Does resilience improve the ability to influence?: A model for sustainability professionals

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ABSTRACT:
Organisations are engaging with sustainability initiatives, giving rise to new professional roles with the responsibility to implement change within organisations and deliver sustainability outcomes. At present there is limited research on sustainability professionals working as change agents in organisations. One aspect that warrants investigation is the potential for sustainability professionals to experience stress and burnout as a result of the challenges faced in their roles, and the resultant effect on their ability to influence change. Without effective and committed change agents, the viability of corporate sustainability as a response to the environmental crisis will be diminished. We develop a model for understanding the role of resilience in improving performance of sustainability professionals. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics values and management futures, Organisational culture, Business Ethics, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is on the global agenda as a critical priority to be addressed. With the deteriorating state of the environment as a result of human impact now globally acknowledged (IPCC, 2014), environmental and sustainability issues are moving to the forefront of public debate as the realities of climate change - and society’s response to it - gain higher visibility. The organisational sector is awakening to its responsibilities in the shift towards sustainability, with corporations and institutions now engaging with initiatives like corporate sustainability, corporate social responsibility and sustainable enterprise (Banerjee, 2002; Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003).

The sustainability professional has emerged as a key role in these initiatives, legitimising the work of sustainability managers and consultants. People in these roles have the responsibility of affecting sustainability outcomes through influencing people and implementing change in organisations, ranging from improving environmental performance to systemic cultural change (Benn, Dunphy & Griffiths, 2014; Gallagher, 2006; Van Marrewijk, 2003). Indeed, the increasing number of such roles have warranted the recent establishment of a dedicated professional body, the Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability, designed to support the development and standards of sustainability professionals in practice (Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability, n.d.). Current research around sustainability professionals has focussed on the responsibilities and
characteristics that define the role (DETNSW, 2009; Wiek, Withycombe, & Redman, 2011), what drives their motivation and commitment (Visser and Crane, 2010) and how they influence change within organisations (Cherrier, Russell, & Fielding, 2012; Sonenshein, DeCelles, & Dutton, 2014; Wright, Grant, & Nyberg, 2012).

While sustainability professional roles are increasingly accepted, operationalizing such roles, and the required change, often creates tension between the underlying goal of profitability and sustainability goals. This in turn creates potential contradictions for sustainability professionals in their work (Hoffman, 2003; Wright et al., 2012). Some research suggests individuals in these roles can struggle with the resistance to change they face in their work, and with reconciling their own sustainability ideologies and values within their organisational context (Hoffman, 2003; Visser & Crane, 2008; Wright et al., 2012). There is emerging evidence to suggest this can result in stress and burnout in sustainability professionals, to the detriment of their wellbeing and work performance (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Visser & Crane, 2010).

Although there is a growing literature that considers the role of the sustainability professional, our reading of the literature suggest that there is little work on stress and burnout in sustainability professionals and how this situation might be improved. Looking more broadly at change agents who face similar challenges in their work to influence others to undertake change, for example social workers, psychologists and teachers, there is a richer body of literature to support stress and burnout as problems that impact effectiveness and performance (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Fothergill, Edwards, & Burnard, 2004; Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002). We argue the same can apply to the context of sustainability professionals. In these other fields, the construct of resilience is used to describe and understand how people can persevere through adverse conditions and negative experiences (Collins, 2007; Gu & Day, 2007; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Knight, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2002). Resilience is, therefore, also a useful construct in the context of sustainability professionals, with potential to explain how these change agents might be able to overcome the negative experiences, such as stress and burnout, to be more effective in their roles.

Given the importance of sustainability in business (Banjeree, 2002; Nguyen & Slater, 2010; Snider et al., 2003), the role of sustainability professionals in corporate sustainability initiatives (Benn
et al., 2014; Gallagher, 2006; Van Marrewijk, 2003; Visser & Crane, 2010;), and the potential for individuals to experience stress and burnout as a result of values dissonance and resistance to change in their work (Hoffman, 2003; Wright et al., 2012), further research on sustainability professionals in the organisational context is necessary to support their success and performance. The aim of this paper is to develop a model to understand how resilience can enable professionals working as change agents in organisations to protect and enhance their ability influence sustainability outcomes.

PROPOSED MODEL

In this section, we propose a model suggesting that individual resilience may enable sustainability change agents to become more influential in their work and to improve sustainability outcomes in organisations. Given the evidence that professionals who face challenges of resistance to change and values dissonance in their work can experience stress and burnout (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Fothergill et al., 2004; Lloyd et al., 2002), we argue these same effects can apply to sustainability professionals working to affect change in organisations. Drawing on a positive psychology theoretical framework (Seligman, 2002) we note other fields, such as health, psychology and education, have employed resilience theory as an approach to addressing the effect of resistance to change and values dissonance, that being stress and burnout, on professionals (for example, social workers and teachers) (Collins, 2007; Gu & Day, 2007; Knight, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2002).

In Figure 1 we outline our model. In the following sections, we address relevant literature to develop each construct and pathway within the model.

Negative experiences and sustainability professionals

Sustainability professionals are typically engaged by organisations with the specific purpose of influencing and implementing change in line with the sustainability goals held by the organisation. Despite this explicit purpose and agenda, sustainability professionals can face resistance to the very change they are employed to generate, along with dissonance between their own values and that of the
organisation (Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). As Wright et al. (2012, p.457) explain, while particular organisations can be “generally ‘progressive’ on the issue of climate change…they are nevertheless varied in their interpretations about what role business should play in relation to this issue”.

Sustainability professionals can experience resistance to change at an organisational level and from individuals within the organisation. In a study on professionals in support of sustainability, Sonenshein et al. (2014) observed participants found it difficult to balance their responsibility to influence sustainability outcomes for organisations with the realities of profit making within business. Similarly, Visser and Crane (2010) found sustainability professionals also have to contend with the scale and complexity of environmental problems and the scope of their role within the organisation. In terms of resistance to change on an individual level, sustainability professionals can be effected by the attitudes of other employees and managers. These attitudes can range from scepticism and critique of the relevance of sustainability in business, particularly where messages of climate scepticism have been absorbed (Wright et al., 2012), to complacency and apathy (Sonenshein et al., 2014). Such responses to attempts to influence change can cause sustainability professionals to question their effectiveness and experience stress (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012).

Values dissonance can also be a source of negative experiences for sustainability professionals. Research shows sustainability professionals can be strongly influenced by their values and ideologies in how they work (Hoffman, 20003; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). As Hoffman states (2003, p.196), people in sustainability professional roles “see their attempts to bring environmental sustainability into the core values of the organization as a spiritual cause and purpose both for maintaining their personal identity and for positively impacting society”. Yet they often work in conditions where they have to manage their own values within the responsibilities of their role and their organisational context, which may be at odds depending on the operations and culture of the organisation. This potentially situates many sustainability professionals within a contradictory space (Hoffman, 20003; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). For example, a sustainability consultant using a values-based approach to reducing carbon emissions (doing something good for the
environment) may be seen as emotional or overzealous, as opposed to using an economic rationale for reducing carbon emissions (doing something good for the business). Given sustainability professionals generally have a core value set that promotes sustainability (Hoffman, 20003; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012), the dissonance that can be generated by competing priorities can generate stress for these individuals. These instances highlight the potential for sustainability professionals to have to deal with negative experiences in trying to fulfil the responsibilities of their role. We argue that these negative experiences will also impact on the sustainability professionals’ ability to continue to influence change.

**Negative experiences and stress and burnout**

The challenges described above present a number of situational, personal and professional difficulties for sustainability change agents in organisations leading to potential detriment to their wellbeing and work performance (Hoffman, 2003; Sonenshein et al., 2014; Visser & Crane, 2008; Wright et al., 2012). The question is then, what are the consequences for these professionals in trying to manage and reconcile such difficulties? Stress and burnout are identified in professionals in other fields who face similar challenges of values dissonance and resistance to change (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2002), from which we argue similar outcomes are possible for sustainability professionals. There is some evidence emerging to support this, with examples of stress and burnout identified within studies on sustainability professionals’ experiences with affecting change in their organisations (see for example, Hoffman, 2003; Sonenshein et al., 2014; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012).

Hoffman (2003) discusses possible outcomes for sustainability professionals from negative experiences, ranging from mild tension around values dissonance to severe stress where they will leave the organisation. In Visser and Crane’s study (2010), for example, sustainability professionals faced continual resistance to the change they were attempting to influence, leading to stress about the lack of difference they were making, which resulted in minimised work output, and in some cases, individuals left their job altogether. However, evidence of stress and burnout in sustainability professionals to date appears as incidental reflections and never as the focus of the study. For example, while Wright et al. (2012, p.1460) note that “individuals become demoralised and burn out
within organisations that fail to support their change initiatives”, the aim of the study is to examine identity within sustainability professionals, not stress and burnout. While this research provides a starting point to gain insights on the effect of challenges on sustainability professionals, further understanding of the issue can be gained by examining broader literature from other change agent roles in environmentalism.

In the broader context of environmentalism, Thomashow (1995), Macy (1991, 1995), Shields (1995) and more recently, Kovan and Dirkx (2003), all identify burnout and stress as issues faced by environmentalists. While each author describes these impacts as experienced by environmentalists in different roles, the same feelings – isolation and being overwhelmed (Macy, 1995; Shields, 1995; Thomashow, 1995) – are described as those experienced by sustainability professionals in the few studies we do have in organisational research (Sonenshein et al., 2014; Visser & Crane, 2010; Wright et al., 2012). Shields (1995, p.xii) offers insights on the negative effects of burnout and stress experienced by environmentalists: “Many are stopped before they start – stopped by feelings of isolation, by notions that they don’t possess the necessary expertise or moral stamina”. This immobilisation is a particular problem for sustainability change agents given their job requirement is to affect change within their organisation. There is a need, therefore, to address burnout and stress in sustainability professionals to support their job satisfaction and performance.

Based on the foregoing arguments we propose that:

**Proposition 1:** Negative experiences will increase the potential for the sustainability professional to experience stress and burnout.

**Stress and burnout and the ability to influence**

In terms of negative relationships, stress and burnout are often discussed together, where stress is a negative response to pressure or challenges leading to physiological reactions that impair work performance, with burnout occurring when is stress taken to overload and negative outcomes are manifested together resulting in emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and diminished personal accomplishment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Wright & Bonett, 1997). Stress and burnout have been shown to be costly to performance and retention in the helping professions, such as education and social work (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Studies in these fields show
stress and burnout negatively impact job performance and retention (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Kim & Stoner, 2008). In line with our argument that helping professionals share characteristics with sustainability professionals in terms of the challenges they face, we now extend this argument to the negative impact of such challenges on performance.

Given that stress and burnout manifest as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and diminished personal accomplishment (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Wright & Bonett, 1997) and the supporting empirical evidence from studies on these factors in teachers and social workers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Kim & Stoner, 2008), we argue stress and burnout will reduce the performance of sustainability professionals, that is, their ability to influence change in organisations. For sustainability professionals, Sonenshein et al. (2014), while not explicitly focussing on the relationship between burnout and performance, identified professionals’ performance became limited under conditions of resistance to change, identified above as a potential antecedent to stress and burnout. This relationship is also supported by Threat Rigidity Theory (Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton, 1981), which argues that when individuals perceive a threat it triggers a process that makes their decision making more rigid. Within a Threat Rigidity framework (Staw et al., 1981), the sustainability professional may perceive resistance to the change they are working to influence as a threat, and thus make less effort to achieve their sustainability goals within the organisation and constrain their activities to administrative functions only. Consequently, the sustainability professional is less likely to try to influence others, making change less likely. In summary, Threat Rigidity Theory (Staw et al., 1981) posits that stress caused by a threat (e.g., resistance to change) will cause the individual to constrain their resources to deal with the threat (make less attempts to influence change). Consequently, we propose that:

\textit{Proposition 2: Increased stress and burnout will reduce the sustainability professional’s ability to influence the organisation.}

The moderating role of resilience

Resilience is understood as the capacity to endure and develop in the face of adverse conditions, commonly referred to as the ability to ‘bounce back’ (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; McCubbin, 2001). While the foundations of resilience research are in the field of psychology
(Garmezy, 1974), there is now research on resilience being undertaken in many areas, for example, social work, ecology, organisational psychology, health and education (Coutu, 2001; Garmezy, 1974; Gu & Day, 2007; Luthar et al., 2000; McEwan, 2011). The growing interest in resilience stems from recognition of the importance of understanding and predicting human behaviour in the face of adversity, and from the need to identify the capacities and competencies critical in shaping resilience (McCubbin, 2001). For resilience in individuals, Connor and Davidson (2003) argue that it consists of characteristics such as self-efficacy, sense of humor, patience, optimism, and faith.

Looking again to research in the helping professions, resilience has been identified in teachers and social workers who have been able to persevere through adverse conditions and negative experiences at work to be successful in their roles (Collins, 2007; Gu & Day, 2007; Knight, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2002; Lundholm, 2011). In organisational research, resilience frameworks are being used in positive organisational behaviour contexts to describe the positive relationship between an individual’s resilience and desirable work outcomes including job performance, job satisfaction, work happiness and organisational commitment (Kaufman, 2005; London, 1983; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). For the purpose of this model, resilience is described as the individual’s capacity to persevere through stress and burnout from negative experiences to carry out the responsibilities in their role as a sustainability professional and influence change in their organisation. We identify with Connor and Davidson’s (2003) construction of resilience relating to the characteristics of self-efficacy, sense of humor, patience, optimism, and faith. In applying this argument to sustainability professionals’ ability to influence change despite facing negative experiences in the role, we therefore propose that:

Proposition 3: Individual resilience will moderate the relationship between stress and burnout and the sustainability professional’s ability to influence others such that higher levels of resilience will increase the ability of the sustainability professional to influence change.

Implications for theory and practice

In terms of theory, our model brings the construct of resilience in individual sustainability professionals into the field of corporate sustainability. It provides a theoretical framework to assess the effect of negative experiences on sustainability professionals and their capacity to persevere and influence change within organisations. While future research will be required to test the associations
suggested by the model, if people working as sustainability professionals are better understood, organisations can better manage the integration of such a role into broader operations, enhance recruitment and retention of sustainability professionals and develop more effective organisational leadership and culture for sustainability.

In terms of a contribution to practice, it is clear that understanding the effect of stress and burnout on sustainability professionals as individuals, and the moderating effect of resilience on their ability to influence change, provides a mechanism to identify opportunities to build resilience. It will also allow greater understanding of their experiences at work, including issues of job satisfaction, retention, behaviour and performance. As organisations increasingly value sustainability outcomes and recruit professionals to enact and engage such change, this model can potentially be used to identify training and development opportunities to increase the resilience of sustainability professionals. This will allow managers and organisations to create organisational contexts where such roles are fostered, thereby increasing the potential for sustainability professionals to experience improved performance outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The model we have proposed explores the effect of negative experiences on stress and burnout in sustainability professionals in an attempt to identify the link between resilience in sustainability professionals and their ability to influence change in organisations. We suggest that negative experiences such as resistance to change and values dissonance can cause stress and burnout in sustainability professionals, limiting their ability to influence change. We further suggest that sustainability professionals who have higher resilience will have increased ability to influence sustainability outcomes within their organisation. With sustainability emerging as an industry in its own right, and a growing profession as well, any research that contributes to a better understanding of sustainability professionals is likely to offer benefits to a growing field. We trust our model will enhance the discussion of these ideas in the field.
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Figure 1: Model of the effects of negative experiences on sustainability professionals’ ability to influence change

Negative Experiences
- Dissonance based on values
- Resistance to change

P1

Stress and Burnout

P2

Ability to influence change within the organisation

P3

Resilience