Extending the discourse in research on corporate sustainability

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Abstract: This paper is based on the notion that the discourse of corporate sustainability is becoming institutionalised at a time when it is just getting started. It therefore attempts to contribute to research approaches that question and go beyond the dominant normative discourse of corporate sustainability. It poses the question of what would be some of the assumptions needed to open up the discourse and what would be some of the implications of doing that. It assesses a number of earlier reviews of the field, and undertakes a case study of The Natural Step, which, while claiming to open up a new discourse, may be understood as another means of institutionalising the narrative of corporate sustainability. Three areas for future research are outlined in this paper.

Keywords: sustainable development; corporate sustainability; discourse; critical; dialogic; The Natural Step.


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1 Introduction

The corporate sustainability discourse is in danger of becoming institutionalised, encouraging the concomitant institutionalisation of the concept of corporate sustainability. It is the literature of eco-efficiency and ‘the business case’ for sustainable development that tends to dominate the journals that focus on corporate sustainability. This constrains the discourse of corporate sustainability, not least by promoting new approaches to ‘business-as-usual’ rather than opening up an innovative discourse on business and on what corporate sustainability means.

At the same time, there are also calls for a more extended, or different, discourse (Egri and Pinfield, 1999; Roome, 1998; Springett, 2003; Welford, 1995). In this paper, three research overviews of corporate sustainability, calling for a shift out of the mainstream, are taken as examples and critiqued. Firstly, the paper by Gladwin et al.
published in the *Academy of Management Review* in 1995.1 This paper is one of the few critical contributions focusing on corporate sustainability in the high-ranking international management journals. Secondly, the paper by Dobers, Strannegård and Wolff, published in *Business Strategy and the Environment* (BSE) in 2001.2 Dobers et al.’s paper is based on a review of the top cited references in BSE, which is the leading journal in corporate sustainability. Finally, the chapter by Starik in the anthology *Research in Corporate Sustainability*, published in 2002.3 The anthology is the most recent in corporate sustainability and Starik writes the last chapter, reflecting on the future of the area.

Taken together, these reviews underline some limitations in the dominant discourse and attempt to extend it in different ways, purportedly pointing research on corporate sustainability in new directions. The question posed in this paper is whether, in fact, new conceptions of corporate sustainability that extend the discourse are actually envisioned in these contributions. Do these writers, in fact, identify ways of extending the discourse, or are they offering better approaches that still amount to business-as-usual? The argument in this paper suggests that these reviews all identify interesting, but potentially limited, paths. They are examples of how efforts to introduce innovative discourses are frequently caught up in the established narrative of business, accommodating corporate sustainability to the traditional paradigm of business. This means that some potential avenues as well as traditions of research that might help to develop a broader discourse around corporate sustainability might be overlooked. This paper therefore attempts to suggest directions that might extend the discourse in more fundamental ways. Firstly, though, a closer look at the three papers.

Gladwin et al. (1995) divide earlier research literature in management and sustainability into the technocentric paradigm (the dominant paradigm), the ecocentric paradigm (the critical one) and the sustaincentric paradigm (the third way out). Framing the technocentric paradigm, the authors assert: “Assuming continued economic growth and technological innovation, today’s generation need only pass on to the next an aggregate capital stock no less than the one enjoyed currently. Reasoning is egoistic, linear, instrumental and rational” (1995, p.883). In the ecocentric paradigm, the dictum of ‘humans first’ is rejected. Therefore, human action can only be accommodated through “small, simple, resilient and decentralised systems and technologies that make minimal demands on nature” (p.887). The problem with this paradigm, the authors claim, is that it “fails to embrace the capacity of human intellect and, thus, the whole of reality,” as well as “to adequately address issues of unemployment, income inequality, and other social pathologies that grip the industrial world” (p.888).

From this perspective, corporate sustainability is an established area, though one in need of renewal. Even the so-called ‘critics’ (the ecocentrics) have come up against the wall and are in need of some guidance on how to get on track towards sustainability. Gladwin et al. therefore argue for studies that address the critics’ often one-dimensional emphasis on critique as well as their lack of feasible alternatives; and the technocentrics’ more romantic view of the reserve and growth of natural resources, of technological development as an intrinsic part of fixing the problems, and of human nature. They consequently outline the ‘sustaincentric paradigm’, which, according to the authors, “is both people centred (concentrating on improvement in the human condition) and conservation based (maintaining the variety and integrity of non-human nature)” (p.894).
Based on this, the authors identify three necessary transformations: (i) agency to communion, (ii) exterior to interior and (iii) concept to implementation. However, these transformations can still be thought of as fairly conventional.

In Gladwin et al.’s suggestions lies a clear view of another ‘right’ way towards sustainability, the sustaincentric way. For example, (i) a communitarian way is better than the liberal way. But how far should this be taken? A clear bias towards communitarian ideals, with its emphasis on responsibilities, could underestimate the necessity of ‘rights’ in sustainable development, for example, the importance of universal human rights. Exterior to interior (ii) takes for granted that the spheres between “exterior nuts and bolts” and “interior hearts and minds” (p.899) can be cut off from each other. But is it fruitful to reify this divide in sustainable development? Have the deep ecologists been misread by the authors (see Newton, 2002; Starkey and Crane, 2003)? One key issue in sustainable development is how to integrate economy, ecology and society. As such, there is also a call for research approaches that are sensitive to such integration. Concept to implementation (iii) puts the emphasis on operationalisation and measurement, and takes for granted that “ultimate and outcome objectives” (p.900) are possible to define as well as necessary for a changeover to take place. Although Gladwin et al.’s call to arms aims to revivify the discourse, it has been argued that, to some extent, they fall victims to their own critique (see Newton, 2002).

In another approach, Dobers et al. (2001) argue for more interpretive-styled studies on business and the natural environment. They claim that three types of knowledge interests could be identified. Firstly, the technical knowledge interest, ‘has the objective of mapping and controlling humanity and nature’; while the secondly, the hermeneutic knowledge interest, is driven “by an urge for understanding, often in everyday life, human interaction” (p.335). Finally, the emancipatory knowledge interest, “is critical and seeks to show underlying power structures and ideologies” (p.335). The authors conclude that there is a clear bias towards technical and emancipatory interests, and a particular neglect of hermeneutic studies. Dobers et al. therefore claim that “a discipline that lacks a hermeneutic knowledge interest in its main theoretical underpinning is bound to become unbalanced and single-tracked” (p.342).

However, Dobers et al. do not really develop their alternative, but point us in a rather vague direction. In practice, however, hermeneutic knowledge interests tend to remain attached to a faith in the scholar collecting field texts that (accurately) describe the phenomenon under study. The scholar remains sensitive to the respondents or the observed, but there is an ambition to describe the phenomenon as it is. It is a matter of getting it right (Deetz, 1996). In Dobers et al.’s account, there is a divide between descriptive and normative uses of knowledge. Hence, they assume that this divide is possible. But can research or use of knowledge be thought of as purely descriptive? What does this say about, for example, the scholar conducting the research? In what way can a scholar be critical?

A hermeneutic knowledge interest also relies on a realist ontology (as expressed in Gladwin et al.’s ‘nuts and bolts’ versus ‘hearts and minds’), holding nature as ‘out-there’, and not part of inseparable action-nets consisting of both human and non-humans (cf. Czarniawska, 1999; Latour, 1999). Relying on a hermeneutic knowledge interest is also commonly translated into taking on a social constructionist approach, but this usually means that the scholar adopts a fairly conventional dualistic representation of reality (Hacking, 1999). The social is constructed, but the natural is left outside.
In a third example, Starik (2002) also demonstrates that, even when authors are arguing for a change in the discourse, they may be reinforcing parts of the traditional discourse that have become institutionalised. Starik argues that many corporate sustainability scholars have been preoccupied with the organisation, or the business and the social environment and less focused on the natural environment. Thus, “it may soon be time for some of us to more fully ‘green’ our research, that is, to focus as much on natural environment phenomena as on organisational variables” (Starik, 2002, p.322). Starik sees as promising the discourse of industrial ecology through which organisations “form networks to exchange material and energy inputs and outputs” (2002, pp.330–331). He also writes about taking more account of the values of the scholar conducting the research (p.323), and to acknowledge established, but commonly neglected, research approaches, such as longitudinal and multilevel analyses (p.326).

However, a similar concern to that expressed about the work of Dobers et al. arises when reflecting on Starik’s chapter. There seems to be a divide between organisational variables and natural environmental phenomena. While Starik claims that scholars have predominantly ignored the environment, the ‘promising’ area of industrial ecology that he promotes is, in fact, already a well-established area. There are international journals and networks devoted to the topic. Furthermore, industrial ecology also leads to established system theory and this is partly why Luke (2001) recognises such an approach as dampening agency and individual responsibility in the network. In other words, industrial ecology could even be seen as an obstacle for corporate change towards sustainability. Casting the firm as merely one actor out of many in a complicated web of interdependent relations can play down each actor’s responsibility to change any destructive structures. It might also play down the crucial role that certain, more powerful, actors have in the network. While useful on a systemic level, industrial ecology does not seem to take full account of power in the network nor for the often-messy practices of social interaction. Pointing us in the ‘natural’ direction also contradicts, for example, the view of Sharma (2002; Starik’s co-editor) on why sustainability has made an impact in research on corporate responsibility. Behind Sharma’s argument lies the belief that research in the area has come from a green interest and then been challenged to integrate the social and the human. Starik takes the opposite route.

2 Extending the discourse

However, the important thing that Starik calls for is that we ‘unleash our imaginations’ (2002, p.335), and this paper is an attempt to address that challenge. Given that the growing attention to corporate sustainability in practice and in academia is paralleled by growing environmental destruction and social inequity (cf. UNEP, 2002; Worldwatch Institute, 2004), research in the area might represent a largely unexplored potential in exploring alternative discourses. Roome (1998, p.260), for example, also concludes that:

“Managers of industrial organizations are constrained in their move toward sustainable development by the conceptual frame that shapes their thinking and the contextual frame that determines the overall setting within which they act. Unless we can break free from the prison of these frames and develop new frames that relate business more closely to sustainable development, a sustainable industrial society will remain a chimera”.


Although I am to some extent skeptical about Roome’s conception of a sustainable industrial society, he does point to the importance of the ‘discursive framing’ of corporate sustainability, as opposed to the further development during the last decades of the dominant conceptual framework under a ‘green’ guise (as in Gladwin et al.’s technocentric paradigm; and Dobers et al.’s concern for an unbalanced and single-tracked area of research). In this paper, it is therefore argued that research on corporate sustainability is becoming institutionalised in an increasingly technocentric management discourse. This is also taking place at a time when there is an apparent need for new stories and approaches to corporate sustainability, even approaches extending beyond alternatives outlined by some critical scholars. The question seems to be whether the ‘alternatives’ outlined do, in fact, lead to new ways of understanding corporate sustainability that do better justice to the eco-social flow of sustainable development. The argument advanced here is that it seems as if there is yet to be a breakthrough. Jamison expresses his concern as follows: “As cleaner technologists have moved their products and their product concepts closer to the commercial marketplace, the ‘space’ for critical discussion and reflection seemed to be getting smaller” (2001, p.140).

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the widening of this space by calling for an extended, innovative discourse on corporate sustainability. More specifically, questions posed include: What might it take to open the space up? What might be (some of) the assumptions needed and what might be (some of) the implications of exploring this space? The purpose is not to launch a new research program: this is well beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, an attempt to open up thinking about the discourse of corporate sustainability and to propose some ways forward.

In this paper, I call upon Deetz’s (1996) reworking of the Burrell and Morgan (1979) grid, the classic outline of different paradigms in social science; and employ this to frame the discussion of The Natural Step’s (TNS) and its system conditions for sustainable development. TNS is chosen for its prominence as a sustainability partner for many businesses worldwide and its contribution to these businesses’ development of approaches to sustainable development. The argument in this paper aims to illustrate both the eagerness of the TNS approach to define and control sustainability as opposed to the inherent fluidity of sustainability.

3 Understanding corporate sustainability research

Deetz basically develops alternative differentiations to the Burrell and Morgan grid. These differentiations represent two dimensions. One deals with a research approach’s relation to dominant social discourse and is framed on a continuum by the concepts of consensus and dissensus. Consensus and dissensus are not to “be understood as agreement and disagreement but rather as presentation of unity or of difference, the continuation or disruption of any prevailing discourse” (Deetz, 1996, p.197). It is a matter of whether or not the research program contributes to an existing discourse or whether it basically disrupts it. The other dimension deals with the origin of concepts and problems, and is framed on a continuum by the concepts of local/emergent and elite/a priori. In this case, “concepts can be developed with or applied to the organisational members being studied” (Deetz, 1996, p.195). Research programs with a clear theoretical framework that is decided a priori usually apply their concepts and seek to impose causality on the actors and contexts studied. This would be an elite/a priori oriented
discourse. Research sensitive to how local actors, or networks of actors, shape realities would be more in line with a local/emergent-oriented discourse. Although warning readers of the often-present simplifications of developing grids like this, Deetz moves on to outline “prototypical discursive features” (1996, p.199) for each of the four fields.

**Consensus – elite/a priori:** This is the normative discourse. Deetz’s use of the term ‘normative’ might be seen as controversial, but the reason is “to emphasize the centrality of codification, the search for regularity, normalisation of experience, and a strategic/directive control orientation” (1996, p.201). Research interests in corporate sustainability within this discourse tend to focus on questions such as ‘which factors explain’, ‘which is the most effective way’ and ‘how-do-we-do-it’. Gladwin et al.’s technocentric paradigm and Dobers et al.’s technical knowledge interest would tend to fall into this field.

**Consensus – local/emergent:** This is the interpretive discourse. In this discourse, the aim is “to show how particular realities are socially produced and maintained through norms, rites, rituals, and daily activities” (Deetz, 1996, p.202). In this discourse, the scholar aims to identify and reproduce the way things are done in a particular social context. The scholar does not ‘feed’ concepts to the respondents or the observed, but allows concepts to grow out of the research process. Still, the search for norms, habits and routines are in focus, which means that a lot of action falls outside what is then categorised as such. What is not conceptualised as a routine, for example, risks exclusion. In this way, unity and stability are searched for. Deetz states that “like normative research the pressure is to get it right, to display unified, consensual culture in the way that it ‘actually’ exists” (1996, p.202). Dobers et al.’s hermeneutic knowledge interest would probably fall into this field, although this knowledge interest, the authors argue, pays closer attention to what people do in practice and they point out that these types of studies lack a focus on corporate sustainability. But there is still the dissensus and consensus dimension of the grid. How are such approaches related to the dominant discourse? The striving to be sensitive to local actors and their contexts are frequently still within the goal to contribute to established discourses. The question of ‘why?’ is seldom addressed in the interpretive discourse. The scholar remains descriptive (descriptive use of knowledge).

**Dissensus – elite/a priori:** This represents the critical discourse. For scholars drawing on this discourse, the aim is “to demonstrate and critique forms of domination, asymmetry, and distorted communication through showing how social constructions of reality can favor certain interests and alternative constructions can be obscured and misrecognised” (Deetz, 1996, p.202). Dobers et al.’s emancipatory knowledge interest and Gladwin et al.’s sustaincentric paradigm would tend to fall into this field. The discourse has its root in critical theory (cf. Alvesson, 2003) and is dissensus-oriented in its ambition to dismantle existing oppressing structures, but it is elite/a priori as it often launches an alternative to how people can liberate themselves from the dominating constructions.

**Dissensus – local/emergent:** This is the dialogic discourse. Scholars with such a research approach pay particular attention to how the nature of people and reality is (de)constructed. The discourse has its roots in postmodern and poststructuralist writings (e.g. Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault) and takes as its core a critique of a “long-ignored weakness in the traditional accounts of self, truth, science, and their relatives” (Gergen, 1999, p.19). It is particularly the taken-for-grantedness in how we talk and make sense of the world that is subject to deconstruction. Gladwin et al.’s
version of the ecocentric paradigm could to some extent be related to this field, but it is
difficult to find corporate sustainability research from the reviews cited earlier that falls
within this discourse.

Employing Deetz’s grid as a lens to examine the accounts by Gladwin et al., Dobers
et al. and Starik, it can be seen that these efforts to extend the normative discourse still
come across as limited to some extent. There are some ideas on extending it to the critical
and interpretive discourses, but it is more difficult to find traces of the dialogic discourse.
In a way, it seems as if the normative discourse is always present and the discourse these
pathfinders have to depart from when trying to extend the way corporate sustainability is
approached. I use the case of TNS to further illustrate this.

4 The Natural Step and sustainable development

The Natural Step is a not-for-profit organisation working for a sustainable society. A core
part of their model is the four system conditions, constituting principles for sustainability.
These principles serve the purpose of raising the debate above the quarrels between
scientists. Instead, the aim is, on a more systemic level, to shed light on where the health
of humans and nature are heading, why this might be so, and how this can be fixed.

When TNS (originally a Swedish organisation) started spreading its concept and
operations internationally in the mid-1990s, the conditions had been implemented in over
60 Swedish municipalities and several hundred Swedish firms, such as Ikea (furnishing),
OK (fuel distribution) and Scandic (hotels). Since then, many other international
corporations have also worked with the model, such as McDonald’s, Nike and Starbucks.

Interface’s founder Ray Anderson held it “as a compass to guide our people up the
mountain” (Anderson, 1998, p.15). At that time the four conditions were constructed
as follows:

1 substances from the earth’s crust must not systematically increase in nature
2 substances produced by society must not systematically increase in nature
3 the physical basis for the productivity and diversity of nature must not be
   systematically deteriorated
4 fair and efficient use of energy and other resources to meet human needs.

The first three are non-negotiable scientific conditions constituting the limits of the
natural environment. The fourth condition is more concerned with human nature.
It is also when shifting from conditions 1–3 to condition 4 that the movement from
ecological sustainability to sustainability takes place. With this condition, the natural is
opened up to the human and the social. This condition also seems to be the one least
developed by TNS. Contrary to the others, it seems to be more open to subjective
interpretations. The first three conditions hold reality as translated into hard scientific
facts. They indicate that this is how things are and how things must develop if we are to
achieve sustainable development. In TNS case, it is even argued that the conditions are
based on scientific consensus. This consensus holds that we are heading towards a cliff.
The dilemma is only that it is foggy outside and we do not really know when we will
make the dive. The cliff, it seems, is moving.

In the academic community within which I operate, a critical stance towards the
system conditions, particularly conditions 1–3, would probably be labelled a postmodern
attempt to deconstruct what really is reality (see Deetz’s dialogic discourse). But natural laws have not always been taken for granted, and in a reflexive community, and a risk society, they will always be open for revision (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Wynne, 1996).

5 TNS: a case of ‘extending the discourse’?

Around 1997, TNS experienced a credibility crisis as the consensus in the system conditions was questioned (Gerholm, 1997a,b; Robért, 1997a,b). Tor Ragnar Gerholm, a professor in physics, versus Karl-Henrik Robért, a medical doctor and the founder of TNS, headed the debate. Endorsed by Timbro, a Swedish publisher with a bias towards market liberal ideas, Gerholm argued a less absolute interpretation of the first three conditions (Gerholm basically holds the fourth condition as unscientific) and subsequently tried to spread scientific doubt into them. Gerholm even referred to the conditions as a case of ‘fundamentalism’. However, Robért countered the factual arguments, albeit also stressing that scientific consensus is always subject to continuous dialogue. The Gerholm position was criticised for questioning TNS on political grounds and its proponents’ intentions were to some extent questioned, as they were perceived as market liberals speaking on behalf of industry, partly given their connection to Timbro. Representatives of TNS felt that they maintained their position throughout the crisis, but the system conditions were altered after the debate.

What the Gerholm side managed to show was that the scientific ‘consensus’ could be doubted. Indeed, what came out, although not the intention of Gerholm, it seemed (he seems to be a true believer in science-as-facts), was that TNS’s system conditions were also based upon value judgements and that TNS’s construction of consensus might not be a stable network. The system conditions were not ‘pure science’, not value free, nor were they independent of who did the ‘perceiving’. Upham (2000, p.184) concludes in his study of TNS that:

“what is at issue is not so much whether there are limits to growth – or, more specific to TNS, limits to assimilation and hence growth, but what scale of the human economy and its components is sustainable. This is not a question that science alone can answer. That which requires sustaining cannot be defined without value judgments relating to the adequacy of evidence, and to the relative worth of a development and the portion of the biosphere that it replaces. [...] TNS principles oblige the user to err on the side of caution: since almost all actions breach the principles, the implication is that a cessation of growth should be worked towards now. In this sense, TNS is a political and ethical message based on trend extrapolation, not on consensually accepted evidence”.

TNS, Upham claims, mixes facts and values, but claims to be producing facts. The present definition of the system conditions looks like this (The Natural Step, 2005).

In the sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

1 concentrations of substances extracted from the earth’s crust
2 concentrations of substances produced by society
3 degradation by physical means. And, in that society
4 human needs are met worldwide.
Instead of ‘must not’, the conditions include ‘not subject to systematically increasing concentrations and degradation’. They are a more humble set of conditions than the original ones, although there are still traces of an ontology of being (Chia, 1995). There is still a belief in defining the sustainable society and the principal means to get there. However, a slight lean towards a more fluid, or less deterministic, view on sustainable development, towards an ontology of becoming (Chia, 1995; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), would most likely reveal a continuous flow of sustainable societies and alternative routes to them as well. Condition four also constitutes a constant reminder of that. A less deterministic view on scientific facts might also be particularly justified in the area of sustainable development on the basis that “the environment is subject to long-term unpredictability and certain, natural extinction” (Upham, 2000, p.185). If some more ecocentric environmental scientists have taught those rooted in the dominant management paradigm one thing, it is that the environment is inherently complex, indeterminable and unpredictable (Starkey and Crane, 2003, p.225). Upham (2000, p.188), however, also takes his point further and argues that TNS plays along with commercial realities, basically showing companies new ways of making profits, promoting a mindset that is still rooted in a traditional growth paradigm. On its Swedish homepage, TNS also states that they help organisations to ‘open their eyes’ to how problems can be transformed into increased productivity and reduced costs, new products and services, increased shareholder value, stronger competitive advantage through better branding, stronger customer loyalty and less risks, and, helping the organisation move in a more sustainable direction (Det Naturliga Steget, 2005), although what is promoted here appears to differ little from the traditional business model of production, consumption and profit.

The image of TNS and its system conditions beginning to emerge from my account, I believe, is that of a concept housing some tensions, and still caught up in the ‘business case’ for sustainability. The system conditions might have the potential to revolutionise some areas of production; but, somehow, businesses that use them do not seem to be particularly revolutionary. In this case, any challenge to ‘business-as-usual’ is quickly accommodated into the traditional paradigm, even by the organisation launching the challenge in the first place.

Following TNS’s framework further, focusing particularly on the fourth condition, the tensions become obvious. Human needs to be met worldwide. What needs do we have? What is a fair share? Who is to decide? These fundamental questions are implicit within a single condition. In a way, the human and the cultural are treated in a fairly sweeping manner, creating a space for subjective interpretations wherever the condition is applied. This means that the condition runs a great risk of being tailored to an existing discourse, rather then extending or disrupting it. This is more difficult with the first three conditions, though. That is, condition one might perhaps be ‘fixed’ by ending the extracting of non-renewable resources from the earth’s crust; but how, for example, do companies meet human needs worldwide? The conditions seem to run into even more problems here. Natural sciences, it seems, lend themselves better to universal claims, but the social sciences are packed together in a single condition. Still, albeit an implicit message in both Gerholm and Robért accounts, such a divide is protested.

Tensions are valuable in that they represent invitations to dialogue and learning. Tensions should even be conceived as ‘natural’, and not embedded in a grand narrative of sustainable progress or in a ‘right’ consensus-based view of sustainable development. Making sustainability more complex could surely stifle action; and it can be argued that
models such as TNS’s frequently do inspire action that was previously ignored. However, this is also a paradox. Lifting the head, attempting to see a broader system-level picture (as in industrial ecology), things sometime come across as more clear. Yet, clear images may also risk downplaying the need for sensitivity towards micro-stories from an often-messy practice. Generic and prescriptive versions of sustainable development seldom fit in action, but they tend to influence the construction of sustainable development in action and thereby the discourses that surround the concept. As both Gerholm and Upham suggested, TNS promoted simplifications while claiming some sort of universality for the construction of sustainable development. This ‘certainty’ might be problematic, for example, when it can be shown to be ‘leaking’, thus tending to augment the uncertainty around sustainability (Beck, 1992). From this perspective, TNS must continually defend its thresholds as its basic concept is not stable.

TNS aims at a simple pedagogical and system-level model that can reach a mass audience (and fuel the organisation financially) and this might hinder its proponents from getting down to the nitty-gritty of sustainability or grappling with the fact that sustainability issues are “multi-faceted, cross-disciplinary and controversial” (Egri and Pinfield, 1999, p.209). Different localities, competing scientific perspectives and the political content of any sustainability change process load these issues with tensions and make each of them unique in some sense. Research on corporate sustainability up to date does not seem to have taken up the challenge of viewing it as such. Jamison (2001, p.27) states that:

“The analyst is all too often forced to choose a particular terminology and theoretical approach that tends to exclude the others, at the same time as research attention, according to the methodological precepts of academic life, is customarily confined to one particular aspect of reality, or one particular sector. […] In this, as in so many areas of social life, we need theories that are somewhat less grandiose and exclusive in their ambitions, and more open to the flow and dynamic of (eco) social development”.

6 Discussion

Viewed from the perspective of Deetz’s alternative grid, TNS seems to be caught up in the normative discourse that represents the mainstream, or dominant, discourse on corporate sustainability (Dobers et al., 2001; Egri and Pinfield, 1999; Gladwin et al., 1995; Roome, 1998; Springett, 2003; Welford, 1995). For TNS, the challenge brought to companies is the scientific ‘fact’ that “almost all actions breach the principles” (Upham, 2000, p.184) and that companies’ strategies and visions therefore have to be fundamentally transformed. TNS can of course offer this help, developing the particular company’s sustainability performance while simultaneously improving its competitive advantage.

The story of TNS, as told in this paper, however, identifies a leaking normative discourse. The scientific facts, as in the acclaimed scientific consensus on the first three conditions, are disputed; the human and the social are basically not treated (one very loosely formulated condition attempts to integrate the social and the human with the natural); and, the organisation draws much of its credibility from the business case for sustainable development, that is, from transforming companies’ environmental challenges and financial troubles into profitable futures. In this sense, TNS is not radical
in that its philosophy does not challenge companies’ bottom line objective to make profits. It helps companies make money in another way. The bottom line seems to be basically unquestioned. TNS’s message, then, only seems radical within the established discourse. In this way, the case points to the fundamental necessity for some of the other discourses to be embraced, too; for example, the interpretive discourse’s sensitivity towards the object of study; the critical discourse’s interest in who is gaining what from whom (and why) and in how people can regain influence over their lives; and the dialogic discourse’s skepticism towards stability and consensus, and towards who is voiced in the stories told.

In saying this, I do not imply that, in sum, we should take a ‘four-fields-in-harmony’ approach to corporate sustainability. There are more than four discourses, and a discursive approach opens up new discourses. Different discourses also see and talk of different things and could only be seen as complementary to some extent. However, by applying Deetz’s grid onto corporate sustainability research, there are (still) some evident challenges to the normative discourse that need to be explored further.

This discussion is an attempt in this direction. The basic argument is that corporate sustainability research might benefit from fighting “the tendency to reduce conceptions to categories or reduce sensitising concepts to definitions” (Deetz, 1996, p.191). Some steps in this direction might include a stronger sensitivity towards: (i) “the centrality of codification, the search for regularity, normalization of experience and a strategic/directive control orientation” (Deetz, 1996, p.201) in corporate sustainability; (ii) how the actor-networks related to corporate sustainability are constructed (empirically) in action; and (iii) the scholar’s own ethico-politico research engagement and how it can be built-into the research process. Below, these steps are framed in three assumptions for the study of corporate sustainability, which are coupled to some of the implications of adopting them.

‘The first assumption is: consensus on sustainable development is the exception and only temporal consensus on companies’ relations to sustainable development can be reached’. The question is not whether our investigations arrive at the truth or not, “whether or not they capture what is ‘really going on out there’. Such questions are unhelpful, largely because they are undecidable” (Tsoukas, 2000, p.531). Gergen (1999, p.14) reflects on the matter:

“Knowledge begins, it is said, with careful observation. Yet consider this configuration that I call ‘my desk’. In my world the desk is solid, mahogany colored, weighs some 80 lb, and is odorless. Yet, the atomic physicist approaches this configuration and tells me that it is not solid after all (it is primarily constituted by empty space); the psychologist informs me that it has no color (as the experience of color is produced by light waves reflected on the retina); the rocket scientist announces that it only appears to weigh 80 lb (as weight depends on the surrounding gravitational field), and the biologist proposes that my sense of smell is inferior to that of my dog for whom the desk is rich in olfactory information. As carefully as I might observe, I would never reach any of these conclusions”.

Sense and truth, that is, are in the eye of the beholder – but does not this perspective still rest a little uncomfortable? Even though people, based on their experiences and the particular situation at hand, to different degrees have different realities, are there no truths, no fundamental aspects that we all subscribe to? What about the natural
environment? Does arguing that people have different realities and truths include denying the reality of universal laws, such as gravity and thermodynamics? What about the first three system conditions of TNS? Maybe they are ‘truer’ and ‘more scientific’ than the fourth, that is, how to satisfy human needs most effectively. Truth, however, is “the continuous movement of doing away with the closure of meaning. In other words, truth exists only in the interminable interrogation of currently accepted truths” (Tsoukas, 1992, pp.646 and 647). Fixed truth is from such a perspective a moving phenomenon and not a steady state (Czarniawska, 1999; Latour, 1999).

An implication of this assumption is, therefore, to beware of the generic definitions of sustainable development and of research approaches that are trying to ‘get it right’. The question for a corporate sustainability scholar could be, ‘how is this definition or right view (temporal consensus) reached?’ It could also be to question the question, that is, why this consensus has to be there in the first place. Although certain versions of sustainable development make a strong impact, such as the Brundtland Commission’s definition or the World Business Council for Sustainable Development’s interpretation, such definitions are never just out there. They are always temporary, or in a state of becoming (Chia, 1995; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), as well as tied to certain localities and political interests (Springett, 2003). This goes for TNS’s system conditions as well, but the case of TNS in this paper represents the search for consensus and control inherent in the normative discourse on corporate sustainability, and this always runs the risk of becoming a paradigmatic shut-in with little sensitivity to the eco-social flow of sustainable development.

‘The second assumption is that a local/emergent approach to the study of corporate sustainability assists us in better understanding what is going on’. To some extent, the implications of this assumption go beyond more traditional hermeneutic styles of research. One implication is that organisations and sustainability are “treated as effects or outcomes” and not as “explanatory resources” (Law, 2004, p.157, defining actor-network theory). With this assumption, another implication is a greater “sensibility to materiality, relationality, and process” (Law, 2004, p.157) on behalf of the scholar. As such, this view echoes the calls for more sensitive local/emergent empirical research (Dober et al., 2001; Starik, 2002) and for the nature part of sustainability to be integrated with the social (the ecocentrics in Gladwin et al., 1995; Starik, 2002), but it also represents a deeper dimension of empirical research. This dimension calls for the widening of the space in which the scholar remains receptive. It is a matter of being receptive to that which is ‘othered’. In analysing the analyses of the Ladbroke Grove rail collision in the UK, Law (2002, p.97) asks where the ‘making of pain, broken lives, lost partners, parents and children’ are. This goes for corporate sustainability research as well. As factories are closed and moved east to duck environmental legislation and high taxes, what is made present and what is ‘othered’? An implication of this assumption is to make ‘the other’ present in corporate sustainability. Whose ‘voice’ is not heard, and why? ‘What is being made present’, Law concludes, “always depends on what is also being made absent” (2002, p.83). Some sustainability scholars have explored this type of approach empirically, but none seems to have taken on the spirit of the approach as accounted for by Law above (Bergström and Dober, 2000; Catasus, 2000; Füssel and Georg, 2000; Sandström, 2002).

‘The third assumption is that the scholar’s values and experiences are intrinsic parts of the study of corporate sustainability and should be built-into the research process rather than suppressed’. The implication is a call for more ethico-politico approaches to
research, which is not to say more unscientific approaches. Gerholm’s view on the conditions, holding the first three as poor science and the fourth as non-science, is not the idea here. Gerholm’s background as a physics professor is interesting, but his tie to Timbro is also part of his credibility in the debate against TNS. A point made by Upham is that values are an integral part of sustainable development and it might be fruitful to treat them as such. Roome (1998, p.271) claims that scholars ‘are not neutral observers and research institutions are not observatories of development’. Scholars, Roome continues, even should be critically engaged in corporate change towards sustainability. Starik (2002, p.323) also encourages us to take better into account the scholar conducting the research. Jamison (2001, p.40) frames this assumption and its implications beautifully:

“Rather than seeking to achieve a false sense of objectivity and academic distance in relation to the topics that are under investigation, we should instead try to develop a more conscious sense of our own intellectual engagement, combining the detachment of the scientist with the passion of the participant. As citizens, as human subjects, we are inevitably part of the processes we study, and our research, whether we like it or not, is always a form of political intervention. By focusing attention on some aspect of social reality we also give it form, voice, and meaning, however, scientific and impartial we might try to be. The challenge is to use our involvement – and our research ‘role’ – creatively, not by dismissing it or rejecting it, or being ashamed of our own values and beliefs, but by trying to build those values and normative attachments into our understanding”.

7 Conclusions

The normative discourse on how corporate change towards sustainable development should be coordinated is, for many, of great concern. At policy level, it might even be regarded as a sticking point. That is, aggregated and simplified principles and visions of sustainability are by many seen as necessary as sustainability issues travel across national, disciplinary and sectoral borders. Decision-makers also have to make decisions and preferably with some sort of legitimate package of arguments and facts on which to base them on. This paper does not mean to render such knowledge as less valuable. But with more than two decades of principles and demands even from within industry to ‘walk-the-talk’ (Holliday Jr. et al., 2002), this paper has raised some examples of where the study of corporate sustainability is heading and some ideas about how research in corporate sustainability could be opened.

Stimulating practices with more clear and clean policies or more generic sustainability tools, as the typical output of technocentric research, is but one part of the solutions. Extending the discourse might instead lead to different stories and more locally sensitive learning opportunities in corporate sustainability. It might also pick up on some of the clues as to why interests in corporate sustainability are still paralleled to increasing environmental destruction and social inequity. This is a paradox yet to be untangled by scholars working within the normative discourse. TNS and its system conditions are an attempt to contribute to the normative discourse, but working more actively with alternative discourses could render in different understandings, storylines and programs of action in the end. Such processes, it is argued, might be stimulated by taking on the three suggestions outlined in this paper.
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Notes

1 Shifting paradigms for sustainable development: implications for management theory and research.

2 Knowledge interests in corporate environmental management.

3 Childhood’s end? Sustaining and developing the evolving field of organisations and the natural environment.