

The Transformation Paradox of Emerging Fields

A Bourdieusian Approach to
the Bibliometric Study of Sustainability Science

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BIBLIOTEKSHÖGSKOLAN
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Abstract

How can a field that promotes transformation and interdisciplinarity simultaneously reproduce the academic hierarchies it seeks to transcend? This thesis examines sustainability science as an emerging interdisciplinary field, mobilising Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to analyse how symbolic capital, legitimacy, and recognition become structured as durable institutional forms during field formation.

Drawing on four complementary studies, the thesis traces three decades of intellectual and institutional development in sustainability science through an analytical framework combining bibliometric mapping, network analysis, and interpretive analysis of editorial discourse. It demonstrates how symbolic reward structures—such as journal hierarchies, editorial networks, and citation practices—do not function as neutral measures of scholarly contribution, but act as instruments in ongoing struggles over field boundaries and legitimate participation.

The thesis employs a reflexive multimethod design to map sustainability science across multiple analytical dimensions, integrating bibliometric analysis, social network analysis (SNA), geometric data analysis (GDA), and qualitative content analysis (QCA). Using citation and co-authorship patterns, published editorials, and the composition of editorial boards in a selected set of journals central to sustainability science, the thesis reconstructs the field's intellectual and social organisation, tracing how recognition structures crystallise into durable institutional forms. The analysis identifies three historical phases—Foundation (1993–2002), Introspection (2003–2012), and Diversification (2013–2022)—each marked by shifts in epistemic orientation and the redistribution of symbolic capital. Editorial discourse functions as a central site of symbolic struggle, where competing visions of sustainability science—and rival claims to definitional authority—are articulated and contested.

The thesis reframes the empirical analysis through field-theoretical concepts, foregrounding recognition, hierarchy, and symbolic power. By treating bibliometric indicators not merely as analytical tools but as socially embedded instruments of valuation, the study contributes to library and information science (LIS)—particularly scientometrics, bibliometrics, and scholarly communication—while engaging sociological perspectives on science. The findings provide a critical account of how emerging interdisciplinary fields institutionalise authority while reproducing academic stratification—often in tension with their programmatic commitments to transdisciplinarity and post-normal science.

Keywords: Bibliometrics; Sustainability science; Bourdieu; Scholarly communication

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