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Responses to tensions of (un)sustainability in organizational narratives of textile companies

Research question

Environmental and social sustainability challenges has spurred sustainability focused businesses that integrates social and environmental values in decision making. In practice, sustainability aims and outcomes are labelled by tensions which often trigger negotiations and compromises. Here, we focus on tensional experiences of (un)sustainability narrated in companies that identify themselves as forerunners of sustainability in the textile industry.

Theoretical framework

We apply human agency theory and use narrative methodology to understand how such experiences are responded and narrated. Particularly we are interested what kind of agency is produced. Theoretically, human agency is understood as the capacity to act and make a difference, either individually or collectively, as well as ability to engage in purposeful action. To study human agency through narratives enables us understand tensional experiences of (un)sustainability as loose and salient, but also as contradictual and inconspicuous. Moreover, it enables us scrutinize powerful organizational narratives that may (un)freeze or mobilize agency for sustainability in such organizations.

Method

The empirical part is based on five case organizations in Finland. We use a multi-level research data: 20 individual and four focus group interviews. In both interview settings, thematic interviews were used and analysis utilized content analysis and narrative analytic procedure.

Findings

As a result we present three different organizational narratives. In the first narrative, which we call 'honesty' narrative, (un)sustainability tensions are presented as unsolvable but are responded with honesty 'talk' which according to our analysis freezes the inability to act (un)sustainability. The second narrative, a 'distansing' narrative, presents also the tensions as unsolvable but takes a more active stand on finding possible solutions. The agency is mobilized towards finding a 'joint' solution and activating agency. The third organizational narrative seizes the tensions as solvable, and is identified as a 'Forerunner's competence'. In

this narrative there is ability to act and create solutions, yet the agency focuses on maintaining status quo instead of inducing change. Our study furthers the understanding the tensions related to (un)sustainability and shed light on sustainability agency in a forerunning companies.

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