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Uncommon ground: The role of different place attachments in explaining community renewable energy projects

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Abstract

For rural communities, energy projects can provide a host of benefits, and yet also be a source of significant conflict. Place attachment has become an increasingly popular concept for understanding local responses to large scale renewable energy installations. However, there has been significantly less attention paid to how place attachment influences local responses to community-led developments. This study contributes to the body of research on place attachment by examining its role in shaping opinions on two locally initiated projects. Interviews were conducted with residents in two rural communities in the Scottish Highlands, where community organisations are developing renewable energy projects. The findings show that place attachment was an important motivator for the development of these projects, but that different types of place attachment also formed a key source of disagreement. Finally, the implications of these findings for rural communities engaging in community-led development initiatives will be discussed.

Keywords: community-led development, rural Scotland, place attachment, renewable energy, rural development
This paper focuses on the role of place attachment in shaping community-led energy projects in remote rural Scotland, and local responses to them. We demonstrate the value of this concept for considering endogenous development-related conflicts within rural communities, and for providing a nuanced understanding of the way in which responses are formed.

We chose Scotland because of the preponderance of remote rural communities, and the associated policy focus (Markantoni and Woolvin 2015, Skerratt and Hall, 2011). The Scottish Government has developed programmes to support community-driven development and engage communities in the transition towards low-carbon futures (Creamer 2014, Markantoni and Woolvin 2015). This includes the Scottish Government’s Routemap for Renewable Energy, which sets a target on 500MW in community and local ownership by 2020; and the Scottish Government’s Local Energy Challenge Fund (2014), with £20m available to support community energy projects. However, our analysis has a broader relevance beyond the Scottish context. Local movements promoting small-scale renewable energy have emerged across Europe (Harnmeijer et al. 2012, Kunze and Becker 2014), and issues around local acceptance based on competing visions of (rural) places are therefore also anticipated to be pertinent elsewhere.

One factor to account for policy makers’ support for community renewable energy is the assumption that such projects will enjoy greater local acceptance (Warren and McFadyen 2010). While the definition of ‘community’ in community energy continues to be a source of discussion (Rudolph et al. 2015, Walker 2011), community energy projects are likely to have several key characteristics which are deemed to garner support. First, they are likely to be small: projects are often at the meso-level, smaller than technologies that are generally associated with a centralised energy system, but larger
than a single household/building (Devine-Wright and Wiersma 2013, Walker and Cass 2007). Second, the community label indicates a set of social relations expected to influence how these technologies are developed and the outcomes distributed. There is the presumption that participants play an active role in the development of the project and that benefits will be experienced collectively (Devine-Wright and Wiersma 2013, Walker and Devine-Wright 2008). Such benefits can be wide-ranging and include income generation, tackling fuel poverty, community regeneration, increased social cohesion, addressing inequalities, and skills development for local people (Capener 2014, Middlemiss and Parrish 2010, Murphy 2010, Walker 2007). Third, from these expectations of scale and local involvement, it is often presumed that community projects are more sensitive to local concerns, and therefore more acceptable to the communities in which they are situated (e.g. Bomberg and McEwen 2012, Hielscher 2011, Walker et al. 2007, 2010, Warren and McFadyen 2010).

This assumption has ensured that local acceptance of community projects has received only limited empirical attention (see Otto and Leibenath 2014 for one recent exception); or has meant a focus on the strength of support and opposition, rather than the contributing factors (e.g. Haggett et al. 2013, Warren and McFadyen 2010). Here, we move beyond the assumption that such projects will be well-received and present a novel focus on the contexts of rural community energy schemes. We use the lens of ‘place attachment’ to do so. Research focused on large scale renewable energy projects, has found that place, and related concepts of attachment and identity, plays an important role in forming opinions of energy developments (Bell et al. 2013, Devine-Wright 2009, van der Horst 2007, Vorkinn and Riese 2001). Yet, little is known regarding community projects and the impact of ‘place’ on their acceptance. By considering the complex role
that place plays, a more complete understanding of community responses can emerge (Manzo and Perkins 2006).

This matters because of the location of community energy projects. Although found across Scotland, many are located in remote rural areas renowned for their natural beauty and unspoiled character. These are also often places where communities are “fragile” or “in decline” (Murphy 2010, p. 10) and in need of an economic boost (Mackenzie 2012). Furthermore, the rise of community energy initiatives has coincided with land reforms aimed to redress the historic inequalities of land ownership, by promoting a collectivist, place-based community development model (Shucksmith, 2010). These coinciding movements are both argued to help write people ‘into the land’, challenging dominant discourses of who and what rural land is for (Mackenzie 2006a, 2006b, Shucksmith 2010). In this context, we explore two rural community energy projects with different landownership arrangements, aiming to further a sociological understanding of how different perceptions of place shape rural visions which inform both the motivations for, and responses to, such projects.

Place and place attachment

There has been a range of sociological work examining communities, local responses, and energy projects (Aitken 2009, 2010, Haggett 2008, 2010, Woods 2003), and sociological work positing the value of a place based approach (for example, Gieryn’s seminal paper in 2000) but little which has brought these two traditions together. In much sociology, place “remains invisible only because it is rarely framed in this way” (Gieryn 2000, p. 464). We aim to make place visible in this study, and explicitly demonstrate the value of incorporating ‘place’ when considering responses to rural energy projects. We therefore draw on concepts from across disciplines to explore the way in which place can
be understood in the broader context of human-environment relations (Lin and Lockwood 2014a, 2014b) as well as contributing to an understanding of how those relations are perceived and constructed (Greider and Garkovich 1994, Hannigan 2006).

We follow Devine-Wright’s (2009, p.427) lead in considering ‘place’ as both the physical aspect of a location, but also as the “variety of meanings associated with that location by individuals or groups”. The community groups at the centre of this study define themselves in terms of geographical area, which overlap with historic parish boundaries. Although these ‘places’ are both administrative and geographically bounded areas, they are not static pre-given entities. Rather, their meanings are contingent and at times controversial, produced through the practice of social relations both within and external to the location (Harvey 1996, Massey 2004, Mackenzie 2006b).

There are numerous strands of research concerning people-place relations, including those focused on sense of place (Convery et al. 2012, Shamai 1991, Tuan 1980); place identity (Proshansky et al. 1983); and place attachment (Devine-Wright and Howes 2010, Lewicka 2011), described as a distinct form of sense of place (Convery et al 2012, Jorgensen and Stedman 2001) and a precursor to place identity (Hernández et al 2007). The different disciplinary traditions from which these research strands have emerged has, however, contributed to a lack of consensus regarding the meaning, and interpretation of these concepts, as well as the precise relation between them (Convery et al 2012, Hidalgo and Hernández 2001, Horlings 2015). What they have in common is a concern with the – generally positive – meaning assigned to a particular location (Vorkinn and Riese 2001).

In this paper we focus on place attachment, most simply defined as the bonding between “individuals and their meaningful environments” (Scannell and Gifford 2010, p.289). Early literature was often concerned with the role of (shared) social bonds,
processes and connections that contribute to people’s attachment to their neighbourhood (Lewicka 2011, Scannell & Gifford 2010). There, the physical aspects of a place are merely a setting for social interactions. More recent research however, has tended to conceptualise place attachment as having two dimensions: the physical and the social (e.g. Devine-Wright and Clayton 2010, Gunderson and Watson 2007, Hidalgo and Hernández 2001, Vorkinn and Riese 2001). The physical dimension of place attachment can include both functional attachment – the direct reliance of people on a place’s physical attributes or resources to support specific goals or activities (Lin and Lockwood 2014a) – and emotional attachment: the socially constructed meanings given to landscape features, enabling aspects of a location to become part of an individual’s identity (Greider and Garkovich 1994, Hernández et al. 2007, Lewicka 2011, Proshansky et al. 1983).

This contrasts with the second dimension of place attachment, which refers to the presence of current social ties, as well as an emotional connection based on personal, historical or cultural connections to the area (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001, Lin and Lockwood 2014b, Raymond et al. 2010). This social attachment can be experienced at an individual level, but also as part of a collective community identity, based on a shared locality, history and sense of belonging (Heiskanen et al. 2010, Walker and Devine-Wright 2008).

Thus, research on place attachment has encompassed a variety of different contexts and disciplines. We suggest it can be adapted to explore issues relevant to community development projects: the attachments formed to places, the relevance of the social context, and how these issues influence perceptions of change. We focus in what follows on the effect of place attachment on the development of community energy projects.
An interesting and emerging body of research has applied the ideas about place attachment to explain local responses to energy infrastructure (e.g. Devine-Wright and Howes 2010, Vorkinn and Riese 2001). Early research often focused on how material factors (such as type of technology and physical proximity) influence opinions of a particular development (Lee et al. 1989, Thayer and Freeman 1987, Wolsink 1989). More recent work has suggested a place-based perspective which moves beyond the prominence assigned to physical proximity on shaping opinions. Instead, this place-based perspective highlights the socially constructed, symbolic aspects of places – informed by previous and current human-environment interactions – and how development proposals ‘fit’ with these (Devine-Wright 2011, Devine-Wright and Howes 2010, Haggett et al. 2014, van der Horst 2007). The place-based perspective adopted by this body of research refers both to the specific sites where developments are proposed, but also to the transformation of wider landscapes through “the extension of industrial and extractive components of the energy system into places and communities that previously were unaffected” (Bridge et al. 2013, p. 335). The ongoing expansion of renewable energy into remote rural landscapes therefore requires a re-evaluation of not only the use and form of these landscapes, but also the cultural meanings and emotional attachments embedded in them (Bridge et al. 2013).

Research using a place-based approach has primarily focused on large scale, commercial energy projects. Local acceptance is therefore often framed as resistance to developments proposed by ‘outsiders’, deemed insensitive to local, place-based, attitudes and concerns (Dalby and Mackenzie 1997, Devine-Wright 2009, Haggett 2009, Murphy and Smith 2013, Scannell and Gifford 2010). Whilst this literature tends to consider these critical responses to development project as place-protective action, those drawing on
relational notions of place have argued that these responses can also be seen as multi-scale and network-oriented strategies to redefine and reproduce ‘place’ (e.g. Escobar 2001, Massey 2004) in ways that avoid what Swyngedouw (2004, p.43) sees as the dangers of ‘militant particularism’. As such, these places can be framed not only in terms of resistance, but also as places of possibility (Mackenzie 2012, Massey 2004).

Community-led projects present an interesting and different dynamic for the study of responses to proposed developments and the role ‘place’ plays as these projects have arisen from within communities, rather than being ‘imposed’ upon them. Studies suggest that community-ownership of renewable energy creates higher level of local acceptance (Barry and Chapman 2009, Bell et al. 2005, Toke 2005), but how place might contribute to this higher level of acceptance is not well understood. In this paper, we therefore apply the ideas presented above to analyse responses to community-owned projects.

Different people, different attachments

As well as a greater empirical discussion of the role of place in acceptance of community-led projects being warranted, we suggest a more nuanced understanding of place attachment is also required. Others adopting a place-based approach to understand local acceptance have considered the importance of distinct characteristics and associated meanings of different places (e.g. Batel and Devine-Wright 2015, Devine-Wright and Howes 2010). Attachment is not necessarily experienced in a uniform manner by residents of one place, however, and differences within places should not be neglected. One approach is to explore the personal characteristics that influence an individual’s place attachment (Haggett et al. 2014, Lewicka 2011). This is especially relevant in the context of rural areas, where ‘incomers’ or second home owners are often juxtaposed with long-
term residents regarding their values and attitudes towards rural landscapes (Pitkänen et al. 2014).

Previous research has often equated length of residence, through notions of ‘insidedness’ (Relph 1976) or ‘rootedness’ (Hay 1998), with increased levels of place attachment (Lewicka 2011, Stedman 2006). Through greater use of local areas, local residents are ‘expected to develop attachment to the areas to a larger degree’ (Vorkinn and Riese 2001, p.250). Hence, levels of ‘insidedness’ (Relph 1976) or ‘rootedness’ (Hay 1998) are often used to explain different degrees of place attachment. Additional research has equated ‘insidedness’ not with strength of attachment, but with different aspects of place attachment. For example, length of residency may affect the shape of social place attachment, with long-term residents being more concerned with the long-term future for their communities, whereas ‘incomers’ may be more focused on short-term desires and priorities (Bomberg and McEwen 2012 Walker et al. 2010). Others have suggested that ‘incomers’ may have inherently different environmental values and different perceptions of the land than long-standing residents (Hernández et al. 2007, Stockdale et al. 2000).

In the Scottish Highlands, these issues have particular resonance. Discussions around community energy revive long-standing debates surrounding land use in the Scottish Highlands. These debates invariably revolve around competing views of those ‘outwith’ and those ‘within’, where the environment becomes a “proxy battleground” for broader issues of demographic changes, social cohesion, economic inequalities and identity (McIntosh 2014, p. xxi, also Hunter 2014, Wood 2003). The expansion of renewable energy projects in these areas provides a new dimension for this debate, as newer residents may be more sensitive towards new developments (Bomberg and McEwen 2012), and more concerned about their visual impact (Toke 2005). This discussion is not limited to large-scale energy developments. Some small-scale
community-led developments have also been perceived as potentially at odds with the conservation of ‘natural heritage’ or ‘wild land’ (Mackenzie 2006a, 2012). This research explores the importance of how different perceptions of place influence individual opinions.

Methodology

Several frameworks (e.g. Devine-Wright 2009, Walker et al. 2011) have been developed for understanding public responses to renewable energy developments, the role ‘place’ plays in informing these responses, and their evolution throughout the development process. We drew on Walker et al.’s (2011) framework as it emphasises contextuality, such as the characteristics of local places, and pays attention to the actors involved in promoting developments as well as the wider public. Whilst we limited the contextual variables to focus primarily on the role of place, this contextual factor is particularly pertinent to explore in connection to community projects, as both groups of actors (‘developers’ and ‘public’) are situated in the same places, ensuring that both the proposals for development and the responses to it are informed by a particular spatial and cultural context. The community-led nature of our projects therefore required the incorporation of an additional analytical dimension; how place attachment is mobilised to initiate renewable energy developments, rather than a sole focus on the role it plays in informing responses to these developments.

Different methods can be used to understand place-related meanings (Lin and Lockwood 2014b). Whilst a longitudinal approach can reveal the evolution of responses to place changes over time, the majority of studies to date have focused on one particular aspect of understanding these responses (Devine-Wright 2009). Our chosen methods
complement the, often quantitative, research in this field to date (e.g. Scannell and Gifford 2010, Vorkinn and Riese 2001). Based on the assumption that physical places obtain their meanings through a variety of ways, such as through individual and group memories, and symbols associated with a place (Lewicka 2011), we adopt a qualitative approach to highlight the subjective ways in which people form relationships to an area (Gunderson and Watson 2007) and the role this plays in both initiating community-led developments and in interpreting and evaluating proposed changes to places.

This study is based on a series of semi-structured interviews across two case studies, allowing for flexibility whilst also providing a structure that enables cross-case study comparability (Bryman 2012). Participants were selected using a snowball sampling strategy. A total of nineteen interviews were conducted during summer 2013: seven with active members of the community organisations developing the energy projects, eight with local residents not actively involved, and four with key stakeholders including consultants and agency workers. All names have been removed to ensure participants’ anonymity.

Whilst aware of the limitations of a small-scale qualitative study, we believe this approach is valuable as interview participants often share information that extends beyond what is captured by quantitative research (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995). We suggest, accordingly, that this qualitative inductive approach generates illuminating data based on participants’ expression of place attachment through their own words, allowing their subjective, lived-experiences to be better understood (Davenport and Anderson 2005). In reporting our findings we have chosen to make extensive use of participants’ own words and provide descriptive contextual details, enabling the reader to assess the applicability of our findings to other contexts (Creswell and Miller 2000).
An initial range of topics were used in the interviews, with additional questions and prompts chosen depending on the respondent. As our emphasis is on respondents’ meanings and interpretations of issues and events, there was significant space for interviewees to pursue topics of particular interest to them (Blaikie 2000). Analysis of the interviews started with open coding, through which the data was broken down into eight categories and nineteen sub-categories. Following this, relationships were established between categories and the data was put back together thematically, with key themes identified for further analysis (Bryman 2012, Straus and Corbin 1990).

Case studies

Two community groups in neighbouring areas in the Scottish Highlands were identified as case studies. This region was selected because of the significant institutional context provided by Scottish Government policy and targets, and previous research suggesting that the use of shared symbolic resources, such as place attachment, by community groups in the Highlands can be particularly successful in garnering support for community-led energy projects (Bomberg and McEwen 2012).

Both case studies are located in the northwestern part of the Scottish Highlands. Case study 1 is a community organisation that represents an area with approximately 300 residents spread out over five settlements. Case study 2 is a community organisation in the geographical area directly to the north of case study 1. Its main town has approximately 600 citizens, close to half the area’s total population. Both areas are located more than 70 miles away from the nearest city, and are classified by the Scottish Government as ‘remote rural’ (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics n.d., a,b,c). They are highly valued for their landscape and natural environment: both are part of a designated National Scenic Area and are home to a number of sites with environmental designations.
Additionally, the location of case study 2 is designated as ‘wild land’ by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH 2014b). These areas are also home to small communities with a strong sense of identity (MacPhail 2002, Scotland Office 2013). Therefore the effects of both physical and social dimensions of place attachment in shaping people’s opinions on the proposed developments are valuable to study.

One relevant key difference between the two communities is that of landownership. Landownership arrangements are key to the development of community energy – “who owns the land can work the wind” (Mackenzie 2006b, p.386) – and also indirectly through influencing people’s perceptions of place (Hunter 2012, Murphy 2010). The areas represented by the two community groups have different landownership arrangements. The community organisation in case study 2 owns the land on which they propose to develop a hydro project. In case study 1, the land on which the energy projects are to be built is owned by a national conservation charity. We explore the impacts of these different arrangements in this study.

Project description

Both case studies focus on projects developed by the community, for the community; the communities are taking the lead in developing these projects, and the financial returns are to be used to fund further community projects.

Case study 1 are developing a 100% community-owned 900kW wind turbine and a joint 435kW hydro project (together with the landowning charitable body), in which the community group will have a 50% share. Case study 2 had previously proposed a three-turbine wind project, but due to vocal local objections the community group changed this to a 100% community-owned 2MW hydro scheme.
At the time of research the projects were in the pre-planning stage. Previous research has found that the stage of the development affects public opinion, with support at its lowest when a project has been proposed, but not yet built (Devine-Wright 2005, van der Horst 2007, Warren and McFadyen 2010, Wolsink 2007). This temporary dip in support has been attributed to people who are generally weakly pro-renewables but who change their mind in response to project-specific issues, such as proposed technology, or concerns with the development process (van de Horst, 2007). This is followed by a return to more positive attitudes once a project is operational. It is therefore anticipated that the opinions expressed by our interviewees may be more critical than if the projects had been at other stages in the development process.

Findings

Our analysis shows that place attachment was important for informing opinions on community energy projects in two ways. Firstly, it can be mobilised as a driver to start a project. Secondly, and conversely, it can also form a source of protest against community energy projects. We consider both of these roles of place attachment below.

Place attachment as impetus to develop

Our data indicates that place attachment not only informs responses to community-led energy developments, but also plays an important role in providing the *impetus* for these developments. As in other parts of rural Scotland (Creamer 2014), these communities have experienced significant social changes which have brought a number of challenges to residents’ ways of life. Interviewees in both case studies considered their communities to be under threat, due to fewer employment opportunities, high cost of living, and the
closure of local businesses (threats to functional attachment) and associated changes in demographics (threats to social attachment). This is significant because the preservation of these attachments is what mobilised some residents to take action:

“I suppose I feel a big stake in it all... I don’t want the school to close, I don’t want to see the shops go. [...] I don’t want to be living here all on my own.” (Community representative, case study 1)

These threats motivated one community group to run a visioning exercise: where do we see ourselves, as a community, in 5/10/20 years? This mix of threats to existing place attachment and the development of alternative place-based visions for the future led the group to consider its options. Supported by stories from other communities who had managed to ‘turn the tide’ as a result of having a regular income stream, the group began to pursue the possibility of setting up a community energy scheme.

As a result of a similar process community group 2 had initially purchased part of the local estate – to create new opportunities to benefit the local population. However, this also created new challenges, specifically the income needed to run the estate:

“You can’t eat landscape. You can’t sell it to people. [...] I don’t know how you can make the ground pay except by exploiting it.” (Resident, case study 2)

As is evident from the large number of community-owned estates who are in the process or have developed renewable energy technologies, this is a key way of ‘making
the ground pay’. Although some interviewees emphasised the desire to develop renewables from an environmental-perspective, ultimately, the decision to embark on a renewable energy scheme was based on its potential to provide a long-term, relatively stable income stream, which in turn could be used to create new opportunities:

“The key driver [for exploiting renewable energy] is an economic one. It’s what it can do for the organisation.” (Community representative, case study 2)

For the community group in case study 2, landownership therefore provided an impetus for pursuing renewable energy. However, in our case studies, physical ownership was not as important as we had anticipated based on the literature (e.g. Mackenzie’s 2006b, 2008). Indeed, the land-owning organisation in case study 2 decided to abandon an initial proposal for a wind project after encountering significant local opposition. On the contrary, the organisation in case study 1 was encouraged by the conservation charity that owns the land to develop a second, joint ownership, project, which received significant support from the local community. Hence, in these case studies having ownership of the land was not the decisive factor in determining the success of these projects.

Nonetheless, the community landownership movement seems to have had an important indirect impact on the development of these projects, through changing people’s relation to places and creating a context where confidence and local people taking charge are encouraged (Mackenzie 2006b, Murphy 2010). As the director for one community group indicated:
“It is all part of something bigger isn’t it? Community energy projects, communities’ quests for landownership, Scottish independence... it all stems from a desire to take control of our own affairs.” (Community representative, case study 1).

To summarise, different forms of place attachment were found to play a role in providing an impetus for the development of community renewable energy: perceived threats to both functional and social place attachment and emergent, alternative visions for the future were catalysts in both case studies. In case study 2, action had initially taken the form of a community land buy-out. Nonetheless, physical attachment to the land – in the form of landownership - was not sufficient in itself for the successful development of an energy project, and, as we will discuss, other factors were also important. However, landownership did inspire new forms of emotional place attachment in both case studies. These emerging place-based meanings – formed around the idea of local people taking charge - were found to be a key impetus for both communities to pursue renewable energy.

Place attachment as the motivator for opposition
Support for the community projects was not unanimous, however; and opponents would also often draw on place-based factors to explain their opposition. Place attachment determined perceptions of what ‘fitted’ in a landscape; and perceptions of this fit were often more important than ‘actual’ environmental impact.

For example, it became evident in both cases that wind energy was a significantly more controversial development proposal than hydro, based on the perceived differential impacts of these technologies on the landscape. The proposed hydro schemes were
expected to have a greater impact on the land and local ecosystems, due to the need to construct pipes and cables all the way down the hills. Nonetheless, despite the potentially smaller impact of wind turbines on the land they were interpreted to have a potentially bigger impact on the feel of the wider landscape. Accordingly, the proposed wind turbines were far more controversial, with some of our participants opposing those whilst supporting the hydro projects. Concerns about wind turbines were primarily related to their visibility, and how they would ‘fit’ within the wider landscape:

“People come up here not to see a bloody turbine, but for the landscape.”

(Resident, case study 1)

“I was one of the people that signed the petition saying ‘no wind’. It would have been a complete mar on the landscape. Although there will be some visual impact with the hydro, it’s absolutely minimal.” (Community representative, case study 2).

It became clear through our interviews that local opponents to wind energy felt a strong emotional attachment to a landscape, which they saw as ‘natural’ or ‘unchanged’. This emotional attachment shone through in the language that interviewees used in reference to the landscape. For example, the interviewee quoted above said he considered the landscape in the area to be the “the scenery of the soul” (Community representative, case study 2).

Thus, opposition to wind energy was to a large extent influenced by emotional attachment to the visual landscape, which opponents interpreted to be under threat. However, it would be shortsighted to dismiss this as NIMBYism. Instead it is clear from
our interviews that the visual aspect of the landscape is associated with deeply rooted meanings attached to the place:

“When I am actually choosing my subject [for my paintings] within the landscape it tends to be very much about the emptiness of it. It’s my emotional response to that vastness […] it tends to be about land that hasn’t changed for millennia. That’s what fascinates me.” (Resident, case study 1)

From our interviews with opponents to the wind turbines it was clear that for them, the emptiness or naturalness of the landscape was a key source of the meaning they attached to the place. For them, the visual landscape is what made the place unique:

“There is a lot of stuff written about the mountains in the background, they’re unique. Not just in Britain, but in the world.” (Resident, case study 1)

“We came here because we were sick and tired of a landscape that was dominated by farming. […] We thought we’d like to retire somewhere where there isn’t quite the strain on the landscape.” (Resident, case study 2)

Thus, the construction of the local ‘place’, in which the development should ‘fit’, was through strong emotions inspired by the particularities of the landscape, which stands in contrast with a wider and less specific landscape and scenery elsewhere. Nonetheless,
for some the social dimension of place attachment mitigated concerns about the projects’ impact on emotional attachments to the land:

“Inevitably, like all places where there’s very little work, you put up with an oil rig or a salmon farm. We have all these things of which people think ‘mweh’, but if they weren’t there, it would take something away from the community. The community, whilst you have this incredible relation with the landscape you also require people to be there, otherwise it falls flat very quickly. It’s just a bit of give and take.” (Resident, case study 1)

This returns to our point made in the previous section, that the potential impact of a community-owned energy on the preservation of social place attachment was an important source of support for these projects. What varied between participants was the importance assigned to either social or physical attachment, with those emphasising social attachment to the place more likely to support the project. Indeed, Hidalgo and Hernández (2001) found that when attachment to a place is more concerned with the local community rather than the local environment, opinions about development projects are more likely to be based on the effects on the local population rather than the environmental impact; a finding we see reiterated here.

Acceptance of the projects was related to their perceived ‘fit’ within both the physical and social dimension of the place. The, perceived, dichotomy between landscape preservation and supporting local communities arose regularly in interviews, with most participants prioritising one over the other. This affected the symbolic meanings they attached to the proposed development. For some, a community-owned project was viewed through a lens of possibility, of social and economic recovery. For others, it was
an industrial element, another reminder of unwanted human presence in an otherwise ‘untouched’ landscape. Even for some proponents, the development of a community energy scheme is not something that is necessarily wanted, but rather something that is needed for the community’s sake: a means to achieve other ends. In the next section we develop this further and consider whether people’s views of these developments are correlated to any specific personal characteristics.

The role of personal characteristics in explaining different attachments

Much is made in the (community) energy literature of the concept of the ‘local’ and ‘local acceptance’, but there is less attempt to question who or what is ‘local’ (Batel and Devine-Wright, 2014). We found little evidence for any clear differences of opinion on the proposed developments based on people’s location of residence or proximity to the development. Of those interviewed only one resident expressed an opinion of the turbine that appeared to be directly related to their place of residence, or more specifically, their physical distance from the turbine:

“I don’t want to have anything more to do with [the wind turbine]. It’s not in my area anyway, it’s at the other end.” (Resident, case study 1)

We did find very different opinions between residents within a single location. When asked to explain this, interviewees hinted at the different meanings people attach to the area based on an individual’s ‘localness’. This follows previous research, which argued that rather than well-known social divisions like race or class, the most important division in the Scottish Highlands is that between ‘locals’ and ‘incomers’ (Creamer 2014, MacLeod and Payne 1994).
Both case study areas have a large number of holiday homes, and are also popular destinations for migration from other parts of Scotland or England (Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics n.d., a,b,c). Two different, but related, explanations emerged from our data that could explain why ‘locals’ may have a different opinion of energy developments than those who have moved into the area. The first explanation is that locals and incomers view the environment in ways that are different. It has been suggested in the literature that interpretation of the Highland landscape by ‘locals’ is likely to be influenced by their historical understanding of the place. For ‘locals’, Hunter (2014) argues, the emptiness of the Highlands is “…every bit as symbolic of the eradication of human communities as [it is] suggestive of wild nature” (Hunter 2014, p.37). These words were echoed by one of our interviewees:

“There is no wild land. These are places that used to have people and now just have ruins.” (Resident, case study 1)

Additionally, to account for different views of the environment, it was suggested to us that ‘locals’ are more likely to have a functional, rather than emotional attachment to the landscape, adhering to the view that “landscape is what you get your living from” (Resident, case study 2). According to this view, locals may be more likely to support renewable energy development, as it is simply another way to make a living. These long-term residents thought that the place attachment drawn upon by (those described as) incomers was primarily emotional, based on a meaning they ascribed to the place when they first encountered it, often rooted in romantic notions of the environment as ‘wild’ and ‘untouched’.
The second, related, possible explanation for different views on the proposed developments is that those who considered themselves to be local were more ‘tuned in’ to the socio-economic challenges the communities face. Here, respondents argued that the people who move into the area are often retirees, well-off and therefore described as having different concerns and priorities:

“…people who bought a house here, they fell in love with everything, they remember that magic moment in time and they always want it to be like that. If you only come here for a couple of weeks to your rural paradise, […] it’s neither here nor there whether there’s a primary school or not.”

(Community representative, case study 1)

Although long-term residents are likely to value the scenery, we found that generally their primary source of place attachment is based on the social bonds they have, and which they perceive to be at risk. Therefore, they felt dependent on the development of a community energy project to aid the community’s viability and help to preserve their social and functional attachment:

“I think, ultimately, that is the most important thing, what the community is going to get out of it. […] With the amount of money that we are going to get from these projects we can actually make a difference here for the future.” (Community representative, case study 1)

However, most interviewees also emphasised the complexity of the situation. Not all ‘incomers’ are against the proposed developments, and not all ‘locals’ are in favour,
and a number of interviewees questioned the basis of the local/incomer division. When interviewees spoke of differences between ‘locals’ and ‘incomers’ and how this impacted upon their perception of new developments, this division was not necessarily based on how long someone had spent in the area. Rather, our data support Kohn’s (2002) argument that ‘localness’ is not simply a product of time spent in the area, but that through participating in local activities and developing social ties one can ‘become’ local (also see Brunett 1998, Kohn 2002, MacLeod and Payne 1994). In addition, views differed on who was considered to be local or an incomer, further problematising this division.

From our interviews it was therefore evident that there can be significant differences in place attachment within a single settlement. While this may in part be related to length of residency or role or involvement in the community, like our interviewees, we would caution against overstating this local/incomer division. The point is that site- or place-based characteristics alone do not determine attachment, and that an understanding of how individuals’ characteristics may affect attachments within a single place, can be of value.

Discussion

The role of place in community energy: place as mobilisation tool

Previous research examining the role of place attachment in mobilising action and influencing opinions to energy projects has generally focused on large scale developments that can be deemed to be detrimental to one’s sense of place (e.g. Devine-Wright 2011, Devine-Wright and Howes 2010, Haggett 2008, Rich et al. 1995, Woods 2003). In this body of literature, and the analytical frameworks it uses (e.g. Devine-Wright 2009) the role of place attachment has often been studied in relation to reactions to proposed developments. However, in our case studies it was evident that place, and
attachments to it, played an important role, and at a much earlier stage: perceived
detrimental changes to place and people’s attachment to it, and the development of
alternative visions for the future were important motivators for developing these projects
in the first place. As they were developed by members of the community rather than
‘outsiders’, local action was not as much an act of resistance, as a way to build alternative
futures (also see Massey 2004).

The construction of ‘place’ in the Highlands has often been dominated by views
from outwith the area, whether as an area full of deer and salmon ready for the taking, or
as an area of untouched wildness, there to be visually consumed (Macdonald 1998).
Community landownership has been suggested as one opportunity for people to
reconstruct rural development set within locally prescribed narratives of place (e.g.
McMorran et al. 2014).

In our case studies, ownership of the land did not play a decisive direct role in the
development of community energy. Despite owning the land, the community group in
case study 2 encountered substantial local resistance to their proposed wind development,
based on perceived impact on the wildness of the landscape – as a result they cancelled
their turbine proposal. Nonetheless, the broader land reform movement did play an
important indirect role in fostering these community energy projects through shifting
perceptions of ‘what is possible’ in both our case studies, landowning or not.

Many of our interviewees saw community ownership of land as the start of a trend
to give communities greater control over their future (also see McMorran et al., 2014).
Thus, among our interviewees, whether from a landowning community or not, there was
a strong narrative which considered the community landownership movement to have
enhanced their feelings of self-belief and fostered alternative, locally-determined, place-
based visions for the future.
For example, as a result of community of land and energy in other areas, community group 1 had run a visioning exercise to consider the priorities for their area and the steps needed to realise them. Here, the development of community energy was seen as an opportunity to counter threats to social and functional place attachment, such as rising house prices, the closure of schools and businesses, and changing demographics. In other words, it prioritised the possibility to (re)create a healthy and vibrant community over the preservation of a ‘wild’ landscape, to be visually consumed. As such, it was based on both a desire to protect existing, primarily social, place attachments as well as to create new place meanings, defined from within rather than outwith the Highlands.

Thus, whilst community group members in our case studies often drew on threats to the local place to explain their motivation for setting up a community-owned energy project, they also felt their actions were part of ‘something bigger’. This indicates that these groups activities’ transcend locally-based, place-protective action to engage in what Escobar (2001, p. 161) calls ‘coalition making with other place-based struggles’.

Whose place? One location, many meanings

In previous analyses of the role of place attachment in local acceptance of renewable energy, comparisons of local acceptance were often based on place-based characteristics, such as whether locations were known primarily for their industrial or natural heritage (e.g. Batel and Devine-Wright 2014, Devine-Wright and Howes 2010, Haggett 2008). This, however, can ignore the possibility that there are different factors that shape individuals’ place attachment. In our research we found that individuals living in the same places formed different types of attachments to the area which influenced
their opinion on energy developments in the area. Confirming previous research, we found that those who emphasised emotional attachment to the land, which was associated with notions of “wildness” or “unspoiled beauty”, were more likely to oppose new developments, unlike those who emphasised the human-dimension of their environment or represented it as a ‘community of neighbours’ (Stedman 2002, p. 570-571, also see Hidalgo and Hernández 2001, Scannell and Gifford 2010, Vorkinn and Riese 2001).

In addition we analysed why people within a single location might have different forms of place attachment. Previous studies have sometimes argued that there is a structural difference in feelings towards the landscape between those who ‘have roots’ in an area and those who ‘fell in love’ with it (Jedrej and Nuttall 1996, Kohn 2002). Some interviewees would indeed argue that those who had moved into the area sometimes identified with it through what Kohn (2002, p.153) has called “an almost romantic love of the place as a wonderland”, prioritising the preservation of this visual wonderland over what others considered to be pressing socio-economic problems.

Nonetheless, although some interviewees appeared to fit this locals/incomers division and the importance they assign to different aspects of place, overall the reality was more complex. Place attachment is not static, as evidenced by interviewees who had moved to the area for the landscape, but remained – many years later – because of the strong social attachment they developed over time. This social attachment was formed through participation in local activities and the development of social ties; part of the process of ‘becoming’ local (also see Kohn 2002).

Accordingly, many residents indicated that they had multiple attachments to the area. What varied was the importance assigned to different types of attachment. Here, our data also indicates that community ownership could make some difference in terms of local acceptance. For some, but certainly not all, interviewees community ownership
increased the proposal’s acceptability, as its perceived potential to maintain or enhance
the community through community-led development aligned with their social attachment
to the place, overriding concerns regarding projects’ impact on their emotional attachment
to the landscape.

Harvey (1996, p.182) argues that all proposals concerning the environment are
also proposals for social change: they are never neutral (also: Yearley 2009). These case
studies highlighted a dichotomy (which sometimes, but not always, overlapped with the
incomers/local division) between those who considered the current socio-economic
situation to be unproblematic, and those who thought that substantial change was needed.

Accordingly, project opponents were sometimes characterised as being out of touch, and
not being fully part of the place, irrespective of time spent in the area. The use of these
dualisms in relation to proposed developments is not uncommon (Devine Wright 2009),
but it shows that ‘reconstructing’ place, even when led by local people, is not without
controversies.

Conclusion

Notions and narratives of community energy are filled with expectations that local
action can and will be effective, that communities can function as the site of cooperative
action as well as being the recipient of collective benefits (Haggett et al. 2013, Walker et
al. 2010). However, we need to guard against simplistic ideas of ‘what works’ and
assumptions that community projects can simply be replicated from place to place
(Walker et al. 2010). What is possible in one place might not be in another, and
understanding place attachments in context is therefore as important as projects’ technical
dimensions.
This paper has highlighted the role place attachment plays in the development of two community groups’ energy projects. It shows that, when applied to community projects, place attachment not only influences acceptance of these projects, but also acts as an important motivator for establishing them. Furthermore, whilst community ownership may positively affect acceptance for some people, local acceptance of community-led projects should not be presumed and exploring ideas around place are one way to understand differentiated responses. Support for these projects was driven by threats to functional and social place attachment and a perceived opportunity to reconstruct rural development set within locally prescribed narratives of place. However, not everyone shared this common visioning of ‘place’. Those who expressed a strong emotional attachment to a landscape that they saw as ‘unspoiled’ opposed what they considered to be the ‘industrialisation’ of the land through the development of renewable energy.

Finally, as is evident from our previous point, different people within the same community can form very different types of place attachment. Our research has focused on some of the different opinions expressed within settlements and, whilst this is a complex issue, found some evidence for the idea that ‘incomers’ and ‘locals’ hold different opinions based on different types, rather than necessarily different strengths, of place attachment.

These differences in place attachment and their effect on acceptance of community energy projects have thus far received little attention. Whereas previous research into the role of place attachment has largely focused on how it mobilises and unites communities against external threats, this research shows that mobilisation can also emphasise existing differences in perceptions of place within the local population. Some community group members viewed these projects as part of a wider process of
communities taking action to create alternative futures through redefining and reconstructing rural places and development. However, ‘constructing’ place is never straightforward, and these changes also mean that old sources of place attachment may be disrupted, creating local tensions around preservation of the current distinctiveness of place (based on perceived uniqueness of the landscape) versus creating a new sense of place. While others have also considered competing visions of place in relation to proposed energy developments (e.g. Horlings and Kanemasu 2015), these issues have received less attention when concerning fully community-owned projects.

These findings are therefore relevant for the body of research on local acceptance of renewable energy, but also more broadly regarding the possibilities and challenges of community-led development projects in (re)defining place. Whilst such processes have previously been considered as multi-scale and network-oriented strategies to redefine and reproduce ‘place’ (e.g. Escobar 2001, Massey 2004), this research emphasises the tensions involved in this, and raises questions around whose visions for the future are deemed valid.

The qualitative approach adopted in this research enabled us to highlight the subjective and complex ways in which people form attachments to an area and interpret changes to these places. Further research on acceptance of community energy projects could take a longitudinal approach to understand how different stages of development affect acceptance of place change, whilst ethnographic approaches could help deepen understanding of the intra-community negotiations around the process of (re)constructing place in light of community-led development proposals.

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