

Sense of Place and Business Sustainability: The Case of an Enterprise on Tibetan Plateau

Research Gap and Theoretical Framework

Sustainable development¹ means that we need to meet increasing demands while being able to operate within natural limits and not compromise the interest of marginalized groups and future generations (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development and business sustainability are interdependent because business organizations are a dominant process in the large interconnected social-ecological systems (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995). Current research on business sustainability, however, suffers from treating organizations as discrete entities from the physical ecological system (Bansal & Knox-Hayes, 2013; Bansal & Song, 2017).

To enrich our understanding of organizations, scholars have incorporated sense of place from human geography into business research (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). A physical space is uniform, homogeneous, amorphous and intangible, while a place involves a concentration of human intentions, attitudes, purposes, experience and culturally endowed values (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). Sense of place refers to “*the attitudes and feelings that individuals and groups hold vis-à-vis the geographic areas in which they live*” (Henderson, 2009, p. 676). Like sustainable development, sense of place assumes the world as an interconnected social and ecological reality and specifically addresses individual and group emotional motivation vis-à-vis their natural and human-made environment (Tuan, 1974, 1977, 1990). Scholars implicitly or explicitly suggest that managers who possess a sense of place through long-term interaction with their place commit more to sustainability practices (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013; Whiteman & Cooper, 2000). Despite the theory’s intuitive appeal, one puzzle remains: how can we explain puzzling phenomenon such as over killing animals in some North America’s indigenous communities’ during the 17th Century (Krech, 2000)? *How exactly does sense of place impact organizational sustainability practices?*

Research Design

To answer this question, I conducted a three-month ethnography by living and working in YAK, an enterprise on Tibetan Plateau. I collected data through observation, 51 in-depth interviews, approximate 40 informal discussions, around 2000 pages of company archives, and more than 1000 pictures. Grounded theory development is chosen for this research because of its ability to develop new theory, its creation of constructs from the data rather than preconceived hypotheses, and its focus on answering a "how" question.

YAK is a luxury enterprise that designs, produces and sells yak wool textiles made by nomads at ZR², a village at 3200 meters above the sea level on Tibetan Plateau. YAK was established in 2007 by a Tibetan-Western family with the mission to create jobs in nomadic villages, providing sustainable livelihoods for Tibetan nomads in an ever-changing world. By 2017, the company employed 120 people, around 10% of the local population. YAK's products had been recognized by the global market, with client accounts being luxury houses such as Hermès and Yves Saint Laurent. In 2018, an Oscar-winning director released a YAK focused documentary, which was officially selected in film festivals in Asia and North America, presenting YAK's position on the Tibetan Plateau, where tradition and modernity collide. YAK is one of many enterprises whose entrepreneurs originated from a certain place and returned to that place to build up ventures to

¹ In this paper, “sustainable development” mean societal level development model that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987); “business sustainability” describes organizational level firm’s ability to cope with short-term needs without compromising their own and societal long-term interests (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015).

² All names of villages, organizations and individuals in this paper are pseudonyms.

create local sustainable development in an age with unprecedented global changes. The way YAK has been organizing is unique and unconventional, its extremity can also serve as valuable asset (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) in developing a theory. This research could provide *de novo* perspectives on management theories, as Bamberger & Pratt (2010) note, unconventional settings “*allow a researcher to capture constructs and relationships that may be too weak to notice or capture in traditional settings, thus facilitating the development of rich theory.*”

Finding and Contribution

Previous business sustainability literature that engages the concept of sense of place may have held the problematic assumption that social actors embedded in a place have an emotional drive that can be homogeneously motivated to protect their place and neglected the instrumental aspect. The first contribution of this paper is to unpack social actors’ relationship with their place. I discriminate social actors’ relationship with their place as *emotional attachment to place* and *instrumental dependence on place*. I find that the emotional attachment to place is the main driver for organizational sustainability practices. To possess an emotional attachment to place, social actors perceived the place as a source of well-being through physical experience with nature and part of their identity. When individuals and groups are emotionally attached to a place, they tend to demonstrate pro-environmental and pro-social behaviors towards their place (take care of the place). Instrumental dependence on place indicates an individual or an organization’s critical needs and goals that are mediated by the material and non-material resources possessed in the place. To possess an instrumental dependence on place, social actors perceive place as a source for physical, human capital and organizational capital resources. When social actors depend on the place, they utilize the place.

The second contribution of this paper is to uncover how the paradoxical interaction between emotional attachment to place and instrumental dependence on place allows the organization to manage sustainable development. Instrumental dependence on place, within an extent, allows organizations to have the means to improve individuals’ life by making a feasible business, while emotional attachment to place ensures the organization operate in a way that is aligned with the place’s ecological boundary. This finding challenges the false nostalgia that romanticizes pre-modern way of life and advocates a progressive relationship where emotional attachment and instrumental dependence interact in congruence for sustainable development in a globalizing world. However, when the instrumental dependence is too strong, it would ultimately damage the place. I identify that modern secular education and penetration of market economy as conditions for developing a strong instrumental dependence on place. This magnified instrumental dependence relationship on place explains the over killing of beavers and caribou by the indigenous communities in the 17th Century when they started to trade with Europeans.

Implication

Sense of place offers an opportunity to reconcile the division between human society and nature. To possess an emotional attachment to place, social actors perceived the place as a source of well-being through physical experience with nature and part of their identity. The place we are attached to can be understood as a natural unit with a common identity shared by social actors. Our emotional attachment to place and commitment to sustainability could probably take place at the two extreme scales, local and global. If we realize that the earth itself is a natural unit, and human beings share a common fate, we could eventually develop an emotional attachment to the planet itself and take global sustainability seriously.

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