

Ecocentrism vs. Environmental Management

Julian Barg

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What is sustainable? What is sustainability? There are some formulaic definitions that are widely accepted, including the dogmatic definition that "[s]ustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. IV). But if you ask two sustainability scholars to define sustainability in their own terms, chances are you are still going to get very different answers. Potentially including the ubiquitous phrase "I know it when I see it" (White, 2013). All that is not to criticize sustainability scholarship. It is the nature of the beast of dealing with complex systems—such as our planet—that things are difficult to nail down.

Definitions attain importance in research because they shape the research that takes place after the introduction section. Things may be assumed away, and a definition can determine the direction of a research project. The definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)—despite being the most widely used definition of sustainability by far—is still contested. On the one hand, the WCED definition is widely used as a working definition. On the other hand, the WCED definition is criticized for putting too much focus on economic *development* for resolving current and future distributive and environmental problems (e.g., Constanza et al., 2014, 6f.).

This blurb introduces the discourse on the WCED definition and what assumptions it introduces to research. It covers on the one hand research in business journals that apply the definition. These articles have in common that they turn to businesses and their policy decisions for potential solutions to common environmental or social problems. On the other hand, there is a critical discourse on sustainable development that explicitly discusses the inherent assumptions and typically rejects the notions that companies are suitable agents that can be relied on for change (e.g., Banerjee, 2003).

The discourse is driven by competing assumptions on the ability for corporations to act as agentic actors for change.

- Add "third way" implications similar to Giddens (1979).
- Actually in some sense, this directly parallels Giddens's comments on structure vs. agency—e.g., Heikkurinen et al. (2019).

- the "third way" is actually the extant literature I have extracted before—<http://wiki.jbarg.net/Constructivism%20%26%20Ecology.md#environmental-science-stream>

Terminology and Definition

A range of terms have emerged to describe the different takes on sustainability. For the critical stream, there is ecocentrism (Purser et al., 1995), deep ecology (Newton, 2002), the New Ecological Paradigm (Catton and Dunlap, 1980 via Hoffman and Jennings, 2015), critical epistemologies (Ergene et al., 2020) or even ecofascism (Newton, 2002). For the "non-critical"¹ stream there are environmental management (Purser et al., 1995), corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2014), eco-modernism (Springett, 2003), and managerial epistemologies (Ergene et al., 2020). For the purpose of this work, I will adopt the terms ecocentrism and environmental management respectively (Purser et al., 1995).

Environmental Management

Hart (1995) delivered what is possibly the first work in the business space to pick up the ideas of the WCED (Montiel & Delgado-Ceballos, 2014). He introduces these ideas to a wider audience by building on the resource-based view. Hart identifies the natural environment as a potential "bottleneck" that could strangle corporations' long-term business. But alas, through reduction of their environmental emissions, and by low-impact development of the global South,² the negative relationship between business and environment can be "severed" (Hart, 1995, p. 996), while regulations will only play a temporary role or follow from corporate action (Hart, 1995, footnote p. 991, p. 995). Hart revisited the topic in 2003, when he lays out more clearly the role of businesses (Hart et al., 2003). Sustainable development is described as a combination of (successful) industrialization, civic engagement, environmentally friendly technologies, and addressing population growth. Again, firms are actors in the spotlight that can find answers to all challenges and create value for themselves and others.

The next landmark article in this discourse is Bansal (2005), which was preceded by Bansal (2002). Bansal (2002) mentions explicitly that sustainable development *must* be implemented by one specific *actor*: *firms* (Bansal, 2002, p. 124). The article lays out that economic, social, and environmental sustainability are interdependent, yet, managers might fail to implement social and environmental sustainability, because the rewards in those areas are diffuse. If firms are not to implement sustainable development because they don't understand the benefit to society, it might require for front runners to institutionalize measures first within their respective industries to get the ball rolling. Bansal (2005) reiterates the theme of interdependence between social, environmental, and economic sustainability, and emphasizes that the three are not at odds, but

¹For the lack of a better word. It should be acknowledged that these authors themselves are also critical of an orthodox works such as Friedman (1962).

²This development of the global South is the *development* part in sustainable development.

internally consistent (Bansal, 2005, p. . 197). Through *environmental management* firms can improve efficiencies and reduce impacts, ultimately achieving a better environmental performance and developing superior capabilities and resources. A further dissemination of sustainable development occurs based on "[r]esource based rationales" (Bansal, 2005, p. 200, referring to Barney, 1991) and institutional processes à la Meyer and Rowan (1977).

- Haugh and Talwar (2010)

Moving agency to the employee-level, to strike a balance between Friedman (1962) and Freeman (1984).

- Hernandez (2012)

Advancing notion of employee-level efforts toward sustainability. Explicitly mentions agency theory, but adds concept of stewardship as driver.

- Bansal and DesJardine (2014) + Slawinski and Bansal (2015)

Adding temporality to previous work as an example of bounded rationality.

- Hahn et al. (2014)

On second read, an outrageous article, not sure if I can tease that out.

- Heikkurinen et al. (2019)

Theorizes specifically around agency.

Ecocentrism

- Purser et al. (1995)
- Shrivastava (1995)
- Banerjee (2003)
- Springett (2003)
- Milne et al. (2006)
- Banerjee (2011)
- Hoffman and Jennings (2015)
- Ergene et al. (2020)

Discussion

- Agentic view of corporations in environmental management
Unsurprising for business school faculty to turn to organizations/corporations as a potential solution—is that problematic?
- Structuralist view in ecocentrism
- Suggest encompassing view—agentic organizations responding to external pressure
Renewable energy: external impetus, for-profit companies as agents of implementation.
- Difficulty of "proving" a world view vs. another
Giddens (1979)

Conclusion

- Suggest turn toward debates focused on specific, local contexts and phenomena
Problem of organizational inertia—future solutions will have to come about in the context of a economic and societal structure that is similar to or derived from the current one—study it!
- Present examples from extant literature—<http://wiki.jbarg.net/Exant%20empirical%20paper>.

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