

Becoming greener: Connecting events and mobilizing artifacts in individual sustainability journeys

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How do individuals in organizations develop their sustainability engagement as a primary desire of their work-related life story? Taking a process-based approach, this study explores the formative experiences, relational resources, and interpretive processes by which individuals “become greener” at work. Four preliminary patterns of observation stand out, all speaking to emergent desires of people’s sustainability engagement. First, people emphasize *desiring artifacts* as a symbolic resource in their journeys. These artifacts are used to rekindle the engagement of themselves and others, connect to nature and emphasize purpose. Second, is a pattern of *desiring space* as a recurrent relational effort to protect, restore and fuel a growth path towards working with sustainability. A third pattern that emerges is *surfacing desire*, the externalization of tacitly held commitments that surfaces in contrast with the perceived desires of others, or lack thereof. A fourth pattern is *desiring justice* where people’s engagement is fueled by experiencing strong unfairness, inequality or the like. This desire is one of rage and disgust and is predominantly triggered by one or more emotionally powerful experiences where people are struck by the vulnerability of nature and reminded its inherent intrinsic value.

Introduction

How do individuals in organizations develop their sustainability engagement as a primary desire of their work-related life story? Taking a process-based approach, this study explores the formative experiences, relational resources, and interpretive processes by which individuals “become greener” at work. We respond to calls for more radical engagement in organizations (Ergene et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021) to protect social and planetary boundaries and contribute to socio-ecological wellbeing (Dixson-Declève et al., 2022; Stoknes, 2021). Yet, the literature on sustainable transitions has typically emphasized macro and meso-elements in organizations and their eco-systems (Cillo et al., 2019; Dixson-Declève et al., 2022; Geels, 2019), and said much less about the importance of building bottoms up engagement in individuals (Schaltegger et al., 2023). Likewise, the literature on the role and effects of sustainable education programs is largely variance-oriented (MacDonald & Shriberg, 2016) and focused on cases of educational efforts (Dyck & Caza, 2022). Even literature that focuses explicitly on the role of individuals in an organization, as Green HRM (Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020) and employee engagement for sustainability (Onkila & Sarna, 2022), tend to take a variance-oriented, top-down perspective on how organizations influence their employees (Benevene & Buonomo, 2020; Onkila & Sarna, 2022).

To approach this void, this study takes a process approach by exploring the storied formation of generative engagement (McAdams & Guo, 2015) as entrance-points to sustainability-journeys. The work of McAdams and colleagues (McAdams, 2015; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992) have been vital for the rich literature on generativity, understood as “an adult’s concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations” (McAdams & Guo, 2015, p. 476). The authors use life-story interviews to identify central events,

patterns, and outcomes, and have further inspired the use of narratives in research on pro-environmental behaviour (Brown, 2017; Dunlop, 2022) and callings (Bloom et al., 2021).

We seek to build on such work by phenomenological oriented research focusing on the formation of personal desires (Ruti, 2013) of a sustainability-oriented nature (Chawla, 2020). We also connect to broader literatures on the formation of callings in life-transitions and work engagement (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019) and development of positive identities (Dutton et al., 2010, 2020).

Method

Our paper draws from ongoing research and is based on a sub-sample of 54 interviews and 40 executive student essays from three different cohorts, all related to the PhD of the first author. The larger research project has grown gradually to focus on eliciting stories of people's journeys of developing their sustainability engagement, as connected to contexts of childhood, work and/or education. These topics had a smaller role in the early phase of the project, while it had the key role in the follow-up interviews conducted in 2024.

Project-focus & year	Number of interviews
Research project on understanding motivation for participating in and effects of MBA-programs on sustainability. 2022	20
Essays on “becoming a sustainable leader” through executive class. 2021/2022/2023	40 essays
Interviews on sustainability and sustainable innovation, mainly in two different case organizations	26
In-dept life narratives interviews. See table 2	8
Total	54 interviews and 40 essays

All interviews are semi-structured and open-ended, varying around topics on sustainability, engagement, sustainable leadership, innovation, and critical incidents in one's career. When analyzing these interviews, interesting patterns occurred with powerful stories from childhood experiences, emotional career-shifts and forming events. We saw that there were potential for more in-depth work on the episodes described, and decided to go for a more systematic approach with life-story interviews (McAdams, 2008; 2021), and with narrative identity construction as the lens for our work. A interview-guide was developed that both used the narrative format of questions (imagine a book or a novella over your life and development of sustainability engagement and define the chapters) and different life-periods; (childhood, early adulthood, career).

All these interviewees had been interviewed prior to this, so this second wave goes more systematic and in-depth, following a life-narrative approach. All work in the Nordics, but have varied nationalities.

Table 2. Primary data for this paper – 17 interviews with 9 persons

Name and occupation	Sex	Nationality
Maria, illustrator and designer	F	Argentinian
Tom, community and sustainability responsible, land-based fish farming	M	Norwegian
Sig, entrepreneur	M	Norwegian/Finnish
Camilla, CSO in food-industry	F	Norwegian
Roger, finance in clean-tech	M	Dutch
Siri, business development for international NGO	F	Norwegian
Alexia, Country manager for industrial company	F	Italian
Jenny, engineer for a consulting company	F	Norwegian
Oliver, manager land-based fish farming	M	Norwegian

All interviews except one were conducted digitally through Zoom. The interviews were transcribed, read by both authors, and analyzed through approaches to narrative thematic analysis (Maitlis, 2012) and live coding (Locke, Feldman & Golden-Biddle, 2015), looking for commonalities, contrasts and puzzles across the interviews.

Findings

Through the analysis, four preliminary patterns of observation stand out, all speaking to emergent *desires* of people’s sustainability engagement. All four have a function in “becoming greener” but play varying roles in the interviewees’ narratives. First, desiring artifacts was present in a majority of the narratives, but represented in many different forms and with different “strengths” and materiality in different narratives. Second, desiring space was narrated as a set of events over a period of time that led to a clear change in the individuals engagement for sustainability and action towards expanding their role in the domain. Most of these narratives are very explicit to the interviewees. Third, surfacing desires is predominantly present in the interviewees narratives in early adolescence, where they are introduced to new people or communities, and also go from an atomistic to a more systemic understanding of the society and their own role. Fourth, in desiring justice, the emotionally of rage, disgust and commitment are vividly present.

Pattern	Description	Illustrative narratives
Desiring artifacts: Symbolic resources to rekindle engagement	People emphasize <i>desiring artifacts</i> as a symbolic resource in their journeys. These artifacts are used to rekindle the engagement of themselves and others, connect to nature and emphasize purpose.	● Camilla: Memories of a 40 year old apple representing resource-distribution ● Oliver: The ritual and symbolic value of repeatedly passing by fish tanks and looking at 200.000 healthy fish ● Ben: Rituals of gathering around a fragile coffee-tree that connects to farmers* ● Sig: The school that represents his indigenous culture*
Desiring space: a new trajectory towards protecting and expanding	A recurrent relational effort to protect, restore and fuel a growth path towards working with sustainability. Here, our interviewees talk about setbacks, competing business agendas and being caught in confining roles. Then they learn something new or experience mastery that somehow gets connected back to earlier events of engagement, and the space is re-opened.	● Roger: Could 12 year old me be proud? ● Mary: A career shift towards green growth ● Tom: Crumbling doing event-management* ● Alexia: Doing construction with the next generation in mind*
Surfacing desires: The externalization of tacitly held desires by contrasting the other	How people's internalised sources of sustainability engagement and values are brought to the surface in certain events. This describes interviewees gaining a new understanding of the society – and new reflections about their own sustainable practices.	● Tom: A hunter as a brick in the eco-system ● Maria: From her mothers house in the jungle to studies in London ● Siri: A world with different values* ● Sig: Caring for the dimwit*
Desiring justice: How experiencing threats to sustainability and justice fortifies engagement.	The fourth pattern is desiring justice by experiencing strong unfairness/inequality or strong unsustainability. It is predominantly triggered by one emotionally powerful experience, activating people's empathy for an identified beneficiary or rage against injustice.	● Maria: Love for animals and Cowspiracy ● Roger: A sympathy for the underdog and the Mexican Mahatma Gandhi. ● Sophie: How can humanity behave like that? * ● Siri: Human-trafficking and genocide as a gateway to solving systemic challenges*

* = not presented in this version

Emphasize desiring artifacts – symbolic resources to rekindle engagement.

People emphasize *desiring artifacts* as a symbolic resource in their journeys. These artifacts are used to rekindle the engagement of themselves and others, connect to nature and emphasize purpose. Artifacts are physical, intangible, or re-represented by new forms of the same kind. They are frequently symbolic representations of beneficiaries. Artifacts are re-visited to revitalize the interviewees sustainability-engagement, and in the most prominent stories in our data, these artifacts are represented by a physical entity at the work-place, facilitating shared experiences or rituals.

Desiring artifacts have three main functions towards individuals' sustainability engagement. First, these artifacts refuel your own and others' engagement and purpose. They play the role of constant reminders (tangible or intangible) to keep sustainability activated. Second, they materialize desired impact. It removes the blindness to individuals purpose, and facilitates other-taking perspective and empathy. Third, the artifacts connect with others, bringing a sense of community and common purpose - either through common practices at the workplace or through own narratives that connect others with the cause. As the artifacts are symbolic they are not static but rather re-narrated and given new meaning and power throughout the individuals interaction and re-experiencing of it.

The 40-year-old apple. Camilla

Camilla has for the last 20 years worked as a consultant or director on sustainability. She was one of the early-movers within business sustainability in Norway, and has a track-record of guiding large companies in their sustainability transitions or CSR-initiatives. Growing up on a farm with academic parents she reflects on getting the best from two worlds; a closeness to nature and the understanding of farming, combined with being invited into discussions on politics and inequality. Her role-model is her mom. "She was so good at combining a rational approach with actually getting things done".

Camilla is now the CSO of a major grocery chain, and repeatedly recounts a story of apple-harvesting on the family-farm at the age of five. She recalls her bitter disappointment that the largest and best apples, the ones they were most proud of, were not automatically accepted as class one for sale in retail. They were too big. "The point was not that we did not get paid a premium for the great apples. The point is; I just didn't understand it, I really did not understand it..." At the same time the holes in the ozone-layer headlined the news, and she reflects how these two events were starting-points for her sustainability engagement.

"There was a spark which meant that I have always been very concerned with ... like, with resource distribution, inequalities, how we should, in a way ... everything about climate and the environment".

She regularly uses the story about the apple in business-presentations and in narratives about her own background and way into working with sustainability.

There are so many layers to that story that make it easy to use. ... but it was one of those things that I often brought up to explain something like that ... What is it that is somehow wrong? (...) Then I used it, and then it has followed me the whole time. And then I actually realized that it was one of the first times I became aware that there is something called a resource assessment. So that's why I think it has kind of stuck with me.

For Camilla, the apple plays the role as a symbolic artifact that exemplifies her growth into sustainability, as well as being an easy to grasp story that brings others into her purpose. More than primarily reconnecting her to nature and her childhood-awakening, it represents

the failure in the system – with how the largest apples are used for animal-feed because “random” industry standards are set. 40 years after picking that wonderful apple, it still plays an active part as an mobilizing artifact in her narrative.

The intrinsic value of 200.000 fish: Oliver

Oliver is in the top-management of a disruptive land-based fish-farming company with an expressed regenerative agenda. Their goal is to be the most sustainable fish-farming company in the world. “ We already are,” states Oliver confidently. Oliver finished his studies as an aquaculture graduate 15 years ago, and has since worked in fish-farming in his home region in Northern Norway. When the opportunity came to join top-management in the land-based fish-farming company four years ago, he saw a great way of contributing to the future of fish-farming - solving industry challenges as degenerating local eco-systems, and an average fish mortality-rate of 15-20%. “And when 20% of the salmon die, maybe 50 % have wounds and cuts”. His company last year accomplished having five times lower salmon death than industry-average.

Key to the business case is being a regenerative alternative to fish-farming, and that puts healthy fish at the center of their work. For Oliver and others in the firm, passing by the cages with the beautiful, healthy fish is a daily ritual and a reminder that what they do matters:

So, when we... it becomes a bit like that, when you come to work, and then you have 200,000 fish in front of you in a pool, and you see that the behavior of the fish is natural, you see that it thrives, you see that it feels good... that impression, that feeling you have then, the good conscience it gives... because I have stood on some poolsides where it has been bad. (...) We see it everyday (how the salmon is thriving). Oh my God, we see how well this works (...) We now have a way of doing it (fish-farming), which actually solves so many of the challenges that we have. That's quite a strong, emotional moment... that I've had quite a few of during the year.

In his narrative, the desiring artifact plays several roles. First, it is a tangible beneficiary, where thriving fish is central to Oliver’s success and the impact they have on the industry. Second, the fish brings the people at work together – around the fish that materializes their purpose – giving Oliver a community sharing his engagement, and refueling his focus on sustainability. Third, it can also be a symbolic representation of a second beneficiary – the wild salmon. In conversations with Tom, a colleague of Oliver, Tom pointed to the symbolic value the fish has for the management-group of the company. They are all invested in saving the wild-salmon in the area. In this sense, the salmon at the fish-farm just as much is a representation of healthy wild-salmon and flourishing eco-systems.

Desiring space: A new trajectory towards protecting and expanding

A second pattern is desiring space as a recurrent relational effort to protect, restore and fuel a growth path towards working with sustainability. Here, our interviewees talk about setbacks, competing business agendas and being caught in confining roles. Then they learn something new or experience mastery that somehow gets connected back to earlier events of engagement, and the space is re-opened. These stories are activated by anything from participating in executive education-programs, sick-leave or to being laid off at work. There is a pattern that these narratives are part of a fight for coherence, and a confrontation with the career-trajectory you are on. A driving force is reconnecting to your former

sustainable practices. The narratives are mostly describing journeys over time, and are often ongoing; they are alive and keep developing.

Would 12-year-old me be proud? Roger.

Roger is a thinker. Reflective and attentive to his own journey, making interviewing him a pleasure. You quickly learn that he is just as skilled with numbers and Excel as with people. He identifies as an underdog from youth. Not good at football, thinking too much, a learner that liked school.

When they asked me what I wanted to do when I was a grownup, I wanted to be a teacher. And that was also very much for... with the idea of helping others. I like talking, I like knowledge, but I also very much thought it's helping somebody... explaining something to somebody and bringing that other person up.

He is now a finance manager in a renewable energy company, and vividly tells about how he transitioned from corporate banking to a NGO before joining that company. Being driven by a competitive environment during his studies, he entered one of the top finance institutions – continuing competing for promotion, feedback and bonuses. A series of events influenced him in his transition, but his deep reflections started after a panic-attack at work, followed by a short sick-leave. During the first psychology appointment Roger got challenged:

I had like only a couple of talks with a psychologist. And it was very much where she said, “the way you describe yourself and the way you describe work, seems like a complete disconnect. You seem like this thing doesn't seem to fit with you at all. Could it be that you're a very different person at work than you are in your personal life?” (...) Probably that started building without me being aware, at a certain point, that I kind of had this thought in my head, saying “is this really what I want to be doing? The rest of my life?”

Roger reflects on other events in that period. A visit and a motivational speech from the owner of the bank - with a goal of triggering more engagement and work-effort - which Roger found offensive: “I was completely triggered by him, I thought, what a, what a dick!”. Traveling on vacation with a friend to Asia, where he in chats with new acquaintances would feel a bit dirty telling about his career - maybe because it started feeling meaningless to himself.

And then I would almost feel guilty. (...) Ok, am I. Am I at a point that.. 12 year old me would, would be... proud of as well? You know, did 12 year old me... (have) A dream of working in a risk department at a corporate bank somewhere, or were my aspirations that young people get higher than this? So that, that's something that urged me to kind of move around a bit.

During the interview he reflected about his passion for underdogs, giving him an engagement for social inequality and redistribution of wealth through his young adulthood. He quit the role in the corporate bank and secured a job financing energy projects in South America for an NGO.

And that was kind of an epiphany to me that, I felt this is motivation in a very different way. And I completely was a different person at work as well. I was much more teamwork oriented, much more soft in a way, right? Much more in harmony, because I felt like I don't need to prove myself here, as long as we're

building something good. And I thought that was just such a positive experience. Where I really learned.

Rogers' narrative exemplifies most of the characteristics of “desiring space”. Rather than being one critical incident, it is a series of events that brings forward a shift of trajectory. For him it was a short period of burn-out and a psychologist that was the starting-point for expanding his work on sustainability, as he then started observing himself and reflecting even more on what brought purpose to his work and life. As well as his desire to make 12-year old Roger proud.

Frustrating politics leading to a career shift towards Green Growth: Mary

At the time of the interview, Mary is in her early forties, has a lovely 2-year old at home and has recently started her new job as net-zero responsible for a large industry-company. That has given her the possibility of putting green growth on the daily agenda, feeling new energy and drive in her career and sustainability engagement.

I have had a background as a very socially conscious person. So I have been involved in politics for many years. First in the municipal council, where I come from, and later as a political adviser for the Labor Party both in the... the municipal council and in the parliament for the leadership there. So it's always been a very driving force in me that I think we humans can do a lot with the world we live in, and that we can do a lot of damage. But it's really important that we rather try to concentrate on making it better.

Mary, at the time a political advisor for the government, understood she was on the wrong path when she took an executive program on sustainability. For her the engaging content at the course, the network she created, and a passionate lecturer re-activated her environmental engagement. It was the starting-point for finding a new and more active role in business, as many of the slow processes in politics frustrated her. When interviewed about the role the executive program had, she replied:

It probably contributed to me wanting to do something other than politics. The executive program "doesn't sugar-coat." Its' not trying to say that this (sustainability) is super easy. But there was something about me getting a very like that ... if you first crack that code. make sustainability sustainable also for businesses, then it (the transition) goes by itself. Then you don't need to decide what is legal and what is not, or use tax systems or whatever, then this will go by itself. And that is very rewarding to be a part of.

Mary now has the role of working directly with emission-reduction and new technology in a Norwegian industry giant. She strongly believes businesses can lead this green-transition, and is excited for her journey ahead.

Desiring space has an especially central place in the group of interviewees conducting executive education in sustainability (green growth), where understanding and mastering the subject seems to be central. Equipped with new resources they are ready to start working – either with new responsibilities in their existing job or through a career shift. For Mary, the combination of the new capabilities, the growing frustration with politics, and a well-timed call from a recruiter were key ingredients in her *desiring space*.

Surfacing desires: The externalization of tacitly held desires by contrasting the other

A third pattern that emerges is *surfacing desire*, the externalization of tacit held desires by contrasting the other. This describes interviewees gaining a new understanding of the society – and new reflections about their own sustainable practices. Through the narratives, several of the interviewees have grown up with sustainable practices from home or their communities that are largely internalized or tacit to them. Then - often during youth/early adulthood - they experience new communities/persons that contrast with their practices, leading to a process where they reflect and take a standpoint on their sustainable practices, and decide how to act on them and integrate them moving forward.

We observe that this often is the starting point of a trajectory where sustainability goes from implicit values to revitalizing actions. We conceptualize this pattern to be characterized by situations that seldom are narrated as “life-changing” events, but rather as a starting-point for a trajectory where sustainability plays a bigger role through ongoing reflection.

A hunter as a brick in the ecosystem: Tom.

Tom has grown up in a small community in Northern Norway, where he grew up fishing wild salmon, exploring nature, and hunting with his father and brothers. Being part of this small community has formed his deep connection to nature and his thinking around sustainability. Tom has through his career working experiences as a ski-guide (which he loved) as an sales-representative and event manager (which he described as weathering) and in children's welfare (which increased his social awareness). Today he has managed to combine his different experiences in his role as a community and sustainability responsible in a land-based fish-farming company.

Hunting plays a strong role in his life-story, and of the many parallels between his work on sustainability and hunting, he reflects on the relevance of the learnings from hunting with his father and two older brothers.

The interaction was immensely fascinating with the hunt. (...) You read the dog, and the dog stands, and grouse go up. The difference between the sexes in terms of sound and size. All the things there I thought were very fascinating to be allowed to learn... (...) Then you started choosing hunting friends... (...) You don't understand what you understand, what you know, before you mirror the knowledge in someone or something else. The knowledge of management of populations, stock-awareness... Everything is connected, we are just part of this ecosystem. It became very noticeable when I met adults who had just started hunting, because they really wanted to move into this world. They couldn't move rhythmically. They did not understand how you should intuitively relate to the others in the hunting party.

Tom reflects vividly about these learnings and the sustainable practices they represent. For him, taking an animal's life is not something you do for fun - it is about interacting with the ecosystem, and respecting the inherent value of the animal. It's about looking at yourself as part of nature, rather than as in charge of nature. Through readings on deep-ecology and philosophy Tom reflects deeply on these topics in the interviews - and how contrasting to the others as a 16-year-old hunter made it all more explicit to him.

From her mother's house in the jungle to studies in London: Maria

Maria is originally from Argentina, but has spent adult years in Europe. She works as an illustrator and graphic designer in a consultancy working on sustainability, but has spent most of her career working in a marketing agency. Her parents divorced when she was five, and she and her older brothers had their primary home with their father in a large city, while her mother built a home in a forest community, focusing on her art. Maria defines her mother as “a naturalist,” and being brought along on this journey has given her a deep respect for the forest, nature, and sustainable communities.

She describes how her experiences first stood out in contrast to the city-life in London. Maria early became part of a community with strong sustainable practices through her mothers network. This made the practices she had grown up with surface through this period, impacting her strongly.

And it was choices that I was making by myself, right? I was out in the world by myself. So then it impacted me. (...) I didn't really have to cook back home and take care of my own life, my own economy, make my own decisions. Like, this is when I became an adult. So I had all of these examples (of sustainable living) around the people that I hooked up with. And I guess that created an impact.

When she came to London she was exposed to this sustainable community in a stronger and different way compared to back in Argentina. However, she continues to reflect on how “normal” this life was with her mother, not being aware of its strong practices:

I used to live with my dad, yeah and when you kind of were with your mom it was more my mom was like... oh I was young so it wasn't that life-changing, and in that way, it wasn't that life-changing. It was just kind of normal right... It's like everything when we were kids is kind of normal.

For Maria, the sustainable practices went from implicit to explicit both contrasted to what was normal, but also by taking a more active role in a similar community she had grown up with. She vividly tells stories of inspirations during her early years in London. Friends that were Steiner teachers, which inspired her thinking about more analog activities and inner sustainability. Or Nate, who was general manager for a large regenerative farm that was open for tourists, classes and such, inspiring Marias thinking about farming. She still today is part of this community, learning to live as sustainable as possible in Norway.

(The community) it's not really a religion, but it's like, yeah, I don't know how to name it. It's kind of a doctrine in a way. So there's people all around (the world) and I know them everywhere. And they are always very much focused on sustainability in every sense... Yeah.

Desiring justice: How experiencing unsustainability forms (wo)men of action

The fourth pattern is desiring justice by experiencing strong unfairness/inequality or strong unsustainability. It is predominantly triggered by an emotionally powerful experience, activating your empathy for an identified beneficiary. Further, it seems to create a desire to contributing, in that these emotional experiences fuel empathy and engagement towards solving system-issues.

The experiences take the role as critical incidents; an experience they bring high value to in their narrative of their sustainability engagement. It is often the first story they bring up.

Rather than being a one-off, these narratives are key to solving the puzzle of system-failures, and are re-visited and re-narrated when new experiences are developed. We see these narratives as having a key role in transitioning to act, but also as a starting-point of going from a local to a global or an atomistic to a systemic understanding of the world.

Love for animals and Cowspiracy. Maria

You have already met Maria, the Argentinian that grew up with the hippie-mother. When asked about the first forming event for her sustainability engagement, she tells about a series of films that critiqued the industrial food business, in line with the film Cowspiracy (2014). Even though she actively participated in a community with a strong focus on sustainable practices through her mother, it was the films about industrial food-production that she describes as the critical event that explicitly changed her behavior and perspective. The film was introduced to her by her oldest brother. She was 15 years old at the time:

They were vegetarians, both of them (brothers). Yeah, and then he was really into it. So, he just kind of showed me. (...) I think I watched it by myself. And that shocked me a little bit. And then I started talking to him and talking to them about it (...) And then also like the fur thing, right? It's just knowing the things that I, and then I understood that like, we are kind of ignorant, a lot... in a lot of stuff that we do, right. (...) There was a moment that I didn't even buy leather, trying to be coherent, leather and fur. So that became me. A little bit crazy on that lane!

She recounts how this was the first experience where she took a clear stance herself – inspired by – in her eyes – the amazing big brother. Maria has been vegetarian most of her adulthood since, and is still influenced by the community of her mother and the network in London. Her strongest inspiration for a sustainable living is still her mother.

My mother is a gigantic influence in these naturalist ways. And up to today, she lives on the top of the mountain (...) You need to go with a car. Like, you know, a very rough road. And then you need to walk one hour up the mountain with all that you're going to eat and stuff. And then you find her place. Only her that is there. The gigantic waterfall. Big house (built from mud). Super nice. Yes, that's my mom!

Today Maria lives with her two children, trying to give them the same values she grew up with. She finds it challenging to be coherent to her practices modern Norway, but tries her best. She is amazed at how the kids refuel her engagement for sustainability.

Because kids are present in their time and they have all the time in the world. So they just stay there in the world. Whatever is happening, they're completely there, 100%. And we are normally everywhere. We're always running after the clock, doing something. (While they are) really present whatever we're doing in the park or in nature, wherever it is.

A sympathy for the underdog and the Mexican Mahatma Gandhi. Roger

Roger - the finance manager in the clean-tech company - vividly reflects on what has influenced his engagement through the years. A story that he connects a lot of value to is his experience of taking a year of his business-studies in Mexico. Having a Mexican girlfriend at the time he came close to the local community, and experienced all the strong injustice and inequality.

I saw myself as an underdog, which I think has also grown a sympathy for the underdog. And then the underdog in a very wide context or definition(...) I was so shocked by how many people live in such a different way of life, how people, and I met some really, really good, passionate people there that were so kind, but were struggling with life just because of how wealth is distributed over the world. (...) And I always feel a bit guilty about it, thinking I have such an easy life.

When asked about specific examples and stories from the year in Mexico, rather than one specific incident that formed his desire for justice, he highlight Mateo. He was the 55-year-old stepfather of the now ex-girlfriend. Roger ended up living with him for a month - in poor circumstances. Mateo fascinated him, being a well-educated and very knowledgeable man - especially about history. The experience of living with Mateo broadened Rogers perspective and inspired his thinking beyond the business-curriculum.

I also felt very much like, yeah, there's so much more out there that I should focus on, right? Social inequality, economic inequality. Already back then we talked about the environment (...), that wasn't really a topic on my mind at all at that time. (...) This (Mateo) was like a local Mahatma Gandhi to me, you know, where I thought this is very inspiring to me that this man can actually see past his own issues and just really be... positive about having his impact on others. That was something that very much triggered me when I came back from Mexico... That I thought "I'm a different person than I was when I left a year ago".

Mexico gave Roger his first experience of strong unsustainability, and that year also brought him hours of conversations that fueled his interest in being part of solving these systemic failures. Through his last six years working with financing clean-tech projects his specialty has been South America - exemplifying his love for the region. At the end of the interview he reflects on his own journey and his desiring justice:

I think the conclusion that I draw from hearing myself talk is the narrative has to work for me. And the narrative has to be something that satisfies my needs to be knowing that you're on, kind of the right side of history, so to say. Right if in 30 years the whole world blows up or melts down because of global warming, and there's like a final judgment day and everybody can kind of plead their case... Then at least I want to be able to say "look I could have done more, I fully agree, but I was trying... You know, I was working towards a better place".

Discussion and contribution

The aspiration for this version of the article - to be presented in the PDL, has been to present rich narratives and preliminary findings to fuel discussions and co-interpretation. Our claims to contribution are thus tentative, and we remain open to what others see in the data beyond what we believe that we see.

The overall contribution of the study is to provide a first empirically based theorizing of how individuals narrate their sustainability engagement over time. Within that larger contribution, we see three tentative analytical observations across our four patterns, each having the potential for a contribution in itself:

1. *The eventness of developing desire of sustainability engagement*: What we see is not a cumulative process of progressively increasing engagement but a non-linear and

recursive dynamic whereby sustainability engagement is reassessed as new events are linked to those from the past. Indeed, the interviews as such are interpretive events where people make such connections, thereby potentially in itself an engagement-producing event where people establish backwards looking coherence along with forward looking hope. This *eventness* is in part a temporal connecting and reconnecting that forges continuity and opening at the same time (Carlsen, 2006; Hernes, 2022). It is also a relational connecting, to others in the organization, to nature and with figures from the past, all speaking to a variety of calls to people's character and the distinct desires that these calls carry (Ruti, 2013). Moreover, while one can see a certain redemptive sequencing of events in most interviews, this emphasis of what were the turning points in such a redemptive development seems to be shifting? What does that imply?

2. *The coexisting forces of negatively and positively charged events:* The events whereby desire for sustainability engagement is seeded, strengthened or, indeed threatened, are both of positive and negative valence. Positively charged events are recalled as the sometimes nostalgic childhood memories of meaningful connection with nature as well as experience of mastery and feeling hope from progress and role models. Negatively charged events tell of rage, disgust and despair when recalling destruction of nature, lack of engagement of others and narrowing space for one's own engagement. Could it be that both sets of forces are needed for building and upholding strong engagement over time?
3. *The visual and physical nature of storying one's engagement:* Both the positively and negatively charged events that our interviewees highlight as formative for sustainability engagement are narrated with supportive visuals and artifacts. One could perhaps see this as a form of worldmaking whereby people physically and symbolically anchor their engagement. What is so far relatively unexplored in the data is the sense of place in such anchoring.

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