

Review Article

Stewardship as a boundary object for sustainability research: Linking care, knowledge and agency



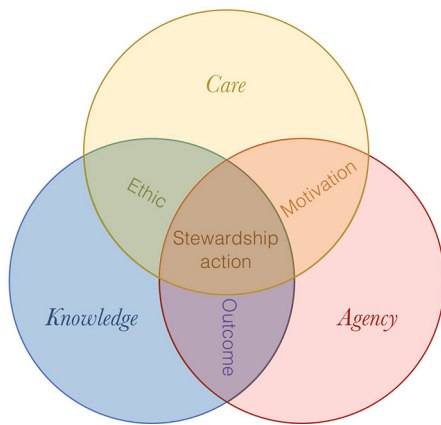
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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

We identify four distinct uses or meanings of stewardship in the literature: Ethic, Motivation, Action and Outcome. Using a framework based on three overlapping dimensions of stewardship – care, knowledge and agency – we demonstrate how these meanings relate to each other and how this can facilitate communication and collaboration between and among scholars and practitioners.



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ABSTRACT

Current sustainability challenges – including biodiversity loss, pollution and land-use change – require new ways of understanding, acting in and caring for the landscapes we live in. The concept of stewardship is increasingly used in research, policy and practice to articulate and describe responses to these challenges. However, there are multiple meanings and framings of stewardship across this wide user base that reflect different disciplinary purposes, assumptions and expertise, as well as a long history of use in both academic and lay contexts. Stewardship may therefore be considered a ‘boundary object’; that is, a conceptual tool that enables collaboration and dialogue between different actors whilst allowing for differences in use and perception. This paper seeks to map out the multiple meanings of stewardship in the literature and help researchers and practitioners to navigate the challenges and opportunities that come with using the term. We provide the first qualitative systematic review of stewardship, and identify four distinct meanings of the concept in the literature: Ethic, Motivation, Action and Outcome. We then develop a novel framework for thinking through and connecting these multiple meanings, centered around three dimensions: care, knowledge and agency. This framework is used to

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identify the care dimension and relational approaches as important areas for future stewardship research. In these efforts – and for scholars engaging with the stewardship concept more broadly – this paper can act as a helpful ‘centering device’, connecting practitioners, policy-makers and researchers from multiple disciplines in pursuit of sustainability.

1. Introduction

Contemporary landscapes face an array of sustainability challenges, including biodiversity loss, pollution and land-use change (Wu, 2013). Many of these challenges are rooted in a failure to realize and effectively acknowledge key characteristics of landscapes, including complexity, dynamic change, and the inextricability of social and natural phenomena (Ahern, 2011; Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2003; Leach, Scoones, & Stirling, 2010; Lorimer, 2012). The global significance of these issues is captured in the Anthropocene concept, which refers to a proposed new geological epoch in which humans are influencing planetary-scale biophysical processes in unprecedented ways (Crutzen, 2002; Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007). It is clear that we need to develop new ways of understanding, acting in and caring for the landscapes we live in (Palsson et al. 2013).

Stewardship is increasingly used to articulate and describe responses to sustainability challenges (Connolly, Svendsen, Fisher, & Campbell, 2013; Enqvist, Tengö, & Bodin, 2014; Nassauer, 2011). The concept of stewardship has a long history of use in environmental thought and has often been used to refer to the wise or responsible use of natural resources (Welchman, 2012). More recently, stewardship has been used to indicate a broad shift away from techno-managerial, control-oriented approaches to landscape and environmental management, policy and planning, towards those that prioritize participatory, cross-scale, and trans-disciplinary, engagements rooted in shared values (e.g. Worrell & Appleby, 2000, Chapin, Sommerkorn, Robards, & Hillmer-Pegram, 2015). A variety of distinct framings of stewardship have emerged in recent years, each carrying particular disciplinary emphases and normative commitments. These include ‘landscape stewardship’ (Plieninger & Bieling, 2017), ‘ecosystem stewardship’ (Chapin, Kofinas, & Folke, 2009), ‘earth stewardship’ (Chapin et al., 2011), ‘planetary stewardship’ (Steffen et al., 2011) and ‘biosphere stewardship’ (Folke, Biggs, Norström, Reyers, & Rockström, 2016). The stewardship term has also been extensively adopted in policy and practice, ranging from, for instance, certification schemes such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (Eden, 2009) and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) (Cummins, 2004), to civic and community environmental groups (Fischer, 2015).

With this wide and diverse use across research, policy and practice, the concept of stewardship has accrued multiple meanings – and particular uses have attracted a range of different critiques. These controversies reflect the complex, contested nature of pursuing sustainability, and also the different approaches to using concepts among natural and social scientists, policy-makers and citizens. For instance, social scientists have criticized the stewardship term for depoliticizing contemporary sustainability challenges and limiting the potential for radical social change (Swyngedouw & Ernstson, 2018). Meanwhile, natural scientists have accused the FSC and MSC of ‘greenwashing’ on account of their failure to secure promised environmental benefits (e.g. Christian & et al., 2013). While these controversies are rooted in different ideas of what stewardship ought to mean, researchers have only recently started to unpack and explore the assumptions, emphases and purposes underpinning different uses of the term (Bennett et al., 2018; Mathevet, Bousquet, & Raymond, 2018; Romolini, Brinkley, & Wolf, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to enhance understanding between scholars and others engaging with the stewardship concept, and help readers to navigate the opportunities and tensions that come with using the term. Our first contribution is a qualitative systematic literature review to

examine the multiple meanings of stewardship. In the natural sciences, for example, one might seek to assess different approaches to stewardship by measuring their relative ability to secure particular sets of (environmental) outcomes, with the aim of discerning and then promoting the ‘best performing’ one. While this perspective might be useful for exploring the more ecological aspects of sustainability, it assumes that intentions for using the stewardship concept are uniform, and that desired results are unitary, explicit and easily quantifiable. However, with complex sustainability challenges there is likely no ‘single best use’ because intentions differ and desired results are often emergent, implicit and multi-faceted. We therefore take an approach more common in the social sciences, where we address stewardship as a ‘boundary object’: a concept, framework or tool that is “both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity” (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). The plasticity of boundary objects helps to facilitate communication between disciplines (interdisciplinarity) and science and policy (transdisciplinarity) towards a common goal, without requiring strict consensus on a final definition (Baggio, Brown, & Hellebrandt, 2015; Brand & Jax, 2007). While a ‘boundary’ is often taken to mean edge or barrier, Star (2010p. 602) clarifies that in the context of boundary objects, it should be thought of as a “shared space”. Treating stewardship as a boundary object is valuable for researchers across the natural and social sciences and humanities, as it enables a greater appreciation of the range of knowledge and action necessary to address complex sustainability challenges.

Our second contribution is to provide a novel framework for connecting the multiple meanings of stewardship, centered around care, knowledge and agency. The framework is important theoretically, because it helps to maintain the ‘common identity’ and communicative ability of the stewardship concept across the broad range of disciplines engaged in landscape and sustainability science – facilitating engagement and discussion, establishing points of common ground, and identifying new research questions. The framework is important practically, because rather than forcing a single definition of stewardship upon policy-makers and practitioners, it provides them with the tools to understand what advantages and disadvantages their use of the term might have compared to others’ interpretation of it. Our care-knowledge-agency framework may consequently serve as a useful ‘centering device’ within the stewardship literature, serving to bridge research, policy and practice.

The paper is structured as follows. We first outline our methodological approach – an exploratory reading group to identify how stewardship is used in the literature, followed by a qualitative systematic literature review to assess the presence of and connections between these uses in the stewardship scholarship more broadly. We then present the two contributions of this paper: the results of the review as an overview of the meanings of stewardship across a range of disciplines, and our proposed conceptual framework to help connect these meanings. The discussion examines the utility of engaging with multiple meanings for researchers and practitioners, and uses the care-knowledge-agency framework to identify two promising avenues for future research and practice: exploring the role of care in stewardship, and developing more relational approaches to stewardship.

2. Methodology

The first author initiated a reading group on stewardship in 2015 at Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, motivated by the

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