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**ORGANIZING OURSELVES AND THE  
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - PAST AND  
FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

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# **ORGANIZING OURSELVES AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - PAST AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will explore into the terrain of reflexivity in business and the environment studies. Over the past ten years we have witnessed a growth in the body of literature contributing to our understanding of the why's and how's of organizational greening and the more encompassing issue of organizations and the natural environment. The same body of literature, however, has been relatively silent when it comes to self-reflexive studies on more foundational and inescapable issues of how to make sense of and crafting directions to develop the research field. Studies of ontological and epistemological tensions within the field, reflexions on progress in empirical and theoretical

insights adding to a common body of thought and reflexions on insights from outside the field influencing the development of the research agenda is relatively sparse.

Some few contributions, however, are devoted to the basic issues of what is at the heart of the foundational assumptions and social organization of research fields and disciplines. Gladwin (1993) point among other things to the fact that research within the field is not embedded within the broader streams of organizational research and recommends more conceptual and methodological rigour to remedy this poor state of affairs. Wolff (1997) is echoing this call for a disciplinary development rooted in management and organization theory in order to move beyond the relative dominance of technical paradigms. Welford (1997) take this argument further in arguing in favour of a more critical approach to corporate environmental studies that would match the environmental and social challenges of the post-modern era of socio-cultural life. Wolff et al (1999) argue that the research agenda has been skewed towards british contributions when looking at the field trough the lense of one dominant academic journal, thus touching upon the skewed social and political organization of the field. Dobers at al (2001) find corporate environmental studies in need of developing a hermeneutic knowledge interest to balance the predominance of technical and emancipatory interests. In Boons (2001) we find an exploratory attempt at characterizing and developing the research field both in terms of it's position in the academic division af labour and the different research positions to be identified within the field. The contribution from Sandstrøm (2001) is scrutinizing some path-breaking and influential texts within the field to argue that in spite of original claims made by the authors of being radicals in terms of their ontological and epistemological positions towards research in general and towards environmentalism specifically, they all adhere to the progress-myth of more technology and more management - yet of another kind - as the way forward in terms of environmental research and organizational practice. Finally, Heiskanen (2002) argues in favour of an integrative and interdisciplinary epistemology that

potentially would bridge the nature-culture divide in environmental management studies and thus pave the way for a renewed and critical research agenda.

The above contributions are important since an on-going conversation on the epistemological and social organization of the field is identity building both at the level of the research field as such in the academic landscape and at the level of the individual researcher. Drawing upon own experience and research findings, I think other scholars would recognize both the struggle and the need for this research field to be legitimate and acknowledged among peers and institutionalized in research programmes and curricula. And as a corollary, the task of exploring and convincing ourselves and others as to why and how the study of organizations and the natural environment can contribute to our understanding of organizational behaviour and thus generating new research positions and fruitful explanations that adds to our knowledge of the field.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to contribute to this conversation. Admittedly, the title is presumptuous. The paper does not pretend to be an encompassing account of the intellectual development of the field nor does it intend to 'straightjack' some future avenue or territory. Rather, the aim is to sketch how disciplinary identity has developed and argue in favour of what I call 'a pragmatic empirical interest' as one possible future avenue of research. In doing so, the first part of the paper will discuss the issue of disciplinary identity. The second part is trying to make sense of how the field has developed in terms of research themes and research approaches illustrated by an empirical study of The Greening of Industry Network. The third part massage the epistemologies and knowledge interests of the field and develop the fargments for another epistemological approach. Finally, the conclusion will sum up the analysis and arguments.

## **DISCIPLINARY DISCONTENT AND DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY**

The above contributions leaves the impression of scholars displaying discontent with the development of the field. Summing up and cutting across the arguments, the field has not developed the necessary intellectual rigour to penetrate into or winning acceptance in mainstream organizational research, the field is divided by different knowledge interests spanning structural-functional to more system-holistic accounts and finally the field lacks a critical potential as to dealing with the subject matter as well as putting the field into a socio-political perspective beyond the academic field itself. Interpreting these characterizations of the field, one can recognize the pessimism Hargens & Kelly-Wilson's (1994) describe when one's discipline or field becomes "pedestrian and uninteresting" and a loss of confidence in the value of research because of lack of recognition (Hargens & Kelly-Wilson, 1994; 1177-78). According to the authors the perceptions of disciplinary discontent within a discipline or a field can be described / explained along two parameters: the anomic division of labour between non-integrated specialisms within a field and a low consensus on the relative importance of different research topics and the theories and methods appropriate for studying these topics.

Business and the natural environment studies - or often more or less interchangeable terms like 'corporate environmental management', 'sustainable business', 'organizations and the environment' - is best thought of as an emerging field of knowledge. A collage of different sources of knowledge, disciplines and epistemologies from where the field is constituted and re-constituted, comprising mainly management and organization studies as well as science and technology studies. However, in the academic landscape there are territories and boundaries and the social context and identities they are embedded within. Most approaches to describing fields of knowledge operate along disciplinary lines, placing rather well-known disciplines into some taxonomical system that emphasize difference rather than connection (Whitley, 1984). Thinking of fields of knowledge as

organizations - alluding to disciplines as carriers of some more or less distinct subject matter and epistemologies as well as the social organization in which this takes place - one could apply insights from the discussion on organizational identity. In Albert & Whetten's (1984) seminal work, they characterize identity in essentialist terms, as something 'stable, enduring and central' (Albert & Whetten, 1984:265). In other words - and translated onto scientific fields and disciplines - it means that there are relatively fixed ideas of the subject matter, epistemologies involved and a supporting socio-cultural context. Alternatively, we can think of identity as relational and thus constructed and re-constructed in an on-going negotiation with others, thus opening for change and multiplicity (Putnam, 1997). In the first case, identity is established through what is beyond the boundary and excluded from the territory; in the second disciplinary identity opens the territory to be influenced by and engage in a conversation of territories and boundaries, leaving room for transgressing subject matters and approaches.

In this respect, environmental studies is tilsyneladende somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand it is often claimed that dealing with environmental issues - whether oriented towards intervention or interpretation - is inherently interdisciplinary (Welford, 1998; Boons, 2001; Heiskanen, 2002). The environment is simply too complex to be grasped by single disciplinary perspectives, thus, collaboration across disciplinary boundaries are necessary. On the other hand one could hardly find any other research question producing that many subdisciplines within the natural sciences, engineering and the social sciences (Huber, 2001). To name just a few within the social sciences environmental management, ecological economics, environmental sociology, environmental history, environmental psychology and environmental education has emerged as separate and well-established areas of research within the past 20-30 years. Even though these subdisciplines hardly exists in isolated territories one feels tempted to characterize their emergence in terms of hyphenation rather than interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity that works to promote a common

set of concepts or axioms for a set of disciplines. The intellectual ambition of bridging different fields of knowledge often turns into tribalization (Becher, 1994) and territorial closure. Business and environment studies might be a case in point.

## **THE CASE OF THE GREENING OF INDUSTRY NETWORK**

Founded in 1991 The Greening of Industry Network (GIN) has been and still is arguably the single most important forum for research, industry, public institutions and NGO's within the field of business and the environment. It could thus be seen as a reflection of changes in the discourses of the field, including research focus and the role GIN as an organizer of the discourse.

Looking through the overall themes of the GIN conferences one can identify a clear shift in the conversation that both reflects the development of the research agenda and the linking of the environmental issues to wider societal concerns.

### **Table 1. GIN conference themes**

- Research Needs and Policy Implications for a Sustainable Future (1991)
- Designing the Sustainable Enterprise (1993)
- From Greening to Sustaining: Transformational Challenges for the Firm (1994)
- Research and policy: Learning to Build Sustainable Industries for Sustainable Societies (1995)
- Global Restructuring: A Place for Ecology? (1996)
- Developing Sustainability: New Dialogue, New Approaches (1997)
- Partnership and Leadership: Building Alliances for a Sustainable Future (1998)
- Sustainability: Ways of Knowing / Ways of Acting (1999)
- Sustainability at the Millennium: Globalization, Competitiveness and the Public Trust (2001)
- Corporate Social Responsibility & Governance for Sustainability (2002)

Source: [www.greeningofindustry.org](http://www.greeningofindustry.org)

One might characterize the development as going from the original idea of ‘greening’ to the more encompassing idea of ‘sustainability’ and from a focus on firms, industries and technologies to a focus on environmental governance, a widening of corporate responsibility to include social issues and a systems view on environmental change. This is also evident from the workshop themes at GIN conferences in recent years.

**Table 2. GIN workshop and session themes in 1998 & 2002**

<b><u>Theme</u></b>	<b><u>1998</u></b>	<b><u>2002</u></b>
Environmental management systems	9	7
Industry & sector studies	9	4
Environmental technologies	5	3
Regulation & policy	3	7
Local & regional perspectives	4	2
Interorganizational relationships & networks	3	2
Stakeholder involvement	2	2
Corporate social responsibility	0	8
Other	6	9
Total	41	44

Source: [www.greeningofindustry.org](http://www.greeningofindustry.org)

Although one should be careful not to infer too sweeping conclusions from this it seems as if broader institutional and social topics are gaining weight at the expense of environmental management, industry & sector studies and technology. At the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference of The Greening of Industry Network, Kurt Fischers, one of GINs co-founders, opening remark addressed the debates taking place in GIN over the first ten years. The initial debate centered around ‘technology vs. society’, the second on ‘eco-efficiency vs. systems change’/’incremental change vs. revolution and the current debate centres around the issue of sustainability in all its shades (www.greeningofindustry.org). This movement from ‘greening to sustaining’ is also reflected in GINs research agenda (Schot et al, 1997) and in a proposal to a revised agenda for GIN (From Environment to Sustainability: The Greening of Industry Network at the millenium) presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> international conference (www.greeningofindustry.org). Major challenges for GIN is identified as paying more attention to regional differentiation in modes of industrialization and restructuring towards sustainability, paying more attention to the social issues of sustainability and to shift the focus on individual actors to more broad issues of institutional and societal change. As the proposal states: “In our original mission we focused for the most part on *business as an actor* (emphasis in original). The position of one specific actor, however, is not highly relevant in the debate on sustainability” (p. 7). Moreover, Fischer et al envision GIN to more fully develop its role as a knowledge-broker and as a change agent.

This self-description is slightly contradicted in an analysis of GIN as a contemporary environmental organization. Jamison (2001) describes the history of GIN as one of increased fragmentation into special interests and subareas and a closing of the ‘autonomous space’ that the open-ended and environmental movement-like network once provided. Broader issue like social assessment of technology, initially at the heart of GIN, has now been marginalized by a

management discourse and ethos on the ecological modernization agenda. In Jamison's view, members of GIN has become competitors on knowledge and expertise:

“As economists and engineers have developed the concepts of environmental management, cleaner production, eco-efficiency, life-cycle analysis and industrial ecology, they have been forced to seek out market niches in the global economy” (Jamison, 2001; 12).

Accepting Jamison's description of an increased fragmentation within the field, his 'market-pull' interpretation as the driver needs some qualification and complement by a paradigmatic 'knowledge-push' mechanism in explaining the organization of knowledge and tribalization of the field.

First, issue-driven and interdisciplinary/hybrid fields tends to fall into the trap they set out to avoid; they become self-contained systems and, thus, contribute to the fragmentation of knowledge instead of bridging different fields of knowledge (Klein, 1996). In our case this is, among other things, demonstrated by the very existence of GIN - and this standing group - and the emergence of specialized journals such as 'Business Strategy and the Environment', 'Eco-Management and Auditing', 'Greener Management International' and 'Journal of Industrial Ecology'. Comparatively, environmentally related contributions is sparse in mainstream management and organization journals with the notable exceptions of special issues of 'Academy of Management Journal' in 1995 and 2000 and a special issue of 'International Studies of Management and Organization' in 2000, devoted to corporate environmental management. In effect, the field produces an encoded language, or more languages, not readily accessible to others. One might also speculate in the epistemic and social powers of root-disciplines of management, accounting and industrial engineering in the formation of a tribalized scientific community, suggesting that these might be

more powerful than a common commitment to the environment and sustainability across disciplinary boundaries.

Second, knowledge-producing institutions and their disciplines engage in a power-knowledge play to capture the environmental and sustainability discourse (Luke, 2001). In the market for knowledge and institutional legitimacy this means that educational institutions and environmental professionals “... must be dedicated to protecting and enhancing the performativity of our environments” (Luke, 2001; 16). Although Luke’s study covers only environmental studies anchored in the ecological sciences, his observations could easily be applied to corporate environmental management as well. ‘Eco-managerialism’ captures the spirit of contemporary corporate environmentalism in privileging the discourse and knowledge claim of nature as being a yielding infrastructure and yet an object of protection, succinctly summed up in the principles of sustainable development.

Third, and as a corollary, the knowledge interest displayed in the GIN research agenda revolves around the metaphor of sustainability. Thus, sustainable governmentality - the bringing together of knowledge and policy - seems to have captured the research agenda at the expense of the ambition to promote a critical corrective to business and policy practices and to exhaust ambitions of challenging disciplinary conventions within management and organization studies as well as technology studies. Looking at how corporate environmental management has developed when it comes to inter- or transdisciplinarity, sustainability as a politically and ideologically organizing metaphor for a common denominator of research does not seem promising.

## **(RE)VITALIZING THE FIELD**

Recall that a dominant theme in the contributions to corporate environmental management is the need to develop a critical research agenda (Welford, 1998; Dobers et al, 2001; Sandström, 2001; Heiskanen, 2002). Funtowicz & Ravetz (1993) discuss the emerging 'post-normal' science that potentially would provide for a democratization of science and respond to the current challenges in what they call the post-normal age. According to the authors post-normal science is issue-driven and applies to situations "... where facts are uncertain, values in dispute, stakes high and decisions urgent" (p. 744), that is, issues - like risk and the environment - where conventional scientific methodologies are ineffective to cope with systems uncertainties and decision stakes. Thus Funtowicz & Ravetz (1993) envisions a new scientific methodology that is able to contain both epistemic and axiological aspects of a problem and the quality judgement of knowledge production is embedded within an extended peer community, consisting of a dialouge between all those with a stake on the issue at hand. Although the GIN research agenda does not explicitly refer to Funtowicz & Ravetz (1993), the familiarity in intent should be obvious.

Funtowicz & Ravetz's (1993) call for a more democratic and integrative epistemology to cope with comtemporany complexities and uncertainties and bringing together knowledge and values is highly sympathetic. Within environmental management similar voices have been raised in favour of a more critical epistemology (Welford, 1997; Dobers et al, 2001). Based on a reading of contributions in Business Strategy and the Environment, Dobers et al (2001) find that knowledge interests in corporate environmental management revolves around technical and emancipatory interest while hermeneutic knowledge interests are completely absent, that is "... interests [...] of daily interaction, of an urge to understand human interaction in everyday life" (p. 342). Moreover, , developing a research agenda that would match the "... shift in issue and problem perception" and adopt a systems view at the expense of the role of single actors (GIN, p. 7) as in the case of GIN

and finally the development of an interdisciplinary approach in overcoming the disciplinary compartmentalization of knowledge and match the complexities of current environmental problems. However, a host of questions surfaces. What does it mean to be critical, democratic and to match complexities? Does our knowledge per se become more applicable to problemsolving when negotiated in 'extended peer communities' or adopt a more holistic 'systems view' of problems, actors and the socio-cultural set-up?

What is at stake is in my opinion much more than giving voice to alternative perspectives and interests currently underdeveloped or suppressed. It is about the more fundamental assumption about human knowledge and scientific practice. An underlying current in the approaches touched upon above is the need to develop theories and concepts to match or be in congruence with a new post-normal or post-modern reality. However, the question is if our conceptualizations have ever matched some reality and if they should. Adopting a constructionist epistemology, knowledge and conceptualizations are not providing us with exhaustive accounts or current representations of reality, rather they serve as the material under study: how they are locally translated and perform (Czarniawska, 1997) and produces effects, i.e. the shaping of constructs, knowledge and power relations (Latour, 1986; Law & Hassard, 1999, Foucault, 1994). Theories and concepts are always practiced in some social context and therefore produced and reproduced in this context, translated into meaningful and action-producing constructs, objects of multiple sense-making processes (Weick, 1995) etc.

Leaving a representational and de-contextualized epistemology in favour of a pragmatic and performative epistemology has at least three sets of interrelated consequences and advantages. First, an empirical and micro-sociological devotion to studying how corporate environmentalism unfolds

locally. Among other things this means studying how ‘the environment’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘environmental technologies’ are translated and perform in an organizational context, are enmeshed with other currents of organizational reality and becoming realities in organizational negotiations. Some few empirical studies adopting a constructionist epistemology demonstrate the potentiality of interpreting organizational institutionalization of environmental concerns from this vantage point (Boons & Strannegård, 2000; Catasús, 2000; Heiskanen, 2000; Fineman, 1996; 1998, Füssel & Georg, 2000, Georg & Füssel, 2000).

Second, a pragmatic epistemology holds the promise of inclusiveness in listening to the many voices of the field. In centering on human practice as the object of research it leaves behind pre-conceived and reified notions of human action - and in this case also nature and the natural environment as being ‘out there’ and not conceptions open to interpretation and contestation - to develop an epistemological pluralism that represents a clean break with epistemological representation and sovereignty (Rouse, 1992; 1996). This strand of thought favours heterogeneity, transparency and openness as main normative and descriptive features of knowledge production and does not privilege any knowledge position (Healy, 2003; Thevenot, 1999).

Third, the above arguments is clearly in favour of and echoing what one might characterize as a swarm of closely related epistemological developments originating in different disciplinary contexts. Contemporary management and organization studies are thus being heavily influenced by the ‘practice turn’ (Thevenot, 1999), the ‘rhetorical and communicative turn’ (Klein, 1996; Putnam, 1996; Boden, 1994) and the ‘narrative and ethnomethodological turn’ (Czarniawska, 1997) in ethnomethodological studies, language studies and sociology respectively. This interdisciplinarity have so far gone relatively unnoticed in organization and environment studies, thus, supporting the

characterization of corporate environmental management as “... not yet integrated in general management and organization studies ...” (Dobers et al. 2001: 335) and, as the above discussion suggests, displaying an interest in interventionist and ideational approaches at the expense of a truly empirical knowledge interest and a reflexion on underlying assumptions about the subject matter. However, a social constructionist approach - and it's non-essentialist undercurrent- might end up leaving the environment(s) and nature(s) as semantic constructs, in effect no different from the reified notions found in the realist-representational epistemology that it set out to transcend. Perhaps a socio-material approach to research within the field (Heiskanen, 2002; Rouse, 1992; Latour, 1986, 2000) holds the promise of bridging materiality and sociality of environmental issues and in a wider sense coalign nature and culture.

## **CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK**

Scholars (e.g. myself) within the field of organization and the natural environment might be described as belonging to a loosely coupled tribe, caged in a territory partly of (my) their own making and partly by the workings of the social organization in academia. Issue-driven and interdisciplinary fields have a hard time of gaining legitimacy in the academic landscape as the disciplinary powers of existing truth regimes tends to translate uncertainty about new issues into well-known and manageable discourses and practices. In this case it seems as if an original ambition of developing an interdisciplinarity field around business and the environment has contributed to producing sub-tribes mainly situated in their root-disciplines and generic epistemologies, while also paying visit to the larger tribal community of The Greening of Industry Network.

The tension between an interventionist and an ideational approach to the field, as e.g. expressed in the development of the GIN research agenda, is, however, a false one. ‘Greening’ and ‘sustaining’ operates out of the same structuralist-functionalist assumption of the environment as being a reality out there and organizations as rather rational entities. Developing and implementing the right management technologies - environmental management system, technologies, values, stakeholder dialogues, multi-actor governance systems - will be appropriate interventions to align organizations with their social and natural environment. The approach adopted in this paper is rather one of examining how environmental management technologies are translated into processes of organizing around the environment and produces effects of power, politics, values and how ‘the environment’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘environmental management’ are conceived of as symbolic and real constructions in different contexts. Thus, the approach holds no initial assumptions of effects, but study the performativity of human practice.

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