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Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability

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ABSTRACT

There has been growing interest in policy and among scholars to consider culture as an aspect of sustainable development and even as a fourth pillar. However, until recently, the understanding of culture within the framework of sustainable development has remained vague. In this study, we investigate the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability by analyzing the diverse meanings that are applied to the concept in scientific publications. The analysis shows that the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability is organized around seven storylines: heritage, vitality, economic viability, diversity, locality, eco-cultural resilience, and eco-cultural civilization. These storylines are partly interlinked and overlapping, but they differ in terms of some contextualized aspects. They are related to four political and ideological contexts, conservative, neoliberal, communitarian, and environmentalist, which provide interesting perspectives on the political ideologies and policy arenas to which cultural sustainability may refer. Some of the story lines establish the fourth pillar of sustainability, whereas others can be seen as instrumental, contributing to the achievement of social, economic, or ecological goals of sustainability. The eco-cultural civilization story line suggests culture as a necessary foundation for the transition to a truly sustainable society.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The concept of sustainable development was introduced in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), as part of the report 'Our Common Future'. In the report, sustainable development was specified as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, 43). The definition broadly refers to global and intragenerational equity and fairness in the distribution of welfare, utilities, and resources between generations. Since this time, the concept has frequently been used in research and policy. The concept has become a part of educational programs and is well known among the general public. Although the concept has faced considerable criticism, its relevance has persisted and, with increasing environmental and social challenges, has attracted attention in science and policy. This popularity may be explained by the way the concept unites imaginative and reformist views of environmental policy (Dryzek, 2013) as well as by its elusiveness. Due to the multi-interpretability of the

concept, many stakeholders may connect with it (Buckingham and Turner, 2008).

Sustainable development is often considered to consist of ecological, economic, and social dimensions, or 'pillars' (Connelly, 2007; Black, 2007). These pillars were established in the Sustainable Development Congress in Johannesburg (2002) and have been developed further by scholars. The origins of sustainable development lie within ecological concerns, and the environmental dimension has consequently been the most frequently discussed dimension. Nevertheless, the social dimension and institutional aspects are increasingly seen as important in achieving environmental aims (see, e.g., Boström, 2012). Economic sustainability, as an aspect of its own, is relatively seldom discussed explicitly, but it is an essential part of discussions on ecological modernization, green economy, and bio-economy, which aim to combine ecological and social goals of sustainability through economic means.

In the policy field, culture has been mentioned as an aspect of social sustainability and occasionally even as an aspect or dimension of its own. In particular, during the UNESCO Decade of Culture and Development (1988–1997), the interrelationship between culture and development was discussed, resulting in the WCCD Report 'Our Creative Diversity' (WCCD, 1995). Since this time, the connection between sustainable development and culture has been discussed in other international policy documents and conventions, such as 'In From the Margins' (European Council, 1997),

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'Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage' (UNESCO, 2001), and 'Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions' (UNESCO, 2005). UNESCO is currently working to include culture in the UN Post-2015 Millennium Development Goals. However, the relationship between culture and sustainable development or culture and the environment has not been thoroughly explored in these documents.

There have been other policy initiatives to introduce culture as an aspect of sustainable development at the international, national, regional, and even local levels. Internationally, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) has actively worked to promote culture as an aspect of sustainable development. In 2009, UCLG adopted Agenda 21 for Culture, suggesting that culture needs to be taken into account in local policy processes. UCLG also imported culture into the Rio + 20 process (Agenda 21 for Culture, 2012). Although governmental policies and NGOs increasingly recognize the importance of culture as an aspect of sustainable development, it can be argued that culture is not yet institutionalized as an aspect of sustainability because it has not been systematically included in sustainable development policies, practices, or assessments compared to ecological, economic, and social sustainability. Consequently, international, national, regional, and local policy aimed at sustainable development often examines the cultural dimension as part of the social one or completely ignores it (Chiu, 2004; Throsby, 2008).

Among scholars, there has been growing interest in considering culture within sustainable development. Hawkes (2001) introduced cultural sustainability as a fourth pillar of sustainability, emphasizing the role of culture in local planning. Chiu (2004) discussed the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability within the area of housing. Nurse explored the culture of sustainable development (2006), whereas Birkeland studied the regeneration of post-industrial communities in terms of cultural sustainability (2008). Throsby (2001) treated the topic from a cultural economy point of view, assessing the cultural economy against the general principles of sustainability. He subsequently explored the linkages between ecological and cultural sustainability (2008). Duxbury and Gillette (2007) examined cultural sustainability from a community development perspective. However, until now, there have been no scientific studies systematically aimed at analyzing and elaborating the role and meanings of culture in sustainable development, and culture in the framework of sustainable development has remained under-emphasized and under-theorized (see also Throsby, 2008).

We suggest that one explanation of this new focus on culture is relatively recent acceptance of and openness to the geographical and cultural diversity of the world associated with globalization and localization. We also assume that this interest in culture in relation to sustainability and sustainable development reflects a recent interest in the new roles of culture in society (McGuigan, 2004) and the cultural turn in the sciences, which involves a new way of looking at causality (Ray and Sayer, 1999) and language (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 1994). The cultural turn is associated with the new role of language and discourse, which is seen as not only representing but also constructing realities. Therefore, the cultural turn is often called a linguistic turn, where language and representation as part of culture is questioned, particularly in poststructuralist thought. What do words do? Are our concepts able to represent reality? Or are they ways of seeing the world that reproduce existing power structures in society? Such ideas have influenced many environmental researchers, such as Hajer. These researchers have shown that concepts such as sustainable development are socially constructed and contested in a struggle about meaning, interpretation, and implementation (Hajer, 2005; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). As meanings and concepts are contested, it becomes obvious that a diversity of meanings exist and that there is no one authoritative interpretation.

Given the political and academic interest in culture in sustainable development, we became interested in how the concept of cultural sustainability has been used by scholars. We conducted an analysis of peer-reviewed scientific articles that use the term "cultural sustainability". In this study, we discuss the results of this analysis by asking the following questions: what are the objects and representations of culture in the cultural sustainability discourse? To what is cultural sustainability constructed as a solution? To whose interests do these solutions speak? By examining the concept of cultural sustainability in scientific discourse, the overall aim of the paper is to increase the understanding of the role and meaning of culture in sustainable development.

We begin with a clarification of the theoretical background for the research to explain how we understand the concepts of culture and discourse in an attempt to distinguish the meaning of cultural sustainability from social sustainability and how to deal with cultural sustainability within sustainable development discourse. We then describe the method and data. In the main part of the article, we present the seven story lines and discuss the implications of the results for research and sustainability policies.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives: culture, discourse, knowledge, and society

By making the obvious semantic connection between 'culture' and 'sustainability', a path has been laid to make sense of sustainable development through the lens of culture. What does culture mean? The growing interest in culture and sustainability draws on many conceptualizations of culture, both wide and narrow. A wide understanding of culture makes culture a condition and premise for action, meaning, and communication (all humans have, share, and "do" culture). Culture refers here to the meaning content of human communities, the symbolic patterns, norms, and rules of human communities (Hylland-Eriksen, 2001) that divide humans from nature. Culture also divides humans from other humans (Hastrup, 1989), making it one of the most complex concepts (Williams, 1985). In a narrower sense, culture refers to civilization, to the improvement of the human, and to that which is excellent (for example, in the arts and science).

An important question is how cultural sustainability is related to sustainable development. We can imagine several options. Culture can be viewed as "cultural sustainability" as a fourth and parallel dimension to ecological, economic, and social sustainability. We can also imagine that the cultural sustainability discourse departs from the discourse on sustainable development in ways that are not anticipated. When culture is considered a fourth pillar in sustainability, it obviously must be distinguished from the other three pillars of sustainability, particularly social sustainability. Culture has often been considered part of social sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability, covering cultural aspects such as equity, participation, and awareness of sustainability (Murphy, 2012); the behavior and preservation of socio-cultural patterns (Vallace et al., 2011); and social capital, social infrastructure, social justice and equity, and engaged governance (Cuthill, 2009). Social and cultural phenomena are, of course, interconnected. Cultural structures and values influence social life and therefore also social understandings of sustainability and social sustainability, as Chiu (2004) shows. It is likewise the case that social structures affect cultural patterns and practices, and, as Chiu (2004) shows in the case of housing, the social and cultural dimensions of sustainability are interlinked. We also suggest that cultural sustainability is linked but not equal to issues of social sustainability, such as social justice and equity, social infrastructure, participation and engaged governance, social cohesion, social capital, awareness, needs and work, and issues of the distribution of environmental "goods" and "bads" (as reviewed in Boström (2012)).