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# Sustainability and Place-Based Enterprise

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## Abstract

In this article, we critique the “placeless” character of enterprise sustainability research and introduce the concept of the place-based enterprise (PBE), arguing that such enterprises offer a potentially important means of fostering ecological and social sustainability in local communities. Drawing on a variety of disciplinary perspectives, we offer a specification of the concept of place and explore the relationships between places and enterprises. We maintain that PBEs, whose resources, productive activities, and ownership are anchored in specific local places, and who themselves possess a sense of place, may be more likely than conventional enterprises to pursue locally beneficial economic, social, and environmental outcomes. A typology of PBEs and suggestions for future research are proposed.

## Keywords

community, local ownership, place, place-based enterprise, sustainability, sense of place, sustainable enterprise, rootedness, placelessness

Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place.

—Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (2009, p. 39)

Sustainable enterprises are necessary to solve the central problem of human survival—that is, finding ways for 9 billion humans (by 2042) to survive and flourish on earth without destroying life-supporting ecosystems (Rockstrom et al., 2009). By sustainable enterprises we mean organizations that are mindful of the challenges of global sustainable development, and making efforts to minimize their ecological and social impacts while maintaining good financial performance. Although such enterprises are needed to insure the preservation of the earth, too often the discourse on enterprise sustainability has been abstract in the extreme (Walck, 2003, 2004). Since we experience the earth in specific *places*, it is reasonable to examine whether the relationships between enterprises and *their* places are important for the fostering of sustainable enterprise behaviors.

Yet place, as a multidimensional concept, has received relatively little theoretical attention in the organizational literature (Thomas & Cross, 2007). Nor have scholars often explored the relationships among place, enterprise, and sustainability. We particularly need a better understanding

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of the conceptual linkages between a “sense” of place and the development of sustainable enterprises (Thomas, Gaede, Jurin, & Connolly, 2008).

The lack of attention to place is a curious lacuna in the literature on sustainable enterprise. This is an anomaly because other literatures on sustainability (such as geology, geography, climate science, agriculture, architecture, and even sociology) pay specific attention to place. But as one scholar of place notes, “No-one quite knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 1). In this article, we examine place as a multidimensional concept, defining it as *a built or natural landscape, possessing a unique geographical location, invested with meaning*. It has materiality but is also socially constructed. Furthermore, we examine the concept of *sense of place*, which we define as *a personal connection with place, encompassing feelings of identity with and attachment to a place*, in all its complex dimensions (Hay, 1988). Sense of place is about knowing deeply and caring intensely about any unique place, region, or bioscape, including in a larger sense the entire planet. Both of these concepts admittedly resist methodological tightness, as they cross disciplines and levels of analysis, and operate with different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Yet if management theory is to contribute to the ways in which people, enterprises, and communities find solutions to the 21st-century challenges of sustainable development, it must begin to grapple with the slippery concepts of place and sense of place. Organizational sustainability literature in particular, which currently operates with undertheorized concepts of place, cannot reach its full potential without addressing this gap.

Our purpose in this exploratory article is to expand the theoretical conversation around place and business enterprises through (a) critiquing the “placeless” character of much of the enterprise sustainability literature, (b) offering a more detailed description of the concepts of place and sense of place, (c) developing a typology of place–enterprise relationships and introducing the concept of the place-based enterprise (PBE), and (d) proposing specific directions for future research. Our fundamental research question is, “Do those enterprises that are physically, socially, and emotionally embedded in a specific place evince better sustainability performance than those that are not?” This article contributes to the organizational sustainability literature through exploring such enterprise–place relationships, where place represents a complex, multidimensional construct. This represents a significant extension to prior work that has treated place as a one-dimensional construct. The article also contributes a typology of PBEs that can serve as part of the theoretical frame for studying place-based sustainability.

We begin with a selective review of the sustainability literature, tracing its conceptual evolution as it relates to place and theorizing sustainability as a phenomenon grounded in physical, social, and cultural spaces through the investiture of meaning have become places (Tuan, 1977). We then review key concepts defining place and sense of place, where we position place as the foundation from which specific forms of sustainability can arise, giving concrete effect to an ethos and a practice of sustainability. The following sections introduce a typology of enterprise–place relationships, discuss place-based organizing, and offer the concept of the PBE as an organization anchored in a local community and possessed of a distinctive sense of place. We conclude with suggestions for future research into the ways in which PBEs may be useful components of sustainable local (but globally linked) economies.

## The Evolution of “Placeless” Sustainability

The concept of sustainability is rooted in the environmental movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Ironically, these environmental movements were fundamentally about place and geography. However, over the past 100 years and with the migration of sustainability to the organizational literature, the idea of place was lost. A brief acknowledgement of these roots situates

our current understandings of sustainable development into a sociohistorical context (Edwards, 2005). The history of environmental movements reveals competing views surrounding the relationship between human growth and the natural environment. Premodern human societies succeeded or failed depending on the kind of relationship they established with the places in which they lived (Diamond, 2005). The “natural environment” referred to land, landscape, water, flora and fauna, and natural elements of our environment, and it had a central position in the ontology and cosmology of different cultures (Berry, 2006). In contrast, the modern sustainability paradigm took form in a milieu of increasing human population and attention to human needs.

Influenced by Romanticism and mystical spiritualism, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau viewed nature as reflecting divinity rooted in place. Transcendentalists believed in an ecocentric “preservationist” strain of environmentalism and argued that the natural environment, as embodied in places, had value in itself and should be sheltered from human intrusion. They advocated solving environmental degradation problems by fundamental changes in societal values (Thoreau, 1995).

In contrast, a competing and more anthropocentric “conservationist” approach to the environment originally emerged in Europe but was honed in the United States and British-India. It advocated that natural areas should be protected for use and enjoyment by people (Robinson, 2004). Conservationists emphasized that nature was a font of resources that should be harnessed and managed conservatively. They put faith in technology as well as private and collective use policies to solve environmental problems (Bates, 1957). This led to widespread exploitation of natural resources—forests, mines, cultivable and buildable land, fisheries, and so on (Gifford, 1945; Jones, 1991). In the case of British-India, this approach played well into the colonization project of resource extraction (Sivaramakrishnan, 2009).

The dramatic fourfold rise of human population in the 20th century, from 1.6 billion in 1900 to 6.8 billion in 2000, made the anthropocentric conservationist position the *de facto* logic of environmental discourses. It is from this logic that the concept of “sustainability” emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century. Over the past 50 years, sustainability and sustainable development have cemented the instrumental vision of conservationist environmentalism and accommodated modernity’s fundamental commitment to economic growth at all costs. The result was nearly complete displacement of “sense of place” from sustainability discussions and the commoditization of place as a natural resource (Mrozowski, 1999). Sustainability has come to mean meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The core issue that “sustainability” sought to address was finding ways of continuing economic growth even in the face of real physical and thermodynamic limits to growth in a world with finite resources (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972). Meadows et al. concluded that earth’s finite resources were on a collision course with human populations’ increasing demands. The negative impact of approaching sustainability this way was that it completely removed from the discussion any mention of specific places.

The sustainable development paradigm accepts the compatibility of environmental concerns and economic development and argues for making economic growth compatible with eco-capacity and intergenerational equity. In practice, the various concepts of sustainability have mostly accommodated global economic growth agendas, whereas environmental conditions have worsened over the past 30 years. This is evidenced by the increasing carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere. This carbon accumulation, which remained constant around 280 ppm for thousands of years prior to the 1800s, has risen from 316 in 1960, to 380 in 1990, and to 396 in 2012 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2012). Meanwhile, sustainable development has done little to center the environmental discourse on issues of place.

Sustainability seeks to balance social concerns with environmental concerns without an explicit posture toward specific places. It can be surmised that the “place” for sustainability is the whole earth and could include outer space. Sustainability also incorporates concern for ongoing economic development with preservation of long-standing diverse cultures and is conducive to politically stable democracies. Both cultures and political institutions of democracy arrogate rights to humans over nature in place-bound jurisdictions. So, place as accommodated within the sustainability discourse betrays a commoditized view of nature.

Sustainability can be better understood by examining its rootedness in place. Clearly, economic development is at least partly dependent on natural resource endowments of place (Starik & Rands, 1995). The availability and productivity of land, water, agriculture, forests, fuels, and minerals in a place determine the kind of development possible there. In the *Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990), Michael Porter argues that the natural and labor resource endowments of nations are root sources of competitive advantage. To those sources, we would add social and cultural resources, which can also directly contribute to economic productivity. Porter has a transactional view in which nations and regions offer their natural and created endowments to be wrought into strong clusters of globally competitive industries. Bereft of emotion, feeling, connection, and driven solely by a calculus of economic advantage, this framework ignores those aspects of nature (and of place) that cannot directly be monetized.

The natural resources-based view of the firm makes similar arguments at the firm level (Hart, 1995; Sharma & Starik, 2002). Companies mindful of their natural and social resource bases can construe production systems and competitive advantage out of these resources. The growing literature on environmental management examines the many impacts that industrial systems have on land, water, and air (Hoffman, 1997; Hoffman & Bansal, 2012). These approaches explicitly recognize the embeddedness of firms in the natural environment and the advantages derived from cost savings related to pollution prevention and reduced externalities (Marcus, Shrivastava, Sharma, & Pogutz, 2011; Van Marrewijk & Werre, 2003). Yet their conceptions of place are highly generalized, and they do not address “place” as a sociocultural historical specificity.

This faint presence of “place” in sustainability is a gap that organizational researchers need to address. Place, after all, represents the coalface, the grounded intersection of business activities, nature, and society. These activities happen in physical, social, and cultural spaces, a substantive yet complex arena that is packed full of meaning. Ultimately, sustainability either will or will not happen in distinct *places*, where we live our lives, create meaning, permit our organizations to pursue their goals, and where the future of this planet will be determined. As McKibben (2010) writes,

The project we’re now undertaking—maintenance, graceful decline, hunkering down, holding on against the storm—requires a different scale. Instead of continents and vast nations, we need to think about states, about towns, about neighborhoods, about blocks. (p. 124)

In other words, the above grand project of sustainability will be given effect in *places*, and therefore organizational researchers must begin to grapple with the complexities, meanings, and implications of places.

## Place

If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are. (Wendell Berry in Stegner, 1986, p. 1)

If sustainability is to be more than a “big idea of general usefulness” (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995, p. 876) or an abstract, Proteus-like concept, it must be given effect on the ground, in physical *spaces* that through the investiture of meaning have become *places* (Tuan, 1977). Such places, as the settings in which humanity directly experiences the world (Relph, 1976), represent an essential context for the practice of sustainability; and where place does *not* exist, that is, where the *placelessness* that accompanies an increasingly “flat” and globalized world dominates, there sustainability cannot obtain. If this assertion has any basis, then surely there are few concepts more critical than that of place and its relationship to organizations and the practice of sustainability. Like sustainability itself, the concept of place may offer a different lens for seeing the world (Cresswell, 2004) and, at least for some, represents a form of resistance against those forces that would homogenize, dehumanize, or “displace” us (Relph, 1976).

One difficulty in conceptualizing place is its ubiquity; the word *place* is part of our everyday vernacular (Cresswell, 2004; Relph, 2008) rather than a well-specified concept for the use of scholars. Perhaps for this reason, while use of the notion of place in the organizational literature is not unknown (e.g., Guthy & Whiteman, 2009; Thomas & Cross, 2007; Thomas et al., 2008; Thomas, Jurin, Gould, & Gaede, 2011; Walck, 1996, 2004; Walck & Strong, 2001; Whiteman & Cooper, 2000), it has yet to receive much conceptual scrutiny. Indeed, the meaning of place within the organizational literature is fuzzy, suggesting that its outward simplicity belies an underlying complexity. In the following section, we build on this and other disciplinary work to propose a concept of place that encompasses dimensions of *location*, *landscape*, and socially constructed *meaning* that we hope will move the discussion of the interplay among place, enterprise, and sustainability forward.

### Conceptualizing Place

Place has most often been used in management theory in a way that roots it firmly within the material world, with a socially constructed dimension that is less often explicit. Other disciplines, however, have been more willing to confront the challenges inherent in such multidimensionality. We believe that together, the following dimensions offer a more expansive and useful description of the concept of place. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that attempts to specify a robust construct of place will need to address and reconcile the variety of ontological and epistemological issues common to multidimensional constructs (Law, Wong, & Morley, 1998; Suddaby, 2010). Our goals here are admittedly more modest: to highlight the richness and potential utility of a multidimensional concept of place.

**Location.** At its most elemental, every place is distinct and possesses a precise geographical *location* in the world, a latitude, longitude, and altitude. All places are situated within biophysical space and can be located. Even though they may be mirrored in virtual space (e.g., “second life” or “cloud” dimensions), they must first be concrete, tangible, and physical. To be a place, there must be a *there* that can be objectively denoted (Agnew, 1987). Every place is unique unto itself, enabling us to make “the distinction between here and there . . . near and far” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 464). Or as Tuan (1977, p. 6) explained the difference: “If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” In other words, although *space* is what you travel through, *place* is where you stop.

**Landscape.** Every place has a physical dimension and is part of the natural environment. Many ecologists and environmentalists, in fact, center their work on the notion of the *bioregion*, a geographic area that shares landscape and ecology and carries a local population that is integrated with nature and largely self-sufficient within it (Berg & Dasman, 1977). Stedman (2003) argues

that the physical environment, with its landscapes and ecological services, while not the sole determinant of place, is nevertheless a significant factor in its creation. A “material reality” must exist before place can become anything else.

In management theory, place has often been used as a proxy for “the land” or the natural landscape, although a wide variety of other terms have been used. As the “context and situation of all life” (Walck, 1996, p. 27), place is transcendent and neither “ism” nor ideology but instead concrete and essential. It is also local—bounded by natural borders and its physical endowments (Walck, 1996). Notions closely related to place as landscape include *space* (Banerjee, 2000, 2003), *ecological embeddedness* in the land (Whiteman & Cooper, 2000, 2006, 2011), *community* (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), *ecological environments* (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2008), and *the local* (Collins & Kearins, 2010).

Yet place also encompasses human-created structures—the built landscape. Recent work that examines organizations as “place builders” (Thomas & Cross, 2007; Thomas et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2011), for example, includes the material, man-made environment in its conceptualization of place, as do conceptualizations of place in other literatures (Agnew, 1987; Cresswell, 2004; Gieryn, 2000). The built environment, as a dimension of place, is an important setting for social relations, defining the shape of the place in which people live their lives.

*Meaning.* But place is more than a physical, spatial location; it is also the product of lived human experience in the everyday world (Cresswell, 2004; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977). Recent work in management theory has acknowledged that place encompasses not only the natural and man-made environments but also the cultural and social dimensions that give places meaning (Guthey & Whiteman, 2009; Thomas & Cross, 2007; Thomas et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2011).

People, in their attempts at sense-making, cocreate places (Stedman, 2003), and are reflexively created by those same places. Place embraces the composite meanings assigned to it by the individuals, groups, communities, and organizations that live and work there. It possesses “a collection of symbolic meanings, attachment, and satisfaction with a spatial setting held by an individual or group” (Stedman, 2002, p. 563). Whatever place is, it is packed with meaning (Relph, 1976), a holistic and complex nexus of interactions, experiences, meaning, emotions, and a material landscape where humans feel at home in their world and consummately in their place. “A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings” (Gussow, 1971, p. 27, in Relph, 1976, p. 142). Relph argued that

the basic meaning of place, its essence, does not therefore come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial and mundane experiences—though these are all common and perhaps necessary aspects of places. The essence of place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence. (Relph, 1976, p. 43)

This suggests that where there is no sense of connection, meaning, or attachment, there is no place. Such a state of *placelessness* is characterized by standardization and uniformity, mobility, and lack of emotional attachment (Relph, 1976). The opposite of *placelessness* is an *authentic* place: unique and distinctive, composed of meanings assigned by individuals and communities and forged by these meanings and their complex interactions, within the context of a natural and man-made environment, and colored by local culture, traditions, and history (Relph, 1976). Not only a consummately social process, place is also a dynamic creation, undergoing a continuous cycle of creation, destruction, and recreation.

## Conceptualizing Sense of Place

A “sense” of place is intrinsic to the definition of place, of that which *creates* a place (Agnew, 1987). Although perhaps “a gestalt that is difficult to penetrate” (Hay, 1988, p. 163), *sense of place* represents a value that contributes to making human lives sustainable and meaningful (Relph, 2009). This sense of place creates meaning, embracing the meanings that people have derived from their physical and material experiences in places that provide enduring attachment and satisfaction (Stedman, 2003). Sense of place is characterized by *genius loci*, the soul of a place, the “living ecological relationship between an observer and an environment, a person and a place” (Cobb, 1970, p. 125). Thus, sense of place is not only about *insideness* but also about *oneness* with a place, its landscape and natural environment, the built environment, and the people who call it home. If meaning constitutes one dimension of place, then *sense of place* represents the emotional attachment people have to a place, the level of connectedness, and even insideness, real or imagined.

Related to sense of place is the notion of *topophilia*, defined as the affective bonds, even love, that people develop for particular places (Tuan, 1974). This intimate connection or psychological commitment to one’s place may serve to motivate a variety of political, economic, and regulatory decisions that are consistent with the preservation and sustainability of that place. It may generate community values, related institutions, and public policies that foster sustainability; it may also attract those business enterprises that possess an ethos of sustainability and seek a “living ecological relationship” with a place (Russo, 2010).

Sense of place encompasses tacit knowledge, authenticity, and identity.

An authentic sense of place is above all that of being inside and belonging to your place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it. This might be so for home, for hometown or region, or for the nation. (Relph, 1976, p. 65)

Extending this assertion, humanity itself can have a sense of place for the earth, as its common home, and a feeling of being an “insider” rather than an “outsider” on this planet, a part of the earth’s ecosystem rather than separate, apart, and above it. Sense of place connotes an intersection and intermingling of interests, as preservation of the earth is neither more nor less than the preservation of self.

To summarize, place is a social creation, containing the sum of meanings, values, and interpretations attributed by people, but also physical—grounded in the natural and built environments. It is perhaps “not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11). Indeed, it is *only* in places that we can see, experience, and understand the world. A meaningful *sense* of place at the individual and organizational levels may represent a powerful force in advancing sustainability in the 21st century (Relph, 2009).

## Place and Enterprise

Given the reflexivity that exists in the concept of place, human-created business enterprises can be both place builders (Thomas & Cross, 2007; Thomas et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2011) and place destroyers (Walck & Strong, 2001). As they engage in their activities, and depending on the geographic scale and scope of their operations, and their industry, mission, ethos, organizational form, and ownership profile, enterprises will evince varying levels of embeddedness in or attachment to any particular place. Enterprise assets may be widely spread throughout the world or concentrated in one place, operations may be widely diffused or centralized, ownership may



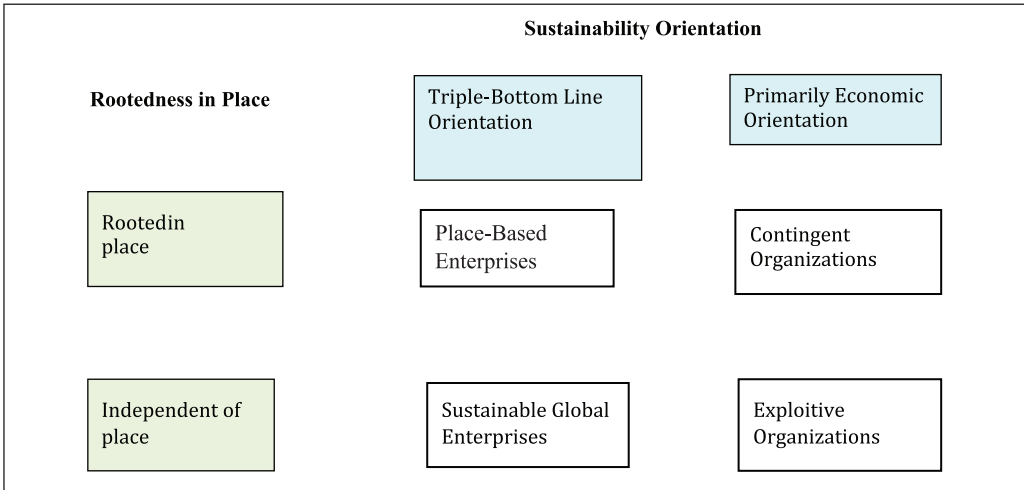
be local or distant, the organizational mission may dictate narrow economic goals or encompass a social or “shared value” orientation (Porter & Kramer, 2011), and enterprises may hold vastly different views of their responsibilities to the places in which they are located (Thomas & Cross, 2007). The physical and social resources located in a place may be essential to an enterprise’s success, or merely instrumental and expedient. The extent of organizational embeddedness in place and the extent of rootedness in a locality are reflected in either strong or weak ties; these ties, we believe, may have important implications for not only the well-being of places but also for the success of the broader endeavor of global biophysical and social sustainability.

In an intriguing line of research, Thomas and Cross (2007), focusing on the social construction of place, examined how organizations as *place builders* rely on the perceived agency orientation of firms (i.e., firms see themselves as independent vs. interdependent with place) and the goal orientation of firms (economic success as a priority vs. place well-being). They posited four types of place-building organizations—*transformational* organizations, *contributive* organizations, *contingent* organizations, and *exploitative* organizations—that have differential effects on the well-being of place. They argued that corporations that *perceive* their success to be interdependent with the success of a place, that is, where firm and place experience a mutual dependency, will “view their success as intimately tied with the greater well-being of the place, and actively seek a variety of opportunities to invest and contribute to the multiple aspects of place” (Thomas & Cross, 2007, p. 40). On the other hand, organizations that are *not* embedded in place, and that demonstrate a more independent agency perspective, will tend to view themselves as “merely occupants of place and economic agents, rather than integral members of place” (Thomas & Cross, 2007, p. 40).

### A Typology of PBE

We have built on and revised the Thomas and Cross (2007) framework to offer a typology of PBEs. In doing so, we propose the concept of the PBE, which we characterize as those enterprises with a local or place-based locus of ownership and control, embeddedness or rootedness in the physical, social, and human capital of a place, possessing a sense of place and a social mission. The typology we propose is based on two dimensions. The first dimension is organizational *rootedness* in place. Firms that are *rooted* are dependent on place and see their own fortunes as linked with the health and welfare of a particular place. They are embedded or deeply rooted in that place, mindful of their complex links with the natural and built environments there, and may be conscious of a particular responsibility to that place. Their links with place are both tangible (natural, human, social, and financial capital) and intangible (e.g., identity); they cannot simply fold their tents and go. Transplanting such organizations is difficult if not impossible. On the other hand, organizations whose roots in place are weak and underdeveloped, and who inhabit multiple locations or possess operational options that compete for their loyalty, will be less embedded or rooted in one specific place. They are relatively independent actors, with shallow roots in place. They are global, mobile, and in some sense, placeless; they can succeed as organizations in many soils, but without loyalty to any particular place.

The second dimension is *sustainability orientation*: at one extreme are sustainable enterprises that seek to balance the well-being of place (in all of its physical and social manifestations) with their economic success; they grade themselves with a balanced scorecard of financial and nonfinancial measures and operate with a focus on the triple-bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance (Elkington, 1998). At the other extreme are those organizations that see themselves as primarily, if not exclusively, economic vehicles; the well-being of place, its natural environment, and the communities that inhabit it is of secondary or limited concern (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Typology of organizations in place.

Note. Adapted from Thomas and Cross (2007).

*PBEs* are firmly rooted in and interdependent with place and practice an ethos of sustainability. They possess a distinctive sense of place and a social mission; the well-being of place is an important organizational goal, both intrinsically and for its own instrumental value in fostering organizational success. They maintain balanced goals for both financial and social outcomes. Such firms will be characterized by attributes such as local ownership and control, the anchoring of firm assets in place, and so on. They can be for-profit, not-for-profit, community-owned, or employee-owned, hybrid forms of enterprise such as cooperatives or any number of other forms (Imbroscio, Williamson, & Alperovitz, 2003; Williamson, Imbroscio, & Alperovitz, 2003). Family-controlled firms, for example, appear to demonstrate better environmental performance than other firms, particularly at the local level (Berrone, Cruz, Gomex-Mejia, & Larraza-Kintana, 2010). Indeed, family-owned firms, particularly those with operations where the family lives, may be particularly sensitive to local pressures to perform in an environmentally acceptable and place sensitive manner.

*Contingent enterprises*, although dependent on place in the sense that they need specific resources, maintain a narrow focus on economic performance rather than creating social value for the place in which they are embedded. These *contingent* firms focus on place utility and will not tend to demonstrate an acute sense of place. They lack either a sustainability orientation or a social mission; all they owe place is to be economically successful, expecting that economic benefits may trickle down but lacking a sense of obligation to place. Their practice of philanthropy or corporate social responsibility is done primarily for instrumental purposes (Thomas & Cross, 2007).

*Sustainable global enterprises* (SGEs), while possessing global mobility advantages and able to arbitrage opportunities on a vast scale, also recognize the importance of “indigenizing” (Hart, 2010) and cocreating social and economic value in all the locations in which they operate. While not place-based, they are place *sensitive* and may still develop and possess a sense of place, although perhaps shallower, more dispersed, and diffused than that of PBEs. Their reservoirs of capabilities and competences, particularly regarding cutting-edge environmental practice, can usefully pollinate local practice and foster place-based sustainability practices. They are, after all, what their name suggests: global enterprises with a sustainability orientation. As enlightened

enterprises with a sustainability mission, they are careful to avoid treating place as an instrumental resource to be exploited. Rather, their goal is what Porter and Kramer (2011) call “shared value creation,” the simultaneous creation of economic value for the firm and social and environmental value for the places in which they do business.

*Exploitive* enterprises are neither rooted in place nor possess a sustainability orientation. Their goal is simply to exploit the resources of place to further their economic goals; they are single-purpose economic instruments. Indeed, they reflect the type of multinational corporation (MNC) demonized by critics of globalization: that of the stateless, rootless global behemoth, ruthlessly exploiting places for the sole goal of maximizing shareholder value. *Mobility* and presence in multiple locations have been theorized as essential competitive advantages of the multinational enterprise. These attributes enable MNCs to play options and arbitrage opportunities between places (Kanter, 1995; Kogut, 1983) and, at least according to their critics, not necessarily to the benefit of those places. This thinking is mirrored in an abundant critical literature on globalization and MNCs (e.g., Barnet, 1994; Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Barnet & Mueller, 1974; Fletcher, 2009; Greider, 1997; Korten, 1995, 1999, 2006), where place is often viewed as a victim of MNC abuse. MNCs have also been excoriated by critics for being *stateless* and *placeless* and for having neither commitment nor attachment to any particular place. They are accused of adopting a purely mercenary approach and failing to develop relationships that are not instrumental to their profit maximizing goals (see Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Fletcher, 2009; Greider, 1997; Korten, 1995, 1999, 2006). Alternatively, Ghemawat (2007) argued that the world is still far from flat, and business enterprises must still adapt to significant differences across cultures and regions, while others (Bradley & Kennelly, 2008; Rugman, 2005; Rugman & Verbeke, 2005) assert that MNCs remain regionally bound rather than being global. Logic suggests that if multinational enterprises represent a unique and powerfully built-for-purpose organizational form, then so do PBEs—although perhaps to different purposes and effects.

Equating placelessness with multinationality is patently superficial. In fact, some scholars of SGEs have suggested that MNCs, by “indigenizing” their operations, can go beyond greening and foster environmentally and socially sustainable outcomes, particularly in the developing world among the four billion people at the base of the pyramid (Hart, 2010). After all, a common definition of *indigenous* is “belonging to a certain place.” Such SGEs effectively cocreate appropriate products and services employing native capabilities and improving unique places at the base of the pyramid. While not place-based, they are place *sensitive* and may still develop and possess a sense of place, although perhaps shallower, more dispersed, and diffused than that of PBEs.

### Place-Based Organizing

Enterprises with strong and strategic ties to place and regional traditions have endured in some industries for centuries. France and Italy provide obvious examples, with artisanal industries based on *terroir*, and the social and cultural attributes of their regions. It is the quality of local environment, water, land characteristics, animal breeds, seeds, micro climates, flora and fauna, production practices, social tastes, labor skills/knowledge, and cultural support that provide uniqueness and *character*. Wines (e.g., Champagne), beers (Germany and Belgium), cheeses (Italy, Denmark), breads, and other food products have subtle nuances and characteristic differences attributable to their place of origin. Such place-based economic activities are complex and rich, culturally and naturally rooted, positively inimitable, and, most important, conducted with deep respect for the soil and habitus that provide the generative force. Out of necessity, these activities must be pursued in a sustainable manner, with an ethos of care and craft, prudence, and

precaution. Some organizational scholars have recognized such place-based caring activities, and some initial studies of place advantage have tended to focus on community, social, and cultural capital (Guthey & Whiteman, 2009).

Social capital, rooted in specific geographical and cultural places, is increasingly viewed as a primary resource for the creation of so-called “smart” or “knowledge” economies. Unlike other resources that are mobile, social capital (like *terroir* in the wine growing region) is anchored in specific places, difficult to duplicate, and is unique (Guthey & Whiteman, 2009). Richard Florida, for example, has written of a world that is not “flat” but “spiky,” where creative, innovative knowledge workers cluster in economically vibrant regions and globally competitive cities that become “cauldrons of creativity” (Florida, 2007, p. 159) and where they can enjoy the benefits of the “human capital externalities” (Robert Lucas in Florida, 2007, p. xiv) that drive innovation and even quality of life. Such creative economies are surely distinct places, but sustainability is largely absent from the discussion. Like the resource-based view of the firm (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003; Barney, 1991; Collis & Montgomery, 1995; Wernerfelt, 1984), which holds up such inimitable, rare, and nonsubstitutable resources as the keys to competitive advantage at firm level, Florida’s notion of place includes an array of tacit resources (skill networks, labor pool, policy infrastructure, and capital) and other exploitable assets, but excludes notions of attachment, rootedness, or sense of place.

The PBE is not unrelated to Peredo and Chrisman’s (2006) idea of the *community-based enterprise* (CBE), which they define as “community acting corporately as both entrepreneur and enterprise in pursuit of the common good” (p. 310). In CBEs, the members of the community own, manage, and are employed by the enterprise that suggests that CBEs are a form of PBE. Community is defined as people who have a “shared geographical location, generally accompanied by collective culture and/or ethnicity and potentially by other shared relational characteristics” (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006, p. 315). They further argue that CBEs are characterized by “a fundamental merging of economic and non-economic goals” (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006, p. 324) and an “enhanced ability to draw on the social and material resources of the communities” in which they have arisen (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006, p. 324). Drawing on social capital already embedded in communities, such CBEs naturally evolve as cooperatives, volunteer associations, member-based labor organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, and in time, they develop a global advantage based on the local culture.

Ownership and control are central to organizing in a place-based manner. Imbroscio et al. (2003) focused on place-based ownership models that create sustainable enterprises through local ownership that are *rooted* in community and serve to anchor capital. They can serve as buffers against the hypermobility of capital and the negative fallout from globalization. They also evaluate a range of organizational types that are place-based:

- *Community-owned corporations*—companies owned by and embedded in community
- *Nonprofit corporations*—hospitals, universities, charitable organizations, and so on
- *Public enterprises*—municipal water and sewer services and other utilities
- *Cooperative enterprises*—worker, producer, or consumer cooperatives, credit unions
- *Employee stock ownership plans*—employee pension fund-owned companies
- *Community development corporations*—nonprofit organizations that stabilize community by combining community caring and private enterprise

Although perhaps subsumed in the above-noted categories, potential additions to this list would include social enterprises and “hybrid organizations” (Boyd, Henning, Reyna, Wang, & Welch, 2009), which combine pursuit of profit with social objectives and possess elements of private, public, and voluntary sector organizations.

Organizing PBEs requires building interdependence with place and linking organizational performance with the health and welfare of a particular place. It involves firm embeddedness in a place, mindfulness of its complex links with the natural, built, and social environments, and consciousness of its responsibility to a place. The links with place are both tangible (natural resources, human and social capital, etc.) and intangible (e.g., identity), achieved by policies of local use (resources, labor, and consumers), self-sufficiency, and community control (Shuman, 1998).

Such organizing is a joint task for organizations and social institutions. The province of Quebec in Canada offers an example. It has a large and robust social economy sector that is sustainable and Quebec-centered. Among its components are the Bank Desjardins (a cooperative, member-owned bank); Equiterre, a community supported agriculture movement with nearly 300 farms; the Solidarity Finance Network (owned by pension funds and labor groups) that provides patient capital to social projects; and a government-supported child care network. Collectively, these sustainable enterprises constitute nearly 20% of the Quebec economy (Bourque, Mendell, & Rouzier, 2009).

Recently, in a study of “mission-driven” enterprises, Russo (2010) noted the tendency of such firms to collocate in particular places where “regional values” and social institutions are compatible with the firm’s mission (along with other factors). He concluded that “place matters” and that locational choice was very much about “the indigenous values of a place and whether or not they resonate with the business owner” (Russo, 2010, pp. 160-161.). In his example of Portland, Oregon, as a place that has attracted investment from a variety of small to medium-sized enterprises, imbued with a mission to foster sustainability and in turn creating clusters of similar enterprises, we see an example of place-based sustainability. Portland is special, unique, distinctive, and attracts those enterprises that will feel “at home” there and share its core values (Russo, 2010).

PBEs, deeply, intricately, and intimately connected with and rooted in places, may represent key components of locally sustainable economies. Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be reasonably proposed that *PBEs are more likely than other enterprises to engage in socially and environmentally sustainable performance*. PBEs are anchored in and coupled to particular places in rich and dense ways and, given this, are more likely to demonstrate sustainability behaviors. PBEs are characterized by the following:

1. Local ownership and control. Capital invested in such enterprises will tend to be patient capital, invested for the longer term
2. Production activities that are interdependent with place, relying on it for particular, unique, and inimitable resources, creating an enterprise identity that itself may be strongly related to place
3. Complex multilayered relationships with iterated meaning, where place creates enterprise and enterprises create place
4. A strong and holistic understanding that place is more than mere location, locality, or landscape, but is also socially created in a nexus of meaning

## Researching PBEs and Sustainability

This exploratory analysis of place-based sustainability generates many research questions highly germane to the field of “organization and environment.” In this concluding section, we suggest some future directions for research on related conceptual and practical issues.

### Conceptual Research Issues

A better understanding of the dynamics of creating sustainable economies and organizations requires conceptual innovations, some of which we suggest below.

*Fields of care.* We need a better understanding of what it means for organizations to be rooted in a place or to possess a sense of place. A sense of place may breed not only familiarity, affection, identity, and attachment but also a “field of care” on the part of individuals and their organizations to feel a “real responsibility and respect for that place” and have a “complete commitment to that place, a commitment that is as profound as any” (Relph, 1976, p. 38). This caring is related to Heidegger’s notion of *sparing*, which implies letting places be

the way they are, having tolerance for them in their own essence, taking care of them without subordinating them. Sparing is a willingness to leave places alone and not to change them casually or arbitrarily, and not to exploit them. (Relph, 1976, pp. 38-39)

Specific research questions can include the following: How can we measure concepts like organizational rootedness and sense of place? How can we classify enterprises as place-based? How can organizations develop a field of care for a place and become willing to *spare* that place? What are the important determinants of whether people, communities, and organizations engage in sustainable behavior in that place? Whiteman and Cooper (2000, 2006) proposed that “a strong personal identification with local ecosystems” is essential to having a sense of place. It seems there may be other organizational, stakeholder, and environmental attributes that are “ecologically embedded” and better equipped to make sense of ecological conditions, and are equally essential to developing sense of place and PBEs.

*Authenticity and sense of place.* Haluza-DeLay (2007) noted that much of the literature in the field of environmental studies links place with the concepts of authenticity, caring, and attachment. Orr (1994) wrote that “I do not know whether it is possible to love the planet or not, but I do know that it is possible to love the places we can see, touch, smell and experience” (p. 146). Future research questions can examine how sustainability behavior toward the environment begins with genuine experience of places. What relationships to place are necessary to develop personal meanings and counteract alienation? Sustainability must take place in a lived world where humankind and biophysical earth interact in a welter of experiences, decisions, intentions, meaning creation, and scientific reality. Place and sustainability both are, and must be, products of that same lived world.

Another researchable question is whether an authentic sense of place at local, regional, and national levels can get PBEs to foster an ethic of care, exercise prudence and caution, accept responsibility, and embrace behaviors consistent with an ethos of sustainability. Understanding the ways that people and their organizations retain, protect, and constantly recreate an authentic sense of place remains a central challenge for researchers (Jackson, 2010).

### **Practical Issues**

Ultimately, PBEs may be a critical component of our response to the global challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and income and wealth disparity, all of which manifest on the ground in the places where we live. PBEs can catalyze sustainability, leveraging the emotional attachment and care that people and organizations have for their places. So we are interested in practical considerations for companies to become place-based. Below, we identify some issues of practical importance.

*Ecological citizenship for multinational companies.* Crane et al. (2008) introduced the concept of ecological citizenship as *intimate connection* with nature. It is clear that just the location of an enterprise within a community does not guarantee a greater attention to the immediate local environment. Ecological citizenship requires corporate managers to be “embedded” in local environments to foster sustainable behaviors. This raises a question: Can MNCs ever become true ecological citizens given that their power, influence, and impacts are so thoroughly

nonlocal? MNCs are an important organizational form and probably the most challenged to evolve the emotional connections inherent to the localizing agenda. Further research is needed on how they develop emotional connections to place, instead of opting for a delocalized, deterritorialized approach to ecological citizenship.

*Family business sense of place.* A fruitful focus for research on emotional connection to place is family-controlled firms. They possess at least some elements of our conceptualization of PBEs. Recent research demonstrates that they display better environmental performance than other firms, particularly at local level (Berrone et al., 2010). Indeed, family-owned firms, particularly those with operations where the family lives, and concerns over the legacy they leave for future generations, are particularly sensitive to local pressures to perform in an environmentally acceptable and place-sensitive manner. These firms show a broad stakeholder orientation, in that they recognize the recursive effects of place on people and of people on place. They encompass both place attachment and place identity that can get closely tied to organizational identity and may hold lessons for all enterprises seeking place-based sustainability.

*Role of ownership and scale of operations.* The decentralization of enterprise and ownership is a central tenet of the “small is beautiful” movement (Schumacher, 1973) and the “degrowth” movement that promote enterprise at a human scale (Gladwin et al., 1995). It is also asserted by critics of globalization (Fletcher, 2009; Greider, 1997; Korten, 1995, 1999, 2006) and by advocates of community and regional economies (Alperovitz, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 2006; McKibben, 2007, 2010; Williamson et al., 2003). This is in stark contrast to the tendency toward large-scale and centralized control of modern companies. Further research is needed on the role and forms of ownership that enable PBEs.

*Strategic management of PBEs.* The strategic management field may benefit by adapting the PBE approach to examine an organization-environment nexus rich in materiality as well as economic and social interconnectedness. PBEs may have a significant role to play in enacting the vigorous and entrepreneurial local environments envisioned by scholars who have advocated a “redefining” of corporate purpose to one that emphasizes the creation of “shared value” and an expansion of the “total pool of economic and social value” (Porter & Kramer, 2011, p. 65; see also Bansal & Roth, 2000).

Porter and Kramer (2011) argued that the strongest global corporations will be the ones that have developed the deepest roots in local communities (i.e., places), connect and collaborate with local suppliers, develop competitive local clusters, and recognize that “not all profit is equal” (p. 75) and that profits that incorporate provision of some sort of social value are “a higher form of capitalism” (p. 75). This social value is cocreated by businesses and communities, and redounds to the betterment of place. It also begs the question: Are PBEs in a better position, through their local roots, to create these more exalted forms of value? Research on the creation of “shared value” by PBEs might shed light on this question; indeed, if PBEs behave no differently than MNCs in terms of the creation of shared value, why should anyone care about advocating for such organizational forms?

*Strategizing about place.* Serious focus on place demands that enterprises strategize about the local places, bioregions, and landscapes that they inhabit and influence and make enhancement of places a key objective. This opens up a new area for researching enterprise strategy, one that is devoted not to provision of products and services, or the use of internal resources, but to the well-being of places. Such strategies could be enacted collaboratively and are particularly suitable for public-private partnerships. Companies and their regional stakeholders, collaborating to make bioregions competitive and sustainable through waste exchanges, industrial ecosystems, and purchasing networks, may open up many new opportunities to improve their collective eco-footprint. Developing economic-ecological strategies of *bioregions* can help maintain their ecological integrity. Bioregions, as areas with tight ecological interdependence that reflect

interconnections and balance between multiple ecological, social, and cultural elements, are thus amenable to certain competitive advantages and disfavor certain economic strategies. Corporate sustainability strategies can extend this way of viewing regions by layering on social, cultural, economic, and emotional components of place.

A place-based conception of sustainability also harkens to different corporate approaches to people and social issues. People and their organizations, to develop successful and sustainable societies, must be mindful of the natural resources of place, of labor processes in place, of social/cultural history of place, and must reflect a dynamic and progressive view toward the challenges and possibilities of local futures that are consistent with global futures. Development in place must be socially equitable, environmentally sustainable, community compatible, and economically viable.

## Conclusion

Place-based sustainability represents more than a romantic notion, and we do not suggest a return to some past vision of an idyllic Arcadia. If anything, place and PBEs are expansive and potentially subversive ideas that demand the critical examination of dominant organizational forms. They challenge corporations, those artificial persons, to enter into authentic relationships with places and people, and to develop the requisite fields of care without which appropriate stewardship of both the natural environment and other components of place may be impossible. It also highlights the potential that may remain locked in any number of sustainable organizational forms that have been rarely examined by organizational scholars.

Focus on PBEs encourages a different focus for organizational research. We have spent decades studying the motivations, structure, operations, and performance of MNCs. We suggest studying the millions of unique, distinctive, and special places that host them and also many other organizations, to better understand the nature of those relationships and the impact of organizational outcomes. It will, perhaps, help those who study management and organizations to “practice the act of imagination that enables us to relate the immediacies of our lives in particular places to larger environmental and social issues” (Relph, 1996, p. 15).

In closing, we want to acknowledge the potential pitfall of place-based behavior becoming a trap of parochialism. Although strong links to place can be instrumental in meeting the challenges of “unrootedness” and may even represent acts of resistance against the forces of globalization, efficiency, and rationalization (Cresswell, 2004; Harvey, 1996), adopting such a perspective is not without its dangers. In its extreme form, one might paint sense of place into a parochial reactionary corner, using it as a negative, retrograde, single-purpose tool to uncritically oppose globalization. Nor may sense of place and the emotional attachments it engenders always represent unmitigated goods. They can sometimes lead to exclusion, xenophobia, structures of domination, and worse (Harvey, 1990, Massey, 1991). The challenge for researchers is to accommodate geographical differences, uniqueness, and rootedness without becoming reactionary.

Despite these dangers, we are convinced that place and sense of place represent rich concepts that offer scholars a new lens for studying the complex and dynamic relationships among natural and built environments, organizations, and the practice of sustainability. Ultimately, all organizational actions happen in places; understanding the motivations for sustainable or unsustainable organizational performance in those places makes all the difference.

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