

Living with contradictions: the dynamics of senior managers' identity tensions in relation to sustainability

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate how senior managers located in Northern Europe in the energy and power industry coordinate their recognition of sustainability challenges with other things they say and do. Identity theory is used to examine the fine-grained work through which the managers navigate identities and potentially competing narratives. In contrast with other studies we find that pursuing cohering identities and resolving potential tensions and contradictions does not appear to matter for most of the managers. We explore the dynamics of how managers live with apparent contradictions and tensions without threat to their narrative coherence. We extend existing research into managerial identities and sustainability by: showing how managers combine different potentially contrasting identity types; identifying nine discursive processes through which the majority of managers distance and deflect sustainability issues away from themselves and their companies; and, showing the contrasting identity dynamics in the case of one manager to whom narrative coherence becomes important and prompts alternative action.

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Introduction and outline

From a personal point of view we're not moving quickly enough. The whole global environment isn't moving quickly enough towards reducing its impact on the planet and therefore you've obviously got to think about your grandchildren and forwards from there From a business point of view you know there are a lot of the [energy] technologies available and it's just frustrating to see the lack of support for those that can supply some of the answers to the burning problems at the moment. – David, Group Managing Director, energy and power industry

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 at this point in time. ... Many of the target[s] that have been set seem to be ... flying by the wayside and the problem seems [to be that] ... industry is still very much financially motivated. – Duncan, Global Managing Director, energy and power industry

David and Duncan (pseudonyms), like most of the senior managers in this study, express significant unease that business lacks a sense of urgency in responding to what they see as sustainability challenges. And yet alongside these concerns they were relatively untroubled. We use identity theory as a theoretical lens to: understand how managers do not, often, appear to coherently align their insights about sustainability with how they live and work; and, to explore the processes involved in holding what could appear contradictory identities. Our study examines how senior managers coordinate their acceptance of sustainability challenges with other things they say and do, and explores how they use discursive tactics to navigate apparent tensions and contradictions amongst their views. We consider two key research questions:

Does narrative coherence across the managers' identities in respect of sustainability appear to be important to them?
How do managers navigate potential identity tensions and contradictions?

Recent work about sustainability in a variety of organizational settings considers managers' identities and potential tensions within and between their identity narratives – as entrepreneurs (Phillips, 2013); as specialist sustainability managers (Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012); and as senior managers in a large hospital (Cherrier, Russell, & Fielding, 2012). Our study adds to these debates by mapping and analysing the dynamics of the discursive processes through which senior managers navigate identities and potentially competing narratives. We have chosen to study managers in senior positions who do not have 'formal' responsibilities for sustainability because they have the potential to legitimise and support corporate action. We focus on the energy and power industry as this sector is central in sustainability debates, particularly in relation to the carbon emission impacts of fossil energy on climate systems, and so heightened awareness might be expected amongst sector leaders. Because of this prominence any tensions and contradictions for senior managers can be brought into greater relief.

Identity theory offers possibilities to investigate how organizational members negotiate issues surrounding the self and the workplace as a way of considering managers' agency and to gain an understanding of potentials for change. Self-identity is conceived here as a process through which, within the bounds of relationships and their shared histories and fictions, a person can do much of the identity work for themselves (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009).

Our study contributes by: showing that most managers appeared unconcerned about narrative coherence between identities in relation to sustainability; developing understanding about the dynamics of how managers combine potentially contrasting identity types; expanding earlier work by identifying nine discursive processes whereby the managers distance and deflect sustainability issues away from themselves and their company on to ‘others’; and, in contrast, exploring potential dynamics through which coherence may become important and self-alienation might prompt alternative action, as shown in one manager’s case.

We first outline identity, the lens we have taken, and key debates. This leads into a discussion of related studies that have also considered how managers make sense of the contested concept of sustainability and what this implies for their self-identities. Next we outline the research approach. Our analysis focuses on identifying and understanding the discursive processes through which the managers shift between identities and blend potentially competing narratives. Finally, we use our findings about senior managers’ self-identities to explore people’s capacities to live with contradictions and consider how this contrasts with one of the manager’s feelings of self-alienation.

Self-identity

Identity has been regarded as a bridging concept which can help consider the interplay between the person and society (Ybema et al., 2009). It offers ways to conceptualise the notion of an individual as well as explore how what they say about themselves, their work and their relations with others interacts with ideas and discourses about society. A range of terms, some distinct and others overlapping, have been used in connection with ideas about identity. These include: self-identity e.g. Watson (2007); personal identity e.g. Shoemaker (2003); and identity work e.g. Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003). Amongst this variety, our primary interest will be the notion of self-identity, relating to the internal aspects of how people work out who and what they are (Watson, 2007). This can be understood as formed of narratives about the self which help situate who a person is and what they do across time (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Ricoeur, 1991), hence connected terms of self-narrative and narrative identity. Self-narrative refers to how a person authors accounts of interactions between self-relevant events to support an ongoing sense of purpose (Gergen & Gergen, 1997).

Whilst there are many similarities in authors’ notions of self-identity, there are also some differences, emerging especially from varying sensibilities towards ideas of reflexivity. In this respect, reflexivity can be understood as related to recognising the potential to ‘envisage alternative realities and to re-construct and change our world’ by comparing and contrasting ourselves with others (Collinson, 2003, p. 529). Disagreements related to reflexivity centre around the capacity or desirability for coherence of self-identity / self-identities and self-narrative(s). These are both in terms of how researchers think self-identity or self-narratives *should be*, as well as to what degree people care about understanding themselves as being coherent and non-contradictory.

There is a prevalent argument that self-identity formulation has become a much more reflexive project because historic constraints (related to family, religion, mobilities) which are seen to foster coherence have decreased (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991). This is related to suggestions that the potential for a connected and authentic narrative of self-identity may be impossible (Bauman, 2004). These arguments, which are often associated with post-structuralist approaches, suggest that self-identities cannot be associated with a singular and uncomplicated narrative, but instead can be understood as assortments of ‘little stories, poems

[and] language games' (Hetherington, 1998, p. 24). This view connects with other arguments that identities are unstable and fragmented, lacking a cohering narrative (Clarke et al., 2009; Collinson, 2003). Whilst acknowledging the challenges of holding a cohering narrative, other scholars argue that there is a tendency for managers to want to seek coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2007). In this way, self-identity involves a perpetual struggle for connectivity between who and what we are in life and at work. For example, some scholars who have applied Ricoeur's ideas about narrative identity have suggested a need for an appreciation of the temporality of self-identity (Mallett & Wapshott, 2012). They have argued for the importance of being aware of the potential for contradiction as a person seeks to find 'a sense of stability in the face of conflict, complexity and uncertainty' (p.18). This has informed understanding that narrative processes provide 'a bridge between the remembered past, experienced present and anticipated future' (p.24).

We seek to appreciate these various sensibilities and the potential limits of imposing a narrative structure or coherence on self-identity. We use ideas of self-identity as a revealing way to explore senior managers' discursive struggles when, alongside the organizational narratives they live amongst, they attempt to incorporate ideas about sustainability into self-narratives about their place and role within the world. The struggles are seen to involve managers sometimes trying to overcome feelings of contradiction, disruption and confusion in how they see themselves and their actions, and at other times living with apparently contradictory thoughts and practices. We conceive self-identity here as a process through which, amongst the potential slipperiness of language, a person can do much of the identity work for themselves. However, this does not mean that self-identity becomes infinitely fluid, as it is understood to come into being and be sustained within the bounds of relationships and their shared histories and fictions (Clarke et al., 2009).

Self-alienation

Associated with theories of identity, we use self-alienation to consider the discursive struggles and antagonisms which are noticed amongst the sense making of the senior managers studied. Taking a discursive approach, and avoiding its essentialisms, self-alienation builds upon the concept of dis-identification, which has been used when managers experience levels of incongruence between their sense of self, their values and the values of the organizations at which they work (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Self-alienation involves a sense of unattainability, when 'the imaginary authentic self is visualized, but cannot be realized given extant employment conditions' (Costas & Fleming, 2009, p. 362). In particular, it relates to understanding 'reflexive moments' when actors recognise a sense of incongruence with their employing organization and that they have thus become someone they do not want to be. These moments are described as occurring when the 'authentic self ("who I really am") is paradoxically experienced as inauthentic because it fails to live out the narrated imaginary of authenticity one still aspires to' (p.362) – it becomes 'frustratingly unattainable' (p.370). Hence self-alienation speaks to moments when we become discomforted by seeing ourselves as being who we do not want to be, with related identity tensions potentially encouraging us to shrug off our employment associations in discursive or physical ways. We suggest below that this reflexivity may be prompted in dialogic spaces, such as interviews. We choose this approach to self-alienation as it enables the complexities of self-identity to be explored.

Sustainability and the landscape for managers' sense making

To put it crassly, consumers want consumption sustained. Workers want jobs sustained. Capitalists and socialists have their 'isms', while aristocrats, bureaucrats, and technocrats have their 'cracies'. All are threatened by the decay of global life support systems. No one can publicly advocate unsustainable progress and maintain credibility. Thus sustainability calls to and is being called for by many, from tribal peoples to the most erudite academics, from peasant farmers to agro-industrialists, from denim-clad eco-activists to pinstripe-suited bankers. With the term meaning something different to everyone, the quest for sustainable development is off to a cacophonous start. (Norgaard, 1994, p. 11)

As Norgaard suggests, the notion of sustainability has a multitude of diverse expressions. The associated cacophony and contestation is the backcloth against which managers make sense. Some authors suggest that responding to sustainability challenges is about 'working better' by sustaining levels of consumption and accelerating product and service innovation in order to reduce the materials and energy inputs employed in designing, making, distributing and selling them (Nidumolu, Prahalad, & Rangaswami, 2009). Other scholars track and critique organizations' attempts to reduce their environmental impacts through approaches such as corporate environmentalism and corporate greening (Banerjee, 2008; Bowen, 2014; Nyberg & Wright, 2013). Thus corporate approaches to sustainability may be a bit less unsustainable, rather than actually addressing sustainability challenges (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). Some present scientific research suggesting that planetary biophysical limits and planetary systems are tangible and currently threatened (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Rockström et al., 2009), and invite us to ponder what it would mean to organise (society, business) in ways that are restorative rather than degrading (Bansal & Knox-Hayes, 2013; Borland & Lindgreen, 2013; Whiteman, Walker, & Perego, 2013). Some argue that nothing short of radical revisions of capitalism will adequately address the challenges global society now faces (Milne, Kearins, & Walton, 2006). At stake are fundamental ontological issues about the nature of humanity, 'nature', 'society' and 'business', which are all contested notions.

If and how such divergent views and debates are apparent in senior managers' talk is part of this study. We seek to add to a new area of research that has emerged about managers' identities and how they engage with and respond to sustainability issues. We bring relevant aspects of three recent studies into this paper to allow us to explore how managers work with issues of identity in the complex territory of sustainability.

The first study by Cherrier et al. (2012) investigates 'how top management supports, accepts, negotiates, disregards, or rejects the implementation of corporate environmentalism' in a large hospital in Australia. Six potential 'identity management' responses or dominant discourses to corporate environmentalism were proposed, with the managers seen as moving between them to construct coherent identities in relation to sustainability. The discourses include three 'defensive identities' and three 'supportive identities'. Defensive identities do not embrace corporate environmentalism, seeing this as promoting conflict, focusing instead on organizational objectives of finance and customer care. Supportive identities do embrace corporate environmentalism by seeing it as aligning with organizational objectives, understanding organizations as having responsibilities in respect of society and other species.

The second study by Wright et al. (2012) involves interviewing 36 specialist sustainability managers and consultants employed in large corporations in a variety of industry sectors in Australia about their work and career histories, and their personal attitudes towards the

environment and climate change. These 'frontline business specialists' are selected because they are seen as key to promoting organizational action on sustainability issues (p.1452). Similarly to Cherrier et al. this study identifies some principal identities which are seen as roles or characters that the sustainability change agents enact. Wright et al. develop their analysis by tracing how the interviewees discursively move between these identities to create coherent narratives of the self by attempting to balance the needs of business and the environment.

In the third study Phillips (2013) focuses on the identity narratives of two UK-based ecopreneurs selected from an original sample of thirty participants. Ecopreneurs are positioned as people that have founded and run their businesses with a greater interest in creating social and environmental value than economic value. Hence these people, like those in Wright et al.'s study, have to blend their commitments to both business and the environment. Phillips describes how in narrating their identities the ecopreneurs walk a tightrope of 'anxiety and discomfort' as they attempt to present a coherent and credible self that is good for the environment and good at business (p811). She demonstrates how the ecopreneurs achieve a reasonably coherent narrative of self by drawing on a number of discursive resources to provide 'narrative scaffolding' (p795).

A theme within these three studies that is central to the focus of our research is how people in organizations move between different identities in relation to ideas about sustainability. Cherrier et al. propose that the managers they studied moved from one identity response to another, attempting to negotiate potential tensions and contradictions between their expressed organizational and environmental objectives. Wright et al. explore the managers' movements amongst multiple and competing identities, encompassing differing degrees of commitment to the environment and their organization, which involves 'bridging tensions between their sense of self and divergent circumstances and audiences' (p1470). Contextual and situational factors of their interactions with others are thus important, for example at home versus at work. Phillips considers the discursive strategies that managers display in their talk when striving to avoid confronting potential incoherences of simultaneously holding conflicting ideas about being both *for* business and *for* the environment. She develops ideas about 'distancing and deflection' where perceived negative characteristics that could threaten a purported moral and competent self are deflected onto some supposed others.

Our study adds to these debates by focusing on the fine-grained work through which senior managers navigate identities and potentially competing narratives. We explore the dynamics of managers' identity tensions and contradictions, how these relate to discursive processes of distancing and deflection, and whether identity coherence is important to the managers.

Studying senior managers' talk

We study managers in senior leadership positions in the energy and power market. This is an important and rich industry context in which to investigate debates, as a range of sustainability challenges are being faced, including mineral ore supply shortages for power generation equipment and the need to move away from a reliance on fossil energy due to impacts on climate systems. Because these sustainability issues are more prominent than in other industry sectors the discursive contradictions and potentially competing identities for senior managers can be brought into greater relief. Consequently, how the senior organizational actors studied are making sense of these issues and explaining the actions of

their organizations in relation to them offers an important view into the potential legitimisation of substantial corporate action for sustainability.

The interviews which form the basis of our analysis are seen as opportunities where self-identity and the related views and daily actions of the managers are partially ‘made visible’ through what they say about sustainability in relation to themselves (Coupland, 2007, p. 276). They offer a window upon self-identity and narratives of the self rather than giving full access to these substantially ‘inaccessible’ concepts (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Additionally, we appreciate what the managers said as potentially tending to connect with their actions, albeit that such interrelationships are often diffuse.

We interviewed the corporate managers in different organizations in the Northern European energy and power industry across two phases of research (see Table 1). The first phase took place at the end of 2009 and consisted of thirteen telephone interviews conducted by the first author who asked a range of broadly situated questions to explore what sense the managers were making of the notion of sustainability (e.g. ‘Tell me what sustainability means to you?’, ‘How are these debates taking place in your organization?’ and, ‘How does sustainability impact you at home?’). The research participants were known to the first author prior to the study through previous working relationships whilst the latter was employed by a research and consulting company. Earlier interactions (meetings and telephone conversations) had taken place separately with each interviewee and related to the provision of consulting projects and market intelligence for their companies, focusing upon developing market growth strategies and corporate growth opportunities. None of the senior managers had formal responsibility for sustainability and the topic had not been previously discussed. One of the managers was female and all held senior management positions (some the most senior position in their company). Their role titles are shown in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

From the first research phase the first author conducted an extensive thematic and detailed analysis (see below). Whilst all the managers had expressed concerns about sustainability, this analysis showed apparent tensions and contradictions for the managers, between acting on their concerns and performing their organizational roles. These tensions seemed to connect with pragmatically delineating between economic and ecological contexts, and between work and home lives. The first author shaped a second phase of research at the end of 2010 by sharing a two page briefing document summarising these key observations from the first phase. The second phase consisted of eight face-to-face interviews with the managers from the first phase who were based in the UK and one additional participant who another interviewee recommended. These lasted between one and two hours and were designed to learn more about some of the emergent themes from the first phase and see how managers’ views may have evolved. This phase of research was explained to participants as being about exploring how the managers came to their views on sustainability issues; how they held those views; and, what they do about them. The first author invited comments on the summary briefing document. Questions were tailored to refer to examples and instances previously mentioned by each interviewee, inviting their reflections on these and exploring how they expected sustainability debates to evolve in their organizations, and what they thought a sustainable future might look like. Bringing forward the findings about tensions and contradictions from the first phase analysis was not intended to be adversarial, but to invite

the senior managers to explore how they might want to engage with and reflect upon the apparently contradictory messages.

The first author conducted, recorded and transcribed the interviews. During each interview he took notes about the content of the conversation, along with ethnographic details about the arrangements of the office locations in which the interviews occurred. Whilst transcribing, he captured additional impressions of the interviews in a separate document. A mode of analysis associated with constructionist grounded theory was adopted for both phases of interviews, where the gathered data was coded to help navigate the material and relate it to identity types and track different discursive practices (Charmaz, 2014). Consideration was given to how the data from conversations was situated within particular exchanges with the interviewer, in particular settings.

Our analysis and findings are ordered around two research questions:
Does narrative coherence across the managers' identities in respect of sustainability appear to be important to them?
How do managers navigate potential identity tensions and contradictions?

To approach these questions we have mapped the data into Table 2. The names given in the first column are aliases. For the second and third columns we noted if interviewees stated that they understood that tensions existed between doing business and acting on sustainability and whether they expressed concerns about the potential consequences of sustainability issues to themselves and their families. These two columns include some additional comments for some interviewees when their views were not clear cut.

In the fourth column, we have compared our data with the management identities developed by Cherrier et al. (2012) in a hospital context to trace the managers' movements between different identities. Through a process of mapping the managers in our study of the energy and power industry we have adapted the identity types. These are presented in alphabetical order in our analysis as we are interested in the combinations. None of the senior managers in our study expressed any doubts or resistance to the concept of sustainability relating to environmental issues (including climate change). This meant that unlike the senior managers in Cherrier et al.'s study there were no displays of the three defensive identities – 'traditionalist', 'pragmatist' and 'observer'. For example, whilst many managers were 'financially minded', connected with pragmatist, they expressed this in ways that were supportive of sustainability which we have related to 'technocentrist'. We have included the 'observer' identity in our mapping as some managers in our study 'observe and commentate on change within their organization' (p524). However, we have adapted this identity type to include debates *outside* of the organization and that it is about being active participants, rather than passive, in debates. In terms of Cherrier et al.'s supportive identities we have adapted 'holist' by relating it to managers who understand the economy as a subsystem embedded within the ecological, which differs from Cherrier et al.'s classification as relating to talk about sustainability being a topic of human values. Given these adaptations for the context of our study, the meanings of our identities types are:

Observer – observes and commentates on change within and outside their organization, identifying supporters and resisters of change

Technocentrist – identifies practical gains of environmental sustainability, is financially minded and identifies resource and financial savings from environmental initiatives

Holist – approaches environmental sustainability at a holistic level and discusses their organization as being embedded within and dependant on ecological systems
Ecopreneur – takes on responsibility for future generations and expresses the need for the concept to be integrated into their personal and organizational lives

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The final column in the table tracks the ways that managers use discursive processes of distancing and deflection which emerged from the grounded analysis. These have been further harmonised into nine key types found across all the managers interviewed.

It is important to note that during our analysis we often found issues emerging in the processes of seeking to recognise and explore tensions and contradictions in identities. Reflecting upon how we designated what in the senior manager’s talk was apparently contradictory suggested to us how important our judgements and ethical stances upon what made sense, rational or otherwise, were in determining these. Given these challenges we have concentrated upon the senior managers’ own perceptions of tensions as we did not want our reflexivity to over-shadow the managers’ voices.

By approaching these questions we add to existing debates by showing the dynamics of potential tensions and contradictions within and between identities, including presenting the types of discursive practices used to incorporate these into apparently satisfactory narratives of self. In doing this and exploring one manager's moment of self-alienation we problematize ideas that most managers seek cohering identity narratives.

Exploring contours of self-identity and self-alienation

As framing for the analysis which follows, it is important to note that most of the managers were very articulate about sustainability and its systemic and complex qualities, and, when asked whether they had any concerns about sustainability, identified climate change as a significant threat, as the opening quotations to this paper illustrate. However, the senior managers found themselves to be slightly empty handed and uncertain entering these debates as they were largely unable to trace their views about sustainability to particular sources of information or conversations. This also suggested that views about these issues were often not grounded amongst their everyday work. Ideas were traced on occasions (Steve to the writings of James Lovelock, David to films of Al Gore, Adrian to his early career as an energy analyst, and Paul to his upbringing on a farm), but these potential resources were not prominent in conversation. When their complex and systemic ideas about sustainability were brought into their working day through the interviews, their talk in relation to them frequently appeared unrehearsed. Sustainability and its systemic and complex qualities could easily be pushed out in favour of their resolute insistence that their job was simply about the business case. Hence being a ‘rational manager’, like that depicted by Wright et al. (2012), was a comfortable mode that managers could talk within to settle down or avoid any emergent tensions. Talking in this mode seemed part of performing their imaginaries of a senior manager social identity which would be generally expected or appreciated by audiences (McInnes & Corlett, 2012). However, as will be explored potential tensions were expressed

in multiple and differentiated ways as the meanings which they gave to sustainability shifted and flexed in their accounts.

Does narrative coherence across the managers' identities in respect of sustainability appear to be important to them?

In Table 2 we have mapped the combinations of identity types that each manager displayed and organised them into three groups. The groups are arranged based on the managers' expression of tensions between doing business and acting on sustainability, and the managers suggested concerns about the potential consequences of sustainability issues. The first group expressed neither tensions nor concerns, the second expressed tensions but not concerns, and the third expressed both tensions and concerns. This mapping enables us to illuminate the patterns of movement and non-movement between identities and explore how this related to the managers' apparent ambivalence towards narrative coherence.

In the first group – those expressing neither tensions nor concerns – each of the seven managers' talk can be connected with a technocentric identity type through which they expressed positive connectivity between economic and ecological agendas. For example, when asked if he had any concerns, Brian spoke about his comfort with his role and consistently framed sustainability as a business opportunity and as complementary with economic objectives. When asked how debates about sustainability were happening in his organization, Sam used ideas about product lifecycle costs and energy efficiency as interchangeable terms with sustainability, suggesting there was no tension. Stuart talked about sustainability as having balance in an organization to be competitive in the market place, which meant that he did not bring a broader (ecological) consideration of sustainability into the conversation.

When the observations of potential tensions from the first phase of interviewing were brought into conversation in the second phase (through the briefing document and tailored questions) these were ignored or reject by the managers in this group. For example, Victor explicitly refuted the potential for tensions between economic and ecological agendas when asked about this – *'I don't have a tension'* (2nd phase).

Two of the seven managers in this group also displayed aspects of a holist identity. Whilst none of the managers in this group expressed any great unease about their constructions of sustainability, talking about sustainability and not expressing potential tensions was more complicated for Mark and Steve when blending technocentrist and holist identities. They saw their organizations as inevitably embedded within a wider ecology, but held that financially driven action for efficiencies and introducing new technologies was sufficient to address their understandings of sustainability challenges. Blending these positions whilst not suggesting tensions or concerns was associated with them engaging in various discursive processes (discussed more in the next section of analysis) to deal with potential contradictions. For example, Steve at one point sought to distinguish between a personal view and a business view.

(1st phase: How do you see interconnections between issues of material supply and sustainability?)

Steve – *I think that there are issues ... you are getting into a realm which is perhaps not necessarily my business view but my personal view. My personal view is that there are*

too many people in the world and it's growing too rapidly and that there [are] ... finite resources.

The second group of three managers – those expressing tensions but not concerns – could be seen to display a greater range of identity types than the first group. All three managers in this group blended a technocentrist and holist identity, Adrian also observer and Roger also ecopreneur. In displaying this range of identity types there were occasions when different aspects of a manager's view appeared contradictory. For, example Adrian suggests that businesses have the sustainability agenda in hand:

(2nd phase: What does operating sustainably mean?)

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.

This comment seems in tension with his later remark in the same interview.

(2nd phase: How do you see sustainable futures emerging?)

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.

Apparently contradictory elements of managers' talk in this second group were often related to how some of them overtly questioned what they described as the economic logic of business, which they saw as problematic when operating under their holist conceptions of sustainability. For example, Edward makes a clear statement about this:

(1st phase: Do you have any concerns related to sustainability?)

Edward – I think the concerns are that economic factors come into decision making, and one thing does worry me that suddenly somebody says “that's going to cost too much”. So it seems like a good idea, but we're not going to do it, we're not going to improve the environment because it has a big impact on the cost of electricity, or water costs go up. If you're going to do it there should be ways and means of ensuring that it still goes ahead without financial restriction.

There are four managers in the third group, those expressing both tensions and concerns. However, whilst these managers (especially Trisha and David) spoke in strong ways about their concerns in relation to climate change or supply shortages, none of these managers spoke about potential tangible implications of sustainability for themselves, their families and businesses. For example, Duncan in the second phase stated that '*nobody in your immediate foreseeable future - your children, your grandchildren and so on - are really going to be enormously impacted*'. David and Paul gave a sense of taking some responsibility to act in respect of their concerns, aligning with aspects of an ecopreneur identity, although (see below) part of their discursive strategies of distancing and deflection included placing the responsibility for change on others (politicians, big businesses). Overall, the different identity types which each of the managers in this group moved between did not differ

substantially from the second group, as all included holist and technocentrist. Paul blended the greatest range of identity types, moving between all four used in this analysis.

A key finding from this sample of managers is that most of them did not seem to be worried about narrative coherence in relation to themselves and their views about sustainability. This appears to contrast with the other key articles reviewed here in which people studied were seeking cohering narratives of self. When managers in this sample did blend identities with contrasting sets of ideas, such as holist and technocentrist, any potential discomfort from holding multiple conflicting identities and acknowledging tensions seemed to be accommodated through various discursive processes which we discuss next in our response to the second research question.

How do managers navigate potential identity tensions and contradictions?

Phillips (2013) proposed the process of distancing and deflection from her analysis of ecopreneurs' identity narratives, where people place onto supposed others 'perceived negatives that could threaten a purported moral or competent self' (p812). We connect with this idea, adapting and expanding it to relate to a wider array of discursive processes which we identified as important in our study. The discursive processes which were predominant in blending and moving in and between identity types relate to the ways managers' constructions of sustainability issues and the potentials for action are distanced away from their company and/or role by deflecting them onto 'others' who have a greater need to show action as they are positioned as a larger part of the problems. So through these processes the managers become able to remove their possible agency, constrain their responsibility and be comfortable with the tensions as the core problems are displaced away from them. We have identified nine such processes whereby sustainability issues become distanced and deflected by managers from themselves and their organizations in their movements between identity types. These will be discussed next. The nine managers who moved between identity types (see the fourth column in Table 2) are included in this part of our analysis.

Placing primary responsibility to create change on others

This was the most prevalent type and could be noticed in seven of the managers' talk who used strategies of distancing and deflection to navigate potential identity tensions. The range of 'others' primary responsibility was placed on by the managers included politicians, consumers, China and big business. For example: when David was asked where he saw leadership for sustainability coming from he said '*unless the politicians actually put some mechanisms in place to force it to happen, then it is unlikely to happen*' (1st phase). Similarly Duncan, who described himself as working for a medium sized company, suggested that '*the bigger companies have an obligation to lead the way*' (2nd phase). This discursive ploy also involved the manager's detaching from the holist identity present in other areas of their talk as the 'others' responsible were articulated as disconnected from them. For example, several people said that China opens a new coal fired power station every two weeks, negating the potential for impactful action in Europe. However, when questioned about the potential connection with many everyday goods sold in the UK being made in China, this aspect of the debate was not followed up.

*Understanding business actions as only being able to be driven by financial logics
Requiring a stable / growing economy to act properly on sustainability
Seeing economic growth as inevitable*

These next three most prevalent types of discursive processes, with three or four managers deploying each of them, are taken together as they centre on ideas related to economics. In various ways the managers introduced an inevitability and singularity about how businesses and economies operated. For example, it was overwhelmingly assumed that less wealthy nations too need / want to adopt Western ideas about economic development and emulate levels of consumption. Although some managers did reflect upon their own behaviours and lifestyle patterns and how these might need to change. For example, Roger said “*I could drive a smaller car. ... I drive a big car for two reasons, not so much status, although that does count, I drive a big car principally because of comfort*” (2nd phase). Only Paul (discussed more below because his identity tensions connected with self-alienation) questioned the idea of economic growth and its compatibility with acting on sustainability. This key difference between the majority of managers who were able to hold potentially competing self narratives and the one person who eventually could not do so is an important insight from our study that is not discussed in others e.g. Phillips (2013) and Wright et al (2012).

The potential to distance and deflect issues of sustainability away from themselves in the three ways identified above offered the managers some key discursive processes to constrict their potential agency and responsibility. Drawing upon these discursive processes also enabled separation from the managers' holist identities, which implied views of businesses as being embedded within the ecological, to simultaneously protect themselves within a more neo-classically orientated economic position.

Separating personal and business views

Three of the managers created two detached and potentially competing viewpoints as another process of displacement. This was noticed earlier in relation to Steve moving between technocentrist and holist identities. It can be understood as part of a pragmatic move by the senior managers to push the domains of work apart from other aspects of their lives, particularly when they had agreed that there were tensions and contradictions between doing their work and acting on sustainability. Another example of this was from Trisha who asked at the outset of the first phase interview whether she was required to talk from a “*personal or business perspective*”.

Taking a Hobbsian perspective on society

Two of the senior managers drew upon Hobbesian styled views of human behavioural tendencies, where at an extreme people are suggested to be ‘inherently vicious, cruel, and selfish’ (Anderson, 1996, p. 94) which helped justify and naturalise how they understood themselves to be competing for growth by working in business. For example, Duncan, when talking about potential change for sustainability, said “*we’re very selfish as a society*” (2nd phase). This seemed to be a tactic to discursively ‘fend off’ aspects of sustainability which might necessitate cooperating for change and abstaining from consuming so that the biophysical limits and taking care for future generations which they mentioned could be respected. With everybody else depicted as being in ‘it’ for themselves the tensions which seven of the managers noticed about themselves could fade in significance behind this view of society.

Needing science to determine the way forward

David and Duncan used an idea of science as something that could find answers and show the way forward in the second interview phase. This was a similar strategy to placing responsibility on others, but different in that a rarefied view of scientific authority could both

resolve conflicting positions and also inform technological developments that could overcome biophysical planetary limits:

David – *“If the scientific community spoke with one voice and actually produced some hard evidence and did it in a credible way I think it would have a big impact”*;

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”*.

Hence, this strategy for distancing and deflection appears to be taking a position of faith in a process almost above humans that could shepherd them away from how they understood the issues associated with sustainability.

Positioning environmental groups as extreme and detrimental to sustainability

Appreciating unsustainability as part of a natural order of things

These last two types of discursive processes were each only shown by one manager. The first one most closely connects with Phillips’ ideas about distancing and deflection where perceived negatives were assigned to organizations connected to an ‘environmental movement’. Trisha, whose company had come under pressure from these organizations, positioned them as an uncompromising and potentially detrimental force for sustainability – *“I think that actually... organisations like Greenpeace and other extreme movements they might be very harmful for the sustainability issues”* (1st phase). In the second phase Duncan suggested that *“if you want to think on the bigger scene then perhaps our development and then our decline is part of the natural order of things”* which has similarity to Hobbsian styled ideas to naturalise how things are and will be. This deflects responsibility to act in an equally all encompassing and generalising discursive ploy that places the heightening sustainability issues he described as inevitably aspects of the human journey.

So far in this analysis, we have seen that potential contradictions were not disruptive to managers’ self-identities. We have discussed nine processes whereby sustainability issues become distanced and deflected by managers from themselves and their organizations in their movements between identity types. Our findings appear to show some of the potential contours of the inevitable dynamics of ‘denial’ that people located in an industry which is highly affected by sustainability issues need to adopt to remain plausible in the economic rationales that govern their context. However, a key occurrence for opening up issues of self-identity contradictions to a nuanced view was when, between the two phases of interviewing, Paul who seemed unable to live with the apparent tensions of his self-identity decided to leave his job. He cited his commitments to sustainability as part of his explanation for this decision, and the first interview as a partial prompt to becoming more aware of contradictions in his self-narrative. The remainder of our analysis concentrates upon the conversations with Paul to give texture to how discursive struggles in relation to the interaction of ideas about sustainability with self-narratives can produce ‘reflexive moments’ of self-alienation, which can be seen to have consequences in action (Costas & Fleming, 2009).

The following excerpt from the first research phase helps give a substantial grounding in how Paul understands himself within conversations at work and outside in relation to sustainability, and the issues and antagonisms he sees himself amongst. In particular, his contact with people who work on renewables, who he knows from earlier in his career, prompts recurring conversations in which he finds himself being placed as ‘against’ sustainability. Paul’s explanation of moving between different groups engaging in sustainability related conversations was important in his self-portrayal. Issues of this kind were not mentioned by the other managers. This may well be related to the range of

identities Paul moves between and how doing this helps him notice and find difficulty with holding divergent positions together. At the end of this quote his potentiality to act (leave his job) from what can be seen as his sense of self-alienation is apparent.

(1st phase: When do you find yourself in conversations about sustainability?)

Paul – *I'm in ... a strange position. I'm a pretty passionate believer in protecting the environment and have spent most of my education working on renewable energy sources. Then [I] moved into the gas turbine industry which is a big part of the problem. I end up on my soap box from time to time with a lot of my colleagues... . I tend to be the bleeding heart liberal in that conversation more often than not. But then I've got another group of people that I [know] through [my time with] renewables, ... you know the open toed sandaled, tree hugging variety of people. In that conversation I end up being a fascist, a non-believer, a don't care, a selfish... I'm the wrong end of the spectrum. ... I also [have] conversations going on in my own head where I think about if I am doing enough and ... probably if I took a hard look at myself [I] would end up just saying "well it's time to move on and do something different".*

Paul's story of self-alienation was illustrated by his account of his recent exit interview with his Chief Executive. Paul depicts his views, and how he sees the views of his company / industry through the Chief Executive's comments, as having solidified his decision to leave his job, placing previously tolerated tensions as now sufficiently adversarial to explain action. His use of the word 'disappointing', twice, suggests that Paul had imagined that his Chief Executive would share some of his concerns rather than stoutly repelling them.

(2nd phase: How does sustainability come into conversations?)

Paul – *Our Chief Executive asked for... 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 capitalist model. There is this corporate social responsibility piece in the role of the 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....'"*

So in those dialogues... 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.

Paul translated his discomfiting sense of self-alienation into his decision to leave his organization. He appears to be seeking a self-narrative that allows coherence between his values and what he does for his job. Paul talks about an impending birthday – *"I ... find myself staring at 50 and thinking if I'm going to do something else for the rest of my life I better do it about now"* (2nd phase). This is an important catalyst for bringing a narrative together as part of a reappraisal of how he is living up to his image of himself. Also, he suggests that doing sustainability is highly complementary with his national cultural identity of being *"a frugal Scot"* (1st phase). This can be connected with Wright et al.'s finding that

some of their specialist sustainability managers identified critical events which had ‘led them to reconsider their job or career and discover a higher purpose’ (2012, p. 1468). Coherence of narratives about who they are, where they have been and where they are going may become more important at certain moments in people’s lives, such as “significant” birthdays.

We have attempted to show that there is a complex intersection of a range of factors surrounding managers’ talk during an interview which can be seen as potentially involved in people noticing and caring about living with contradictions. Another factor that may be relevant to making sense of Paul’s comments is how the interview was physically situated. For the other interviews the office spaces tended to be safely located within large buildings with minimal furnishings removed from the ‘nature’ that the senior managers discussed in connection with ideas of sustainability. The spaces felt to reflect and help perpetuate boundaries between the interviewees and a broader ecology, which played into the potential to form competing narratives about themselves (at home and work). The conversation with Paul in the second phase was conducted via internet video call software (Skype) with Paul in his home office as snow prevented travel to his workplace. Reflecting this different situation, for example, Paul referred to his family’s recycling bins which he could see out of the window, and he also spoke about the logs that he collects on weekend walks from his local forest which he saws up for their home fire. Hence, the material arrangements surrounding the interview may enable the places of work and home to come into closer conversation amongst Paul’s self-alienation.

Concluding remarks and reflections

We have used identity theory to explore how senior managers in the energy and power industry talk about sustainability. Identity was taken as a bridging concept which helps explore the interplay between a person’s agency and society. We have worked with a perspective upon self-identity where there might be a tendency to seek a coherent understanding of ourselves living and working by attempting (and struggling) to connect life histories to daily discursive accomplishments. By mapping and analysing the dynamics of senior managers’ identities we have attempted to bring insights into how business-as-usual is being held together. This has involved exploring the textures of tensions that managers’ express, and considering the narrative processes which they employ to side step them, enabling the majority of the sample to live with contradictions, not caring about seeing themselves as coherent. In contrast the contours of one manager’s moment of self-alienation with their organization in relation to sustainability was illustrated and analysed in order to develop understanding of how contradictions can become discomfiting and narrative coherence can come to matter.

In our study we asked two main research questions to contribute to an emerging stream of research about sustainability and managers’ identities (Cherrier et al., 2012; Phillips, 2013; Wright et al., 2012). By responding to the first question we showed how narrative coherence across the manager’s identities in respect of sustainability did not appear to be important to them. We extended the previous work which suggested that managers moved between identities by mapping the dynamics of how the managers’ combined potentially contrasting identity types which they displayed in their talk. Our finding that the majority of our sample live with apparent contradictions is significant as it contrasts with the other studies which suggest that managers seek coherence. Additionally, we found that the managers lacked rationales about how they had come to hold their views about sustainability, and their talk

appeared unrehearsed which suggested that most of them, in an industry that we selected for its prominence in debates, did not often talk about sustainability in relation to themselves and their work.

In response to the second question, by analysing how managers navigate potential identity contradictions, we identified nine discursive processes whereby the managers' distance and deflect sustainability issues away from themselves and their companies on to 'others'. This developed the work of Phillips (2013) by illustrating a wider array of ways that managers become able to remove their possible agency, constrain their responsibility and be comfortable with tensions as the core problems are displaced away from them. These narrative processes remove difficulties, so that action to deal with them becomes unnecessary. One key theme in three of the discursive processes was that economic growth had unquestioned priority over sustainability. In contrast one manager's questioning of economic growth being compatible with sustainability related to his self-alienation. We found the predominance of economics in relation to how managers construct their identities to be highly important. This dynamic has not been substantially discussed in the existing studies of identity and so is an addition to debates.

By exploring the case of one manager's self-alienation (related to a decision to leave his job) we showed the contrasting dynamics when coherence becomes important and prompts alternative action. Others have suggested that certain critical events can lead to managers' reconsidering their job or career (Wright et al., 2012). We have extended these ideas by showing the multi-stranded character of this manager's decision which relates to factors including a significant birthday, hearing his own views expressed in the first phase interview and on-going conversations in communities of friends who question his identity. This corresponds with findings from a study of other significant life decisions in which senior women managers who faced conflicting identities when trying to survive in male dominated organizations, left their jobs only once 'an accumulation of dissatisfactions' triggered their latent decisions (Marshall, 1995, p. 291). It is also notable that this manager displayed the widest range of identity types in the sample.

From our study we suggest that limited struggle is needed for the majority of the senior managers to deal with any potential contradictions between their identities in this industry context. There appears to be an acceptable range of discordance which is unproblematic, even for institutional actors who tend to be skilled in forming smooth narratives about the past, present and future identity of their organizations. It appears that the managers are engaged within communities, professional and otherwise, that do not often create circumstances that may prompt questioning or reflection about identity contradictions. A combination of a narrow range of possibilities about what it means to be a senior manager in business, with social acceptability of contradictions within their working and living makes it unproblematic to obviate the uncertainties and complexities of sustainability. Whereas in the case of one manager's self-alienation the limits of this fluidity of self-identity can be glimpsed as the relational processes which produce identities bring about boundaries which intervene in the comforts of being contradictory. The flow of the relational processes that the majority of the manager's move within do not tend to produce such boundaries. These relational flows can be understood as encompassing both social and physical arrangements. As argued we have made connections between how the physical work environment in which the interviews occurred may be reflective of the discursive processes which managers express.

Our research could be extended, within the energy and power sector and to other sectors where heightened awareness of sustainability challenges might be expected, such as mining and the chemical industry. Doing this could offer opportunities to understand in what ways our key finding that the pursuit of cohering identities and resolving potential tensions and contradictions did not appear to matter for most of the managers might be particular to the energy and power sector and certain senior management roles.

The implications of our study depend on one's location in the landscape of concerns about sustainability. For managers in such sectors, the findings may provide some solace that they are not alone. For activists wishing to influence change, the findings provide some evidence of what unsettles attitudes sufficiently to prompt review, with the salutary caution that people then leaving the industry does not prompt change within it. One implication for us as management educators is that we can use the study's findings as prompts for discussion about how executives we work with hold their ideas about sustainability and what implications they experience for identity coherence, tensions and coping patterns. The findings suggest that opening up such issues may well be unsettling and could jeopardise students' organizational commitment. Critical management education pedagogies and sensibilities will therefore be needed for tutors to engage well in such discussions.

Based on this research we can develop more probing interview formats that can explore the issues uncovered in depth. Not that we are seeking to trick research participants into demonstrating 'inauthenticity'. This would not be an ethical approach, in our view, given the entanglements we recognise as scholars too in un-sustainability. Rather we think that this area of research could benefit from a radically participative approach, such as co-operative inquiry (Reason & Heron, 2001), in which managers become reflective co-researchers of their own experiences, synthesising these conceptually in collaborative sense making. This could yield more nuanced understandings of the identity issues explored and their interrelationships with what managers, and scholars, think, say and are willing to do in different contexts.

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Table 1 – List of interviewees:

Alias	Phase 1	Phase 2	Title	Business Area	Annual global revenue (approx.)	Location
Stuart	✓		Vice President Sales and Marketing	Power transmission	£10m	Denmark
Hugh	✓		Chief Executive Officer	Power protection	£50m	Switzerland
Victor	✓	✓	Strategy and Marketing Director	Power systems	£150bn (Division £40bn)	Southern England
Sam	✓		Strategy Director	Power protection	£2bn	Germany
Brian	✓	✓	Business Development Manager	Power systems	£10bn (Division of £1bn)	Northern England
Mark	✓		Director of Business Development	Power systems	£1bn	Scotland
Steve	✓	✓	Financial Director	Alternative energy	£300k	Northern England
Adrian	✓	✓	Director of Technology	Renewable energy	£240bn (Division of £3bn)	Southern England
Edward	✓		Managing Director	Boilers and economisers	£30m	Northern England
Roger		✓	Managing Director	Energy management	£130m	Northern England
Trisha	✓		General Manager Business Intelligence	Power systems	£5bn	Finland
Duncan	✓	✓	Global Managing Director	Power protection	£160m	Southern England
David	✓	✓	Group Managing Director	Cogeneration and renewable energy	£130m	Northern England
Paul	✓	✓	Director of Sales	Overhaul and maintenance	£5bn (Division of £1bn)	Scotland

Table 2 – Mapping of identities

Alias	Stated that tensions exist between doing business and acting on sustainability?	Expressed concerns about the potential consequences of sustainability issues to themselves and their family?	Identities	Types of distancing and deflection
Stuart	No	No	Technocentrist	n/a
Hugh	No	No	Technocentrist	n/a
Victor	No	No	Technocentrist	n/a
Sam	No	No	Technocentrist	n/a
Brian	No (although some suggestions of tensions between the right level of investment for environmental performance and satisfying shareholders)	No	Technocentrist	n/a
Mark	No	No	Holist; Technocentrist	Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (politicians) Understanding business actions as only being able to be driven by financial logics
Steve	No (by being part of a business looking at energy efficient devices, sustainability equals economic benefits)	No	Holist; Technocentrist	Requiring a stable / growing economy to act properly on sustainability Taking a Hobbsian perspective on society Separating personal and business views
Adrian	Yes (although also suggested that sustainability is about greening rather than reducing consumption)	No	Holist; Observer; Technocentrist	Requiring a stable / growing economy to act properly on sustainability Seeing economic growth as inevitable Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (politicians, consumers)
Edward	Yes	No	Holist; Technocentrist	Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (China) Understanding business actions as only being able to be driven by financial logics
Roger	Yes	No	Ecopreneur; Holist; Technocentrist	Requiring a stable / growing economy to act properly on sustainability Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (China) Seeing economic growth as inevitable
Trisha	Yes (although also idea of efficiency of resource use as a business equating to sustainability)	Yes	Holist; Technocentrist	Understanding business actions as only being able to be driven by financial logics Separating personal and business views Positioning environmental groups as extreme and detrimental to sustainability
Duncan	Yes	Yes (although nobody in family is going to be enormously impacted in foreseeable future)	Holist; Technocentrist	Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (politicians, big businesses) Taking a Hobbsian perspective on society Appreciating unsustainability as part of a natural order of things Needing science to determine the way forward
David	Yes (although also suggest to be "business opportunity [for them as an organisation focused on renewable energy technologies] within driving a sustainable future")	Yes	Ecopreneur; Holist; Technocentrist	Needing science to determine the way forward Seeing economic growth as inevitable Separating personal and business views Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (politicians)
Paul	Yes	Yes	Ecopreneur; Holist; Observer; Technocentrist	Placing primary responsibility to create change on others (politicians, big businesses) Understanding business actions as only being able to be driven by financial logics