Justifying business responses to climate change: discursive strategies of similarity and difference

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Abstract. Despite increasing interest in corporate environmentalism, less attention has been directed to how corporations justify and defend their initiatives in this area. This is important in understanding how corporate environmentalism is legitimized in the face of crises, such as climate change, and the ongoing criticism of corporations' deleterious impacts upon the environment. Based on qualitative data from Australian corporations, we illustrate how organizations and managers employ a range of justifications for their activities in order to meet criticism and challenges. We identify different discursive legitimation strategies that are used by managers to deal with conflicts between justifications, and argue that this framework has broader implications in understanding the arguments that underpin social conflict over environmental sustainability.

Keywords: climate change, corporate environmentalism, justification, legitimation, discourse

1 Introduction

Growing awareness of the threat of climate change (IPCC, 2007) has prompted significant social and political debate. Business corporations are key actors in this process as major producers of greenhouse gases, as well as because of their potential role in the transition to a low-carbon society through the development of new technologies and business models. Indeed, the recent adoption of concepts such as 'corporate environmentalism' and 'ecological sustainability' (Jermier et al, 2006; Shrivastava, 1995) promote the idea that through improved efficiency and the development of new 'green' products and services, businesses can not only benefit their shareholders through improved returns, but also improve the environment and society though carbon emissions mitigation (Hoffman, 2007; Orsato, 2009).

Such a positive 'win–win' scenario is not without its critics, who argue that the underlying business logic of maximising shareholder value compromises environmental activities by mixing sustainable development with more 'legitimate' corporate activities focused on business growth (Banerjee, 2008; Luke, 2008; Prasad and Elmes, 2005). Critics therefore see environmental sustainability activities as 'green-washing' initiated by corporations that have 'hijacked' the environmental movement to further legitimize their business interests (Banerjee, 2008 page 64; Crane et al, 2008). These critics provide compelling arguments for how corporations subjugate the environment through the hegemony of a neoliberal discourse—both within the organization, as well as more broadly through political lobbying (Levy and Egan, 2003).

However, both advocates of corporate environmentalism and their critics describe a largely unitary view of the organization in which consensus of interest is assumed (Newton and Harte, 1997). Proponents tend to reduce organizational interests to utilitarian calculations, while critics view them as products of supraorganizational relations of power. Treating organizations as economically rational actors, or even as responding to different stakeholders' demands (Clark and Hebb, 2005), neglects the diverse and often paradoxical

interests and demands within the firm. There are therefore only limited accounts of the conflicts and disputes that occur within organizations around environmental initiatives, and the different justifications which individuals and groups may use in promoting or rejecting them. The position of corporations towards climate change involves multiple dimensions and occurs at different levels (Levy, 1997; Starik and Gordon, 1995). For instance, while much attention in business 'greening' has been directed to issues of firm competitiveness, behind this generic claim lie a complexity of justifications, including: issues of increased efficiency, social contribution, organizational and personal well-being, public reputation, and genuine concern for the environment and the future of humanity. A simple classification of business self-interest does not account for the role of individual and group agency which underlies organizational policies and practices.

In exploring corporate environmentalism, we consider the black and white picture of corporate initiatives as either 'authentic' or 'green-washing' to be overly simplistic (cf Fineman, 1997). We are interested in how companies and managers use different forms of justification in responding to criticism of their environmental initiatives. We suggest that investigating intra-organizational justifications used in legitimizing environmental agendas, as well as the discursive strategies through which conflicts between justifications are resolved, will help us to understand better how corporations defend their legitimacy as key economic institutions and shape community perceptions of their role and activities. Specifically, we ask what are the different justifications that corporations use in defending their environmental actions from critics; what discursive strategies are involved in resolving conflicts and tensions between different justifications; and how do these justifications contribute to the legitimation of corporate engagement with climate change?

To account for the diverse range of motivations and strategies within organizations, we engage with the conceptual matrix of Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2000, 2006), which investigates the way in which arguments are mobilized through engagement with plural common goods, such as, profit, welfare, inspiration, and the environment, that are used to criticize, justify, or legitimate an argument. Our analysis shows how organizational actors deploy a range of different, and often competing, common goods to justify and legitimate their activities. In seeking to overcome the incompatibility of these goods and to respond to criticism, discursive strategies are pragmatically employed to establish relations of equivalence and difference between the goods (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Our findings contribute to the debate on corporate environmentalism by unpacking the false dichotomies of ethics versus self-interest (cf Fineman, 1997; Pulver, 2007) and moral versus rational legitimacy (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2000).

2 Legitimation and justification of social goods
Aligned with the growing public concern about the potentially catastrophic effect of climate change, there has been an increase in awareness and critique of corporations treating the environment as an 'externality' (Stern et al, 2006). Climate change has created a reflexive understanding, a critical moment, that something has to change (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). For organizations to have authority to claim societal resources and pursue their goals in the presence of criticism, their values and activities need to be seen to be in correspondence with the societal values in which the corporation operates (Parsons, 1960; Scott, 1991). Corporate legitimacy is dependent on the congruence of the corporation with surrounding norms and values. Under attack for their 'negative' social contribution to the environment generally, and climate change in particular, corporations have quickly adopted corporate greening activities and environmentalism to defend their positions in society (Levy and Egan, 2003). Concepts such as corporate social responsibility, sustainability, or citizenship, can be seen as legitimation strategies to protect and increase their acceptance as actors in

society (Castelló and Lozano, 2011). This legitimacy to operate is thus a dialogical social construction that corporations undertake to manage social perceptions that their actions are appropriate (Suchman, 1995).

The possibility for corporations to (re)gain legitimacy when challenged or questioned has been postulated to be dependent on the result of two different types of strategic actions: (a) *pragmatic* or rational legitimacy, where society will ascribe legitimacy to corporations through exchange of valued goods and benefits; and (b) *moral* or nonrational legitimacy, where corporations gain legitimacy based on the judgment that their activities are the 'right thing to do' (Suchman, 1995; Weber, 1978). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) question this dichotomy or separation by suggesting that most public disputes rest on a notion of good and that there are plural social or common goods, each with their own logic or rationality of distribution (see also Walzer, 1983). Recognizing a plurality of goods, a market exchange is merely one way to respond (rationally) to critique, solve a public dispute, or gain public legitimacy for corporate activities. Any societal agreement, or continued legitimacy, is based on justifications of good or values recognized in a particular sphere (Walzer, 1983), or legitimate order (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), and suitable to the practical situation of the disagreement or challenge. The legitimacy of corporate activities in confronting (potential) criticism, is hence the outcome of a justification process.

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) draw various conceptions of the 'common good' from the classic works of political philosophy, considering the latter as grammatical enterprises that were intended to clarify and fix rules that are oriented toward justice. Their initial six 'orders of worth' were 'inspired', 'domestic', 'opinion', 'civic', 'market', and 'industrial' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006). This list of justifications is not exhaustive and is seen as empirically validated. Indeed, Boltanski and Thévenot later included two additional forms of justification: the order of 'project' worth, and the order of 'green' worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Thévenot et al, 2000). Actors within organizations and in the marketplace are considered by Boltanski and Thévenot (2000, page 213) to be "moral beings in the sense that they are capable of taking abstraction from their particularity in order to agree on external goods, which are universally listed and defined." Hence, managers are seen as able to draw upon social goods external to the corporation and marketplace.

As outlined in table 1, each of these justifications is based on different principles evaluating worth in a social situation of dispute or uncertainty, with different modes of evaluation and tests as to whether the justification is applicable and will lead to a common good. Each of these 'legitimate orders of worth' also relies on different forms of argumentative proofs supporting the superior principle (Thévenot, 2007, page 415). Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) emphasize local material situations, where people and things ground the justifications and reduce the uncertainty. In each of these 'worlds' particular human beings and objects have a stronger say and ability to reduce uncertainty. For example, the market world is commonly evaluated through price or cost, with competitiveness as the central test for the argument in relations built on exchange. The proof for the superior principle within the market is monetary and this can be applied in the local situation of goods and services, with customers and traders being qualified to evaluate the worth.

Boltanski and Thévenot aim to clarify the differences and points of convergence between the 'grammars' which are attached to different conceptions of the 'common good'. Thus they offer an approach to organizations "construed not as unified entities but as composite assemblages that include arrangements deriving from different worlds" (2006, page 18). These legitimate orders can be used as support to criticize activities or to provide arguments in response to criticism in interorganizational or intraorganizational disputes. In particular, for corporations to maintain legitimacy it is important that disputed public actions can be

Table 1. Empirically grounded orders of worth (sources: Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999, 2006; Thévenot et al, 2000).

	Market	Industrial	Civic	Domestic	Inspired	Opinion	Green
Mode of evaluation	Price, cost	Productivity, efficiency	Collective welfare	Reputation, loyalty, tradition, locality	Inspiration, creativity, grace	Renown, fame	Environmental friendliness
Test	Competitiveness	Reliability, planning	Equality, solidarity	Trustworthiness	Passion, enthusiasm	Popularity, recognition	Sustainability, renewability
Form of proof	Monetary	Statistic measurement	Demonstration of a just cause	Anecdotal, oral	Emotional involvement, myths	Public support	Ecological
Qualified objects	Market goods and services	Projects, methods, plans, investments	Rules, regulations, rights, policies	Rank, title, manner	The sublime	Media, brand, interviews	Environment
Qualified human beings	Customer, consumer, trader, seller	Engineers, professionals, experts	Collective persons and officials	Authority, boss, leader	Visionaries, creative beings	Celebrity, spokespersons, PR agents	Environmentalist
Elementary relation	Exchange	Functional	Solidarity	Trust	Passion	Recognition	Ecological

Note. The additional order of 'project' worth is not included in this table as this did not emerge to any significant extent in our data coding.

characterized as serving the common good *and* that the use of different orders of worth are practically relevant in the specific material context.

As suggested in table 1, different principles of goods are incompatible with one another, with each established through its own test as well as qualified objects and subjects. Ending a public dispute (beyond domination or violence) requires, then, either (a) an agreement about the appropriate order of worth or (b) a compromise between them (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; 2006). The former suggests that one legitimate worth is established as more relevant or practical, while the latter implies cooperation without clarification of the principles that are used in the criticism or dispute. The solidification of compromises is dependent on the establishment of equivalence between the different goods to make them compatible (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). The continuation of corporate activities in the face of criticism is, then, a justification process which balances the creation of equivalence and the compromise of differences between the social goods (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Corporate engagement with the issue of climate change is an area in which conflicting social goods and justification are likely to be particularly evident, given the role of corporations as major contributors to increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

3 Research design

Our study involved a discursive analysis of managerial depictions of environmental sustainability practices in large corporations based in Australia. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for richness of data to aid understanding the complex organizational motivations and practices of climate change response. In gathering our data we targeted large corporations from a diversity of industries which could provide different examples of formalized environmental practice and a broad range of justifications for these initiatives. For instance, how a resource and mining company engages with environmental sustainability is likely to be significantly different from the approach of a bank or insurance company. Despite these differences, we deliberately sought out organizations and managers with developed motivations to engage with sustainability and climate change. Against the backdrop of heated political debate over the pricing of carbon emissions in Australia, these companies viewed climate change as a key strategic issue given their exposure to associated regulatory, reputational, and physical risks and opportunities.

The empirical material presented in this paper is derived from semistructured interviews carried out during 2010 by the authors with thirty-six sustainability managers and consultants (see table 2). These included senior sustainability directors and consulting partners, as well as several mid-level sustainability practitioners. The respondents worked in major companies in manufacturing, transport, retail, communications, construction, energy, resources, and financial and professional business services. While these companies were significant national organizations, a number were also major global corporations—in these cases we focused on their Australian operations. Our focus on senior sustainability practitioners reflected their role as the key personnel charged with designing how their companies responded to the risks and opportunities of climate change. The interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes and were recorded and fully transcribed. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their company roles as environmental sustainability managers and consultants. The interviews explored the respondents' personal attitudes as well as organizational activities in relation to climate change. For most of those we interviewed, the topic of climate change and sustainability was a high personal and professional priority and the interviewees' demonstrated significant insight and reflexivity. We supplemented the interviews with a range of documentary data from the respondents' organizations. This included sustainability reports, emissions reporting, marketing materials and strategy documents, as well as submissions to government on a proposed carbon pollution reduction scheme.

Table 2: Details of interview respondents

Organization	Title	Age (years)
Airline A	Manager Climate Change Strategy	35–40
	Head of Environment and Climate Change	40–45
Airline B	Environment Manager	40–45
Banking and financial services	Advisor, Group Sustainability	35–40
Car manufacturer A	Energy & Environment Director	40–45
Car manufacturer B	Manager Environmental Policy	45–50
Construction and mining	Group Sustainability Manager	50–55
Energy utility	Manager, Sustainability Strategy	30–35
	Head of Sustainability	40–45
Engineering consultancy	Manager, Sustainability & Climate Change	35–40
	Senior Sustainability Consultant	25–30
Environmental consultancy	Leader Climate Change Practice	25–30
	Senior Associate	30–35
	Director	50–55
	Director	45–50
Environmental NGO	CEO	55–60
Food manufacturer	Health, Safety and Environment Manager	40–45
Funds management	Principle, Sustainable Funds Management	35–40
Accounting practice A	Associate Director, Sustainability and Climate Change Services	40–45
Accounting practice B	Partner, Climate Change and Sustainability Services	45–50
Infrastructure services	Environment Manager	25–30
Insurance company A	Sustainability Manager	40–45
Insurance company B	Culture & Reputation Executive	40–45
Management training organization	Program Director	35–40
Media company	Manager, Environment & Climate Change	50–55
	Assistant Manager, Environment & Climate Change	30–35
Property and commercial building A	Sustainability Manager	45–50
Property and commercial building B	Group Sustainability Manager	40–45
Property and real estate	Head of Sustainability	35–40
Resource and mining A	Business Improvement Director	40–45
	Environment & Climate Change Manager	45–50
Resource and mining B	Manager Climate and Energy Efficiency	50–55
Resource and mining C	Sustainability Adviser	30–35
Resource and mining D	Climate Change Advisor	45–50
Resource and mining E	Executive Director	50–55
Retailer	Group Manager, Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability	40–45

We began our data analysis by reading through the collected texts and identifying and coding expressed claims and rationales for climate change responses. We used the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo to facilitate multiple coding of text passages and explore the relationship between emergent thematic concepts. This initial analysis was inductive and aimed at highlighting reasons for engaging in sustainability activities more broadly and responding to climate change specifically. In this 'grounded'

analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we found a range of different reasons for engaging in sustainability which were coded and found to broadly parallel the conceptual matrix developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006). The engagement with their concept of 'legitimate orders' of worth thus flowed from our data analysis, rather than directing it.

In the second part of the data analysis we engaged further with Boltanski and Thévenot's framework. After recognizing a plurality of justifications for engaging in sustainability, we attempted to connect the analysis of the locally produced texts (little 'd' discourse) with the broader legitimate orders (as big 'D' Discourse) (Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002). Each legitimate order, or Discourse, was specified through its basic 'grammar' and terminology (see again table 1). For example, the market Discourse was analyzed in terms of concepts, such as 'new business opportunities' and 'competitive advantage'; subjects, such as 'customers' and 'shareholders'; and objects, such as new 'products' and 'services'. Our analysis thus highlighted a range of justifications to engage in corporate environmental activities, as well as criticism of these activities. Indeed, justifications were commonly used to critique corporate greening initiatives (eg, corporate activities were not 'green enough' or the corporation as an object was not qualified to evaluate the green order in the first place).

In the third part of our analysis we turned our attention to the dialectics between (a) conflicting plural Discourses of good and (b) the local discourses (and practices) and the broader Discourses of good. Here we explored how managers and documents linked incompatible Discourses of good and their different practical implications. For the former, the recognized incompatible goods are transcended to appear to be compatible in practice: that is, while the goods are different, the practices in which they are tested are the same. For the latter, the different practices are used to illustrate the equivalence of the different goods, that is, the goods themselves are claimed to overlap. Both these type of discursive strategies established a 'chain of equivalence' between radically different discursive formations resulting in market hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001).

The following empirical sections illustrate these discursive strategies by first outlining how managers recognized and separated the different social goods, and, second, how they established this 'chain of equivalence' between incompatible goods (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Forging a link between these diverse goods to avoid the obvious conflicts and criticism regarding sustainability initiatives was undertaken by situating them in the corporations' specific situations and practices. However, this required a fine balance since the justification process has to support the difference between the good of the environment and the market to avoid further criticism of, for example, green-washing, but simultaneously subvert these differences into an equivalence of values in order to legitimate market activities that are (often) detrimental to the environment.

4 Justifications for corporate environmentalism

In their efforts to justify and legitimize their organization's environmental practices, respondents made use of a range of different legitimate orders of worth. These included the more obvious market and industrial worlds which predominate within for-profit corporations, but also extended to many of the other worlds identified by Boltanski and Thevenot (see table 3). For example, while many of our respondents emphasized how sustainability activities would lead to competitive advantage (market) and more efficient production (industrial), simultaneously they might describe their passion for the environment (green or inspirational) and creating a better society (civic). Thus, both interviews and documents recognized plural goods as legitimate to pursue.

Reference to the order of *market* worth was pervasive throughout our data, with managers and organizations justifying and legitimizing environmental sustainability initiatives as responses to the business threats and opportunities posed by climate change. Organizations

Table 3: Justifications for corporate environmental sustainability

Order of worth	Definition	Examples
Market world	Justification based upon improved competitiveness, shareholder value, profitability.	" … the opportunity here is for us to build new businesses out of a new carbon economy, essentially, and we've done a lot of work on that. We've formed an industrial energy division to take advantage of those opportunities. We've got partnerships with a number of renewable energy technology providers" (sustainability manager, construction and mining company). "Businesses are businesses. If they can see benefit, if they can see value to the business in doing something they'll do it as long as it competes… We're no different" (manager, climate change strategy, airline).
Industrial world	Activities are justified through improved efficiency and productivity.	"It's about efficiency, resource efficiency, energy efficiency. That's what we would describe as the 'low hanging fruit'—reduce your energy and waste" (director, sustainability consultancy). "[W]e have a very rigorous management system with a whole lot of different databases and processes on how to manage internal energy use" (energy and environment director, car manufacturer).
Domestic world	Justification based on local traditions and loyalty to the group.	"It got a lot of pushback.… If you look at that profile of people within that business it was predominantly male, overweight, 50-plus, sceptics probably most of them. Nice guys but they were just more interested in going out and boozing with the insurance brokers than really thinking fundamentally about what this means to the business" (sustainability manager, insurance company). "I think most of them feel quite proud about that … when you look at the top four lead activities that drive engagement in our annual engagement survey, community and sustainability is always one of the top four" (advisor group sustainability, financial services).
World of inspiration (Green world)	Justification based on personal inspiration—environment engenders passion and emotion and provides a source of meaning and self-fulfilment.	"I want to be able to leave a legacy, it doesn't matter how small … so my kids' kids can still see the sun, can still see birds flying" (head of environment, airline). "The environment is the reason I get up in the mornings…I tell my kids, 'Daddy is going to save the planet'" (sustainability manager, food manufacturer).

Table 3 (continued).

World of opinion	Justification is based on being renowned or recognized. Corporate environmentalism contributes to recognition and support of the company.	"They are often held up as they're the 'green energy company' because all their marketing material is around 'green'. So you go to them if you want your green power because their ads are saying 'green'" (sustainability manager, energy company). "If we're going to talk the talk on sustainability we have to walk the talk as a company. So our factories should be showcases in terms of environmental efficiency" (sustainability manager, manufacturer).
Civic world	Justification for action based on the collective welfare of society; the corporation should attend to the needs of a broader range of stakeholders beyond shareholders.	"We help meet the needs of the present generation but we try to do it in a way that doesn't limit future options" (director, environmental consultancy). "We will play a pivotal role helping our customers, employees, and the broader community shift to this low-carbon economy" (financial services, 'climate change position statement').

thus were commonly portrayed as engaging with sustainability in order to gain competitive advantage, and sustainability measures were assessed in terms of their contribution to 'bottom-line' indicators such as profits and shareholder value. The market logic was also pronounced in the areas of 'green' products and the marketing of organizations as having a 'green' brand. In particular, sensing consumer concerns about climate change was viewed as important for selling products and services. Interviewees provided a range of examples of new products which they had developed to try to tap into these changes, such as 'low-carbon' beer, recyclable office equipment, and hybrid and electric cars. More generally, developing a corporate identity as a 'green' company was also seen as important from a marketing perspective. For example, sponsorship and engagement with NGOs and environment groups was often presented as promoting a favourable public image which would translate into improved sales and profits.

Closely related to such market justifications were references to the *industrial* world. Here activities were justified through the metrics of efficiency and productivity, qualified through planning and projects, and with the engineer as the credible subject (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). Within our data, the key practices associated with this order of worth related to improvements in energy efficiency and reductions in production costs, which were seen as legitimate internal justifications for sustainability practices. For instance, many of the managers we interviewed stressed their concern for efficiency, eliminating waste from the production process, and using less energy and resources. As one manager stated,

"I've a strong passion in efficiency and how you use resources because I think waste is the worst thing."

Practically, this involved developing detailed measurement systems around energy usage, both within the organization as well as across the broader supply chain.

However, beyond these conventional business justifications, our respondents also simultaneously made reference to other legitimate orders of worth. For example, the *domestic* world featured in discussion of organizational cultures, both in the context of resistance to environmental initiatives where sustainability was seen as impinging upon traditional sales or production cultures, as well as instances where sustainability activities were seen as building loyalty and trust between employees. Such instances of staff engagement with environmental sustainability also linked to the world of *inspiration*. Here, the environment was seen as a topic that engendered passion and emotion, providing a source of meaning beyond material rewards. Interviewees spoke of how the environment had featured in their upbringing and education, as well as in their home and family lives in terms of recreational activities, lifestyles, and consumption choices. Indeed, many of our interviewees illustrated a passion for the environment and strong emotional engagement with the issue of climate change, suggesting the environment is in some instances justification in itself as a separate *green* order of worth (Purser et al, 1995). This also included display of commitment to the environment beyond the organization. In particular, in the fight to maintain legitimacy respondents and documents displayed awareness of the importance of the world of *opinion*. Some organizations traded on the personality and celebrity of their environmental spokespeople and senior managers who had developed a public profile around climate change and promoted a positive image of their companies as environmental leaders.

Climate change initiatives and sustainability practices were also commonly justified and legitimized using grammar situated in the worth of the *civic* world, evaluated through the collective welfare of society and the nation. For example, the environment manager in a large media company argued that his company's environmental practices were an expression of the need to be "good corporate environmental citizens". Other managers included the discourse of 'giving back to society' and a concern for 'future generations'. In terms of this broader civic justification, a key practice was the potential for businesses to engage in

social advocacy for environmental sustainability. For example, several of the companies we examined were prominent in advocating greater government action on climate change and had established coalitions of business leaders to promote this issue.

While reference to these different orders of worth could be framed in ways that supported traditional corporate objectives of profitability and shareholder value, reference to the domestic, civic, and green worlds and the worlds of inspiration and opinion also highlighted conflicts with the market and industrial worlds. In particular, the conflict between the narrow well-being of the corporation and its shareholders, and that of the broader society and environment was a constant theme in our data to which both organizations and individuals devoted significant discursive resources. In particular, in responding to both external and internal criticism, companies sought to overcome criticism and legitimize their activities by discursively bridging the incompatible goods. In the next section we tease out the discursive strategies through which conflicting orders of worth were made to appear compatible.

5 Overcoming incompatibility: discursive strategies of legitimation

While business organizations and managers provided a range of justifications for their environmental sustainability activities, these were often the subject of further criticism. This could, for instance, reemphasize differences between social goods such as the market, environment, and society. In particular, the concept of 'green-washing', in which companies are perceived to be involved in a duplicitous use of public relations 'spin' and to misrepresent their environmental claims, was widely acknowledged by our respondents as a real possibility if green efforts were not carefully managed. A good example of internal criticism in this regard was outlined by one of our respondents when she described how her company's initiative to convert the company's car fleet from larger 'gas-guzzling' models to a well-known hybrid brand resulted in significant employee criticism because "it wasn't green enough or it was the car that you buy when you seem to be green, not when you really are." Hence, the environmental practice was criticised by employees for not being sufficiently environmentally friendly. In a similar manner, external criticism could come from NGOs and environmental groups which argued that corporate environmental responses were not as sustainable as they claimed, or that the corporation was not qualified to evaluate this order of worth.

Responding to this criticism then required further justification. Indeed, these more complex forms of justification involved a balance of difference and equivalence between different orders of worth (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). This was primarily a pragmatic activity undertaken in response to different forms of criticism. Indeed, one interviewee outlined the basic pragmatism behind these activities when he stated that "the best thing a business could do for the environment would be to shut down, but that's clearly not a viable option." In the next section we outline four different discursive strategies of legitimation which we identified in our data. We outline the basic forms of each of these strategies and their potential consequences for the justification of corporate environmental sustainability more broadly (see table 4).

5.1 Combining justifications in practice

The first legitimation strategy we identified was based on two different justifications that were *combined* in one single practice. Here, the *different* social goods were recognized, but the *same* practice addresses them both. In these situations the practice was evaluated according to both orders of worth and it was claimed by the respondents to satisfy the tests of both worlds [eg, by being *both* environmentally more friendly (green) and helping to increase efficiency (industrial), or making the firm more competitive (market)]. This was a strategy that was relatively common within our data as managers and company documents

Table 4: Corporate legitimation strategies in responding to criticism

Discursive strategy	Definition	Example
Combining	Two justifications provided in one practice and evaluated according to both orders of worth.	An organizational practice which is both environmentally friendly (green) and increases efficiency (industrial) or improves profitability (market): eg, reducing production waste, recycling materials, using natural lighting.
Collapsing	Two justifications provided in one practice evaluated primarily according to one order of worth.	An organizational practice where one justification is largely subsumed by another: eg, using staff training in climate change awareness to sell more products or appeal better to customers (market subsumes green).
Coupling	Two justifications bound together within two practices and evaluated simultaneously.	Two organizational practices where justifications are interrelated: eg, public policy advocacy for renewable energy (civic/green), and investment in renewable technologies (market).
Connecting	Two (or more) justifications and practices later connected to suggest similarities.	Multiple organizational practices linked at a later stage of evaluation: eg, efficiency improvement (industrial/green) and sustainability reporting (opinion/green).

often responded to criticism of their activities with the retort of a 'win–win' outcome for both the company and the environment. For example, sustainability managers in a major airline emphasised how, in response to criticism of the airline industry's growing carbon footprint, their company was exploring new algal-based fuels which would result in less environmentally damaging emissions but also contribute to significant efficiency gains and reduced fuel costs. Similarly, the sustainability advisor in a bank explained how producing an interest free 'green' loan for customers highlighted the bank's tangible commitment to responding to climate change. The recipients of the interest-free loans could spend the money on any activity evaluated as 'green' by the government. However, this practice was seen as also fulfilling the test of the market since 30% of the people who walked into the bank to take out the loan were new customers.

Beyond the pairing of market and green justifications, many other combinations were evident within a single practice. These might include the combination of inspiration and industrial worlds (eg, green office programs resulting in employee passion and innovation); opinion and market (eg, developing a corporate brand as a 'green' company, which increases sales); or civic and green (eg, advocating as a corporate citizen for action on climate change in the media and with government). While the strategy of combining different worlds appeared to solve the dilemma of criticism, this was, of course, at best a temporary settlement which could be subject to further criticism in terms of whether the specific practice adequately satisfied either or both of the different orders of worth.

5.2 Collapsing justifications in practice

Another legitimation strategy, *collapsing*, occurred where two justifications were provided in one practice which was subsequently evaluated in only one world. Here, legitimation rested on the ability of those justifying the practice to satisfy the order of worth deemed most important for the particular critic. Thus, while the differences of goods were invoked, the value of the environment was displaced in favour of the market: that is, it is possible

to evaluate both in the market. Hence, unlike the strategy of combining where the valued goods were *different*, in collapsing the value of the environment is repositioned within the market to be the *equivalent* of the market good. For example, a sustainability manager in an insurance company described how she had developed a climate change training programme for insurance brokers:

"Basically, what we said to them was to scare the life out of the [clients] in terms of their increased risk to get them to insure properly … so basically we used climate change as an excuse to sell more insurance to our clients."

In this case, the training practice was justified by referring both to an order of green worth in responding to climate change, and to the market order in selling more insurance. However, the practice was tested in terms of its contribution to the market order in terms of increased profit. As highlighted in this case, the actors draw on the advantage of one line of argument (eg, the green worth of sustainability) to support another (the market worth of competitiveness).

However, the strategy of collapsing justifications is risky since such a claim can easily be criticized by other actors for the duplicity inherent in claiming an additional order of worth. So, for example, involving the green order of worth in a practice which is primarily justified as contributing to profitability and firm competitiveness, can lead to criticism from others of tokenism and 'green-washing' (Newton and Harte, 1997). Making the goods the same is thus open to criticism both from a different good (since they are now collapsed into one) as well as from within the market world if the 'token' green activities are not properly linked to profits. Indeed, several of our respondents referred to the more general phenomenon of the discounting of the worth of the environment in favour of the market in circumstances where corporate profits were squeezed and the firm was under pressure to cut costs on 'noncore' activities.

5.3 Coupling justifications in practice

Beyond the linking of different goods in the same practice, the potential for different practices to be linked with overlapping goods highlights the potential for other forms of legitimation. Here, two practices with different aims and outcomes could be linked to overlapping goods used in the evaluation of the practices. For example, the strategy of *coupling* occurred where two justifications were tightly bound in time and space within two practices which were evaluated simultaneously. In these circumstances, the two practices were dependent on each other's justifications. For example, the sustainability manager in an energy company outlined how her company was a strong advocate for government regulation of carbon emissions and establishing a price on carbon, while also investing in renewable energy sources such as wind farms, and geothermal and solar power. In this case, the practices of public advocacy and investment in renewable power were coupled but also reliant on the different justifications of both the civic and market worlds (eg, the collective welfare of society and a more profitable and competitive energy utility). While the two practices were different, the justification established a chain of equivalence between the two goods by coupling them in time and space as interdependent.

Importantly, this legitimation strategy is open to further criticism from either world through argumentation that the practices are not, or should not be, dependent on each other (eg, 'one should protect the environment, even if it will cost a bit of money', or 'it is the government, not the corporation, that should look out for the environment'). Indeed, the difficulty of establishing a link between social goods in evaluating practices was exemplified in one of the environmental consultancies we studied, where a director explained how they had established an internal ethics committee to respond to employee criticism concerning working with companies with a dubious environmental record. The establishment of the ethics committee was explicitly linked to the consultancy's practices of engaging in 'socially responsible' client

work and involved coupling practices both in market and in green justifications. However, further employee criticism of the ethics committee's decision to work for one particular client highlighted the differences of the goods through the lack of equivalence between being competitive as a business and green enough for their environmentally conscious employees.

5.4 Connecting justifications in practice

The fourth discursive strategy involved multiple practices which were developed independently from each other and then *connected* in terms of their later justification. Unlike coupling, where different practices were dependent on each other in addressing justifications based on multiple common goods, connected practices were developed separately and later connected to support or bolster an initiative. In connecting practices, reference to different orders of worth were subsumed into a more singular and later developed justification.

A good example of the connecting of different practices and justifications in this way was sustainability reporting. Here, a dispersed range of practices and justifications was connected within the sustainability report to display a unity or equivalence between them. Practices which were often developed in separate parts of the organization were described in these reports as a coherent set of activities and justified largely in relation to minimizing environmental harm (the 'green' order of worth), or the promotion of the company as an environmental leader (the world of 'opinion'). This process was highlighted by the environment director in a car manufacturer when he criticized his own company for connecting practices of improving production efficiency and energy saving with the writing of sustainability reports by the marketing department. Although he argued that the company's efficiency initiatives provided valid measurements and examples of sustainability, the director questioned the use of sustainability reports:

"We don't want to spend money on sustainability reports! What good do they do? [Sustainability] is about having an impact."

In this case, the separate developed practices associated with energy efficiency, based on an industrial justification, provided the basis for much of the company's sustainability reporting, and were justified in relation to the world of opinion (eg, the company gains a public profile for sustainability through its public reporting).

Indeed, this discursive strategy provides space for subsequent criticism from actors and groups who are involved in the different practices that are later connected. In the example above, the sustainability manager, while involved both in efficiency improvement and in sustainability reporting, relied more heavily on the order of 'industrial' worth, while downplaying justifications of public opinion. However, it is entirely likely that different forms of justification for these connected practices would be provided by the marketing department. Hence, connecting the different practices in their justifications is a simplification of the organizational space in order to convey a coherent message to internal and external actors. Involved actors often recognize this complexity and judge such 'hypocrisy' harshly. Not surprisingly, the justification of corporate environmental practices was often presented as highly contested between different functional groups within the corporation based on occupational allegiances to differing orders of worth.

6 Implications and conclusion

In this paper we have argued that corporations' claims to environmental sustainability are often disputed. In response to criticism from within and outside the organization, managers develop complex justifications for their activities. While Boltanski and Thévenot (1999; 2006) identify the generic importance of compromise in resolving tensions between different orders of worth, our research demonstrates how attempting to overcome these tensions is a complex and ongoing activity. While the four discursive strategies of combining, collapsing,

coupling, and connecting provided some response to criticism of corporate environmental practice, these were at best temporary resolutions. Indeed, these strategies opened the door to further criticism from internal and external actors who could point to instances where either the claimed orders of worth were not satisfied, or where alternative orders of worth were seen as more important.

While the process of justification and criticism is an ongoing phenomenon in socially contested contexts, such as corporate engagement with climate change, our research suggests that attempts by managers and companies to promote a similarity between distinct orders of worth is more likely to promote further criticism than are discursive strategies which acknowledge these differences. Hence, combining and coupling maintained the distinction between different social orders of worth while uniting them within the same or interdependent practices. While still subject to further criticism, in terms of the extent to which these different social goods were achieved in practice, the form of criticism was qualitatively different from that which was directed at attempts to merge or subsume the environment within other worlds. So, for example, the strategies of collapsing and connecting opened managers and corporations up to a more fundamental critique in which they sought to dominate one world (eg, the environment) within another (typically, the market or industrial world). Hence, strategies aimed at legitimating corporate environmental practice appear more successful where they acknowledge differences between social goods (combining and coupling), rather than their sameness (collapsing and connecting).

This logic is clearly spelled out by Laclau and Mouffe (2001, page 128) when they suggest that "two terms, to be equivalent, must be different—otherwise, there would be a simple identity." Simply collapsing justifications or connecting social goods can easily be criticized for subsuming and failing to address either of the claimed orders of worth. So the mixing of social goods, such as the market, environment, or civic good, can be easily criticized upon the idea that the corporation has legally defined fiduciary responsibilities to its shareholders which do not extend to broader social or environmental concerns (Devinney, 2009). As one of our respondents noted, "when you talk about a corporation's responsibility, that is by law defined as shareholder interest." Alternatively, making the environment and the market equivalent can just as easily be criticized as green-washing. Hence, as one of our respondents commented of companies who proclaimed their social and environmental worth, "Don't fiddle with the peripheries. You dig big holes in the ground and export coal and you fund the Opera House. It's just ridiculous!" The 'spirit of capitalism' is thus the ability to incorporate, rather than remove, differences (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The legitimation of corporations is therefore dependent on 'borrowing' legitimizing principles external to the world of the market, while simultaneously establishing a difference and equivalence between the worlds in order to answer the very critique of the expansion of the market (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Legitimation strategies are thus not conscious strategies for capitalist domination but, rather, a moral *and* rational response to critique of corporate activities.

Our study suggests further areas for exploring the role of justification and legitimacy in corporate environmentalism. For instance, while we deliberately focused on companies and sustainability specialists who are progressive in their attitudes about climate change and the environment, other managers and companies may well respond differently. Research into corporations which are more sceptical about the environment, as well as other managerial functions and geographic contexts, may well reveal different patterns of justification. The role of different discursive strategies of legitimation also appears relevant to environmental conflicts more broadly. For example, the current debate over mitigating greenhouse gas emissions through the 'pricing' of carbon and carbon taxes is rich in appeals to civic, green, and market justifications. Similarly, conflict over biodiversity, and the allocation of scarce natural resources, often involve appeals to domestic orders of worth symbolised in local

communities with long histories of custodianship, balanced against broader civic, green, or market justifications. These examples provide rich empirical sites for the further investigation of justification as well as of the different legitimation strategies that are utilised by different stakeholders in promoting and arguing their case. Practical implications of such research could include a better understanding of the basis of each party's claims as well as the change and stakeholder management strategies that are most effective in winning such contentious social conflicts.

While we have stressed the multiple justifications that are drawn upon within business, it is evident from the empirical material that there is indeed a hierarchy of worth within the modern corporation, with the market order being the lodestar that is most often followed. However, we also found situations where sustainability activities were performed without being evaluated solely in terms of competitiveness or efficiency. Facing the threat of climate change therefore appears also to offer possibilities for agreements around organizational activities based on other justifications, such as solidarity, passion, and sustainability. Better understanding of the complex social construction of corporate environmentalism can hopefully contribute to improved advocacy for these broader social orders of worth. These ongoing negotiations and struggles within organizations suggest that the hegemonic legitimation of the market can be challenged.

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