

# Constructing sustainability: when managers' self-narratives break down

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## Abstract

The complex interrelationships between social and natural systems reveal profound difficulties when we seek transition towards sustainable ways of organising society (Bateson, 1972). However, there is mounting scientific evidence that we need to take immediate actions to avert ecological collapse (Rockström et al., 2009). This paper explores how managers within the UK energy and power industry are making sense of these challenges and how they are constructing and holding sustainability within their 'self-narratives' (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). The findings show that the shape and content of manager's self-narratives have likely evolved significantly from earlier similar studies (Fineman, 1997). Whereby the tensions if interpreted in a modernist rationalist frame offer an array of disconnects as managers seek to preserve their identity. One manager's inability to continue to entertain these disconnects within his self-narratives leads him, between research phases, to leave his organisation citing his commitments to working towards a more sustainable society. Whilst predominant ways of doing business remain largely unchallenged this paper suggests a heightening 'green narrative' appears to be unsettling manager's identities and prompting them to act upon their commitments to sustainability (Starkey & Crane, 2003).

The title of my paper – which I have developed to be a read paper - is '*constructing sustainability: when managers' self-narratives break down*'. Whilst I will elaborate on my ontological associations and consequent research interests in a moment it first seems important to provide some additional framing. This paper is substantially informed by writing from Science and Technology Studies (STS) - 'the study of science and technology in a social context' (Law, 2004, p. 12). An area of scholarship which seeks to explore the complexities and entanglements of knowing. Reaching towards methods that endeavour to notice dominant framings of the world and 'constraining normative blinkers' (Law, 2004, p. 4). STS I believe offers important resources for Management Studies in its efforts to approach questions of how to perform in an unsustainable world. A systemic unsustainability which Gregory Bateson suggests in his seminal work *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* lies deeply rooted in the 'separation [of] the notion of mind from the natural world' (1972, p. 492). I am using the term unsustainability to describe current patterns of human organising and consuming in a world which I understand cannot defy its limits through Promethean hope<sup>1</sup> or speaking of infinite plasticity. A world in which there is mounting scientific evidence suggesting that we may well have already overstepped key planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009). Hopefully this short introductory explanation will help provide an understanding of and sympathy for my experimental approach to making sense and communicating about my recent encounters with managers in the UK energy and power market.

My ontological location is associated with a 'weak constructionism' (Newton, 2007) where 'we are forced to deal with a world that is out there' (Anderson, 1996, p. 112). Our existence as social anthropologist Tim Ingold notices involves continual and essential 'material and energetic exchanges with components of the environment' (2002, p. 41). This stance which is attentive to a 'coevolution' (Norgaard, 1994) of the natural and social seeks to maintain respect for the otherness of a nature that possesses real consequences for human continuance, which cannot be remedied and reconstituted in language. I am using the STS scholar John Law's term of 'gatherings' from his book *After Method* (2004) to trace my efforts and approaches as I go about describing and inscribing realities. I am trying to perform method – although I think my success is modest – in ways approaching Law's challenge to seek methods 'that are not moralist; that imagine and participate in politics and other forms of the good, in novel and creative ways' (2004, p. 9).

My first challenge is telling you when this research began. For ease I will refer to it as commencing during two phases of my PhD field work. This inevitability tells little about the story – in the words of the psychologists Kenneth and Mary Gergen - of the 'self-narrative' (1997) that have I constructed to locate myself within it. But in this brief paper I will cover the who I am in this research lightly as I want to leave the greatest room possible for the voices of the managers with whom I have been speaking. Instead I will try to place some glimpses of me amongst my observations as part of my methodological experimentation. An experimentation in which I am not feeling a sense of command but rather confusion and haziness.

The conversations or semi-structured interviews that I am drawing from followed earlier shorter telephone interviews. These earlier conversations had been with thirteen managers (Managing Directors, company owners or senior executives) based across Northern Europe within private businesses which operated in the energy and power market; most of them manufacturers of power generation equipment. This later phase at the end of last year followed almost a year after the first conversations where I had asked a range of broadly situated questions to explore what sense they were making of this notion called sustainability. The eight managers with whom I spoke for between an hour and two hours were spread across the UK and all apart from one was interviewed in the first phase of work. I first came into contact with these individuals a few years ago, before seeking solace in Lancaster, when I worked as an Account Manager in London for what I will call a Global Research and Consulting Company, GRCC from here on. Back then my primary objective was to sell these managers market intelligence either off the shelf or consulting projects which were offered under a banner of helping their businesses pursue new markets and grow – sustainability was not part of these conversations.

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1 From John Dryzek (2005, p. 51) - 'In Greek mythology Prometheus stole fire from Zeus, and so vastly increased the human capacity to manipulate the world. Prometheans have unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome any problems - including environmental problems'.

I had originally embarked on these discussions as I wanted to connect to views in practice to test the terrain for the tightly framed research topic that I had carried into my PhD; a question which I can only now vaguely remember. My intent was mildly mischievous as I wanted to get them to engage with a concept that is often suggested to be adversarial to prevailing ways of doing business and is often partnered by forceful critiques of global capitalism and its logic of boundless quantitative growth. Operating under my Management School banner and not long ago having leapt out of the corporate world I felt my approach wouldn't appear too quarrelsome particularly as I left them to define what sustainability meant. Stuart – all the names here are aliases – for example took it to be about work-life balance which was quite tangential to my intention. Despite being told on a number of occasions by interviewees like Edward that they *didn't know where I was coming from* with my vague and unspecific questioning I found the exchanges fascinating and unexpected which peaked my interest for more detailed discussions.

My lack of specificity about the level I might be entering into a conversation left the managers grappling for some contextual bounds to frame and assemble their responses. My expectation was that their sense making would be drenched in business-isms and they would place themselves as largely embodying the goals and objectives of the corporate entity which they were part. Whilst there was plenty of business styled language woven into their responses they communicated some very broad and wide ranging conceptions of sustainability in terms of its environmental origination. Leading some of the managers to overtly question the economic logic of business which they saw as problematic to operating under their conceptions of sustainability. Duncan gives a clear statement about this which can be traced in many of the conversations:

(13DP @ 11m74s of 27m48s)

Duncan - *'The first concern is that given the reports with regards to the consumption of non-renewable energy and ... damage to the environment [and] the rate at which that's happening it seems to me that the momentum just isn't there as this point in time. ... Many of the target[s] that have been set seem to be ... flying by the way side and the problem seems [that] ... industry is still very much financially motivated. Even though big companies ha[ve] to talk about things like sustainability or green credentials ... most of their actions at the end of the day seem to be driven by sound economic decisions.'*

This was unexpected to me as I felt that such questioning would have been resisted or pushed aside with talk of sustainability more commonly positioned as business opportunity rather than adversary; although these constructions were not absent. How could a majority of these managers hold such wide ranging systemic views of interactions between social and natural systems and profess some significant unease with current ways of organising but hold their views in a way that appeared to avoid what I perceived as the multiplicity of tensions in how they made sense of the world and their corporate role within it? Often appearing to detach themselves as citizen and as manager, their language steeped in objective rationality and the hegemony of science, often placing them in what I perceived as a comfortably powerless position to take action.

Perhaps the more surprising thing was that I had considered that there might be a close relationship and strong connectivity between what people said and where they chose to place themselves in the world; along with an expectation that these managers would tend to embody their exalted organisational positions. Was my belief that managers and people would more generally have something resembling a consistent thread linking their thoughts and actions deeply naïve? My feeling was that if I was committed to a particular state of knowing about something then I would need to operate in a way that took account of it i.e. engage in learning or self-reflection. Indeed only recently a friend described my wife and I as 'coherent'. When I asked him what he meant he described that he saw an usual connectivity between what we advocated and what we did citing observations like we grew some of our food and avoided owning a car. Perhaps I had become some peculiar product of modernist rationality blinkered by a Newtonian logic of simple, predictable and controlled cause and effect.

These observations about myself amongst my research was something which became prominent for me whilst working to analyse my second encounters with these managers; which I am still yet to tell you about. This awareness led me to questions about the utility of some of language I was applying such as disconnects to describe my interpretations. I am still wavering a little to fully detach from my earlier ideas of a joined up

and slightly lethargic notion of identity towards one described by Zygmunt Bauman, a celebrated sociologist, of fluidity amongst a Liquid Modernity. He suggests identity is something 'one ... needs to ... choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for, and then to protect through more struggle' (Bauman, 2004, p. 15). Where there is 'a simultaneous struggle against dissolution and fragmentation; an intention to devour and at the same time a stout refusal to be eaten' (Bauman, 2004, p. 77). However, I do want to temper this potentially chaotic notion of identity to suggest a tendency towards a more viscose character. Where as John Shotter in his book *Conversational Realities* describes the legitimacy of potential choices are always rooted in 'our involvements with those around us' (1993, p. 29). Whilst Shotter is primarily talking in the sphere of conversation, my primary means of analysis, rather than identity but there seems a useful connectivity. Particularly if these notions are understood amongst Kenneth Gergen's discussions of our social saturation amongst increasing exposure to ever more opinions, values and lifestyles leaving us populated by an 'infusion of partial identities' (1991, p. 49). It is important to notice that I have constructed this theoretical orientation retrospectively i.e. following my analysis of my second phase of data so I feel a need to be cautious for these concepts of identity to not become too instrumental. Whereby I might become overly preoccupied in inscribing rather than describing in my attempts to gain credibility by aligning with respected writers.

I led into these second encounters by sharing a two page briefing document. This attempted to frame my work in an accessible way which I set within some of the concepts I had encountered in my cross disciplinary reading and offered my key observations of the earlier conversations. Observations that I have already tried to give you a sense of. I had told the managers that although I had prepared a number of questions – which were largely focused around the briefing document and my interpretations of the previous discussions – I was seeking an exchange more akin to a conversation than an interview.

It felt an odd experience going back to visit these managers which I had previously met at their offices when I was working for GRCC. These places that several years earlier were normal and uninteresting now felt exciting and novel. My observations seemed to be with a fresh pair of eyes which I found to bring forward elements which I had not previously noticed or pondered. Whether it was about navigating past a thick set bouncer who was standing at the door of the headquarters of a major global oil company where I then waited in their expansive lobby observing the very hard furnishings with lots of spotless polished surfaces and large screens flashing images under titles including *sustainable development in Angola*. Or, musing about the differing approaches to promoting change as I watched people try to overcome a police barrier at the student fees protests in Parliament Square on a plasma screen whilst in the waiting area at one of a innumerable entrances on the city like complex of a major manufacturing company. Or, overhearing a conversation between the company owner and a visitor at an industrial estate located alternative energy business about their ponchon for sports cars. Such places and scenes had been previously part of my day to day. But I felt almost like I was a visitor from a separate world as I travelled around the UK pushed about by a cold and snowy December.

Earlier on in this paper I spoke about my intent to strive for methods that were not moralising. Instead I am endeavouring to be reflexive about my entanglements in what I have described as a systemically unsustainable world. Whilst these are impossible to trace, and likely I risk falling into something of a positivist trap, a useful example was brought forward to me about some of the unintentional and unconscious nature of my entanglements. A consulting project that I had previously sold whilst at GRCC to Paul, one of the interviewees, the commission from which had paid for a decent chunk of ten months travelling – a core space for reflection before I decided to embark on my PhD – showed itself to be promoting something rather sinister which I had not taken on board at the time. The project was a global opportunity analysis to help understand the country markets where the client could sell older power generation equipment – largely gas turbines – that they had refurbished. However, the interesting back story to this work which quietly emerged during this interview was that in large part as Paul put it was about finding '*legislative environments we feel that we can go and exploit else where so can we take these nasty old horrible turbines and sell them in Africa or something*' (10PW @ 24m12.1s of 76m59.2s). Whilst some wider eyes at the time might well have picked up on these unseemly undertones to the project it was slightly alarming to have this brought into focus what my job and well intentioned hard work to design and agree the project had promoted. Those lazy starts to the morning in Spain where myself and my wife supped a cafe con leche and munched some butter

laden tostada outside a café in the sunshine before we continued on our three months of wandering across Northern Spain felt somehow tainted as I contemplate what other effects my earlier profiteering might have been having on some unsuspecting corner of the globe. Indeed the Nicaraguan village where we had lived for three months during our travels certainly appeared unprepared for similar outside forces. Whilst notions of simple cause and effect lack sophistication with as Karen Barad, a Feminist and STS writer, argues our actions 'reconfigur[ing] the world in [their] becoming' so leaving their effects largely untraceable and unknowable here was a glimpse of my deep entanglement (2007, p. 394).

My conversations with Paul – who made this quite flippant and indirect comment to me about the consulting project – was probably the most invigorating of the eight discussions I participated in. Between the two interactions with Paul he'd decided to leave his job – having had a bit of a rethink at fifty – to seek ways to address some of the sustainability issues he saw. And whilst some managers confessed to barely being able to recall our first conversation Paul speaks here about the significance that he's attaching to it.

(10PW @ 72m28.6s of 76m59.2s)

Paul - *I've found it's been very strange in many ways this dialogue. ... It's been very interesting and stimulating and definitely outside of my normal scope of dialogue in my professional career and that's obviously very welcome. But it's also been quite depressing and ... it's been kind of strange. ... When I take time to think I do have views on these things. My ... reaction was when you first approach[ed and said] you'd like to talk about sustainability. What views might I have on that? But actually when you start to think about it, it's amazing what you do have views on ... . So it's been quite provocative in a kind of very positive way. For that I thank you. I've also found it very enjoyable but kind of unfinished business so now that some of this stuff has bubbled to the frontal lobes of your thinking then you can't ... not think about it going forward.*

It appeared that Paul had been struggling, using this conceptualisation of Bauman, like the other managers appearing to be an unexpected mass of contradictions but in this second conversation had fought his way towards a self-narrative that appeared so distinctly different to the others. Hence the language of *breaking down* that I have used in the title of this paper. His construction of how he's understanding himself to operating through his work towards sustainability was threatened to the degree that he has had to reconstruct both his sense making and acting. The account that Paul offers of an exit interview he had recently had with his companies Chief Executive gives a sense of how he now talks about the work he was involved in and shortly to leave.

(10PW @ 11m50.3s of 76m59.2s)

Paul - *Our Chief Executive asked for an hour of my time to get my views on why I was leaving and what we should be doing as a company ... . I did take the opportunity to talk about this kind of treadmill of growth and how he viewed that and you know it just seems quite disappointing .... His view is shareholders just don't give a shit, you know it's absolutely about making more money and more money and that [is the] capitalist model. There is this corporate social responsibility piece in the role of board of a company but I get the sense it's very much there ... for publicity and ... it's not really impacting on the ways that companies do their business. So as I challenged him on well we've got this exercise on measuring our global footprint ... his response was well the investor community expects it. We're doing it because we have to do it we're not doing it because we want to do it. We didn't invent the idea and come to the alleluia moment let's do this because we can be more environmentally sympathetic perhaps as a result of evaluating what we do and how we could do things differently. So in those dialogues I have to say it's very disappointing that he's a Chief Executive of a five billion dollar company and he's pretty much of the view of it's all bollocks we just need to make more money. So that's quite a turn off actually and I would guess he's probably representative when it comes to industry leaders.*

This discussion with Paul was very distinctive both in terms of the strong way that he expresses himself and that he makes a pointed critiques of prevailing capitalist and economic logics. Most of the other managers did not dispute my observations of the tensions that I noticed from the first phase of interviews although they offered limited self-reflection about it. Some framed sustainability like Brian as a business opportunity and Victor vociferously refuted that there were tensions between natural and economic systems during our

truncated meeting.

The struggles, or perhaps partial identities, that I have talked about amongst these managers sense making became apparent when I was working through my analysis of these second encounters. Working with the comments I had made whilst transcribing, the notes about my expectations ahead of each interview and my reflections afterwards along with ethnographic field notes I set about developing some emergent themes to talk about these conversations. What I found was when I tried to compare and contrast managers views under one of the eight themes I would begin building an argument from the sense that I had made. But as I progressed with this placing and positioning of the content of each managers sense making I would frequently become unstuck as looking back through the transcripts I would notice something that appeared to cut across their other views. A good example of this is from Duncan. Where he suggests that science is the critical route to deal with the issues:

(13DP @ 58m55.1s of 122m07.6s)

Duncan - *It's really down to science isn't it. Science has got to come up with an answer we'll be fighting over water at some stage.*

Which when I looked back again through the interview appears contradictory to earlier statements he made about moving toward what he terms a natural approach.

(13DP @ 26m51.4s of 122m07.6s)

Duncan – *It seems to me [that] we're trying to use science to combat the effects that we're having on nature and we haven't being going at it for as long as nature has so where not really as good. We've done one or two good things but the end of the day that's how we're trying to do it with genetic crops and all sorts of other things. We're trying to defeat nature or trying to find a way around it so that we don't have this negative effect. I suspect we probably won't be successful on that basis I think we've really got to back to some sort of a natural approach.*

Adrian offers some similar confusion with a comment about how his views on current predicaments.

(4AB @ 57m14.0s of 70m35.1s)

Adrian – *We don't really understand complexity that well and all the interplay so maybe coming out of this mess ... people are now thinking [about] ... these issues ... climate change [and] banking disasters. ... I ... think people all took [these things] for granted ... all we need is for the lights to go out a bit and that would probably be the last piece or food shortages.*

A comment which seems strange considering this earlier remark about how businesses has the sustainability agenda in hand.

(4AB @ 34m22.9s of 70m35.1s)

Adrian - *I think the corporations are all switched on to it companies like us understand corporate social responsibility [and] have some sort of sustainability agenda etc. so I don't think there's an issue at the corporate level. But corporations have to have a viable offer they [have to] make money ... for their business models so ultimately the consumer has to be able to discriminate and pay the extra.*

Here you can see how I started to find myself a little lost and confused in where these managers were placing themselves and how they were seeking to be identified in our conversation about sustainability. With their explicit recognition of the tensions between economic agendas and their environmental concerns sustainability does appear to upset, confuse and struggle with some of the core constructs when they talk about the world and their actions within it. For Paul I have shown the example whereby he has actually shifted to seek an alternative place to work which he sees in part triggered by the creation of the conversational space between us where he could hear himself articulate his views. Space which seems limited for these managers. I have tried to work within the nuances of this dialogic sense making and reflect up my own placing and potential naïvety that I would find coherence and connectivity through these managers views. However, it appears that these confusions for managers around their construction of the

issues encompassed by the notion of sustainability can be precarious as they struggle to sustain their viewpoints and positions. Whereby notions of sustainability or 'green narratives' can help unsettle manager's self-narratives and prompt them to act upon their commitments to sustainability (Starkey & Crane, 2003). Self-narratives which, when reflecting on the following comment from Paul, are likely associated with what could be considered as radical management discourses.

(10PW @ 45m27.9s of 76m59.2s)

Paul - *I hate to sound like some kind of Marxist or something. But I think the whole capitalist model is the biggest part of the enemy here. You know the kind of green model and growth model it's really difficult to imagine sustainability and capitalism being intertwined going forward. Maybe I'm just not bright enough to understand how [we can have] ... perpetual growth that doesn't continue to deplete the resources of the world. It's very difficult for me to grasp how those are not totally incompatible concepts. Inevitably ... we will either get to a point where globally we will understand the incompatibility ... of [the] traditional capitalist model ... and we'll do something different. Or we'll continue in denial until basically the space ship is going crash or burn or something.*

In closing I hope that my experimentation with methods has offered novelty and shown a glimmer of success at moving within, in Laws words, the 'fluidities, leakages and entanglements' of the social (2004, p. 41). Along with some hope that amongst the disconnections there is what appears a struggling sense amongst these managers that sustainability is worthy of some considered self-reflection about where and how we are placing our attentions.

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