Qualitative Study Review

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Shawn K. Olson-Hazboun’s mixed methods qualitative dissertation “Public Opinion on Renewable Energy: The Nexus of Climate, Politics, and Economy” was published in 2017. The dissertation examines the factors underlying public opinion toward renewable energy in the United States. Shawn states that “Further research is needed to understand under what circumstances the public may take oppositional stances.” (Olson-Hazborn, 2017)

 Shawn uses three different datasets to examine the perceptions of renewable energy, which consist of two surveys and sixty-one structured interviews as qualitative research. Using multi-level modeling and statistical analysis Shawn attempts to understand the underlying reasons and rationale for why certain community and individual characteristics are related to their views on renewable energy. The first two projects are quantitative analyses examining the statistical relationships between renewable energy attitudes, climate change opinions, and a variety of individual place-based characteristics. The third project utilizes qualitative interviewing to investigate the discourse meaning systems that individuals employ to rationalize their attitudes toward renewable energy and climate change (Olson-Hazborn, 2017).

The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze the barriers for laying a smoother path for renewable energy development in the United States. The goal of the dissertation is to understand the elements connected to public opinion toward renewable energy, including the role of place-based factors, political and economic concerns, and individual environmental attitudes. In addition, the dissertation will aid policymakers and energy professionals in better predicting, managing, and planning for public responses toward renewable energy development in both place-specific contexts as well in within the larger arena of public opinion and policymaking, a major driver of the United States’ energy transition (Olson-Hazborn, 2017).

 Shawn has an extensive background in environmental studies and experience credibly supporting the dissertation topic. The author includes a Curriculum Vita which includes: education, research & teaching interests, publications, grants & fellowships, experience, presentations, research assistantships, service and professional memberships. Most of Shawn’s experience and education has been in environmental and politics. Currently, Shawn is a professor at the Evergreen State College with a Ph.D. in philosophy.

The dissertation consists of five chapters, three of which contain most of the subject matter and content. Chapters two, three and four contain a separate literature review, data method, conclusion and reference section.

The literature review for chapter one is titled: Public Attitudes Toward Renewable Energy, which discusses climate change, the environment, political ideology, and economics. The literature review for chapter two looks at the relationship between environmental beliefs and renewable attitudes. The literature review for chapter three covers the role of policy, politics and public opinion in renewable energy growth. However, the literature review content does not directly support the respective chapter title. Chapter two is public views on renewable energy in the rocky mountain region of the United States; chapter three title is the influence of extractive industry activities on public support for renewable energy policy; chapter 3 title is double benefit or double-edged sword? The purpose of a literature review is to survey books, articles or another source that is relevant to the research problem being investigated. The mark was missed on the literature reviews relating to the content of the respective chapter.

Relative deprivation framework explained how the public forms opinions about renewable energy. The author uses relative deprivation framework to explain the blue print for the research on renewable energy.

Samples were conducted through interviews and surveys for chapters two, three and four. Most of the data was collected in Utah and the Rocky Mountains. Interviews and surveys were conducted with a myriad of people, focusing on six local sectors: government, business, education, agriculture, religion and energy. The majority of questions were open-ended question and the author used follow-up questions to pry or probe the participant for more information if needed. The surveys were distributed and collected using a drop-off/pick-up survey methodology. The surveys gathered information from respondents on a number of socio-demographic characteristics. The descriptive statistics for independent variables were: age, income, median household income, education, gender, length of residence, religious affiliation, and political orientation. About one-fourth of the interviews were done over the phone with members in each county within Utah and random counties in the Rocky Mountains area. More samples should have been done across all fifty states to provide a thorough dissertation on the United States. The author did note that while collecting samples it was done during a political ‘moment’ in history as Secretary Clinton and President Trump were competing for the white house and that each candidate had their own political views on renewable energy and the environment. Noting this in the dissertation is credible, because there may have been a possible bias or partisan among certain participants.

An analysis of disclosure provides insight into regular patterns in the variability of accounts, including repeatedly occurring description, explanations, and arguments, in different participants. The author used the data to examine language, beliefs, assumptions and values of individuals relating it to energy and the environment. The purpose of the analysis was to identify what discourses articulated at individual and collective levels to describe renewable energy with a correlation to the environment (Olson-Hazborn, 2017).

Data collection and data analysis consisted of sampling and interviewing, which were audio recorded. Each interview was then fully transcribed word-for-word and spot-checked against the audio recording for accuracy. Analysis of the data was conducted with Nvivo 11 software. The software compiled codes to identify larger societal discourses at work, and link discourses together to identify discursive membership categories. The three core chapters of the dissertation, which are chapters two, three and four contain how the data was collected and the methodology in which the data was used.

Ethical considerations were made while sampling participants by giving everyone a pseudonym to protect their privacy. After reviewing the survey questions and interviews there was no mention of ethical considerations. In fact, after conducting a word search there were no hits on the word ethic, ethics, or ethical. From observation one can conclude that ethics were involved in the study as far as the type of questions, demographics, biases, and religious considerations. However, the dissertation should have had formally mentioned ethical considerations within the content or as part of the methodology.

The findings indicated that a majority of individuals across study sites were either outright supportive of renewable energy or had mixed views. The findings resulting from the research done for the dissertation was vague and inconclusive.

The conclusion states “This study examines the perceptions of renewable energy held by sixty-eight representatives of six different local sectors across three different study sites in Utah.” The conclusion is mostly about Utah and not the United States as indicated in the title of the dissertation.

The author used well over 200 references to write the dissertation. The dissertation consists of five chapter and at the end of each chapter there is a list of references. Having an extensive reference list shows rigor towards collecting credible information, which takes an enormous amount of research time and is well respected.

The title and topic of the dissertation is extremely broad. The dissertation covers information required from a large geographical area, the United States, which raises concern for accuracy and ambiguity of the study.

The dissertation is well organized, east to navigate and flows making it easy to read. The dissertation does include technical terms; however, it is needed to convey information precisely. In the table of contents there are several questions, which are later answered within the chapter.

However, there are several grammatical, spelling and even typographic errors can be found within the text which is disappointing for a dissertation of this caliber. It would have been helpful if the Shawn secured an editor prior to publication of this study.

 In conclusion the dissertation was well written and very informative. Conceivably this dissertation could have been written as a three ‘papers’ essay, because there are three core chapters unique in of themselves. In addition, the three content filled chapter titles are misleading and not representative of the title of the thesis thus supporting a three ‘papers’ essay. Furthermore, the dissertation mostly covers one state out of the fifty United States; therefore, a suggestion would be to change the title to “Public Opinion on Renewable Energy: The Nexus of Climate, Politics, and Economy in the Rocky Mountain area”

# References

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design 3rd Edition.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Olson-Hazborn, S. K. (2017). *Public Opinion on Renewable Energy: The Nexus of Climate, Politics, and Economy.* Logan: Proquest LLC.