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Illuminating perceptions about communication in environmental consultancy organizations

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Abstract

Environmental consultant organizations deal with solving environmental problems. In this process of solving environmental problems communication is an important and integral part. How consultant organizations perceive communication has an effect on how they develop strategies for communication. By conducting seven semi-structured interviews, this study investigates how consultants working for environmental consultancy organizations perceive communication in their work with clients and what meta-theories about communication that informs the development of communication strategies. The study aims at highlighting aspects of communication that are of importance for the work the environmental consultants engage in, aspects of their work which might not be of focus in a day to day setting. By using the data from the interviews, themes that represent how the consultants talk about communication are identified. These themes are then analysed and discussed from the perspective of two meta-theories about communication, transmission of messages and symbolic interactionism. The study shows that depending on the objective with the communication, the consultants perceive communication differently. It is common for the consultants to perceive communication as corresponding to the transmission model of communication. But approaching communication with the perspective of symbolic interactionism highlights important aspects of communication that otherwise might not be revealed. Analysing different ways of approaching communication allows for a discussion about how to approach communication in environmental consultant organizations.

Acknowledgement

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1. Introduction

Research shows that human contribution to environmental degradation risk leaving societies in disastrous situations (IPCC, 2014). Accordingly, there is an increased call for societies and their organizations to adopt business in a more sustainable direction. Environmental problems often require expert knowledge from various fields to be solved, and many organizations do not have that in-house. To seek the services from environmental consultancy organizations have become one way of solving this. They assist society and organizations with knowledge in the pursuit of a development in a sustainable direction (Bouteligier, 2011). With expertise, environmental consultants offer clients knowledge about how to facilitate environmental issues and develop solutions. This process of implementing the expertise is usually one that involves interaction with clients and sometimes stretch over long time-periods (Simon & Welsh, 2010). Many environmental problems are becoming more and more complex, hence competence in personal communication and process facilitation is demanded to a greater extent (Nitch, 2000, Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). Within the field of environmental communication, there is an interest in seeking ways to plan activities which will contribute to improving natural resource conservation and develop practices in society that are environmental sensitive (Nitsch, 2000). Hallgren & Ljung (2005) points out that one obstacle for solving environmental problems is "faltering communication". Lack of focus or knowledge about communication within environmental consultant organizations could then be problematic for delivering their service when trying to address environmental issues. So, by directing focus to improving the quality of communication would then possibly assist the organizations when dealing with the problems that they face. This calls for exploring the social aspects of the practices that these consultant organizations are engaged in since communication is a social phenomenon. Assuming that the way people talk about things affects how they act, acquiring knowledge about how the consultants themselves understand communication could be one starting point when trying to improve the communication, and consequently the service they provide. That is, engaging in activities that aspire to change the client organizations in a more environmental friendly way.

2. Research problem

When addressing organizational change many organizations fail in their implementation (Kwahk, & Lee, 2008). This could be because of challenges these organizations face in their daily work such as changes in the economic environment, or members in the organization's commitment and readiness for creating change (Ben-Gal et. al, 2011). It is common that environmental consultation projects focus on technical aspects when delivering solutions to a problem, therefore it is my assumption that when planning and executing consultation projects, communication might not be a priority. Strategies and plans for communication might therefore be overlooked. This could then have implications for the service provided. Kwahk, & Lee (2008) informs us that for a relationship in consultancy work to be productive, effective communication is key. Also, Innes (2002 p. 70) explains that "Communication is particularly important to the development and ongoing reproduction of an organization as a social entity, for it is through communication that actions are planned, directed, co-ordinated and accounted for". This means that communication enables for the consultant and the client organization to share meanings about the roles in the organization and the nature of the work. Through this communication, symbolic attachments and commitments forms what the organization represent, what it does and stands for, both for members and non-members. The outcome of this communication will affect people's interaction with the organization. It will influence how people think and feel about the organization, and consequently have an effect on how they act, react and interact towards it.

Solving environmental problems often require interdisciplinary perspectives due to the complex interplay between society and nature. Here is where environmental communication plays its role. Technical knowledge is required in many cases, but when dealing with issues that includes social interaction we have to understand and explore the socially constructed part of the world that we act in. How we think and talk about communication is likely to have an influence on how we communicate, and the way we communicate has an effect on how we think about communication (Craig & Muller, 2007). How people engaged in consultancy work perceive communication, will probably function as a foundation to how activities in their work are planned and designed. My intention with this study is to investigate what consultants who work for environmental consultancy organizations have to say about communication in their work with clients. By analysing how the consultants talk about communication I will increase my understanding about how they perceive communication and its role in the work with their clients. This in order to seek an understanding of if and how they view communication as a tool for carrying out their work and to see what they think of the potential of create change in a sustainable direction in their client's organizations. To have an understanding about how communication is perceived might give important insights about how the consultants come to think about their world affects their actions. In this case, how communication is perceived might affect the outcome of the consultancy service provided, assuming that what forms human conduct is how people understand what they do and what other people are doing (Craig & Muller, 2007) and as Oliver (2012 p. 411) puts it "language itself patterns experience". When the consultants develop their communication strategies, my point of departure is that they are guided by meta-theories of communication that informs them how to reach their objective in their work. When having a better understanding of the communication between consultants and clients, the environmental consultancy organizations could get a better chance of improving the communication. By discussing and analysing the relevance of the theories that guides the development of the communication strategies they could consequently be better prepared in meeting problems that they face.

3. Aim

The aim of the thesis is to develop an understanding of environmental consultants view on communication and the meta-theories on communication that guide them in their work with client organizations. This will show us if and how environmental consultants see communication as a tool for providing the service to their clients.

3.1　Research questions

How do environmental consultants perceive communication?

What meta-theories seem to guide the consultants in their development of communication strategies?

4. Background

This section aims for reviewing what other scholars have written about meta-theories of communication. This in order to position the study within the broader field.

To find a single definition of communication is difficult and communication theory as a field is not coherent (Craig and Muller, 2007). As communication theory has evolved from different disciplines, each discipline has its own way of explaining certain aspects of communication (ibid). Searching for one single formula for communication for all different kinds of situations could be problematic because of the multifaceted characters of many environmental problems. Instead, when we theorize about communication, we could discuss tensions between different ways of thinking and talking about communication that would lead us in a direction where we better understand communication problems that occur and how we could create tools for solving these. Grady (2004) discuss how humans use metaphorical associations relevant to the process of communication. By mapping out conceptualizations that forms our language construction we could get a better picture of relationships between these conceptual domains.

In their study McEntee & Mortimer (2013) discuss the appropriateness and effectiveness of different approaches of communication when addressing environmental issues. They conclude that one-way communication strategies could bring positive effects in regard to bringing awareness to an issue, fill in knowledge gaps, and to direct people to services. They also propose that this strategy is to prefer when you are communicating on a larger scale. However, the lack of target group interaction when adopting this top down approach highlights the practical limitations when dealing with environmental issues of contentious character. The inability of this strategy to deal with tensions and objections that might occur shows that you must be ready for different ways of communicating in some situations.

Churchman (1967) refers to environmental problems as wicked problems. Meaning that they are often caused by a complex set of independencies, characterized by competing values, scientific uncertainty, emerging conflicts and solutions are sometimes better explained as better or worse than true or false. When approaching these issues, one might face different interest that conflict with each other, where people have different ways of approaching and understanding the issue. Kaiser et. al (2016) argue that in order to deal with issues in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary environments, methods for mutual knowledge exchange are needed. The transferring of knowledge in an organization is not simply a matter of transferring knowledge from one place to another. Rather, there are social factors that needs to be considered in the development of knowledge creation. Therefore, they argue that you in some situations must adopt communication strategies that are better at dealing with situations where people have different perceptions of a situation, and when context must be dealt with. Strategies that are better suited for negotiating the construction of knowledge through inclusive interactive communication and move away from emphasis on information transfer.

Thakadu et. al (2011) argues that in order to meet many environmental problems we need to improve and explore effective communication strategies. There is a need for understanding people's perception and acceptance for the diverse approaches and tools used in communication. To address the complexity and abstractness of many environmental problems they propose that one should be open for innovative ways of communicating important information when trying to address these issues. With a better understanding of how the receiver in communication best acquire the knowledge, the chance of finding ways to develop models for solutions increases.

5. Theory

In this section I present two theories of communication that will be used in the discussion part of the study. The perspective of symbolic interactionism and the transmission model are two theories of communication that stands in contrast to each other for the differentiated approach to communication. These theories will be used when analysing how the consultants' reason about communication and their communication strategies with their clients.

5.1 Transmission model

One influential theory of communication developed by Shannon & Weaver (1957) is called the transmission model. It belongs to the cybernetic tradition of communication which theorizes communication as information processing and explains communication from a broader systematic perspective (Craig & Muller, 2007). Shannon & Weaver (1957) refer to communication as all procedures by means of which one mechanism affects another mechanism. Referring to human communication, this could be translated to how one mind affects another mind (Craig & Muller, 2007). Shannon & Weaver tried initially to theorize how to overcome the problem of smooth information flow that would enable for telecommunication systems to work (Craig & Muller, 2007). Starting of as a theory that was thought to work for machines and systems, this theory was further developed and thought of as well suited for human communication as well. It relies on the idea that in communication there is one sender that sends a message to a receiver. The sender and the receiver are separated by noise which is explained as the obstacle for the message to get through. How could you as a sender of the message best package the information you want to convey in a way so that it gets through the noise and reach the receiver, is a central concern in communication. This linear notion of communication assumes that when the message is received this will result in influencing the receiver who then give some kind of feedback on the message (Jourin et. al, 2010). This perspective on communication have been influential for the development of communication planning and procedures that are used today and has been critiqued for the way of treating the receiver in communication as a static entity lacking agency (McEntee & Mortimer, 2013)

5.1 Symbolic interactionism

Originating from the pragmatic school of social theory, the perspective of symbolic interactionism is used as an approach to study human group life and society (Blumer, 1986). It focusses on explaining what happens in human interactions and what influences people to act. Taking on this perspective on communication one presumes that human knowledge and action is socially constructed and communication as constitutive for society. Contrary to other sociologists who see society as a static entity that shapes individuals, symbolic interactionists emphasise society more as a dynamic process where people constantly interact, develop new definitions of the present and thereby shape groups and society (Charon, 1998). The outcome of our actions is the result of engagement in social interaction. Charon (1998 p.1) introduces his view on the concept of perspective as an attempt to better understand the mystery of how there can be such a gulf between what is perceived as truth in a situation; "People interact over a period of time: out of that interaction they come out to share a perspective: what they see will be interpreted through that perspective: often each perspective tells us something very important about what is really true". The perspective of symbolic interactionism is founded on three main premises. Firstly, people are seen as an active social agent whom interact with others, interaction between people is what makes up for society (Charon, 1998). People act towards situations and things depending on what meaning they ascribe to the them. Secondly, the meaning these things have evolves from social interactions the person has with other people. Thirdly, these meanings are modified and treated in a so-called interpretative process by the person exposed to the particular thing (Blumer, 1986). This means that people try to define the situations that they are facing before they take action, they do not instantly feel the environment (Charon, 1998). This definition could be influenced by their past, the present and

also the intentions of other people. Contrary to the transmission model of communication that treats the receiver in communication as passive, symbolic interactionists argue that all participants in communication are actively contributing to defining the present situation (Charon, 1998). Creation of meaning is being negotiated between the involved actors through the use of symbols. The meaning could be investigated trough studying how individuals make use of language in the particular phenomena studied. Using the hermeneutical view, which is a way of interpreting different phenomenon, discourse can be revealed through studying the language that is used. The way people talk about things is a reflection of how they understand it and what they believe as truth (Feindt & Oels, 2005). Humans see reality by looking through different perspectives (Charon, 1998). Investigating phenomena by using the theory of symbolic interactionism could assist you with a frame of reference when trying to understand social interaction and what guides people to act in a certain way. In this thesis, it will serve as an analytical tool when discussing the different ways of understanding and reason about communication, based on the collected data.

6. Methodology

This section explains how the study was designed. It includes methods used for collecting the empirical data, how this was analysed and a discussion on the research design.

6.1 Research design

When doing research using qualitative methods you analyse how people verbally interpret real life situations (Silverman, 2015) hence the choice of using this method in this thesis. The empirical data in this study relies on interviews where members of environmental consultant organizations speak about the role of communication in their work. The research design departure from a constructivist philosophical worldview which is characterized by the researcher relying much on the informants' view of the things that are being studied (Creswell, 2014). Using qualitative research design gives a detailed and thorough analysis of a specific case (Bryman, 2008). Since the complexity of society and the inability to study it as a whole, to study specific cases in society could be seen as a point of departure from which broader conclusions about trends in society could be drawn (May, 2013).

6.2 Data collection

In total seven semi-structured interviews were held in the spring of 2019, three in one on one setting and four were held over telephone. The duration of the interviews was between 30-50 minutes. Questions were asked about their work tasks and communication relating to them. The questions were open-ended so that the informants themselves were given the opportunity to formulate their own understanding of the topic. Using the technique of semi-structured interviews, informants are given room to express their opinions and reflections in an open setting (Creswell, 2014). The formulation of the questions was constructed in a way so that they did not come with implicit meaning and would steer the informants too much in any direction. All interviews were recorded for limiting the risk of missing out on information during the interview-sessions. The interviews were later transcribed, and a content analysis was made. The process of coding started with an analysis of the data collected to form themes that were based on how the informants talk about communication. From this then patterns or generalizations emerged. Later these patterns were used in order to describe the situation that the informants talked about. The data from the interviews is presented in the result section of the study according to first identified theme "the role of communication" where the informants talk about how they view communication in their work and what challenges there might be. In the second theme "What communication strategies are used in order to solve communication problems?" the informants explain how they approach communication problems and what strategies that they use. Further on, a discussion is formed about what metatheories that seem to guide the consultants in their communication and the development of communication strategies with their clients.

6.3 Discussion on research design

6.3.1
Considerations during data generation

Ethical considerations such as offering the informants anonymization was made, and only data relevant to the study has been used. Because of the chosen method of using semi structured interview questions I thought it would be important for the interviewees to have knowledge about the subject that would be investigated. Therefore, sampling of the informants was done in a strategic way. The organizations were chosen with the requirement that they were working

with environmental consultancy work. As a researcher, it is relevant to point out that your background, personal attributes and thoughts all have an impact on the study (Creswell, 2014). Also, the result of this study is based on my interpretation of the data collected. With that in mind, during the interviews I tried to stay as neutral as possible and not influencing the informants too much in any direction. Doing this without steering the interviews was a challenge, but indeed a good learning experience. And after all, it is not possible nor the goal to be completely objective in qualitative research, rather to be transparent with your methodology and intentions is what is important. In qualitative research, validity refers to certain procedures for checking accuracy on the findings in the study (Creswell, 2014). How these findings are accurate is based on the account of the researcher, the participant and the reader (ibid). Bryman (2008) argues that reliability, meaning that if the study is done again it would show the same result is one of two major aspects for evaluating social science research. Another procedure is replication which means that the study should be able to be done again. If replication is not possible, it is difficult to prove or disprove the result of the study (ibid).

6.3.2
Alternative approaches

When investigating how consultants make sense of communication in their work one could take on different approaches. Another interpretive approach that could be used for collecting data for this thesis is observation study, which is commonly used by symbolic interactionists. Benefits with this approach is that the researcher with observational studies could have the chance of getting under the skin of the culture that is being studied (Creswell, 2014). Participating in the activities studied in real time could have benefits that are not given when conducting interviews or studying texts since some artefacts of communication in real life situation can't be revealed in the same way in texts (Charon, 1998). Participatory studies however usually tend to require much time and resources which is one reason I chose not to use that model. To apply the theory Critical discourse analysis on the material would be a way of analysing how the informants perceive communication in their work since it "provides theories and methods for the empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural developments in different social domains" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 60). Critics to the theory of symbolic interactionism argue that focusing too much on the micro scale of the social world you miss out on the larger influential social forces and institutions that forms human conduct. However, that is not the aim this study. Rather, the conclusions made might reveal general characteristics about a phenomenon that could be useful in another setting.

6.3.3
Informants

Informants in this study are seven consultants working for five different environmental consultancy organizations. The work they engage in entails assisting clients with expertise in issues relating to the environment and how to develop solutions to existing and potential challenges. The informants' commitments span between different fields such as city planning procedures, construction processes, policy development, process facilitation and support and they all share the vision of changing society in a more sustainable direction. Some of the issues that the consultants work with are how one could develop plans for physical environments in a more environmentally friendly way to meet the needs of society on both local and in some cases national level. Some are working with clients in the development of concepts relating to methods that are used in these processes. Other issues concern how to integrate environmental issues into construction processes, and how to follow up these during the process. Their work involve interaction with clients where they in different ways assist their clients with expertise on how to change their business in a more sustainable direction.

7. Result

In order to meet the aim of the study and answering how the informants perceive communication in their work and what meta-theories that seem to guide them I here present the result from the interviews. It is structured according to themes that have emerged from my analysis of the interviews conducted. The themes represent how the consultants approach communication and what strategies they use in order to solve communication problems.

7.1 What is the role of communication?

Most informants say that communication plays a central role in their work. Communication is commonly portrayed as creating an understanding for the situation that the involved actors face. *"The purpose is to create an understanding"* (#6). This sounds to me that the better understanding of a situation you and involved stakeholders have, the more likely you are to meet your objective. *"To steer what kind of work we are performing, so that it actually is what answers the question and not only checks the specifications"* (#5). Also, to be able to understand the meaning with the work the organization engage with: *"I would say that it [communication] is vital for people to understand what this means"* (#1). The role of communication is also to create legitimacy for what the organization does. So that their clients trust what they are doing: *"So then we have to talk about it in a way that makes us trustworthy"* (#1). The role of communication is here described as a driving force, the motor that gets the client organization going. Good communication means that people are informed and have adequate understanding. This will increase the chances for the them to "accept the project", and if they understand, they are more likely to agree with you in these projects. This reasoning is exemplified in following quotes from the interviews: *"You know yourself, if you are stuck in the metro and you don't receive any information, then you think it is bad. But if you get information that it is bad, then you accept it"* (#1). To deter potential problems in you work you should package your message with information so that it is clear and readily available for the people involved to understand. *"But also so that you get everyone with you. So that everyone is on board, so everyone understands. If you are not clear in your communication, this could create obstacles in your assignments. Especially if the receiver doesn't understand why, what is the purpose that you are in that position such as mine with environmental responsibilities"* (#6).

When talking about why communication is important and what potential improved communication could have one informant said: *"It is important because it is mostly technicians in this business, and they are not very good in expressing themselves in an easy way. Because it is often very complicated technical words that are used that people don't understand. So it would make it more easy. Even because different divisions in the business doesn't understand each other, because people talk in all kinds of abbreviations that one doesn't know what it means. I think it would improve everything, both internally and externally"* (#1).

When speaking about the role of communication and existing challenges several informants brought up the difficulties with creating a common understanding of a situation that the consultants are facing together with the client. Differentiated views on a problem or a situation is both common in their work and also sometimes difficult to deal with. From one of the interviews when answering the question: "Would you say that it happens often, that the costumer has an idea of one situation but you have a different view? *"Yes, but it could also be because they just simply have not been able to understand what ecosystem services are. Or their understanding does not reflect the one that we have. Sometimes it could be that they think that they understand, but in reality they have not. We don't have the same vocabulary"* (#3).

Another challenge is the overflow of information. There might be instances where information might not be helpful and this could affect the feedback that you would like to receive. *"I notice*

that some of our clients has a very big inflow into their mailboxes. And they are not always very good at answering. That's a thing I also feel, I receive a lot of e-mails. I put a lot of time on handling e-mails" (#4).

One interviewee exemplifies that information is not the only thing that gets people to define a situation. Rather, more information could cause confusion and not always be helpful when taking decisions. This is exemplified in the following quote when asked a question about challenges in communication. In which, communication is explicitly referred to as informing a client, and that relying too much on that in their work with clients could be problematic. *"The problem with communication is that there is an overconfidence in communication. Information does not make people more secure in their decision making is what we have come to realise. That sometimes it is better to just say, this is okay, it is fine, rather than to get involved and explain how it actually is…It is almost that the more information you receive, the more worried you become. We have seen quite a few examples of that. Not in the strategic communication, but more with the specific issues"* (#7). Respondent #6 also talks about this when elaborating on the issue of creating an understanding in communication and the importance of making sure that you and your client understand each other. If not, communication has failed. *"The challenge with communication is always to make sure that those involved has understood the message. Because sometimes you think that you are super clear. But if you don't follow up and ask questions to make sure that the message is received. If someone hasn't understood, it doesn't matter how much you talk to people"* (#6).

7.2 What strategies are used in order to solve communication problems?

When talking to the informants about how to approach communication in their work it became clear that a dominant idea of communication is to keep people that are taking part of the work they engage in informed. As one informant explains a strategy used for communication: *"Communication is to inform, colleagues, public, involved actors in order to spread knowledge about the projects. Also, when information is spread, people improve their acceptance for emerging problems and barriers in the work"* (#1). The perception of communication in their work is to inform someone. This information also conveys meaning in some form. By sending information, you could increase your chances of reaching your objective. Another informant explains: *"To spread information about what the organization want to change in society. Become visible to its surrounding environment in order to have an influence on the development of society"* (#2). If the organization manages to inform its surroundings about their objectives, this would lead to a change that aligns with the visions of the organization. Addressing the importance of your information reaching through to the right person*: "So communication is that you give and receive information also. That you create communication channels, who should I communicate with? So that it is the right person who I am communicating with. So that it doesn't go through several people. Instead that you get direct contact with the one that is affected by the situation* (#6).

Other statements about how to approach communication problems describes it as a process of educating yourself and the people you work with. These examples show that it is more about engaging with people in order to facilitate a better understanding of a situation: *"To form a common understanding of what is important and needed for the projects. This is done through workshops, interviews and involvement at the initial phases of the projects"* (#1). Meetings or workshops were described as ways for enabling good communication. It provides with opportunities to inform involved actors which would increase the understanding and acceptance for the projects. *"Workshops are a really good way both for learning and to be informed. Because if you learn and keep yourself informed, then you are more likely to accept the project. People oppose decisions only because they don't get to know"* (#1). There seem to be focus on informing people but also an urge to become familiar with how the people

involved in the communication understands a situation, in order to facilitate better communication. This process would then increase the knowledge for the involved actors in a situation. Some informants stress that communication is more a reciprocal activity, where one seeks an understanding of a situation by engaging in dialogue with someone. This quote I think shows that there needs to be room for you to approach communication in a flexible way, and maybe be open and have the possibility for negotiation in a situation. *"I think that you need to be smooth, that you cannot be square (vara fyrkantig) either. You have to realise that this is something you need to solve together"* (#6)

As a consultant you need to establish relationships and exchange information that goes between those involved in communication. *"To create relationships with the client is important"* (#4). When talking about communication as a dialogical process, some informants explain it as a tool to better understand the problems that one face. Assuming that in this dialogical process you would be able to unravel aspects that would help you solving the problem faced. *"Also, to, when it comes to communication, be able to have a dialogue. Because the dialogue is important. So that you could find out what is at the centre of the problem"* (#7). If you have a dialogue with your client, the informants feel that they could approach the situations they face in a better way: *"I work quite a lot with consultation for environmental assessments. In that case you don't want only inform people, rather that you facilitate a dialogue"* (#4). When addressing aspects that are important in communication with clients', terms such as creating understanding and finding agreement are recurring. That by trying to find a common understanding of a situation one could easier go on and find solutions. This reasoning is further elaborated by informant #6 *"Maybe I know that this will take two years, but if I create a good relationship with the supervisor and being honest with what needs to be done, and so that that person understands my situation as well"*. Following informant talks about the need for creating a common understanding together with the client about how the communication process should look like: *"But what feels important is to try to find an agreement at an early stage when we start projects so one could agree on how to communicate further on. So that it matches with the expectations"* (#4).

One useful strategy in communication is to make sure that what you are trying to convey is relatable and easy to understand for the person you are working with. You have to think about the way you send and "package" the information in order for your client to understand the message that you are sending. This informant explains what is important with communication: *"One needs to make it comprehensible to people"* (#7). When talking about how to best anchor your message following informant gives an example of how you can handle a situation where you have two different points of entries. *"They usually don't care that much about the issues relating to the environment as such. Because it is considered a necessary evil. Then it is important to be very clear with what consequences that will have"* (#6). By taking the perspective of the other in this situation, the informant shows that it is important to try to understand how the other person might see the situation in a different way, as explained by Charon (1998); you might have different interests in mind when dealing with the same issue. When facing a situation like this you as a consultant will probably have the interest of the environment in mind, but your client might just see this situation as something that stands in the way for his or her business practices. Another example of this reasoning: *"Then it's better to say that we understand that you don't like this, absolutely, you live next to a road that will start to be trafficked with heavy vehicles. It is very important to understand what objections people have"* (#7).

Here the interviewee indicates that there needs to be something more to it than just providing information. To facilitate a dialogue and find out how the client perceive the situation. *"To only feed (the client) with information, we have noticed does not make people more secure"…I would rather say it is about having a dialogue with people. To find out what the concern is. What people actually would like to know"* (#7).

Statements such as *"Connect it to something personal"* indicates that you should convey your message which will later be interpreted by the person involved in communication. To *"connect"* could be understood as what the theory of symbolic interactionism describes as the interpretative process where meaning is created (Charon, 1998). *"So, if I would say that I would not like to live here with my children, that you connect it to something personal and something firm (handfast)"* (#7). And, further on the same track: *"How I see it, it is about connecting it and make something abstract into something simple and human"* (#7). I think this implies that, in situations where it might be difficult for the clients to understand certain things, there might be a need for explaining in a way the client could relate to.

8. Discussion

My aim with this study was to, by analysing the way in which the informants talk about communication get an understanding about how they perceive communication and what meta-theories of communication that guides them in their work. In this section I will discuss the results from the study. This will be done by answering the research questions and analyse these through the theoretical lenses.

As shown in this study, some people talk about communication as corresponding to the view that is offered by the transmission model, while others give a different view. I argue that in many situations the consultants find themselves in, where social interaction is often taking place, to view communication as a matter of information transfer, doesn't completely explain communication . When looking through the lens of the perspective of symbolic interactionism, aspects of what happens in communication can be revealed that is not in focus when using the transmission model.

When addressing the two research questions "How do the consultants perceive communication" and "What meta-theories seem to guide them in their development of communication strategies?" there seem to be different ways of approaching communication depending on what the objective is.

Most of the informants give the role of communication a central place in their work. Communication is commonly expressed as essential for their work to be successful. One of the more common generalization about what communication is in the consultants work with clients is that it is about informing people. When this information is transferred, it would provide a better understanding in relation to the issues that are dealt with. This generalization I find fits with the perspective transmission-model of communication (Jourin et. al, 2010). That, by transferring information to the client this will increase the possibilities of reaching the objective. Terms as "*educating relevant stakeholders*" seem to imply an alignment to the transmission, top down model. Meaning, that a sender sends a message to someone that will act on that information. Also, statements such as "*become visible to its surrounding environment in order to have an influence on the development of society*" and "*also when information is spread, people improve their acceptance for emerging problems and barriers in their work*" I think aligns with the transmission notion that if your message manages to "*reach through the noise*" it will give, in this example predetermined feedback (Jourin et. al, 2010). When talking about creating a common understanding of issues, there are also signs of this top down way of communicating. Meaning that it's important for involved stakeholders to be informed and educated but focus might not be on investigating how the stakeholders themselves perceive the situation, rather that the focus is on how to best package the information you want to convey.

Other examples disrupts this way of understanding communication, for example when informants stress the importance of establishing a relationship with the client, where dialogue is both important and desirable. This view describes it as more of a reciprocal activity, where information goes both back and forth between the consultant and the client. This understanding of communication fits the perspective of symbolic interactionism better. This is when they problematize communication and dig deeper into the situations discussed. For example, when they mention that in order to succeed with communication it is not only a matter of keeping the stakeholders informed or for them to have knowledge. Some quotes from the interviews shows that it is rather a matter of finding a meaning of the situation that they find themselves in. This will then influence how the informants perceive the situation, from where one could form better decisions on how to act. One example of this:" *So, if I would say that I would not like to live here with my children, that you connect it to something personal and something firm*". In the

previous quote the informant exemplify communication as trying to make the situation talked about relatable to something that brings meaning to the person, which goes beyond the transmission model of communication that treats the receiver as a passive receiver of information (McEntee & Mortimer 2013). The informant use words that would symbolise a meaning to that person. Instead of just act on "raw information", the phrase "*connect it to something personal*" indicates that there is something that will need to happen "inside" the person that you are communicating with. Meaning that the person interprets what you are saying, defines and brings meaning to it. The action taken by the person is then influenced by the meaning brought to the situation. This corresponds well with one central idea of symbolic interactionism, that is, taking another person's perspective into consideration when deciding how to act in a situation (Charon, 1999). That in communication, you perceive the other person as someone that have agency in the present situation and whom interprets the situation before taking action.

When describing the role of communication in terms as "*to create an understanding*", or "to create legitimacy", I think it is important for the consultant organizations to actually know how their client perceive the organisation. If not, perhaps misunderstandings or objections could create problems. Utterances such as "*finding a common understanding*" and "meaning" are recurring when informants talk about important aspects as well as challenges with communication. Utterances that I find calls for using the thinking of symbolic interactionism rather than the transmission model. Meaning that, communication is a process of co creation where involved actors brings their own meaning to a situation. The transmission model does not treat the recipient as an active agent in communication, hence lack interest in finding out what meaning and understanding that a person gives to situations. Thinking about communication from a symbolic interactionist perspective allows for a more dynamic process where the social process co creation of meaning in a situation could be examined (Charon, 1998). When facing obstacles in communication, approaching communication with the tools that the perspective of symbolic interactionism gives us might facilitate the process in a more constructive way by examine the social situation deeper and treat the recipients of communication as active agents who interpret the situation before they act.

As mentioned earlier, dealing with environmental problems often means that you are dealing with so called wicked problems that might be difficult to fully grasp from a single perspective and usually entails conflicting interests (Balint et al, 2011). Lack of interest and knowledge, having different perspectives and point of entries could form different understandings of the same issue. The importance of understanding the potential of looking at the same issue from different perspectives that Charon (1998) discusses I find suits the reasoning from the interviews where many of the informants explains that one difficulty with communication is how to form a common understanding of the situation that you face. "Imagining the world from the perspective of another" (Charon, 1998, p. 110). This quote from the interviews I think exemplifies how one informant tries to adopt this thinking: "*How I see it; it is about connecting it and make the abstract thing to something simple and human*". Reading from this statement I think the informant implies that if succeeding with forming a common understanding of a situation it might be easier to solve potential problems that emerge in the communication situation. Several informants mention that it is preferable if one is able to form a common understanding together with the client of an issue at an early stage in the process, so that you are "on the same page". This would then limit the risk of misunderstandings and deter potential problems further into the working process. Potential problems that, if discovered and dealt with at an early stage have the potential of limit both the time and financial spending.

In examples where the transmission perspective is evident such as "*it is important to educate*

and inform people" there seem to be of little interest to examine how the recipient in communication themselves form their understanding of the communication process. Rather it seems like it is expected that predetermined feedback will be sent back from the receiver as soon as the message with information has been sent. Here, from a symbolic interactionist perspective it would be of interest to investigate how the involved actors understand what is being said, how they define it in that specific situation. Other informants highlight the challenge of making sure that the receiver has understood the message. That it doesn't matter how much you talk or send information if the message is not understood. This I think shows an example of the practical limitations of adopting the transmission approach of communication. That, in order to fully understand what is going on in communication situations, you need to consider how personal traits affect how people involved in communication come to act. When sending a message, the transmission model would argue that people give feedback on that message without actively processing this feedback (Jourin et. al, 2010). Contrary to this, symbolic interactionists would argue that humans are social beings whom actively define how they perceive the world in social interaction, and act according to how they define the situation (Charon, 1998), influenced by the interpretation process (Blumer, 1986).

As the result shows, communication could be understood differently, and could depending on context appear and have different meaning. To have a broad understanding about what communication is and what role it should have in an organization could be of value. Assuming that many consultants working for environmental consultancy organizations mainly are specialized in technical areas they might lack some skills that are necessary for enabling better communication. Therefore, I argue that along with the technicalities relating to the service provided other aspects that affects the processes should be carefully prepared and planned. Assuming that no communication is perfect, there is always room for improvement.

Most of these organizations do act within a capitalist system where time and financial considerations are key. Reading from some of the interviews, to take quick decisions is something they need to consider on a daily basis. This for me makes the predominant view of communication align with the transmission model more understandable and perhaps more suitable for some specific situations. There is a need to convey messages quickly and the aim with communication might then be to tailor that message in the best possible way so it gets through the noise and reach the receiver in the most effective way (Jourin et. al, 2010). However, I don't think it is a very good way of fully understanding communication in many of the situations these organizations find themselves in, especially not in communication as social interaction situations and when the organizations aspire to create a change in behaviour. In situations where communication problems might occur, or where one simply wants to investigate communications on a micro level, looking at these practises as dynamic processes, rather than static I argue is then a better way of approaching communication.

I would like to stress that it has not been my intention to prove one meta-theory of communication better or more useful than the other, rather to problematize communication and provide with perspectives on how it as a phenomenon could be understood. Due to the complexity of the wicked problems that environmental consultant organizations are facing this thinking is hopefully useful.

9. Concluding remarks

When starting this thesis work my initial assumption was that in environmental consultancy organizations, communication might not always be a priority. That the service they provide to their clients might focus more on issues relating to the natural science rather than the social science. As an environmental communication student, with my feet based in the social science field I'm interested in solving environmental problems and create change by finding channels and processes for enhancing improved communication. My idea was that I could analyse the work of these organizations with a different perspective that otherwise might not be common. Aiming to investigate how the consultants in the organizations themselves perceive communication in their work by analysing the meta-theories that seem to be guiding them in their work, opens up for a discussion where one could ask questions such as what communication is, and what it ought to be in relation to the service provided. A better understanding of communication provides a platform from which you can improve communication. The performance of environmental communication is as Nitch (2000) calls it an art, meaning that it requires much more than just knowing about different models of communication in order to perform well. The complexity of many of these environmental problems demand the practitioners to handle complex problems and situations. And in the end, these abilities can only be obtained through experience and the practice itself supported by planned communication strategies.

Main findings in this study are

- Communication is commonly perceived as transmission of messages. Summarized as sending a tailored message to someone will result in that someone taking action.
- However, this notion of communication is also challenged in some situations. Examples of perceiving communication as a process of co construct meaning in a situation are also there. Usually when the communication situations are described as more complex or where misunderstandings might occur. The role of communication is in several examples described as forming a common understanding of a project or a situation. This is also commonly perceived as a challenge in communication.
- Context matters. Different situations and issues require different approaches to communication. One way of viewing communication in a situation might not be appropriate in a different setting.

For future studies, I suggest that by adopting a different methodology, more knowledge about communication in environmental consultancy work could be obtained. By studying the meta-discourse about communication this thesis provides with insights about how communication is conceptualized by the consultants. How the consultants talk about communication in their work is likely to influence how they communicate. By building on this knowledge and for further investigations of communication in consultancy work one could apply practice theory. This could assist with more detailed knowledge about how the communication is actually carried out in practice.

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11. Appendix

Interview guide:

- Practical examples of a consultation situation
  - How they plan their work they perform
  - What are the thoughts behind these plans?
  - How is the work done?
  - What is your role in this?
- Their view on communication in their work with clients
  - What is communication when working with clients?
  - How is it carried out?
- What role does communication have in their work when aiming to meeting the consultation's goal?
  - How do you see on the potential of communication to affect the work?
  - Examples on when communication has been successful
  - Are there any challenges in the consultancy situations?
  - Could anything be changed/improved in terms of organizing/performing the work?

Potential follow up questions:
How they follow up work with clients
What works when trying to contribute to change?
How they do when trying to anchor their message with their client?