

# Realistic Environmentalism

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## 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 (n.d.); Gouldner (n.d.); Jones and Bartunek (n.d.); Zbaracki, Watkiss, McAlpine, and Barg (n.d.).*

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, n.d.). This article takes a look at the drivers of sustainability research and the imprint these motivations have had on the research (Latour, n.d.). That insight on the motivation and the research process allows us to problematize missed opportunities (?). 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, n.d.). First, there is a rift between ecocentrism and the environmental management paradigm (Purser, Park, & Montuori, n.d.). Related to this rift is the question what response to environmental damages and

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

threats is warranted. Second, there is a divide between research focusing on solutions, and research describing problems. The divide between problems and solutions is related to strategizing among researchers with regard to hypothesized effects on the reader (Westoby & McNamara, n.d.). In addition to these discourses is also a direct effect the research has on the researchers that is described as environmental or climate grief (Conroy, n.d.; Cunsolo & Ellis, n.d.).

Aiding the discussion will be the two constructs of reliability and validity. Organizational learning is said to be valid when learning outcomes can be effectively used in prediction and control. Organizational learning is reliable when the outcome of the learning process is shared across the members of the organization or a collective (Rerup & Zbaracki, n.d.). Validity and reliability represent a challenge for research on organizations and the natural environment. What may have been found to be unsustainable in the academic literature can still be a viable practice e.g., in the economic system (Habermas, n.d.; Maguire & Hardy, n.d.).

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, n.d.). 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.

## Discourse on organizations and the natural environment

- Ecocentrism vs. environmental management

### Ecocentrism literature

Catton and Dunlap (n.d.-a)

Catton and Dunlap (n.d.-b)

Shrivastava (n.d.)

Purser et al. (n.d.)

Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause (n.d.)

T. Newton and Harte (n.d.)

Srikantia and Bilimoria (n.d.)

Levy (n.d.)

T. J. Newton (n.d.)

Pick up the "ecofascism" argument of Netwon to show how absurd the debate is—criticizing the

This is where the empirical works I collected from environmental science on the social construction of the environment comes into play (link).

Did not check whether I have cited the right volume of Habermas.

hypothetical fascism of a hypothetical movement rather than considering the gradual nature of real-life changes.

Springett (n.d.)

Hoffman and Jennings (n.d.)

Ergene et al. (n.d.)

At this point, the ecocentrism literature has sufficiently "made its point", so the authors revisit the literature with the purpose of showing that it is still relevant, not to develop new theory.

Win-win development

Find literature (duh!)

System change

Banerjee (n.d.)

Ergene et al. (n.d.)

More, much more!

- Solutionism vs. describing problems

Examples of empirical papers that focus on solutions

Slawinski and Bansal (n.d.)

More!

The trick here is to show that empirical papers that select on sustainability make a concealed claim that the identified variables lead to sustainability.

Examples of papers describing problems

Wright and Nyberg (n.d.)

Cockerill, Armstrong, Richter, and Okie (n.d.)

More, so much more!

Strategizing papers that describe hypothesized effect

Westoby and McNamara (n.d.)

Probably some AMJ editorials

- Environmental/climate grief

Cunsolo and Ellis (n.d.)

Conroy (n.d.)

## Discussion

- Reliability & validity perspective

Rerup and Zbaracki (n.d.) March

- Viability of unsustainable behavior  
Habermas (n.d.)

## Conclusion

- Postmodern take on research direction  
Giddens (n.d.)  
Maybe Fraser and Nicholson (n.d.)?  
Other works from sociology, AMR pieces on postmodernity?

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