ORIGINAL PAPER

Enabling Sustainable Transformation: Hybrid Organizations in Early Phases of Path Generation

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Abstract

The rapidly growing research on hybrid organizations in recent years suggests that these organizations may have particular abilities to facilitate institutional change. This article contributes to our understanding of change and, in particular, sustainable transformation in society by highlighting the importance of organizational forms. Looking more closely at the role of hybrid organizations in processes of path generation, we analyze the conditions under which hybrid organizations may enable path generation. A retrospective (1988–2017) exploratory case study of the Swedish hybrid organization *The Natural Step* confirms how hybrids can take part in- and may facilitate the early phases of path generation: assimilation and coalescence. The conclusion drawn is that hybrids have multivocal abilities that enable them to earn trust and authority to open up "neutral" spaces for orientation and connection between actors in separated sub-paths, and that this in turn may ease tensions and trigger dialogue and exchange, also between former opponents. Yet, as also seen in the case, this enabling position of the hybrid may be both fragile and temporary.

Keywords Path-generation · Institutional change · Hybrid organization · Multivocality · Sustainability · The Natural Step · Sweden

Introduction

In contemporary society, debates on the need for a sustainable turn in society are topical. Translated into business studies this often means research that, in general terms and in various ways, focuses on issues related to organizational change towards more sustainable and responsible strategies and production processes. Within this wide field of study, organizational hybridity is an age-old theme that has re-emerged over the last decade, thanks to its increased relevance for complex contemporary change processes. A common theoretical argument in this growing body of literature is that hybrids have particular multivocal abilities (Jancsary et al. 2017) and are hence able to handle multiple and conflicting demands such as taking social responsibility,

generating profit, and employing sustainable strategies. Less attention has, however, been devoted to theorizing the conditions for when hybrids may make use of their multivocality to contribute to generating new ethical trajectories in society. In fact, although the role of organizations is emphasized in studies of path generation and market formation, there has, to date, been little discussion of the theory on the contribution by different organizational forms in general, and hybrid organizations in particular.

Drawing on theory of societal change (path generation and market formation) as well as theory of hybrid organizations, the aim of this study is to open the way to a more nuanced discussion on the role of organizational forms in processes of sustainable transformation. We do so with a particular focus on the role of hybrid organizations and the phases during which, and conditions under which, they may be able to facilitate change. Theoretically, the study aims to contribute to our understandings of societal change and sustainable transformation by exploring the research question: What is the role of organizational forms and, in particular, the role of hybrid organizations in processes of path generation? In so doing, the study also contributes to theories of hybrid organization, foremost by introducing hybrid

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organizations as potentially significant actors in processes of path generation.

The findings presented in this paper draw on a retrospective case study covering nearly three decades of operations in *The Natural Step (TNS)*, which was established as a hybrid organization in the late 1980s. While combining a world savior mind-set with commercial actions, according to studies of the environmental movement (Boström 2001) and the diffusion of CSR (Windell 2006; Frostensson 2010; Alexius et al. 2017) in Sweden, TNS was a significant actor in a formative period of the Swedish sustainability and CSR field and market in the early 1990s. In this paper, we attempt to explain how this happened and thereby contribute to illuminating the general research question of the role of different organizational forms in processes of societal transformation.

It goes without saying that a single organizational case study cannot provide all the answers, but if we are to guide the way towards a more sustainable future for ourselves and the planet we need every piece of the puzzle. The need for such exploratory empirically based theory-generating studies has been emphasized, in recent years, in a repeated call for empirical studies on the coexistence of and responses to multiple logics in organizational fields, with a particular focus on the micro-perspective of these issues and connecting it to meso- and macro-level developments (Kodeih and Greenwood 2014; Reay and Hinings 2009; Purdy and Gray 2009; Dunn and Jones 2010; Meyer and Höllerer 2010; Su et al. 2017). This study responds to these calls by focusing on the role of actors and actions from a micro-perspective while theorizing on conditions that enable hybrid organizations to play a significant role in early processes of path generation.

Theorizing Societal Change Processes

Considering that natural- as well as social scientists stress an urgent need for actions to handle today's complex global challenges such as climate change and migration, it is highly relevant that the business ethics research community strives to develop and enrich the understanding of societal change processes on global and transnational as well as local and national levels of analysis.

Looking at basic research on societal change processes and central issues such as what- and who contributes to change, when, and how, two key insights are that such trajectories do not take a single linear "path" nor do they stem from individual actors. Czarniawska (2013), for example, argues that actions taken by particular actors can be seen as responses and consequences of actions taken by other actors before them while constructing "action nets." Introducing the concept "organizing spirals," Furusten and Werr (2017) conclude that such actions may generate transnational order. These are examples of constantly ongoing inexplicit and discrete organizing that generate particular trajectories for development in different fields. It also intimates, however, that processes of organizing may develop in different ways, depending on what actions are taken, how they are taken, by whom, and when. This corresponds well to Garud et al. (2010) argument of how new societal paths are created. They state, for example, that it is likely that "initial conditions [for action] are not given, but flexibly defined and constructed through negotiations by actors" (2010, p. 763).

This represents a more dynamic view of development in a field than that suggested by the theory of path dependency. Theories of change as "path-dependent," tend to overemphasize individual actors' first-mover advantages in setting the stage and shaping the content in ways that supposedly "lock in" all followers. Based on empirical insights, the concept of path dependency has also been criticized for under-emphasizing the role of agency, as in "experimentation, conversion and recombination of institutional resources, or leverage embeddedness in multiple fields to transpose practices and logics across boundaries" (Bothello and Salles-Djelic 2018, p. 96; see also; Djelic and Quack 2007; Garud et al. 2010).

Inspired by earlier critical studies on institutional change, organizational reform, and the creation and travel of ideas between cultures and organizations (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Sahlin-Andersson 1996; Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Furusten 1999; Røvik 2000), the alternative concept of "path generation" has been introduced in order to better capture change that results from the contribution of a number of sub-paths involving different actors with different economic and political interests, normative orientations and social identities (Djelic and Quack 2007). The concept of path generation thus suggests that, in order to understand change, we must continue to go beyond individual agentic-based assumptions and, rather, depart from an assumption of an emergent development where different actors with different economic and political interests, normative orientations and social identities take part over long periods of time, not only at specific moments or critical junctures as suggested in theories of path dependency. Path generation therefore suggests a need to study the actions undertaken by different actors who have the ability to mobilize support and legitimacy for new approaches and to establish institutions that socialize other actors towards the new approach (Djelic and Quack 2007, p. 181).

Similar arguments for pervasive social change are also echoed in economic sociological literature on spontaneous market formation. Aspers (2011), for example, divides processes of market formation into three phases: orientation, contraction and cohesion, concluding that markets emerge spontaneously as an unintended result of actors who mutually adjust to one another's behavior. This normally involves many actors that gradually orient towards one another in processes where their old identities may be changed and

new cultures may be created as relations are negotiated (e.g., orientation and negotiation of who may be sellers and buyers, and what may be exchanged). It is clear that contraction and exchange take place only after the phase of orientation and culture-making, however, also in the case of market formation, Aspers (2011) argues that we still know too little about what and who enables (or hinders) this crucial early development.

By directing our interest to early phases of social formation, the concept of path generation is useful when seeking to understand and theorize about how social transformation is likely to occur. Thus far, however, theorizing on mechanisms for path generation is at an early stage. Building on Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018), to date one of few empirically based theoretizations of this concept, is therefore reasonable. They suggest that the evolution of how environmentalism has been conceptualized since the 1960s and onward can be divided into different regimes: sustainable development, sustainability, and resilience. Each regime is seen as a new path generated through the mechanisms of assimilation, coalescence, cooptation and recombination. At different points in time these mechanisms facilitate interaction between separated sub-paths, such as scientization, managerialism, and risk management. The authors also claim that the generation of new paths can be understood as a consequence of interaction between sub-paths around issues such as overpopulation, pollution and the use of poisons. Through interaction, separated paths are *assimilated* and transformed from isolated national movements into a transnational matter. Such assimilation of knowledge helps to pave the way for further actions, enabling environmentalism to be picked up by actors other than scientists. One outcome they describe is the UN-initiated "Brundtland Report," where issues such as international security, resource scarcity, overpopulation and social exclusion were *coalesced* into a single comprehensive concept: sustainable development. Thus, in the Brundtland Report, arguments earlier cultivated in separated sub-paths merged, and earlier loosely coupled issues and disconnected actors came together in a broad construct, leading to the institutionalization of a transnational sustainable development regime. The Brundtland Report spread widely, and in turn generated further interaction between actors previously separated on relatively isolated paths.

The period from around the mid-1990s and onward, Bothello and Salles-Djelic define as a phase of path stabilization, that they describe as triggered by a *co-optation* of environmentalism by institutional trajectories such as managerialization and neo-liberalism, during which sustainability became an outcome that organizations were expected to measure. The most recent concept established in the transnational environmental discourse is "resilience," which is understood to have emerged through a *recombination* of knowledge cultivated in different scientific disciplines, hence a mechanism of path re-orientation towards an emphasis on issues related to how the planet can be maintained and recover from climate change.

Although Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018) argue that we can understand institutional change towards a more environmental transnational trajectory through the lens of these four mechanisms (assimilation, coalescence, cooptation and recombination), they also emphasize that it is a "crooked" trajectory that is an outcome of nested parallel processes in separated paths, events, and decisions taken over decades. Despite this being an important contribution to how sustainability became a transnational issue, we still know little about how and why actions that contribute to path generation are taken, and how different types of organizations contribute in ways that generate new paths. And despite path generation theory's ambition to demonstrate how different kinds of organizations mobilize, champion and appropriate different conceptualizations and labels, as these studies typically analyze transnational macro-development, they cannot explicitly discuss how different organizations go about doing this in local or national contexts, and whether or not it matters what organizational form the different contributing organizations have. Hence, much exploration and theory building remains to be done with regard to the specific mechanisms of distributed agency that produce and alter institutional trajectories.

Further justifying the relevance of studies of how different types of organizations might take part in societal change, in the literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) scholars like den Hond and de Bakker (2007) and Rasche et al. (2013) note the lack of studies that examine the role of non-business actors as possible facilitators in processes of institutional change towards a more sustainable society. In a similar vein, Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) add that it is generally relevant to pay particular attention to non-business actors since they may have different abilities and ways of organizing than, for example, multinational corporations have (cf. Chapple and Moon 2005; Vigneau et al. 2015).

Taking this argument one step further, the rapidly growing interest in *hybrid organizations*, that is, a term often used to frame non-business actors, in recent years (see next section) highlights the fact that such organizations are often characterized by a familiarity with combining different logics of operation that may give them a particular ability to facilitate early processes of institutional change as arenas for the bridging and blending of logics, traits and ideas from the different organizational "ideal types" they reflect (Alexius and Furusten 2019). So far, however, there is a lack of empirical studies of such actions. Our interest here in this paper is therefore to contribute to the theorizing on societal change and path generation by exploring the role of a specific type of actor, the hybrid organization.
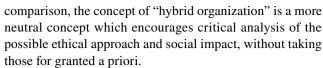
Hybrid Organizations

Exploring hybridity in organizations is not a new phenomenon (March and Simon 1958; March 1962; Cyert and March 1963; Billis 2010; Denis et al. 2015; Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith 2015). Yet, research on hybrids has intensified in the past decade as the number of hybrid organizations in contemporary society is reported to be growing (e.g., Haigh et al. 2015). Hybrid organizations are generally characterized by three attributes (Mair et al. 2015): (1) a variety of stakeholders, (2) the pursuit of multiple and often conflicting goals, and (3) engagement in diverse or inconsistent activities. As such, hybrids do not fit neatly into one of the ideal-typical organizational categories of the *corporation*, the *political organization*, or non-governmental organizations such as the *association*. Instead, the typical hybrid organization is characterized as a blend of operational logics and/or a blend of ideal-typical structural traits (cf. Billis 2010; Denis et al. 2015; Grossi and Thomasson 2015; Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith 2015). As such, hybrids are argued to be well-adapted to handle colliding worlds at institutional crossroads. Positioned at the interface between logics, the hybrid offers opportunities for innovation (Padgett and Powell 2012). Comparing hybrids to traditional businesses, Hockerts (2015, p. 102) argues on a similar note that hybrids are "much more open to sharing lessons and encouraging others to copy their approaches." This suggests that hybrid organizations might represent what Jancsary et al. (2017, p. 1162) see as a potential role category "positioned at the interface of two or more logics [that] are multivocal in the sense that their evocation offers the opportunity to leave open which logic is initiated." This ability, Jancsary et al. argue, is likely to allow the organization more leeway to conform to institutional plurality, giving it advantages in selecting elements from different institutional logics.

The rise of hybrids in contemporary society is explained by scholars with reference to an increasing prevalence of pluralistic and complex institutional environments (Pache and Santos 2010, 2013; Thornton and Ocasio 2008; Bromley and Meyer 2015), institutional conditions that these authors suggest suit hybrid organizations particularly well. In addition, it is also argued that acute social, environmental and economic challenges open up "opportunity spaces" for hybrids (Holt and Littlewood 2015).

A typical study object in this line of contemporary organization literature is the "social enterprise" that mixes business with charity (Aiken 2006; Mars and Lounsbury 2009; Battilana and Dorado 2010; Grassl 2011; Ebrahim et al. 2014). However, as pointed out by Greenwood and Freeman (2017), concepts such as "social enterprise," "social venture," or "social entrepreneurship" may be seen as "politically tainted" concepts that may invite, a priori, to assumptions on social impact (see also Dorado and Ventresca 2013). In

comparison, the concept of "hybrid organization" is a more neutral concept which encourages critical analysis of the possible ethical approach and social impact, without taking those for granted a priori.

On one hand, the literature on hybrid organizations presents hybridity as a condition that gives an organization the opportunity to harvest legitimacy-enhancing elements from different institutional logics (e.g., market, political and civic logics) in order to survive and thrive (Brunsson 1994; Battilana and Dorado 2010). On the other hand, due to the high degree of institutionalization of the ideal-typical forms of organization in contemporary society (Thornton et al. 2012), organizational stakeholders and policy-makers can become puzzled and "institutionally confused" when a hybrid's behavior does not match these descriptions (Brunsson 1994; Alexius and Grossi 2017). Although hybrid organizations often face a challenge in handling the tensions embedded in their identity, the conflicting logics they respond to, and the practices they implement (Battilana and Lee 2014; Santos et al. 2015), they may also, by their very constitution, be well-adapted to handle such situations (Alexius and Furusten 2019). In *constitutional hybrids (*Alexius et al. 2017*)*, founded with the explicit purpose of creating value by operating in between the market, the public sector and civil society, such conflicts of interests are a natural part of the organizational constitution and often a source of pride for its owners and management.

However, how hybrid organizations select, prioritize & integrate plural institutional logics remains a topic in need of further theoretical development (Kraatz and Block 2008; Denis et al. 2015). Jancsary et al. (2017) also call for more studies that explore the conditions that enable organizations to develop multivocal skills, thus the competence of balancing between institutional logics.

Research Design, Methods and Materials

In order to analyze the role of hybrid organizations in processes of path generation, we have employed an exploratory retrospective case study approach. Like Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018), we acknowledge the importance of the nestedness of organizations in path generation, but since the focus here is more on exploring what role a particular organizational form may play in this regard, we have applied what Stebbins (2001) calls a "concatenated exploratory approach." This means that we have striven to view our single case in a wider context—over time as well as within the contextual framework of larger sets of actors, actions and processes, well-explored by Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018). From a path-generating perspective, an exploratory approach is particularly useful (Otley and Berry 1994), not least in developing theory based on case data on groups, processes and activities that have "received little or no

systematic empirical scrutiny … or have grown to maturity […] but have changed so much along the way that they beg to be explored anew" (Stebbins 2001, p. 11). Also Eisenhardt (1989) emphasizes the appropriateness of applying an exploratory approach to topics that, thus far, have not undergone much empirical scrutiny. The role of hybrid organizations in path-generation processes is an understudied, yet relevant, research topic.

Generally speaking, the single-case exploratory approach has several strengths, such as better chances of incorporating rich and detailed data as well as unexpected data and data that spans longer periods of time, making it possible to perform temporal comparisons. The approach is also highly useful when aiming to relate micro-level analyses to meso- and macro-levels of analyses (while comparative designs of a large number of cases typically focus on the meso- and macro-levels). A combination of single-case and multiple-case designs is hence a fruitful approach for the research community when collaborating to theorize a certain topic.

As with all research designs, exploratory research on a single case has its limitations. One risk with exploration is that the data gathered becomes too general and descriptive, and with a single case comes the risk of overemphasizing patterns seen in the case as generally representative. To manage the weaknesses and aim for the strengths of the design, employing robust strategies for data validation is key. To make the most of our case, we have used a number of strategies inspired by the methodology work by a range authors like Lincoln and Guba (1985), Kirk and Miller (1986), Eisenhardt (1989), Otley and Berry (1994), Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994), Maxwell (1996), Johnson (1997), Alvesson and Deetz (2000), Davies and Harré (2001), Stebbins (2001) and Rehn (2006). Noting that the advice offered is rather similar across these authors' works, and respecting the limited space available here, we refer in the sections below to Johnson (1997) comprehensive list for validation as a useful and illlustrative summary of what validation of qualitative analyses generally means and has meant for our work in practice.

Case Selection

The selection of the case to be studied builds on insights from previous research on the development of the environmental movement (Boström 2001) and the field of sustainability services in Sweden (Windell 2006; Frostenson 2010; Alexius et al. 2017). As suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), when selecting the case organization, we aimed for a theoretically useful case that could extend the theory (of path generation) by filling a conceptual category (the role of hybrid organizations).

Considering the findings of earlier and broader field studies performed in the Scandinavian context (cf. Strand et al.

2015), a particularly formative phase for framing environmentalism in terms of corporate social responsibility and sustainability is likely to date to the years around 1990. Boström (2001) noted that *The Natural Step* (TNS) was an organization bordering the Swedish fields of science, environmental activism and management consulting, and portrayed a peculiar and uncommon hybrid of the traits and logics of a research institute, activist association and commercial consultancy. Alexius et al. (2017) made similar note of TNS's entrepreneurial and boundary-spanning role in the emerging field of sustainability in Sweden during the 1990s. This seemed to apply in particular from the establishment of TNS in 1988–1989 until about 1995.

Thus, without going into empirical detail about its role in the development of the field of sustainability in Sweden, earlier research had identified TNS as a potentially significant actor. Yet, these earlier studies neither aimed to explore hybridity in detail nor aimed to contribute to theories of path generation. In terms of hybridity, over the years TNS has combined several institutional logics: (1) the scientific logic of a research institute, (2) the civic logic of an activist NGO and, in later years, (3) the market logic of a management consulting firm (see case narrative below). For these reasons, and for its interesting historical development from the late 1980s through 2017, TNS was selected as the case for comparisons over time and a qualitative case study was designed to this end (cf. Alvesson and Deetz 2000).

When analyzing the previous studies (in which TNS was present) in relation to hybrid organizing, we found it reasonable to assume that TNS could somehow have made use of its hybridity to help initiate and shape a new path in the emerging field. However, informed by theory on path generation (Djelic and Quack 2007), it is unlikely that new paths are created by a single entrepreneur (cf. Hwang and Powell 2005). TNS was therefore explored as one organization nested in sets of other organizations and parallel processes, all engaged in contributing to an ethical and environmental turn in Sweden.

Methods and Materials

Contact with TNS was established in December 2012 and the main data collection began in the spring of 2013. In gathering the data, we used a combination of methodological techniques (Schatzman and Strauss 1973), aiming for a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the evolution of the organization and its potential role in processes of path generation. This involved extensive document studies of available internal and external documentation of the history of TNS, such as internal TNS written material (reports and website data, and documentation published by the founder throughout the years, and Robèrt 1992, 1995, 2002, 2017)

as well as earlier, external research that mentioned TNS (e.g., Boström 2001). This material was complemented by 12 approximately 90-min long semi-structured interviews with all but one (whom we were unable to reach) of the active TNS co-workers and decision-makers at the time of the interview study (2013). Nine of the interviews are cited in this paper and thus listed in the references at the end of the paper. Half of the 12 interviewees had been with TNS since the early days, around 1990 (while the others joined later on). In terms of data validation strategies, access to both interviewees and other sources of verbatim accounts (observations of meetings, the founder's own books) means that the case narrative to a large extent is based on low inference descriptors, i.e., verbatim accounts of the informants' own views (Johnson 1997). Historical documents have been used as a further sounding board, helping us to make contextualized interpretations of the contemporary interview material. In addition, to capture the contemporary culture and operations of TNS at the time of study, we observed two internal staff meetings and a 2-day sustainability course with clients given by TNS in its Stockholm office.

Data Analysis

The documents, the field notes, and the verbatim transcriptions totaling approximately 25 h of interview time along with our own reflections noted after each interview session, were analyzed in several rounds. The data was coded in an abductive mode (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994; Rehn 2006) using a general topic guide that focused on gaining a better understanding of TNS's role as a hybrid organization, with particular concentration on its potential role in path generation and the establishment of the Swedish sustainability field over time.

Following a first round of coding, the data was recoded to ensure that all relevant instances of the interview text were retrievable. Since this project is a collaboration between two authors, all coding and analyses were first conducted individually by the two authors, after which another round of re-coding and analysis was conducted jointly. In an interpretative mode, a cross-reading of all of the interview transcriptions and field notes was performed by the authors to tease out analytical patterns and relevant themes. Allowing time between the rounds of analysis provided an opportunity for further reflection, enabling the discovery of new meaningful patterns (Davies and Harré 2001). Although all of the data collected has been considered in our coding and analyses, only a few sources are referred to in the narrative of the case, to illustrate patterns interpreted as representative for the material as a whole.

Translating this into triangulation strategies to validate our data (Johnson 1997), we thus used (a) *data triangulation* where we analyzed verbatim transcripts of interviews, written documents of the history of the organization, website data, and field notes from participant observations, (b) *methods triangulation* (document studies, interviews, participant observations), and (c) *investigator triangulation*, in the sense of teamwork between two authors in collecting and interpreting the data, and (d) *theory triangulation*, where we have used multiple theories and perspectives to help interpret and explain the data (i.e., mainly theory on path generation and hybrid organizing).

As all but one of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, relevant sections of these interviews have been translated into English by the authors. None of the informants requested anonymity, and all gave their oral, recorded consent to use the interview data in academic publications. A few key informants asked for and were given the opportunity to read and comment on earlier drafts of the paper. These interactions resulted in a small number of minor revisions, mainly the addition of details or clarification of emic concepts used by the practitioners. This *participant feedback* represents another validity-promoting strategy to verify interpretations and extended insight (Johnson 1997). In addition, it goes without saying that the analysis has benefited from *peer review*, where tentative analyses have been presented and discussed in a number of research seminars and international conferences since the project began in 2013. Throughout the research process, the authors have aimed for *reflexivity* in the form of critical self-reflection on our potential biases and predispositions, where having two researchers gather and analyze the data adds an extra dimension (Otley and Berry 1994). Employing these kinds of validating strategies in data generation and analysis has been argued to push the exploratory research towards both methodological and theoretical rigor (Stebbins 2001; Eisenhardt 1989).

Taking advantage of access to retrospective data that spans over a long time period, which offers the possibility of within-case analyses and comparisons over time instead of between-case comparisons and analysis (Eisenhardt 1989), we aimed for a relevant periodization. To this end, we first mapped the different activities of TNS chronologically to capture how the organization had interacted with its institutional environment and stakeholders. The long-term commitment by the group of key informants who had stayed with TNS since its early days offered the valuable opportunity of interviewee retrospection to complement the documentation from different time periods. As mentioned above, other interviewees were relatively recently employed and thereby represented a category that lacks first-hand experience of the organizational legacy. Comparing the accounts of long-term employees with those of the more recently employed, proved fruitful to pinpoint differing views on the hybrid's identity as well as differences in ideas on its ideal future development (e.g., as concerns the managerialization of environmentalism). Over all, gathering and comparing data

from different periods of the full lifecycle of TNS, from its foundation in 1988 until its bankruptcy in 2017, enabled us to compare how TNS management and staff related differently to the institutional environment in different phases of its development. As a next step, we "enfolded literature" (Eisenhardt 1989), both the results of previous field studies of the Swedish context and general theory of path generation and hybrid organization—to build internal validity and raise the theoretical level of our analysis. This resulted in a case narrative that is organized chronologically so as to provide insights on the different phases of path generation (assimilation, coalescence, cooptation and recombination) as defined by Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018).

The Case of The Natural Step Sweden (TNS)

Bridging Actors for Assimilation: Scientization of Environmental Debates in the Late 1980s

In Sweden in the 1980s, a range of actors addressed the need for more serious consideration of environmental issues (Boström 2001). The public debate, however, was fragmented and conflict-ridden. There was confusion about what was meant by a "sustainable society" and how it could possibly be realized. There was political polarization between activists claiming to be "world saviors" but who proved unable to stand united, and corporations who were caught off-guard and responded by defending their traditional "money makers" position (Windell 2006). In this sensitive political climate, politicians were reluctant to take action, afraid of becoming trapped between the two opposing camps (Boström 2001).

Robèrt, the founder of TNS, was ethically motivated to mission the need to cooperate to sustain life on Earth, based on his experience of how families, care providers and the community came together to attentively and efficiently help children with cancer. Inspired by the Brundtland Report of 1987 and the polarized debate on the state of the environment in the world at the time, Robèrt brought his personal experiences from bridging different categories of actors and blending their expertise for the cause of treating sick children, to the cause of sustainability (Interview 1).

To do so, he initiated multi-disciplinary collaborations with the ethical objective of writing a joint scientific consensus-based manifesto on fundamental conditions needed for a sustainable life. Robèrt first presented his idea to close colleagues in oncology science, and later introduced it to a group of Swedish experts outside his discipline as well as a number of peers in other scientific disciplines. His idea was to mail the resulting manifesto to all Swedish households once a scientific cross-disciplinary consensus had been established. Work began and draft versions of the manifesto were actively discussed in the network of experts and

scientists. As Robèrt recalls in his autobiographical book, he took the feedback into account without delving too deeply into the details (Robèrt 2002, p. 28):

> I sent out the manuscript, took heed of comments, wrote additional drafts, and expanded the circle of scientists to include physicists, medical doctors, chemists, biologists, and so on. As we proceeded with the arduous work of correcting, altering, and proofreading the manuscript, more and more participants were drawn in—people from the major educational associations, a growing number of scientists, and researchers and teachers from schools and universities.

In December 1988, the scientifically based, cross-disciplinary collaboration manifested in a final framework describing "fundamental conditions for life." As evidence of the process, Robèrt (2002) notes that 21 drafts were circulated and input was gained from over 50 scientists—mainly ecologists, chemists, physicists and medical doctors. The ethical motivation throughout the process had been to bring to the fore the fundamental issues where consensus between scientific disciplines and between different interest groups in society could be found, and to do so in a "neutral way that doesn't push your personal spiritual beliefs onto others" (Robèrt 2002, p. 16).

The resulting manifesto was named *The Natural Step Framework* and was organized according to four system conditions: (1) Change the energy systems; (2) Phase out the use of chemicals and metals that cannot be broken down; (3) Manage and support ecosystems—fresh water, forests, meadows and fisheries—in a sustainable life-supporting manner; (4) Work to heal the battered and broken cultures around the world (Robèrt 2002). The four principles were used to order and systematize the detailed yet fragmented knowledge of different experts, and gather all the relevant knowledge into a single comprehensive framework (Interview 1).

In *The Natural Step Story*, it is evident that Robèrt sympathized with the idea of catalyzing and reinforcing global environmental concerns by way of scientization. In this book (Robèrt 2002) he describes how the strategy used was to *combine* a cross-disciplinary scientific approach with a "missionary" approach. As noted by Boström (2001) in his analysis of the different actors and sub-paths of the Swedish environmental movement at the time, many actors referred to science in their ambitions to generate a path to sustainability, but TNS, perhaps thanks to its outspoken missionary ambition, was outstanding in its reach. As Boström concludes (2001, p. 76):

> A common method of influence for environmental organizations is to pursue specific issues/campaigns. This may be the decommissioning of nuclear power

stations or the use of chlorine or to mission for sustainable forestry. TNS pursues actors, rather than specific issues. It all comes down to conveying knowledge and meaning to the environmental work of different actors, and to co-ordinating and uniting actors.

In an ambition to reach out beyond the scientific communities, Robèrt vividly describes (in books and retrospective interviews) how he approached a number of Swedish celebrities—musicians, media managers, politicians, and eventually also the King of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf, to spread the word about the scientific framework about to be finalized and to ask them to join and support the movement (Interview 1; Robèrt 2002; Boström 2001). These "missionary" ambitions were widely welcomed, and the notion of The Natural Step soon expanded beyond Robèrt as an individual and TNS's founder, and beyond the manifesto framework document itself.

The consensus approach was important in attracting stakeholders, as was the strive for dialogue and bridging of "unnecessary polarity." TNS's internal documents and brochures from the time describes how it wanted to be a partner rather than a rival, and to guide rather than to confront actors. This approach, together with the holistic ethical view, made it easier to create a sense of consensus on fundamental issues, which in turn enabled further communication and translation. As Boström put it (2001, pp. 87–88):

> If everyone – politicians, public servants, CEOs, professionals and consumers – all depart from the same framework, this creates conditions for people with different competencies to have a more efficient dialogue with one another.

TNS came to be seen as a "node" to which different actors both could and wanted to connect. TNS soon experienced a range of different types of actors willing to let their different sub-paths cross at the new national node for sustainable cooperation, TNS. For example, in September 1988, while the network of scientists had still not ratified the scientific manifesto, Robèrt pitched the idea of the framework to Sweden's public television broadcaster (SVT). His idea was to celebrate the launch of the manifesto with a national TV broadcast including famous music artists. The head of SVT Channel 1 first laughed at the idea (Interview 1) but eventually agreed, under the condition that Robèrt could find the funding for his endeavor. He then approached the Ministry of Education, asking if they would be interested in a booklet and audiocassette of the scientifically agreed-upon knowledge to be mailed free of charge to all the schools. They were, again provided that Robèrt was able to find the necessary funding. He also went to the King of Sweden's personal assistant with the same offer noting the involvement of "the government and Channel 1 and all these artists and scientists

and I…" and, to his surprise, he received an invitation to meet with the King and Queen at the royal palace to present the project (Interview 1).

All in all, driven by a strong ethical, "world savior" ambition (Windell 2006), TNS managed to reach out to representatives from a wide range of organizations, to either engage them in a network or possibly enroll them as funders. In the case of the latter, a diverse set of organizations were approached, including private corporations like IKEA and the state-owned companies of Nordbanken (since privatized and now Nordea Bank) and SJ (Swedish Railways), as well as civil-society organizations such as the Swedish Cancer Foundation, the Lions Club and the Church of Sweden, as well as other hybrid organizations such as the mutually owned insurance company Folksam and cooperatively owned retailer KF (Sweden's then-largest supermarket chain), along with three labor unions—Metall, Fabriks and TCO (Interview 1). The board chairs of these organizations were invited to join an ad hoc sponsoring group and to sit on the prospective board of the new organization envisaged to take on the role of coordinating the missionary project.

While the response was supportive and invigorating, no-one wanted to be the first to promise to help cover the substantial cost (of 40 million SEK—about 4 million EUR) of the planned mail-out and related projects (Interview 1). But Robèrt pressed on, calling all of the potential sponsors to a general meeting to be held in November 1988 at Arlanda Airport. He did not ask for confirmation, however, but simply wrote a letter of gratitude, thanking them all for agreeing to attend. As it turned out, everyone invited actually did show up and it was finally decided that the soon to-be-founded foundation, The Natural Step, would receive funding (Interview 1).[1] With funding secured, in April 1989, Robèrt was able to present the foundation and its framework in a SVT Channel 1 broadcast, after which the initiative received congratulations and public support from several celebrities and other notable sources, including King Carl XVI Gustaf, then-UN Secretary-General Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar, and famed Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. One week later, the booklet and audiocassette were mailed out to all schools and households in Sweden (Interview 1; Interview 9).

Thus, it was at this point in time that TNS and all it stood for became legitimized as an innovative blend of the logics of science and missionary work. It was seen as an innovation also for its outspoken ambition to bridge

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[1] The "foundation," *The Natural Step International*, is a registered non-profit association in Sweden made up of organizations that share TNSi values and have signed a license agreement permitting them to use the TNS brand and related materials. http://www.thenaturalstep.org/www/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SIGNED_TNSiArticlesofAssociation_Final_170524.pdf.

policy-making, activism, business and science, a contrast to "normal" organizational life where individuals spend much of their time in separate "silos," at times criticizing one another for making the wrong priorities based on their respective institutional logics (Boström 2001; Windell 2006).

The node for connecting stakeholders and their different sub-paths into a common broader path had been created and legitimized in a very short time (9 months), and the spirit was entrepreneurial, innovative and professional, a blend that was also easy to support because it was not seen as a threat to any of the supporting actors. TNS was something new, a hybrid that embraced a bit of everything and had the ambition of helping to make the world a better place. As an idea and initiative, TNS was attractive to many, and around 1990 an organization was established to help fulfill its mission.

It is fair to define the early 1990s as the heydays of The Natural Step. It was more or less a name on everyone's lips then, at least in Swedish industry, in the media landscape and in the political debate (Boström 2001). At that time, when TNS started, it had a first-mover advantage and was able to connect actors and their sub-paths in the sparsely populated emerging field of sustainability in Sweden. The environmental movement was already operating, and green parties had become established in a number of countries, but the dominating view of industry was that it was populated by capitalists with nothing but profit on their minds (Windell 2006). In this context, TNS's politically neutral ambition to bridge science and society was seen by many in the business world as novel—an inspiring and much-needed addition to the emerging field. As recalled by the TNS co-workers recruited in the early days, the reference to "neutral" science helped to initiate many constructive conversations (Interview 7):

> It was completely value-neutral. We didn't attempt to taint anyone with our values, and that offer of value neutrality seemed to open things up and motivate those concerned to start questioning their own views and values.

Established environmental movement activists, however, saw TNS as not having enough distance to the "evil villains" of the business community, but, as Boström (2001) notes, the comparative closeness in TNS's approach to different stakeholders enabled it to actually reach and involve them in fruitful dialogue. The common way for TNS to describe its position was to say that: "We are your critical friend—not only critical, but first and foremost friend" (Interview 1 and Participant Observation of 2-day client course). And this applied not only to industry. As a hybrid, TNS's ability to persuade a range of different actors to join the widening common path did not only stem from its perceived neutrality.

TNS also benefited from its ability to communicate in a multivocal way. As expressed by Boström (2001, p. 89):

> The Framework is the connection but the cognitive work of TNS is more nuanced. In the interaction with municipalities and larger corporations, specific "frame bridges" were used to enable an increased response.

Thus, initially, there was a focus in TNS's activities of assimilating actors from different separated paths in order to initiate interactions among them and the paths they came from. Retrospectively, and as shown above, it has been noted that TNS was successful in its attempts (Boström 2001; Windell 2006; Frostenson 2010; Alexius et al. 2017), which means that TNS contributed significantly to establish a new path in the Swedish environmental discourse, about the same time that "the sustainable development regime" emerged transnationally (Bothello and Salles-Djelic 2018). Consequently, in a short period of time, The Natural Step had managed to facilitate a space for assimilation of different interests and earlier separated actors.

Coalescence: Conceptualizing and Organizing for Further Missioning

After the initial phase of constituting TNS as a space and node for assimilation, managers of large respected corporations like IKEA and Electrolux began to call the small TNS office in Stockholm, often wanting to meet Robèrt in person to learn more about the peculiar new hybrid approach (Interview 1). TNS responded to these calls and gradually began to take on assignments instead of acting mainly proactively by providing knowledge and information. This also meant that, as an organization, it had to recruit new people to meet the demand of organizations that wanted to hire TNS to help them implement the framework. In a way, the new recruits were hired to serve as disciples to the founder and to help to share and spread the established framework to as many organizations and policy-makers as possible. At the same time, TNS also had to handle the increased demand for services (Interviews 3, 5–8).

As time progressed, TNS incrementally developed and delivered services designed to contribute to orienting decision-makers from a wide range of organizations (public and private companies, municipalities, NGOs, and others) to the sustainability issue and its translation into various institutional elements such as written materials, training programs and advice (Furusten 2013). In some ways, this helped to shape the organizations into potential buyers with a demand for products and services not yet offered by anyone. Because it had now become possible to envision a future market for such products and services, aimed at helping to address and solve sustainability issues, more potential buyers turned to TNS, looking to purchase services beyond

the scientific framework and enlightenment workshops first offered by the organization (Robèrt 1992, 1995, 2002; Interview 1; Boström 2001). Still, the advisors at TNS struggled to combine their roles of scientific missionary and sellers, and began, somewhat reluctantly, to charge clients market prices for their services (Interviews 1, 3, 5–8). This, in turn, meant that the funding model of the organization gradually changed. From being financed in the first years of the 1990s mainly through the foundation, donations and sponsor arrangements, toward the end of the decade TNS became a mainly fees-based organization (Interview 9). This development also came about as a response to a changing interest from TNS's initial donators. Having already helped to fund TNS's start-up, they were anxious about committing to a second round of donations to support an unbiased knowledge development and information distribution. This shift in income sources for TNS may also be seen as a sign of an ongoing market contraction. Besides TNS, a range of sellers had gathered to meet the growing demand for sustainability services (Windell 2006; Frostenson 2010; Alexius et al. 2017).

This development highlights the importance of the financing of hybrid organizations. As long as the hybrid ambitions were funded by donations, financing was not an issue of conflict. The inflow of resources could be used to realize the initial mission. However, along with a decrease in organizations' will to donate to the cause, doing business gradually replaced doing missionary work as the dominating logic for organizing activities in TNS, although the scientific logic of neutrality remained a selling point. In the rhetoric, however, "science" was still the basis for the services sold. But as recalled by the TNS advisors, fewer clients asked for science (Interview 3, 5–8).

Consequently, from about the mid-1990s, it is fair to describe the supply and demand of sustainability-related actions as an emerging field where sets of actors produce and demand recognizable services (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This brought about a turn and a new balance in the hybridity of TNS, from having mainly represented science and missionary civic logics, the mission gradually drifted towards a market logic as TNS's consultancy role gradually became more important in its daily practice (Interviews 1, 3, 5–8).

To handle the emerging field, a limited corporation called *Det Naturliga Steget AB* (TNS Limited) was founded in 1997. The idea was to separate the commercial side of TNS from the scientific and missionary side, in an aim to de-hybridize and adapt to the developing structure in the field where different categories of actors, such as consultancies, research units and more activist organizations, could now be recognized (Interview 9). Unhappy with this mission drift, founder Robèrt toned down his role as a TNS manager and took a part-time position as a professor of sustainability at Blekinge Institute of Technology. Faced with criticism from both the left and the right that his beloved framework was in fact not scientifically solid nor neutral (Boström 2001), Robèrt took every opportunity to defend it. In seminars, pamphlets, books and academic papers. The meta-study by Robert et al. (2002) is an interesting example of this defense strategy and resistance as it claims that all the novel sustainability applications flooding the market at the time should be seen as mere translations of the TNS framework.

Thus, starting in the early 1990s when the phase of assimilation of actors representing different interests through the establishment of a platform, or a space for interaction among those actors and the paths they represented, a phase of coalescence had begun, where general frameworks of a need for an environmental turn in society were replaced by concepts such as sustainability and corporate responsibility. TNS was early in using and promoting the sustainability concept. However, it also held onto its ambition to be a forum for assimilation, which led to it not fully giving in to coalescence. In retrospect, it is clear that TNS played a considerable role in both the assimilation of actors and the coalescence for sustainability until the mid-1990s. However, when the field started to get crowded and more complementary but also competing inspirational nodes and frameworks saw the light of day (Windell 2006; Alexius et al. 2017), the missionary hybrid became uneasy.

Cooptation: Managerialization and Mission Drift

By the year 2000, the field of sustainability service providers had become crowded (Interview 5). Compared to TNS's holistic solutions, those of its new competitors were more hands-on, though TNS still aspired to offer a more conceptual and academically based system (Alexius et al. 2017). As stated by the new secretary-general, recruited in 2012 (Interview 2): "The academic connection is both our strength and our weakness." One of the senior advisors describes a change in how the clients responded to the framework—from seeing it as a respected and inspiring basis for interaction to almost a disappointment, spawning comments like: "So you're still clinging to the same old framework are you? Isn't it time to move on?" (Interview 3).

In the late 1990s and onward, determining how to manage the organization's hybrid identity became an internal struggle. One significant example was the launch, in May 2008, of a new network for applied research, the *Alliance for Strategic Sustainable Development* (ASSD). ASSD was established by TNS, Lund University and Blekinge Institute of Technology, and was initially funded by five Swedish research agencies—the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the Swedish Energy Agency, Formas, VINNOVA and NUTEK. It was based on the TNS scientific framework and, in some respects, it represented an attempted restart of the scientific dimension. But at this point the field of

sustainability had seen the birth of a number of research initiatives, such as the influential Stockholm Resilience Centre,[2] and TNS was no longer unique in its scientific profile.

The secretary-general of TNS Limited later described this development as TNS having "outsourced research" to other organizations (Interview 2). In the 2010s, external pressure to adapt its "product and service portfolio" to the field norm intensified internal discussion about what road to take, a discussion in which the commercial consultancy logic gradually won out (Interview 6, Observation of internal staff meetings at TNS in 2013).

Still, the new management struggled to find ways to simplify the communication of what TNS had to offer, without completely losing sight of its holistic ethical outlook and detailed scientific basis (Interview 4). In the mid-2010s, when asked how TNS presents what it does, one of the senior advisors interviewed replied:

> [Long silence] It depends on how… erhm… how interested they really are. Because to understand what I do, kind of requires lengthy discussions. So, in that situation, I have to decide whether I feel like having that discussion, and if I don't, I simply say that I'm a consultant, or perhaps a sustainability consultant… If I said that I work in an idea-based organization of advisors that accelerate the transition towards sustainability, and that we are "critical friends," then no-one would really understand me. (Interview 5).

And she was not alone in this observation. A similar reflection was made by one of her colleagues, also a senior advisor (Interview 7):

> We take pride in being part of an organization where surplus is used to develop our purposeful operations… But if someone asks me what I do for a living, I say: "I'm a management consultant."

TNS's newly employed board and management struggled to put their trust in policies like a new salary policy, and in evaluation. Managerialization had gained a substantial impact on the hybrid. This increased the internal conflicts about how to maintain a hybrid identity, however, since emphasizing commercial efficiency and professionalism in consulting meant a step further along the trajectory towards the commercial logic of the consultancy. Nevertheless, the decision made was to adopt and implement the structures of a "proper" professional service firm, to find ways to define and transform TNS into a "normal," "comprehensive consultancy" (Interview 2, Interview 4, Observation of internal staff meetings).

Recombination: Bankruptcy of the Consultancy and Internationalization of the Hybrid

Although TNS's management team had struggled from about 2015 to embrace managerialization, even given the re-orientation towards a management consultancy, its financial situation was uncertain and the internal conflicts about whether or not to sustain the organization's hybrid identity continued. These internal conflicts eventually led the founder, Karl-Henrik Robèrt, to leave TNS. Robèrt's exit should be seen as a protest against recent phases of re-conceptualization and re-labeling in the field and in "his own" organization, developments he saw little value in. Ever since the path of sustainability had been co-opted (transnationally as well as nationally) by business interests and managerialization, Robèrt had missioned the need for a holistic outlook, the value of staying true to and going back to the fundamental conditions for life and not let oneself get all excited and caught up in the new talk and incremental development of sustainability-related tools and services, most of which he saw little value in (Interview 1).

The meta-article written with nine other scientists in 2002 (Robèrt et al. 2002) is an example of this tireless missioning, wherein Robèrt and his co-authors defended the concept of "strategic development" and argued for apparent synergies of the various tools available in the developing market. To them, these tools were mere variations on the same theme. However, as Robèrt proved genuinely unwilling to use the "new market talk on sustainability and resilience" and chose to stay true to the "same old" scientific framework (Interview 1), fewer people listened and even fewer seemed to understand his point, which caused frustration in the TNS board and management (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 9). What had started as a successful external ambition to unite and inspire a range of different interests in society had gradually become an internal identity struggle within the hybrid itself, which the organization had failed to manage and solve.

In the spring of 2017, shortly after Robèrt's exit, TNS filed for bankruptcy (Robèrt 2017). However, reflecting the internal identify struggles, in October of the same year a new benefit corporation (B Corp) called *Sustain in Time* was founded by former TNS co-workers and was taken up as Sweden's new member in the *TNS International* foundation (TNSi), comprising companies from eleven other countries from around the globe.[3] Although initially very positive to

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[2] A Swedish think-tank founded in 2007 that promoted social-ecological resilience policy-making to state and intergovernmental organizations (see Walker and Cooper 2011; Bothello and Salles-Djelic 2018).

[3] Although not in focus empirically in this paper, TNSi is a global network inspired by Robèrt and TNS Sweden. Formally it is an association composed of one member from each of the 11 countries (Sweden, Finland, Israel, Italy, China, New Zealand, Canada, Portugal, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany) together aiming to

the framework spreading around the globe (when TNS had been contacted by foreign consultancies across the globe and TNS International (TNSi) had been set up as a global association in the 1990s), Robèrt now disagreed with the direction TNSi's new policy was taking. The changes decided on happened to correspond with the market direction taken by TNS Sweden Limited and later by its successor Sustain in Time. Only a few days after the new status of Sustain in Time was announced, came the announcement on the TNSi website that Robèrt had decided to withdraw all engagements and to cancel all associations also with TNS International (http://www.thenaturalstep.org/news/).

Thus, along with the decisions to tone down its activist missionary role and scientific profile, and to tone up its consulting identity, TNS had suffered from mission drift and lost track of both its holistic world savior mission and its relevance as a path-generating hybrid. This was due in part to, following de-hybridizing, TNS was no longer a hybrid in the same sense. Instead of remaining a significant contributing actor in changing trajectories for environmentalism, TNS's successor, the new corporate initiative *Sustain in Time*, had chosen to adjust to the expectations of the field and its discourse by stepping onto the now beaten path, which had stabilized substantially in recent years. While his former co-workers proved more pragmatically willing to adjust to the new lingo of the increasingly marketized path, this was a point of no return, a matter of personal ethical principle for Robèrt (Interview 1).

When TNS was first established, there was no sustainability field in Sweden (Windell 2006; Frostenson 2010; Boström 2001; Alexius et al. 2017). Less than a decade later, the common holistic and comprehensive path of sustainability, which TNS had helped to generate, had taken a different trajectory than the one suggested by the TNS framework, and broadened substantially. TNS had made continued efforts to maintain its position as an organizer and influencer of the development but, as many different categories of actors had already moved on along the coopted and recombined environmental path, its ambitions to open the way for continued processes of assimilation and coalescence did not stir much interest. It seemed that as the

path stabilized, the hybrid organization had played out its role. Or, to put it differently, perhaps its mission as facilitator had been completed?

Discussion

Our overarching theoretical interest in this paper concerns the role of different organizational forms in processes of societal change and, more specifically, the role of hybrid organizations in processes of sustainable transformation. As acknowledged in the literature review earlier in the paper, societal change should not be seen as a linear, path-dependent evolution dominated by particular institutional entrepreneurs with a clear agency. Rather, theory grounded in empirical evidence has demonstrated that it is more reasonable to understand the generation of new paths as a consequence of ongoing construction work involving different actors over longer periods of time.

Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018) make a contribution regarding the generation of paths at the transnational macro-level. However, further theorizing is necessary in order to understand how such transnationally institutionalized conceptualizations of environmentalism are translated into something tangible and meaningful at the national and local levels. In order for our theories to better account for how macro, meso- and micro-development are related, as is repeatedly called for, more local case studies are needed, including the micro-level, to explain what roles different organizations can play in generating paths for societal transformation.

This paper responds to this call with a local case study on how a hybrid organization can enable societal transformation towards sustainability thanks to its form and position at the crossroads of institutional logics. The three-decade life story of TNS illustrates that hybrid organizations can play a significant path-generating role during early stages of market orientation, culture shaping and path emergence. In the following, we discuss when and how hybrid organizations may or may not enable the path-generating mechanisms discussed above, i.e., assimilation, coalescence, cooptation and recombination (Bothello and Salles-Djelic 2018), with a summary of this analysis shown in Table 1. Through applying Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018) phases to our local case, we have identified typical actions, conditions and consequences for the organization, as well as for the generation of a national (in our case, Swedish) path towards CSR and sustainability. Our narrative starts at a time that Bothello and Salles-Djelic (2018) define as the phase of cooptation in the transnational development. However, seen from the perspective of our local case, when the transnationally conceptualized agenda of environmentalism is translated to national levels, a new

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Footnote 3 (continued)

"accelerate the transition towards a truly sustainable global society" and "actively contribute to the development of The Natural Step as a global organization." (thenaturalstep.org, retrieved 20 June 2018.) Although the TNSi association has existed for over 25 years at the time of writing, it has not managed to scale up and grow enough to have a substantial impact on the transnational discourse and path development. The members are mainly very small consultancies and most work in the local/national market.

Table 1 Hybrid organizations in local processes of path generation

	Hybrids in the assimilation phase	Hybrids in the coalescence phase	Hybrids in the cooptation phase	Hybrids in the recombination phase
Actions	Connecting sub-paths	Nurturing neutrality	De-hybridizing	Organizational survival
Conditions	Transnational trajectory established	Institutional pluralism and support from actors representing different logics	Multivocal and institutional pluralist positions are fragile and only temporally legitimate	Institutional consolidation Reduced understanding and demand for hybridity
Consequences				
Organizational	Multivocal position	Neutral node	Mission drift	Synchronized identity
Path generation	Opportunity space for orientation	Dialogue	Contraction and diffusion	Path re-orientation

round of path generation starts – one that may also be structured into these analytical phases.

Connecting Scientific Sub-Paths: Hybrid Organizations in the Phase of Assimilation

In the early days, the hybrid in our study enabled assimilation in the environmental field by offering a space (Holt and Littlewood 2015) for orientation and interaction between earlier separated sub-paths. Thanks to its multivocal abilities and perceived neutrality at the crossroads of societal logics, the hybrid organization gained the trust of both representatives for scientific disciplines and those with practically and politically oriented sub-paths. This, in turn allowed the hybrid to contribute to resolving deadlocks and bridging value conflicts with authority. In practical terms, the hybrid offered former rivals a neutral space where they could meet and orient towards one another and the novel topic of sustainability.

The established transnational trajectory towards sustainability in the wake of the Brundtland Report (1987) was an important condition. Yet, without the initial spaces for orientation offered by the hybrid, the deadlock may very well have continued. Hence, we suggest that the active presence of hybrids may not only enable but also affect the pace and timing of local path generation. Although studies of path generation acknowledge the impact of entrepreneurs, the argument is that it is the sum of all attempts made by many different actors that create new trajectories (Djelic and Quack 2007). Still, in our case, for the transnational trajectory to materialize at the national level, the entrepreneurship of the TNS founder cannot be overlooked. Due to personal properties such as being a recognized scholar and a dedicated world savior with an outspoken ethical approach, the founder's aim was to connect the different scientific sub-paths for the sake of a higher ethical cause rather than to make money or spend time in the limelight (cf. Greenwood and Freeman 2017). When succeeding to connect and unite scholars from different scientific paths toward a common

cause, TNS earned trust through its multivocal skills and position at the crossroads that likely helped open the way for continued scientific dialogue and interaction. This in turn made it attractive for other scholars to become loosely connected to the TNS network, which also opened a broader opportunity space for TNS to become a central node for coalescence of other paths and actors.

Nurturing a Neutral Node for Translation: Hybrid Organizations in the Phase of Coalescence

Once connection between sub-paths has been established, interaction triggers mechanisms of coalescence. The hybrid in our study provided actions such as training programs, written materials and advice in order to communicate and share its framework with as many as possible. Such activities can be seen as attempts to nurture the already-established connections in order to trigger further interaction and constructive path-breaking dialogues.

Since the hybrid is not formed according to any single institutional logic (Thornton et al. 2012; Skelcher and Rathgeb Smith 2015), it does not sort under a single scientific discipline, nor solely under one of the institutional logics for research institutes in academia, activist organizations in civil society, or consultancies in the business sector. Rather, the hybrid represents a little of all of these logics, but at the same time – and this is crucial—may be perceived as understanding all but representing none of them. Thus, a hybrid organization's perceived status as a neutral node in a polarized field makes it attractive for a range of different stakeholders to connect to, as well as to seek out a forum for interaction. And they are able to do so with little risk of being criticized, since their engagement with the hybrid is something that takes place outside these stakeholders' respective paths and professional communities and hence does not interfere with what is *comme il faut* there. Thus, the hybridity of an organization grants it a neutral status that allows it to enable coalescence of different paths in science, business, politics and activism (in this case, for example
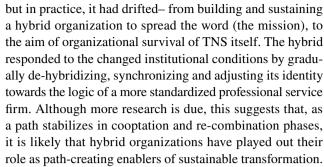
environmentally engaged artists). Thus, in line with what Hockerts (2015) argues, hybrids are often open and eager to sharing lessons and encouraging others, and by doing so enable coalescence to take place between actors from different "normally" separated paths.

De-Hybridizing Struggles: Hybrid Organizations in Phases of Cooptation and Recombination

Although hybridity may enforce path emergence in processes of assimilation and coalescence, a hybrid's multivocal path-generating position can be both fragile and temporary (cf. Santos et al. 2015). When fields mature and become professionalized and the emerging market contracts (which began to happen in the Swedish sustainability context starting in the mid-1990s), the legitimate opportunity space for hybrid organizations in path generation gradually erodes. When our studied hybrid was established, there was no sustainability field in Sweden (Windell 2006; Frostenson 2010; Boström 2001; Alexius et al. 2017). Less than a decade later, the common holistic and comprehensive path of sustainability, which TNS had contributed to generate, had been coopted by the paths of managerialism, neoliberalism and the risk society. Instead of adapting to the changed conditions, however, TNS made continued efforts to maintain its position as a facilitator and influencer of the development. However, when the path matured into a field with clearer structures for different categories of actors, TNS's earlier achieved legitimacy as a hybrid between science, activism and consulting, and a leading actor in all of these three institutional spheres, was questioned. TNS faced competition in two of its core arenas: science and consulting. It increasingly became perceived as a problem that the hybrid was not specializing in anything; but rather did a little of everything and had a generalist profile (Alexius et al. 2017).

As many different categories of actors had already moved on along the co-opted environmental path, the hybrid's ambitions for re-combination with paths for sustainability developed elsewhere, and to open the way for continued processes of assimilation and coalescence stirred little interest. Although TNS made several attempts to counteract this development, these attempts fell on deaf ears. As time passed, TNS's framework was no longer seen as a fruitful point of departure for cross-sectoral dialogue and development. Rather, the framework became another old product on the market. Consequently, the role of TNS changed from a path-generating hybrid to a somewhat exotic actor offering services based on what the field considered to be yesterday's knowledge and models.

Depending on how the management of a hybrid organization responds to such changes in institutional conditions, the hybrid identity of the organization can either be sustained or change. In the TNS case, officially its mission remained, but in practice, it had drifted– from building and sustaining a hybrid organization to spread the word (the mission), to the aim of organizational survival of TNS itself. The hybrid responded to the changed institutional conditions by gradually de-hybridizing, synchronizing and adjusting its identity towards the logic of a more standardized professional service firm. Although more research is due, this suggests that, as a path stabilizes in cooptation and re-combination phases, it is likely that hybrid organizations have played out their role as path-creating enablers of sustainable transformation.

Summing up, our analysis suggests that in the phases of cooptation and recombination, hybrids are no longer as understood and hence, the space for them to play any significant role in further path generation shrinks. One strategic option aimed to sustain or regain momentum as a hybrid path generator could be for the organization to change institutional environments (Alexius 2007), for example by engaging in another path yet to be developed, or by taking its operations abroad, as indeed TNS attempted to do via the TNSi network of consultants around the globe. Re-combination of the own framework with frameworks developed in other paths could also be an option to sustain or re-construct a hybrid identity. However, in the case studied, at the local national level (in this case Sweden), TNS saw no other option but to de-hybridize and struggle to compete with the many newly established sellers of sustainability concepts that had emerged on the market. By doing so, the de-hybridized organization did take part in further transformation of society towards sustainability, but not in the catalyst role of a path generator and not with the same transformative strength and pace. The further development of the path from this institutionally consolidated stage onwards was consequently characterized more by patterns of path dependency, where most actors now acted as followers on the established path, offering standard products and services.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that in early phases of path generation hybrid organizations may play a significant role in facilitating processes of social transformation. In later phases such as cooptation and recombination, however, and when processes of early market formation have turned to a phase of market contraction, the hybrid is likely to have played out its role as an enabling path generator.

Our findings suggest that hybrid organizations are better adapted than other organizational forms to facilitating connections between "locked-in" organizations situated in separated sub-paths, which are core mechanisms of assimilation. Hybrids may also nurture connections to further prolong and intensify interaction and dialogue among other actors, and thus trigger the mechanisms of coalescence. Positioned

at the intersection of institutional logics, and thanks to their multivocality, hybrid organizations may also be better adapted than other organizational forms to becoming (and being seen as) trusted neutral nodes. Moreover, in established markets (beyond the contraction phase), there may be little acceptance for hybrids with a path-creating identity. In this phase, path generation may still take place, but mainly in the form of diffusion of already-achieved knowledge.

Generalizing from a single case is difficult, but further research on the roles of different types of organizations in path generation may actively study cases where hybrids have engaged successfully also in cooptation and recombination of a path. Such cases would be valuable in order to confirm or perhaps rule out the tentative hypothesis that hybrid organizations may be most prominent as path generators in the early phases of assimilation and coalescence. We welcome more thick case studies of hybrid organizations, as well as studies on the role of other organizational forms in processes of path generation towards sustainable transformation. Our study offers one piece of this puzzle, and highlights the conditions and nested actions that allowed a hybrid organization to enable local path generation and market formation with respect to sustainability and CSR in Sweden. However, this study also highlights conditions when hybrids cannot play this role, when institutional pluralism is reduced and the legitimacy space for hybrids shrinks.

We conclude that different forms of organizations are likely to play different roles in path generation, at different times. This has methodological implications. If most studies on the role of hybrids in CSR and sustainability development are performed on already-established paths and markets, we miss out on an important piece of the puzzle, that of the hybrid's potentially powerful role in early phases of societal transformation. Future research should therefore systematically study the prevalence of hybrids across paths and nations to see whether differences in the timing and pacing of local path generation may, at least partly, be explained by the prevalence of enabling hybrids. Although this paper deals with the role of a hybrid in a local field, focusing on a single nation, future studies should also look at hybrids contributing at the transnational and global levels.

As we read the literature on hybrid organizations, one of its main conclusions concerns the difficulty for hybrids to survive and thrive in established fields. Although hybrids are designed to handle institutional crossroads, a hybrid's legitimacy cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be cultivated and nurtured by its management and staff, and it needs an accepting environment. We believe that our ability to perceive hybrids as either odd and problematic, or complex and challenging in an inspiring way, is fundamental to the mindset of its leaders as well as to other stakeholders in and around hybrids, including scholars of the business ethics community. It is high time to seek out and cherish the special

values and contribution hybrids bring to society, not least in their role of path generators enabling sustainable change.

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Interviews

Interview 1. Founder of TNS. Interview conducted 18 April 2013.

Interview 2. Secretary-general of TNS. Interview conducted 19 April 2013.

Interview 3. Advisor at TNS. Interview conducted 19 April 2013.

Interview 4. Communication manager at TNS. Interview conducted 22 April 2013.

Interview 5. Advisor at TNS. Interview conducted 22 April 2013.

Interview 6. Advisor at TNS. Interview conducted 29 April 2013.

Interview 7. Advisor at TNS. Interview conducted 13 May 2013.

Interview 8. Advisor at TNS. Interview conducted 13 May 2013.

Interview 9. Chair of the TNS board. Interview conducted 14 May 2013.

The nine interviews drawn from in this paper were conducted in 2013 and are listed below in chronological order, with the informant's title at the time of the interview. Each informant was interviewed once.