




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meaningfulness, satisfaction and frustration: The importance of emotions for sustainability change agency

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Abstract

Changes in business strategies are necessary to increase sustainability within business organisations, and change agents are key to bringing about and shaping change. Sustainability change agency involves constant reflection on change agents' roles in complex contexts, a process that arouses emotions for those agents. In this study, we assume a contextual view of change to understand how sustainability change agency develops during change processes and the role of emotions in agency behind strategic changes, such as the implementation of a circular economy. The study is based on interviews with 51 circular economy professionals in Finnish business organisations. By analysing key events and emotions in sustainability change agent (SCA) work, the study contributes to the existing research by showing that initiating and managing sustainability strategies consists of multiple unplanned and unexpected emotional events and experiences. These events and experiences shape SCA's ability and motivation to act for change, leading to continual individual-level reflection by SCAs, manifesting as ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes within the larger change process. Such reflection maintains, paralyses, enforces or reshapes their agency, depending on the context.

KEYWORDS

change agency, circular economy, contextual change, emotions, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Sustainability induces a variety of changes in business life that also necessitate the implementation of new types of business strategies. Indeed, change is key to the success of strategy implementation. Strategic changes take many forms in business organisations (Bridges, 2009) and occur on multiple levels, including the individual, group and organisational levels (Cameron & Green, 2019; Walsh et al., 2023). In recent years, the circular economy (CE) has been introduced as a

concept and model that promotes sustainability in business organisations, which has been another driver of changes in business strategies. The profound ideas of the CE in modifying business strategies—presupposing a transition from a linear economy to a circular one (Kirchherr et al., 2017)—necessitate rethinking and replanning in business. Moreover, these ideas are often relevant to strategic changes within company business models (Centobelli et al., 2020).

Within organisations, when changes such as CE strategies are introduced, change agents are key in bringing about, shaping and enabling change (Caldwell, 2003). Change agents are defined as individuals or teams that take responsibility for leading a change

Abbreviation: CE, circular economy.

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(Caldwell, 2003); importantly, their agency is not tied to a formal managerial position but is rather a choice (Caldwell, 2005). Specifically for sustainability-oriented changes, the role of change agents is crucial for steering changes towards more sustainable solutions and strategies (Hoppmann et al., 2018; Onkila, 2011; Rossi et al., 2000). Such individual change agents create visions for and lead changes towards more sustainable futures (Rossi et al., 2000) while stimulating new directions for change (Hoppmann et al., 2018). They may be internal or external actors within business organisations and hold varying levels of formal power within and outside organisations (Hoppmann et al., 2018; Prömpeler et al., 2023). Their various attributes, such as their personal values, may strongly influence change agentic actions (Prömpeler et al., 2023).

In the present study, we are interested in internal change agents' work at the individual level to guide change towards a CE. We call them *sustainability change agents* (SCAs). Their role entails acting in complex inter- and intra-organisational environments to introduce and manage changes, which also involves constant reflection among these change agents on their role in frequently complex contexts (Hassett et al., 2018). In addition, they normally have extensive experience implementing strategic changes towards the goal of a CE. This often arouses emotions in the change agents as they manoeuvre through a complex web of intertwined relationships (Koban et al., 2017). Here, by 'emotion', we mean 'a mental state of (action) readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events, social interaction of thoughts' and 'a transient feeling state with an identified cause or target that can be expressed verbally or nonverbally' (Maitlis et al., 2013, p. 223).

Emotions experienced by SCAs are a meaningful part of sustainability change processes within organisations. Specifically, sustainability-related changes in business arouse emotions, which are of paramount importance in decision-making related to sustainability (Martiskainen & Sovacool, 2021). On the one hand, this necessitates that SCAs manage and cope with such emotions, as identified by Wright and Nyberg (2012) and Russell and Victoria (2022). Wright and Nyberg (2012) focused on how SCAs endeavour to manage their emotions to obtain acceptance of their sustainability initiatives. Russell and Victoria (2022) studied SCAs' strategies for coping with negative emotions evoked in their work. Both studies adopted a rationalist view of sustainability changes in companies (Caldwell, 2005). They focused on emotions that arise as a result of change processes planned by SCAs in their expert roles and on ways to rationally handle these emotions, either by consciously managing them to gain acceptance (Wright & Nyberg, 2012) or by suppressing them through various coping strategies (Russell & Victoria, 2022). These studies have contributed to the current understanding of how working with emotions can facilitate sustainability change processes and how negative emotions can be managed in SCA work.

On the other hand, a contextual perspective on change (Caldwell, 2005) allows us to embrace the complexity of the role of emotions in SCA work, which partly explains companies' difficulties in implementing sustainability changes, such as a CE. A contextual perspective on change entails an interest in the nonlinear and processual

nature of change over time as a continuous process with unplanned and unstructured features and unintended consequences, both in external and internal contexts (Caldwell, 2005). This approach helps to understand not only how emotions play a crucial role in change agency development during change processes, facilitated by SCAs' multiple roles in generating and implementing change, but also that those roles are by no means static; rather, they are evolving, decentred and distributed (see Buchanan et al., 2007). Consequently, emotions appear as not always manageable but rather as naturally emerging phenomena that shape agency. This includes both negative and positive emotions.

In this view, change lacks predictability and does not unambiguously link agency to formal leadership positions; rather, it stresses agency as a choice (Caldwell, 2005). By adopting a contextual view of CE change in the studied companies, we aimed to supplement the current understanding of the significance of emotions for the work SCAs do, especially concerning how their agency builds and develops during change processes. To address this, we pose the following research questions: *How does SCA agency develop during change processes, and what role do emotions play in this agency?*

We study SCAs' emotions and agency specifically from the point of view of introducing and implementing CE strategies. A contextual view of change, with a focus on its uncertain, unplanned and unintended features (Caldwell, 2005), particularly suits the study of CE changes because CE is still a novel concept, and the related changes are marked by multiple uncertainties and by theoretical and practical ambiguity (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Ghisellini et al., 2016; Sarja et al., 2021). However, the current literature makes it evident that CE change is strongly based in the principles of sustainability (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017).

To this end, we conducted interviews with 51 CE professionals in Finnish companies endeavouring to implement strategic changes towards a CE. Many of the interviewed individuals held formal managerial positions, while some did not; however, all were primarily responsible for CE introduction and implementation. By analysing key events and emotions in SCA work, the current study contributes to the research on emotions in SCA work by showing that initiating and managing sustainability strategies and changes consist of multiple unplanned and unexpected emotional events and experiences. These events and experiences shape SCAs' ability and motivation to act for change, leading to continual individual-level reflection of SCAs that manifests as ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes within the larger change process. Such reflection maintains, paralyses, enforces or reshapes their agency, depending on the context.

The present paper is structured as follows. We first introduce the key concepts of the study, their definitions and prior research on change agency and emotions. We then introduce CE in Finland as our research context, as well as our interview-based research material and its analysis. In our findings section, we explore how emotions are meaningful for SCA agency, especially through three intertwined processes—ideological, reassuring and fragmenting—which both motivate and result from change agency. We also investigate how change agency is enforced or passivated through these experiences. Finally,

we discuss the recontributions of the study and introduce directions for future research.

2 | SCAS' AGENCY AND EMOTIONS

Given the recent recognition of the importance of sustainability, SCAs have garnered growing interest among scholars within organisation studies (Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012). SCAs are change agents for sustainability that work to generate, implement and adopt change within and outside organisations. These change agents need to be able to work autonomously in often unsupportive environments (Heiskanen et al., 2016). In the present study, we follow Caldwell's definition of change agents as 'individuals and teams that ... initiate, lead, direct, or take direct responsibility for making change happen' (2003, p. 140). By adopting a contextual view of change (Caldwell, 2005), we further define change agency as not being restricted to managerial positions in organisations. Instead, it is a choice available to any individual within the organisation. In addition, agency is always inherently shaped by various contexts of action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Change agency may also be an organisational-level collective action (see Bies et al., 2007); however, we are interested in experiences at the individual level, that is, the micro-level (Ashkanasy, 2003). Despite our focus on the individual level, we acknowledge that SCAs serve to activate change at different levels, including interpersonal, institutional and professional (Campbell et al., 2009). Thus, the role of change agents is highly interactive.

According to Teerikangas et al. (2021), all sustainability agency involves essentially change orientation; they define sustainability agency as 'intentional, proactive individual or collective level action geared toward sustainable futures, also involving interaction with nonmaterial forms of agency. Thus, the concept incorporates the idea of change agency and includes an increasingly diverse set of actors' (Teerikangas et al., 2021, p. 423). There has been some prior research in this area, especially on SCAs. This research field has demonstrated how diverse worldviews (van den Berg et al., 2019), their sensemaking processes (van der Heijden et al., 2012) and different discursive fields (Pesch, 2015) influence the action of SCAs. Visser and Crane (2010) elaborated on how sustainability managers within organisations are change agents who can be characterised into a typology of experts, facilitators, catalysts and activists. They argue that these managers develop their sense of meaningfulness in diverse processes based on values, inspiration, expertise, empowerment, strategic thinking and social contribution. Most studies in this field have adopted a rational view of change, stressing the need for the intervention of a formal change agent to implement sustainability-related changes and initiatives. They primarily treat sustainability as a planned change, thus overlooking the processual and unintended aspects of change (Caldwell, 2005) and giving less attention to unplanned features and contexts in change processes.

In addition to revealing such diversity in change agency motivation and action via a largely rational focus, prior research has also highlighted the challenges SCAs face in creating change (Heiskanen

et al., 2016; Walker, 2007). In creating changes that challenge the basic premises of business, such as CE, SCAs face a unique set of pressures and resistance (Walker, 2007). In endeavouring to implement these changes, often against resistance, sustainability change appears to be a key emotive event. This is because strong feelings often accompany the changes that are about to be implemented (Wright & Nyberg, 2012). Although prior research has shown SCAs' passion for driving these changes (Wright & Nyberg, 2012), it has also demonstrated negative emotions created by resistance and failures (Walker, 2007). Thus, sustainability change agency is emotionally intense, and the emotions of change agents also influence how sustainability issues are diffused and approached within organisations (Blomfield et al., 2016). This has also been observed in wider contexts, including among employees within organisations for whom sustainability changes and related tensional experiences create the need to engage in sensemaking to resolve the emotional tensions created (Sarna et al., 2022).

As we have argued above, understanding change agents' emotions is vital to any sustainability change process within an organisation. Following work by Sinkovics, Zagelmeyer and Kusstatscher (2011, p. 28) and Kusstatscher and Cooper (2005, p. 48), we argue that emotions are 'a mental state of (action) readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events, social interaction of thoughts' and 'a transient feeling state with an identified cause or target that can be expressed verbally or nonverbally' (Maitlis et al., 2013, p. 223). Emotions have been categorised in many different ways (e.g., Huy, 2002; Lazarus, 1999) and in language that is more or less implicit.

Change agency arouses emotions for the change agent, who often must manoeuvre through a complex web of intertwined relationships (Koban et al., 2017). Emotions are usually focused around events that take place and, hence, can be described as episodic (Mulligan & Scherer, 2012). This perspective allows us to appreciate discrete instances, such as certain events or actions, that arouse emotions (Lazarus, 1999; Verduyn et al., 2009). These events or actions may have a cognitive origin. A broad swath of literature has focused on understanding how individuals come to experience emotions. Within the stream of psychology research, emotions are related to the interpretation (appraisal) of events and actions, which involves a process of evaluating the experiences in which individuals find themselves (Frijda, 1987). This stands in contrast with work within the sociological stream, which focuses more on social constructions and learned experiences within social structures, viewing emotions as phenomena that mimic what other people are experiencing (Thoits, 1989).

The importance of emotions for SCA work has been acknowledged, and how emotions are intertwined in their work has also been studied. Previously, two studies have focused on analysing SCA emotions: Wright and Nyberg (2012) and Russell and Victoria (2022). Both adopt a rational perspective on sustainability change, meaning that they stress mainly planned and structured features in sustainability changes and sustainability as the planned strategic action of a company. Wright and Nyberg (2012) investigate different types of

approaches that SCAs use to manage their emotions to gain acceptance for initiatives. This, for example, means constraining their own emotionality or using it in a calculative manner. Russell and Victoria (2022) focused on the coping mechanisms that SCAs use to handle the emotions aroused by their work. These involve, for example, using rationality to overcome and learn from negative experiences to facilitate the resolution of similar issues in the future. Both of these studies examined rational ways of dealing with emotions (cf. Caldwell, 2005). We contribute to this field of research by adopting a contextual perspective on change (Caldwell, 2005). This means focusing on the non-linear and processual nature of change over time as a continuous process, along with its unpredictable features and unintended consequences, in both external and internal contexts (Caldwell, 2005). Furthermore, a contextual perspective allows for analysing emotion's significance for the development of change agency. As suggested by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency essentially entails actual in-context interactions that often manifest as ongoing conversations that shape agency.

Our adopted approach stresses agency as a choice rather than linking it unambiguously to formal leadership positions. Moreover, it stresses that change agents take on multiple roles in generating and implementing change and that these roles are by no means static but rather evolving, decentred and distributed (see Buchanan et al., 2007). This approach facilitates the development of a more nuanced understanding of how SCA agency evolves during change processes, revealing the importance of emotions in this process. This focus has been absent in prior research thus far; however, it is integral to a deeper understanding of change agency work, including its unexpected and nonstructured features.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research context

Finnish society is often acknowledged as pioneering when it comes to sustainability improvements and a CE as a common societal aim. Despite its average ranking in the study of Mazur-Wierzbicka (2021) and rather low ranking in Politico's CE index (Hervey, 2018), in which larger countries seem to have higher scores due to relatively more CE investments and patents, Finland has set ambitious national CE targets. For example, in the programme known as A Socially, Economically, and Ecologically Sustainable Society (Finnish Government, 2019), Finland states its aim to become the global leader in CE implementation. It was the first country to create a roadmap to CE in 2016 (Sitra, 2016), which was followed by many other European countries. This was followed by the introduction of a strategic programme to promote CE in Finland by the national government in 2021. The country has targeted a carbon-neutral CE by 2035 (Finnish Government, 2021). In addition, the first World Circular Economy Forum was organised in Finland in 2017. Because Finnish society has demonstrated its commitment to CE pioneering, Finnish businesses

have begun to act to further this aim. Naturally, the national targets increase the pressures on Finnish businesses to create changes to advance the CE, and in the national discourse, the CE is often framed through new business opportunities, while national development organisations offer different types of support for businesses transitioning to the CE. Consequently, more business organisations are striving more diligently for CE implementation. This is increasingly visible in business practices and communication. For example, the number of companies included on the list of the most interesting CE companies (Sitra, 2023) has rapidly increased. The list, maintained by Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, shows an increasing number of companies focusing on product lifespan extension, product as a service, sharing platforms, renewability, resource efficiency and recycling in their business model.

Within this macro environment, we have selected companies that demonstrate a commitment to CE. In these organisations, we are interested in change agents' emotional experiences as micro-level actors. We believe that despite the supportive nature of the macro environment, changing agency to facilitate the CE transition in business is not an easy task. Indeed, change agents struggle with setbacks, a lack of solutions and resistance to change, which naturally involve emotional experiences that shape change agency.

Our research material consists of 51 interviews with CE professionals in Finnish companies. We selected interviewees from business organisations with a clearly expressed aim and commitment to developing a CE that were also able to show actual CE-based business practices. To identify such companies in Finland, we used three sources. First, our main source was the abovementioned list of the most interesting CE companies in Finland. Based on this list, we selected companies of varying sizes from different industries that represented different types of business models, as categorised in the list (product lifespan extension, product as a service, sharing platforms, renewability or resource efficiency and recycling). We selected different types of companies to avoid by focusing on certain industries or approaches because our aim was more generally to provide an understanding of the significance of emotions in change agents' work. Second, during the interviews that we conducted based on the list of the most interesting CE companies in Finland, the interviewees suggested certain companies that had not applied to be listed but had a clear CE focus, both in their practices and as published commitments. Based on these suggestions, we used snowball sampling and conducted interviews with representatives from the suggested companies. Third, as CE researchers, we used our own knowledge of CE companies in Finland that had convincing CE practices and a clear commitment to CE, inviting them to be interviewed. Our final sample consisted of 51 CE professionals working in pioneering CE companies in Finland (see Table 1 for details). The companies represented different types of manufacturing (e.g., the forest and textile industries) and service organisations (e.g., the IT sector, financial sector and online platforms for second-hand items). The size of these private organisations ranged from start-ups to large multinational companies, and their CE approaches varied from a focus on lifespan extension to recyclability.

TABLE 1 List of interviewees.

Date	Code	Organization	Position	Face to face/ online	Duration
May 2019	I1	Environmental service provider A	Business director	Face to face	62 min
June 2019	I2	Sustainable development company	Leading expert	Face to face	81 min
June 2019	I3	IT company	Sales director	Face to face	49 min
August 2019	I4	Environmental service provider B	Circular economy specialist	Face to face	39 min
August 2019	I5	Construction company	Sustainable business director	Face to face	54 min
September 2019	I6	Manufacturing company A	Business unit manager	Face to face	55 min
October 2019	I7	Manufacturing company B	CEO	Face to face	28 min
October 2019	I8	Forest industry company A	Director of sustainability	Face to face	42 min
October 2019	I9	Energy company A	Sales director	Face to face	35 min
November 2019	I10	Energy company B	Biorefinery business director	Face to face	61 min
November 2019	I11	Forest industry company B	Business unit director	Face to face	71 min
November 2019	I12	Manufacturing company C	Chief marketing officer	Face to face	60 min
November 2019	I13	Car sharing company A	CEO	Face to face	49 min
November 2019	I14	Car sharing company B	Marketing & sales coordinator	Face to face	45 min
November 2019	I15	Forest industry company C	Manager, environmental production support & responsibility Director, strategic partnerships & technology	Face to face	45 min
November 2019	I16	Forest industry company D	VP sustainability	Face to face	86 min
November 2019	I17	Environmental technology company A	CEO	Face to face	65 min
December 2019	I18	Waste management company/	CEO	Face to face	62 min
December 2019	I19	Forest industry company C—Subsidiary	Sustainability expert	Face to face	31 min
December 2019	I20	Consulting company A	Director, circular concepts	Face to face	31 min
January 2020	I21	Financial company	Investment director	Face to face	54 min
January 2020	I22	Service company A	CEO	Face to face	68 min
February 2020	I23	Manufacturing company D	CEO	Face to face	52 min
February 2020	I24	Nonprofit recycling company	CEO	Face to face	100 min
February 2020	I25	Biogas company A	CEO	Face to face	54 min
February 2020	I26	Material recycling company	CEO	Face to face	35 min
February 2020	I27	Environmental & property maintenance company	SVP, corporate relations	Face to face	57 min
February 2020	I28	Service company B	CEO	Face to face	37 min
	I29	Waste management company	CEO	Face to face	37 min

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Date	Code	Organization	Position	Face to face/ online	Duration
February 2020					
March 2020	I30	Online platform for second-hand items A	CEO	Face to face	53 min
March 2020	I31	Textile company A	Senior vice president, business concept development	Online	65 min
March 2020	I32	Outdoor textiles & items	CEO	Face to face	48 min
March 2020	I33	Furniture company	Sustainability manager	Face to face	69 min
March 2020	I34	Interior design company	Strategy director	Face to face	50 min
March 2020	I35	Waste container manufacturer	Circular economy specialist	Face to face	45 min
March 2020	I36	Textile company B	CEO	Online	27 min
March 2020	I37	Civil engineering service company	Chairman of the board	Online	40 min
March 2020	I38	Biogas company B	CEO	Face to face	68 min
March 2020	I39	Manufacturing company E	Business director	Face to face	75 min
March 2020	I40	Manufacturing company F	CEO	Online	40 min
March 2020	I41	Online platform for second-hand items B	Marketing & communications	Online	47 min
March 2020	I42	Online platform for second-hand items C	CEO	Online	55 min
March 2020	I43	Manufacturing company G	CEO	Online	69 min
March 2020	I44	Agriculture & forestry machine retailer	CEO	Online	42 min
March 2020	I45	Design retailer	CEO	Online	47 min
March 2020	I46	Composting company	Business manager	Online	27 min
March 2020	I47	Manufacturing company H	CEO	Online	37 min
April 2020	I48	Textile company B	CEO	Online	55 min
May 2020	I49	Textile company C	CEO	Online	41 min
May 2020	I50	Textile company D	CEO	Online	54 min
May 2020	I51	Manufacturing company I	Director, sales & management	Online	91 min

3.2 | Research material

In each firm, the person responsible for CE implementation was interviewed. In many cases, this meant the CEO of the company, especially in smaller firms. The other interviewees were various directors, managers and experts. It is notable that no interviewees held formal managerial positions, although many acted as change agents in nonmanagerial positions and, thus, could be perceived as charismatic heroes of radical corporate transformation. In the present study, we have taken a processual view of change, which has led us to define SCAs as those individuals who initiate and manage change and whose agency is not tied to formal managerial or leadership positions in the organisation (Caldwell, 2003, 2005). Their responsibilities focused on managing and implementing CE changes in their organisations. Both women and men were interviewed. The duration of the interviews varied between 27 and 100 min. The interviews were either conducted face to face, often at the interviewee's location, or via the internet using either Zoom or Skype. Information on the interviewees is listed in Table 1.

The interviews were semi-structured. The covered themes included the interviewee's background, CE practices in the

interviewee's organisation and CE implementation in their line of business and Finland overall. Emotions were also directly asked about with the following questions: 'How has acting as a change agent felt?' 'What kind of experience has it been?' 'What about change agency has been challenging and rewarding?' All of these themes were covered in every interview, although the exact questions used in each interview differed because of time limitations and the expertise of the interviewees. All interviewees gave their permission to record the interviews. Later, the interviews were transcribed.

3.3 | Analysis

The interviews were thematically and inductively analysed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). We first reduced the data by extracting the sections in which change agents speak of their emotions and agency. Based on Caldwell's definition, we focused on those sections in the interviews in which the descriptions of actions and situations in which 'individuals and teams ... initiate, lead, direct, or take direct responsibility for making change happen' (2003, p. 140) and emotions are explicitly mentioned as part of the action. In looking at these sections

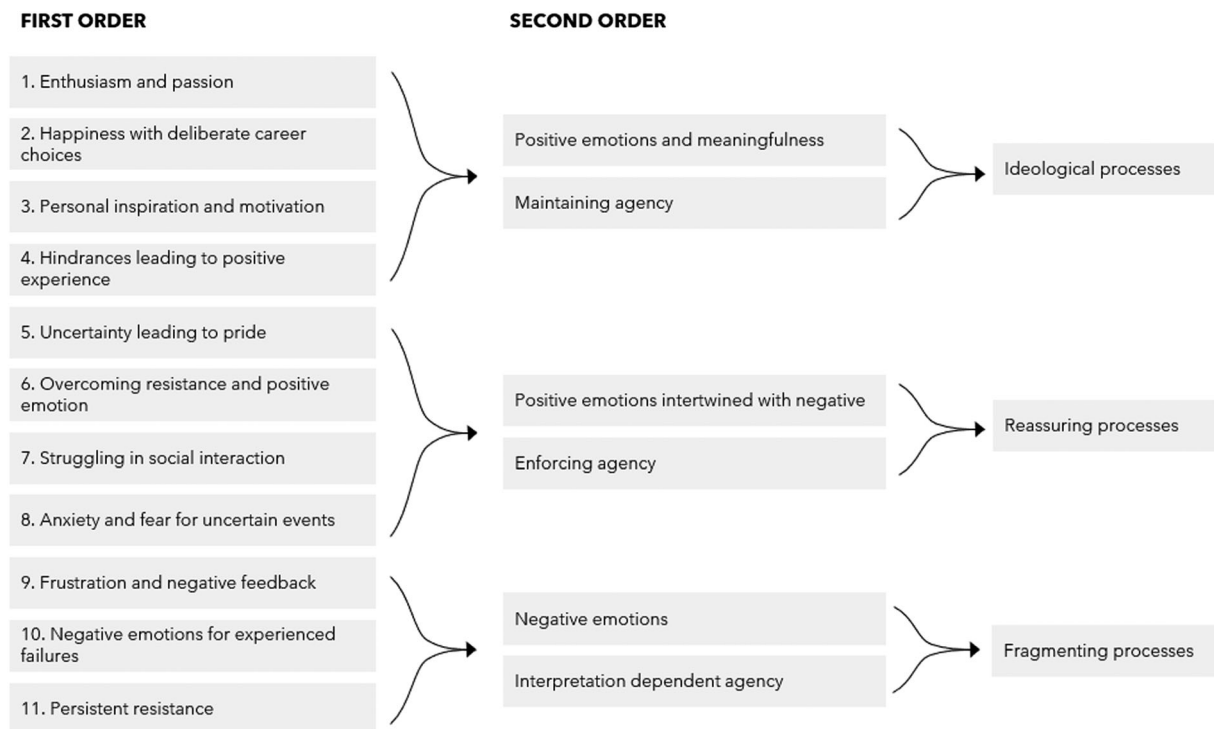


FIGURE 1 Analysis process.

of the interviews, it was noted that the interviewees regularly described change agents' work as a struggle with unexpected and unplanned events, which then led us to focus on a contextual view of change (Caldwell, 2005). We continued our analysis process by following the principles of qualitative data analysis, from coding to the identification of similarities, which were isolated and elaborated upon (Miles et al., 2020) using Gioia et al.'s (2013) four phases of data analysis in order to move from data to theoretical interpretations. NVivo software was employed to support our iterative analysis process, which moved back and forth between the analysis phases and the literature. However, here, we present it chronologically. Our four phases of analysis are explained in detail below and described in Figure 1.

We continued the analysis by comparing these data segments and synthesising our list of first-order concepts. In this phase, we followed the contextual view of change (Caldwell, 2005) and focused on analysing the expressed emotions, related events and experiences, and contexts in which they appear. Based on this, we identified the following themes as first-order concepts: enthusiasm and passion, happiness with deliberate career choices, personal inspiration and motivation, hindrances leading to positive experiences, uncertainty leading to pride, overcoming resistance and positive emotion, struggling in social interaction, anxiety and fear for uncertain events, frustration and negative feedback, negative emotions related to experienced failures and persistent resistance.

The first-order concepts are listed in Figure 1. In the second phase of our analysis, we compared the descriptive coding of each section in the first phase and noticed differences in how emotions were intertwined in SCAs' work, along with how their relationship to

agency development was described. Based on these, we were able to identify our second-order concepts to describe the aspects mentioned above. The second-order concepts are as follows: positive emotions and meaningfulness, maintaining agency, positive emotions intertwined with negative, enforcing agency, negative emotions and interpretation-dependent agency. These second-order concepts are listed in Figure 1. All the codes in the first round constitute and contribute to two second-order themes: the emergence of different types of emotions and developing agency. In the third phase of our analysis, we integrated the contextual view of change (Caldwell, 2005) with the SCA work and emotions, letting those guide the formation of our final identification of categories. Through a comparison with the themes identified during the first and second rounds, we noted that our empirical findings yielded three types of processes on which SCAs rely when speaking of their work: ideological processes, reassuring processes and fragmenting processes. We further analysed the content of each practice in this phase based on the second-order concepts and by going back and forth between the research material, the identified themes and prior research. In the fourth phase, we integrated our findings with the contextual view of change (Caldwell, 2005), creating a conceptual model for understanding how initiating and managing sustainability strategies and changes consist of multiple unplanned and unexpected emotive events and experiences that shape SCAs' ability and motivation to act for change. The identified processes shed light on how different social contexts in which SCAs act and the extent to which emotions are interwoven into these different contexts. In addition, they explained how meaningful emotions are for SCAs' work.

4 | FINDINGS

The findings show how meaningful emotions are in SCAs' agency development and how key events and experiences shape this agency across the various change processes in which they are involved. Those events and experiences during the change processes involve unexpected aspects that lead to a general perception of SCA work as a struggle, meaning that SCAs face multiple challenging, difficult and frustrating situations in their work. However, these do not simply lead to negative emotions but are also intertwined with positive emotions. Based on our empirical findings, we show that SCAs' work consists of multiple unplanned and unexpected emotional experiences and events that shape their agency during the multiple change processes in which they are involved. This leads to continual individual-level reflection by SCAs, which shapes their agency over time and manifests as ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes. These different types of reflection are intertwined and may appear at the same time and in the same place as they continuously interact.

4.1 | Ideological processes

SCAs use ideological processes to manifest their perceptions of 'self' in their work. This involves SCAs representing themselves as ideology-driven individuals whose actions are reinforced by positive emotional experiences that support their conscious career choices. In these ideological processes, emotions have a twofold meaning: they are characterised as a source of motivation for SCA agency throughout their careers as well as the result of acting as a change agent, although the work also has its difficulties.

Ideological career choices, laden with emotions, served as a source for the narration of personal choices related to the careers of the interviewees. This was particularly evident when interviewees discussed making career choices that diverged from general societal expectations, such as choosing a career based on personal prestige and monetary rewards. In the data, this involved a sense of meaningfulness as an emotional motivator derived from sources of ideological motivation towards sustainability or CE initiatives. This motivation was characterised by a willingness to work out of personal motivation for sustainability rather than simply for financial gain or to secure esteemed positions. It also related to interviewees' own enthusiasm and passion specifically for SCA work and a commitment to creating change. Such ideological commitment was presented as a strong driving force for initiating and implementing CE changes, as indicated in the following interview extract:

Well, I came in because I was asked. They introduced the concept to me, and I got interested in it right away. I've spent my entire working career doing the things I want to do, and I want it to have a meaning other than just the salary. So, the reasons were ideological, too.

(113)

As indicated in the above extract, the interviewed SCAs included a subset of individuals who had worked on sustainability changes throughout their careers because of a desire to do something ideologically meaningful instead of simply making money. However, we also identified individuals who had decided to completely change the direction of their careers after reawakening to the importance of sustainability issues or the necessity for a CE transition. For example, one interviewee had left his position at a larger company with a higher salary and better prospects because he was more motivated to do good than to earn a lot of money:

It is a key motivational factor because if the motivation for building a company like this was money, I wouldn't have gotten into it at all. I would've stayed at a large company with a big salary and very good future prospects. So, there must be motives other than money in it—that is, being able to do something good. But of course, you also want to earn a living because you have to have something to buy food with, or you just hoard it.

(143)

The sense of meaningfulness served as a strong source of commitment, but it also created positive emotional experiences in everyday SCA work. In the studied data, although the interviewees reported experiencing challenges and difficulties in their work, they also described how positive experiences in initiating and managing change create positive emotions during their careers, such as pride and satisfaction, and enhance enthusiasm. The interviewees often described how such a sense of meaningfulness grew when they saw the importance of their work for sustainability. For example, one interviewee explained how his positive emotions towards SCA work were constantly growing, thus supporting how he experienced the significance and inspiration of his work:

My motivation for this activity in construction has increased 100%. Working right now gives me new inspiration; each day is different, and the way I feel its significance in my work is totally different from before.

(137)

The SCAs framed themselves as self-motivated individuals looking to create sustainability and CE changes. They described ideology-driven action, placing a sense of meaningfulness at the centre of the individual level. Such reflection was especially important for initiating changes and creating strategies for sustainability but not necessarily enough for struggling through their implementation. However, it helped the SCAs maintain their motivation during change processes, especially through the experience of doing 'good' at work. For example, the following interviewee described how this feeling supported his agency, meaning his ability to act and commit to his daily work as an SCA:

Same for me. I can honestly say that I feel like I'm doing important work and that it's sort of my main motivator. I never have the feeling in the morning, like, why do I have to go to work. I think the tasks I have are really nice and interesting. And, as I said, I feel that I'm doing important work.

115

4.2 | Reassuring processes

The SCAs used reassuring processes to reflect on their perceptions of success in creating change through their work. This involved narratives of positive emotions raised by succeeding in changing stressful and challenging situations into positive experiences. These processes were induced by situations in which SCAs felt that they were struggling and battling at work, which framed the implementation of CE strategies as a demanding task, although the challenges could be overcome. In particular, these reassuring processes showed how positive and negative emotions were constantly intertwined in the SCAs' work. They were triggered by a narrative that described SCA work as 'struggling for success', especially disruptive events that create negative emotions, such as confusion and uncertainty, when SCAs aim to introduce and implement change. In the studied data, positive emotions were evoked among SCAs by successfully managing and implementing changes aimed at circular solutions. The positiveness, however, was created through a struggle—change agency is not an easy process but rather faces constant challenges and hindrances, such as the ignorance, negligence and resistance of others. Overcoming these challenges can create positive emotions, including satisfaction, pride, gratitude and the rewarding feeling of overcoming challenges. These emotions were related to two contexts: social interaction and the introduction of new technical and structural solutions.

In social interaction, change agency was challenging, especially due to resistance to change and limited understanding and knowledge of CE among internal and external stakeholders. Despite these challenges faced in social contexts, positive emotions, such as satisfaction, were derived from successfully managing and fostering changes in internal and external stakeholders' understanding, thinking and acceptance of CE, which supported and reinforced agency. Thus, change agency appeared as a struggle and effort but led to positive emotions when the challenges were overcome. For example, one interviewee described the satisfaction he felt after changing the thinking of others and how it gave him the strength to create more change:

Well, I find it very (valuable), and I'm extremely thankful for it. I put my heart into this, after all, and if I see that the things I say or (what I) believe myself, so (it's) like a religious sect. And if I can get someone to believe and think, and at least (wake up) to this different way of thinking, I have to say that it's really satisfying; it gives me the strength to do my own (work), and I'm really grateful for that. And I'm doing exactly what I

want to be doing.

(136)

When introducing new technical and structural solutions, change agency can be challenging, especially due to uncertainty about the functionality of new solutions, which can often raise negative emotions, such as anxiety and fear. However, when such solutions succeed, they lead to positive emotions. In similar cases, the SCAs' work also appeared as a struggle involving challenges in developing new solutions, as exemplified in the following interview extract:

Maybe the most challenging thing, if I think about this centralised waste collection—it's a good example because it's a clear-cut project—was first to find our own point of view, the way we are part of this CE, and what kind of message we're sending, so that we're not talking about the same old deep collection method in waste collection. At first, it felt like there was no new perspective, but then, as we had the new thing and the piloting started, we get new research results all the time, and we have important new information that many parties are interested in. It felt important for me, too. I have started to believe in it more myself because I feel like I'm spreading an important message.

(135)

Reassuring processes can provide SCA tools to handle stressful and complicated situations and events, which are inevitably important for managing longer strategic change processes and stabilising the long-term direction of change. This is indicated in the interview extract above. It also exemplifies how these processes enforce SCA agency in the long term. When such tools for handling and adjusting to challenging situations are provided, they can support SCA action towards change, despite the challenges. This was continually described as a rewarding experience. For example, one interviewee described how challenging it was to work on CE changes with external stakeholders, but at the same time, it created the feeling of being rewarding when changes were successfully implemented:

It's cooperation, after all. That is, in a way, cooperation with people outside the company. It's challenging, and the things that come up are different than in, say, normal business activities. But at the same time, it's really rewarding when you succeed and get things done.

(111)

4.3 | Fragmenting processes

The SCAs used fragmenting processes to reflect their perceptions of negative emotions related to their work, such as frustration and negative events created by failures in initiating, implementing and managing changes. The negative emotions related to experiences of socially

and societally demanding changes that should be implemented for circularity can lead to fragmented outcomes for SCA change agency. In the interviews, it was described that such situations arouse negative emotions, such as feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction. Typically, such experiences of failure were derived from different types of negative feedback on change initiatives, such as persistent resistance to change or a sense of inability to produce more change, accompanied by failure to introduce the aimed-for change. These experiences resulted in emotions such as (nonphysical) pain, frustration and a sense of trouble and difficulties.

This type of process was fragmented in the sense that it could create different types of impacts on SCA agency and work, depending on how the change agent interpreted negative experiences of failure in their work. The impact notably varied depending on how the sources of negativity were interpreted by the change agent—thus, the negative emotions might maintain, reshape or paralyse SCA action. First, when change agents speak of negative emotions as a natural part of change, which are always encountered when creating change, they tend to overcome negative emotions and continue actively acting for change. Overcoming such negative feedback is interpreted as something that naturally belongs to the work of change agents. Negative experiences are then transformed through acceptance, persistence, stamina and willpower to something that keeps them acting for change. The following interview extract exemplifies how such resistance and negativity may create negative emotions but has been accepted as a natural part of SCA work:

Of course, sometimes, you meet people who are opposed to change, and who even say it out loud. Even if they don't believe in something, it's not appropriate to run others down. It's sad that, sometimes, you meet people who just don't understand and who complain on top of that. That's the bad part. It's this transitional phase; that's just how it is.

(137)

Second, when change agents interpret such negative emotions as an indication of more changes being necessary or required, they tend to transform negative experiences into catalysts for innovating and creating more change and thus include new forms of action for change. Negative experiences can be transmuted into a sense of meaningfulness, thereby motivating change agency. The following interview extract exemplifies how an interviewee turned negative experiences into a driving force behind finding more circular solutions:

Of course, one aims to always promote it (CE). Though it is, of course, challenging, when there are these problems, you yourself also get a negative feeling, and you feel like nothing will come of this, but then, on the other hand, you are able to find the solutions, so it is not so much a 'feet off the ground' circular economy but rather seeking practical solutions.

(126)

When the change agents spoke of negative emotional experiences as problems that they simply could not change, these experiences tended to render SCA agency passive—or even paralyse it. Such experiences were drawn from the various societal limitations of their actions, such as a lack of societal support and structures. The inability to change these led to a sense of powerlessness and an experience of struggling with hindrances that simply could not be changed. The change agents related such experiences to the sense of being alone in creating change. This led to experiences of failure despite earnest efforts to create change, which then retarded or even paralysed agency. The following extract exemplifies how an interviewee spoke of the feeling of pain created by her long-term struggle for change, which was notably limited by a lack of societal support:

I find it really painful that, as a small company, we need to come up with solutions to build these kinds of tools. I think there should be support for things like that. And of course, the fact that the genuine promotion of these things, like the circular economy, for example, in competitive tendering for municipal projects, is still nonsense. There should be sanctions, even, or at least strong incentives, which would steer things in a more concrete direction in terms of measurability and so on. At least that. And I would kind of hope that they, well, Sitra, for example, they do talk and do a lot to promote this, but then again, we remain on a kind of theoretical level here.

(149)

In summary, our empirical findings have provided an understanding of how constant reflection on emotions is meaningful for continuous SCA agency development. The intertwined negative and positive emotions relate to agency through different reflective processes, as presented in Figure 2. Figure 2 summarises how key emotional events and experiences—such as uncertainty, difficulty, reward or frustration—are related to reflections on self, failures or success, hence leading to positive or negative emotions. The reflections can be categorised as ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes that are continually present in daily SCA work. Through these reflections, SCA agency continually evolves, and it is maintained, enforced, hindered or reshaped in these processes.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the present study, we were interested in how SCA agency develops during change processes and the role of emotions in SCAs' agency. Based on our empirical findings, we showed how emotions are meaningful in shaping SCAs' agency in the implementation and management of CE-related changes and strategies. To accomplish this, we introduced three reflective emotional processes that SCAs constantly engage in during their daily work: ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes. As we have shown above, multiple positive and

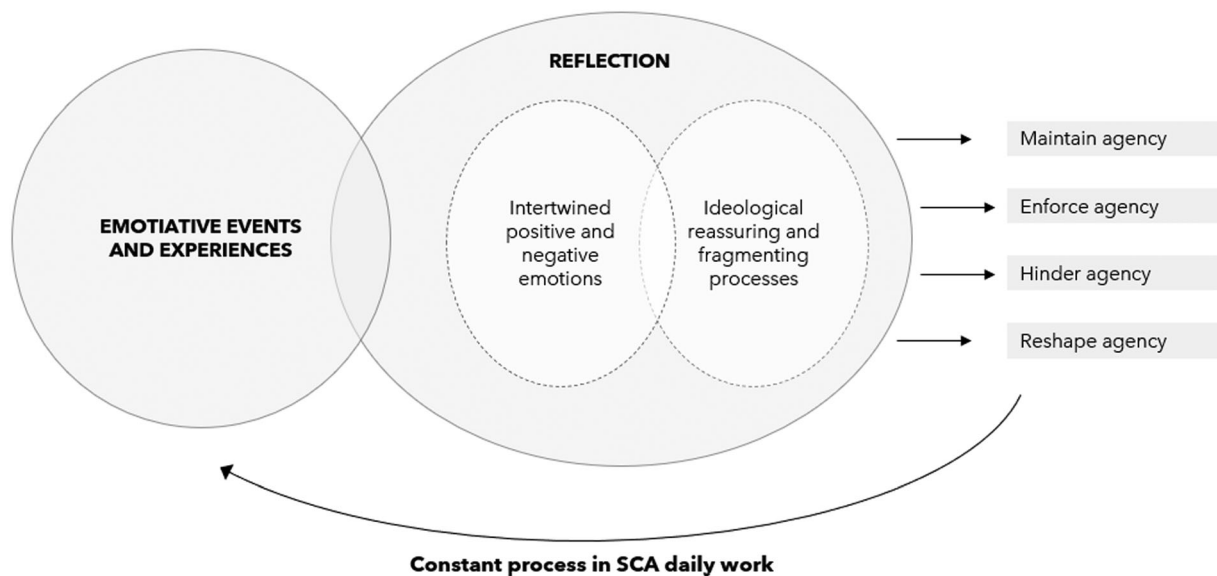


FIGURE 2 Emotions in continuous SCA agency development.

negative emotions are intertwined in SCAs' work. Emotions may serve to motivate change agency through a sense of meaningfulness by reinforcing change agency by means of positive emotions created in particular social contexts or by maintaining or hindering agency change agency through negative emotions.

Our study contributes to the existing research on emotions in SCA work by showing that initiating and managing sustainability strategies and changes consist of multiple unplanned and unexpected emotional events and experiences that shape SCAs' ability and motivation to act for change. These, in turn, are shaped by various contexts of action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), which foster continual individual-level reflection by SCAs that manifests as ideological, reassuring and fragmenting processes that are part of the larger change process. Such reflection maintains, hinders, enforces or reshapes their agency, depending on the context. Prior research has identified the unique set of pressures that SCAs face (Walker, 2007) and the intensity of emotions, including positive and negative ones, created by them (Walker, 2007; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). This has led to the characterisation of sustainability change agency as emotionally stressful (Russell & Victoria, 2022); however, previous work has focused on rational approaches to change (Caldwell, 2005) and thus on providing rationally focused management and coping strategies for SCAs in managing changes (Russell & Victoria, 2022; Wright & Nyberg, 2012).

By adopting a contextual view of SCA work and related emotions, our findings extend the current understanding provided by prior research. Wright and Nyberg (2012) provided an understanding of how change agents manage their emotions to gain acceptance for their initiatives in relation to social and local emotionologies. They contend that such management can be achieved by using a calculative approach to tailor presentation styles, constraining one's own emotionality or deliberately showcasing or concealing emotional responses, particularly in the case of negative emotions. Compared with the work of Wright and Nyberg (2012), we extend the current

understanding to appreciating how emotions are not only management tools used by SCAs to gain acceptance but also something by which SCAs are captivated, or even captured, in their daily work. We thus further the existing understanding of how emotions naturally emerge in different contexts and continually shape how change agency appears over time. This means that besides SCAs having the possibility to use emotions in the promotion of sustainability initiatives, change agency processes are also always shaped by different types of emotional events that create abstract 'spaces' within which SCAs can act. This then modifies the agency by enforcing, maintaining, hindering or reshaping it.

Russell and Victoria (2022) showed how SCAs' individual-level stress and coping styles manifest in three different ways. They identified three different types of SCAs from the perspective of managing negative emotions: rational avoiders, committed go-getters and green philosophers, all of which have their advantages and drawbacks in managing stress. Similar to our study, Russell and Victoria's (2022) findings show how emotionally tense SCA work is and how emotions may influence the ability to produce change. We extend this perspective in our study by addressing emotions more extensively and showing how positive emotions are also strongly attached to change agency, particularly in enforcing and maintaining agency, but also in reshaping agency. Furthermore, while Russell and Victoria (2022) showed how negative emotional experiences necessitate coping with negative emotions, we extend the understanding to how a wider variety of emotions naturally shapes agency. We further show that they are not always coped with, as there are also situations that lead to giving up.

In summary, our study demonstrated how emotions play a role in motivating individuals to initiate and manage changes through positive key events and reflection on their own careers. Emotions enforce agency via the tools they provide to handle the stress of social situations, the development of technical solutions and of hindering,

enforcing or maintaining agency. This depends on how emotions and related key events are interpreted by SCAs. We especially wish to highlight the role of negative emotions, which do not one-sidedly hinder agency. When these experiences are interpreted as an indication of further necessary changes, they may also serve as powerful motivators for SCA work and inspire a search for new solutions. Because emotions play a strong role in shaping SCA work and agency, we call for managers and practitioners to devote more attention to them and provide SCAs with better tools to render these processes visible and allow SCAs to cope with and handle them. This also has practical implications, as it helps organisations understand how change agents conduct their work and what impacts it. This, in turn, is key in enabling sustainability action and transitions.

The present study also has its limitations. First, we have only shown the meaningfulness of emotions at the individual level, and second, we have focused solely on sustainability professionals. Because most of the still limited research on sustainability in business and emotions has focused on individuals' emotions, we call for more research on the role of emotions in the sustainability transitions of business organisations. This would be crucial to understanding how individuals' emotions influence organisational sustainability strategies in social interaction and how this shapes the approaches adopted by companies and other organisations. Furthermore, we call for more research on the emotions of individuals within organisations, although the focus should be extended beyond sustainability professionals. The emotions of all organisational members influence how a sustainability strategy is approached in organisations; therefore, it is important to understand how sustainability is shaped as an organisational phenomenon by all of them.

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