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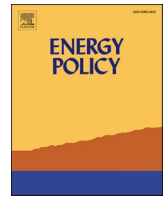
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Detecting energy injustices: Climbing the ladder of “hidden morality”

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ABSTRACT

Governing a just energy transition requires detecting and anticipating energy injustices. Although much scholarly attention has been given to frameworks to *analyse* energy injustices, a consistent framework for policymakers and researchers to *detect* them is lacking. Current methods for detecting what the publics perceive as (un)just rely on explicit articulations of grievances by citizens in official participatory settings or during energy conflicts. However, it is implausible that all injustices manifest within these contexts. This study introduces a framework to understand why injustices might remain unseen and unaddressed, inspired by the concept of *hidden morality* as introduced by the philosopher Axel Honneth. The framework of hidden morality conceptualises several steps between an injustice and social change: (1) experience of injustices; (2) expression of injustices; (3) collective action; (4) uptake in public discourse; (5) reformulation; and (6) social change. Between each of these steps, different obstacles can arise. The paper explores the mechanisms that prevent energy injustices from surfacing and being resolved through philosophical literature and two case studies. Its contribution is twofold: it raises awareness of the fact that injustices can remain undetected, and it proposes a framework that is the first systematic tool for policymakers to detect injustices when making energy policies.

1. Introduction

Transitioning from a fossil-based energy system towards renewable energy is one of the main challenges of the 21st century, not least because energy transition policies are prone to spark social resistance and energy conflicts (Pesch et al., 2017). Energy technologies, systems, projects, and policies significantly impact societies and nature, as they often disrupt the landscape, affect the environment, influence behaviour, bring about safety concerns, and exacerbate inequalities. Many scholars have studied the reasons for social resistance and protests against energy policies and infrastructures, concluding that NIMBY-ism, selfishness and interests have little explanatory power (Batel, 2020; Batel et al., 2013). Instead, people are mostly motivated by experiences of injustice, in relation to their identities that are relationally shaped by attachments to places, practices, and people (Cuppen et al., 2019; Dignum et al., 2016; Groves et al., 2016; Roeser, 2017). Social resistance and protests against energy policies can often be understood as moral concerns about justice.

Policymakers are demanded to reconcile energy and social policies, which can be understood as the challenge of organising a *just energy transition*. Dealing with the just transition challenge requires detecting

and anticipating energy injustices. In 2013, researchers were challenged to “address justice-based concerns within energy systems” by studying energy injustices and making policy or design recommendations (McCauley et al., 2013). Such injustice concerns surface through institutional and non-institutional participation procedures (Hooghe and Marien, 2013). A first way to uncover what the publics perceive as unjust is by inviting the publics for official meetings or participation events, which Wynne described as *invited publics* (Wynne, 2007). For example, the Dutch government prescribes local participation processes for decision-making related to the energy transition (Rijksoverheid, 2019). In such participatory settings, the invited publics can voice their values and concerns, in other words, their perceptions of injustice. In this, the publics can have various levels of influence, from effective decision-making power to an advisory role in which stakeholders’ knowledge and values are consulted to inform decision-making (K. Jenkins et al., 2016).

Another method for uncovering what people perceive as unjust is by studying *uninvited publics* (Wynne, 2007) engaging in pro-active, self-initiated, or non-institutionalised participation. This includes energy conflicts, resistance, protests and controversies (K. E. H. Jenkins et al., 2020). Here, it is assumed that injustices inspire citizens to resist energy

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policies or projects by means of activism. Understanding what constitutes energy conflicts is the aim of several papers on the intersection of energy justice and conflict or controversy studies (Cuppen et al., 2015, 2020; Pesch et al., 2017). Methods of detecting moral concerns vary from conducting surveys, organising interviews, meetings or consultations, or doing Social Impact Assessments (Esteves et al., 2012) and Participatory Value Evaluations (Mouter et al., 2019, 2021). Such research endeavours assume that “public debate can form a rich source from which to retrieve the values at stake” (Dignum et al., 2016). In other words, studying the roots of energy conflicts leads to detecting perceived energy injustices that can inform decision-making towards a more just energy system.

To sum up, current methods for detecting what the publics perceive as (un)just rely on explicit articulations of beliefs by citizens in official participatory settings or during energy conflicts. However, it is implausible that all injustices manifest within these contexts. For example, many municipalities in the Netherlands struggle to organise inclusive participation trajectories that involve truly diverse publics (Buitelaar and Heeger, 2018; Jansma et al., 2020; Samantha et al., 2020). Moreover, not all citizens easily engage in public resistance. As a result, not all energy injustices are detected, understood and mitigated. To understand and overcome this problem, it is important to explore which mechanisms prevent injustices from surfacing and being resolved in decision-making. Our research question is as follows: What mechanisms keep injustices hidden and unaddressed?

This study introduces a concept that is helpful in understanding why injustices might remain unseen and unaddressed, namely *the problem of hidden morality* (Honneth, 1982). The term was coined by the philosopher Axel Honneth, who is primarily known in the energy justice scholarship for theorising justice as recognition. Honneth posits that there are several steps between the occurrence of injustices and social change. Inspired by his explorations, we analysed two case studies in the Netherlands in which injustices occur, yet do not result in social change. We use the results of these case studies, supplemented with philosophical and empirical literature on justice, participation, and social change, to construct a framework of hidden morality that outlines six steps between the occurrence of an injustice and social change: (1) injustices are experienced as “negative emotional reactions” (Honneth, 1995); (2) injustices are expressed as claims of injustice; (3) people collectively organise themselves and engage in collective action; (4) claims are taken up in the public discourse; (5) claims are reformulated positively; and (6) actual social change addressing the injustice. Between each of these steps, different obstacles can arise.

The contribution of this paper is twofold: it raises awareness of the fact that injustices can remain hidden, and it proposes a conceptual framework that identifies mechanisms that prevent injustices from surfacing and being addressed. We propose the framework of hidden morality as a promising avenue for future research on detecting and understanding hidden energy injustices. Moreover, understanding which and why injustices remain hidden is the first step towards making energy systems more just, and the framework of hidden morality is the first systematic tool for policymakers to detect or anticipate injustices when making just energy policies.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section Two, the problem of hidden morality is introduced by articulating six steps from experiencing an injustice to actual social change. Section Three elaborates on the methods for analysing the two case studies. In Section Four, the results are presented in the form of the mechanisms that prevent injustices from surfacing and leading to social change. In Section Five, the hidden morality framework is constructed, based on the results from the case studies and philosophical literature. Section Six explores the policy implications of the hidden morality framework and concludes.

2. The problem of hidden morality

Energy justice is the academic field concerned with uncovering and

analysing injustices in relation to energy policies. Generally, energy injustices are analysed through a tenet-framework that distinguishes multiple categories (“tenets”) of justice (McCauley et al., 2013). *Procedural justice* refers to just decision-making procedures; *distributive justice* refers to a just distribution of burdens and benefits; *justice as recognition* is concerned with recognising all actors through love, law, and status order (Uffelen, 2022); and *restorative justice* implies the just restoration of injustices or harm (van Uffelen et al., 2024). Distinguishing these tenets and different conceptions thereof allows to categorise, analyse, and understand grievances articulated by citizens in relation to energy technologies, systems, and policies.

Although much scholarly attention has been given to frameworks to *analyse* energy injustices, a consistent framework focused on *detecting* injustices and the mechanisms that hide them is lacking. Several scholars have shown how energy injustices – predominantly energy poverty – can remain hidden. For example, energy poverty measured as “spending a disproportionate share of income on energy” can remain hidden when people restrict their energy consumption (Barrella et al., 2022). Moreover, people in energy poverty are often socially isolated and hesitant to reach out for help due to stigmas and shame (Bredvold and Inderberg, 2022; Garthwaite, 2015; Middlemiss et al., 2019; Rincón-Rubio and Cedano-Villavicencio, 2023; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). There are several frameworks within behavioural psychology to better understand behaviour in relation to climate and energy issues, such as the attitude-behaviour-context-model (Stern, 2000). However, such models have different functions, namely explaining (climate-related) behaviour, and are not focused on detecting injustices. Currently, there is no conceptual tool available within the field to think about undetected and unaddressed injustices and the mechanisms that systematically hide them. This paper proposes such a framework. As such, the proposed framework does not replace the tenet-framework to analyse injustices, or the ABC-framework to explain behaviour; we consider it complementary, as it focuses on (obstacles to) *detecting* energy injustices.

In one of his early essays, the philosopher Axel Honneth gave the problem of undetected injustices a name: *hidden morality* (Honneth, 1982). In this essay, Honneth argues that relying on public discourse to detect injustices is insufficient because not all injustices find their way to such settings. Honneth distinguishes between *well-developed, normatively based ideas of justice* and a *consciousness of injustice*. The former are well-formulated, structured ideas about justice and the right course of action. The higher social strata in society generally hold these ideas. A consciousness of injustice on the other hand is often emotional, fragmented, situationally dependent, unwritten, and experience-bound. Generally, only well-developed and articulated ideas of justice surface and land well in public discourses. Experiences of injustice, on the other hand, often remain hidden from the public debate. This empirical blindness is conceptualised by Honneth as *hidden morality*, implying that some injustices remain undetected.

In his essay, Honneth starts to explore why injustices might remain hidden and fail to result in social change, in other words, what constitutes the problem of hidden morality. One reason is that not all people can experience injustices, and as such the injustice remains unarticulated. For example, an individual can be in energy poverty without realising it. Moreover, not all experienced injustices are always expressed or translated into constructive policy proposals. If people succeed in articulating injustices, there is no guarantee that others hear these claims, partly due to their negative formulations. And if claims of injustice reach the public debate, they are not always followed by social change. These insights can be summarised as six different ‘steps’ between the existence of an injustice and its mitigation, which we will visualise in Section Five as the ladder of hidden morality:

- (1) Injustices are experienced;
- (2) Injustices are expressed as claims of injustice;

- (3) People collectively organise themselves and engage in collective action;
- (4) Claims are taken up in the public discourse;
- (5) Claims are reformulated positively; and
- (6) Actual social change addressing the injustice.

Now, it can be clarified what we mean by ‘detection’. *Detecting* injustices refers to the identification, acknowledgement, and consideration of injustices by actors with decision-making capacities. In general, several actors can do the detecting, such as individuals or actors who have decision-making capacities, such as policymakers or engineers. In the steps in between, many other actors play a role in detecting injustices, such as researchers, the media, community groups, or businesses. When an injustice is detected only by individuals or other societal actors, yet they remain hidden from agents in power, it is possible to speak of ‘partial detection’. When an injustice remains partially hidden, social change addressing the injustice does not occur.

As a last remark, Honneth speaks of hidden *morality* because people’s experiences of injustice are morally relevant. Experiences of injustice often translate to “negative emotional reactions, such as being ashamed or enraged, feeling hurt or indignant” (Honneth, 1995). Such moral emotions are important indicators of actual injustices; thus, it is important to take these emotions seriously (Roeser, 2017). In other words, a lack of social acceptance can reveal an ethical unacceptability (Taebi, 2017). When experiences of injustice remain hidden, actual injustices might remain undetected and continue to exist. However, experiences of injustice cannot be identified with actual injustices. People’s moral intuitions are fallible, for various reasons (see Section 5.1). Although experiences of injustice are an indicator of actual injustices, additional ethical reflection and argumentation¹ are necessary to evaluate whether these experiences correspond to actual injustices.

3. Methods

To better understand the mechanisms contributing to hidden morality, we analyse two case studies in which (experiences of) injustices occur without ensuing social change, in other words, in which injustices are hidden. Each case study represents a different ‘stage’ of hidden morality and as such, they are complementary. The first case study pertains to the injustices that citizens with low socio-economic status and a migratory background face in relation to the heat transition in Moerwijk, The Hague, in the Netherlands. As there is hardly any collective action addressing energy injustices in Moerwijk, participants seem ‘stuck’ on the first three steps of the hidden morality ladder. In contrast, the second case study mainly pertains to the final four steps of hidden morality. This case pertains to the conflict around compensation for damage in relation to Underground Gas Storage (UGS) Grijpskerk and Norg in the North of the Netherlands. Here, collective action occurred, with mixed results.

3.1. The heat transition in Moerwijk, The Hague

The first case study focuses on experiences of the heat transition in the neighbourhood Moerwijk in the city of The Hague in The Netherlands (ten Caat et al., 2024). For Dutch households, the heat transition mainly concerns the phase-out of natural gas, commonly used in the Netherlands for heating and cooking. Between April and June 2022, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with citizens with low socio-economic status and a migratory background (for an overview, see Appendix 1). Within the Dutch context, this group of citizens is especially vulnerable to exclusion from (political) communities and public participation, and municipalities struggle with including their

¹ One such strategy is that of immanent critique, which will be deployed in the case study of Moerwijk in The Hague.

needs in policies.

Because this target group is typically difficult to reach, participants were found by visiting activities organised by the neighbourhood and a housing corporation, and by door-to-door efforts. To navigate language barriers, all invitations to participate in the study, prepared interview questions and visual aids used during the interviews were translated into multiple languages. Participants were asked about their knowledge, perceptions and opinions of (participation in) the heat transition and about their relations with their neighbours and relevant institutions.

In this case study, it is possible that injustices occur yet are unexperienced by the participants. To study this, transparency about what we consider as ‘injustice’ is crucial. In this analysis, we identify (in)justices by comparing the conceptions of ‘(in)justice’ of the municipality of The Hague – as found through an analysis of policy documents – with the empirical reality. This move constitutes an *immanent critique*, as an institution is considered unjust by its own standards (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). For example, if the municipality states that all citizens should be informed about something, yet the empirical reality shows that this is not the case, the situation is unjust by the municipality’s own standards. Although the conceptions of the municipality may be critiqued, the immanent-critique approach allows us to study the mechanisms that hide injustices, which is the purpose of this paper.

The data analysis combined inductive and deductive coding using atlas.ti. The analysis was guided by the six steps between the existence of an injustice and its mitigation (see Section Two). Given the absence of collective action in this case study and the theory-building purpose of this paper, the analysis focused on the first three steps of hidden morality. These steps formed the code groups, which were further subdivided along the tenets of energy justice (see Appendix 2 for the codebook). For the code groups on ‘expressing injustices’ and ‘collective action’, the codes were inductively formulated. Given the methodological challenge of coding for inexperienced injustices, codes within the code group ‘experiencing injustices’ were deductively created, based on the municipal conceptions of (in)justice. We present the (un)experienced injustices and the mechanisms hiding these in section 4.1.

3.2. Gas storage in Grijpskerk and Norg

The second case study is a qualitative investigation of the societal unrest above Underground Gas Storage (UGS) Grijpskerk and Norg in the North of the Netherlands (van Uffelen, 2024). The main conflict pertains to the compensation system for damage that results from the UGSs.

Between March and May 2022, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with (activist) citizens, scientists, and governmental organisations related to mining in the Netherlands (for an overview of the interviewees, see Appendix 3). A balance was sought in finding interviewees between active citizens and interviewees from different institutions. The interviewees were found through snowballing, and the sample was supplemented by proactively contacting underrepresented parties. The interviews were conducted both online and in the regions surrounding Grijpskerk and Norg and focused on understanding the conflict and the concerns of stakeholders.

In this case study, we remain formally agnostic about whether or not the experiences of injustice, as voiced by the participants, are ethically justified. This is because the main function of this case study is to study the barriers on ‘higher’ levels of the ladder, including obstacles in relation to collective action, public uptake, positive reformulation, and social change.

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on the data using atlas.ti to identify the themes on which there is conflict or that participants experienced injustices towards (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, the interviews were coded inductively (subthemes); second, the codes were clustered into seven themes (for an overview of all seven themes and their subthemes, see Appendix 4). Four themes pertain to the topic of conflict; as such, they signify the content of the experiences of injustice.

The remaining three themes were relevant to the problem of hidden morality, namely (1) activism and awareness, (2) perceptions about regional and national identities, and (3) participation in decision-making procedures. In section 4.2, we link the findings pertaining to these three themes and their subthemes to the final four steps of hidden morality as outlined in Section Two.

4. Results

4.1. The heat transition in Moerwijk

In the first case study, actors were mainly subject to barriers to the first three steps of the ladder: experiencing injustices, articulating them, and organising collective action, making them unable to achieve social change (ten Caat et al., 2024). Table 1 summarises the result.

4.1.1. Experiencing injustices

Municipal policies stated that inhabitants had the right to be informed about the heat transition (e.g., why it is important and what it would mean for the citizens), and that they had the right to participate in decision-making. This information should have been shared well before housing corporations started on the renovations to peoples' homes. However, nineteen interviewees had their homes renovated, yet they were either ignorant about the heat transition or unaware that they could have had a say in matters. As such, nineteen interviewees were unable to experience a procedural injustice, even though they were subjected to it.

The main barrier to experiencing these procedural injustices was the interviewees' lack of knowledge about rights as Dutch citizens, including participation possibilities and the services and information they should have received from the municipality and the housing corporations. They wondered: "What are my rights to request things? What should I receive according to my rights?" This lack of knowledge extends to a lack of familiarity with democratic regimes in general.

Another barrier to experiencing injustices was low expectations among respondents about how the municipality should treat them. For three interviewees, harmful experiences in their previous countries of residence hindered them from experiencing injustices. They saw any treatment they received in the Netherlands as comparatively positive and just. As one interviewee explained: "I have learned to be content with what I get. (...) Because I have had it worse, you know?" In essence,

Table 1

The obstacles between injustices and social change in the heat transition in Moerwijk.

The ladder of hidden morality	Obstacles in the Moerwijk case	Examples of quotes by inhabitants in Moerwijk
Collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low social cohesion due to language barriers and discrimination (Perceived) incentives to isolate households 	<p>"Because it is so racist here, I do not involve myself."</p> <p>"Everyone receives a different treatment. Who can speak up, who talks well: they get all the good things."</p>
Expressing an injustice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear of repercussions Language barriers 	<p>"They do not dare to share their opinion. And, that stems mainly from their fear that the housing corporation would hold a grudge against them, for example."</p> <p>"I speak to little Dutch, I understand too few Dutch words. I found it real hard."</p>
Experiencing an injustice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of knowledge of rights and possibilities Socialisation (incl. harmful past experiences) leading to low expectations 	<p>"What are my rights to request things? What should I receive according to my rights?"</p> <p>"I have learned to be content with what I get. (...) Because I have had it worse, you know?"</p>

socialisation in unjust systems provided participants with low expectations of how they should be treated, rendering them unable to experience the energy injustices they were subjected to.

4.1.2. Expressing injustices

Except for the three interviewees with harmful past experiences, who did not experience any injustices, all others did experience injustices. As such, most interviewees were unaware of some injustices and aware of other injustices. Some interviewees did not experience injustices caused by the municipality but were aware of those caused by housing corporations, and vice versa. Others expressed misrecognition because they felt underrepresented in decision-making ("They talk about us, not with us"). Most concerns are related to procedural issues, and a handful of interviewees also discussed distributive injustices ("Housing corporations receive lower costs, but we inhabitants are set back"). Participants were able to express their grievances in the interviews but encountered barriers in communicating these to other people or organisations.

The first barrier to expressing injustices to others seemed to be a fear of repercussions. Interviewees experienced that many of their neighbours, who are also migrants with a low socio-economic status, feared to express themselves openly to anyone outside their private circles. They expected to be punished by the municipality and housing corporations for articulating critique. Even though such a situation would be unlawful, they perceived it possible to become the victims of unequal power relations.

The second and most common barrier to expression was the language barrier. Many of the migrants in Moerwijk speak little to no Dutch, which is the officially mandated language of government communications. This prevented interviewees from learning about their rights in the heat transition as Dutch citizens (which would have aided them in experiencing injustices). In addition, their inability to converse in the required language meant they were deprived of the necessary concepts to express their injustices in Dutch. As a result, their experiences remained mostly unarticulated to policymakers, and therefore hidden.

4.1.3. Collective action

Among migrants in Moerwijk, there is little to no collective action addressing the injustices. This is mainly because interviewees hesitated to share their injustice experiences with their neighbours. Heat transition projects affected entire buildings or streets simultaneously and neighbours often rented from the same housing corporations and as such, interviewees were often subjected to the same injustices as their neighbours. Still, there was little communication between neighbours, for several reasons.

First, language barriers and discrimination led to low levels of social cohesion in Moerwijk. Interviewees said that "we do try to speak with several neighbours". However, especially when trying to connect with their Dutch neighbours, they found that "our level of Dutch is not high enough". Some interviewees also experienced a negative attitude of neighbours towards people with a different cultural background: "Because it [the atmosphere in the building] is so racist, I do not really get involved." As a result, interviewees had "basically no contact" with their neighbours. Instead, they relied on their friends and family for support, who might not experience the same injustices, but often did encounter similar obstacles to enacting social change.

Next to that, low levels of cohesion were also due to frustrations among neighbours. On the one hand, the renovations brought neighbours closer together, as "we were all in the same boat". On the other hand, they experienced that "everyone received a different treatment". This led to some frustrations towards their neighbours, especially when interviewees found out that "those who can speak up, who are Dutch, speak well, they get everything they need". Relations of distrust and resentment towards neighbours prevented collective action.

4.2. Underground gas storage Grijpskerk and Norg

In Grijpskerk and Norg, citizens are mainly concerned with the damage that might result from the underground gas storage, and the changing, inconsistent, and burdensome compensation measures (van Uffelen, 2024). The participants were able to experience and express several injustices and subsequently organise themselves in political action groups. However, not all citizens were willing or able to engage in collective action. Moreover, the activism of the participants who articulated injustices has yet to lead to the relevant institutions addressing the expressed injustices. Therefore, this case study illustrates the barriers to the final four steps of the ladder, namely collective action, the uptake in public discourse, reformulating claims of injustice in a positive manner, and barriers to social change (see Table 2).

4.2.1. Collective action

Even though many inhabitants are aware of gas storage, a relatively small percentage become active in local organisations. The participants who engage in social action explain their motivation by referring to their own character, their inability to tolerate injustices done to themselves or others, and their responsibility towards their fellow villagers. Two reasons were found why many people refrain from social action.

First, according to the Province of Drenthe, people who engage in social action are “the ones that are victims or perceive themselves as victims”. In other words, citizens who have received no or little compensation for damage often engage in social action. This also shows that citizens who have received generous compensation are less incentivised to engage in collective action.

Second, the inhabitants of the provinces Groningen and Drenthe explicitly self-describe their regional identities as “down-to-earth”, “subdued” or “uncomplaining”, and “self-reliant” or “autonomous”. Because of its geographical remoteness from the seat of the national government in The Hague, citizens in these provinces are used to doing things autonomously, without relying on the national government for help. One activist claimed: “Yes, the Groningers let things happen. (...) I

Table 2

The obstacles between injustices and social change in relation to the controversy on compensation and gas storage in Grijpskerk and Norg.

The ladder of hidden morality	Obstacles in the Grijpskerk & Norg case	Examples of quotes
Social change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Round tables (omgevingstafels) • Institutionalised conception of restorative justice 	<p>“Specifically, the omgevingstafels and the participation of citizens, I feel like it is a bit late to do this, really. Groningen has been going on for multiple years.” – research institute</p> <p>“the way it is done right now where there is incidental compensation, I don’t think that is enough” – government institution</p>
Positive reformulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complexity of subsurface and institutions 	<p>“A municipality and province often have an opinion that often makes sense. But it is hard for them to justify that.” – government institution</p>
Uptake in public discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stereotypes attached to identity features (rural, profession, education level) 	<p>“Then you see, on television, always again, like, those people in the North, they are a bunch of stupid farmers” – activist citizen</p>
Collective action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receiving compensation • Regional identities 	<p>Those who become active are mostly “the ones that are victims or perceive themselves as victims” - activist citizen</p> <p>“Yes, the Groningers let things happen. (...) I think they are used to doing things alone” – activist citizen</p>

think they are used to doing things alone, and also, historically they have been more secluded and directed towards each other.” Participants claimed the threshold to engage in protests was relatively high due to this regional identity. One activist participant claimed that “this would never have happened in Rotterdam”.

4.2.2. Uptake in public discourse

Citizens claim that the national media almost never covers issues around the gas storage units. From the documents that participants sent, it can be drawn that the citizens’ grievances have had very limited uptake in the public discourse. If there is attention for gas-related injustices in the Netherlands, it goes to the (graver) injustices related to the Groningen Field instead, thereby ignoring the grievances above UGS Grijpskerk and Norg. Moreover, citizens claim that the issue hardly ever comes up in parliament and if it does, “they hold a debate for a few hours and then another month passes”.

The main barrier to public uptake is credibility deflation of the input of citizens. The citizens interviewed in this study are inhabitants of a rural area, and the data indicates that the credibility of their testimonials is inflated due to stereotypes attached to rural identities. The participants living near Grijpskerk and Norg – even those with much expertise in subsurface and mining – feel perceived as ignorant, irrational, or profiteers. Moreover, their grievances are often not taken seriously or are even ignored by participants from institutions in ‘the West’ of the Netherlands. Moreover, several participants testify that emotions and societal knowledge are less valued than scientific knowledge and thus quickly dismissed, and only when there are scientific reports on the matter, does knowledge successfully come through. For example, a participant from a research institute stated: “It was of vital importance that we could state, scientifically, and prove, that gas storage has emotional and psychological consequences for the inhabitants. As a publication, they can consider it when reforming policies.” In sum, stereotypes and a bias towards experience-based knowledge lead to credibility deflation hindering public uptake of expressed injustices.

4.2.3. Positive reformulation

Citizens also experience barriers to reformulating their claims of injustice in a positive manner. They have become very experienced in articulating what is unjust, yet coherent, clear and feasible formulations of what a just compensation system would look like are scarce. The proposed solutions often remain very vague (“we should talk to each other more”, “compensations need to be more generous”). The solutions remain general indications, yet their implications have not been thought through.

One barrier to articulating a view on restorative justice in this case seems to be a lack of knowledge. Given the complexity of institutions, decision-making procedures and science about the subsurface, it is very hard for citizens to propose clear and feasible steps towards addressing the injustices voiced.

Another barrier seems to be contradicting views on the best course of action. Some citizens argue that “we need to copy Norway’s approach to compensations”, or that “we are entitled to some of the profits”, suggesting that compensation should happen regardless of, or before, physical damage to buildings occurs. However, citizens also often state that “of course, compensation is not appropriate when there is no causation”, contradicting statements that stress more proactive approaches to compensation. As such, there is also normative uncertainty about the best course of action (Taebi et al., 2020).

4.2.4. Social change

Above UGS Grijpskerk and Norg, the efforts of active citizen groups have not yet led to social change in which the voiced injustices are

addressed.² The design of the compensation system has remained unchanged since the articulation of concerns. From the data, two possible causes can be deducted.

First, social change can be prevented through the exercise of power. In the gas storage case, there were two competing ideas about how to organise a compensation system (e.g., two conceptions of restorative justice). One of these ideas was institutionalised through the mission statement of the organisation that organises the compensations (the IMG, *Instituut Mijnbouwschade Groningen*) and as such, it was dominant and more powerful than the other. Citizens faced a power inequality and as a result, social change was hard to achieve.

Second, social change can be avoided through symbolic fixes, or bribes, to keep societal unrest at bay without actually addressing the injustices. In the gas storage case, the *Omgevingstafels* were created, which is a round table for dialogue between citizens, the municipalities, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and the NAM (*Nederlandse Aardolie-maatschappij*, the company that owns UGS Grijpskerk and Norg). Almost all interviewees (except for the IMG, who organises the compensation system) expressed the hope that this consultative body would be the proper platform through which injustices can be addressed. According to their website, the first (and, at the time of writing, the only) meeting happened on November 14, 2022.³ In the absence of any real results, these *Omgevingstafels* might be a symbolic fix, leading to the absence of real social change.

5. Discussion

This section constructs the ladder of hidden morality by giving an overview of the possible obstacles between each step, informed by the results of the two case studies. Because the two case studies cannot provide an exhaustive overview of all barriers between injustices and social change, the identified barriers are supplemented with insights from empirical and philosophical literature on justice, participation, and social change. The insights from theory also deepen, generalise, and contextualise the results from the case studies. Moreover, this section elaborates on the responsibilities of researchers, policymakers, the media, NGOs, and other relevant societal actors in mitigating these obstacles, and related ethical difficulties. This section culminates in the framework of hidden morality (Section 5.7), which features the six steps between injustices and social change and the barriers between the steps identified in the case studies and philosophical literature.

5.1. Experiencing injustices

The first step towards social change is experiencing an injustice. Injustices are not always experienced by actors who are subject to them. In other words, there might be moral reasons to be concerned with a situation in the world that impacts a group of actors negatively, irrespective of the experiences that they have. Two different causes can be distinguished that prevent an injustice from being experienced.

First, people can experience an unjust situation as just. There are several reasons why this might occur. For one, people might lack knowledge about rights, procedures, or facts about the world. In the case study on Moerwijk, nineteen participants were unaware they should have been informed about the (right to participate in the) heat transition. Moreover, people can have faulty moral intuitions. People's moral intuitions are fallible, which means that people often have difficulties in

sensing what is right or wrong. Moral agency is a skill that can be trained (Pesch, 2020). Yet, the problem can be more persistent than incidental faults in moral intuitions. Honneth theorises that when a person's relation-to-self is severely damaged, one might not think of oneself as worthy of respect or esteem (Honneth, 1995). Consequently, an injustice can be perceived as deserved when a person does not expect to be treated better. In other words, people can get used to injustices through socialisation in an unjust system, which can incite low expectations for how one ought to be treated, which might lead to failing to notice injustices, as was the case for some participants in Moerwijk.

Second, it is impossible to experience an injustice when actors are unable to have experiences altogether. This goes for people who are literally unconscious, but also – and perhaps more relevant for energy ethics and justice – for future generations that are not yet born, and for non-humans such as plants and ecosystems. Phenomena in our world can be unjust for these groups of actors, yet injustices can remain unexperienced because these actors are currently incapable of having experiences. This point was not found in a case study but was added upon further reflection.

Because injustices are not always experienced, especially not by the most vulnerable groups in society, there is a responsibility for others – for example, researchers, the media, or interest groups – to conceptualise injustices for those who do not experience them. Here, the issue of unexperienced injustices poses a methodological problem for social science, because methods that rely on experiences of injustice – such as social acceptance approaches – do not suffice (Taebi, 2017). What remains are methods that empirically describe a state in the world – for example, anthropological observations, economic data, or modelling outcomes – followed by a judgement about justice. However, such efforts can also be interpreted as paternalistic, as an injustice is hypothesised for a specific group that is not experienced by them. As such, making injustices that are not (yet) experienced by the affected groups visible is a precarious endeavour that demands rigorous argumentation.

5.2. Expressing injustices

Even when injustices are experienced, there is no guarantee that they are actually expressed. In other words, not all actors are able to articulate a felt injustice. In such cases, people experience injustices as moral emotions, such as anger, disappointment, hurt, and frustration (Roeser, 2017), yet they are unable to shape these emotions into well-articulated statements about what is unfair and why, for several reasons.

First, some experiences of injustice remain external to the world of communication due to a deprivation of language. Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice is the most advanced theory on this phenomenon. *Epistemic injustice* refers to “those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices” (James Kidd et al., 2017). Fricker distinguishes between two forms of epistemic injustice, namely *testimonial* (see Section 5.4) and *hermeneutical* injustice. The latter is of relevance here as it occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker, 2007). In other words, people can have insufficient conceptual tools to properly comprehend and subsequently express their own experiences. People experience an injustice, yet they are unable to make sense of it because the right words are not yet available (to them), or because some words (still) carry undesirable meanings (Fricker, 2007). As a result, the experiences of injustice remain ill-understood, by the subjects themselves and by society at large. Especially the most vulnerable groups in society are prone to hermeneutical injustices, as collective interpretations are “unduly

² There is one exception: citizens expressed that it was unfair that UGS Grijpskerk was not included in the *Legal Presumption of Proof*, as there are no relevant differences between UGS Grijpskerk and UGS Norg (the latter was already included). On 13 December 2022, it was decided that the presumption would be applicable to both UGS Grijpskerk and UGS Norg.

³ See <https://www.omgevingstrajectgrijpskerknorg.nl/omgevingstafels>, accessed on 18 April 2023.

influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups" (Fricker, 2007).⁴ In the Moerwijk case, participants were not proficient in Dutch and as such, they were struggling or fully unable to verbalise their frustrations or characterise their own situation as energy poverty. In conclusion, injustices can remain hidden if the right words with the right meanings are not available to people subjected to injustice at a specific moment in time.

Second, relations of power, dominance, and suppression can prevent the expression of injustices. This can be done by explicit threats of negative consequences when an injustice is expressed, yet most power mechanisms are much more subtle. Injustices are inextricably intertwined with power relations, creating and sustaining unfair patterns of advantage (Powers and Faden, 2019). This also goes for energy systems, as people are dependent "on a complex socio-technical energy system, characterised by inequalities of power" which includes governments, energy suppliers, and landlords (Groves et al., 2021). When such relations of dependence become harmful, they might prevent a subject from expressing an injustice (e.g., staying silent because of a fear of repercussions such as being evicted from your house, as expressed by participants in Moerwijk).

Third, cultural norms and social pressure can prevent things from being said. Examples of such mechanisms are taboos, stigmas, and shame. A taboo represents a strong or even "sacred" moral norm that should not be violated (Tetlock, 2003). Several authors have shown how the existence of taboos prevents concerns of justice from surfacing (Colvin and Przybyszewski, 2022; Mattioli, 2016). For example, stigmas and shame related to energy poverty can prevent people from expressing injustices (Garthwaite, 2015; Middlemiss et al., 2019; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). People who are ashamed of their energy-poor situation are inclined to hide their situation, avoid inviting guests in the winter or seek help (Bredvold and Inderberg, 2022; Rincón-Rubio and Cedano-Villavicencio, 2023), as was the case in Moerwijk. Such cultural norms entail a serious challenge for the social sciences, as participants might not be entirely honest about their experiences of injustice.

Fourth, actors can be unable to articulate injustices in language due to their cognitive or physical (dis)abilities. Not all people can speak or communicate as typically developed communicators (neurotypical). For these groups, various Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) technologies are often available through which injustices can be articulated. However, not every person has access to these technologies. Moreover, conveying emotions or individuality via text or a monotone computer-generated voice is difficult. Lastly, speech is not everyone's preferred way of communication (van Grunsven and Roeser, 2022). This also affects most non-human animals, unable to communicate in ways that humans (try to) understand. To conclude, injustices might remain hidden due to the inability to convey injustices in spoken or written language, or the unease to do so.

Experienced yet unexpressed injustices pose an important problem for energy justice scholars. Like the problem of inexperienced injustices, people treated unjustly must rely on others to articulate injustices for them. When groups of people with moral emotions have trouble articulating an injustice, can anyone step in, or does that have to be someone who has (had) similar experiences? For example, is it possible for a white scholar to articulate injustices experienced by people of colour? On the one hand, it can be argued that only those who experience the harm can fully and correctly articulate it (Birhane, 2021). Fricker suggests that subjects of injustice should find their own way and words to express their moral emotions (Fricker, 2007). On the other hand, understanding and articulating injustices experienced by others might be hard, but perhaps not impossible, for a virtuous listener (Fricker, 2007). In any

⁴ Fricker gives the example of women experiencing sexual harassment or post-natal depression in a time in which those words did not yet exist. Moreover, she gives the example of a homosexual person in the 1950s who does not identify as such due to the negative meanings that were attached to the word.

case, it is important to be aware of the danger of misinterpretations when making injustices visible at this stage.

5.3. Collective action

Once individuals experience and express injustices, it is vital to find others who experience and express similar grievances. Finding others empowers individuals to collectively organise themselves, in other words, to form a group and engage in activism through protests, resistance, or other means. However, there are obstacles that prevent individuals from finding others, forming groups, and engaging in collective action.

First, certain policies can prevent people from sharing their experiences of injustice. For example, compensating (some) individuals for harm can prevent collective organisations from addressing the root causes of the injustice from emerging, as was the case in Grijskerk and Norg. Alternatively, some policies can result in individuals becoming (physically) isolated, which prevents them from sharing their experiences of injustice. Honneth describes processes of "institutionalised individualisation" or the "administratively ordered destruction of neighbourhood living environment" such as public gardens or parks, communal living spaces in neighbourhoods, or shared canteens at work (Honneth, 1982). By individualising and separating the experiences of social living, opportunities to exchange grievances are minimised. Insights from sociology and energy scholars confirm these hypotheses: having a social network is one of the main predictors of non-institutional political participation (Campbell, 2013; Larson et al., 2019). Middlemiss et al. show that the absence of good social relations can lead to energy poverty, and that energy poverty leads to the absence of good social relations (Middlemiss et al., 2019). This cyclical movement makes it likely that the injustice of energy poverty of isolated individuals remains hidden.

Second, the formation of collective action groups can be hindered by a lack of resources, including money, space, and time, or a missing legal or institutional framework, rendering collective action illegal. Engaging in collective action requires sacrifices from individual members, and thus activism can be seen as a privilege, as not every individual has the means to do so. These sacrifices are especially significant when activism is illegal, as is the case for civil disobedience, or struggles for justice in non-democratic regimes. When the costs of collective action become too high, resistance is mostly reserved for the privileged, white, rich, cis-gendered citizens.

Collective action is an important stage in the detection of injustices, and the responsibility for its facilitation is shared amongst policymakers, the media, businesses, social organisations, and individuals. In this, decision-makers have a vast responsibility to facilitate collective action and minimise its cost.

5.4. Uptake in public discourse

Once a group of people manages to collectively organise themselves to address a certain injustice, there is no guarantee that their grievances will be taken up and taken seriously in the public discourse. The uptake of injustice claims in public debate can mean many things, from exposure of the issue on news and media platforms to setting the agenda in parliament. Moreover, a true uptake in public discourse implies that the issue and its campaigners are also taken seriously.

Apart from mere luck, various obstacles prevent injustices from becoming recognised and part of the public discourse, and they can be placed under the header of *testimonial injustice*. This second category of epistemic injustice refers to systematically assigning a "credibility deficit owing to an identity prejudice in the hearer" (Fricker, 2007). When we listen to others, we assign credibility levels to what is being said. However, there are numerous false assumptions and stereotypes attached to identity components, such as gender, skin colour, emotional reasoning, accents, professions, rurality, or non-perfect language use.

We speak of testimonial injustice when a testimony's credibility is reduced due to such prejudices, leading to people's testimonials being ignored, delegitimised, or deemed irrelevant or wrong (Fricker, 2007).

Credibility deficits can occur due to prejudices concerning language use and communication style. Defending claims of injustice in a debate, in the media, or in official political settings requires intricate cognitive and analytical skills, such as formulating valid arguments (e.g., avoiding and noticing fallacies), distinguishing between main and secondary issues, and listening and responding to the arguments of others. Moreover, actors ought to be proficient in the language of the public discourse. These abilities are more prevalent amongst highly educated citizens, which implies they are more likely to influence the public discourse. Alternatively, activists who have less analytical skills, are less proficient in the relevant language and tend to express injustices in a more emotional manner are taken less seriously in the public debate. Often, claimants of energy injustices are only taken seriously if they frame their arguments in a scientific or economic way; the same message in a more emotional frame is not perceived as credible (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2015; Jasper, 1998; Rasch and Köhne, 2017), as occurred in the gas storage case. Moreover, in Grijpskerk and Norg, credibility deflation occurred due to the professions and rurality of participants. As such, actors in power, such as the media, social organisations, and politicians, have the responsibility to be virtuous listeners.

5.5. Positive reformulation

Protestors often express injustices in a reactive and negative way, fuelled by emotions such as anger and blame. However, there is "suspicion of irrationality surrounding most emotions", preventing the underlying injustices from being noticed (Jasper, 1998). In other words, positive reformulation contributes to the likelihood of the injustice becoming visible and taken seriously by decision-makers (see Section 5.4). Moreover, and more fundamentally, stating that something is unjust is in itself insufficient for guiding policymaking and social change. To fix an injustice, an action has to be taken, for example, inventing, abolishing, or amending a policy. So, negative formulations such as "X is unjust" *must* at some point be translated into positive statements such as "to eliminate injustice X, Y should be done". In other words, injustices must be reformulated into a prescriptive normative statement for social change to occur. Grievances that are not positively reformulated go 'undetected' as they, in themselves, cannot become policies. Therefore, the step of positive reformulation is crucial. Moreover, according to Honneth, mostly the 'higher social strata' seem to possess the capacity to reformulate their concerns positively, which systematically disadvantages 'lower social strata' whose negative expressions rarely result in concrete policy change (Honneth, 1982).

However, translating injustices into feasible to-do's is no easy endeavour. There seems to be an asymmetry between positively and negatively formulated ethical statements, as "the negative terms are more definite, categorical, and fundamental than the positive" (Fjelland, 2016). As a result, it is easier to formulate that something is bad or unjust, such as *you shall not kill*, and harder to find a positive formulation about how we *should* be living together. Two elements contribute to this difficulty.

First, suggesting feasible courses of action that mitigate the injustice assumes fine-grained (scientific) knowledge of how institutions work, what actors have which power, and what is feasible given the current socio-political-economic circumstances. Honneth suggested that different social strata have different resources for translating grievances into positive conceptions of justice, resulting in a disadvantage towards achieving social change (Honneth, 1982).

Second, there might be normative uncertainty about what the best course of action is due to epistemic disagreements, competing interests, or divergent moral intuitions (Taebi et al., 2020). Activist groups are often heterogeneous and may host competing conceptions of justice. So, once a group of citizens manages to organise themselves around one or

multiple injustices, there is no guarantee of a consensus about the best course of action.

Given these two obstacles, some actors may not be able to do this reformulation, and thus other societal actors, including researchers, policymakers, NGOs, and the media, should play a supporting role. However, the methodological challenge is significant. Translating injustices into positively formulated proposals for action, such as inventing or amending a policy, is possible because claims of injustice contain implicit moral standards (Honneth, 1982; Roeser and Pesch, 2016). By claiming that something is unjust, an assumption is made about *why* something is unjust. From this (often implicit) criterion, a more positive idea about justice can be derived. For example, one can identify possible interventions by defining the injustice of energy poverty as a loss of certain capabilities (Day et al., 2016). Grasping implicit normative standards in claims of injustice requires interpretation, which should be done with utmost precision.

5.6. Social change

Even if all the steps described in the sections above are achieved – in other words, when an injustice is experienced, expressed, organised, taken seriously, and reformulated positively – the injustice might persist due to the absence of social change. Social change that addresses an injustice can manifest in multiple forms, such as new or altered policies or laws, a change in the design of an energy technology or system, or compensation for duped individuals or communities. Yet, several things can hinder social change, allowing the injustice to persist.

First, a symbolic fix to the problem can distract from the need to fully eliminate the root cause of the injustice. Two symbolic solutions are prevalent regarding energy injustices, namely apologising and providing compensation. Apologising for an injustice is often a necessary component of moral repair, as it entails an acknowledgement of the wrongdoing. Yet, in some cases, it might be insufficient as they offer a mere symbolic but not a real or material solution to the problem. In this respect, apologising has been characterised as a "politics of distraction" that can sometimes result in an "excuse for inaction" (Corntassel and Holder, 2008). Providing compensation is a more substantial solution to an injustice, yet in some cases, it can be questioned whether compensation amounts to bribery (Hannis and Rawles, 2013). (Economic) compensation can be considered inappropriate, or even insulting and thus worsening the injustice, depending on the nature of the inflicted harm (Mansfield et al., 2002; Saglie et al., 2020; van den Berg and Tempels, 2022). In the case of Grijpskerk and Norg, providing limited compensation reduced the pressure for social change.

A second mechanism is more straightforward: claims of injustice are seriously considered but dismissed. This occurs when individuals or groups with decision-making power prefer to retain the status quo due to conflicting interests. The dismissal of concerns can also be caused by competing conceptions of justice, or – in other words – competing ideas about which laws and policies should be in place. In this case, the institutionalised laws and policies clash with the protesters' proposals, and this power inequality makes social change unlikely (van Uffelen, 2024).

As a last remark, social change should be seen as a continuum, varying from a full victory for the grievant, including the elimination of the roots of the injustice and the compensation of the harmed parties, to dismissal and an unchanged status quo. Some mitigation measures only represent partial social change, such as apologies or limited compensation.

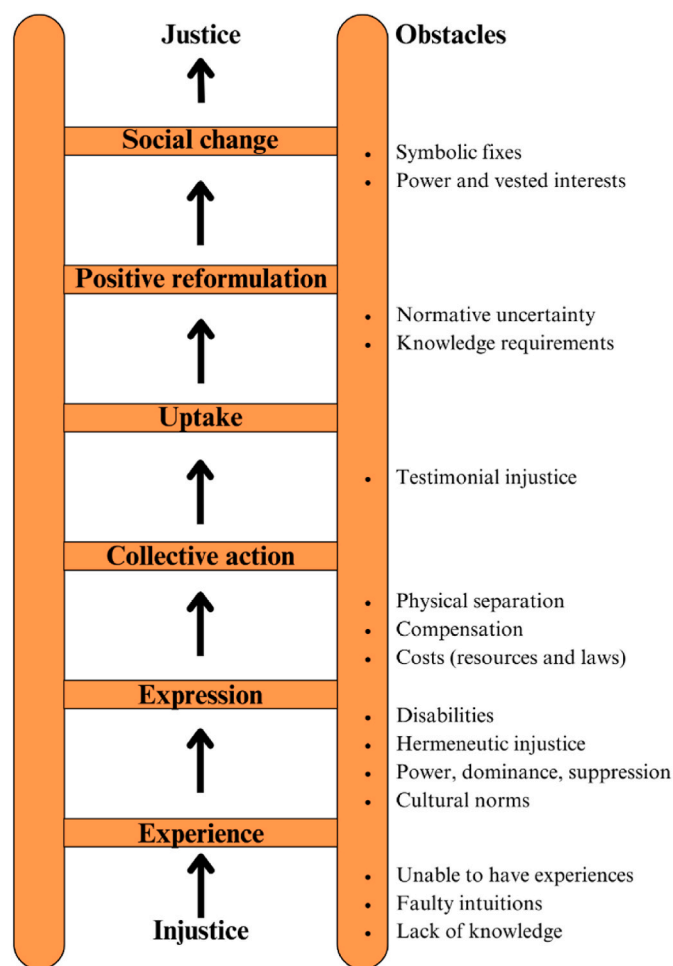


Fig. 1. The hidden morality framework, portraying the steps between the injustice and social change addressing that injustice, and the barriers that can occur between each step.

5.7. The ladder of hidden morality

Fig. 1 presents the hidden morality framework. Between each step, obstacles can arise that prevent an injustice from going “up the ladder”.⁵ The list of obstacles is likely not exhaustive and can be supplemented by additional insights from empirical and philosophical research.

Empirically speaking, each step often presupposes the previous stages and as such, they are rough prerequisites. For example, it is hardly possible to engage in collective action without articulating an injustice first. However, the framework is not meant to be a universally true representation of how the empirical world works. The steps are not strict prerequisites for the next steps, as exceptions can be imagined: some steps might be skipped, or the order might be switched. For example, an individual might be able to influence the public discourse without a collective organisation. Moreover, the necessary concepts for expressing an injustice can sometimes only be found in collective conversations about individual experiences. Therefore, the framework is meant to be a model or conceptual tool to help understand why injustices might remain hidden in the empirical world, which informs possible ways to overcome these obstacles and increase participation in energy decision-

⁵ This ladder should not be confused with Arnstein’s ladder of participation. Arnstein’s ladder of participation means to distinguish levels of participation, while the ladder of hidden morality distinguishes the steps from injustice to social change. As such, both the content and the function of both ladders are different.

making, leading to more just energy policies.

6. Conclusion and policy implications

Policymakers are increasingly confronted with the demand for a just energy transition. To respond to this demand, policymakers detect, anticipate and mitigate unjust consequences of energy policies, technologies and systems. The aim of this paper was to propose a framework to detect energy injustices by exploring the mechanisms that might hide them. This framework was constructed through the qualitative thematic analysis of two case studies in the Netherlands, supplemented by political philosophy and energy justice literature. The framework maps why perceived injustices might remain hidden and unaddressed, and as such it can act as a lens for detecting injustices in a more systematic manner. Moreover, it can inspire research methodologies, as injustices that remain ‘stuck’ on different levels of the ladder take on different forms and, therefore, require different techniques to uncover. Insights into the barriers that prevent injustices from surfacing are vital to facilitate a smooth and just transition.

The insights in this paper have implications for different societal actors, such as policymakers, the media, NGOs, researchers, community groups, businesses, engineers and designers. Given the scope of this paper, the remainder of this section focuses on the implications for policymakers and recommendations for further research.

The main takeaway is that not all injustices surface during participation events or in protests. This means that a policy is not necessarily just if it does not meet resistance. As a result, we cannot rely on protests and citizen participation to detect all energy injustices, especially because such methods are prone to exclude the most vulnerable participants from exploring and expressing injustices. Organising a just energy transition requires a more proactive approach to participation. In this, policymakers can deploy methods developed in academia that are able to give a ‘voice’ to otherwise silent citizens, such as PVE (Participatory Value Evaluation) (Mouter et al., 2019, 2021) or Q-methodology (Rodhouse et al., 2021; for an attempt to translate moral emotions about energy transition technologies into positively formulated statements via Q-methodology, see Ruiter, 2023).

Second, the framework can act as a tool for (municipal) governments to avoid the creation of barriers that prevent injustices from surfacing, or to be sensitive to these mechanisms when they cannot (easily) be removed. For example, when language is a barrier, municipal policymakers are recommended to enable the expression of concerns in multiple languages. This can be interpreted literally, as not all citizens speak the language in which a country communicates. Yet, art can also be seen as an alternative ‘language’ through which people can articulate their concerns or visions of the future in which they (do not) want to live (e.g., Bendor et al., 2017). Moreover, it is important for government officials to be aware of mechanisms such as cultural norms and fear of repercussions that prevent people from sharing (truthfully) their grievances. The problem of hidden morality has no one-size-fits-all solution, but instead necessitates a careful consideration of who encounters obstacles, what they are, how they interact with other steps on the ladder, and what can be done to remove them.

Third, it is important to train government officials in developing virtues of epistemic justice. Fricker describes how epistemic injustices can be mitigated when the listeners possess certain virtues. On the one hand, the *virtue of hermeneutic justice* entails that the hearer realises that the person who struggles with formulating emotions into words and phrases might deal with a hermeneutic gap. The person might lack certain concepts, words or meanings to express the felt injustice. As such, the listener must ‘listen through’ the struggles, which requires certain amounts of reflexivity and awareness of the possibility of hermeneutic injustice. The *virtue of testimonial justice*, on the other hand, demands that the listener resists the tendency to deflate credibility based on these standards and judge the credibility of the speaker based on valid criteria.

Lastly, contestation is not intrinsically problematic or something that needs to be avoided and constrained (Cuppen et al., 2019; Pesch et al., 2017). Aiming to reduce social contestation, for example, through providing compensations or formulating apologies, can distract from real injustices. On the contrary, conflict can be constructive when tackling the just energy transition challenge. Through collective action, injustices can surface that need addressing. Therefore, it is important to give activists the space and resources to address their grievances. Also, taking their (often negatively formulated) concerns implies a humble attitude from policymakers. The (proposed or current) energy policies might not be the one and only best solution and as such, there is something to learn from engaging with these activist groups.

This study has limitations that inspire avenues for future research. Given its roots in two Dutch case studies, the hidden morality framework does not present an exhaustive list of steps and mechanisms. As such, future research can be dedicated to expanding the hidden morality framework. For instance, more case studies and other bodies of literature can shed light on other mechanisms that contribute to hiding injustices. In this, there is a need for case studies from the Global South and different social and political systems with varying levels of civic freedom, such as nondemocratic regimes, as it is likely that barriers that hinder the detection of injustices vary over different political contexts. Moreover, it might be fruitful to study hidden morality in relation to different levels of political trust, as this might provide additional insights into the barriers that hide injustices. Lastly, it would be fruitful to explore *structural hidden morality*. We hypothesise that especially the most vulnerable people - in terms of race, education, and gender - encounter persistent obstacles at different steps of the ladder. As such, we expect that there are structural patterns of disadvantage at play, meaning that some people are more likely to climb the ladder than others. Empirical research adopting an intersectional approach can lay bare these structural mechanisms at play.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nynke van Uffelen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sander ten Caat:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2024.114465>.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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