

# Realistic Environmentalism

Julian Barg

February 7, 2021

## Introduction

*A personal episode*

*Before I wrote my first term paper I had learned to avoid words such as "should", "must" or "have to". I had learned to avoid normative language and stay "neutral". Today we know that an author's background inevitably enters the writing process, if not in language then in content, and that sometimes it is more sensible for us reflect on our values and maybe even "disclose" them to our reader. I have come to realize that the abovementioned rule of thumb still holds true in one sense though: it is not that we have to keep our value or norms or opinions out of our research because our research needs to be "objective". Rather, the hard truth is that if you tell "the world" in your paper what to do, the world probably will not listen to you. "The world" probably will not care—beyond your readers.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, it is more sensible for us to lay out the facts and let the audience arrive at the conclusion herself or himself.*

*See also Boisot and McKelvey (2010); Gouldner (1962); Jones and Bartunek (2019); Zbaracki, Watkiss, McAlpine, and Barg (2021).*

In terms of citations and cultural impact, the last 30 years have been incredibly successful for research on organizations and the natural environment. Yet, the community is less than satisfied with the outcomes (e.g., Ergene, Banerjee, & Hoffman, 2020). This article takes a look at the motivations that drive sustainability research and the imprint these motivations have had on the research (Latour, 1987). That insight on the motivation and the research process allows us to problematize missed opportunities (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Toward this goal we carry out a discourse analysis.

At the heart of sustainability research, there are a number of debates that signify distinct epistemic communities, each forming around a disparate larger consensus (cf. Knorr Cetina, 1999). First, there is a rift between ecocentrism and the environmental management paradigm (Purser, Park, & Montuori, 1995). Second, there is a divide between research focusing on solutions, and research

---

<sup>1</sup>And in some cases even those will not care.

describing problems. The divide between problems and solutions is related to strategizing among researchers with regard to hypothesized effects on the reader (Westoby & McNamara, 2019). And finally, there is an underlying disagreement on strategies. Some papers suggest small, gradual changes, while other papers argue that only sweeping changes are suitable for addressing problems such as an accelerated global climate change. Underlying these discourses is also a direct effect the research has on the researchers that is described as environmental or climate grief (Conroy, 2019; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

Aiding the discussion will be the two constructs of reliability and validity (Rerup & Zbaracki, 2021).

The discourse analysis on the three debates—especially that on ecocentrism and environmental management—reveal that there is little hope for a theoretical discussion to arrive at a definite answer. They represent diverging hypotheses about a future that has not arrived yet. Comparison to other fields and debates suggest possible pathways for resolving the deadlock (cf. Giddens, 1979). Specifically, the comparison suggest that the debate could move on by (1) discussing specific ecosystems rather than "nature" as a universal construct. (2) Research that problematizes rather than primarily offering solutions. (3) By taking a relational approach to integrate different streams.

## References

- Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011, apr). Generating Research Questions Through Problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 247–271. Retrieved from <http://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amr.2009.0188> doi: 10.5465/amr.2009.0188
- Boisot, M., & McKelvey, B. (2010). Integrating Modernist and Post-modernist Perspectives on Organizations: A Complexity Science Bridge. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3), 415–433. Retrieved from <http://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amr.35.3.zok415> doi: 10.5465/amr.35.3.zok415
- Conroy, G. (2019). ‘Ecological grief’ grips scientists witnessing Great Barrier Reef’s decline. *Nature*, 573(7774), 318–319. Retrieved from <http://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02656-8> doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-02656-8
- Cunsolo, A., & Ellis, N. R. (2018). Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-related Loss. *Nature Climate Change*, 8(4), 275–281. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0092-2> <http://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2> doi: 10.1038/s41558-018-0092-2
- Ergene, S., Banerjee, S. B., & Hoffman, A. J. (2020). (Un)Sustainability and Organization Studies: Towards a Radical Engagement. *Organization Studies*, 017084062093789. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0170840620937892> doi: 10.1177/0170840620937892
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory. Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1962). Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of a Value-Free Sociology. *Social Problems*, 9(3), 199–213. Retrieved from <http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/abs/10.1525/sp.1962.9.3.03a00010> doi: 10.1525/sp.1962.9.3.03a00010
- Jones, E. B., & Bartunek, J. M. (2019). Too Close or Optimally Positioned? The Value of Personally Relevant Research. *Academy of Management Perspectives*. Retrieved from <http://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amp.2018.0009> doi: 10.5465/amp.2018.0009
- Knorr Cetina, K. (1999). *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. doi: 10.2307/2653984
- Latour, B. (1987). *Science in Action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Purser, R. E., Park, C., & Montuori, A. (1995). Limits to Anthropocentrism: Toward an Ecocentric Organization Paradigm? *Academy of Management Review*, 20(4), 1053–1089. Retrieved from <http://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amr.1995.9512280035> doi: 10.5465/amr.1995.9512280035

- Rerup, C., & Zbaracki, M. (2021). The Politics of Learning from Rare Events. *Organization Science*.
- Westoby, R., & McNamara, K. E. (2019). Fear, grief, hope and action. *Nature Climate Change*, 9(7), 500–501. Retrieved from <http://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0511-z> doi: 10.1038/s41558-019-0511-z
- Zbaracki, M., Watkiss, L., McAlpine, C., & Barg, J. (2021). Transcending Truth: Beauty and Justice as Models for Reality.