

Biophysical Identification in Eco-Centric Enterprises

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Sustainable enterprises have emerged in the past decade to counteract the expansion and effects of modern sustainability problems both social and environmental, such as deforestation, desertification, pollution, inequality, healthy food and biodiversity loss. Consequently, most of current scholarly work has focused on understanding and prescribing (business) solutions to such problems, with models enabling the balance of the three bottom lines. Current approaches to sustainable venturing (Muñoz & Dimov 2015) position the enterprise and the entrepreneur at the center with partially overlapping -social, environmental and economic- circles surrounding, enabling and constraining their actions. This anthropocentric approach is based on the perception of a fundamental dualism between human organizations and nature (Purser et al. 1995). This de-natured view of organizations has been also prominent in sustainable entrepreneurship research, situating the bio capacity they need to propel their ventures as one of the peripheral circles, despite the growing emphasis on environmental protection. A stronger commitment to sustainability, however, involves a departure from this anthropocentric approach and eco-efficient practices towards a deeper involvement with ecological systems and their inner dynamics (Muñoz & Cohen 2017).

We extend theories of eco-centric venturing by introducing the concept of regenerative enterprises, which we define as ecologically-embedded businesses that restore and regenerate degraded natural ecosystems and build resilience in and improve the wellbeing of the communities relying on such ecosystems. Using a place-embedded methodology approach that brings to the fore the co-evolution of natural and entrepreneurial ecosystems and sequence-

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based abduction, we reveal unique hurdles and alignments that differentiate regenerative venturing from the broader set of sustainable enterprises.

We use a single longitudinal case approach with multiple sites (Sonenshein, 2014) of Emiliana, a Chilean organic and biodynamic vinery characterized by its regenerative agricultural business practices. Our research draws on a multi-sited rapid ethnographic (MSRE) design (Baines & Cunningham 2013), which, as an in-depth observation-based method, involves several time deepening strategies, multiple observation points and many data collectors. It requires to narrow the focus of the research appropriately before entering the field, the use of multiple interactive observation techniques to increase the likelihood of discovering exceptional behavior, as well as the use of collaborative and iterative data analysis methods (Millen 2000). Our inductive work focused on understanding eco-centric practices and decision-making within the everyday world of the firm and the interactions between the organization and nature. Data collection in our MSRE research was divided into two stages. Firstly, the research team conducted several short phone pre-interviews with key informants and reviewed secondary data such as media articles and company reports. The aim was to ensure that the participants were clear on the purposes of the study and to start a conversation that deepened during fieldwork. This process lasted three months. Secondly, over the course of one year three researchers independently visited and interacted with the firm in several occasions. This allowed us to capture a full agricultural business cycle including organizational, operational and natural cycles, as well as identify those salient practices and living processes enabling the firm to think and act in synch with nature. Following the tenants of MSRE research, our qualitative data in this second stage was collected using rapid ethnography techniques such as phenomenological interviews and participant and non-participant observation. Notes and insights were kept from each other until the data structuring and analysis sessions.

Our longitudinal inquiry reveals a sequential process of biophysical identification that unfolding seamlessly over progressively refined sequences of breaches and restorations of the venture-nature relationship. Biophysical identification brings to light the importance of the place for the firm in biophysical and material terms, as anchors (identifiers) and dynamic determinants (identification) of organizational identity. We observed a number of living processes whereby elements and dynamics found in nature are assimilated and replicated at the organizational level. This can be observed through, for example, facilitated trophic cascades where pests are treated through predator-prey chains including hen, foxes and peacocks, leading employees to reflect on that “the enterprise exists in the fields...it’s hard to understand the company in the headquarters office, without ever visited the fields”, shaping aspects of organizational identity. Or through the qualities of natural-local yeasts dictating the timing of fermentation processes (28-day cycles, instead of 7 days as in the case of artificial yeasts), triggering a unique view of what the firm is and how it operates (distinctively) within a competitive, low-margin sector.

Our work makes several contributions, first, it introduces the notions of biophysical identifiers and biophysical identification, whereby firms deeply connected to ecological systems shape, adjust and confirm their organizational identity in response to ecosystem changes, expanding in significant ways our current understanding of the determinants and processes of organizational identity. Secondly, it provides a more nuanced view of ecological embeddedness (Whiteman & Cooper 2000), as it provides a dynamic view whereby nature shapes identity and actions. Despite the repeated calls to integrate territoriality and embeddedness into sustainable venturing research (Shrivastava & Kennelly 2013), most of current work has been linked to operational aspects associated to agricultural processes (Sonnino 2006). The sequential process by which regenerative ventures refine their biophysical identity forge a new theoretical link between organizational identity processes, physical place,

and natural cycles. By showing how natural constraints become reference points that enable place-based sense-making and eco-sensitive adjustments, we explain how natural discrepancies afford sequential defense, exploration and change in ventures' biophysical identities and draw attention to the ecological premises and processes of sustainable venturing.

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