Communicative Tensions of Meaningful Work: The Case of Sustainability Practitioners

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• Meaningfulness of work (MoW) continues to be a crucial topic for organization studies (Bowie, 1998; Buzzanell & D’Enbeau, 2013; Cheney et al., 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kuhn et al., 2008; May et al., 2004; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Sverko & Vizek-Vidovic, 1995). However most studies focus on positive aspects, treats MoW as static, or adopt a “factors” approach.

• Environmental sustainability is a “hot” new area of work, yet stymied by social, regulatory, and institutional restraints (Ihlen, 2009; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; May, 2013; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2015; Zorn & Collins, 2007). Relatively unexplored are practitioners’ intersubjective work experiences

**RQ: How do sustainability practitioners find their work meaningful, keeping in mind the tensions at play?**
MoW as Tension-Centered

- Assumes organizational members’ selves are complex, dynamic, and “crystallized” (Ellingson, 2009; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Trethewey et al., 2006; Putnam, 1986)

- Negotiating MoW as ongoing process, not static outcome

- Replacing “factors” approach with one that notes nuanced and contested meaning-making—not merely positive meaning (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Wieland, 2010)

- Foregrounds the political implications of meaningfulness (Broadfoot et al., 2008; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007)

- Sustainability practitioners serve as boundary spanners for diverse publics, and need to temper their passion (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Tams & Marshall, 2011; Wright & Nyberg, 2012)
Method

• Participants recruited via LinkedIn™ professional groups (DeKay, 2009) centered on environmental sustainability

• 45 participants (23 male, 22 female), working in different industries and types of organizations

• Semi-structured interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011): career narratives, daily work experiences, both pleasurable and unsettling work aspects, organization’s reputation, state-of-the-field

• Data analysis based on constructivist grounded theory, attuned to overlaps/conflicts of thematic categories, and participants’ meaning-making of everyday actions (Charmaz, 2004, 2006)
Findings

- Underlying work processes
- Career positioning
- Impacts of sustainability work
1. Processes

- **Enlightening business:** bridge-building to provoke transformation, subject to corporatist logics

- **Stakeholder interaction:** dialogue and translation, exciting new vistas, mixed with technological constraints and emotional risks

- **Political culture:** institutional restraint that also shaped work ethics, honed motivations, and encouraged diverse outreach strategies
I thought, there’s so many things wrong with the world, why don’t I just try to fix one of them and work on it? For a long time I decided that nuclear weapons are evil, and needed to be eradicated, and got myself a job going to Geneva… So, I think there’s a new cause – new theme for my career, and a number of the people, interestingly, who were working on the nuclear issue did actually migrate over to environmental issues…

It [politics] increases your tolerance level to put up with some of the crap… stupid politics and meaningless uses of your time and all the rest, because you’re motivated by some central theme.
2. Impacts

- **Deliverables**: concrete products, services, or processes, but also related to articulating provocative ideas
- **Solution to complex problems**: Mitigate uncertainty, despite open-ended processes and difficulties with mass adoption
It’s been a great experience seeing how this process takes shape, and it’s messy—and I mean that in a good way, because there is no set process. It really is about building relationships, trust, and leadership.
3. Career Positioning

- Valuation as per internal and external standards: finding one’s “niche,” but weighing multiple episodes and viewpoints over time

- Struggles of commitment/passion: acknowledged passion being tested over career trajectory

- Autonomy: flexibility to be innovative, free and take risks, but potentially isolating (and shaped by collective effort in any case)
Like, this week it’s frustrating, because I just got a bunch of writing assignments, and I need to do it, I need the income, but it’s preventing me from reaching out, trying to set up coffee meetings, maybe trying to go to some events here in Silicon Valley. But when I go to these events, I don’t get paid, I’m not doing any work. So, it’s like this feast or famine. The isolation, the unsteady income, and the overall uncertainty is a huge risk that I took.
Discussion

• Workers need not derive MoW despite organizational, social, and political constraints, but because such constraints provoke ongoing “meaning-making” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Buzanell & Lucas, 2013)

• MoW shaped by politics—at level of regulations, affiliation with particular entities (e.g., political parties), as well as ideologies (Cheney et al., 2010; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Mumby, 2005)

• Encourage policymakers and organizational leaders to examine intersubjective meanings related to an emerging field of work, looking beyond just the statistics of sustainability jobs (May, 2013; White et al., 2012)