

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Onkila, Tiina; Teerikangas, Satu; Koistinen, Katariina; Mäkelä, Marileena

**Title:** Sustainability agency in business : an interdisciplinary review and research agenda

**Year:** 2023

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

**Copyright:** © Sally V. Russell and Rory W. Padfield 2023

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Onkila, T., Teerikangas, S., Koistinen, K., & Mäkelä, M. (2023). Sustainability agency in business : an interdisciplinary review and research agenda. In S. Russell, & R. Padfield (Eds.), *A Research Agenda for Sustainability and Business* (pp. 19-35). Edward Elgar Publishing.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839107719.00009>

# **Sustainability agency in business: an interdisciplinary review and research agenda**

Tiina Onkila, Satu Teerikangas, Katariina Koistinen and Marileena Mäkelä

## **Introduction**

Multiple actors, such as managers, activists, employees and customers, in and around business have identified the current significant challenges related to sustainability and have started to argue for the need for change, if not paradigm shifts, in the ways of doing business. Taking a closer look, the role of human action is crucial when pursuing sustainability in business. Across the social sciences, the role of human actors is often approached via the concept of agency, which refers to the human capacity to act and to make a difference (Giddens, 1984; Dietz and Burns, 1992; Bandura, 2006). Further, agency is considered as being intentional and reflexive (Dietz and Burns, 1992; Bandura, 2001). Understanding the relation between business and sustainability requires knowledge of the role of agency in shaping this relation toward greater degrees of un/sustainability. In recent years, the need to pay attention to human action as an enabler of change has been noted (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). This involves asking questions, such as what are or can be the contributions of actors to sustainability, as well as why and how they contribute to sustainability in business (Pesch, 2015; Koistinen, 2019).

While studies have started to highlight the role and importance of human agency toward sustainability change in business, upon closer examination, no single discipline owns this field of research. In other words, this appreciation is fragmented across disciplines, theories, literatures, phenomena, and journals. This mirrors the situation regarding the study of sustainability agency in general, beyond business contexts. Indeed, based on our meta-review of research on different forms and types of sustainability agency across disciplines, levels of analysis, sectors and contexts, we observed the difficulty in finding a discipline with a clear focus on or ownership of the study of sustainability actors (Teerikangas et al., 2021). While the above review provided an interdisciplinary perspective on sustainability agency, there is,

further, a need for a more in-depth and systematic understanding of sustainability agency in business contexts and the role of actors in making business more sustainable. Additionally, we perceive the need for more knowledge of how sustainability actors act, how contextual factors shape their approaches and how they aim to influence business towards sustainability.

In this chapter, we take up this challenge. Our aim is to provide an integrative view on sustainability agency in business, particularly regarding the questions of who the relevant actors are and how they act. To appreciate sustainability agency in business settings and for the purposes of this chapter, three disciplines are of interest: sustainability science, management studies and corporate social responsibility (CSR). For one, sustainability science appreciates agency in the broader, systemic context of sustainability transitions (Fischer and Newig, 2016; Koistinen et al., 2019; Koistinen and Teerikangas, 2021). For another, two disciplines can be pointed out as having focused on sustainability agency as it relates to business: management studies and CSR research. In this chapter, we thus review extant research on sustainability agency, as it relates to business, across the sustainability transitions, management studies and CSR streams of literature. In so doing, our main contribution is in offering a meta-review of prior research on sustainability agency in business settings, a typology of sustainability actors, as well as pointers toward future research.

We have organised this chapter as follows: in Section 2, we introduce the concept of sustainability agency. In Section 3, we introduce our research method and review how it has been studied in the sustainability transitions, management studies and CSR streams of literature, followed by a synthesis of this understanding. Finally, in Section 4, we discuss future research directions arising from this analysis.

### **What is sustainability agency?**

Agency is a classic concept across the social sciences, particularly used in, but not limited to sociology (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). For the purposes of this chapter, we proceed to a selected overview of classics of agency, moving thereafter to appreciating and then defining sustainability agency. Agency can be defined as an individual's or a collective's capacity to act, though the bulk of research tends to adopt the individual-level focus (Giddens, 1984; Dietz and Burns, 1992). Over time, the concept of agency has been viewed and defined across the

social sciences in different ways, using a variety of theoretical perspectives (Bandura, 2002; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Koistinen, 2019; Teerikangas et al., 2021). For example, according to Bandura (2002), agency refers to intentionally influencing one's functioning and life circumstances. Based on Stones (2005), Sherwin (2009) and Tourish (2014), Koistinen (2019) summarises agency as intentional action, involving the possession of power. Thus, it can be defined as the 'ability to engage in purposeful action' (Tourish, 2014, p. 87) and 'having the capacity to take an action' (Tourish, 2014, p. 80). Although multiple non-human forms of agency are recognised (Latour, 2005; Jokinen et al., 2021), in this chapter, we focus on human agency. Such a definition as the capacity to act (Bandura, 2001) reflects free will and determinism (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), thus characterising the historical evolution of humankind.

Similarly, the concepts of agency or agent can be found in both the CSR and the sustainability transition streams of literature. In these literatures, the focus is on individual and/or collective agents and their agency in furthering CSR and sustainability transitions. Taking a closer look, within the framework of corporate sustainability, the term agent refers to individual and collective actors as participants in purposive actions in their attempt to either prevent or generate change (Bos et al., 2013; Fischer and Newig, 2016). In the field of sustainability transitions, agency can be defined as an actor's behaviour with regard to such change (Loorbach, 2007). Koistinen (2019) stresses that agency furthering sustainability transitions may also be a collective action and a social phenomenon that is shaped by sociocultural contexts (Billet, 2006; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Indeed, individual and social agency are mutual and should be considered as intertwined (Billet, 2006).

Concerning agency in sustainability transitions, Pesch (2015) emphasises that the questions of why individual agents make certain decisions, why they have certain motivations and how these motivations can be influenced remain largely unanswered. He also views individual agents as parts of larger societal and institutional realms, motivated by different contextual factors. He calls for a more in-depth understanding of what drives people at different societal levels to embed into sustainability change.

Based on an interdisciplinary literature review, sustainability agency is proposed as an umbrella concept to incorporate the diversity of actors engaging in sustainability work (Teerikangas et al., 2021a). The concept of sustainability agency offers an integrative take, across disciplines, on the phenomenon of active sustainability agency. In so doing, the concept offers an umbrella term for sustainability actors operating at different levels of analysis, contexts, while studied with varying theoretical lenses across disciplines, thereby encapsulating different actor types. The concept therefore encapsulates individual, activist, and relational forms of agency, as well as governance as a mode of agency. Further, the concept of agency is often betted in opposition to and in tandem with surrounding social and societal structures, and a classic question in sociology has been which one matters, agency or structure (Ritzer, 2005). Indeed, while the literatures abound with similar concepts, for example sustainability performance and sustainability behaviours, the uniqueness of sustainability agency is its operating at an aggregate level, encapsulating various forms of agency. It has focus on intentionality and active change orientation, both at individual and collective levels, towards sustainable futures. While for example the concept of sustainability behaviour shares the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability agency, it lacks orientation toward intentionality and active change creation – instead, sustainability behaviour can also maintain unsustainable practice and rather mechanically repeat prior traditions with no focus on change, and be open to influence of others (Ketrion and Naletelich, 2019). As another example, While sustainability agency pays attention at the full processes, for example sustainability performance is oriented on results of such action and characterized by collective level focus (see e.g. Papoutsi and Sodhi, 2020).

## **Methods**

We focused on reviewing three streams of literature in order to gain an appreciation of sustainability agency in business: (1) sustainability transition literature discusses the role of agency in sustainability transition in general; and (2) management studies given its generic focus on management phenomena; and (3) CSR literature given its explicit focus on responsible business. As each stream of literature differs in its focus on agency toward sustainable business, we conducted three parallel reviews, using selected methodologies and search words for each, in order to obtain a thorough coverage and an understanding of the status of sustainability agency research across the studied streams of literature.

In sustainability transition literature, literature search was done in November 2018 in the Scopus database, using the selected terms “‘agency” AND sustainability transitions’ and “‘agent” AND sustainability transitions’ in paper abstracts, titles or keywords. We limited the search to cover the period of 2014–2018. The search resulted in 270 publications. After excluding papers that did not focus on agency and sustainability transitions, 77 journal articles were included in the final sample for review.

We continued our search of sustainability agency in mainstream management journals. Our focus was on the leading 16 journals in the field (i.e. *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Management*, *British Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Annals*, *Organization Studies*, *Research Policy*, *Human Relations*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Long Range Planning*, *Organization Science*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and *Strategic Organization*). As the search with the exact term ‘sustainability agency’ led to few meaningful results, the search was enlarged to encompass terms related to sustainability, including sustainability, CSR, responsibility, climate change, and energy as well as proxies for agency including agent/agency, manager/professional/employee, grassroots, community, niche, activism, social movement, non-governmental organisations (NGO), and social entrepreneur. After cross-checking the full sample, the final sample reviewed included 150 papers published in the period of 1992–2020.

Finally, we reviewed leading CSR journals in order to appreciate the state of the art of research on sustainability agency. The reviewed journals included *Organization and Environment*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Business and Society*. Our search was based on the words agency, championship, activism, advocacy and pioneer. It was conducted in November 2019. This resulted in 281 articles, in which the search terms were mentioned in paper title, abstract or keywords. After exclusion based on the centrality of the search terms in the articles and the meanings in which the search terms were used, the results were narrowed down to 88 articles.

We applied different literature search methodologies for each of the three streams of literature. This choice reflected the fact that, upon conducting the searches, we observed each stream to address and discuss sustainability agency in different ways. Put differently,

each stream of research appeared to bear a different degree of maturity in the study of sustainability agency. While the sustainability transition literature has an explicit, ongoing discussion using the term ‘agency’, such a discussion is missing from the management studies and CSR literatures. Taking a closer look, in the latter streams, the search with the term ‘sustainability agency’ or ‘sustainability agent’ led to few, if any, results. Therefore, as researchers, we needed to revert to different search methodologies and search words for each of the three streams of literature. In CSR literature, where the relevant discussion was more extensive, the search could be done based on terms similar to agency, but in the management journals, also actor groups had to be included in search words. Further, the timescale of our reviews varied depending the existence of prior literature reviews. To this end, the sustainability transition review was done in 2019, covering only the years 2014–2018, given that a prior review exists that covers years leading to 2014 (Fischer and Newig, 2016). In management and CSR literatures, no prior reviews were found, and hence a longer timespan was adopted. The different methods for our literature reviews are summarised in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Methodologies for literature reviews

<b>Stream of literature</b>	<b>Search words</b>	<b>Target journals</b>	<b>Number of articles</b>
Sustainability transition	agency AND sustainability transitions and agen AND sustainability transitions	Searches were targeted at sustainability science literature and especially the discipline of sustainability transitions, with no specific journal limitation.	77 articles
Management	terms related to sustainability, including sustainability, CSR, responsibility, climate change, and energy as well as proxies of agency including agent/agency, manager/professional/employee, grassroots, community, niche, activism, social movement, NGO, and social entrepreneur	16 leading journals in the management ( <i>Journal of Management Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Management</i> , <i>British Journal of Management</i> , <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , <i>Academy of Management Review</i> , <i>Academy of Management Annals</i> , <i>Organization Studies</i> , <i>Research Policy</i> , <i>Human Relations</i> , <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> ,	150 articles

		<i>International Journal of Management Reviews, Journal of International Business Studies, Long Range Planning, Organization Science, Strategic Management Journal, and Strategic Organization).</i>	
CSR	agency, championship, activism, advocacy and pioneer	5 leading CSR journals ( <i>Organization and Environment, Business Strategy and the Environment, Journal of Business Ethics and Business and Society, Journal of cleaner Production</i> ).	88 articles

In the following subsections, we proceed to detailing the results of our review per stream of research before integrating the findings toward an appreciation of sustainability agency in business contexts.

### **Findings: reviews of sustainability agency research in business**

#### *Review of agency in the literature on sustainability transitions*

We began our search in the field of sustainability science, where the bulk of theorising on various forms of sustainability transitions occurs (Fischer and Newig, 2016; Köhler et al., 2019). We reviewed extant literature on agency in sustainability transitions between 2014 and 2018, as we were building on the work of Fischer and Newig (2016), who reviewed the role of actors in sustainability transitions between 1995 and 2014. For another, as the world has experienced the outbreak of various sustainability actions led by individuals and collectives, and the study of agency in sustainability transitions has burgeoned since 2014, we sought to appreciate recent developments in the field. For a thorough overview of the findings of our review 2014–2018, please see Koistinen and Teerikangas (2021).

We noticed an increasing amount of research on agency in the sustainability transition literature in each year from seven publications in 2014 to 25 publications in 2018. Our observation was that the terminology was scattered as regards the terms agent, actor and



agency (e.g. Antadze and McGowan, 2017). A closer look revealed that the contemporary transition literature on agency emphasises three themes: (1) governance (e.g. Klinke, 2017), (2) agent typologies (e.g. Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016), and (3) calls for richer views regarding agency (e.g. van der Vleuten, 2018). First, we observed that the majority of transition studies vis-à-vis agency discussed governance, politics, power of agency or institutions and agency. Second, our findings showed that the transition literature typically conceptualised agents via various typologies. These typologies include categories such as change agency, niche formation, incumbents and strategic agency. Third, we noted that emerging topics in the literature related to persistent calls for richer perspectives regarding agency involved in sustainability transitions, whether in the form of behavioural sciences or views adopted from socio-ecological research on sustainability.

Despite the increasing interest in agency in sustainability transitions, these studies are scattered and set amid various theoretical underpinnings, such as, institutional theory, structuration theory or practice theory (e.g. Kuhmonen, 2017; Stephenson, 2018; Koistinen and Teerikangas, 2021). Upon closer examination, the literature tends to be set on a persistent debate emphasising either the system (e.g. de Gooyert et al., 2016) or the agent (e.g. Bögel and Upham, 2018) as bearing primary importance in the making of sustainability transitions. This mirrors the classic agency-structure question in sociology (e.g. Giddens, 1984; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

#### *Review of agency and sustainability in the literature on management*

Our review of the management studies literature led us to identify numerous types of actors, that is, forms of agency geared toward sustainable business. To begin with, there are actors in the broader societal and institutional environment affecting a firm's sustainability strategy including transnational players, national governments and their environmental policy and regulation efforts, government-affiliated intermediary organisations, regional players within countries, various stakeholders, investors, financial advisors, investment funds, and a firm's owners (e.g. Patriotta et al., 2011; Crouch, 2006; Doh et al., 2010). Second, there is increasing interest in the study of incumbent firms as sustainability actors. In this realm, the factors influencing a firm's sustainability strategy are

under study, alongside their performance effects. The role of political CSR is studied (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), and a number of authors posit firms as operating as both incumbents and activists toward sustainability (e.g. Berggren et al., 2015). Beyond regular performance metrics, questions regarding responsible innovation, new market creation, business models, and growth via mergers and acquisitions (M&As) are raised (Peloza, 2009; Pitelis, 2009). Projects are identified as potential vehicles toward sustainability. The means of managing a firm from a sustainability perspective are questioned, for example, as regards the organisation's logic, its decision-making model, procurement contracts, supply chain management, and the way in which it orchestrates its CSR strategy. In the study of organisations, questions of organisational culture and identity are studied.

Third, questions of collaborative agency have been raised. In this respect, beyond the firm itself, questions of cross-sector partnerships and clusters are studied. Also, questions of shared or collective governance are of interest. Fourth, sustainability agency has been identified to occur within incumbent organisations. In this regard, the focus has been on specific individual roles in the organisational hierarchy, such as board members, chief executive officers, executives, decision-makers, managers, sustainability or CSR professionals and managers, as well as employees (Whiteman and Cooper, 2000; Shepherd et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2017; Mitra and Buzzanelli, 2017). The notion of active agency is studied via the notions of embedded agency (Fan and Zietsma, 2017) and institutional entrepreneurship. In parallel, there is some, though scant interest toward consumers, be it as regards citizen users or consumer behaviour.

Fifth, a number of active organisational sustainability actors are studied by management scholars. Such actors include sustainable entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, communities, non-governmental organisations, social movements, grassroots organisations, activists (whether climate change, civic, institutional or employee activists), communities of place, communities of action, community-based enterprises, neighborhoods, and base of the pyramid actors (e.g. Khan et al., 2010; Markman et al., 2016).

In summary, while the term agency itself was not actively in use, numerous actor types, be it individuals, organisations or collectives, could be identified in this literature. Further, the interest toward their study is increasing in recent years. Upon closer look, the study of each actor type is set amid a specific phenomenon-based literature and theoretical debate, with

little cross-fertilisation across these literatures. As such, our review offers an emerging integrative perspective on the plethora of sustainability actor types studied in this literature.

#### *Review of agency in the literature on CSR*

The reviewed research connected multiple actors with sustainability. These actors were both individuals and organisations, including companies (multinational, small-/medium-sized and family-owned companies), individuals belonging to organisations and societies, managers and leaders, consumers, pioneers and champions in different contexts, public sector actors, shareholders, communities and social movements, NGOs and environmental activists, labour unions and stakeholders as a whole.

The analysis focused on the question of ‘how sustainability actors act toward sustainability’. In the studies’ main findings, we noticed that a majority of the studies focused on how the actors aimed to influence others to promote sustainability. Studies on how the actors themselves acted were less prevalent. Based on the dominant trend, we focused on identifying different influence strategies – how sustainability actors aimed to influence others and thereby to promote sustainability. We identified two main strategies that dominated these studies: influential and co-productive. Regarding the influential strategies, the actors aimed to use their power to promote sustainability, while as regards co-productive strategies, they aimed at collective action to promote sustainability.

To begin with influential strategies, these studies focused on how the actors aimed to influence others by promoting or demanding sustainability. This entailed both direct and indirect strategies. On the one hand, direct strategies were the focus of those studies that examined the direct use of power by a certain actor or actor group (Juravle and Lewis, 2009; Georgallis, 2017; Walls and Berrone, 2017). These studies dealt with how to convince others to pursue sustainability; thus, the concept of power did not refer only to visible sources of power but also to many invisible sources of power and ways to use it (O’Rourke, 2003; Galbreath, 2010). For example, Georgallis (2017) showed that social movements are able to influence the expectations that key stakeholders have about firms’ social responsibility,

making corporate social initiatives more attractive. On the other hand, indirect strategies were addressed by those studies that investigated the indirect use of power by a certain actor or actor group. These studies dealt with the power of networking, the power of language use and the power of interaction, thus entailing invisible ways of exercising power (Lewis and Juravle, 2010; Hancock and Nuttman, 2014; Lorek and Spangenberg, 2014; Sarasini and Jacob, 2014; Peattie and Samuel, 2018). For example, Sarasini and Jacob (2014) showed how managers may reconstruct and sometimes refute the pressures for climate action, and thus shape how it is approached among other actors.

Moving onto co-productive strategies, they dealt with the collective action to promote sustainability and described how one actor group acted in collaboration with others toward sustainability change. However, this type of studies was notably smaller in number than those focusing on influential strategies. In this type of studies, we identified two subthemes: studies highlighting the role of collaboration in the adoption of sustainable solutions (McLaughlin, 2012; Gauthier and Gilomen, 2016) and studies highlighting the limitedness of the single-actor approach (Green et al., 2000; Berry, 2003; Sonpar et al., 2009). For example, Gauthier and Gilomen (2016) showed how collective agency facilitates development towards sustainability and adoption of sustainable solutions. In summary, while the term agency itself was limitedly in use, numerous actor and actions types could be identified in this literature.

#### *On the nature of sustainability agency in business*

Our review of sustainability agency across the three disciplines highlights this topic as of increasing interest. In an effort to summarise and integrate the findings, we observe the following. To begin with, we find that the three disciplines have adopted different foci in their study of sustainability agency. First, sustainability science, particularly the sustainability transition literature, has addressed the role of agency and has increasingly started to pay both thematic and conceptual attention to the role of agency in the broader, systemic context of sustainability transitions (Fischer and Newig, 2016; Koistinen et al., 2019). Second, management research exhibits a wide array of different types of actors and how they may contribute to sustainability change (Teerikangas et al., 2018), while CSR research has shown how these different actors may use their influence to convince others on the cause of sustainability (Onkila et al., 2019).

All the while, the reviewed disciplinary fields seem to operate with relative independence from one another, leading to siloed approaches to the study of sustainability agency as it relates to business. Under such circumstances, obtaining an overview of 'what sustainability agency in business is' becomes an arduous and laborious task. It can even be argued that increasing within-disciplinary research may be counterproductive in the long term, when compared against efforts to synthesise this knowledge.

More alarmingly, we find further siloing within the disciplines. Indeed, our analysis shows how the research in each of the three fields has identified numerous actor types, each often discussed in a separate stream of literature. In other words, the research on sustainability agency in business is not only scattered across disciplines, but further, within disciplines across the study of numerous actor types and levels of analysis, each representing a literature area of its own. Indeed, there is little attempt at integration and synthesis within or across literatures, theoretical debates or disciplines. Subsequently, it is difficult to gain an overview of what sustainability agency in business is and what forms it takes. In this chapter, our contribution lies in bringing forth an integrative perspective to sustainability agency in business, as well as a typology of the relevant actors.

In seeking answers to the question of 'what sustainability agency is', researchers need to recognise that instead of the term 'agency', other terms reflecting active action towards the sustainability agenda are helpful proxies in identifying this literature. Such terms include, but are not limited to, the terms social entrepreneur, transnational standard setter, social movement and activism. Thus, numerous organisational and individual actors have been studied as active sustainability actors. Beyond firms, other organisations operating in the institutional environment, as well as various types of activist organisations, have been examined. Taking a closer look at individuals, the focus appears to be on the study of sustainability-active individuals working for incumbent firms, whether in managerial, professional or employee roles, who actively drive sustainability strategies. Studies on activist organisations focus on the organisation, instead of the individual(s) driving the organisation. Further, the role of collaboration in pursuing sustainable futures is advanced. In synthesis, our three-disciplinary review of the studies on active sustainability actors leads us to view

sustainability agency as occurring either at individual or organisational levels by/in incumbent or activist organisations when they proactively and collaboratively pursue sustainable futures.

### **Future research on sustainability agency in business**

As discussed in this chapter, three disciplines have addressed sustainability agency in business settings: sustainability transition, management studies and CSR research. Going forward, we suggest that future research on sustainability agency in business is a prerequisite for an in-depth understanding of the role of agency in order to steer toward sustainable business.

Based on the three reviews, it appears that prior research has recognised a wide variety of sustainability actors. All the while, these pockets of research appear to operate in relative isolation and in siloes within and across disciplines. In the lack of integrative overviews (on these actors and their agentic practices) researchers and practitioners retain siloed and actor-based views of sustainability agency. While such an actor-focused perspective enables an in-depth appreciation of an individual actor type, it disallows comparisons, cross-fertilisation and integration of knowledge. Such state of affairs can be considered dire and discouraging at this time in the 2020s when the general public's sustainability awareness is increasing and the role of actors is increasingly called for. In the absence of integrative perspectives, the academic community can only provide partial answers. Going forward, we call for more interdisciplinary research on sustainability agency, with an aim to provide integration and engagement between different perspectives, theoretical lenses and levels of analysis. We have begun this work in drawing together an interdisciplinary perspective to the matter (Teerikangas et al., 2021a), but there is room and need for much further work. We argue that going forward, sustainability agency scholars need to work across disciplines, literature streams and theoretical bases. Cross-fertilisation and integration of knowledge areas is not only a means of contributing scientifically (Ladik and Stewart, 2008), but further, a societal service at a time, when individual and organizational actors increasingly ponder about their role in ensuring sustainable futures. It is somewhat paradoxical that while much scientific research exists, as long as it is scattered, it is difficult for the societal audiences to reach this knowledge, and hence, to develop their sustainability agency, and appreciate how one actor type's agency relates to others, and how, collectively and collaboratively, sustainable futures can be enabled.

Prior literature has also offered analyses on how these actors act. However, the understanding seems dominated by the analysis of influence. We still know little about such questions as what is the variety of agency practices – what else does sustainability agency influence? Change agency is an integral part of sustainability agency (Teerikangas et al., 2021b), as incremental, radical and emerging changes are direly needed to integrate sustainability into business. How do these sustainability actors enforce sustainability, and what obstacles do they face? Additionally, responses to active agency are still poorly understood. How does agency trigger positive responses, and how may it encourage others to act? How can collective agency be enforced by individual agency, and what is the role of collaboration in sustainability agency? We suggest that future research should focus on studying the variety of agency practices in different contexts to gain a better understanding of the questions of how sustainability agents act. This would especially require applications of qualitative case studies in organisational settings and in stakeholder relations to enable the use of multiple data sources in order to understand the variety of agency practices and processes.

Furthermore, based on our reviews, we call for a micro-level understanding about the questions of why and when sustainability agents act. The literature has not yet offered an in-depth understanding of actors' experience in sustainability agency – what enforces agency, and what motivates action? We thus know little about the dynamics of individual-level and collective-level agency, including behaviours, motivations, actor attributes and contextual processes shaping agency. Specifically, understanding about bottom-up actions, such as changes initiated by employees within organisations, is still missing. More in-depth knowledge regarding these questions requires the inclusion of psychological theory and behavioural sciences, addressing in particular individuals' behaviours whether alone or as part of organisational and societal contexts. To further the understanding about how individual and collective agency develop in specific contexts, narrative and longitudinal methodologies are called for in order to find out what have been the motives for agency development and what contextual processes have shaped agency.

In turn, actors' motivations also include change-resisting practices. To understand the complex dynamics of creating business sustainability, passive and resisting actors should not be forgotten. Thus, future research could delve into the issue of actor rationales in the form of more passive and even resisting actors in business environments. Furthermore, the concept of power in relation to sustainability agency deserves more attention. What role does power play in building and overcoming resistance?

## References

- Aguinis, H. and A. Glavas (2012), 'What we know and don't know about corporate social responsibility: A review and research agenda', *Journal of Management*, **38** (4), 932–968.
- Antadze, N. and K. McGowan (2017), 'Moral entrepreneurship: Thinking and acting at the landscape level to foster sustainability transitions', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, **25**, 1–13.
- Avelino, F. and J. Wittmayer (2016), 'Shifting power relations in sustainability transitions: A multi-actor perspective', *Journal of Environmental Policy Planning*, **18**, 628–649.
- Bandura, A. (2001), 'Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective', *Annual Review of Psychology*, **52** (1), 1–26.
- Bandura, A. (2002), 'Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency', *Journal of Moral Education*, **31** (2), 101–119.
- Bandura, A. (2006), 'Toward a psychology of human agency', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, **1** (2), 164–180.
- Berggren, C., T. Magnusson and D. Sushandoyo (2015), 'Transition pathways revisited: Established firms as multi-level actors in the heavy vehicle industry', *Research Policy*, **44** (5), 1017–1028.
- Berry, G. R. (2003), 'Organizing against multinational corporate power in cancer alley: The activist community as primary stakeholder', *Organization & Environment*, **16** (1), 3–33.
- Billett, S. (2006), 'Relational interdependence between social and individual agency in work and working life', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, **13** (1), 53–69.
- Bos, J., R. Brown and M. A. Farrelly (2013), 'A design framework for creating social learning situations', *Global Environmental Change*, **23** (2), 398–412.
- Burt, E. and S. Mansell (2019), 'Moral agency in charities and business corporations: Exploring the constraints of law and regulation', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **159** (1), 59–73.



- Bögel, P.M. and P. Upham (2018), 'The role of psychology in sociotechnical transitions literature: A review and discussion in relation to consumption and technology acceptance', *Environmental innovation and Societal Transitions*, **28**, 122–136.
- Crouch, C. (2006), 'Modelling the firm in its market and organizational environment: Methodologies for studying corporate social responsibility', *Organization Studies*, **27** (10), 1533–1551.
- de Gooyert, V., E. Rouwette, H. van Kranenburg, E. Freeman and H. van Breen (2016), 'Sustainability transition dynamics: Towards overcoming policy resistance', *Technological Forecasting and Societal Change*, **111**, 135–145.
- Dietz, T. and T.R. Burns (1992), 'Human agency and the evolutionary dynamics of culture', *Acta Sociologica*, **35** (3), 187–200.
- Doh, J.P., S.D. Howton, S.W. Howton and D.S. Siegel (2010), 'Does the market respond to an endorsement of social responsibility? The role of institutions, information, and legitimacy', *Journal of Management*, **36** (6): 1461–1485.
- Emirbayer, M. and A. Mische (1998), 'What is agency?', *American Journal of Sociology*, **103** (4), 962–1023.
- Eteläpelto, A., K. Vähäsantanen, P. Hökkä and S. Paloniemi (2013), 'What is agency? Conceptualizing professional agency at work', *Educational Research Review*, **10**, 45–65.
- Fan, G.H. and C. Zietsma (2017), 'Constructing a shared governance logic: The role of emotions in enabling dually embedded agency', *Academy of Management Journal*, **60** (6), 2321–2351.
- Fischer, L. B. and J. Newig (2016), 'Importance of actors and agency in sustainability transitions: A systematic exploration of the literature', *Sustainability*, **8** (5), 476.
- Galbreath, J. (2010), 'Corporate governance practices that address climate change: An exploratory study', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, **19** (5), 335–350.
- Gauthier, C. and B. Gilomen (2016), 'Business models for sustainability: energy efficiency in urban districts', *Organization & Environment*, **29** (1), 124–144.
- Georgallis, P. (2017), 'The link between social movements and corporate social initiatives: Toward a multi-level theory', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **142** (4), 735–751.
- Giddens, A. (1984), *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Green, K., B. Morton and S. New (2000), 'Greening organizations: Purchasing, consumption, and innovation' *Organization & Environment*, **13** (2), 206–225.
- Hancock, L. and S. Nuttman (2014), 'Engaging higher education institutions in the challenge of sustainability: Sustainable transport as a catalyst for action', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, **62**, 62–71.

- Jokinen, A., J. Uusikartano, P. Jokinen and M. Kokko (2021), 'The interagency cycle in sustainability transitions', in Teerikangas, S., T. Onkila, K. Koistinen and M. Mäkelä (eds.) *Research Handbook on Sustainability Agency*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Juravle, C. and A. Lewis. (2009), 'The role of championship in the mainstreaming of Sustainable Investment (SI): What can we learn from SI pioneers in the United Kingdom?', *Organization & Environment*, 22(1), 75–98.
- Ketron, S. and K. Naletelich (2019), 'Victim or beggar? Anthropomorphic messengers and the savior effect in consumer sustainability behavior', *Journal of Business Research*, 96, 73–84.
- Koistinen, K. (2019), *Actors in sustainability transitions*. Doctoral dissertation. LUT University Press.
- Koistinen, K., S. Teerikangas, T. Onkila and M. Mäkelä (2019), 'The debate regarding agents and sustainability transitions – review of the literature', Paper presented at Corporate Responsibility Research Conference, 12–13 September, 2019, Tampere, Finland.
- Kuhmonen, T. (2017), 'Exposing the attractors of evolving complex adaptive systems by utilising futures images: Milestones of the food sustainability journey', *Technological Forecasting and Societal Change*, 114, 214–225.
- Latour, B. (2005), *An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory. Reassembling the Social*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Khan, R.F., R. Westwood, D.M. Boje (2010), "'I feel like a foreign agent": NGOs and corporate social responsibility interventions into Third World child labor', *Human Relations*, 63 (9), 1417–1438.
- Kim, A., Y. Kim, K. Han, S.E. Jackson and R.E. Ployhart (2017), 'Multilevel influences on voluntary workplace green behavior: Individual differences, leader behavior, and coworker advocacy', *Journal of Management*, 43 (5): 1335–1358.
- Klinke, A. (2017). Dynamic multilevel governance for sustainable transformation as postnational configuration. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 30(3), 323-349.
- Koistinen, K., & Teerikangas, S. (2021). The Debate If Agents Matter vs. the System Matters in Sustainability Transitions—A Review of the Literature. *Sustainability*, 13(5), 2821.
- Köhler, J., F.W. Geels, F. Kern, J- Markard, A. Wieczorek, F. Alkemade, F. Avelino, A. Bergek, F. Boons, L. Fünfschilling, D. Hessk, G. Georg Holtz, S. Hyysalo, K. Jenkins, P. Kivimaa, M. Martiskainen, A. McMeekin, M.S. Mühlemeier, B. Nykvist, E. Onsongo, B. Pel, R. Raven, H. Rohracher, B. Sandén, J. Schot, B. Sovacool, B. Turnheim, D. Welch and P. Wells (2019), 'An agenda for sustainability transitions research: State of the art and future directions', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 31, 1–32.
- Ladik, D.M. and D.W. Stewart. (2008), 'The contribution continuum', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36 (2), 157–165.

- Lewis, A. and C. Juravle (2010), 'Morals, markets and sustainable investments: A qualitative study of 'champions'', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **93** (3), 483–494.
- Loorbach, D. (2007), *Transition Management: New Mode of Governance for Sustainable Development*, Utrecht, the Netherlands: International Books.
- Lorek, S. and J.H. Spangenberg (2014), 'Sustainable consumption within a sustainable economy: Beyond green growth and green economies', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, **63**, 33–44.
- Markman, G.D., M. Russo, G.T. Lumpkin, P.D.D. Jennings and J. Mair (2016), 'Entrepreneurship as a platform for pursuing multiple goals', A Special Issue on Sustainability, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship. *Journal of Management Studies*, **53** (5), 673–694.
- McLaughlin, P. (2012), 'Ecological modernization in evolutionary perspective', *Organization & Environment*, **25** (2), 178–196.
- Mitra, R. and P.M. Buzzanelli (2017), 'Communicative tensions of meaningful work: The case of sustainability practitioners', *Human Relations*, **70** (5), 594–616.
- Onkila, T., S. Teerikangas, M. Mäkelä and K. Koistinen (2019), 'Sustainability agency: actors attributes and strategies – a systematic review of CSR literature', Paper presented at Corporate Responsibility Research Conference, 12–13 September, 2019, Tampere, Finland.
- O'Rourke, A. (2003), 'A new politics of engagement: Shareholder activism for corporate social responsibility', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, **12** (4), 227–239.
- Papoutsis, A. and M.S. Sodhi. (2020), 'Does disclosure in sustainability reports indicate actual sustainability performance?' *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 260, 121049.
- Patriotta, G., J. Gond and F. Schultz (2011), 'Maintaining legitimacy: Controversies, orders of worth, and public justifications', *Journal of Management Studies*, **48** (8), 1804–1836.
- Peattie, K. and A. Samuel (2018), 'Fairtrade towns as unconventional networks of ethical activism', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **153** (1), 265–282.
- Pesch, U. (2015), 'Tracing discursive space: Agency and change in sustainability transitions', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, **90**, 379–388.
- Pelozo, J. (2009), 'The challenge of measuring financial impacts from investments in corporate social performance', *Journal of Management*, **35** (6), 1518–1541
- Pitelis, C.N. (2009), 'The co-evolution of organizational value capture, value creation and sustainable advantage', *Organization Studies*, **30** (10), 1115–1139.
- Ritzer, G. (2005), *Sociological Theory*, Singapore, McGraw Hill, 5th edition.
- Sarasini, S. and M. Jacob (2014), 'Past, present, or future? Managers' temporal orientations and corporate climate action in the Swedish electricity sector', *Organization & Environment*, **27** (3), 242–262.

Scherer, A.G. and G. Palazzo (2011), 'The new political role of business in a globalized world: A review of a new perspective on CSR and its implications for the firm, governance, and democracy', *Journal of Management Studies*, **48** (4), 899–931

Shepherd, D.A., H. Patzelt and R.A. Baron (2013), "'I care about nature, but...": Disengaging values in assessing opportunities that cause harm', *Academy of Management Journal*, **56** (5), 1251–1273.

Sherwin, S. (2009), 'Relational existence and termination of lives: When embodiment precludes agency', in: *Embodiment and Agency*, Sue Campbell, Letitia Meynell, and Susan Sherwin (Eds.), pp. 145–152. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Sonpar, K., J.M. Handelman and A. Dastmalchian (2009), 'Implementing new institutional logics in pioneering organizations: The burden of justifying ethical appropriateness and trustworthiness', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **90** (3), 345.

Stephenson, J. (2018), 'Sustainability cultures and energy research: An actor centred interpretation-of cultural theory', *Energy Research and Social Science*, **44**, 242–249.

Stones, R. (2005), *Structuration Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Teerikangas, S., T. Onkila, K. Koistinen and M. Mäkelä (eds.) (2021a), *Research Handbook on Sustainability Agency*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Teerikangas, S., T. Onkila, K. Koistinen and M. Mäkelä (2021b), 'Synthesis and future research directions', in Teerikangas, S., T. Onkila, K. Koistinen and M. Mäkelä (eds.) *Research Handbook on Sustainability Agency*, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Teerikangas, S., T. Onkila, K. Koistinen, L. Niemi and M. Mäkelä (2018), 'Agency in sustainability transitions: A closer look at management literatures', A paper presented at the CRR 2018 conference.

Tourish, D. (2014), 'Leadership, more or less? A processual, communication perspective on the role of agency in leadership theory', *Leadership*, **10** (1), 79–98.

van der Vleuten, E. (2018), 'Radical change and deep transitions: Lessons from Europe's infrastructure transition 1815–2015', *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, **32**, 22–32.

Walls, J.L. and P. Berrone (2017), 'The power of one to make a difference: How informal and formal CEO power affect environmental sustainability', *Journal of Business Ethics*, **145** (2), 293–308.

Whiteman, G. and W.H. Cooper (2000), 'Ecological embeddedness', *Academy of Management Journal*, **43** (5), 1265–1282.