

Power and Politics of Organisational Sustainable Development:

An Analysis of Organisational Reporting Discourse

Helen Tregidga

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Abstract

This research begins and ends with a concern for the environment, in particular with unease about current constitutions of the organisation/environment relationship. This thesis explores the discourse of organisational sustainable development examining organisational representations of sustainable development and ‘sustainable organisations’. How a group of New Zealand organisations have come to (re)present sustainable development and how they have come to (re)present themselves in relation to sustainable development within a set of reports is analysed. The analysis aims to problematise the discourse and challenge such constitutions by opening out the debate surrounding the ‘meaning’ of sustainable development within this organisational context. The research considers the role of organisational reporting in creating and maintaining organisational legitimacy, something which is underplayed in the current literature. The thesis makes a contribution to both theoretical development and analytical method through elucidating sustainable development and sustainable development reporting from a discourse perspective.

Discourse (in particular the influences of Foucault and Laclau and Mouffe) both frames and informs the analysis. The discourse of organisational sustainable development is examined through an analysis of an archive of organisational reports and the context of which they are a part. The archive consists of 220 organisational reports (both annual and standalone) from member organisations of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development from 1992-2003. The texts which make up the archive were selected as they represent ‘important texts’ in the discursive debate surrounding organisational sustainable development.

Six themes employed in the discourse when representing sustainable development are identified. These themes are: 1) enlightened self-interest and the business case; 2) organisational sustainable development as a balancing act; 3) organisational sustainable development as necessary and important; 4) being sustainable: a responsibility and/or obligation; 5) the challenge and opportunity of organisational sustainable development; and 6) sustainable development: a new or old concept. Overall, ‘organisational sustainable development’ represents a reweaving of the discourse of organisations and accounting and the discourse of sustainable development. ‘Organisational sustainable development’ is shown to be organisationally focused, and generally does not challenge the traditional rational economic objectives of these organisations.

Representations of ‘sustainable organisations’ within the texts are analysed to show how organisational identities are constructed in relation to sustainable development. Five representations are recognised: 1) ‘sustainable organisations’ as providers; 2) organisations as leaders in sustainable development; 3) ‘sustainable organisations’ as responsible and committed; 4) ‘sustainable organisations’ as protectors; and 5) ‘sustainable organisations’ as accountable and transparent. How the process and practice of ‘sustainability’ reporting serves in constituting the identity of ‘sustainable organisations’ is underscored.

Potential effects of such discourse are acknowledged. The hegemonic potential of the discourse is recognised along with an identification of the ideologically-laden assumptions embedded within the texts. In reflecting on the discourse and its effects, the thesis concludes on a pessimistic note regarding the form of sustainable development articulated and the unchallenging nature of this form of sustainable development on the current structures of organisations and organising.

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