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Visions of the past and future: participatory approaches to identifying sustainable pathways in organisations

Conveners:

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1. Introduction *by Ricardo García-Mira and Giuseppe Carrus*

The study of sustainable practices in organizations has received relatively little attention in Environmental Psychology. Only recently this has started to be an area of interest, due to the growing awareness of the contribution of large-scale organizations to climate change and to the fact that environmental and social sustainability in organizations have come on the agenda of executives and leaders both in the private and public sectors. It has been shown that the potential contribution of large organizations to global warming over the next 100 years will be highly significant: 72 % CO₂, 18 % Methane, 9 % Nitrous Oxide (Emission Database for Global Atmospheric Research, 2000).

Many organisations try to take responsibility for addressing environmental impacts, although some have argued that this is often little more than 'greenwash'. The Stern Review (2007) demonstrated that the business case for integrating sustainability into their business strategies might be the most persuasive strategy (Govindarajulu & Daily, 2004; Ambec & Lanoie, 2008). They show commitment to environmental policies that facilitate a shift towards more sustainable business practices. The movement has gained strengths as many organisations compete to be seen as leaders in sustainability (Zibarras & Ballinger, 2011). Therefore, many organizations have introduced or changed policies, products and processes to address pollution, minimize resource use, and to improve community and stakeholder relations (Crane, 2000).

Nevertheless, these changes may only reflect superficial progress in organizations (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Significant cultural change is needed in order for organizations to adopt sustainable practices both in their production processes and everyday operations, and reach significant reductions in their GHG emissions. Achieving radical transformation requires identifying sustainable pathways that lead to the desired objectives of reducing emissions and contributing to climate change mitigation in Europe. Organizations tend to be slow in implementing radical change and such change may require significantly different management practices such as involving participatory approaches to ensure that all those within a company are not only involved in defining an alternative

future but feel empowered and motivated to take the necessary measures to make transformations towards low-carbon organizations possible.

This symposium reports on an EU FP7 project taking place in Italy, The Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK which is seeking to understand the drivers of and barriers to sustainable ways of production and consumption through an *exploration of management and employee practices in large scale organizations*. The aim of this symposium is to present several innovative methodologies that have proven useful in studying the factors influencing sustainable practices in organizations and the radical transformation and pathways to reaching them. We will concentrate especially on life-history interviews, back-casting scenarios, agent-based modelling and the more classical focus groups and in-depth interviews. The symposium aims to provide a forum for a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these methodologies in studying sustainable practices in organizations, through the analysis of empirical data emerging from the field work in different large-scale organizations across Europe. Implications for future research will also be discussed.

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2. Creating visions of the future: the use of back-casting scenarios in defining change in universities

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Back-casting scenarios constitute a relatively new methodology in the field of sustainability and climate change. Despite its appearance and theorization in the decade of the '70s, it is only recently that it has become widely used as an instrument in helping decision-making processes in policy-making. The back-casting scenarios methodology appeared in response to the discontent with the traditional methods of trend extrapolation in energy forecasting, where it was assumed that energy demand would increase gradually and renewable energy technologies and energy conservation efforts were ignored (Vergragt & Quist, 2011).

In future and sustainability studies, back-casting scenarios are defined as a methodology that allows us to envision and analyze different types of sustainable futures and develop agendas, strategies and pathways to reach them (Vergragt & Quist, 2011). It has a strong

normative component, as it starts from desirable future states or set of objectives and then analyzes the steps and policies that are needed to get there, in order to be able to design agendas that can be implemented and that normally require cooperation and communication among different types of actors in complex socio-economic and political environments. It is considered a useful qualitative tool in going toward alternative futures in issues of climate change (Giddens, 2009).

The present paper will present the results obtained from applying the methodology of back-casting scenarios to the study of sustainable objectives and pathways to reach them in the case of universities. It will present results obtained at the University of Corunna, by using a process-oriented scenario-development method which combined stakeholder and researcher input to generate images of the future and desired end-states. We will discuss the pros and cons of the method of back-casting scenarios, its uses in studying (un)sustainable practices in large scale organizations and the implications for future research and policy development in public organizations.

3. Transforming sustainable practices in work and at home; a life histories understanding

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There is a tendency to see work as distinct from the rest of life. Not only do individuals in organizations bring to work their values, lifestyles, socio-economic conditions, and multiple identities and find creative ways of adapting to the organizational environment, they are also active agents in creating, maintaining and transforming work practices. Moreover, they also have the potential to take learned practices from the workplace to their homes and other everyday settings. How do people connect practices from one area of life to another and what impact does this have on their identities, roles and everyday behaviours related to sustainability?

This study, part of the LOCAW project, is examining sustainability practices of a major international oil extractor/producer located in Aberdeen, Scotland. The research seeks to understand the social dynamics, vested interests, and forms of communication that drive or hinder practices towards more sustainable and low carbon production processes and workplace behaviours.

This study is significant not only in terms of the subject of the research which has rarely been investigated (cross-border sustainability practices in and between work/home), but it is also unique in terms of the methodology. To our knowledge no other research has been undertaken using a life histories methodology (Portelli, 1997) to explore the development of individuals' (un)sustainable practices across the lifespan. What is particularly valuable about a life histories methodology is that these accounts are positioned within a context of temporal, spatial and social relations. The life histories methodology, rather than focussing

on particular sets of attitudes or behaviours, involves the recording of an individual's memories and experiences from across the lifespan, in terms of their simultaneous 'situatedness' in local, national and international spaces, and in the context of social relations within the family, the community and salient institutions. This allows us to understand how people experience, interpret, engage and respond to changes in the world of work and home and how they become active agents capable to plan, initiate, facilitate as well as prevent changes.

This paper will report on life history interviews conducted with members of the workforce (blue and white collar), trade union officials and members of the management in the oil industry in Aberdeen. By selecting interviewees from each of these positions we will obtain a cross section of people in different social positions and come to a closer understanding of the effects of different lifestyles on GHG emissions. The interviews, analysed by means of discourse and narrative analysis, will focus on the ways in which the relationships between work, domestic life and leisure activities affect people's decisions concerning their GHG emission-relevant practices.

4. Individual and organizational drivers and barriers to low-carbon practices at work: a preliminary qualitative analyses in an Italian energy company

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Large organizations are responsible for a significant amount of GHG emissions, and recent estimates suggest that the potential contribution of large organizations to global warming over the next 100 years will even increase. Within this framework, a worthy issue for environmental psychological research is the investigation of the factors promoting or hindering the transition to more sustainable everyday behaviours and practices in the workplace.

The study presented here is part of a larger EU-FP7 funded research project, currently in progress, which groups together seven different research teams from six different European countries: Spain, Italy, Romania, Sweden, The Netherlands, UK. In this case, we will present the results of a qualitative study, carried out with the aim of assessing the existing everyday practices and behaviours in the workplace, which have an impact on the level of greenhouse gas emissions, in a large Italian company in the energy production sector. The environmentally-relevant everyday practices in organization considered referred to three main categories of organizational practices: 1) Consumption of materials and energy; 2) Waste generation and management; 3) Organization-related mobility. Three different sources of data and information were used: a) Interviews with key-informers situated at different levels of decision-making; b) Focus Groups; c) Analysis of organizational documents. All the material gathered was subject to thematic content analysis procedures,

using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), specifically the ATLAS.ti software.

Results from the three data sets converge in showing the presence of main barriers (e.g.: 'Time is a barrier for sustainable mobility'; 'There is no automatic switch off of lights at work') and drivers (e.g.: 'People save energy at home to save money'; 'The organization encourages policies of consumptions reduction') at both the individual and organizational levels. These identified factors are incorporated into a theoretical model, predicting sustainable individual and collective practices in the workplace. This model will be subsequently tested in a quantitative study, conducted through standardized psychometric tools.

The implication of the findings will be discussed, in light of the possible organizational strategies and policies in order to enable transition to a more sustainable working environment and working practices.

5. The pertinence of using focus groups and in-depth interviews in the study of sustainability-related issues in private organizations providing public utility services

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We conducted our research within the LOCAW project in a company which is the Romanian regional operating company of public water and waste-water services. We find very appropriate the use of two participatory methods, focus groups and in-depth interviews, as research tools in our study given the fact that the specific characteristics of our case study organization, the 'natural monopoly' and the 'essential service', could impact the efficacy of data collection methods. Water and sanitation are typically associated with a combined obligation to serve and to use for health and for environmental reasons (Chisari, Estache & Waddams-Price, 2003). Therefore it is very important to find out how employees analyze their company own situation, how they address issues, analyze options, and carry out activities.

Focus groups allow access to people's attitudes, beliefs, values, and also to the meanings that individuals attribute to their life experiences in situations of social interaction. Therefore we used this method to explore perceptions, attitudes and evaluations of workers in relation to individual and organizational (un)sustainable practices. Focus groups had the aim of stimulating an open discussion and a comparison of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and everyday practices as they were individuated and described through preliminary interviews with key-informants and to identify other potential practices that were not detected during the interviews and also aimed to throw light on the normative understandings that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgements.

In-depth interviews were used to investigate the structural and organizational factors influencing sustainability-related everyday practices in the workplace. The key feature that highlights the opportunity of using this method in our case study can be seen as a three pole game, by the empathic interference of investigators' and informants' subjectivity and the third pole of the relationship: the research object. The informant "has only pieces of object, and he sees the third pole more like his own life - the raw material of the interview – which he has to analyse from a totally different perspective. The raw material represents a much larger framework for the investigator: the problem-solving of research. Even if there is a disagreement between the two actors concerning the definition of the third pole, yet they use it as if there is an agreement for attacking along, more profoundly. This three pole game acquires sustain efforts for moving forward towards the results.

6. Drivers of and barriers to sustainable practice at work perceived by the employees of an Romanian company

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This study was conducted as a part of Work Package 2 within the project LOCAW, in order to identify drivers of and barriers to sustainable practice at work in a company which is the Romanian regional operating company of public water and waste-water services. The data were obtained from processing the open answers in the 119 questionnaires which was structured in the analysis of three categories of practices: consumption of materials and energy, generation and management of waste and organization-related mobility.

The results show that the most of the perceived barriers against adopting sustainable behaviours related to the responsible consumption of energy and other resources seemed to be placed at different levels, in equal measure (3 factors for each category): individual and collective human elements (carelessness, habit and convenience), sociocultural elements (education, mentality and lack of environmental culture), and also political, economic or institutional elements (high prices for water systems and electricity use, lack of environmental policies and lack of funds). Retrospectively, the mentioned drivers for the consumption behaviours were more widely represented: organisational and institutional elements (awareness of environmental responsibility, changing working hours, management involvement and inspection), discursive constructions of actors and popular discourses (accountability campaigns, media promotion, open information and posters for environment protection), political economic and institutional elements (fines, rules and creating conditions for the exercise of the ecological instinct), material elements and spatial physical features (using e-mails, using economic bulbs and control prints) and, with fewer items, individual and collective human elements (encouragement and exemplification).

Waste generation and management - the most represented attitude towards the perceived barriers is that there are none or that they don't know. The subjects indicated as stoppers

the individual and collective human elements and sociocultural elements. The attempt to map the drivers for these waste collection sustainable behaviours brings up the same weird observed situation. The most important perceived facilitators for actions related to waste were selective waste collection, as much as there are none.

Organisation-related mobility - The most important mentioned barriers against adopting responsible travel behaviours seemed to be: individual and collective human elements and organizational/institutional elements. The same phenomenon of polarity previously identified, the prevalence of the “potential disengagement” factors/attitude close after the most important factors, can also be observed here. The drivers for the responsible travel behaviours in the organisation: material elements and spatial physical features, organisational and institutional elements and political economic/ institutional elements.

7. Conclusion

By David Uzzell

Some take home messages concerning what can we learn from each other and how can we improve our competences in dealing with participatory approaches to identifying sustainable pathways in organizations.