SUB-THEME 6: NATURAL SCIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIORS

convenors:

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objective:

To explore how natural science assumptions and models of behavior can inform social science research on motivating sustainability initiatives in organizations.

description:

The purpose of this sub-theme track is to explore how natural science assumptions and models of behavior can inform social science research on motivating sustainability initiatives in organizations. Current paradigms governing organizational research focus almost entirely on assumptions and theories associated with social science models of behavior. Theories are built around the "rationally self-interested" individual motivated by selfish, short-term profit interests. However, this does not provide the entire view of humans and their behavior. Practically, when enterprises move towards new strategic initiatives, they permit only a partial and selective understanding of the underlying issues of the initiatives. Corporate sustainability is subject to these restrictions. "Corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility have been historically defined in restricted, instrumental, compliance-driven, and profit-oriented terms" (Shrivastava et al., 2013, p. 231). Often sustainability initiatives are framed in terms of the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997) involving the interaction of people, planet and profit. Given the normative undertones associated with this conception of sustainability, a productive dialogue involving business ethics and sustainability is necessary. To gain

a deeper understanding of what motivates sustainability behaviors is an important task for organizational scholars.

Reynolds and Ceranic (2009) recently observed that "the quantity and quality of knowledge that we have acquired about why individuals act ethically and unethically is incredibly low" (2). They go on to argue that empirical ethics researchers must make "significant changes in our overall approach to our research" in this area (3). (e.g., Reynolds, 2006; Salvador & Folger, 2009). This sub-track for ARTEM-OC explores the potential contribution to organizational ethics research in sustainability from a different lens to understanding human behavior: the natural sciences. Specifically, this track calls for submissions exploring insights from behavioral theories from the evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and thermodynamics at various levels of analysis. In essence, evolutionary approaches provide a broader set of underlying assumptions concerning human behavior that in turn can be utilized in business ethics and sustainability research.

The goal in this track in keeping with other recent efforts to incorporate biological evolution into the organizational sciences (Frederick, 2012; Ilies, Arvey & Bouchard, 2006; Nicholson & White, 2006; Pierce & White, 1999; Saad, 2006) is to inform sustainability research of novel ways to motivate managerial and organizational behavior towards ecological initiatives. If human nature is profoundly affected by the evolutionary history of our species (Nicholson, 1998), it is reasonable to expect that evolutionary theories can provide clues into behavior within organizations.

Some biologists have suggested that evolutionary theories provide opportunity for business ethicists to understand and thus "fortify the other-oriented tendencies of human beings—our tendencies toward sympathy, reciprocity, and loyalty—and to counter our destructive tendencies, such as within-group violence and cheating" (Flack & de Waal, 2004: 23). The relevance of biological perspectives (including both the neurosciences and evolutionary theory) to morality is rooted in the belief that ethics in some way develops from the evolutionary forces present in human life (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Fort, 2004). Evolutionary approaches provide the potential for a more integrated approach to understanding human behavior, in which socio-cultural phenomena are seen as arising from or influenced by natural selection pressures facing our ancient ancestors. Thus evolutionary approaches can take into account both nature and nurture. "Natural" perspectives on human behavior reflect both the social embeddedness and biological nature of individuals. Submissions to this track should seek to offer representative strategies for finding common ground between evolutionary and socio-cultural explanations of ethical/sustainable behavior in organizations.

keywords:

natural science, sustainability, business ethics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, moral foundations theory.

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