

Becoming sustainable?

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Summary

This dissertation aims to contribute to knowledge of the barriers organizations and individuals face when undertaking sustainability transitions and responding to climate change in the energy transition, as it is important for contextualizing and understanding the factors that also foster climate action. This dissertation explores the following overarching research question: ‘How do organizations and individuals understand and respond to climate change?’.

To answer this, this dissertation conducted four studies that sought to:

Study 1) identify the barriers different organizations face when collaborating and learning to respond to sustainability challenges,

Study 2) understand the different ways that energy companies (key contributors to climate change) frame climate change and how this relates to their climate actions,

Study 3) explore the ways that individuals working in the energy transition (a key solution to climate change) justify climate change inaction, and

Study 4) unpack how responding to climate change can alter, challenge, or confirm individual and organizational identities and the ways this can impact organizational sustainability transitions.

By conducting the above four studies, this dissertation presents key insights that contribute to answering this dissertation’s research question and identifies several challenges and opportunities that organizations face in doing so.

Study 1 explores the role of learning in organizational responses to sustainability. By conducting a cross-disciplinary systematic review of the literature on learning for sustainability, this study explores how different disciplines conceptualize and operationalize learning for sustainability and identifies the common themes and challenges. The findings highlight the different ways that power relations influence learning and decision-making processes, and how entrenched traditional value structures and ‘reflexive complicity’ limit practitioners and researchers alike in finding meaningful sustainability solutions. The study concludes that shifting how we motivate business and management research on learning for sustainability, in a way that prioritizes sustainability outcomes over firm performance, could bring us a step closer to more meaningful responses to sustainability. Similarly, breaking patterns of ‘reflexive complicity’ by key actors in business could assist in shifting towards more radical and long-term responses to sustainability in practice.

Study 2 explores how ten European energy companies have framed climate change from 2010-2019, the actions they’ve taken in response to climate change, and what this may signal for future climate change responses in the energy sector. Through analyzing 111 energy company sustainability reports, study 2 proposes a new framework (The Climate Framing Framework) that identifies four inter-related frames that energy companies use to make sense of, and respond to, climate change. The study illustrates the actions that align with these four

dominant climate change frames and explores how energy company framing has either stagnated, evolved, or rewound over time. Finally, by exploring the triggers that stimulate changes in framing, this study draws attention to how the actions of government, civil society, and energy companies themselves can influence future climate change responses.

To explore the disconnect between an acknowledged need to act on climate change and limited climate progress, study 3 looks to the concept of reflexive complicity and climate denialism to unpack climate inaction across organizations in the energy transition. Using in-depth interviews with 34 diverse actors, study 3 shows how actors justify climate inaction by looking outwards and pointing to 'others' to shift responsibility and blame, looking inwards and engaging with issues of virtue and morality to avoid decision making, and staying inside the box to defend the status quo. All of which results in reflexive complicity and climate change inaction that set us down the path toward climate emergency.

Study 4 explores how radical organizational identity change in the energy sector influences individual organizational identification - the extent to which an individual's identity shares the same attributes of their organization - over time. Using in-depth interviews with 34 actors experiencing radical organizational identity change from the energy transition, this study presents five identity archetypes ('the early adopters', 'the committed critics', 'the transformers', 'the resisters', and 'the dreamers') that build on Bednar et al.'s (2020) theoretical concept of organizational identification trajectories. The findings illustrate the identification trajectories of these five identity archetypes and discuss the implications of these trajectories on the members themselves, other members of the organization, and the organization's ability to achieve their aspirational identity. Study 4 provides empirical support for propositions made by previous organizational identification research and introduces new insights regarding the significant role of threats to expertise for identification over time.

This dissertation concludes by drawing attention to two themes that arose when returning to the main research question of how individuals and organizations understand and respond to climate change. First, the individuals and organizations included in the studies are understanding climate change through the lens of their many and diverse stakeholders. The final chapter provides examples of the increasing number of stakeholder needs' that organizations contributing to the energy transition must consider when making sense of, and responding to, climate change. Concluding that managing multiple and conflicting stakeholder demands makes it particularly challenging for actors to make clear choices in how they will respond to climate change, as any decision will ultimately result in trade-offs between different stakeholders. The second theme to arise from this dissertation illustrates that, in light of increasingly complex stakeholder pressures, the most common response to climate change is to continue with business-as-usual responses that do not challenge the unsustainable systems and structures that enable the climate emergency. In the hopes of contributing to resolving this tendency for individuals and organizations to stick with business-as-usual responses that prioritize financial outcomes over sustainability outcomes, the final chapter provides clear avenues for future business and management research and makes several calls to action specific to several stakeholder groups in the energy transition.