government to lose seats in the legislature in the 2011 elections (Howlett and Ladurantye, 2011; Wind Concerns Ontario, 2011).

A region for study within Ontario was selected on the basis of its having a broad range of new energy scenarios providing a wide scope for participant discussion and an opportunity to incorporate under-studied roles of the public beyond that of “objectors” (Walker and Cass, 2007). The Eastern Ontario Highlands (EOH) is a forested, upland rural region of the province under pressure to develop renewable energy projects. A number are in various stages of development initiated by various government, corporate and individual actors. The high school is the site of demonstration biomass heating system installed and paid for by the Province. Instead of heating oil, wood pellets will be used. Dozens of individuals and businesses have installed electricity-generating solar panels under the FIT/microFIT program mentioned above. Three private wind development companies have expressed interest in developing wind farms along ridges in the northern part of the study area. Finally there are dozens of former mill dams and water control structures with the potential to generate hydro-electricity. These latter are overseen by a Conservation Authority delegated by the provincial government to manage water levels. These four examples represent the best-known renewable energy developments in the region and are summarized in Table 1. Informal interviews revealed that residents are also aware of developments elsewhere, such as large solar and wind farms to the south which are in close proximity to regularly visited regional urban hubs. Note that in the EOH case there are no demonstrations or overt conflicts over renewable energy projects unlike other cases examined in the literature (e.g., Fisher and Brown, 2009; Woods, 2003).

I focus on two municipalities of the Eastern Ontario Highlands: Addington Highlands and North Frontenac (Fig. 2). The permanent, year-round population of these towns is 2532 and 1842 respectively (Statistics Canada, 2011), but during the summer months the region’s population is tripled by an influx of seasonal residents (Cumming Cockburn Ltd, 2003). Early on in the research project an energy inventory of the region was prepared from a sample of 176 permanent households to create a baseline for discussion. Total regional energy use is estimated at 426 Petajoules/year, over 30% of this from firewood (Fig. 3). Approximately three quarters of residents use firewood or pellets for heating their homes which is typical of sparsely populated forest communities in Canada and elsewhere (Ericsson et al., 2004). Wood is plentiful and 40% of residents reported using more than 6 cords/yr (i.e. 12 tonnes of wood) which helps explain why household energy use in the EOH is higher than the Canadian average (153 GJ/yr vs. 109 GJ, SHEU, 2007). Electricity use is close to the Canadian average, many households have small generators as back-ups for power outages which can last 48 h or more in the northern parts of the study area. Approximately 1% of permanent households are not connected to electricity grid, a few of these use solar panels or small wind turbines. Many seasonal cottages, not included in the inventory, are off-grid.

Population trends are consistent with patterns elsewhere in rural eastern Ontario; aging and with little or no growth in overall numbers (Sander-Regier et al., 2009). Employment rates and median incomes (45%; $37,789) are considerably lower than the provincial average (67%; $69,156) (Statistics Canada, 2006). Most jobs are found servicing the tourists and seasonal residents. As in other rural Canadian communities, people struggle to retain schools and attract health care providers (McLeman, 2010; McLeman and Gilbert, 2007).

2.3. Characteristics of the local public sphere

The public sphere commonly refers to the media or anything covered by the media (McKee, 2005). In Habermas’ model of society (Fig. 1), the media is one component of a public sphere which converts the social coordinating function of language into a critical check on political decisions (Fig. 1). Thus the public sphere is a normative ideal but also an observable set of practices of how citizens’ organize and communicate values into political decisions. The local media in EOH, the venues for public discussion and the actions of organizations that attempt to influence public opinion make up the local public sphere. It is described below and analyzed later in the paper. This description also provides context for the upcoming discourse analysis. It is based on observations accumulated through attendance at fourteen public gatherings in 2010/

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Renewable energy opportunity</th>
<th>Current status in the EOH</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solar</td>
<td>Increasing presence via individual ownership of micro-size projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>Unrealized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomass</td>
<td>Traditional forms of use high, new forms of use emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small hydro</td>
<td>Unrealized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2011 including town council and cottage association meetings, all candidates’ debates, charity fundraising events and a “Renewable Energy Expo and Tour” organized by the author (Druker, 2011). It is further based on informal interviews and close attention to local media reports.

2.3.1. Three types of organizations in the EOH acting in the public sphere

The first are grassroots groups defending against changes in state delivered services. Faced with the threat that the ambulance base would be moved to a more southern location, residents of the northern village of Denbigh formed a committee, established a web-site and sent a delegation to county council to argue against the move. A similar response was seen for residents of Ompah when their library branch was closed by authorities. These responses incorporated individuals diverse in gender, income, age and both locals and newcomers. These publics came together to test and develop their arguments and develop highly rational responses to policy decisions. For example, the Denbigh Ambulance Network presented a position paper critiquing the County’s assessment of predicted reduction in ambulance waiting times.

The second type of publicly acting associations derives from one social group looking to advance its interests. One such group is the seasonal residents. There are more than two dozen cottage owners groups active in the region. Their concerns are often routine and administrative; road maintenance and garbage collection, but they sometimes engage in public argumentation and try to influence policy. Faced with proposed logging around their lake, one association showed remarkable sensitivity to public reasons for logging. For example members were asked if they would be willing to pay higher property taxes to offset the potential loss in logging revenue if logging were halted.

The last driver to organize and present arguments in the public sphere is by direct establishment or strong facilitation by the state. For example there is a provincial legislative requirement for a local citizens committee to advise forest management plans. Also municipal government facilitated a public organization committed to renewable energy interests in the EOH; the County of Frontenac’s Green Energy Task Force is composed of members of Council and private citizens. Its mandate is to further county energy goals including reduced per capita energy use and increased production of energy from renewable sources.

2.3.2. The power of the groups acting in the public sphere

The state affiliated associations with close connection to authorities, i.e., the County’s Green Energy Task Force and the local citizens’ forestry committee, theoretically have a large influence on administrative decisions. However in practice officials restrict the kinds of acceptable advice. For example, County officials attempted...
to prevent the Green Energy Task Force from commenting during a consultation exercise on changes to the microFIT payment terms. The influence of other groups acting within the public sphere varies. The ambulance network will likely stop any closure of the ambulance base but will have to continually organize as population trends of more residents to the south and fewer to the north continue. As the number of seasonal homes has grown to outnumber permanent residences, cottage associations have increasing influence with local municipal governments due to their large contributions to the tax base.

2.3.3. Spatial aspects

The physical spaces for discussion of public concerns in the EOH are restaurants and coffee shops, stores and other businesses, the schools, community halls for events such as all-candidates meetings, town and county council offices and kitchen tables in households. These are all relatively accessible to any citizen. Coffeeshops tend to be male dominated but it was not uncommon to see single women using these spaces. Some residents indicated that they do little socializing of any kind. A new development is that physically distant individuals are now connecting on-line which provides year-round communication of EOH events for the many part-time residents that have internet access. For example, the Denbigh Ambulance Network used a website to petition seasonal residents and collect comments for a position paper.

3. Habermasian discourse analysis

To study the ways in which citizens understand and negotiate renewable energy developments a Habermasian discourse analysis was used. Those familiar with the use of discourse analysis in environmental studies will note a difference between this concept of “discourse” and Hajer’s notion of discourse-coalition and other Foucault inspired analyses where discourses are treated as storylines (Dryzek, 2005; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005) with an ordering or rule-making effect allowing or disallowing certain representations of the world with implications for who maintains power and control in society (Fairclough, 2003). A Habermasian discourse analysis is less concerned with uncovering hidden meanings and more concerned with how speakers coordinate their actions through language. Discourse refers to specific moments in communication when speakers are pragmatically forced to argue public reasons for their actions. Since much renewable energy conflict and discussion involves disagreement over public benefits (global climate change mitigation, local jobs and investment) and public costs (potentially unwanted land-use, costs of subsidies) this type of analysis is well-placed to explore these tensions.

The conceptual basis for the analysis can be understood by referring back to Fig. 1; communicative action operates when speakers and hearers reach mutual understanding along three dimensions; the objective world dimension of truth, the social world dimension of rightness and the subjective world dimension of sincerity (first assuming that the utterance is grammatically comprehensible to listeners). This lays the foundation for an empirical analysis of conversation and text. A few researchers have pursued this, notably (Cukier et al., 2009; Forster, 2003; Hughes, 2011; Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). Essentially they propose a framework for coding speech and text using the truth, rightness and sincerity categories. A first step is to recognize that different forms of speech refer to different validity claims (Table 2).

The materials used for coding are transcripts of four group discussions organized and moderated by the author in March–April 2011. These meetings occurred in settings that are relatively close to the ideal speech situation formulated by Habermas (participants have equal chance to speak, any assertions can be introduced or questioned, participants are free from coercion). The first two discussions were organized as focus groups. They were held in a village hall and lasted between 2.5 and 3 h. Recruitment for the first group was from residents of EOH who completed an energy survey. Twelve individuals were invited and eight showed up on the day of the meeting. An effort was made to select a diversity of opinion based on their survey responses, and participants included a mix of newcomers (2) and long-time residents (6). A one-page backgrounder was sent to participants prior to the meeting to explain the format and advise of general topics for discussion.

Participants in the second focus group were selected for their being active participants in governance structures in the region. The eight participants, half of whom were EOH residents, included township councillors (3), a representative from the two Conservation Authorities (1) and from the two Counties with jurisdiction in the region (1), the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources (1), the local regional forest management company (1), and the local regional tourism association (1). A research assistant noted non-verbal communication and audio-recorded the meetings. Both groups opened with the same question: “How will people in Addington Highlands and North Frontenac meet their energy needs 20 years from now?” which initiated a broad-ranging, lightly moderated discussion of energy options, opportunities and barriers in the region. After a break, preliminary findings from the energy survey were presented and discussed. A final exercise entailed a guided discussion of participants views on the four examples of local energy projects described in Table 1.

Additional group discussion occurred during three “information evenings” held in Flinton, Denbigh and Ompah (Fig. 2) organized by the author to report back to residents findings of the energy survey. The meetings lasted approximately one hour and began with a 10 min presentation by the author followed by a question and answer period. In each of the meetings all audience members contributed to the discussion but to varying degrees; the Ompah and Denbigh meetings featured numerous exchanges among audience members, but the Flinton meeting attracted only three residents and no transcripts were produced. Overall 27 people from the EOH participated in these events, six of whom also took part in

### Table 2: Distinguishing between different validity claims in conversation (knowledge types).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic types of speech</th>
<th>Knowledge type</th>
<th>Examples from EOH utterances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assertoric</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>“we have lots of water, lots of power situations available, from the one in Flinton to others on the Mississippi, we’ve got several river systems in our area that could be used”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulative</td>
<td>Rightness</td>
<td>“energy may be way too cheap, we are all used to cheap energy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>“being a forester I am obviously interested in wood that is where lies my interest in renewable energy”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings from the energy survey</th>
<th>Local energy projects</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

Fig. 1

The conceptual basis for the analysis can be understood by referring back to Fig. 1; communicative action operates when speakers and hearers reach mutual understanding along three dimensions; the objective world dimension of truth, the social world dimension of rightness and the subjective world dimension of sincerity (first assuming that the utterance is grammatically comprehensible to listeners). This lays the foundation for an empirical analysis of conversation and text. A few researchers have pursued this, notably (Cukier et al., 2009; Forster, 2003; Hughes, 2011; Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). Essentially they propose a framework for coding speech and text using the truth, rightness and sincerity categories. A first step is to recognize that different forms of speech refer to different validity claims (Table 2).
one or another of the focus groups. Participants included newcomers (3), people with an official governance capacity (2) and locals (22).

The utterances of participants in these four meetings were coded first to a truth, rightness or sincerity code and then to a sub-code reflecting the content of the utterance. Note that the term “utterance” comes from linguistic study and encompasses statements, questions and other types of speech. It is defined as a complete unit of talk bounded by a speaker’s silence (Loos, 2003). A second level of coding was used to mark for instances of agreement, disagreement or understanding between participants in groups discussions in order to isolate potential moments of communicative action. Follow-up interviews with several participants were conducted to confirm the outcome of any actions planned during the discussion. A third type of code was applied when speakers made references to societal structures including public opinion (the public sphere), the market, urbanization and rural context. Each transcript was read once in hard copy while making detailed notes and developing codes. The text was then introduced into the NVivo coding program (version 9.2). Notes on non-verbal cues such as nodding of heads, smiles, shrugs and smiles were also incorporated into the NVivo project record and used to supplement and verify

### 4. Findings from discourse analysis

#### 4.1. Evidence of communicative action in the Eastern Ontario Highlands

Coding of the transcripts from the four group discussions resulted in a list of 1640 utterances assigned to one or more knowledge claims (truth, rightness, sincerity) and other thematic codes. Only a fraction of the utterances could clearly be assigned as mutual understanding between two or more participants. These were part of exchanges that include outright agreement (61 times), disagreement (99 times), or other indications of understanding (229 times). For example, moments when speakers finish each other’s sentences or preface their own utterances with “another way of looking at that is...” Table 3 provides a summary of these observations.

Within-group talk of governance officials differed from within-group talk of private citizens. Mutual understanding between officials tended to arise over physical, technical and financial facts. This group described social world relations from a more economic and profit-motive perspective than did citizens. Citizens also spoke

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1. NVivo was used because of prior familiarity with the program. It proved suited to the task, although other programs likely could have been used instead.

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### Table 3

Shared understandings observed during facilitated group discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of knowledge</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Social groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Truth/facts (objective world relations)</strong></td>
<td>Physical: height and location of dams, quantities of gasoline consumed, number of houses an electricity generation site can power, available forest biomass, seasonal water levels Technical: composition of wood pellets and associated machinery, whether or not wood stove sufficient to heat home, electrical connections between grid and new generation sites, electrical storage technologies, Spatial: firewood as local resource and fossil fuels not local, local energy use patterns compared to urban or other rural areas, off-grid living details Political: provincial targets for wind and solar power, Financial: 1) price of solar panel components, payment terms of microFIT incentive program, price of wood pellets, 2) costs of hydro dam and of wood pellet factory</td>
<td>Private citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rightness/norms (social world relations)</strong></td>
<td>Self-sufficiency: village or region producing electricity for own use, inappropriateness of importing wood pellets</td>
<td>Private companies with profit motive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Truthfulness/sincerity (subjective world relations)</strong></td>
<td>Renewable energy avoids an externalized environmental cost of fossil fuel</td>
<td>Empathy with emotion of other publics: protests over wind turbines in other regions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy with emotion of other publics: protests over wind turbines in other regions</td>
<td>Keeping up with others: energy from waste, European carbon tax,</td>
</tr>
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(* = seldom; ** = occasional; *** = frequent understanding among participants where seldom = occurred briefly in only one of the 4 discussions, occasionally = occurred often in one discussion or at least briefly in more than one discussion, frequently = occurred often in more than one discussions. ** * = understanding between groups and bold ** * indicates frequent intergroup understanding. Bold text indicates exchanges which resulted in coordinated action, see text for details).
of physical and technical facts to some extent but a greater portion of their mutual understandings arose through talk of norms like local self-sufficiency and of learning from neighbors. Governance officials, on the other hand, tended to cite private companies acting with a profit motive agreement as the best actors to pursue renewable energy projects. One additional difference is that residents trusted non-professional observations of natural resource facts more so than did officials.

Analysis of the information evenings provided an opportunity to assess talk between the social groups (locals, newcomers, governance officials). Mutual understanding between individuals of different groups arose through talk of financial facts concerning details of the microFIT program and technical details about wood pellet stoves. Additional norm-based understanding arose over the rightness of regional self-sufficiency in energy production and in a general complaint about over-regulation of hydro-dams. All groups raised the topic of wind turbine protest outside the region and expressed a respect that emotions of protestors were authentic and valid.

4.1.1. Communicative action

At this point the discourse analysis has provided us with a rough idea of the relative proportions of truth, rightness and sincerity claims in certain discussion by members of certain social groups. It has also provided an indication of the extent to which mutual understanding occurs. Communicative action however goes further, it occurs when “actors coordinating their plans of action with one another by way of linguistic processes of reaching understanding” (Habermas, 1998: 325). In Table 3 the topics of understanding marked in bold are linked to the following plans of action.

1) One town councilor initiated a wood pellet factory scoping study with the township economic development committee (2) Several community leaders are pursuing the Conservation Authority official to explore an agreement on hydro-electric development of the Flinton Dam (3) the forestry official and Conservation Authority official have identified new prospective sources of thinning for fuel (4) the renewable energy expo organized by the author emerged from the group discussions. In each case it is a combination of fact-understanding and norm-understanding that appear to be required to coordinate action. For example, it is not enough to reach understanding on the fact that the region has a large enough quantity of forest biomass to support a pellet plant, an equally important discussion concerned norms of local resources use and local economic development.

4.1.2. The public interest in climate change

The discussion of climate change in the EOH is of special interest since it is a major rationale of the green energy policy and because the literature often portrays local actors as unable to rationally assess climate change mitigation (Aitken, 2010). In the case of the EOH there were very few utterances and only this one exchange – between two new residents and a town councilor - about greenhouse gases or climate change in any of the recorded discussions.

Phil*: they want to bring in a lot more wind up to 10 or 11% that would be huge, they want to use natural gas up to about 30%, nuclear is about 50% coal zero, the whole point of this exercise from OPGs [Ontario Power Generation is a state owned corporation] point of view is to get rid of coal

Margaret: Is it not an extraordinarily expensive way to do it? Wind power and solar

Phil: It is expensive in dollars but it is considered more expensive of course to the air to create carbon dioxide, that is the cost we are trying to get rid of.
Dominic: that is what I am getting at, I just want to understand why for all these small hydro potential sites (.) why people aren’t lined up at the doors trying to exploit.

This extract is part of a discussion amongst governance officials. Dominic’s argument relies on a set of assumptions that the market will naturally produce hydro-electric projects if the financial cost-benefit analysis is favorable. The behavior of the state (municipalities) and of private individuals is presumed to be equally bound by rational economic laws. There is wide understanding and sympathy of other participants of the mechanics of this assumption (e.g. familiarity with % return on investment and opportunity cost of putting money elsewhere). Initially participants assess the rightness of the hypothetical action (investing 1 million $ in a hydro-dam) against the norm of cost-benefit analysis. However further argumentation begins to scrutinize the norm itself. This is when the argument turns to the next level of practical discourse.

Lucas... if you are starting in completely virgin type of environment the risk appears to be much higher, there is no expertise, there are no people around you can draw on so there is this kind of local expertise and so on and all these other things. And I believe that they work together and then something emerges from nothing and you have that it is not as simple as saying ‘how much? 15%, good, go for it’ because you may probably run higher risk eventually

Terry: Sorry can I just come in on that. You said the million dollars, I think one of the things Ryan is saying is that it has to be a millionaire from Flinton involved as well for that social network to make sure that you don’t get vandalism or site destruction, you have to have the community buy-in as well I think, or it would be very helpful. It is not even enough for the township or municipality to be partner, the village of Flinton has to have a vested stake in it as well I think is a component

Lucas and Terry’s comments raise problems with sole reliance on rational economic actor assumptions. Predicting that hydro dams will be built involves other social factors like perceived risk and legitimacy of ownership. This example shows the ways in which discourse can uncover new reasons for action, brining in new moral principles and thereby act as a reflexive coordinating force between actors.

The next example shows how subjective world knowledge claims are deliberated.

4.2.2. Aesthetic and therapeutic critique

Margaret: who wants a whole field of wind turbines in their backyard?
Phil: fine with one
Margaret: but do you want a hundred?
Phil: I wouldn’t want a hundred but I wouldn’t mind one across the yard
Linda: I LOVE them, I think they’re fabulous.
Jane: I agree
Linda: because they’re not putting anything into the air that I have to breathe or that anybody else has to breathe

In the extract above from an information evening we see subjective claims potentially developing into both therapeutic and aesthetic critique. When Margaret issues a rhetorical challenge to the sincerity of those that might support wind and Phil accepts the challenge, but only for one wind turbine and not 100, their arguments take on a potentially therapeutic effect of revealing hitherto hidden assumptions (i.e. does wind energy mean hundreds of structures or one single structure). Later in the exchange Linda makes an emotional and evaluative statement of love which is argued in a different fashion, she refers to a complex mixture of both local cultural values (cleanliness of her air) and of norms (responsibility to not pollute another’s air). The degree to which those present agree that local clean air is an important value worthy of changing their perception of wind turbines is an example of the aesthetic critique type of argumentation. However, this example also reveals a difficulty in singling out only one type of discourse/critique in discussions as Linda’s statement could also be considered a normative claim.

4.2.3. Theoretical discourse

Phil: what is the energy balance of pellets?
Lucas: ...I don’t want to be quoted with on that if I recall the information is somewhere around 1 to 15, you gain 15 times on your energy input, for energy output relative to energy input.
Phil: and direct fuel is probably 1 to 100 or 1 to 200, that’s what I am trying to figure why would you create pellets rather than just burn it as fuel wood
Lucas: Oh I see, I see well that was my question a year ago but now I understand better, pellets are simply (.) much more ah versatile they are much more concentrated energy you can store it
Phil: mmm hmmm

The final example above is of a fact-based exchange that quickly passes to theoretical discourse. There are two context points to make immediately: 1) for reasons of space an earlier statement from Phil that he thinks wood pellets require more energy to make then they release is not included, 2) Phil’s claim that firewood (direct fuel) has a 1:100 return on energy invested (EROEI) is incorrect. Instead, firewood has an EROEI closer to 1:30 while wood pellets are approximately 1:12 (Katers and Kaurich, 2006) as Lucas had suggested. Notwithstanding the factual error on the claim regarding firewood, this exchange demonstrates the ease with which objective world descriptions of particular facts can pass to generally agreed upon ones. When Phil asks about the energy balance of pellets his question — and Lucas’ answer — presumes that a certain value exists for this characteristic and that all observers could — if required — verify that value and agree upon it. The potential manipulative effect of the error is taken up in the following section.

Each of the three preceding examples is an example of individual actors reaching mutual understanding of a particular situation through language. Habermas’ “force of the better argument” is visible in these examples as is the tendency to enroll more general and abstract forms of knowledge. The ability for discourse to refer to a particular situation while also pointing to a more generalizable rule is especially relevant considering the scale issues associated with renewable energy debates. Before pursuing this there is one more concept from Habermas’ theory that can be used to analyze the EOH case. That is his colonization thesis.

4.3. Barriers to communicative action: colonization of the lifeworld and of the public sphere

Thus far I have analyzed the energy discussions of a sample of EOH citizens for tendencies towards different types of validity claims and for evidence of communicative action and discourse. These activities are discernible in EOH discussions and identifying them provides one part of a picture of how citizens discuss and
negotiate acceptable renewable energy activities. However it is also important to highlight any barriers that hamper deliberation and prevent communicative action as well to query how exactly communicatively reached positions may or may not have political influence.

Habermas suggest barriers to communicative action occur when communication appears to be authentic to actors but is conducted in a concealed strategic manner by one of the participants (1984:333). He suggests this is sometimes done consciously by actors and it is sometimes done unconsciously. The former is termed manipulation and the latter is given the name of systematically distorted communication. These problems are related to the tendency for the goal oriented logic of the systems of the market or the bureaucracy (1987:180–187) to replace the social coordination attained via communicative action. Instead of mutual understanding around “truth”, “rightness” and “truthfulness”, it is the attainment of profit (market system) or the design of rules (bureaucracy system) that coordinate ever increasing parts of society and have “colonized” the background knowledge of our life-world and the public sphere (refer to the dashed lines in Fig. 1).

Manipulation and prevention of discourse was frequently observed in the EOH. Systematically distorted communication was a more difficult concept to apply but one possible example is provided below.

4.3.1. Manipulation and prevention of discourse

A simple example of manipulation occurred during the renewable energy expo when an individual made repeated long-winded statements to which others respectfully listened but only for a short time. The arguments of this individual were then excluded by other participants in various ways including pretending not to hear, interrupting or changing the subject. Another example is the bracketing off of acceptable topics for discussion by speakers. During one of the focus groups a speaker asserted that First Nations groups were extending land claim negotiations solely to extract more money. Others confided later they felt uncomfortable with the assertion and quickly changed the subject, in effect bracketing off this topic from further discussion. A final example is Phil’s uncontested error over the EROEI of firewood. These tendencies in conversation suggest limits to the ability of citizens to spontaneously engage in discussion approximating Habermas’ ideal speech situation (i.e. participants do not have equal chances to speak, some assertions cannot be introduced or questioned, participants may be subtly coerced, erroneous claims may remain unchallenged).

Barriers to communication can also be traced to discourse being blocked indirectly by powerful groups. Seasonal residents are presumed to value different aspects of life in the EOH than do locals, in particular a desire to preserve an idyllic recreation space.

Gus: the syndrome is that this cottage is the last one on the lake, its mine nobody else and they don’t want to change and that’s our tax base it really is...they don’t want to change the landscape, they want to keep it as it is

Locals expressed the view that seasonal residents would be highly opposed to any wind turbine development, more so than locals and for this reason some felt any discussion of wind development should be avoided. This despite evidence that attitudes towards wind turbines are not statistically different for the two groups (Fast and McLeman, 2012).

4.3.2. Systematically distorted communication

Trying to identify systematically distorted communication requires identifying instances of unconscious pursuit of strategic goals by participants. It is highly subjective. This exchange from the citizens’ focus group is one possible example. Despite interest in the technical constraints of regional electricity distribution, participants could not pursue this deliberation and were forced to refer back to bureaucratic policy. Systematic distortion results because their discourse is limited to the rules of the policy (system logic) which “colonizes” any ability to reach other understandings.

Jason: How big a project Eric would it be then that you would not be able to use the regular lines?

Eric: I am not sure uh

Jason: because the electricity you know flows both ways

Reggie: I see it your way too I mean how much does this generate this little mill, a couple of little mills

Eric: What I do know is anything um above 10 kW becomes a FIT project and not a microFIT and a FIT now brings in a whole bunch of other requirements like this economic something test... and there is other, capacity allocation doesn’t actually kick in until 500 kW so if you stay in the 10 to 500 you are ok in that regard but you do as soon as you exceed the 10 kW which is why most people sell 9.99 kW systems to make sure they are under the 10

5. Discussion

5.1. Insight into EOH renewable energy futures

What insight does this Habermasian analysis provide to the picture presented at the beginning of the paper of four different renewable energy opportunities in the EOH? First, it suggests that any tendency for collaboration needs to overcome the tendency for governance officials and citizens to talk past each other. The officials’ have a preponderance for objective-world claims and fact based discussion of technical details and financing mechanisms while local citizens are more inclined to operate with social-world claims including the degree to which renewable energy projects contribute to a stronger community and involve their neighbors. It also suggests that of the four specific actions to come out of the discussions (scoping study for a pellet plant, preliminary negotiation of hydro-electric dam, preliminary negotiation for use of wood thinning, and the renewable energy expo) it is the pellet plant and hydro dam actions that have the best chance for long-term success since the reasons supporting the actions come from both facts (quantity of biomass, layout and cost of dam) and norms (make pellets locally, community buy-in creating a social network to prevent vandalism at the dam), but most importantly are understood as valid by both locals and officials. Table 1 introduced earlier in the paper of the status of four different renewable energy planning examples can now be extended to include a prediction (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Renewable energy opportunity</th>
<th>Status in the EOH</th>
<th>Predicted future status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household solar electricity</td>
<td>Increasing presence via individual ownership of micro-size projects</td>
<td>Unequal abilities to pursue incentive slows adoption and creates tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind farm</td>
<td>Unrealized</td>
<td>Remain unrealized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomass pellets</td>
<td>Traditional forms of use high, new forms use emerging</td>
<td>Traditional use will remain but adoption of new forms will not proceed without greater effort for local supply of wood resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small hydro</td>
<td>Unrealized</td>
<td>Formal scoping efforts will provide sustained interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The wind farm opportunity is slightly different. It will remain unrealized because of power imbalances in the EOH. There will be no further attempts from officials to attract wind developers partly for fear of angering the seasonal resident “tax base”. The resulting discussion about wind turbines is a case of what Habermas terms manipulation because citizens strategically give more credence to certain opinions, not because of the force of a better argument, but because of the force of political power — in this case, financial dependence on seasonal residents. Distortions at the level of interpersonal communication can often be traced to distorting effects at the level of social and political-economic structures (Forester, 1985).

There was a remarkable absence of environmental reasons in the discussions of citizens and local governance officials. At the state level, mitigating climate change and moving away from fossil fuels are at the core of justifications for the green energy policy and programs. These concerns, while expressed by some individuals do not appear to be publicly validated in the EOH. The Habermasian discourse analysis with its emphasis on looking at three different claims helped isolate this point. Without local social testing of the environmental reasons underpinning programmes like microFIT and the Green Schools programme, citizens appear to judge success or failure only on the merits of their technical features. For the microFIT this is about favourable financial rate of return to solar or hydro project owners. For the Green Schools programme it is whether or not wood pellets heat the school to the same level and for the same cost as does heating oil. This raises two tentative broad interpretations. First that the province’s green energy policy is illegitimate; the rationales underpinning the policy do not pass Habermas’ general discourse principle of being agreeable to all those concerned with an opportunity to discuss. However, if we consider that citizens and governance officials in the EOH overwhelmingly use the logic of the market and of the bureaucracy to negotiate renewable energy projects in their region, another interpretation is possible. The pseudo-rational logics of the market system and bureaucracy have diminished the terms of public reasoning over renewable energy. In Habermasian terms, there has been a colonization of the lifeworld and of the public sphere. While tentative, these two interpretations of “illegitimate policy” or “colonized policy” for renewable energy in rural Ontario likely overlap and could be explored further with additional local case studies of deliberations and more focus on the public sphere represented by broadcasting media.

5.2. Deliberative or agonistic processes for renewable energy planning?

Deliberative processes are assumed to result in better environmental outcomes in much green political theory despite varied empirical support (Lovbrand and Khan, 2010). To date analysis of renewable energy deliberations have suggested that deliberation in the strong Habermasian sense of actors finding consensus and changing behavior as a result of the better argument is unrealistic and even impossible. Instead it is better to strive for agonistic processes which assume irreconcilable differences and the need for settlements (Barry and Ellis, 2010; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009). On the other hand, there is a growing body of work analyzing environmental discussions showing that actors change positions after deliberation (Ashworth et al., 2010; Hobson and Niemeyer, 2011; Niemeyer, 2011) moving towards a “meta-consensus” (Niemeyer, 2011).

The EOH case generally supports this latter view. While it is important to note that there is not a current energy dispute in the region polarizing opinions, there are some deeply held differences in attitudes towards wind farms and hydro-electric dams which aggravate existing class and social faultlines (e.g., seasonal resident opposition and permanent resident interest) (Fast and McLeman, 2012). However, these differences do not show signs of being irreconcilable in the way other renewable energy studies have concluded. Instead the emergence of new discourses during focus group discussion helped participants to identify four collective actions around energy. A movement towards a collective action discourse was also seen in (Hobson and Niemeyer, 2011) larger analysis of climate change adaptation options.

The relative absence of climate change discussion in this case also suggest a refinement may be needed in characterizing of renewable energy disputes as (among other things) an active conscious tension between global climate change benefits against a local cost (Barry et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2007; Wolsink, 2000). In the EOH case the tension is only there in principle, local actors have not included global environmental reasons in their reasons. Any agreement or disagreement over specific renewable energy projects is more about technical merits or absence/presence of local benefit. Global climate change aspects were absent rather than actively deliberated and found lacking. This was not due to an insensitivity towards global events as the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster featured in pro-renewables arguments during group discussions (Fast and McLeman, 2012) (see also (Truelove, 2012) for discussion of the potential influence of Fukushima on North American energy source attitudes).

Instead of intrinsically irreconcilable differences, the EOH case suggests a capacity for collaboration that is threatened by larger social processes. There is demographic and political—economic change arising from amenity migration and powerful property-based organizations with strict interests in recreational land-use. A market system entrenched by the choice of the State to use financial incentive programs like microFIT shapes discussions towards a return-on-investment logic to the exclusion of environmental reasoning. As discussed below the mass media dominated public sphere expresses views and values which do not reflect local discussions. All of these forces distort, not only communicative rationality to use Habermas’ term, but also visions for “agonism.” Indeed if the key feature of an agonistic approach is the notion that energy decisions and policy directions can be “re-examined afresh, re-argued and renegotiated in the light of new circumstances, scientific evidence or normative claims” (Barry and Ellis, 2010: 35), then there is very little to distinguish it from Habermasian notions of discourse and communicative rationality.

The real challenge is designing planning processes that are sensitive to how communication is distorted and suggesting remedies. For example, in the EOH citizens faced a disadvantage in their inability to enter into extended fact based theoretical discourse. Discussion faltered around uncertainty of the operation of the electricity grid (e.g. what is the capacity of the wires? where is electricity produced actually used?). This type of distortion can be remedied. Others (Ashworth et al., 2010; Luskin et al., 2007; Niemeyer, 2011) have shown that day-long briefings are sufficient to arm citizens with enough technical information to deliberate complex technical topics. Improving the standing of participants like this is a better measure of public participation than counts of the number of people attending public meetings (Parkins and Mitchell, 2005). This principle goes both ways; as technical experts become familiar with local cultural values and norms this extends their ability to enter into extended practical discourse and aesthetic critique aiding deliberation.

5.3. Contributions to Habermas’ theory

5.3.1. Intersubjective understanding and formal pragmatics

There are only a few examples in the literature of an utterance analysis of actual communication using the truth,
rightness and sincerity framework of validity claims. Forester’s 12-line analysis of a city planning staff discussion (Forester, 2003) is one while other examples rely solely on written text and not spoken utterances. Thus this study’s application of the framework to hundreds of utterances over a total of 8 h of discussion in 4 different meetings breaks new ground in an empirical direction that Habermas himself advocated for (1984: 139). Two contributions come out of this exercise:

(1) It is difficult to clearly isolate moments of shared understanding or what Habermas, following Austin, calls “successful speech acts”. As an observer of communication during and after the group discussions it is impossible to see inside the perspective of participants to know if and what parts of an utterance are accepted as valid. Some, arguing from conceptual examples assert that it is impossible for two persons’ understandings to match exactly and that this is a fatal flaw of Habermas theory (Thomassen, 2010; Wright, 2010). What this study finds is that it is straightforward to isolate understandings between participants, particularly when they express disagreement or agreement with others’ utterances. Mutual understandings over an utterance are also observable when participants incorporate and/or elaborate other speakers’ points (e.g., “As Eric was saying…”). The more subtle and important observation is that understanding is a separate communicative step that may or may not proceed to agreement or disagreement between speakers.

(2) Habermas’ formal pragmatics originally stated that listeners evaluate all three validity claims (truth, rightness, sincerity) simultaneously for every utterance. He has since modified this to say that one type of claim is prioritized while the others remain underemphasized but are still “redeemable” (Heath, 2003). In the talk analyzed for this project, the latter understanding appears correct. Speakers’ utterances were usually made and received in relation to one validity claim (e.g. truth) but sometimes listeners chose to pursue alternative interpretations (e.g., rightness or sincerity).

5.3.2. The public sphere

Habermas’ theory puts strong emphasis on the public sphere but does little to locate the public sphere spatially (Howell, 1993) or to detail the actual practices connecting it to democratic institutions. The EOH offers an example with which to work through his concepts.

Publicly acting organizations including the Denbigh ambulance committee, and cottage associations showed tendencies towards communicative action by considering opposing views and putting forth arguments that, in principle, could be challenged by any interested party. In other words, by being forced to justify their particular interests in a public arena, these groups adopt a position oriented towards coordination on the basis of shared reasons. This fits with Habermas’ emphasis on the public sphere as the site for communicative testing and generating of public values to guide political decision (Fig. 1). Furthermore, Habermas sees the public sphere as “an arena for the perception, identification and treatment of problems affecting the whole of society” composed of many public spheres which “cling to locales” but ultimately become abstracted from local context (1996: 359–362). One illustration of this process is the way the Denbigh Ambulance committee publicly argues against closure of their specific station by insisting on equal rights to emergency treatment regardless of location.

However there are also important limits to the ability of the local public sphere to generate public values accepted freely by all. Notably the public pressure of these groups acting in the public sphere was not due to the strength of rational arguments alone. These groups make strategic alliances and use flattery or coercion in presenting their public positions. For example, the Ambulance Network enrolled the support of citizens of a neighboring County to raise the threat of authorities having to pay for more costly trans-boundary ambulance calls if the Denbigh base was closed. These more strategic measures are considered appropriate ways to reach decision makers and few in the EOH would rely only on reasoned critique of policy decisions as suggested by an ideal-type public sphere.

A second barrier to public sphere interventions in specific political questions is a lack of participants. The existing strong public sphere organizations in EOH are interest-based groups that do not consider energy issues and would require a change in mandate and purpose to do so which is unlikely to happen. While there is an energy group established by one of the county governments it has the problem of very little citizen involvement as its four citizen members are energy professionals, it includes no locals born and raised in the region and it performs little outreach activities. It is what Habermas (1996: 375) calls a “mere user” of the public sphere and not an “indigenous” actor.

Thus there are several implications for a Habermasian vision of the public sphere. First, a tendency for the public sphere to deflect and re-orient particular interests towards communicatively agreed positions is confirmed. But this is only part of the story. Strategic action also plays an important role and communicative action is re-feudalizing public opinion to the point that the ostensibly public values transmitted to decision makers are ones that that local publics have been unable to criticize or influence.

5.4. The use of communicative action theory in renewable energy studies

Overall, the value of a Habermasian approach to analyzing specific renewable energy developments is as a diagnostic focussed on the social process of understanding problems and constructing solutions (Forester, 1989, 2003). This study does not pretend that the ideal speech situation could ever exist in the EOH but takes seriously Habermas’ simple point that for language to mean anything to users, users must communicate as though it could exist and this endows communication with a rational (e.g., problem-solving) potential. Habermas’ theory of language use provides tools to interpret how arguments are presented and responded to by officials and citizens. By holding up communicative action and the public sphere as templates, the study was able to identify deviations from the ideal and hypothesize on the forces that prevent communicative action and constrain deliberation over renewable energy. The contributions of Habermasian concepts of communicative action and communicative rationality are much more
empirically based and revealing of factors that distort social coordination than critics Flyvbjerg (1998) and Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) give credit for.

Within the context of a “discursive turn” in renewable energy studies, Habermas’ theory remains highly relevant. The dominant approach is tending towards q-methodology to analyze shared beliefs of citizens around energy issues (Brannstrom et al., 2011; Fisher and Brown, 2009) but a Habermasian account provides a more realistic (if less statistically rigorous) picture. By observing the public testing of arguments the analyst is more closely attuned to the social construction of values than if the analyst focuses solely on the correlation between individual’s private responses to a set of statements. Finally, the thorough and critical view of society posed by Habermas offers important concepts and ways to think about the role and the practice of policy and planning in a democracy.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented a Habermasian analysis of the response in citizens of the Eastern Ontario Highlands to planning efforts for renewable energy. It has shown how an investigation of utterances, communicative action, discourse and the public sphere can arrive at some tentative predictions for the future of specific renewable energy developments in the region. Unrecognized by governance officials, there are normative claims around solar electricity from citizen concerns about unequal access to incentive programs. The biomass project suffers from a lack of attention to desire for use of local biomass and may fail. Wind-turbine projects will also fail not because the technology has been extensively argued but because unchecked credence is given to a perceived position of the powerful seasonal resident population. There is some chance of success for small hydro projects. All of the renewable energy projects lack the legitimacy assumed by the state of being understood by locals as environmentally beneficial, instead other reasons dominated discussion including costs, local production and the rules of the incentive program.

Working through an analysis of utterances and discourses in this way also contributed to the theory of communicative action. Understanding between actors along the three dimensions of facts, norms and sincerity is at the crux of Habermas’ theory but there have been little empirical attempts to gauge this process. This study successfully operationalized the fact/norm/sincerity framework to identify moments of understanding along each dimension between individuals in group discussions. Moments of discourse whereby individuals and organizations argue in universal and public terms could also be isolated. These findings provide some support for Habermas’ notion of a communicative rationality and a public sphere active in society. However, there was also much evidence of barriers to ideal-type communication.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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