

Management studies

# On micro foundations of corporate sustainability

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Luna Ansari

# On micro foundations of corporate sustainability

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One of the realms where contradictions manifest in organizations is corporate sustainability, in which managers confront tensions between complex and interconnected concerns for the natural environment, social welfare, and economic prosperity. In this doctoral dissertation, I explore what explains why actors and organizations differ in their understanding of the tension between the three pillars – social, environmental, and economical – of corporate sustainability. This question is approached by considering the affective as well as discursive dynamics of dealing with corporate sustainability. This is a study about the lived experience of the challenges of corporate sustainability.

The first essay characterizes the reconciliation of diverging goals in sustainability from a discursive point. The starting point of this analysis is that a central part of reconciliation takes place through language. The second essay focuses on the affective underpinning of living with tensions of sustainability. In particular, I argue that in the sustainability management context, self-regulation supports managers' capacity to accept and promote new environmental frames. In the third essay, I empirically analyze collective action taking and apply media text to study group-based affect regulation.

Through these essays, I contribute to the understanding of the challenges that individuals face in terms of adapting and adjusting to new ways of considering corporate sustainability. By analyzing the working and living realities of various groups of actors, this study provides a holistic understanding of coping mechanisms in mobilizing responses to corporate sustainability demands. This study reveals the affective dimensions individuals face in their endeavors to take on, promote, and institutionalize new perspectives of looking at the phenomenon of corporate sustainability.

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To all those who do not stop getting excited by what they  
don't yet know

And

To the loving memory of my father and sister



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Helsinki, May 2021

Luna Ansari

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## List of Essays

1. Luna Ansari (unpublished essay). On Reconciliation Strategies of Sustainability Goals.
2. Luna Ansari and Johanna Moisander (unpublished essay). Disrupting the notion of business-as-usual: emotion regulation for creating social change.
3. Luna Ansari (unpublished essay). Leading Change for Sustainability: a Group-based Emotion Regulation approach to Institutional Work.

# **PART 1**

## **Introduction**

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Rationale, background and research question

The role of business has undergone profound transformations in the last few decades. Globalization has not only fragmented the production landscape, but it has also pushed private actors to be accountable for their social and environmental impacts at a global scale. In this context, businesses are considered today not only economic actors, they have also entered the political sphere participating in governance activities and the delivery of public goods (Crane et al., 2008; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Valente & Crane, 2010). The term corporate sustainability signals the transformed nature of the involvement of private actors in social and environmental issues. In fact, organizational initiatives aspiring to create positive social and environmental changes are not uncommon anymore; for-profit organizations are increasingly targeting to design such initiatives to “improve the well-being of communities on local and global levels in such areas as health, race relations, the environment, or economic development” (Bies et al., 2007: 788).

Yet, although the value of participating in such initiatives is widely accepted in the literature, we know little about the underlying processes of how to promote and sustain such initiatives over time (Sharma & Good, 2013). As sustainability pressures occur at a range of different levels, i.e., organizational, industrial, national and global, most studies are conducted at a macro level, and research has mainly focused on how corporate sustainability practices are adopted and diffused across corporations (e.g., Höllerer, 2013; Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995). Little is known about the micro level processes of translation of institutional pressures around sustainability inside firms (Reay et al., 2013).

Indeed, research has shown that most grand challenges, such as climate change, clean energy, or sustainable communities, are systemic in nature (George et al. 2016; Howard-Grenville et al. 2014). Yet, many unsustainable structures and practices have become institutionalized, and addressing them requires us to break with taken-for-granted roles and habitualized practices. Parting with institutionalized systems that are unsustainable opens avenues for social innovation and the prospect for change. At the most fundamental level, corporate social initiatives are targeted to create social betterment while operating in a context that also aspires to achieve profit goals. As such, social and profit

objectives may adhere to tensions between economic and non-economic objectives. Particularly, within a for-profit organizational context, the work of middle managers can be an agentic kind of work and has been conceptualized as critical for the continuation of social initiatives (Sharma & Good, 2013).

Institutional theorists have repeatedly called for research that would further develop our understanding of processes accounting for institutional reproduction and change (Zietsma et al., 2019). In particular, researchers argue that these explanations will be incomplete until we are able to articulate why people are concerned enough to participate in processes that reproduce or change institutions (Zietsma et al., 2019) and that without attending to people's motivations to participate in these processes, institutions will remain abstract and separated from the realities of lived social experiences (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018).

Researchers variously argued that this starting point directs focus towards the skills and resources available to mobilize institutional change (Garud, Jain & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Maguire, Hardy & Lawrence, 2004, Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002), neglecting the critical transition from being a passive actor to becoming an active agent (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009; Seo & Creed 2002). Battilana and D'ahunno (2009) suggest that institutional actors should meet enabling conditions to accomplish such change.

Traditionally, institutional analysis has provided a somewhat simplistic view of individuals at the micro level as the insights about institutional actors were limited to two images of mindless institutional reproducers and successful change champions. As a response to this view to individual and agency, institutional work emerged focusing on how individual actors try to shape institutions and was conceptualized as a distributed phenomenon that appears in daily organizational life (Henfridsson & Yoo, 2014; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Suddaby, Seidl, & Lê, 2013; Zilber, 2013). While the early attempts in studying institutional actors focused on long-range planning and the successful implementation of the plan by organized and powerful actors, often called institutional entrepreneurs (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), institutional work implies the notion of incremental strategizing in everyday interaction.



This line of research highlights how individual actors draw on resources and subject positions to build up a bottom-up change in a way that furthers their interest and in this line, examines various strategies i.e., creating (Zietsma & McKnight, 2009), maintaining (Hamann & Bertels, 2017; McCann, Granter, Hyde, & Hassard, 2013; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011; Zilber, 2011), and disrupting (Maguire & Hardy, 2009) institutions separately as the main goal, and sometimes in different combinations as a set of goals (Collien, Sieben, & Müller-Camen, 2016; Daudigeos, 2013; Fortwengel, 2017; Jones & Massa, 2013; Ramirez, 2013).

While in the beginning, studies of institutional work focused on the actions and interactions of organizations (Holm, 1995; Leblebici et al., 1991), the more recent literature systematically analyzes the micro foundations, i.e., actions, subjective experiences, and interactions of individuals while working on institutions (e.g. Labelle & Rouleau, 2017; Moisander et al., 2016; Nilsson, 2015; Radaelli et al, 2017; Rojas, 2010). In particular research has highlighted that in regard to deinstitutionalization and institutional change, cognitive awareness of an institution's flaws may not be sufficient to motivate change efforts; actors interacting with institutions are not only guided by their cognitive and rational thinking, but also by "passions and desires (that) are not reducible to the pursuit of rational interests" (Voronov & Vince, 2012: 59). Emotions have thus been found to be a critical factor in motivating people to work to sustain, disrupt, or create institutional orders (Voronov & Vince, 2012). Recently, institutionalists who foray into the emotional side of agency (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed, Hudson, Okhuysen, & Smith-Crowe, 2014; Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010; Voronov & Vince, 2012) have opened up new territory for studying the change processes.

In this vein, this thesis aims to build an understanding of institutional work through which actors bridge and potentially resolve contradictions. I seek to look at the role that emotions and their management play in building support for institutional change. The aim is to find out how institutional work is affectively grounded and how the affect-laden work can be enacted through language. I take corporate sustainability initiatives within a for-profit context as a suitable empirical setting to explore and address these questions.

This thesis is thus about the lived experience of actors as they engage in changing the institutional framework of the hydropower energy debate, which is taking place in Sweden and Finland. The need to dismantle and change existing energy provision infrastructure is influenced by collaborations among private organizations, policy makers, and environmentalists to address the social, economic, and environmental needs that have arisen through such energy transition. As such, within this energy debate, there are opportunities to explore what organizational adaptation and resilience means under significant disruptions to “business as usual”.

Through an inductive qualitative study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989), I study actors’ work in transcending the contradiction of social and profit demands through their intentional work. This thesis focuses on the dynamics of dealing with challenges of corporate social initiatives. It offers a snapshot of actors’ struggles of embracing tensions of sustainability, and it explores their struggles in mobilizing new responses to environmental demands. In essence, this thesis attempts to analyze the linguistic and affective dynamics of coping with and sustaining through the challenge of responding to different demands of sustainability. By analyzing the working and living realities of the managers and environmental activists, this study provides a holistic understanding of coping mechanisms and responses to the challenges of sustainability.

The gaps identified above and the lack of research on the internal processes involved in the enactment of institutional pressures around corporate sustainability motivated the overall research question:

*How are social initiatives sustained and embedded within a for-profit context?*

The main overall research question is then specified in more detail in terms of three sub-questions:

*How do managers reconcile the contradiction between social and profit in their talk? [Essay 1]*

*How does regulation of emotions support the actors’ agency? [Essay 2]*

*What is the role of group based emotion regulation in the disruption of institutions? [Essay 3]*

I address the above research questions in the three essays that form the body of this thesis. Taking the focus of the thesis on how actors in a contested setting deal with the apparently diverging social and profit goals, I primarily study this phenomenon from the institutional work perspective.

**Summary of essays.** Essay 1 examines words, structure of vocabularies and ordering to shed light on how strategies of reconciliation produced by organizational actors develop and change. It takes a language perspective to reconcile the social and profit logics and studies the mechanisms that support judgment and decision making under conditions of complexity. After identifying the reconciliation strategies, I further study how these structures are cognitively characterized. In the course of this paper, I argue that words or groups of words enable access to concepts and through that, to institutions. As words not only store institutionalized knowledge but also activate it, studying the properties of words enable us to gain access to a better understanding of institutions by examining the meaning of words. The role of institutions as carriers of meaning arises in that institutions will be understandable for individual actors as they carry meaning and give rise to collective norms. The way social actors think and talk about corporate sustainability has an influence on the process through which it is developed and enacted in organizations (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Haack et al., 2012). This essay provides an opening to the thesis discussion about emotions and agency of actors in essays 2 and 3.

Essay 2 focuses on how organizational members deal with the different external demands of sustainability from an affective perspective. Empirically, I adopt a person-centric conceptualization of corporate sustainability (Rupp, 2011; Rupp et al., 2013) and analyze how individuals experience sustainability challenges by taking an active role in extending the boundaries of corporate initiatives. This essay elaborates on why engaging in the “work” of corporate sustainability is affectively challenging and studies how individuals sustain such practices.

In Essay 3, the analytical focus moves to the actors outside organizations as an increasing number of activists try to get energy producing corporations engaged in more

responsible actions regarding social, environmental, and ethical issues. In recent years, activism has become even more important for addressing ecological sustainability since globalized financial markets and multinational corporations are less affected by national regulations and supervisory efforts. Environmental activists are, along with other stakeholders, one part of the institutional environment of organizations that partially answers the question, “why would a corporation ever act in socially responsible ways” (Campbell, 2007: 947). Accordingly, in Essay 3, the focus is on group-based emotions. This study is an analysis of external stakeholders (environmental activists) to legitimize new energy regulatory institutions.

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is written in the form of a collection of essays and has two main parts. The first part comprises of the main theoretical background, methodological choices, summary of the three essays, and a discussion of findings. The second part presents the three essays.

The first part is organized into five chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction and an overview of the study, followed by a rationale of why this study is warranted. It introduces the research questions, the structure, and the empirical research context of the thesis. The second chapter provides the theoretical basis and the concepts of the thesis. It has been organized according to three broader themes: agency and institutional work, emotions in institutional theory, and conceptualization of corporate sustainability. The third chapter on methodology describes research design, choice of methods, and data sources. This chapter concludes with reflections on the researcher’s role. The fourth chapter will present summaries of the aims, focus, main findings, and contributions of each of the essays. This part will shortly discuss the theoretical concepts in detail in the particular sub-field that each article is concerned with. Chapter five of the thesis presents a meta-discussion on the overall concepts used in the study. This part will begin with a summary of the main findings of the thesis, followed by an explanation of the theoretical linkage between the four essays. It provides a conceptual discussion of the relationship between language and managing tensions, as well as legitimacy and emotional work. It ends with suggestions for future research and a brief conclusion for the thesis as a whole.

## **2. Theories and concepts**

This thesis draws on the theoretical grounding of the extant literature in institutional work, emotions in institutional theory, and corporate sustainability. By institutions, I refer to the more or less established rules and conventions that govern collective action by providing templates for cognition, emotion, behavior and actions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011: 53).

### **2.1 Institutional work**

Institutional theory has traditionally focused on the stabilizing nature of institutions (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Oliver, 1991) and examined their guiding qualities (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983; Mayer & Rowan, 1977). More recent institutional theorists have drawn attention to how organizations and institutions change, drawing on notions of institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurs, and institutional work (Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009a; Levy & Scully, 2007).

Within institutional theory, two research streams that have particularly examined agency in relation to institutional change are institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al., 2009, Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2008) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009). The defining theme in institutional entrepreneurship is that the agent has partaken in the institutional change and the participation may be both intentional and unintentional (Battilana et al., 2009). While institutional entrepreneurship has an agentic focus, institutional work looks more into the types and nature of actions within an institutional context and is interested in mundane activities and setbacks of working on institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011).

The standard account of institutional work, as defined by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006: 215), refers to “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” and has been instrumental in orchestrating a shift in the focus of attention from the “relationships among organizations and the field in which they operate” to “understanding how action affects institutions” (Lawrence et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2006). This shift brings into sharper relief the active “micro-foundations” of institutions (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009) – the “work” performed by individuals –

through which macro-level institutions are built, maintained, and changed (see Dacin et al., 2010; Creed et al., 2010; Lok & De Rond, 2013; Gray et al., 2015).

More recent literature systematically analyzes the micro foundations such as actions, subjective experiences, and interactions of individuals while working on institutions (e.g. Labelle & Rouleau, 2017; Moisander et al., 2016; Nilsson, 2015; Radaelli et al., 2017; Rojas, 2010). Nilsson (2015) develops the concept of positive institutional work for better understanding purpose, institutional work, and the creation and maintenance of social goods. Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016) examine how individuals work on timing norms by manipulating experiences of temporality and changing institutions. Dacin et al. (2010), for example, show how the institution of the British class system is maintained and reinforced through formal dining rituals enacted in colleges of the University of Cambridge. By grounding their analysis firmly at the micro-social level, they provide a vivid insight into individuals' experiences of institutionalization. In another study, Lok and De Rond (2013) use similar ethnographic methods to examine the micro processes which underpin institutional persistence (the Oxbridge Boat Race). They recover vivid insights into the practices through which the institution of the Oxbridge "Boat Race" is "inoculated" against institutional breakdown (Lok & De Rond, 2013).

Specifically, Voronov and Vince (2012) integrated emotions into the analysis of institutional work and developed a typology of interactions between emotions and cognition. In this regard, researchers have looked into various types of emotions such as shame or moral emotions. Creed and colleagues (2014) theorized on shame, power, intersubjective surveillance, and self-regulation in institutional reproduction and change processes. Wright, Zammuto, and Liesch (2017) explored the role of moral emotions of individuals for maintaining the values of a profession and developing a model of value maintenance work.

As institutional work perspective provides a framework which enables the capture of individuals' lived and subjective experiences of institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), it has been instrumental in linking individuals' micro-level practices with macro-level institutions (Creed et al., 2014; Gray et al., 2015). A key concept for the institutional work perspective in linking individuals' micro-level practices with

macro-level institutions is the idea of actorhood and the range of actors who engage in institutional work. Research has found that various constellations of actors face various opportunities and challenges, experience different emotions and conflicts, and are able to achieve different institutional outcomes (Hampel et al., 2017). Hampel and colleagues (2017) argue that we have growing insight into the inhabited worlds of individuals and actors that engage in institutional work, but a less developed understanding of when, why and how actors work together to shape institutions. In particular, we know less about the limits of groups of professionals and the circumstances under which their power is curbed (Hampel et al., 2017).

In this thesis, by exploring the connection between emotions and institutional work, I depart from the theoretical views that assume that institutional work is the outcome of a mainly rational and strategic process (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Willmott, 2011). On the contrary, by joining recent efforts to understand the “micro-foundations of institutional work, I aim to look at how “ interests are implicated in institutional enactments ” (Creed et al., 2014). Specifically, I consider how institutional work can be an emotionally-charging endeavor, how emotion work and specific emotions can enhance such an endeavor. Furthermore, by looking at the different constellations of actors in this study, I aim to contribute to the call for further research into homogeneous and heterogeneous collective of actors providing a more balanced view into the role of actors in institutional work (cite).

### **2.1.1 Foundations for agency**

Even though scholars of institutional theory have called for more significant attention to the micro foundations of institutions for more than two decades (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), the role of agency and social structure in the formation of social realities has long been subject to debate in social theory (Dimaggio, 1988). On one hand, social structure is conceived to form individual action (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983) and thus limit forms of agency and, on the other hand, institutional change that has seemingly been triggered or even led by actors, has been empirically studied (see Battilana et al., 2009 for an overview). As action traditionally has been seen as informed and shaped by the institutions within which the actor is embedded, a debate on the paradox of embedded agency emerged, raising the question of how one can

influence the institution within which one is embedded (Holm, 1995; Jepperson, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002).

Institutional theory has conceptualized agency as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement” (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theorized three main aspects of agency. The habitual (iterational) aspect of agency is orientated to the past and reflects the actors’ selective responses to previously learnt templates for action. The imaginative (“projectivite”) aspect reflects individuals’ “capacity to imagine alternative future possibilities”. The judgement (“practical evaluation”) aspect reflects individuals’ “capacity to conceptualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998: 962).

The difficulty to ideate change and impediment to perceive competition between competing logics has been discussed in the paradox of embedded agency (Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2008), where the actors cannot change the existing institution by virtue of being embedded in it. This paradox is related to actors’ ability and willingness to identify alternative arrangements and thus create, maintain, or disrupt the existing institutions. Efforts to solve the paradox have identified a range of elements that influence agency.

On the one hand, research has focused on exogenous elements as triggers that evoke agency. Scholars have shown that field characteristics influence agency as well (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Seo & Creed, 2002; Dorado, 2005). For example, it has been shown that the degree of heterogeneity of the organizational field (Sewell, 1992; Clemens & Cook, 1999; D’Aunno, Succi & Alexander, 2000; Seo & Creed, 2002), its degree of institutionalization (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), and whether the field is isolated or not (Dorado, 2005), affects the actor’s agency, making social change less likely.

In addition to these, research has focused on more endogenous triggers that can cause disruption in consciousness. Previous explanations within the institutional work stream offer three alternative accounts to explain how some actors can ideate alternative possibilities for their field, while most cannot.



The first explanation focuses on the “social skills” (Fligstein, 2001) of the potential actor, suggesting that some individuals are both more sensitive than others to the intersubjective relationships of people in social structures and more knowledgeable of the kind of actions that would be proper and legitimate within the field. While this explanation might serve for certain actors and fields, in extreme oppressive situations, the social skills mentioned in the literature seem to be absent. A second approach in institutional theory has focused on the social position in the field, explaining that actors with privileged access to the different forms of capital are in fact, less susceptible to institutional pressures to conform (Battilana, 2006). Embeddedness in multiple contexts and networks can provide exposure to and encourage consideration of different logics. This explanation may be useful to understand actors belonging to the elites, but it does not seem to be helpful to explain low-power actors’ agency in highly constraining social systems. Finally, the third explanation, offered by Suddaby, Viale and Gendrum (2016), points to the reflexive ability of actors. They maintain that reflexivity, an individual and social phenomenon, varies across individuals depending on their position in the field and their social skills. They observe that it is more likely that an individual with a high social position (i.e., member of the elite) and with more social skills will be more reflective, and thereby more capable of institutional work (Suddaby et al., 2016: 43).

As actors are viewed as being “constrained by institutions, yet still capable of artfully navigating and shaping them (Voronov & Vince, 2012: 58; Lawrence et al., 2009), the conceptualization of actors’ dually embedded agency in foremost implies overcoming the “paradox of embedded agency” (Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002). Those who occupy or “inhabit” (Bourdieu, 2000) institutions are considered “reflexive, goal orientated and capable” (Lawrence et al., 2013: 1024; Voronov & Weber, 2016). Recently, Lawrence and colleagues (2013) called for research trying to theoretically and empirically explain how such reflexivity arises. They argue that an exaggerated focus on the skillful means deployed by the actors might undermine the cognitive and emotional efforts necessary to give birth to such a reflexive shift in consciousness (Lawrence et al., 2013).

As a part of this effort constitutes emotional components as antecedents of institutional work, in this study, I seek to elaborate how emotions enable actors to exercise

agency and how they are used as a form and force to engage with the social world and to transform its salient structures.

## **2.2 Emotions and institutions**

In reconnecting with institutional theory phenomenological roots, studies of institutions have recently started to consider the role of emotions in institutional processes (e.g., Voronov & Vince, 2012; Creed et al., 2014; Moisander et al., 2015; Voronov & Weber, 2016). Emotions are widely acknowledged as being central to individuals' experiences of institutions (DiMaggio, 1997; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Voronov and Vince argue that "emotional experiences do not merely represent reaction to institutions "out there" but are complicit in the work of maintaining, disrupting, or creating institutions" (2012: 61). Emotions are thus shown to play an important role in motivating actions and behaviors aimed at the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Studies of emotions and institutions suggest that further advances in institutional theory can be made by simultaneously broadening the scope and deepening the level of analysis in order to capture the essence of institutional inhabitation (Bourdieu, 2000). By focusing on the phenomenological experience of individual emotions and their different action-orientations, it is possible to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role that emotions play in institutions.

Yet, in order to understand the micro foundations of institutionalization, we need to attend to how people experience the institutional milieu in which they operate (Suddaby, 2010). In other words, the role of emotions in these processes should receive full attention (Voronov, 2014). By describing individuals as cultural dopes or change champions, extant work has masked both the emotional impact that institutions have on individuals' lives (Creed et al., 2010; Creed et al., 2014) and the motivational force that emotions have for stimulating micro practices dealing with institutional arrangements (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Toubiana, Zietsma & Bradshaw, 2013). While we know that organizational events, through their creation of co-presence and sense of immediacy, can be highly emotional (Turner & Stets, 2006), less has been studied about how emotions allow events to bring about institutional effects.

First, emotions have implications for participation (Weick, 1993) in institutional processes, thus revealing what is important to these persons and what motivates their actions (Creed et al, 2014; de Sousa, 1987; Voronov & Vince, 2012) or lack thereof. The bases for human actions are the meaning that emerges through interactions embedded in the various types of emotional bonds (Creed et al., 2014). Emotions shape our understanding of the world and, more importantly, they shape our decisions and their consequences (Gould, 2009). It is known that “people make judgments not only by evaluating the consequences and their probability of occurring, but also and even sometimes primarily at a gut or emotional level” (Bechara, 2004: 30), a claim that has a robust foundation and empirical support in neurosciences (Clore, 1994; Schwarz, 2000). Consequently, emotions influence agency by shaping the way people make sense of their environment and their position in it. “The experience of emotion, affects, the perceptions of meaning in the world, and conceptual knowledge about emotion are bound together at a moment in time, producing an intentional state where affect is experienced as having been caused by some object or situation” (Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007: 377).

Second, emotions help people connect with one another, and help social bonds develop and endure (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Consequently, emotions contribute to creating the conditions necessary for innovations in collective sense-making and collective action taking (Gould, 2009). Indeed, the “local affairs of existing members of a field can both sustain and prompt shifts in practices and conventions” (Powell & Colyvas, 2008), and emotions are the main mechanism by which social bonds are created, recreated, and abandoned. It is through these bonds that new ideas and possibilities develop because long lasting, predictable, and stable bonds are indispensable for any sustainable collective action, and many of these bonds are based on or influenced by emotions.

Scholars have addressed how emotions drive individuals’ apprehension of institutional contradictions (Voronov & Yorks, 2015), institutional work (Voronov & Vince, 2012), institutional control and resistance (Hallett, 2010). They have explored the institutional bases for specific emotions, such as love (Friedland, Mohr, Roose, & Gardinali, 2014), shame (Creed et al., 2014), and compassion (Miller, Grimes, McMullen, & Vogus, 2012), as well as the role emotions play in evaluations of legitimacy (Clemente & Roulet, 2015; Haack, Pfarrer, & Scherer, 2014; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014). Focusing on single

emotions, Creed and colleagues (2014) argued that shame shapes actors' commitment to and compliance with the status quo. Moisander and colleagues (2016) showed how powerful institutional actors arouse, regulate, and organize emotions to create support and acceptance for new political and economic institutions. Voronov & Vince (2012: 66) grasp the emotional scripts with the notion of "fantasmic frames" shared between field members, which reflect and coordinate actors' desires. Lawrence & Suddaby (2006) explained that when cognitive and fantasmic frames support one another, individuals can become emotionally motivated to pursue institutional maintenance work. Despite the recent advances, our understanding of the role of individual emotions in institutions remains limited. This is particularly true of emotions that play a role in the conduct of agency.

Given that institutions reproduce or change "through the everyday activities of individuals" (Powell & Colyvas, 2008), emotions directly impact a person's perceptions and ultimately, the understanding of her social field and her position in it, and the actions s/he will take as a consequence to challenge it or not. This is particularly relevant for institutional theory, and more so when studying different groups of actors (Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

### **2.2.1 The approach to emotions**

As a fundamental part of organizational life, emotions are broad and complex phenomena, which are conceptualized into various categories and perspectives (Jasper, 2006). In general, emotions are considered as internal mental states representing evaluative, valenced reactions to events, agents, or objects that vary in intensity. They are generally short lived, intense, and directed at some external stimuli. Although different theorists conceptualize emotions by emphasizing different physiological, subjective, social or motivational factors, there is a general consensus that emotion is a psychological construct consisting of five components: (1) cognitive appraisal or evaluation of a situation; (2) the physiological component of arousal; (3) a subjective feeling state; (4) a motivational component, including behavior in-tensions or readiness; and (5) motor expression (Scherer, 1984; see Plutchik, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991, for reviews of emotion).

Emotions can be difficult to study because they are transitory, subjective, difficult to describe, and analyze within the context of macro-level institutions. Within institutional

theory, emotions have been studied around various theoretical themes which are accordingly linked to three analytical levels: first, emotions at an individual level (e.g., states of affections such as love, hatred), second, emotions at an inter-individual level (viewed as a collective process such as fraternal solidarity) (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005: 506), and third, emotions at a transpersonal level (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005) that is to say, a level beyond the individuals, and defined by structure or field.

In the development of this dissertation, distinguishing between two theoretical concepts has been important. The two theoretical themes which have the closest conjunction to the theoretical thread of this thesis are emotional work and emotional labor, which will be discussed next.

***Emotional labor.*** Most of the studies on the two distinguished categories of work-related emotional communication – emotion work and emotional labor – have focused on individuals’ emotional communication in their interpersonal interactions with clients, patients, or customers. Hochschild (1983) introduced the construct of emotional labor, distinguishing it from other acts of emotion regulation by its exchange value (i.e., emotional labor is “sold for a wage”) (7). Grandey and Gabriel (2015) explained that emotional labor represents “an occupational category of the emotional effort or labor to perform that job, and the interpersonal expressions as the fruits of the labor,” summarizing this idea as including three components: emotional requirements, emotion regulation, and emotion performance (324).

The two main studied types of emotional labor are surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). *Surface acting* is when workers do not feel the emotion that they are expected to display in their employment positions, but modify their emotional expressions to convey the expected emotion. For example, it is surface acting if a worker smiles at clients when actually feeling annoyed by them (e.g., a sales person dealing with an ornery client). In *deep acting*, a worker does not initially feel the expected emotion, but internalizes it to facilitate meeting the emotion display rules for their position. For example, it is deep acting when a worker puts aside their own feelings that are incompatible with the expected emotion display to conjure up the appropriate emotions to generate the target display of emotion for their work (e.g., a wedding planner in the midst of a bitter divorce). Both of these types of

emotional labor are said to implicate inauthentic emotion displays because they do not arise from the employee naturally. As such, Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) referred to surface acting and deep acting as “faking in bad faith” and “faking in good faith,” respectively.

Apart from these two main types – surface acting and deep acting – introduced by Hochschild (1983), a third type that has not received as much attention in emotional labor research as surface and deep acting have is automatic regulation (Martínez-Iñigo, Totterdell, Alcover, & Holman, 2007).

**Emotion work.** Miller et al. (2007) introduced the term emotion work to describe emotion that is “part of the job,” but a “natural outgrowth of job-related communication” (233). The construct of emotion work was conceived of as the natural emotion that emerges in interactions with clients or patients in human services industries (e.g., health care, social work) (Miller, 2002).

Miller and colleagues (2007) distinguished emotional labor and emotion work as inauthentic emotion versus authentic emotion, respectively. However, this is an oversimplification of the differences between these two constructs when accounting for the role of authentic emotion in the emotional labor of automatic regulation. A more accurate distinction between the two constructs can be made by focusing on the impetus for the emotional communication associated with each of them. Emotion work involves emotions that arise as a consequence of work-related interpersonal interactions, resulting in a responsive emotional communication. Comparatively, in emotional labor, the emotional communication is responsive to organizational or occupational norms imposing emotion display rules for the work-related interpersonal interaction.

Although both automatic regulation and emotion work (the next category of work-related emotional communication to be described below) involve authentic emotions, automatic regulation is distinguishable from emotion work because the natural emotions of emotion work arise from the work for which one is paid (i.e., the work evokes emotion), as opposed to constituting the work for which one is paid (i.e., the regulation or expression of emotion is the work).

Emotion work has not been researched as broadly as emotional labor. To date, it has only been featured in research by scholars in organizational communication (e.g., Miller et al., 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012) or with an academic background in communication (e.g., Snyder, 2009, 2012). Additionally, emotion work has primarily been researched in the context of human service workers' interactions with patients or clients. Although there is a wide variety of emotions that may be evoked in interactions with patients/clients, the two that have received the most scholarly attention are compassion (i.e., the feeling of sympathy towards another with the desire to help) and empathy (i.e., the feeling of understanding the subjective state of another person) (Merriam-Webster, 2014). In the context of work-related emotional communication, the communicative role of empathy and compassion was studied – namely, empathic communication and compassionate communication.

As perceiving and managing emotions are critical for organizational outcomes (Huy, 2012), it is not surprising that empirical studies explore how individuals manage (or regulate) their emotions and how different regulation strategies influence firm's outcomes. Recently, Fink and Yolles (2015) proposed a process model of affect regulation within the context of Mergers and Acquisitions which consists of three stages of affect regulation: identification (affective awareness), elaboration of affect which includes generating emotional responses to and execution and capacity to organize action. In another study, Friedrich and Wüstenhagen (2017) drawing on a five-stage-model studied how managers and companies say goodbye to unsustainable practices that are very dear to them. They showed that the very strong emotion of grief, that is an emotion triggered by a perceived irreversible loss, is regulated by organizational members.

As Voronov and Vince note, it is challenging to attend to emotions at a micro-level without simultaneously “divorcing them from the social structure that shapes and is recursively influenced by them” (2012: 58; see also Calhoun, 2001).

I therefore connect with the recent interest in “social emotions” in institutions which has provided scholars with insights into specific emotions “that pertain to the state of social relations that hold communities together in institutional processes” (Creed et al., 2014: 278) as well as how different social emotions inspire different forms of institutional engagement and disengagement. Drawing on this perspective, emotions function as “a micro-technology

of power” that encourage people “to gain agency in creating, transforming, and disrupting institutions” (Moisander, Hirsto, & Fahy, 2016: 5). Recent studies have investigated shame (Creed et al., 2014), indirect aggression (Kent, Jordan, & Troth, 2014), and different emotions felt while bullying and being bullied (DeJordy & Barrett, 2014). In this thesis, I link emotions to institutions through a relational approach whereby emotions are conceived as occurring within particular interactions and are both outcomes of social interactions. Emotions in this view are conceptualized as a social phenomenon that are created relative to another person, and the stimuli for emotional reaction come from the company of other people.

The theoretical thread of this dissertation recognizes that social emotions can also involve complex patterns of mixed emotions or find their expression through shared anxieties, social defenses, and processes of projective identification, and in connections between fantasy and power. As my study is undertaken in energy debate in Sweden, where tensions persist between old and new institutional forms, I am able to consider the interplay between “the state of social relations” (Creed et al., 2014: 278) and social relations associated with the energy debate.

### **2.3 Conceptualizing sustainability as the context**

Corporate sustainability is a field characterized by new sets of expectations for corporations to fulfill economic, environmental, and social goals. It is characterized by uncertainty and although sustainability is now considered a leading issue in business, there is still a great deal of confusion around its definition, as organizational members experience difficulty in making sense of the concept (Nijhof & Jeurissen, 2006). CSR is often seen as an umbrella term for a rather ambiguous concept (Matten & Moon, 2008), as Okoye (2009: 613) defines corporate sustainability as “an essentially contested concept”. Multinational enterprises, while navigating a complex globalized environment, deal with conflicting institutional demands regarding corporate sustainability issues (Scherer et al., 2013). Firms face contradicting ethical, social, and business logics when managing sustainability activities (Bjerregaard & Lauring, 2013).

Margolis and Walch (2003) pointed out the increasingly complex tensions between financial and social interests. Globalization has further intensified contradictory demands



on organizations (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Changes in the institutional environments have transformed the way organizations maintain their legitimacy in this new international context (Scherer et al., 2013). Externally, they need to comply with formal and informal institutional pressures (e.g., legal, cultural, ideological demands) at different levels (e.g., global, national, industry). Internally, subsidiaries are also pressured to conform to established organizational practices (Kostova & Roth, 2002). Organizations operating in multiple institutional environments need to develop effective responses when facing conflicting institutional demands (Kraatz & Block, 2011). A considerable amount of literature has been published on the external institutional drivers for corporate responsibility and engagement in sustainable projects (e.g., Campbell, 2006; Chih et al., 2010; Lee, 2011). As an example, Campbell (2007) has found that firms are more likely to act in a responsible way under a set of economic (e.g., healthy corporations and economies) and institutional conditions (e.g., strong state regulative system, self-regulation culture in industry, NGO monitoring). The different corporate sustainability and responsibility pressures occur at a range of different levels: global, national and industry. Most studies in this field were conducted on a macro level and generally examine the response to institutional pressures across firms. However, we know less about the micro level processes of translation of institutional pressures around corporate sustainability, as there is a lack of research on the internal context within which corporate sustainability is embedded (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Jackson and Apostolakou, 2010; Richter, 2011). In particular, the role of organizational actors as conduits of institutional pressures has often been ignored (Lee, 2011).

Existing research (Arjaliès, 2010; Markowitz, Cobb, & Hedley, 2012) distinguishes between socially responsible laggards and leaders by relating them to a finance logic that focuses on efficiency and a social welfare logic that articulates social and environmental concerns (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Socially responsible laggards are those firms that draw primarily on the finance logic and do not incorporate much of the social welfare logic; the strategy and practices of socially responsible laggards hardly differ from the strategy and practices of traditional investment firms (Haigh & Hazelton, 2004; Soederberg, 2009). By contrast, socially responsible leaders are hybrid organizations (Pache & Santos, 2013) that incorporate both logics; they develop a distinct

strategy and distinct practices by drawing on both the finance and the social welfare logic (Bengtsson, 2008; Sparkes & Cowton, 2004).

In a recent review of the psychological micro foundations of corporate social responsibility literature, Gond et al. (2017) highlight the rapid growth in research studying how social and environmental responsibilities affect individuals. The review highlights three main areas of research into corporate social responsibility, “drivers”, “evaluation” and “reaction” studies. “Drivers” studies, for example, show the ways in which corporate sustainability is seen as a source of belonging or meaningful employment (e.g., Valentine & Fleishman, 2008; Brammer et al., 2007), whereas “evaluation” studies are concerned with sense-making, framing, and affective understanding, and “reaction” studies try to show that corporate social responsibility causes certain behaviors in a firm. Different to the “drivers” approach, “evaluation” studies are less likely to understand corporate social responsibility as simply an attractive prospect and instead seek the nuance and tensions apparent when individuals work and engage with corporate sustainability (Wright & Nyberg, 2012).

Such research has taken theoretical cues from institutional theory, and the level of analysis and core explanations is often the agentic potential of individuals undertaking institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Dahlmann and Grosvold (2017) are explicit in this regard, looking at the ways in which environmental managers reconcile (or do not reconcile) “market-based” and “emerging environmental” institutional goals by successfully blending or actively decoupling the practices of corporate sustainability from the rhetoric or principles of certain initiatives. Similarly, Kok et al. (2017) note the competing goals of “sustainability” and “the market”, and highlight the ways in which individuals work to interpret and translate these goals depending on their normative beliefs (Greenwood et al., 2011) or membership of a particular subculture.

Yet, within the existing literature in corporate sustainability, research has tended to overlook the more emotional and nonconscious elements of working with sustainability. Kok et al. (2017: 30), comment how “*Project meetings were regularly overflowing with frustration and emotion*”, but this observation is not unpacked in any great detail.

In this thesis, I study how different goals around corporate sustainability are translated within firms and how coping with diverging goals is an affective practice. I draw

from institutional work perspectives to analyze how organizational actors balance tensions between the traditional expectations towards financial goals and their aspiration and self-description to pursue these goals in a socially and environmentally concerned manner.

### **3. Methodology**

To obtain rich information and depth of understanding on these dynamics, I focused on a single industry, the hydropower industry. To facilitate the exploration of a phenomenon within its context and to exploit a variety of data allowing revealing and understanding multiple facets of the phenomenon, a case study has been conducted (Scapens, 1990; Baxter & Jack, 2008). I explore the main research questions around a case study of the renewal of hydropower energy acts in Sweden and Finland. The analysis is undertaken within the hydropower sector which in recent years presents a structural and systemic change.

#### **3.1 Hydropower: A concession change process**

In this section, I introduce the main contexts of the thesis – the hydropower energy debate, the organizations involved, and the actors whose perspectives were relevant for the research questions.

This analysis focuses on an energy debate that is taking place in Sweden. In 2010, Sweden generated 67 000 GWh of electricity from hydropower, making it the biggest hydropower producer in the European Union and the tenth biggest worldwide (IEA, 2012). Today, hydropower energy production constitutes 45% of electricity production in Sweden and is known as an important fossil-fuel free, renewable source of electricity. At the same time, the scale of hydropower production means that roughly three-quarters of the total river discharge in the country's largest river systems is either moderately or strongly affected by fragmentation from dams and water regulations. The negative ecological effects of hydropower production on the ecosystems of the affected river systems have been well documented. This means that hydropower production can cause ecological damages that require mitigating measures in order to comply with Swedish and EU environmental legislations.

The existing institutional frameworks of hydropower are deemed too restrictive. To change any of the operating conditions of a hydropower station or dam and to renovate and repower the old ones, legal action is required to modify and regulate such conditions in the form of granted concession. Various actors and organizations with interests connected to hydropower production are involved in the ongoing process of changing the institutional framework for regulating the hydropower, in order to ensure that any proposed changes to the institutions or rules are in line with their interests and objectives. Even though the Swedish hydropower sector has evolved since 1990, recently, the debate has been more polarized between the environmental activists and NGOs on one side and electricity producing organizations on the other.

It can be argued that in the Swedish context, where the energy sector was deregulated in 1996 and energy is traded in a marketplace, organizations in the sector should, and do, operate according to market logic where profit maximization and shareholder value are key interests (Rudberg, 2013-1). Interviews with representatives of leading energy companies as part of research carried out on the Swedish energy sector supports the following idea: “It is our obligation to our shareholders to create the maximum value possible in our production facilities” (Rönnborg, 2009: 118).

Yet, at the same time, a fundamental alteration in energy provision physical infrastructure is demanded by the environmental activists and public authorities and is nonetheless shifting the playing field for existing organizations. The arguments hereby invite the electricity industries to take a higher responsibility by mitigating the negative ecological impacts in the production sites for the threatened biodiversity. As a consequence of these debates and in order to find a sound solution, policy makers have tried to actively get engaged in dialogue with actors from both sides, in order to make concrete measures to renovate and repower existing hydropower installations and refurbish the aging dams.

As of the beginning of 2014, environmental policy makers have tried to bring the two sides of this debate (members of environmental NGOs and energy organizations) together and there have been regular official meetings.

In the concession change process of institutions and rules governing hydropower production, two types of organizations generally initiate and are active in legitimization: the

hydropower producing operators and the public authorities responsible for safeguarding environmental and other societal interests.

To explore the role of emotional components in institutional work, I focus on hydropower energy change policy, a setting where actors struggle at both mobilization and stability, and emotion is used both for mobilization and conservation of the status quo. My study takes advantage of this diversity of actors' emotional strategies to explore the underlying mechanisms of discourse and emotional appeals in institutional work.

### **3.2 Actors and organizations**

Five multinational organizations operating in Sweden and Finland were selected for the exploration of the research questions and their responses to social and environmental demands within the context of the hydropower energy debate. What characterizes these firms is that they operate in the sustainable energy production sector, and they all have ongoing challenges in mitigating the environmental impacts of their hydropower energy production process located in Finland and Sweden. According to the environmental activists and regarding the challenges that they face, these five chosen organizations have higher commitments to their shareholders than to their non-shareholding stakeholders, as activists are in constant negotiations to convince these firms to take further environmental actions. These organizations are active in various energy sectors: solar energy, fossil fuel, hydropower energy, wind power, and electricity.

Among the various actors involved, I focus on two groups: the environmental activists and the managers in energy producing organizations.

The activists engaged in anti-corporate type of activism, the NGO in this study, are a group of actors that mainly try to impact environmental authorities and politicians, in order to hinder and stop installments of further hydropower facilities at the river sites. Their vision is to protect the nature's ecosystem. The energy production facilities interfere with the natural habitat and ecosystem of rivers and are not reversible. This NGO has been active since 1976 in Sweden. When this NGO was founded, most Swedish rivers were impacted as they were used for hydroelectric power, and the rest were threatened by hydroelectric expansion. Among their activities, the NGO members inform politicians, authorities, and

the general public to participate in various consultations and seminars, participate in court talks, act as advisors to fisheries associations and carry out investigations of existing hydroelectric permits.

The environmental activists demand a fundamental alteration in energy provision physical infrastructure, and this is nonetheless shifting the playing field for existing organizations. They aim to make the Swedish public and policy makers aware of the value of free rivers and the disadvantage of hydropower. These actors argue against hydropower based on environmental grounds and invite the electricity producing corporations in the energy industry to take further responsibility in terms of old hydropower infrastructure. They further argue that the new environmental regulations that adhere to limiting the activities of nuclear power have made hydropower to compensate for the remaining energy consumption, and thus it increasingly puts the biological diversity and natural bed of the rivers at risk.

On the other side, I interviewed managers from energy producing organizations. I focused mainly on environmental managers working at middle level positions as well as top managers. The environmental managers work at the boundary of energy producing organizations and communicate between external stakeholders, including activists and the top management. Mostly at the position of middle managers, the environmental managers were chosen because they are responsible for strategic aspects of negotiating issues with external stakeholders such as regulators, municipalities of local communities, and NGOs in order to mitigate environmental and social impacts. Mitigating these impacts are costly and can negatively influence shareholder returns financially, at least in the short run. As such, the environmental managers face constant challenges in talking to internal boards of top management and external stakeholders' groups. Research has shown that middle managers responding to institutional complexity require distinctive capabilities and negotiations between different stakeholders (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) in an effort to gain legitimacy from different sources.

In addition to environmental managers, in this study, I interviewed top managers. Top managers have a key role in their effort to satisfy expectations for corporate financial and social/environmental performance. They are responsible for integrating the actions of

disparate business units (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), and they have a critical role in creating an organizational context in which individual managers have the autonomy to allocate their attention to different objectives (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). In social and environmental sustainability context, where the correlation between sustainability and financial performance remains inconclusive (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), organizational actions still depend much on how senior executives encode the world around them as for any objective reality (Porac, Thomas & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Reger & Palmer, 1996).

### **3.3 Design and data sources**

To respond to methodological requirements of this study, I draw mainly on real-time longitudinal qualitative data collected from varied sources over 36 months. Every essay has applied a particular combination of these data sources. Therefore, after describing data sources, I will describe the strategy and design of every essay separately to specify which sources were applied and used in essays.

**Media material.** For the purpose of this article, a broader set of texts provide a fuller picture of the reconciliation struggles and offers an opportunity to draw conclusions about the relative importance of specific discourses and reconciliation strategies as well as intertextuality across texts. For this purpose and considering that debates have especially recently been polarized between environmental activists and organizational members, I collected a corpus of media texts dealing with the Hydropower debate from 1 January 2010 to 1 November 2015. I focused on the leading online newsletters *Dagenssamhälle* and *Svenskadagbladet*. I further followed these debates on social media posts and environmental and policy related press releases. The keywords used to collect this material were “hydropower”, “the future”, and “debate”. The final set included 256 texts. In practice, the media text focused on discourses for and discourses against hydropower energy. Environmental and policy press releases and social media texts focused on decisions and actions that needed to be taken to manage the concession modification process. Different discussions would motivate or condemn further physical infrastructure of hydropowers.

**Interviews with managers.** As another data source, I interviewed a number of leaders from industry communities. I conducted semi-structured interviews with fifty-six informants over a period of three years (2015–2018) who (1) worked in the Sweden or Finland sustainability

field and (2) identified themselves as sustainability professionals, in order to investigate how they presented themselves and this field. Each respondent had an extensive history of engagement in the sustainable energy discourse. Discourse emerging from interviews provides an integrated description of (1) verbal and non-verbal language, (2) communication of beliefs, and (3) interaction in social situations beyond simple descriptions of language of an individual or an organization (van Dijk, 1997). Such discourse also constitutes a key data source to understand an individual's frame to perceive her/his reality (Entman, 1993). I sought to involve practitioners across hierarchical positions from senior and middle managers, from associates to partners and directors. The interview protocol was open-ended, covering the background of the participants (education and career), their role within their current organization, their company's role in the development of the field, their relationship with environmental NGOs, clients, consultants, and detailed retrospective examples of good and bad interactions and projects. Interviews lasted one hour and were recorded and transcribed. In all but two cases, they were conducted face-to-face. To guarantee anonymity, participants and their companies are referred to by pseudonyms.

***Interviews with activists.*** Following the red thread of my thesis, I conducted the interviews with the environmental activists. The structure of the interview with activists was designed to create a "conversation with purpose" (Burgess, 2002: 84) as I moved from broader questions to more specific ones aimed at revealing their own interpretation of sustainability as a field, their expertise, their networks, and their sense of professionalism. I also combined questions from our interview guide with open ended interview questions in order to specify certain key questions while leaving other items to be explored (Patton, 2005). In addition, I disclosed the purpose of the study to interviewees while ensuring anonymity.

***Documents.*** To triangulate the data, I sought to compliment the interviews with archival data (Yin, 2009), reviewing a variety of documents. The confidential and strategically sensitive nature of the information made informants frequently reluctant to share archival data; hence, only a limited amount of internal documents was available for triangulation purposes. The archival records obtained included internal presentation slides, reports by employees, reports by consultants, publicly available reports by the firms, public reports by not-for-profit organizations and consultancies, and documents of environmental



codes of practice and operational guidelines which were the publication of Swedish environmental legislations, and EU environmental legislations in order to evaluate actors' account against field-level evidence of institutional struggles (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Trade journals have proven to be valuable in examination of industry attention to events (Hoffman, 1999; Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001). Although this source has limitations, most fundamentally, a bias toward the industry that results in "impression management" and a vulnerability to political pressure from influential members of industry (Hoffman & Ocasio, 2001: 418). Another documentary source of data was a group of materials produced by the major environmental non-governmental organizations. These resources took a variety of forms, including externally focused documents as well as internally focused reports on market research and strategic plans. Externally focused documents were often discussed in accounts by participants, particularly the trade press, thus shaping the hydropower discourse; internally-focused documents were useful for understanding the strategic intention behind environmental not for profit activities.

*Meetings.* As the fourth source of data, I participated in two public meetings and discussions between the activists and the middle managers taking place in Uppsala University. The case here provided a unique opportunity to observe two interrelated meetings during two consecutive years, 2014 and 2015. These two public debates were 2 to 4 hours long. In both of these meeting settings, I took detailed field notes and made audio recordings of the presentations I attended. The organizers of both meetings knew of my presence and purpose, and provided occasional assistance (e.g., providing copies of previous years' programs). The meetings were open to the public, and participants were aware that their remarks could be recorded by attendees and the media. In my observations, I adopted a 'known observer as participant' role (Creswell, 2003: 186), but in truth, the meeting setting offers a unique opportunity to the researcher, as just one of many "observers". My efforts to engage attendees in informal interviews are unproblematic, since people at meetings "come expecting to be approached by strangers" (Lampel & Meyer, 2008: 1031).

I also engaged in pre- and post-meeting observations and informal discussions and feedback sessions. As Yin (1994) recommends, I wrote up observations within 24 hours.

With these textual and interview data, I was able to trace the development of discussions and develop theoretical ideas alongside an increasingly targeted empirical analysis.

### **3.4 Analysis**

The qualitative study design addresses the concerns of social phenomena. My approach is based on the belief that, “the social world is already interpreted before the social scientist arrives” (Blaikie, 2000: 36). The researcher’s job, therefore, is to interpret the interpretations of the study’s participants, relying “as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003: 8). Thus, a qualitative approach is a logical choice when attempting to understand the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e., informants)” (Pratt, 2009: 856) as it is appropriate for examining and theorizing processes that are not yet thoroughly understood (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Given my interest in developing theory on how emotions support institutional work, I conducted an inductive study using elements of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The method of constant comparison is a part of the grounded theory method and emphasizes the process of generating theory: data collection and analysis are being conducted simultaneously in a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006). Grounded theory focuses on the stages and procedures for connecting relating induction and deduction through constant comparison, through theoretical sampling and by testing the emergent theoretical content with additional field work. Although grounded theory is used generally to refer to inductive qualitative research, it involves specific scientific methods and processes (Glaser, 2000). It consists of the systematic collection and analysis of data to assess the “interpretive realities of actors in social settings” (Suddaby, 2006: 634). Corbin and Strauss (2000) further highlight that through the interplay between the researcher and the data, grounded theory presents a framework for coding in a rigorous manner. By doing so, it provides the possibility to consider different dimensions and meanings of a phenomenon.

Despite the slight variations in the analytical approaches taken in the three essays, the general approach of this thesis can be summarized as abductive (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008; Van Maanen et al., 2007) applying a continuous interplay between

observational data and conceptual work- developing theoretical ideas alongside increasingly accurate mapping of the case. Such an approach “assigns primacy to the empirical world, but in the service of theorizing” (Van Maanen et al., 2007:1149). In practice, the data analysis was initially conducted in an inductive manner; I started by going through the interview transcripts and online materials in detail. By iteratively going back and forth between different various data sources, I developed a holistic understanding of each individual organizational case as well as on how generalizable the data found in each case is (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013). As the analysis further developed, I referred to the existing theory to guide the analysis. These iterative exchanges led to the identification of theoretically meaningful variations and similarities across cases.

### **3.4.1 Subcase I: Multiple-case study**

**Choosing the cases.** In this essay, I used an inductive case-based research design, comparing five energy producing organizations (Yin, 1994). Besides being suitable to address research questions that remain unaddressed, an inductive multiple-case study design allows for replication as each case serves to confirm or disconfirm inferences drawn from the others, permitting induction of more reliable models as a basis for analytical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Similar to single-case designs, multiple-case studies allow for rich descriptions with the opportunity to compare and confirm insights across cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). This analysis focuses on how managers in 5 energy organizations in Sweden dealt with the hydropower energy debates.

**Data sources.** This study draws on three data sources: interviews, online media debates, and documents. There were 46 interviews that probed actors’ experiences of reconciliation, making sense of and experiencing social and profit logics at the same time. Several of these were serial interviews, in order to trace my understanding on the unfolding process for each reconciliation manifestation. The interviews were complemented with an extensive collection of media texts of debates over the restructuring of the hydropower sector, between different actors. For the purpose of this essay, a broader set of texts provided a fuller picture of the reconciliation struggles and offered an opportunity to draw conclusions about the relative importance of specific reconciliation strategies as well as intertextuality across texts. Last, the documentary evidence such as draft agreements, best

practice guidelines, and annual sustainability reports were utilized as the third source of data.

**Data analysis.** The extensive material was iteratively analyzed through examining different data sources, the social/environmental sustainability literature, and the emerging understandings during the data analysis process. I initially triangulated interview-based and media insights with proprietary firm-level documents (e.g., draft agreements, best practice guidelines, annual sustainability reports) that embody the firms' work practices and governing logics and with public material (e.g., marketing, client newsletters, websites). In particular, I looked into the archival documents and analysis of reports related to stakeholder negotiations projects of these firms. The analysis was guided by initial mapping the tensions incidents where the attempt to cope with diverging goals was identifiable. After this initial step, the first order code categories were identified as micro discursive tactics. The discursive tactics were then further characterized based on their reasoning features. Ultimately, these were aggregated into higher order themes, resulting in three main groups of tactics of reconciliation.

### **3.4.2 Subcase II: Multiple-case study**

**Choosing the cases.** The methodology adopted for this essay was multiple case study, which is an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003: 13). In this context, I collected data from five different energy firms engaged in these processes in order to analyze how organizational members make sense of social and environmental demands, besides achieving financial performance.

**Data sources.** Two data sources were utilized for this study. The first source of data was a set of 45 audiotaped semi-structured interviews with sustainability managers. These interviews had a clear focus on the emotion work for reconciliation and regulation of affect. The interviews were supported by the second source of data, i.e., archival data and documents from organizations' publications and reports, including environmental and policy press releases focusing on decisions and actions that need to be taken to manage their sustainability agenda.

**Data analysis.** I took an iterative approach between data and theory to explore patterns and identify key themes, which ultimately enabled us to develop novel inferences from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By iterating through the data, I noted which organization configuring events could have triggered emotions such as pilot projects and programs, keynote speeches at conferences, and other key activities (Van Wijk, 2013) to understand the evolution of their sustainability initiatives and managers reaction and reflection to those configuring events. I connected particular emotions to the chronology of the interview contents and stories, re-reading the interviews this time with more focus on illustration of emotions and the use of language by the interviewees. Following the within and across case analysis, I identified positive emotions that promote motivation and behavioral activation, and actions related to negative emotions that inspire individuals to avoid unfavorable life conditions that obstruct the attainment of personal goals.

### **3.4.3 Subcase III: Single-case study**

**Choosing the cases.** Essay three is conducted as an in-depth single case study to capture the nuances of framing processes with the aim of being able to build theory (Lee, 1999). The context of this essay comprises and focuses on the promoters of a new institutional frame (around hydropower energy infrastructures) and their interactants. The selected NGO is a non-profit which was formed in 1974 with the goal of preserving rivers and their biodiversity. Non-profit organizations have been used previously to develop theory about institutional change (Lounsbury, 2001; Hensmans, 2003). The NGO members have regular meetings with both politicians and the environmental managers of big and small energy production firms in Sweden as they attempt to influence the managers to take further actions for mitigating the environmental impacts.

**Data sources.** This essay draws upon four main data sources: interviews, media material, documents and participant observation. The main data source for this essay is the extensive collection of media texts of debates over the restructuring of the hydropower sector, between different actors. This essay drew on interviews with environmental activists and the archival data available from their activities. I also completed my understanding of these debates through participation in two public meetings each of which took 2 to 4 hours.

**Data analysis.** Analysis was conducted in four stages. First we identified the managerial members of NGO and listed the organization's configuring events such as organized conferences, keynote speeches, and main activities and programs. We then created a chronology of events. Reading through these case histories, emotions surfaced as an important element of the phenomenon. Second, we looked into all the three data sources and sought evidence of the identified actors' struggles to promote change in old hydropower infrastructure. Third, after the initial mapping of events, it became clear that the instigating change and debates around environmental and ethical issues of hydropowers were susceptible to being influenced by emotional judgments. Working through these tension points, we coded the dominant structures of emotions and identified the specific word patterns that made up these responses. Then, we then re-examined the data to ascertain the role of subjectification and group based emotions in the conversations. We analyzed pronouns (e.g., I, you, we, our, etc.), text, content, and metamorphic structures to identify subject positions and their associated identities and action possibilities that constituted discourses (Fairclough, 2010).

### **3.5 Ontology**

Having an unambiguous ontology, or "the way we think the world is", is essential for having unambiguous ideas about how the social phenomenon of interest could be thought about and researched (Fleetwood, 2005: 197). To effectively understand how both external and internal institutional and structural factors embed actors' agency in corporate sustainability, it is crucial to have a non-conflating framework that would not reduce institutional and structural factors to each other or to the agency in corporate sustainability context, or merge them together (Leca & Naccache, 2006). To study the dual embedded agency in sustainability context, I build on the critical realist ontology, thereby consciously disaggregating analytical properties of agency and its embeddedness. The critical realist ontology can offer a non-conflating model of the relationship between institutional and structural factors and agency in corporate sustainability, wherein agency and institutional and structural factors are irreducible to one another. In particular, the conceptual framework of this thesis rests on the critical realist idea that recognizes institutional and structural factors and agency as ontologically distinctive and not reducible to one another but constantly interacting levels of reality (Bhaskar, 1978). The relationship between the

institutional context and actors' agency has a dualistic nature, according to which agency produces effects through drawing upon existing institutional factors that are reproduced and/or transformed in actors' interactions within social structures (Fairclough, 2005). Institutional factors, however, do not predetermine agency but shape the objective reality that "houses" agency and gets reflected in actors' motives and meaning systems (Godard, 1993). Critical realism offers a philosophy of social science, which distinguishes between three distinctive ontological domains of the social world – the "real", "actual" and "empirical" (Bhaskar, 1978). The domain of "empirical" refers to the experienced events reflected in actors' perception of reality. The domain of "actual" includes both observed and non-observed events. The domain of "real" pertains to the deeper causal powers that are invoked by the actors to generate the "actual" events. Institutional scholars have started to draw insights from critical realism to articulate institutional theories across three critical realist domains (e.g., Delbridge & Edwards, 2013; Leca & Naccache, 2006) and in application to corporate sustainability research in particular (e.g., Wry, 2009). These studies have connected the concepts of institutional logics, organizational fields, and agency to draw a critical realist perspective on the interplay between institutional and structural factors and actors' agency.

#### **4. Summary and main findings of dissertation essays**

This chapter provides an overview of three essays which shed light on this thesis's questions from slightly different angles. These essays examine the living and working realities of environmental managers and environmental activists from the perspective of language and affect. In Essay 1, I explore how the struggle of taking on new perspectives is reflected in the way individuals speak. Essays 2 and 3 take a combined perspective on both language and affect and describe the institutional work of managers and activists. Table 1 summarizes these structures.

**Table 1: Overview of the essays**

<b>Essay</b>	<b>Contribution and focus</b>	<b>Theoretical perspective</b>	<b>Outcomes studied</b>
1	Describes how managers resolve the tensions in sustainability	Discursive strategies	Reconciliation strategies
2	Demonstrates how regulation of emotions may function as a personal resource that can be cultivated, and how it may support institutional agency	Emotions work	Institutional intentionality, engagement, proactive behavior
3	Shows how regulation of group based emotions is embedded in disruptive institutional work	Group-based emotions	Collective engagement, collective emotion regulation

## **4.1 Essay 1**

### **On reconciliation of sustainability goals**

*Luna Ansari*

Data: Interviews with sustainability managers in 2014–2016

Businesses are under pressure to become socially and environmentally sustainable, but this creates difficulties in decision-making as executives need to reconcile multiple competing social, environmental and economic demands. Most of the solutions proposed to this problem have focused either on improving information and analysis (Zapico, 2014), on cognitive approaches (Hahn et al., 2014) or on organizational factors such as shared values (Epstein et al., 2015). However, there has been very little work looking at the discursive strategies that organizations might draw from to be able to address multiple tensions. We therefore set out to understand how executives experience the conflicting demands of sustainable business, and how they resolve these tensions in decision-making.



In particular, words convey reciprocal typifications of actors, actions, and situations (Schütz, 1967; Schütz & Luckmann, 1973). Within a community, the meanings of these words are intersubjectively shared and understood and passed on over generations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As such, words and vocabularies serve as important “reservoirs” for thought and action (Meyer, 2008) and become meaningful through their relations to other words, through becoming part of a system or structure (Carley & Palmquist, 1992; De Saussure, 1959; Hawkes, 1977). But how are these structures of vocabulary developed and characterized when actors engage particularly in reconciling conflicting goals?

Qualitative analyses have become an established approach towards analyzing structures of words in different types of texts. These approaches have been applied to, among others, extract and analyze mental models (Carley & Palmquist, 1992), to reconstruct the development of new cultural categories (Jones et al., 2012), to explain the popularity (Wruk et al., 2015) or the non-institutionalization of organizational practices (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), and to understand cultural and institutional change (Ocasio & Joseph, 2005).

This essay therefore addresses an important issue: the discursive underpinnings of the reconciliation between competing social and profit goals. In a qualitative study, I first map and analyze the dynamics of the discursive processes through which senior managers navigate apparently competing goals. Six discourses, which reflect how managers cope with and make sense of competing logics, are identified. By studying these discourses in detail, I characterize them by different modes of reasoning and connect these modes to how these discourses are cognitively constructed and oriented. I demonstrate how managers who experience the same complexity apply different strategies in their effort to live with and reconcile competing goals. This essay extends research on micro approaches to sustainability. This study contributes empirical evidence about how managers resolve the tensions inherent in bringing sustainability considerations into business decision-making.

## **4.2 Essay 2**

### **Disrupting the notion of business-as-usual: Emotion regulation for creating social change**

Data: Interviews with sustainability managers in 2014–2016

The role of regulation of emotions has been identified to be central to various aspects of organizing (e.g., Fineman, 2000; Huy, 2012) in the context of balancing competing poles such as change and continuity (Huy, 2001), and in balancing emotions of others and self when having competing roles such as being recipients of change and champions of change (Huy, 2002; Bryant & Stensaker, 2011). A key but largely underexplored question in the context of strategic events is how organizational members succeed (or fail) in regulating their emotions so as to achieve desirable (harmful) outcomes.

This essay contributes to our understanding of agency in institutional theory by theoretically and empirically unpacking mechanisms of self-regulation that underlie agentic-oriented behavior. The focus is on the work of sustainability managers to understand how emotion regulation supports actors' ability in developing sustainability initiatives and disrupting the notion of business-as-usual within a for-profit context. Although research has shown that actors develop various practices to change the existing institutional orders (Battilana et al., 2009; Levy & Scully, 2007; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) mostly under the concept of institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2009a), we still have little empirical knowledge of how actors engage with institutions and how they meanwhile maintain or change their agentic orientations (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009).

Drawing from the concept of emotion work, a number of strategies are identified reflecting how managers mobilize and organize emotions as one key aspect that enabled the continuation of social initiatives. Specifically, we tie these strategies to the modes of agency and find the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative modes as a source of variability in the way actors enact agency through the strategies of emotion work.

This essay contributes to our understanding of agency in institutional theory, by exploring how intentionality may be supported by regulation of emotions, and building a typology around how emotion work could function as a personal resource supporting the managers' ability to exercise agency. The findings suggest that reconciliation of different

goals of sustainability begin to be ideated when actors move out of emotional states that hinder agency.

### **4.3 Essay 3**

#### **Leading change for sustainability: A group-based emotion regulation approach to institutional work**

*Luna Ansari*

Data: Interviews with environmental activists and media material in 2012–2017

Many unsustainable practices and structures in the form of controversies – such as climate change, immigration, fracking, and clean energy – are being increasingly debated online. Addressing them requires parting with institutionalized systems that are unsustainable and frequently require institutional disruption.

Despite early conceptual work calling attention to the processes of deinstitutionalization (DiMaggio, 1988; Oliver, 1992; Zucker, 1988), empirical research on the work done to break with institutions has remained limited. Most of what we do know comes from studies focused on the creation of novel institutions, only “incidentally discuss[ing] disruptive institutional work” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 238; Lawrence et al., 2009). However, our understanding of how individuals are moved to discontinue their use of institutionalized arrangements is underdeveloped.

Voronov and Vince (2012) highlighted that individuals are likely to not only be cognitively but also emotionally invested in the institutional structures they take for granted. More recent findings on micro-level institutional processes also suggest that bringing individuals to reconsider long held beliefs and familiar institutional arrangements may not just be a cognitive but fundamentally an emotional process also (Fan & Zietsma, 2017; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; Tracey, 2016), further highlighting this gap in studies of institutional disruption. Letting go of the familiar seems to be an emotionally charged process. Despite cogent theoretical arguments for the role of explicit emotions in institutional change (Creed et al., 2014), empirical research remains scant. In particular, we know less about the work required to manage emotions in institutional disruption.

To address these questions, I utilize a qualitative, inductive approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), investigating ethical hydropower initiatives in Sweden's energy sector. Ethical hydropower projects ask residents, policy makers, and most importantly, energy producing organizations to abandon taken-for-granted dependence on old energy infrastructure. Instead, they seek to develop legislation for renewal of such old infrastructures that damage the ecosystem of rivers. In doing so, the initiative leaders challenge existing assumptions about the role of individuals and the habitualized practices used to utilize hydropower energy.

The transformational power of emotion here is mainly studied through the analysis of an online energy debate. Drawing from research on group-based emotions, I study how institutional actors strive to influence the behavior and attitudes of their audience through the use of positive and negative emotions. I identify three interconnected and mutually-reinforcing tactics initiative leaders use. They distance residents from the institutionalized hydropower energy system by evoking moral emotions as they raise awareness of the associated misery and problems. They dynamize institutional transition by contrasting the flow of positive and negative emotions as a resource to mobilize change, and to support and encourage the interactants to be perceptive of change. Lastly, they attach residents to the alternative by identifying them with their project and by evoking solidarity emotions as they curb anxieties of residents and their uncertainty concerning the feasibility and viability of the emerging ethical hydropower alternative.

The resulting process model shows that two sets of group-based emotions – solidarity and moralizing – dynamize the intentionality of institutional actors and shape the change processes.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

I set out to understand how social initiatives are sustained and embedded within a for-profit context. This thesis was divided into three questions, each approaching this issue from a different perspective, making distinct contributions. While the first question looks into various forms of language use through which actors mitigate sustainability challenges, the second and third questions address affective states that enhance, support, and engage

actors throughout this process. This study therefore makes multiple contributions to the literature in corporate sustainability, emotions and agency, institutional work, and the role of language. In this section, each part highlights these theoretical contributions and implications, followed by directions for further research.

## **5.1 Contributions to corporate sustainability**

Despite the heightened scholarly and business emphasis on corporate sustainability in combating social and environmental challenges of modern times, in practice, companies around the world demonstrate a significant variety in what they mean by sustainability and the relevant practices they enact. However, if we can better understand sources of variety in how sustainability practices are adopted and implemented, corporate strategies as well as public policies can be easier aimed at reduction of the social and environmental harms or maximization of the impact of companies' operations.

This study has revealed new perspectives on the problem of how managers – in their concrete practices – transform the taken for granted understandings of social and profit goals and how they relate to each other. The study points to the existence of bundles of capabilities that are needed to incorporate social and environmental considerations into different types of decision-making in a business. It has shown that organizational actors draw on a variety of discursive and affective tactics to adapt to institutional pressures as they develop a construct of corporate sustainability that fits their organizational setting. It provides further understanding of the challenges that organizations face as they are expected to adhere to sustainability concerns.

In particular, sustainability practitioners play an increasingly central role in helping organizations meet the requirements and expectations of different stakeholders (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) and in sustaining organizations' performance in times where external pressure reaches new dimensions (Waddock & Googins, 2011). Research has numerous highlighted that the role of sustainability managers is characterized by tensions and paradoxes (De Colle et al., 2014) as they encounter various obstacles while implementing sustainability initiations in their organizational setting (Wright et al., 2012).

While it has been previously argued that the research focus need not be on *acting in spite of* (Hahn et al., 2015) sustainability demands but on how actors can translate structures (Ditlev-Simonsen, 2010) in their local organizational conditions, the current study provides insight into the contextual components of ongoing attempts to try and tackle encountered tensions. The problem of reconciling sustainability goals is shaped by managers' encountering tensions as they are not only becoming aware of tensions but engaging and stepping into a process of attending to such tensions. Therefore, the detailed analysis of managers' responses in this study helps explain how sustainability managers take the roles of "internal activist" (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), "tempered radicals" (Meyerson & Scully, 1995), or "social issue-sellers" (Wickert & Bakker, 2018), as they engage in disrupting the notion of business-as-usual.

By examining the less explored aspect of the linguistic dimensions of goal resolution, this study sheds light on mechanisms that support judgment under conditions characterized with diverging goals. The discursive reconciliation tactics identified in this study illustrates that tactics are not necessarily dichotomous, rather they encompass aspects of acceptance and resolution. The reconciliation of goals arose on top of acceptance strategies, induced a workable certainty (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), and provided the possibility to exercise agency in promoting sustainability within a for profit context. The variety of reconciliation tactics highlights that the choice of reconciliation tactics is not permanent, rather the tactics are interlinked as the sustainability dimensions are intertwined; while certain aspects of sustainability dimensions were reconciled through transition of goals, others were reconciled through synthesizing and selective pulling. The discursive frame enhances identification of the types of decisions that can create holistic approaches to decision-making and helps focus on the type of organizational interventions needed to encourage deeper consideration of social and environmental values in decision-making.

Furthermore, the findings of this study suggest that strategies for reconciling diverging goals of sustainability can take the form of emotion management strategies. While extant literature explores how emotions motivate sustainability managers (Hafenbrädl & Waeger, 2016) and how emotions can "produce effects" on individuals and organizations (Gond et al., 2017), little is known about micro-mechanisms of this work. Research has conceptualized corporate sustainability managers as "emotionology workers", as they are

key actors in the design and implementation of a positive emotionology of environmental change as a challenge and opportunity for corporate action (Wright & Nyberg, 2012). Along these findings, this thesis shows that specific emotions underlie the work of middle managers and are instrumental in interactions that constitute sustainability initiations. Emotions influence actions and decisions, and by managing these emotions, managers extend the array of thought and action and their capacity to engage in sustainability work. Emotions work fosters commitment and perseverance and enables managers to draw on the support and resources to their advantage. Thus, by studying the role of emotions in the work of sustainability managers, this study takes a step forward in understanding how management of emotions can support sustenance of social initiatives.

Attending to such affective dimensions of coping with sustainability contradictions is important in that the development and maintenance of dynamic capabilities requires firms to utilize cognitive and emotional processes in harmony (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011).

Although this study exemplifies an empirical analysis of various micro dimensions of sustainability practices (Han et al., 2014), various factors have been identified as crucial for successful implementation of sustainability initiatives. For example, a primary source of the organizations' tensions has been attributed to the incoherent requirements of a diverse set of stakeholders with a varied set of expectations (Bondy, 2008; De Colle et al., 2014). While studies (Halme et al., 2012; Olsen & Boxenbaum, 2009; Reficco & Guetierrez, 2016; Alt & Craig, 2016) have called attention to internal challenges that prevent business solutions to social issues from developing – due to their social nature – I find that the social aspect of corporate sustainability can uniquely allow its development. Future research can include external perspective to the analysis of tensions to enhance understanding in how tensions are created and surfaced. This can as well provide a contextual element to the analysis of managerial responses.

Given that this study's results were driven within particular organizations, future research can look into the importance of the organizational context (Parke & Seo, 2017) in relation to how emotions could be leveraged to advance corporate sustainability across various types of such conducts. In particular, future research can explore under which

conditions emotions can have an effect in driving corporate sustainability and to what extent emotions determine the outcomes of such initiations.

## **5.2 Contributions to emotion work and agency**

As institutional change is conditioned upon the presence of institutional contradictions (Voronov & York, 2015), one of the main premises in institutional research is that such contradictions are recognized by actors (Seo & Creed, 2002). The recognition process is found to be a highly emotive process far from being automatic. Wijaya and Heugens (2018) argue that even when actors recognize contradictions as they become morally perturbed with the actions of institutional leaders, they might not be able to engage in institutional work and mobilize change because of their emotional ties. Studies have variously shown that not only the lack and repression of emotions can hinder actors' capacity to recognize or seize opportunity for action (Gould, 2009; Delmestri & Goodrick, 2017; Summers-Effler, 2002), but on the other side, emotional investment in the status quo can also constrain opportunity for action (Calhoun, 2001).

In addressing the problem of what compels managers to pursue sustainability practices within a for-profit context, the current study connects with the key concern within neo-institutional theory centered on how people are motivated to create or change institutions and why they will engage to disrupt it (Voronov & Weber, 2020; Voronov & Weber, 2016). This was explored by looking into how pursuing social logic in a for-profit context is characterized by managers' emotion work in regard to different modes of agency. The findings of this study indicate that reconciliation of competing goals begin to be ideated when managers can move out of the noxious emotional states that reduce and prevent agency, a state that is pervasive among the majority of organizational members who studied here and acts as a barrier for ideation, agency, and collaboration. Because corporate sustainability involves dealing with a structure that tends to reproduce itself (Sharma & Good, 2013), institutional work in this context necessitates a subjective perception that incorporates the possibility of agency i.e., the construction of the capacity of the self to ideate and plan for future; a capacity that is taken for granted in institutional work literature (Voronov & Weber, 2016), but appears to be scant in this context. The presence of a projective self. i.e., imagination of self-inhabiting a different social order which can be



contributed and created from the present one, is found to be one of the contributors to ideating sustainability initiatives among managers in this study.

Emotion work in this study is effective as a personal resource, supporting various modes of agency. The findings demonstrate that individuals who experience the same institutionally complex context dwell and apply different strategies to cope within such a setting. In particular, in retaining control for their negative emotions, they transform passive negative emotions into fueling emotions that are imbued with emotional energy (Fan & Zietsma, 2017). Regulation of emotions therefore lessens the effects of emotions that can hinder agency, while enabling engagement and the ability to sustain institutional work.

Furthermore, this study empirically demonstrates that *regulation* of emotions is an important underlying mechanism of agentic work within the sustainability realm. Regulation of emotions mediates the interaction between actors and institutions as it bears both structural and individual dimension. This study shows that although actors' values are structurally defined by the institutions underlying the concept of sustainability, they are made individual and personal through practices of emotion work. Emotion work and institutional work in this setting are intrinsically intertwined because of the ongoing sensemaking that forms, balances, maintains, and repairs the meaningful relationships among the multitude of dimensions in the sustainability realm. While emotion management strategies are motivated by socially prescribed emotional display rules (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983), emotion regulation strategies are motivated by inner driving sources (Mauss & Tamir, 2014). Incompatibilities between expectations of organizational sustainability goals and intrapersonal motives drives managers to direct their emotions to fulfill the intrapersonal motives. By transforming the negative emotions and by balancing negative and positive emotions, sustainability managers reconcile such experienced incongruencies.

While the second research question focused on antecedent of self-directed middle managers' emotion work, the third question shows that managing other-directed emotional responses were instrumental for environmental activists in promoting social initiatives. This study extends field-level investigations of institutional disruption (e.g., Ahmadjian & Robinson, 2001; Maguire & Hardy, 2009), by revealing the work involved in moving

individuals to reconsider taken-for-granted energy institutions. The analysis showed that in compelling energy producing companies, to discontinue the habitualized use of the dominant and old hydropower systems, initiative leaders draw from legislative changes which relate to the antecedents of deinstitutionalization identified by Oliver (1992).

In this setting, the initiative leaders build on antecedents of deinstitutionalization (Oliver, 1992), specifically legislative changes, to compel energy producing companies in Sweden to discontinue their habitualized use of the dominant and old hydropower energy system.

Research on emotions in institutional theory has tended to lean on either positive or negative emotions (Petriglieri et al., 2018). Recently, a stream of research has encouraged institutional and organizational theory researchers to engage with the intersection of positive and negative emotions (Pratt, 2000; Ashforth et al., 2014; Petriglieri et al., 2018). The longitudinal study of the stages of the hydropower change provided an opportunity to explore a collective of episodic emotions, induced and experienced by the actors as they engage in the interactive process of change conceptualization over time. The categorization of emotions based on fixed dualities of positive versus negative is hence abandoned in this study, giving rise to a broader spectrum of valences. This is primarily achieved through the strategic interaction of positive emotions such as hope and pride and negative emotions denoted in fear and anger. The findings of the current study show that contrasting emotions support actors in conducting institutional work. In line with the call for more research “combinations and interaction of emotions” that elicit agency (Jasper, 2011: 291; see also Fan & Zietsma, 2018), I find that the effect of juxtaposing solidarity and moral emotions is closely reflected in the change of valence of dominant groups of emotions at each phase. In particular, while in the first and second phase of change – challenging and changing the current frame – negative valenced emotions such as guilt and indignation were effective in moralizing, positive emotions directed at solidarizing were dynamized to spur action in consolidating the new frame. Studying institutional creation, Fan and Zietsma (2018; see also Ruebottom & Auster, 2018) found that positive emotions towards other groups of actors made individuals more receptive to create new shared institutional arrangements. This study ultimately reveals that for displacement of original attachments, the juxtaposition of negative and positive emotions can come into effect.

Moreover, the findings show that emotions may have unexpected effects in how they are being deployed in institutional work efforts. By highlighting the proactive engagement with sustainability concerns deployed as a positive outcome of a range of emotions, this study promotes a view that while certain emotions may be categorized as negative, they have the potential to contribute to the desired outcomes. Research has shown that in some instances, negatively valenced emotions – such as anger or fear – can elicit positive behavioral outcomes (Lebel, 2017; Geddes et al., 2020). In another study, regarding anger, Geddes and Callister (2007) theoretically argue that it is the organizational observers' reactions and judgments of anger that gives rise to negative or positive outcomes. In line with these findings, this thesis shows that it is important to recognize the full potential of such emotions in institutional work and in organization theory.

Voronov and Vince (2012: 69) have argued that proponents of current institutional order tend to be cognitively and emotionally invested in it as it “offers meaning and pleasure and/or reduces anxieties and fears”. While navigating behavior on the basis of ways that are consistent with the dominant institutional order eliminates unpredictabilities and may seem automatic for such individuals, disrupting respective arrangements is likely to bring out fears and anxieties. Managing such emotions will therefore have a role if institutional actors are to bring about changes to the current orders. This thesis has uncovered how actors can manage emotions such that they can moderate or supersede such affective reactions.

Although related research areas have long acknowledged and empirically studied the important role of emotions in building support for change (e.g. Huy, 2002; Jasper, 2011), institutional research has yet to incorporate emotions more fully (Voronov & Vince, 2012). In particular, future research can pay attention to the need to develop more nuanced ascription of valence to emotions. Instead of binary – negative vs positive – and rather linear approaches to emotions, the emotional valence can be studied in terms of a more extended grid. In a different view, there is potential for considering the effect of the combinations of emotions that can elicit agency (Jasper, 2011; Fan & Zietsma, 2017), i.e., how emotions with a negative valence (e.g. fear, anger, or anxiety) play a role combined with emotions with a positive valence (e.g., euphoria, joy, or happiness). Research can as well look into surprising effects of emotions. For example, we know less about how negative

consequences may be rooted in positive emotions and also how negative emotions may be linked to motivation, agency and action.

In terms of collective emotions, research can leverage our understanding of how different types of legitimation attempts influence the forms of emotion work enacted, by considering how strategies of emotion work in seeking active support – for changes in energy provisions – differ from strategies of emotion work of eliciting passive acceptance. Specifically, research can look into how the distribution of emotions vary in efforts of active support and passive acceptance. This can heighten our understanding of how interest-driven i.e., cognitive and emotional sources of motivation, interact (Voronov & Vince, 2012) as antecedents of institutional work.

### **5.3 Contributions to emotions and institutional work**

Research has explored various ways in which emotions are structurally constituted in institutions (Wright et al., 2017), individually experienced in relation to institutions (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017), and strategically enacted to enhance institutional work (Tracey, 2016). Despite being a largely consequential stream of research and in spite of the recent integration of emotions into the study of institutions, the understanding of ways in which emotions relate actors and actions to institutions are nascent (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018).

The current thesis is developed with the idea that placing emotions as central to the understanding of institutional work significance can move scholarship forward in several ways. By investigating actors' agency in operating within an institutionally complex setting as they bring local meaning to the micro foundations of their institutional work, this dissertation joins the institutional work strand of literature. It has been an attempt to partly capture the variation of the institutional work practices in terms of the affective content and structure as they are initiated by different actors.

The findings add to the understanding of how emotions can support and compel actors to engage in disruption of institutions. By highlighting a variety of emotions, this study illustrates that emotions are rarely experienced in isolation, rather the experience of emotions can have various dimensions. For example, in the context of the environmental

activists' study, national environmental performance becomes a source of pride but when the achievement is set in the context of shame and anxiety due to the undesired and unexpected impacts of the hydropower infrastructure, pride – a positively centered emotion – is experienced negatively. Without these accompanying emotions, the power of pride to compel action in this setting is lessened. In particular, the neo-institutional literature has been criticized for a “scale free” (Whitson, Weber, Hirsch, & Bermiss, 2013: 141) or “binary” (Fiss, Kennedy, & Davis, 2012: 1094) understanding of institutionalization, reducing this processes to the question of adopting or not adopting institutions. Suddaby (2010: 16) argues that retrospectively counting structures and organizational forms hinders research to develop a deep understanding of institutionalization. Studying emotion work of actors as an enabling mechanism is particularly helpful to understand institutional work when its outcome is not clear, to understand institutional change as it unfolds. Therefore, by studying how emotions support actors' intentionality, this study complicates the understanding of intended and unintended consequences of institutional work and contributes to grasping institutionalization in situ and in vivo (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013).

Furthermore, previous research leads us to expect that efforts in institutional disruption will mainly be about undermining the extant institutional arrangements (Oliver, 1992; Creed et al., 2014). For example, research has revealed the role of problematizing the taken-for-granted arrangements in disrupting institutionalized practices (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Yet, in this study, a range of underlying practices of disruptive institutional work involved were found. In particular, it was found that in addition to undermining the extant arrangements, the disruptive ethical hydropower initiatives invested considerable effort in creating new emotional attachments to the available alternatives. This finding is in line with recent findings on institutional creation investigating the dynamics of the work to institutionalize the Euro in Finland. In particular, Moisander and colleagues (2016) found that government agencies sought to inspire national pride and evoked a sense of duty to build support for the introduction of the Euro and the associated novel institutional arrangements.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that in institutional work aimed at discontinuing old institutions, a part of activities are aimed at building new attachments and

attaching the respondents to alternatives to the extant system. This counters the predictability of the extant institutional arrangements and gives way to a new range of emotions. Indeed, the findings show that mitigating the anxiety-inducing uncertainty that comes with the disruption is one main part of activists' effort. Overall, the three identified phases of institutional disruption in this study are mutually reinforcing. While in the first phase the efforts were based on revealing problems in the extant system by arising anxiety due to uncertain alternatives, in the later phase, the initiatives leaders invested considerable efforts in stabilizing the disruption, reducing uncertainty and attaching individuals to the alternative energy infrastructures.

A present theme within institutional theory calls for analyzing the interactions between field level macro dynamic and micro-level practices (Zietsma et al., 2019). This dissertation has been an attempt to engage in this problem connecting the field and individual levels of analysis. Scholars have repeatedly suggested that we are able to gain more insights into processes of institutional work when we transcend such divisions and consider these levels together, instead of examining field and organization-level processes independently (Miettinen et al., 2009: 6; Reckwitz, 2002; Smets et al., 2017, Zietsma et al., 2019). From an agency problematic point of view, institutional change, and interrelating between the micro and macro levels can be affectively demanding (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Regulation of emotions both at individual level and collective level modifies how actors experience and respond to institutional settings. At the individual level of analysis, emotion work supports actors to transform the institutions underlying sustainability work in their everyday activities (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). It spurs actors to take action in order to promote institutional change. Attending to such individual factors is important as it is individuals who ultimately "help or hinder organizational engagement with coexisting and potentially contradictory logics" and who may generate – or disengage from – common organizational responses. At a more collective level, this study shows that emotional attributes form the direction of agreements around an institutional field, as findings of the study with environmental activists shows that emotions foster common understanding and collaboration. Therefore, emotion work supports actors to collectively construct new meaning as they modify existing institutions to fit their organizational context.

In particular, in the context of this thesis, the micro-macro problematization in institutional theory is symmetric to the call for research on the multi-level nature of sustainability tensions (Hahn et al., 2015; Schad et al., 2016). Stadtler and van Wassenhove (2016) describe that tensions “cascade throughout the organization, which makes their management a shared responsibility of actors across all levels”. By analyzing how a particular context-promoting sustainability goals within a for-profit setting unfolds, I argue that such multi-level contradictions need multi-level responses in order to better understand how such tensions can be proactively managed. Therefore, this study brings a step forward towards a more holistic analysis of institutional work practices.

By digging into ways in which institutional work can be emotionally anchored, this study opens up a host of new questions. Research can help further develop a systematic understanding of the differences in the emotional dynamics and processes implicated in different types of institutional work. This can be approached from various angles. One angle is considering the types of emotions implicated in the various practices aimed at disrupting, maintaining, or creating institutions, for example, by looking into how different classes of emotion (e.g. ‘basic’ VS ‘self-conscious’ emotions – Ekman, 1992) are implicated in institution work. The suggested conceptualization of institutional work and organizations is a premise for being able to explicitly address managerial action in relation to them. This allows incorporating managerial practice into the conceptualization of institutions and organizations, which is identified as a major shortcoming in existing empirical studies. Therefore, management is not considered external to the complex institutional and organizational dynamic identified, but as a praxis itself, which is inherently embedded in communities of meaning, organizational processes, and institutional contexts (Schedler & Rüegg-Stürm, 2014).

This study is grounded in a specific empirical context; there are boundary conditions for its transferability to other settings. Further research can compare field contexts characterized by different proceedings of institutional work and deinstitutionalization in particular (Oliver, 1992). While the actors in this setting were aware of and moved by the impact of hydropower, further research can shed light on contexts where higher negative initial emotions are expected and experienced when institutional change is initiated.

## **5.4 Contributions to the study of language and discursive diffusion of emotion work**

In this thesis, one underlying common theme among the three research questions is the role of language. I undertook a discursive approach to organizational institutionalism and conceptualized institutional work as a discursive practice (Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Phillips et al., 2004; Phillips & Malhotra, 2008; Schildt et al., 2011). Several scholars (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Hardy & Maguire, 2010) have elaborated that discourse is embedded in the analysis of institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization processes and that institutions are constituted by discourses (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Building on this perspective, institutional work is understood as discursive work: it constitutes diffusion and evolution of practices and emergence of institutional fields through speech, texts, and discourse (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Institutional work as a meaning-making activity necessitates its influence through creation, transformation and (re)production of supporting talk and text that give shape to institutional objects (Vaara & Monin, 2010; Phillips & Malhotra, 2008).

It is thus based on a dynamic process of “discursive work” through which actors question the general validity of previous norms in particular settings and import an alternative set of values and norms. Building on the discursive perspective, I take institutional work as something that encapsulates and is carried through social interactions, voice, dialogue, and discursive acts and focus on how discourse is formative and constitutive of particular institutional outcomes. In particular, I suggest that drawing from discourse analysis and stressing the discursive gestalt of the institutions helps us to better understand how appeals to emotion and discursive practices are intertwined.

More specifically, exploring the role of emotions in driving and participating in institutional change was mainly studied through the analysis of emotive discursive spaces. On the one hand, this study builds on and extends the studies investigating the use of emotion work in discursive settings. Existing research has looked into discursive and rhetorical manifestation of emotion work in institutional theory (Moisander et al., 2016; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). For example, Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) focused on how emotionally laden discursive moves reflected on social media led to destabilization of



organizational practices. Moisander and colleagues (2016) drew on rhetorical practices to identify strategies of emotion work reflected in textual data theorizing the interplay between power, discourse, and emotions. As with these studies, in this thesis, the discursive setting is applied as a medium to express and study variation of actors' emotion work. The collective regulation of emotions as well as the classification of self-regulatory attempts of sustainability managers is tied to a broader context of hydropower debate and is thus reflective of the broader institutional narratives and sustainability logics. The actors' effort in regulation of emotions is an outcome of discursive practices contained in online debates and organizational media and is illustrative of various types of emotional valences.

On the other hand, the findings highlight the importance of language structure and how words systematically carry and connect ideas. While exclusive forms of language support a narrow categorization of corporate sustainability, inclusive forms of language enhance broad recognition of the various sustainability domains. Neither of these language forms on their own are likely to excel in all aspects of the sustainability problem, as it is the collective of reconciliation tactics that enhances embracing a broad range of stakeholders.

Future research can thus look to find out which variations of discursive settings have a role in emotion work of actors engaging in institutional work and how language can support actors in instigating institutional work and the related activities. Future studies can as well attend to units of language through in-depth qualitative analysis to further shed light on dynamics of coping with challenges of corporate sustainability.

## 6. References

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