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Rationality, experiences, or identity work? Sensemaking of emotionally tense experiences of organizational sustainability

Abstract

Purpose – *Although emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability have been identified, little is known about how employees aim to resolve such situations. This study aimed to explore how employees use sensemaking to resolve emotionally tense situations concerning organizational sustainability.*

Design/methodology/approach – *We studied a case in which, while employees attached positive emotions to organizational sustainability, external stakeholders viewed it negatively. Specifically, we analysed how employees used sensemaking to resolve such tense experiences, and how this sensemaking eventually influenced their actions. To this end, we interviewed 25 employees at an energy company who had experience participating in its sustainability work.*

Findings – *The analysis revealed three sensemaking mechanisms for resolving emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability caused by discrepancies between external reputation and internal personal experience: rational sensemaking, experiential sensemaking, and identity work. The complexity of sensemaking was reflected in the mixed use of these three mechanisms, as employees constantly moved from one to another.*

Originality – *This study demonstrates employees' tendency to defend their positive emotions about their organization's sustainability in tense situations. It further provides insights into related sensemaking processes and shows how they can result in different levels of action.*

Keywords *Employees, Emotions, Organizational sustainability, Sensemaking, Tensions*

Introduction

As sustainability awareness has increased, both cognitive and emotional reactions to sustainability challenges have become increasingly apparent. Particularly climate stress has recently been associated with multiple emotions, such as fear and anger. Thus, sustainability is increasingly framed as an emotional phenomenon. In the organizational context, sustainability is inherently an emotionally laden phenomenon and is often portrayed in emotional terms (Andersson and Bateman, 2000). Research has shown that employees attach both positive and negative emotions to organizational sustainability, depending on the sustainability issue involved (Fineman, 1996; Russell and Ashkanasy, 2007; Wright and Nyberg, 2012; Onkila, 2015). Employees associate self-conscious emotions, such as pride and shame, with sustainability initiatives and their outcomes in the organization (Morales-Raya *et al.*, 2019).

Although sustainability has been identified as an emotionally laden phenomenon, research on employees' emotions regarding sustainability has only recently emerged (e.g., Onkila, 2015; Blomfield *et al.*, 2016). Studies have shown that sustainability in the workplace is emotionally important to employees and that employee participation triggers emotional responses (Rupp *et al.*, 2006; Voronov and Vince, 2012). Emotions may be triggered by certain responses to sustainability events (Harvey *et al.*, 2017) and may contribute to organizational actions towards sustainability (Highhouse *et al.*, 2009). Research has revealed the multiplicity of emotions

related to organizational sustainability and their consequences (e.g., Russell and Ashkanasy, 2007; Ditlev-Simonsen, 2015) and the ways in which these emotions influence sustainability actions within organizations (e.g., Carrus *et al*., 2008). However, while tensions and the attachment of opposite emotions to sustainability have been identified (Wright and Nyberg, 2012; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), little is known about the ways in which employees aim to resolve emotionally tense situations and the consequences of such solutions for their engagement in sustainability action.

To fill this knowledge gap, we conducted a micro-level study of an energy company whose employees describe emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability between themselves and external stakeholders. Whereas the former attach positive emotions, such as pride, to their employer's sustainability performance, the latter perceive it negatively, and the company generally has a poor sustainability reputation, of which the firm's employees are aware. Specifically, we analysed how employees use sensemaking to resolve such tense experiences and how this sensemaking eventually influences their actions. We aimed to answer the following research question: *How do employees use sensemaking to resolve emotionally tense situations concerning organizational sustainability?* We interviewed 25 employees who had experience participating in the employer's sustainability work.

This study contributes to the literature by identifying various sensemaking mechanisms for resolving emotional tensions caused by discrepancies between external reputation and personal experience. Our results provide insights into the complexity of such sensemaking, as indicated by the mixed use of its various types. The study also contributes to the literature on emotions related to organizational sustainability by showing how such sensemaking influences employees' sustainability actions.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. We first review the literature on the meanings of emotions related to sustainability within organizations. We then introduce our sensemaking approach and particularly its emotional features. Subsequently, we describe our data collection and analysis. Next, we report our findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing our findings and comparing them with the literature.

Emotions related to organizational sustainability

Sustainability in organizations is a multidimensional topic with multiple interpretations. We define organizational sustainability according to Dahlsrud's (2008) analysis, which includes an organization's environmental impacts, the relationships between business and society, financial aspects, and interactions with stakeholders. Furthermore, following Dahlsrud (2008), we consider sustainability actions voluntary rather than required by law.

Emotions in organizations are a complex phenomenon. They appear to be essentially social, emerging within social collectives (Rafaeli and Worline, 2001). Organizational-level outcomes and decision-making are essentially affected by employees' emotions (Huy, 2011; Lebel, 2017; Rothman and Melwani, 2017). Due to its complexity, the concept of emotions is difficult to define, and there is no single, accurate definition (Scarantino, 2012). Based on earlier definitions, we define emotions as physical states associated with neurophysiological changes

related to thoughts, behavioural responses, and a degree of pleasure or displeasure (Ekman and Davidson, 1994; Damasio, 1998; Cabanac, 2002).

Research has shown that organizational sustainability is associated with both positive and negative emotions. Employees' perceptions of organizational sustainability trigger not only behavioural and attitudinal responses but also emotional responses (Rupp *et al.*, 2006). Emotional responses range from utterly positive emotions, such as pride, joy, and satisfaction, to negative emotions, such as fear, shame, cynicism, and irritation (Russell and Ashkanasy, 2007; Onkila, 2015), and vary depending on employee perceptions and experiences of organizational sustainability (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2018).

Multiple studies have shown that positive experiences of organizational sustainability, especially feelings of pride, are an important source of employees' affective commitment to the employer (e.g., Ditlev-Simonsen, 2015). Such feelings of pride arise especially as a result of actions and policies aimed at improving sustainability performance and responsibility towards stakeholders (McNamara *et al.*, 2017; El Akremi *et al.*, 2018), sustainability initiatives and accomplishments (Potoski and Callery, 2018), and a climate promoting sustainability within an organization (Rodell *et al.*, 2017). However, studies have also highlighted the complexity of the relationships between employees' perceptions and experiences of sustainability and their pride and affective commitment. Such relationships are influenced by multiple mediating factors, such as leadership styles (Allen *et al.*, 2017), job satisfaction, and employees' attitudes (Rahman *et al.*, 2016).

Prior research has further shown that emotions towards organizational sustainability eventually influence how sustainability is spoken of and how organizational members take sustainability actions. Fineman (1996) showed that managers use emotion-related arguments to justify their attitudes towards an organization's actions (or lack thereof) to go green. Wright and Nyberg (2012) demonstrated that societal emotions impact organizational discourses on climate change. Besides the way in which sustainability is spoken of, emotions also influence concrete actions. Positive emotions, such as pride, may offer solid ground for organizational sustainability, while negative emotions, such as shame, may hinder sustainability improvements (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2018). Sekerka and Stimel (2012) proposed a model for environmental sustainability decision-making and showed that negative emotions may hinder and positive emotions may promote sustainability action. On the other hand, an eagerness to avoid negative emotions, such as shame, may also increase employees' desire to engage in sustainability action (Carrus *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, emotions attached to sustainability influence corporate decision-making. Muller *et al.* (2014) showed that organizational members' collective empathy is a basis for managerial decision-making and organizational approaches to corporate philanthropy. Moreover, emotions influence sustainability actions in wider contexts. Fontana *et al.* (2021) studied negative emotions (fear and anger) in apparel supply chains in Bangladesh and Pakistan after the Rana Plaza incident, the collapse of garment factory. The authors found that the incident resulted in market and social tensions caused by buyers', workers', and societies' demand for more attention to labourers' working conditions. These tensions led to different sustainability actions in the two countries. In one country, limited action was taken because the economic burden of sustainability initiatives and the

likelihood of unrest among employees were considered too high, while in another country, sustainability was considered to offer competitive advantages in the markets.

Recent research has demonstrated that sustainability-related emotional outcomes are not static but give rise to tensions and require negotiations (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). When such tense situations arise, organizations employ strategies to manage them (Daddi *et al.*, 2019). Such strategies may involve reconciling conflicting goals, making decisions, or balancing competing aims (Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). While this tendency to solve tensions on the organizational level has been shown, the strategies for solving emotionally laden tensions on the individual level are still poorly understood. It remains unknown how employees react to and aim to resolve emotionally tense situations and what this implies for their actions for sustainability. This understanding is crucial, since emotional experiences of organizational sustainability can powerfully explain how employees act (or do not act) for sustainability.

Sensemaking approaches to emotional tensions

Emotionally tense experiences trigger sensemaking. Sensemaking is usually thought to be triggered by actions or circumstances whose meaning is unclear or of which one has conflicting expectations (Maguire *et al.*, 2011). With sensemaking, people give meaning to experiences (Weick, 1995).

Weick (1993, 1995) introduced the concept of sensemaking to organizational studies to explore how organizations cope with uncertain or ambiguous situations. Sensemaking refers to the way in which members of an organization continuously construct intersubjective realities through communication and interaction (Weick, 1995). It is triggered when an event causes an individual to challenge a previous understanding under new circumstances and gives rise to a new, ambiguous phenomenon (Maguire *et al.*, 2011). For example, emotionally tense views on organizational sustainability are seen as triggering a process in which many agents act and react to each other (Nijhof and Jeurissen, 2006), which may cause confusion (Dahlsrud, 2008; Ziek, 2009) and high equivocality (Weick, 1995). Such situations in organizations lack clarity and consistency and lead to a search for meaning because of too much or too equivocal information (van der Heijden *et al.*, 2010).

Emotions are an essential part of sensemaking processes at both the individual and collective levels (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). They play a critical role in triggering sensemaking (Maitlis and Christanson, 2014) and in individuals' participation in it (Schmidt and Weiner, 1988). Steigenberger (2015) suggested that emotions are both an input and an outcome of sensemaking processes and shape the content and motivational accounts of sensemaking.

Both positive and negative emotions serve as stimuli for sensemaking processes (Weick, 1993, 1995; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Sensemaking may take on multiple forms. For example, narratives help employees take account of their own experiences, which are selected, organized, and interwoven to answer questions about their individual actions (Riessman, 1993). Identity work is another form of sensemaking (Weick, 1993). Sensemaking can also influence how individuals act in conflicting and tense situations (Maitlis, 2005).

Materials and methods

Research context

This was a case study of a northern European energy company. This company employs thousands of people, and its operations encompass the generation, distribution, and sale of electricity and heat, along with related expert services. It is a public company owned by its stockholders. This firm provides an interesting research context for two main reasons. One reason is its relatively bad public reputation. The other reason is its strong focus on developing organizational sustainability.

The company's bad reputation has frequently been discussed through various channels. For years, it has received low scores in corporate reputation surveys conducted in the country in which it is based. Its poor reputation is also evident in the official ratings of ESPI Rating, which conducts market analyses in the UK, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, and the Baltic countries. The company's ratings are well below the industry average. One year, it was even voted in the top five most hated companies in its country. This bad reputation extends to external stakeholders' perceptions of its sustainability approach.

On the other hand, the company has a broad background in and a strong demand for sustainability. The sustainability work in the company is directed by a sustainability director, who answers to the board of directors. A member of the board handles sustainability issues, which are embedded in its corporate strategy. The company has published environmental and sustainability reports for a long time and is nationally recognized for its sustainability reporting. It participates in multiple sustainability projects, and some of its employees are active members of various sustainability networks. The company is also listed in several sustainability indexes (e.g., the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index and the Carbon Disclosure Leadership Index). Nevertheless, it continues to face evolving sustainability requirements due to the significant environmental impacts of the energy industry.

Research material

This study focused on how employees of the case company make sense of emotionally tense experiences related to organizational sustainability. We adopted the constructionist and interpretative research approach (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Weick, 1995), which characterizes sensemaking studies (e.g., van der Heijden *et al.*, 2010).

The research material consisted of qualitative, in-depth interviews with employees. All interviews focused on the meaning of sustainability in the organization and encompassed four themes: a description of the interviewee's job, views on sustainability in the company, internal sustainability management and communication, and external sustainability management and communication. All topics were openly discussed from the viewpoint of the employees' daily work.

A total of 25 people were interviewed. The interviews lasted from 19 to 65 minutes. The interview data are summarized in Table I in the Appendix. The interviewees were selected in cooperation with company representatives. The researchers established selection criteria according to which company representatives named individuals for the interviews. To ensure

that the interviewees understood the firm's sustainability approach, the focus was on employees with knowledge and experience of sustainability in the company. The interviews included individuals from two levels of the organizational hierarchy: nine managers (e.g., the heads of finance, human resources, and communications) and 16 experts (e.g., environmental engineers, environmental health and safety managers, and business development managers). Our selection criteria excluded shop floor employees from the interviews.

Interview data analysis

We adopted Gioia *et al.*'s (2013) four-stage data analysis to move from data to theoretical interpretations and used Atlas.ti for the analysis. Although here we describe it as a series of chronological stages, the analysis moved back and forth between the stages and the literature and was thus an iterative process. The stages are detailed below and described in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Emotionally tense experience in the data

Based on Gioia *et al.* (2013), the first stage encompassed the development of detailed descriptions. First, we identified parts of the interviews related to the interviewees' emotionally tense experiences. We then analysed each part separately, based on how sustainability was approached and connected to emotions. Next, we compared these parts and compiled a list of first-order concepts. We were thus able to identify differences in how tension was described and how interviewees reacted to it, as well as differences in terminology and intensity, sources of interaction, and actions for sustainability.

In the second stage, we compared the coded sections for each first-order concept, especially the ways in which emotions were related to emotionally tense experiences. We identified differences in the descriptions of emotions, the sensemaking mechanisms employed to resolve tensions, the sources from which views of negative sustainability perceptions were derived, the intensity of the terminology used to describe tensions, and engagement in sustainability while making sense of tensions. Based on this, we identified second-order concepts to summarize the above mentioned differences. It was apparent in the empirical data that expressions of pride and satisfaction were especially related to the resolution of tense experiences.

In the third stage, we integrated the previous two stages of the analysis with the theory of sensemaking to identify sensemaking mechanisms described in the literature. We first noted that the empirical findings pointed to three emotionally laden categories: defending pride, maintaining pride, and settling with satisfaction. This helped us identify how sensemaking was used in the three categories and included going back and forth between the empirical data and sensemaking literature. In this phase, we explored the characteristics of each category based on the second-order concepts, emotional aspects, the level of tension, and indications of employee action. We continued going back and forth between our empirical data, key themes, and the literature. Thus, we identified three sensemaking mechanisms for resolving and explaining the emotionally tense experiences: rational sensemaking, experiential sensemaking, and identity work.

Sensemaking for resolving emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability

Emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability trigger sensemaking. In the studied case, the interviewees highlighted the importance of sustainability in their organization and used positive, emotionally laden expressions signifying pride and satisfaction. All interviewees were aware of the firm's poor sustainability reputation and employed multiple types of sensemaking, such as rationality and counterarguments, narratives, and identity work, to refute these perceptions. Notably, almost all interviewees employed all three types of sensemaking— rational sensemaking, experiential sensemaking, and identity work—while discussing sustainability, constantly moving from one type to another.

Resolution through rational sensemaking

Rational sensemaking was used to question negative external perceptions and thus resolve emotionally ambivalent experiences. This allowed the interviewees to defend their pride in organizational sustainability. They deployed rational arguments, including facts and figures, and stressed the firm's sustainability achievements. This suggests deliberate and cognitive reasoning. Rational sensemaking was triggered when employees experienced a pronounced mismatch between their feelings of pride and external stakeholders' negative perceptions. The interviewees expressed the need to communicate more extensively on sustainability and spread "reliable", "black-and-white information" (Interview 16). They suggested that resolving the mismatch required honest external communication that could allay external suspicions. The following interview extract exemplifies how the interviewees resolved the tension by stressing facts, figures, and achievements, thus defending their pride:

> Then, of course, the important thing above all is that it's the kind of company you can be proud of. It is said that the relationship with the media in particular has been difficult, and it's not often that you see anything positive written about [name of the company] in the press. It's certainly something like with this sustainability issue, that it's done in such a way that, regardless of what is written about it with a negative tone, you know the good that we do, and it's through those examples that we can still be proud of our employer. (Interview 7)

Rational sensemaking was employed particularly in cases in which the experienced tension was particularly high. This was reflected in the use of extreme terms and expressions when contrasting self-experienced pride with the hostility of external stakeholders. An interviewee even suggested that external stakeholders considered the company evil (Interview 8). According to the interviewees, this external negativity was mainly based on two sources: general perceptions of the "bad public image of the company" and more concrete media discussions and face-to-face conversations. The following extract exemplifies how such intensity was constructed using emotionally charged expressions, such as "bad guy," "cheating," "disliking," and "lying":

> When talking about social responsibility, we are seen as a sort of bad guy … we're not particularly liked. We're not attractive, and even when we do good, the first thought is that we're up to something—that we're still cheating. (Interview 8)

Rational sensemaking also had implications for employees' actions towards sustainability, increasing their engagement in sustainability, as well as their awareness of the need for

changes. The interviewees described concrete actions that needed to be taken to improve the company's negative image. They suggested that the company needed to be more proactive in addressing any complaints, improving its social and economic sustainability performance, and engaging with stakeholders in face-to-face meetings to present specific facts and figures. However, many interviewees stated that although this was already being done, external stakeholders were not responsive to their communication. The following interview extract exemplifies how such change agency was expressed:

> So, it might be worth focusing on what we have. And of course, there needs to be a focus on developing new things and not just be in the position of being blamed. In other words, important things also include this world of reality [sustainable development work] and communicating the good in it. In my opinion, there could be more of that. (Interview 4)

Resolution through experiential sensemaking

Experiential sensemaking was used to shift attention from external negativity to internal, emotionally positive experiences. This also allowed organizational members to maintain their pride. Experiential sensemaking was predominantly based on narratives contrasting the interviewees' positive emotional experiences with external stakeholders' negative attitudes. Narratives focused on daily and practical descriptions of change processes within the firm and organization-wide sustainability integration, which was described as a notable achievement. Sustainability was stressed as an organization-wide approach.

The narratives mostly highlighted two aspects. First, they described how well sustainability practices were internally distributed. Second, they emphasized how strategically important, and thus prioritized, they were in the firm. They narrated situations and changes indicating that sustainability was important and meaningful throughout the company. These stories included multiple practical examples: all the projects reflected the principles of sustainable development; the company held active internal sustainable development days, during which good practices were spread; the company had a broad background in sustainability; there was a high level of cooperation for sustainability within the company; and, overall, a lot of work had been done on sustainability. The belief in a well-distributed sustainability approach among all organizational members was a common theme in the narratives. The interviewees also stressed that sustainability was a strategically important differentiating factor for the company. The following interview extract exemplifies this type of sensemaking:

> I've been positively surprised since the moment I came to work here that it [sustainability] really is our mission and our strategy, and also here in this division. It's part of the purpose of our operations, and it is in an important position. … It started with environmental thinking and then gradually spread, and there are still areas that it hasn't quite reached, but it's expanding to social and financial aspects, and it really is in upper management, in the strategy—at least in our division. (Interview 6)

Experiential sensemaking was employed particularly in cases in which tensions were experienced as rather moderate. In these cases, the terms and descriptions used when referring to external stakeholders' negative perceptions were not as extreme as when rational sensemaking was employed. The interviewees still maintained that external stakeholders were suspicious of the company but did not use descriptions of hostility. Instead, when speaking of

external stakeholders' approaches to the firm or organizational members to ask about issues concerning sustainability, they attributed the reasons to having a "critical question" (Interview 7) or a complaint (Interview 6) and acknowledged that society might react negatively to the company's sustainability operations (Interview 8). The following interview extract exemplifies how such expressions were used:

> Sometimes there are fairly concrete questions, such as "Well, what about your emissions?" As a matter of fact, there can be more questions like this, and you can generally answer pretty well and with pride. Even when the questions are pretty critical, the truth is generally rather positive. (Interview 7)

This kind of sensemaking did not lead to taking action for changes, as rational sensemaking did. However, it was based on the view that widespread organizational sustainability commitment promoted each organizational member's ability to act. Shared practices provided the framework for such action. A need for changes in sustainability practices was not identified. Such a view was constantly brought forth in the interviews as an achievement within the firm. The interviewees noted that individuals could take action for sustainability according to shared guidelines. This is exemplified in the following interview extract:

> [Describing what was done well in the company.] Here in my unit, I have cooperated with communications in the same organization, and I have found it [sustainability communication] very functional. I have liked it; I have found it very good. First of all, communication takes place; they have great ideas about how things can be achieved in my work, or they promote my communications matter really well and in things that I wouldn't even have considered [gives a concrete example]. (Interview 10)

Resolution through identity work

Sensemaking through identity work was also used to narrow the gap between the two opposite perceptions and resolve emotional tensions. It allowed organizational members to settle with the satisfaction they feel with organizational sustainability and argue that the two opposite views were not that apart from each other. To narrow the gap, the interviewees invoked internal and external limitations to sustainability and used very mild expressions to describe the mismatch between their satisfaction with organizational sustainability and external stakeholders' negative views.

The interviewees invoked limitations to their own identity, organizational identity, and industrial characteristics to reduce the gap between the two opposing perspectives. They first stressed the congruence between personal and organizational values. From the perspective of personal values, they connected sustainability, for example, to the need to preserve the planet for their children and observe environmental laws. However, the interviewees constructed a somewhat limited personal and organizational sustainability identity. The interviewees constructed an identity of, for example, "light green experts" who believed in sustainability at home but were not fanatic about sustainability issues. For example, they stated that they consumed organic products, tried to save materials, used wood to heat their homes, recycled, and made other personal sustainability-related choices. They also claimed that organizational-level values matched their own. However, the sustainability approach was also seen as somewhat limited. The interviewees maintained that sustainability was not the top priority

among employees or external stakeholders. They also narrowed the gap between their own positive emotions and bad publicity by naturalizing the firm's heavy environmental impact and presenting negative attitudes as a feature of the industry. They explained that the energy industry is environmentally intensive, and therefore negative attitudes towards it were a natural consequence. However, conducting operations in this energy-intensive sector in a sustainable and efficient manner would fit their "light green" identities well. The following extract exemplifies how such identity work was done in the interviews:

> I would call myself "light green." Environmental issues have always been important for me, and at university I studied communication and environmental science. Communication and sustainable development have always been part of my work. Previously, I was a consultant, and I drew up environmental reports, so it's an area, content-wise, that's very close and dear to me. In my personal life, too, I try to live like that—recycling, sorting and living a little bit green. It's important to me, so this job description fits really well with me. (Interview 6)

The tension perceived in these cases was relatively low, and the terms used by the interviewees to describe the two opposite views were rather neutral. The interviewees still mentioned their employer's poor external reputation but considered it a given, or even natural, for a company within this industry. Instead of feeling shame due to bad publicity, they attached positive emotions, especially satisfaction, to the firm's sustainability approach. Interviewees still believed that multiple external stakeholders were naturally interested in the company's sustainability issues. They felt that there was, for example, a degree of obscurity surrounding the firm's interactions and reputation, although they described no direct interaction with stakeholders. The following interview extract exemplifies how the intensity of opposite views was described in such cases:

> I would imagine that it [organizational sustainability communication and reporting] could interest our customers, since we have industrial customers. So, they might be interested in knowing the type of company they buy their products from. And I'll point out that I'm the one who separately reports to the authorities. This report isn't really reviewed by the authorities because they have their own systems and their own perspectives. They aren't really interested in sustainable development but rather in facts, such as the amount of emissions to air and water, among other things. (Interview 4)

Sensemaking through identity work had implications for sustainability action, placing clear limitations on it. It constructed both organizational and individual identities as moderately green (or "light green"), with the interviewees mentioning small and rather obvious actions for sustainability both at work and at home, such as saving energy. They also noted that this was not the most important thing to do. This is exemplified in the following interview extract:

> [Regarding the significance of sustainable development in the company.] I wouldn't say that it is necessarily the top priority in all employees' minds, so it's not the core of everything in this sense. ... It is certainly present all the time, in one way or another, but perhaps not in the way one might imagine, with every workstation constantly being reminded and everyone constantly thinking, "Let us do this or that." I don't quite believe it because many things that we do don't really have a big influence. We have a vast number of office workers, so it's difficult to influence matters. (Interview 7)

Summary of the findings

To resolve emotionally tense experiences related to organizational sustainability, employees use different sensemaking mechanisms: rational sensemaking, experiential sensemaking, and identity work. The key features of these sensemaking processes are summarized in Table I. Rational sensemaking is deliberate cognitive reasoning and processing (Molecke, 2014) relying on rational accounts (Maitlis, 2005) that lead to the refutation of negative perspectives using factual counterarguments (Billig, 1996). By creating rational accounts (Maitlis, 2005), such sensemaking fosters engagement in sustainability and promotes action. Experiential sensemaking utilizes previous experience to resolve situations (Parry, 2003). The narrative features of sensemaking (Riessman, 1993) turn attention to a more positive experience of organizational sustainability. Using this type of sensemaking, action for sustainability is framed as collective, with all organizational members having the capacity to act, but a need for changes in sustainability practices is not perceived. Thus, action is mainly taken in the form of habitual agency that reproduces previously implemented practices (Fan and Zietsma, 2017). Identity work engages an identity-based perspective in sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to narrow the gap between the two opposite perspectives. Organizational members refer to limitations and use mild language. Identity work is frequently employed in sensemaking, especially when a threat to identity is perceived (Rothausen *et al*., 2017). It imposes limitations on action for sustainability and constructs moderately green individual and organizational identities.

Table I Sensemaking types for resolving emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability

Discussion

Contributions to literature

In this study, we have shown how employees aim to solve emotionally tense experiences related with organizational sustainability and what it implies for employee sustainability action. Our study makes two contributions to the literature. We will discuss these in the following from the point of view of emotional tensions, and employee participation in organizational sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

First, our study expands the literature on emotional tensions in organizational sustainability and CSR. As the concepts of organizational sustainability and CSR are considered as near-site concepts, or often even as sharing same meanings, our study contributes both to CSR and organizational sustainability research on emotions. Prior studies have shown that both positive and negative emotions are attached to organizational sustainability (Fineman, 1996; Russell and Ashkanasy, 2007) and that a good sustainability reputation leads to positive emotions, such as pride and satisfaction (Morales-Raya *et al*., 2019). However, it was not previously understood how employees deal with emotionally tense situations. Our study shows that when experiencing such situations, employees tend to defend positive views of their employer by engaging in three types of sensemaking. Thus, this study's findings are not in line with suggestions that a bad sustainability reputation creates feelings of shame among employees

(Onkila, 2015). Despite being aware of the organization's bad reputation, employees do not entertain negative feelings associated with it. Instead, they use argumentation, narratives, and identity work to present reasons, explanations, justifications, and limitations to overrule, question, or undermine such emotions. The sensemaking process is multifaceted, and employees constantly move from one type to another. Thus, unlike prior studies suggesting that congruence between firms' sustainability actions and society's perception thereof creates positive emotions, such as pride (Fineman, 1996; Wright and Nyberg, 2012), we found that emotions are elicited by personal and organizational experiences and are strenuously defended when threatened.

Second, our study provides insights into how organizational sustainability and CSR are practiced among employees within organizations. Prior research has suggested that employee participation in organizational sustainability triggers emotional responses (Rupp *et al.*, 2006). However, our findings show that sensemaking based on emotions can also result in different levels of action. Emotional responses are not only a result of employee engagement in organizational sustainability but also a starting point for different levels of action. While Fan and Zietsma (2017) suggested that emotions enable and affect agency and facilitate reflexivity, commitment, and engagement, in our study, only rational sensemaking enabled active engagement. Conversely, when engaging in experiential sensemaking and identity work, action was only habitual or even limited, without an evaluative or critical approach to sustainability practices. Thus, it is important to explore how such tense situations can be managed within organizations so that more critical approaches and discussions that promote changes for sustainability can be enabled instead of maintaining the status quo and reproducing habitual actions by defending positive emotions. Based on our study, we found an interesting aspect enforcing organizational sustainability: negative sustainability reputation of the employer may actually turn employees to improving sustainability actions and their commitment to sustainability. This seems to be a result of their tendency to defend sustainability position of the employing organization.

Practical contributions

Our findings also have practical implications for organizations that have poor sustainability reputations despite solid sustainability performances. Experiential sensemaking shows that employees rely on their employers to implement and communicate sustainability actions and practices. In our case, for example, employees were more interested in participating in hands-on sustainability approaches and less interested in reading about large-scale sustainability projects (i.e., sponsorship of a national football team) in annual sustainability reports or internal newsletters. We found that it is important for employees to have a personal experience of sustainability, and especially of success stories, to build on their pride. Organizations with poor sustainability reputations should constantly disseminate information on such actions to employees and other stakeholders. This can help reduce employees' anxiety, thereby reducing emotional tensions and generating motivation to defend and maintain pride in the organization. It can also give them confidence in dealing with critical external voices. We encourage discussions within organizations on such emotionally tense experiences. Our results suggest that holding only positive views within an organization leads to maintaining the status quo and

reproducing ingrained habits. Sustainability still requires drastic changes and improvements in businesses. We suggest that enabling critical voices in internal organizational sustainability processes is essential for encouraging further improvement and change.

Overall, these findings show the importance of level of sustainability communication with all types of organizations. Based on our findings, it is important for organizations to connect with employees through authentic stories to convince them that everything possible is being done to improve the sustainability reputation. This does not only help in opening both sided communication within the company, but also in creating a dialogue with the community. The employees who receive the story start to own it, and they take these stories to the communities where they live and help to build the organizational sustainability reputation. Employees also bring authentic feedback from the community, which helps the organization adjust its actions and narrative. In this process of dialogue, the organization may then start building a positive sustainability reputation.

Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations. First, we studied only one company. Future studies should explore this phenomenon in more detail and focus on how such tensions may be experienced by different stakeholders, such as employees, the media, and large audiences. They should also investigate sustainability issues that lead to emotionally tense situations by examining multiple organizations across several industries, countries, and cultures. Second, because multiple stakeholders influence corporate environmental issues, future studies should conduct more in-depth investigations of organizations, including individuals with less engagement in organizational sustainability (e.g., shop floor employees). Similarly, the role of the media as sustainability stakeholders and their relationship with other stakeholders also need to be further explored. Third, we recommend a deeper exploration of how employees' emotions arise in various situations, including internal employee meetings and public communications, and how internal sustainability data are measured and documented. This would offer a broader understanding of employees' emotions and related tensions in organizational contexts. Fourthly, acknowledging the strong role of organizational culture influencing organizational sustainability and sensemaking within organizations, we limited our study more communicative features of sustainability and sensemaking. However, we highlight as an important future research topic analysis on how cultural features of sustainability are meaningful in such tense situations, and how sensemaking in such situations is influencing and influenced by organizational culture.

Conclusions

Emotionally tense experiences related to organizational sustainability trigger sensemaking to resolve situations. Different employees engage in sensemaking in different ways hence, employees' actions to resolve the situation are also diverse in nature. We identified three types of sensemaking: rational sensemaking, experiential sensemaking, and identity work. When experiencing tense situations, employees respond by refuting negative external perceptions

with facts and figures, shifting attention to positive internal experiences, or narrowing the gap and the level of tension through identity work that constructs "light green" identities on both the individual and organizational levels. Sensemaking mechanisms employ counterarguments, narratives, and choice of terminology. Sensemaking has implications for employees' actions for sustainability. While one type promotes change, another encourages only limited action. Our empirical findings also highlight the mixed use of sensemaking mechanisms in emotionally tense situations. The interviewees constantly moved between the three types of sensemaking, which indicates the complexity of the experience and its resolutions.

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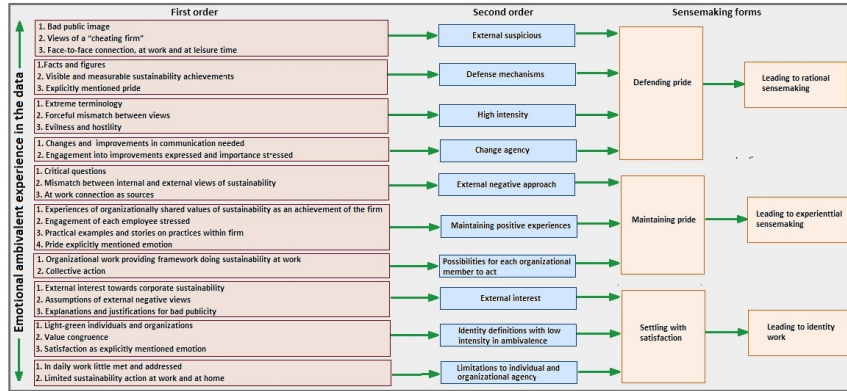Appendix

Table I Interview data

Figure 1

359x150mm (96 x 96 DPI)

Table I Sensemaking types for resolving emotional tensions related to organizational sustainability

Sensemaking type	Emotional elements	Sensemaking devices	Implications for action
Rational sensemaking	Maintaining pride	Questioning using counterarguments	Active action for change
Experiential sensemaking	Defending pride	Using narratives to shift attention from external negativity to internal positivity	Collective action, no need for further changes
Identity work	Settling with satisfaction	Identity work	Limited action

Table I Interview data

Number	Title (gender)	Interview type	Interview length
1	Sustainability manager (female)	Video	41
2	Environmental engineer (female)	Telephone	20
3	Environmental manager (female)	Video	44
4	Environmental manager (male)	In-person	46
5	Environmental health and safety manager (female)	In-person	36
6	Manager (certain geographical areas) (female)	In-person	55
7	Communication director (female)	In-person	46
8	Head of financial issues (male)	In-person	43
9	Head of external communications (male)	In-person	49
10	Environmental manager (male)	In-person	65
11	Environmental health and safety manager (female)	In-person	46
12	Human resources director (female)	In-person	19
13	Purchasing manager (female)	In-person	26
14	Environmental expert (male)	In-person	20
15	Sustainability coordinator (female)	In-person	39
16	Financial manager (male)	In-person	23
17	Communications and sustainability manager (female)	Video	46
18	Environmental health and safety manager (male)	Video	35
19	Legal counsel (male)	In-person	37
20	Production manager (female)	In-person	62
21	Business development manager (female)	Telephone	36
22	Environmental health, safety, and quality engineer (female)	In-person	33
23	Occupational health physician (female)	In-person	25
24	Financial coordinator (female)	In-person	25
25	Business development manager (male)	Telephone	45