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ORIGINAL PAPER

'Activists in a Suit': Paradoxes and Metaphors in Sustainability Managers' Identity Work

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Abstract Both sustainability and identity are said to be paradoxical issues in organizations. In this study we look at the paradoxes of corporate sustainability at the individual level by studying the identity work of those managers who hold sustainability-dedicated roles in organizations. Analysing 26 interviews with sustainability managers, we identify three main tensions affecting their identity construction process: the business versus values oriented, the organizational insider versus outsider and the short-term versus long-term focused identity work tensions. When dealing with these tensions, some interviewees express a paradoxical perspective in attempting to accept and maintain the two poles of each of them simultaneously. It emerges in particular that metaphorical reasoning can be used by sustainability managers in varied ways to cope with the tensions of identity work. We read these findings in light of the existing literature on the relation between paradoxes and identity work, highlighting and discussing their implications for both research and practice.

Keywords Corporate sustainability · Sustainability manager · Identity work · Metaphor · Paradox

The original version of this article has been revised: The layout of the column sub-headings in Table 3 has been corrected.

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Introduction

Reports produced by professional associations and consultancy companies confirm that the number of executive positions in the sustainability area is increasing (GreenBiz 2013; Weinreb Group 2011), and sustainability has recently ascended the corporate ladder to reach the top managerial levels (Strand 2014). Individuals who work to embed sustainability in business contexts, however, are likely to be perceived in different ways. On the one hand, they are often considered to be ineffectual or even retrogressive by critical observers (Crane 2000; Banerjee 2001) because critical voices tend to dispute the attempts to apply sustainability in business contexts, denouncing their 'masked' economic interests (e.g. Forbes and Jermier 2010; Banerjee 2011). On the other hand, 'defenders of the status quo' may suspect them of being too radical and borderline (Wright et al. 2012), so that their efforts are likely to encounter the internal resistance of those who hold a more traditional view of business (Wright et al. 2012; Wickert and Schaefer 2015). As a result, previous contributions have argued that individuals who hold sustainability-related roles experience high frustration, feeling torn between multiple personal and organizational conflicting goals (Wright et al. 2012; Wright and Nyberg 2012; Visser and Crane 2010).

Corporate sustainability (henceforth CS) represents indeed a complex achievement, because the multiple goals that it entails and the multiple means available to achieve it cause tensions in the organization at different levels. Given the persistence of these tensions, a paradox theoretical framework (Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Lewis 2000; Smith and Lewis 2011) has recently been advanced to consider CS issues (e.g. Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). This framework encourages actors to

paradoxically accept and engage with the emerging tensions of CS by employing a holistic 'both/and' mind-set. It seems, however, that the growing strand of studies on the paradoxical nature of CS has to date given little space to the conflicts and tensions experienced at the individual level. In our paper we advance an identity work perspective (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2008, 2009; Brown 2015) to look at the paradoxes of CS at the individual level.

Identity work, understood as the dynamic process leading to the formation of a distinctive and coherent sense of the self (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003), has also proved to be affected by tensions and contradictions, in particular when performed by managerial actors (e.g. Sims 2003; Clarke et al. 2009; Wright et al. 2012). This would particularly apply to those who hold managerial roles dedicated to CS in organizations, because of the paradoxical nature of this domain and their centrality in tackling CS issues (Strand 2014; Wickert and Schaefer 2015). We argue that looking at the tensions that affect sustainability managers' self-understandings has important implications on how these actors deal with the multiple and conflicting goals that CS implies, and it enables the emergence of new 'hybrid' professional and social identities (Ghadiri et al. 2015). Building on these considerations, in the present article we investigate what the paradoxical tensions affecting sustainability managers' identity work are, and how these managers cope with them.

The empirical results reported here assume a conception of identity as a continuous casting and recasting of the self through discursive practices (Humphreys and Brown 2002), consistently with the rich research stream on the discursive construction of identity (e.g. Musson and Duberley 2007; Watson 2008, 2009; Wright et al. 2012). Accordingly, we stimulated discursive accounts of identity work through 26 narrative and semi-structured interviews with sustainability managers. On analysing the interviews, we identified three tensions affecting their identity construction process: business versus values orientation, organizational insider versus outsider and short-term versus long-term focus. In terms of dealing with these tensions, some sustainability managers situate their self towards one pole of each tension, whereas others express a paradoxical identity work aimed at embracing both poles. We found, in particular, that in some cases sustainability managers resort to metaphors in order to bridge conflicting representations of the self. Overall, we believe that these findings contribute to the literature by showing that multiple tensions reverberate at the individual level in sustainability managers' identity work; by highlighting the role of metaphorical reasoning in identity construction processes; and by explaining how metaphors work as strategies to cope, in defensive or constructive ways, with the paradoxical tensions that characterize sustainability managers' identity work.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first review the literature on the paradoxical nature of CS and identity work in order to frame our research question. The description of our methodological approach introduces the findings section, where we illustrate three tensions of identity work and the relative coping strategies adopted by our interviewees. Finally, the findings are discussed in light of the literature and their contributions to it.

Corporate Sustainability Paradoxes at the Individual Level: The Case of Sustainability Managers

CS is typically defined as the attempt of companies to manage their triple bottom line in order to balance at the same time their environmental, social and economic performances (Elkington 1997; Bansal 2005; Hahn et al. 2015). However, this is not a simple task, since it requires managers and other organizational actors 'to address multiple desirable but conflicting economic, environmental and social outcomes at firm and societal levels that operate in different time frames and follow different logics' (Hahn et al. 2014, p. 466). For this reason, Hahn et al. (2015) have recently advanced a paradox theoretical framework within which to consider CS. This framework is intended to supersede a win–win vision of CS as always beneficial for both the company and all its stakeholders, recognizing instead the multiple conflicts characterizing sustainability in business organizations (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015).

Paradox theory relies on complexity thinking, and it does not lend itself to positivist research approaches (Lewis 2000). According to Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 382), the basic unit of a paradox is its underlying tension, which consists in 'elements that seem logical individually but inconsistent and even absurd when juxtaposed'. A paradox perspective intervenes on the tension when, despite its inconsistency, it is conceived as 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (ibid.). There are many coping strategies available to address a paradoxical tension (for a classic account see Poole and Van de Ven 1989), but those preferred from a paradox theory point of view are strategies that encourage actors to 'live with paradoxes' and accept them as persistent and unsolvable puzzles (Lewis 2000; Clegg et al. 2002; Smith and Lewis 2011). Accordingly, in the area of CS, a paradox approach is directed to support acceptance strategies rather than to eliminate tensions among economic, environmental and social concerns (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015).

CS is said to be an issue that conveys paradoxes at three different levels, i.e. systemic, organizational and individual (Hahn et al. 2015). However, it seems that the literature on the paradoxical nature of CS has to date given little space to the conflict and tensions experienced at the individual level within organizations. This is surprising since, paralleling what has been said in relation to corporate social responsibility (Aguinis and Glavas 2012, p. 953), 'individual actors are those who actually strategize, make decisions and execute' CS initiatives. A major exception is the theoretical piece by Hahn et al. (2014), who, while focusing on the individual level, suggest that managers with a paradoxical cognitive frame can recognize the inherent contradictions of CS and are thus better able to deal with sustainability issues than those who hold a business case cognitive frame, which tends to deny the existence of tensions and approaches the matter from a win–win perspective.

Considering the broader organization and management studies literature, researchers have recently focused on a specific individual actor with a prominent role in developing and implementing CS initiatives within organizations: the sustainability manager (Strand 2014; Wickert and Schaefer 2015). This growing strand of studies has shown that sustainability managers experience numerous tensions in their work. In a study on their identity positioning in relation to the issue of climate change for example, Wright et al. (2012) show how sustainability managers, by drawing on multiple and conflicting discursive resources, give rise to the three conflicting identities of the sustainability manager as a *green change agent*, *rational manager* and *committed activist*. Inconsistencies are resolved by displaying different identities in different contexts and situations. In a related article (Wright and Nyberg 2012), the authors focus on the emotional distress experienced by sustainability mangers due to these competing discourses and, in particular, to the clash between the need to achieve business goals and other social and environmental goals. Similarly, with a broader focus on individuals who purposefully undertake a 'responsible career', Tams and Marshall (2011) show that individuals employed in emerging fields such as corporate responsibility and sustainability experience a paradoxical positioning because they are situated between established and emerging institutional fields and constrained by a lack of legitimacy in their work. In an unpublished research paper, Visser and Crane (2010) report how sustainability managers are sometimes frustrated by the apparent contradiction between sustainability ideals and more narrow organizational goals.

In sum, the current literature maintains that sustainability managers experience tensions in relation to their work activity and those tensions have implications in terms of identity dynamics. However, none of these studies employs paradox theory, and only one of them has explicitly focused on the identity issues experienced by individuals engaged in CS-related roles from within organizations (the article by Wright et al. 2012). As shown by Ghadiri et al. (2015) in the case of consultants, a combination of identity work and paradox theory can be fruitfully used to explore how actors deal with the paradoxical tensions of CS at the individual level. Given the importance of internal managerial actors for the implementation of CS, we thus adopt an identity work frame (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2008, 2009; Brown 2015) to investigate the tensions that sustainability managers experience in their work, complemented by the paradox theory perspective already advanced for research on CS (Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). Following Ghadiri et al. (2015), we argue that looking at the tensions that affect sustainability managers' self-understandings has important implications on how these actors deal with the multiple and conflicting goals that CS implies, and enable the emergence of new 'hybrid' professional and social identities. Moreover, as we will illustrate in the next section, the concept of identity work can be usefully and appropriately employed to consider how managerial actors deal with paradoxes, especially those who work in a paradoxical domain like CS.

Studying Paradoxes in Sustainability Managers' Identity Work

Identity is an important and well-established topic in contemporary organization studies (Ybema et al. 2009; Eubanks et al. 2012; Brown 2015). An increasing number of articles have been devoted to studying people's identity at work and several research contributions connect identity to a wide array of organizational phenomena (Alvesson et al. 2008).

The concept of 'identity work' provides those interested in studying identity dynamics in organizations with a powerful conceptual lens. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165) define it as follows: 'identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' of the self. Individuals undertake this form of mental activity by crafting a self-narrative to reproduce or transform their sense of the self (Alvesson 2010). Seeking to account for 'external' aspects, Watson (2008, 2009) affirms that individuals engage in identity work by drawing on discourses available at the societal level—such as those related to age, gender, profession or managerial work—in order to develop a personal account of the self. In a recent literature review, Brown (2015, pp. 20–21) states that identity work

is at present 'the most meaningful metaphor' for the analysis of 'identities construction in and around organizations'.

Although identity work is aimed at the production of a positive and distinct sense of the self (Alvesson 2010), many researchers tend to highlight the tensions and struggles characterizing individual processes of identity making. In the research area of entrepreneurship, for example, two empirical studies have identified tensions in entrepreneurs' identity construction, respectively, related to the establishment of green businesses (Phillips 2013) and to CSR as a discursive resource for small business owners' identity work (Lähdesmäki 2012). Regarding workers in creative industries, the empirical study by Gotsi et al. (2010) highlights that there is a tension between their need to be creative and commercially successful at the same time. In a recent empirical work, Beech et al. (2016) contest the emphasis on coherence and resolution of tensions in identity studies and argue for the conceptualization of identity work as a never-ending struggle.

Owing to the multiple competing pressures experienced in his/her work, a figure that has attracted considerable attention in the literature is that of the manager. Managers have indeed been indicated as a key group for the investigation of identity construction processes because they undertake considerable 'identity work' as a consequence of those pressures (Knights and Willmott 1999; Cunliffe 2009). Many contributions have focused both on the study of managers' identity work in general (e.g. Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Martin and Wajcman 2004; Watson 2009) and on the identity dynamics of specific managerial figures such as supply chain and marketing managers (Ellis and Ybema 2010), HR managers (Pritchard 2010), supervisors and middle managers (Sims 2003; Down and Reveley 2009; Harding et al. 2014), sustainability managers (Wright et al. 2012), strategists (Dameron and Torset 2014), leaders (Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014) and "future managers", i.e. MBA students (Hallier and Summers 2011; Hay 2014).

In accordance with the broader literature on identity work, studies focused on managers confirm that the ongoing process of identity construction of those engaged in managerial roles is often characterized by dilemmas (Hallier and Summers 2011), struggles (Hay 2014), dualities (Clarke et al. 2009), tensions and contradictions (Sims 2003; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Wright et al. 2012). Many of these studies also report the negative effects of the tensions affecting managers' identity work in terms of dissonance, anxiety and emotional distress (Clarke et al. 2009; Hallier and Summers 2011; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014).

A brief review of the identity work literature demonstrates that, as argued by Gotsi et al. (2010), paradox and identity work theories can be usefully complemented in the study of problematic organizational phenomena, especially when looking at the identity work undertaken by managerial actors. This has been already proved for managerial domains such as strategy (Dameron and Torset 2014) and leadership (Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014), and it can thus be extended to a paradoxical domain such as CS. Situated in the emergent stream of research on paradoxes in CS (Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015), our study investigates the identity work undertaken by sustainability managers. In doing so, we respond to the recent call for novel theoretical and methodological approaches to research on CS (Hahn et al. 2017). At the same time, we aim to contribute to an emerging field of studies which addresses this issue on other CS-related roles (e.g. Gadhiri et al. 2015, on consultants), while focusing on the individual level and exploring sustainability managers' reactions to the paradoxical tensions that affect their identity work.

As a consequence of these considerations, the research question that we pose is this: what are the paradoxical tensions affecting sustainability managers' identity work and how do these managers deal with tensions in their efforts to built a sustainability-related image of their self?

Research Approach

We position our research article within the rich research stream on the discursive construction of identity (Musson and Duberley 2007; Watson 2008, 2009; Koning and Waistell 2012; Wright et al. 2012; Hay 2014), which conceives it as a continuous casting and recasting of the self through discursive practices (Humphreys and Brown 2002). In so doing, we adopt a conception of identity which is «fluid» and «fragmented», in accordance with postmodern and discursive studies of identity work (Brown 2015).

Like much of the identity scholarship in organization studies, our research paper is based on empirical material deriving from face-to-face interviews (Alvesson et al. 2008). Interviews are considered appropriate because they provide an account of the linguistic and social categories used by interviewees to make sense of their situation (Musson and Duberley 2007). A 'theoretically informed use' of this research tool, moreover, makes it possible to undertake an interview as 'a site for identity work' in which the interviewee's identity is situationally constructed and reconstructed through the interaction with the interviewer (Alvesson 2003).

We based our sampling procedure on an Italian professional association connecting managers who work as sustainability and corporate responsibility managers in

organizations (see Table 1 for a profile of respondents). In the period between March and November 2014, we conducted 26 interviews with sustainability managers operating in both national and multinational companies. We differentiated our interviewees on the basis of their age, gender, role seniority and their managerial level and position in the company. These criteria were not intended to achieve statistical representativeness of the entire population of the members of the association, but rather to collect differentiated voices and perspectives from the field. Thanks to informal contacts, we also included in the sample four interviewees who were not members of the same professional network.

Following Alvesson and Willmott (2002 p. 640), we thus intended the interview to be 'an open-ended input to identity work'. We used a mixed narrative and semi-structured interview track to investigate sustainability managers' identity work. Accordingly, we divided the interview track into three parts, respectively, investigating the past, present and future of the interviewee. In the first part, we asked interviewees to reconstruct how they became sustainability managers, including both work and private life events that were significant to them. This narrative phase of the interview, which lasted from a minimum of 20 min to more than 1 h, was highly unstructured and allowed us to create an atmosphere of confidentiality and trust with the research

Table 1 Profile of respondents

Name	Male/ female	Age	Role seniority	Managerial level[a]	Organizational unit	Industry
Marco	M	40–45	More than 10 years	Layer II	CSR	Airport service provider
Matteo	M	50–55	5–10	Layer I	CSR and internal audit	Food retailing
Luca	M	55–60	5–10	Layer III	Marketing and communication	Supermarket chain
Giorgio	M	30–35	2–3	Layer III	Internal audit and sustainability	Public transport
Carlo	M	55–60	3–5	Layer II	Sustainability and CSR	Multi-utility service provider company
Simone	M	55–60	5–10	Layer II	CSR and Sustainability	Building and infrastructures
Mattia	M	35–40	3–5	Layer II	Sustainability	Food distribution services
Mara	F	35–40	3–5	Layer II	Human resources	Delivery company
Davide	M	50–55	5–10	Layer III	Corporate identity, quality and sustainability	Banking and financial services
Nadia	F	40–45	more than 10	Layer I	Sustainability	Insurance
Elisa	F	45–50	5–10	Layer II	CSR	Chemical industry
Cristian	M	40–45	3–5	Layer III	Health, safety and environment	Oil and energy industry
Alex	M	45–50	5–10	Layer II	Public affairs and communication	Oil and energy industry
Serena	F	35–40	3–5	Layer III	Communication and marketing	Telecommunications
Lucia	F	55–60	more than 10	Layer II	Sustainability	Oil and energy industry
Daniela	F	40–45	3–5	Layer III	Communication and marketing	Delivery company
Massimo	M	45–50	3–5	Layer II	Communication and marketing	Manufacturing
Antonio	M	45–50	5–10	Layer I	CSR	Multi-utility service provider company
Stefano	M	45–50	5–10	Layer III	Sustainability	Telecommunications
Michele	M	55–60	More than 10	Layer III	Communication and marketing	Insurance
Irene	F	40–45	2–3	Layer III	Communication and external relations	Tourism
Renato	M	35–40	3–5	Layer III	Sustainability	Car manufacturing
Riccardo	M	60–65	More than 10	Layer III	CSR and sustainability	Banking and financial services
Elena	F	40–45	3–5	Layer I	CSR and communication	Building and infrastructures
Anna	F	50–55	5–10	Layer I	Sustainability	Beverages
Paola	F	40–45	5–10	Layer II	Communication, CSR and special projects	Business consulting

[a] Layer I directly reports to the CEO/Country Manager; layer II is two managerial levels below the CEO; and layer III is three managerial levels below the CEO

All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees

participants. We then investigated the current work situation of the interviewees by asking questions about their tasks, responsibilities, difficulties, relations with colleagues and the perceptions of their work by other actors inside and outside the company. Finally, we asked interviewees to project themselves 5 or 10 years forward and discuss whether and how they saw their future work in relation to CS. In order to avoid guiding responses, similarly to Gotsi et al. (2010) and Ellis and Ybema (2010) we chose not to use terms like 'identity', 'tensions' or 'paradox' in the interviews; rather, we tackled these topics indirectly by asking questions about the interviewees' work, career history and private life. We let the interviewees choose the interview site in order to make them feel more comfortable: most of the interviews took place at the workplace, although six participants preferred to be interviewed in a public place. All the interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h were full-recorded and transcribed.

Our theoretical background required an approach to data that would facilitate exploration of the interviewees' identity construction. This implied multiple stages of data analysis. The first was a data reduction stage in which we identified and isolated the interview passages related to discursive identity work. With a process similar to the one used by Harding et al. (2014), we focused on the passages where participants used the personal pronouns 'I', 'me' and 'you' to refer to their subjectivity, where they discussed their experience as sustainability manager in the company where they worked, and where they reported corporate initiatives or official communications about sustainability with reference to interviewees' personal role and experience. We then performed an open coding of the selected interview passages while being attentive to tracking passages that expressed conflict, tension and discomfort felt by the interviewees. In order to identify recurrent themes and expressions in the interviewees' discourses, we performed both a within-case and a cross-case analysis of the interview transcripts (Miles and Huberman 1994). This led to identification of the tensions and paradoxes of identity work illustrated in the findings section (for further details on our coding process see Table 2). While examining the empirical documentation, we noticed that interviewees made large use of metaphors to refer to themselves and their work. We thus ran a final round of analysis to find metaphors in the transcriptions and understand how they were related to identity work. In the second and third phase of the analysis, two researchers performed a thematic analysis on the transcriptions. The researchers met regularly to discuss their interpretations: problems and inconsistencies were solved through the identification of 'key quotations' (Guest et al. 2012) which are now included in the next section of the paper.

We must finally acknowledge that there is a great deal of subjectivity both in the collection and the examination of our empirical documentation: we elicited a self-reflection on interviewees' identity through the co-production of discursive accounts of the self, and we coded the transcriptions using concepts and categories (identity work, tension, paradox, metaphor) that were mostly part of the researchers' understanding of reality. Consistently with our interpretive and constructivist epistemological stance, we are indeed aware that our research activity is a way of 'world making' (Brown et al. 2008) that co-produces, together with our research participants, a particular version of reality. Such a research attitude represents a move away from the 'aperspectival sense of objectivity' that characterizes traditional organization science (McKinley 2003 p. 142) because it recognizes that every act of interpretation is necessarily situated and subjective (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). We found this consistent with our aim to investigate sustainability managers' identity work and with most of the scholarship on the discursive construction of identity (Brown 2015). A discursive approach to studying identity is furthermore consistent with paradox theory, which requires alternatives to the traditional research approaches based on realism and rationality to investigate complex phenomena in organizations (Lewis 2000).

In the next section we present the outcome of this research process, which consists in the identification of three tensions affecting sustainability managers' identity work and how they discursively cope with them.

Findings

> Our figure, our profession… lends itself to multiple interpretations but probably it is as always a matter of synthesis. Personally speaking, I think I have a very Chinese mentality like the Yin and the Yang. I believe that in everything there is also its contrary and if there isn't… we need to create it.
>
> Riccardo

We found that our interviewees discursively construct their identity by contrasting different elements. These oppositions are structured in pairs and represent the three paradoxical identity tensions that we identified when researching on sustainability managers' identity work. Several interviewees deal with tensions by orienting their identity towards one of their two poles, whereas a 'happy few', like the strategists studied by Dameron and Torset (2014), express a paradoxical identity work aimed at embracing those contrasting poles simultaneously. In the following section we provide data for each of the identity orientations in relation to the three identified tensions. We then present metaphors as cognitive strategy used by interviewees to cope with the tensions of identity work.

Table 2 Coding scheme with additional quotes from the interviews

Exemplary quotes	Open codes (examples)	Aggregation and identification of the tensions/paradoxes of identity work
You can really measure sustainability only in your business strategy, in your products: it isn't about rules or how many ethical codes you write… by the way, that part has little to do with me because I have a conception of sustainability which is tightly linked to the idea of competitiveness and… survival on the market (Nadia)	Strategic Competitive Product-oriented Anti-ethics	Business oriented
I started to feel the need to couple my professional experience with certain of my personal values, in order to help my company increase awareness about the social and environmental impacts of its activities (Luca)	Calling Personal values	Values oriented
I am convinced that sustainability is strictly bound up with the ways of doing business, so that… you can't just be a philanthropist but… personal ethics and professional and… even marketing skills… are all necessary, as well as the capacity to harmonize these aspects (Irene)	Personal ethics Not-just-philanthropist Sustainability and business Marketing skills Harmonization	Paradoxical Business–values Orientation
I thought it was easier to work inside a company, but in reality it's much more complicated than that (emphasis)… indeed, before (when working as a consultant) I didn't feel at all responsible, but here… if something bad happens, something like a work accident, a lawsuit or a problem with clients… I feel responsible. Of course, I'm part of a staff function, so I'm not formally responsible for anything, it's the CEO's formal responsibility. Nevertheless, I feel responsible for the company's actions because… I am part of it and… in a key position, I'd say (Antonio)	Part of the company Key position Anti-consultant	Organizational insider
Well… I usually try to explain my role here by saying that I… make donations, do sponsorships… I provide financial support for initiatives of a social and environmental nature… mainly external ones, as if I was in a foundation or an NPO… maybe I should better be called a community manager or a stakeholder manager or… oh, I don't know (Michele)	Non-profit organization Stakeholder/community manager Outward looking	Organizational outsider
This boundary point… is interesting, don't you think!? I mean of course it could have been an NPO or something else… it's like being on top of a ridge: it's a prime point of observation, it's a fortunate situation because you can get a dialogue started, an exchange, and you need trust on both sides (Riccardo)	Non-profit organization Boundary point Being on the edge Two sides	Paradoxical Insider–outsider Positioning
Our study on recycling has been cited at European level. To be modest, it was a success… unfortunately it's not always like that. You can't take it for granted, 'cause you have to gain trust year by year, semester by semester, with new proposals in order to say "hey, I'm here too". Otherwise you get forgotten (Anna)	Constant Tireless proponent Time pressured	Short-term focused
For me everything about sustainability is clear: the environment, the creation of shared value, everything is obvious but… things are changing slowly and I've got to be patient. But this is my vision of the future and I'm sure 1 day it'll happen (Paola)	Vision of the future Perceived slowness of change Patient	Long-term focused
My personality would push me to go much faster because there's still so much work to do… however, we're already doing so many things that seemed impossible before… the sustainability report, the GRI, certifications… of course I have to keep calm and accept that the pace is not the same for everybody and… of course, insist… keep going because, otherwise, I'll be an obstacle to change (Stefano)	Perceived slowness of change Keep calm/keep going	Paradoxical Short-long-term Focused

The Business-Oriented Versus Values-Oriented Sustainability Manager

As Linnenluecke and Griffiths (2010, p. 363) argue, to move towards CS, organizational leaders need to abandon a purely economic view of the firm and embrace "a more balanced set of social and environmental values". At the same time, critical observers have highlighted how managerial actors tend to see only the business side of sustainability, stressing its economic value for the firm beyond any personal or ethical commitment (Crane 2000; Banerjee 2001). Accordingly, when analysing sustainability

managers' discourses, we found two main themes indicating a tension in their identity work: a business orientation versus a values orientation. At one pole there is a dominant view of managerial work as oriented to profit maximization and financial performance. This pole recalls the image of the *rational* sustainability manager described by Wright et al. (2012). At the other pole, some interviewees state that they interpret their role as a mission, stressing the importance of consistency between personal values and their work, similarly to the *committed activist* sustainability manager of Wright et al. (2012) and the individuals undertaking a responsible career studied by Tams and Marshall (2011).

The business-oriented sustainability manager. When orienting themselves towards this pole, interviewees reject the idea of being 'do-gooders'. The sustainability manager of a big insurance company further elaborates thus:

> I was raised by a Swiss-German nanny whose father was a Calvinist minister. My education was therefore Calvinist, which means that, being a sustainability manager, I'm generally considered to be a do-gooder. But in reality I'm not at all. For me, what matters is the utility produced by my work: I'm totally against do-gooders because, in my view, everybody should compete with each other. My colleagues say that I'm a hyena because they can't talk to me about work problems… I don't forgive anyone.
>
> Nadia

Business-orientation is often connected to deep-lying aspects of personality, although the recurrence of this argument indicates that it is a common discursive resource among sustainability managers:

> I've always been… probably because of a cultural deficit of mine, not really good at talking about ethics. I prefer talking about… concrete actions that are… functionally directed to supporting the company's value-creation.
>
> Antonio

Business-oriented sustainability managers emphasize a rational and instrumental approach to managerial work. Consequently, a background in business and economics is considered essential, as well as a certain attitude towards accounting practices in order to be able to prove their contribution to the economic performance of the firm. This is well summarized by the constant quest for the business case, as expressed in the following quote:

> My biggest aspiration is… to find the business case. You know, I've got a master in economics and business.
>
> Elena

The values-oriented sustainability manager. Although a minority among our interviewees, some sustainability managers interpret their work in a values-oriented way. For example, a young and enthusiastic sustainability manager affirmed that the biggest risk for those employed in CS-related roles in organizations is 'becoming hypocritical', further adding:

> Sustainability today responds to a peculiar condition of mine, the especial attention I pay to the community. Because I feel that a company should share the wealth it produces with the external social and natural context. If a company is a good company, for me this is a necessity.
>
> Giorgio

Another interviewee, who had suffered from health problems, affirmed how, after that episode, she had found it no longer possible to forfeit her personal principles by continuing to work in the marketing department. For this reason, soon after she had recovered, she decided to bring her interest in business ethics and sustainability, which she had previously cultivated through private training courses, to the centre of her professional life. She consequently asked her superiors for a new role as sustainability manager of the company:

> I realized that if I'd died at that time, I'd have been happy about my family, my travels, my relationships, but not about my work because… it was in contrast with my personal values and… I felt wasted.
>
> Mara

Finally, a values orientation to work may induce some managers to engage in public and institutional roles. This was the case for example of one interviewee who was currently the president of the Italian professional association of sustainability managers. As he explained:

> I felt the need to do something bigger, and not just be focused on the everyday business of my company. That is why I assumed this role of president… to have an active role in cultural change. The idea behind it is that corporations can play a different role in society by contributing to the general well-being.
>
> Alex

The paradoxical perspective on the business–values tension. Although the sustainability managers generally say that they do not like to talk about ethics because it is a subject very distant from their everyday work, they sometimes express the desire to conciliate business rationales with a values-laden approach to work. In these cases, they use terms like 'compromise', 'harmonize', 'dilemma' and 'inconsistency', which signal a paradoxical perspective on identity work:

> One has to wonder: what is my ultimate goal? Do I want to live in total respect for the environment or do I want to have an impact? Because to do my job I have to take the car, go to the office, submit to rules and constraints… I have to make a compromise by giving up some personal values. However, since my ultimate goal is to produce a change, even though a small one, I chose to be a sustainability manager in a big company like this one, with all the consequent problems and inconsistencies, because I think I can really make the difference here.
>
> Renato

The Organizational Insider Versus Outsider Sustainability Manager

Recently, Rego et al. (forthcoming) have tracked the relevance of the organizational interior–exterior divide in CEOs' discourse about sustainability. Although 'corporate sustainability' literally means the application of sustainability at the corporate level, as a concept and an area of managerial intervention it indeed transcends corporate boundaries, placing organizations in relation to their wider social and environmental context (Hahn et al. 2015). Managerial actors who deal with sustainability issues may thus feel torn between firms' internal logics and the interests and demands of external stakeholders. We found in fact that our interviewees experience a tension with regard to their identity positioning within or outside organizational boundaries. They usually think of themselves as full organizational members, presenting their company as a privileged area of intervention. Simultaneously, they express an identity as outsiders in a variety of ways: for example, by stressing an anomalous background with respect to their colleagues or affirming a special connection with external stakeholders. This is a cause of distress to them because of the contrasting feelings deriving from the need to be internally recognized and achieve results, and the sources of identification that they derive from their relations with the social context outside the firm. The insider/outsider tension recalls the sense of 'liminality' which affects the identity work of other actors operating across organizational boundaries (Ellis and Ybema 2010).

The organizational insider sustainability manager. Because they are in a position close to top management levels, sustainability managers usually consider themselves full organizational members and construct their identity accordingly. Here is how the sustainability manager of an airport operator company, who had previously worked as a consultant, describes the difference between the two work experiences:

> When you're a consultant, you visit a firm, show your slides, suggest solutions… and then you go. The important thing is to get the project done, but… you don't really experience the company reality. On the contrary, sustainability managers are an integral part of the team of other managers and directors. Then you need to know, to talk with colleagues, understand the distinctive features of the company's business. The consultant says: 'they did this, you could do the same…' whereas the sustainability manager acts on the organizational culture from the inside.
>
> Marco

For 'internal' sustainability managers, it is important to develop a deep knowledge of the firm, internalize company values and work in a team with colleagues. The contrast between their 'internal' identity positioning and the context outside the firm is also constructed through comparison with the non-profit world, as illustrated by the sustainability manager of a food retail company. In the following passage, the interviewee narrates an anecdote about having a discussion with a NGO representative who treats him as 'the bad, dirty fast food company representative'. The narration of this episode gives him the opportunity to reaffirm his identity position as an 'internal' organizational member:

> I'm a normal person and it is not that… because I work for a company, I don't have any doubts or regrets… I have my own dignity and we must be able to talk together even if we have different sensitivities. I'm doing my job in the best way possible, I have duties and responsibilities, but when I go to bed I want to sleep well just like anyone else.
>
> Matteo

The outsider sustainability manager. Affirming a varied and distinctive career background is one strategy with which interviewees discursively construct an identity as outsiders. Some of them stress the importance of having previously worked for different companies or as consultants, so that they can develop an external point of view on their company's CS issues. Lucia recounted how, for example, in her career she had continuously shifted between positions in the company foundation and the corporation in order to be able to maintain a strong link with sustainability in her work. In regard to her educational background, another interviewee said:

> I graduated in theoretical philosophy with an experimental thesis on informatics. Therefore… I don't really belong here.
>
> Nadia

Moreover, it seems that these managers suffer a certain lack of internal recognition and legitimacy because of their sustainability-related role (Wright et al. 2012). This could induce interviewees to connect their identity strongly with the external stakeholders with which they deal in their work:

> You get much more satisfaction from the outside than from the inside. For example, when you develop projects with schools or you give a public speech showing what the company is doing in terms of sustainability, you get lots of consensus and recognition from stakeholders and then you're more motivated because you understand that these people really need you. I think they pay much more attention on the outside than on the inside to my work.
>
> Anna

The paradoxical perspective on the organizational insider–outsider tension. Sustainability managers may also affirm an identity positioning in-between the interior and the exterior of the organization. In such cases, they express a paradoxical perspective on this tension, proposing themselves as mediators between the different interests involved in the company's activity thanks to their personal sensitivity:

> We're placed at a boundary point because we have to listen carefully to the world outside, reporting it in the inside, and at the same time listening to the inside with all its reasons. It's… diplomatic work, which requires you to seek a compromise, but starting from the assumption that it may not be possible because of a conflict of views and interests. There isn't sufficient understanding of the reasons of others. However, being on the edge is a very fascinating element of our job. At least, for me it's fascinating.
>
> Riccardo

The Short-Term Versus Long-Term Focused Sustainability Manager

According to Waldman and Bowen (2016), leaders in organizations nowadays need to be able to face the contingencies that emerge in their day-to-day work while simultaneously 'keeping an eye' on long-term trends and planning for future change. This is particularly true of those engaged in sustainability initiatives, since CS entails broad horizons and a long time of implementation in organizations (Slawinski and Bansal 2015). Accordingly, we found that sustainability managers assume the attitude of a 'patient believer' waiting for when, in the long run, companies will be able to respond to the challenges posed by CS. This continuous deferral, however, is in contrast with the pressures exerted by the organizational environment and the ambition of sustainability managers to have an impact on current business practices. As a result, the interviewees continuously struggle to maintain a short-term focus in their work, whereas they also know that it is only in a distant tomorrow that they will be able to achieve CS objectives.

Short-term focused sustainability manager. The need to pursue immediate results is something that sustainability managers perceive as resulting from pressures typical of the organizational context. This is fundamental for recognition of their personal contribution, as explained in the following extract:

> If you don't show results they simply don't get why you're here, so… you need to be very good at managing projects, meeting deadlines and expectations. Otherwise the risk is that you'll become the last stack of paper on your colleagues' desks.
>
> Alex

Discussing the resistances that he faces with colleagues, the sustainability manager of a railway company shows how difficult is to build an identity connected to his work because it is not well-established like other organizational roles and, thus, strongly dependent on short-term results:

> The sustainability manager is a new figure and… so we are forced to produce concrete results in terms of communication, energy savings, relations with clients or… we risk being perceived as just a nice-to-have. If you are, for example, an internal auditor… nobody sees you but they know you're there, they know what you do, you're necessary. Honestly, I thought it would be easier but… I'm always under scrutiny here.
>
> Giorgio

Long-term focused sustainability manager. Sustainability managers are also aware of the long-term horizon typical of CS. When focusing on this pole, sustainability managers sometimes construct their identity through comparison with other managerial actors usually depicted as short-term focused. As an interviewee argued:

> All my colleagues here work to produce results, therefore… I represent a departure from their point of view, a much longer way to realize company objectives. They are victims of short-termism because they think that this year they're here but next year they don't know… therefore it's better for them to perform positively right now and then goodbye. But this way someone else will pay the consequences of their actions. Managers nowadays suffer from a short-term vision being victims of dangerous power logics… it's

> a big obstacle. For me it's different, I can't be like that.
>
> Carlo

The sustainability manager of a local bank company provides another clear-cut comparison with the situation of his colleagues:

> As sustainability manager you have the impression that you run and run. And it is not necessarily that everybody is following you but you have a clear sense of the destination… which is still very far and that's why you need to keep running and… set an example because, you know, we will never get there.
>
> Davide

The paradoxical perspective on the short-/long-term tension. Some interviewees also express the need to balance a short-term and a long-term focus, introducing a paradox perspective on this time-related tension affecting their identity work. The difficulties of this subtle balancing game are reported by the following interviewee, who explains why he chose to undertake a sustainability-related career:

> For me, social and environmental aspects can't be excluded from business management. Rather, they are absolutely fundamental… and luckily I was passionate enough that I told myself 'this will be the topic of the future, companies cannot do without it if they want to survive'. Therefore I insisted on this way, but then, you know, they say 'this is a veeery long wave' and, of course, it's difficult to carry on certain initiatives. You have to continuously prove their value in your everyday work because everybody keeps asking 'how does sustainability survive from day to day?' and you have to be good enough to settle their doubts. It's a personal aspect of course, but… I was also attracted by the business side of it.
>
> Renato

Metaphors as Cognitive Mechanisms to Cope with the Paradoxes of Identity Work

On going through the transcriptions, we noticed that sustainability managers made large use of metaphors to describe themselves; this is in accordance with previous empirical contributions that have indicated the use of metaphorical expressions as a form of identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Ghadiri 2010; Kram et al. 2012; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014).

Metaphors have been broadly defined as cognitive mechanisms through which two thoughts, belonging to different realms of meaning, are connected to produce a new understanding of reality (Morgan 1980). In several cases, metaphors were employed by interviewees to orient themselves towards one pole of the tensions affecting their identity work. They therefore worked as cognitive coping strategies (Poole and Van de Ven 1989) to deal with the tensions of identity work in a way that tries to annul or deny the tension by choosing one identity positioning considered to be superior or positive over another positioning instead presented as negative and unattractive.

As regards the business–values tension, we have already reported the 'hyena' and the negative image of the 'do-gooder' recalled by Nadia to express an instrumental and ruthless attitude in her work. The same image is used by Antonio, although it expresses a somewhat more nuanced identity position, which does not completely distance himself from the idea of 'being a good person':

> Sometimes you find yourself playing the part of the do-gooder, although it was hard for me. Of course it doesn't mean that I'm not good, just that I'd prefer to convince my interlocutor with the force of my arguments, instead of doing so with an alleged moral superiority.

In relation to the insider–outsider tension, Michele instead seems to reaffirm his outsider identity position by proposing the idea of being the 'stakeholders' voice":

> If you are in my position you work a bit like the stakeholders' voice, because they come to you and they know you'll speak to the company on their behalf.

A vivid representation of the long-term focused sustainability manager is provided by Simone:

> All those bringing new visions like us seem like prophets. They are visionaries who bring messianic visions… and then eventually the disciples will come, but… who know when?

The 'do-gooder', 'stakeholders' voice', 'prophet' and 'visionary bringing messianic visions' metaphors thus had the effect of 'polarizing' interviewees' identity work towards one of the two poles of the identified tensions by affirming their identification with or, alternatively, distancing themselves from certain representations of the self.

Interestingly, we also found some examples of metaphorical images that were used to bridge the two conflicting representations of the self represented by each pole of the identity tensions: they thus work as cognitive coping strategies to deal paradoxically with the tensions of identity work. While discussing the 'ambiguities and compromises' typical of his work, Renato presents one such image:

> The fact that I deal with social and environmental issues while wearing a suit… is a sign that I chose to negotiate with myself. I mean, I could have been an environmental activist, with long hair and sandals protesting outside companies for my principles, but that way nobody would have listened to me. The alternative is to accept being part of this world and trying to shift capitalist organizations to a more sustainable way of doing business. This way you enter the game, and of course there are ambiguities and compromises, but this doesn't mean that you give up entirely on your principles. For me, working here is like being an activist in a suit.

The 'activist in a suit' is a powerful metaphor that expresses the need to reconcile personal principles with the desire to have an active role in the capitalist production system. While distancing himself from the idea of being an activist "with long hair and sandals protesting outside companies", at the same time Renato does not fully embrace the idea of being a business man (the suit). Instead he presented a somewhat mixed identity positioning in-between the two images. The 'activist in a suit' metaphor can thus be connected to the business versus values orientation tension as well as to the organizational insider versus outsider one because of the (only partial) identification with the image of the political activist.

In relation to the insider–outsider tension, we identified two further images introduced by our interviewees to integrate its conflicting poles:

> I don't think it's the right way to say it but I think that a sustainability manager is a bit like an undercover consultant: someone who brings a vision that is not part of the organizational culture, but undercover because they work from the inside together with the rest of the organization.
>
> Alex

> I would like to be a virus that contaminates the blood of the company to make it more sustainable… I conceive the company as a human body and I'm like a virus which enters that body to modify its DNA.
>
> Paola

The 'undercover consultant' gives the idea of an external actor who works 'from the inside' without being recognized or perceived as an intruder. The 'virus' instead is a foreign body that penetrates the 'organizational body' to such an extent that it is able to modify its 'DNA': its deeper structure and modes of operation. Although these two metaphors bridge the tension in a way that seems more oriented towards the 'outsider' pole, because both the virus and the consultant represent two external elements to the corporate 'body', at the same time also evident is the effort made by interviewees to position themselves within organizational boundaries, when Alex affirms that sustainability managers "work from the inside together with the rest of the organization" or through the idea of the company's DNA. We thus understood these two metaphors, together with the already discussed 'activist in a suit', as cognitive coping strategies attempting to paradoxically maintain the two poles of the insider–outsider tension simultaneously.

A metaphorical image attempting to bridge the two poles of the short-/long-term focused sustainability manager tension is advanced by Mara:

> We should work for our company exactly like parents: their objective is to bring the children to autonomy. But in order to do that they have to lead them step by step. Good parents should never be sorry if one day their children don't need them any more: it's their duty. The duty of sustainability managers is to lead the company along the path to sustainability, although this means that one day they will disappear.

This metaphor refers to an argument commonly reported by the interviewees: the fact that some time in the future, sustainability will be integrated into the business and there will be no more need of their work (the same argument has also been reported in the study by Strand (2014). However, in order for this to happen, sustainability managers must accompany their organizations 'along the path to sustainability'. We interpreted this metaphor as a strategy to paradoxically cope with the time-related tension because, although it is only in a distant tomorrow that sustainability managers will achieve their goal, in order to do so they must prove that they are 'good parents' in the everyday life of the organization.

In sum, in this section we have distinguished between metaphorical images that polarize interviewees identity work towards one pole of the tensions, and metaphorical images that, by attempting to bridge the two poles of each tension, express a paradoxical identity work. In Table 3 we present an overview of these findings, adding further metaphorical images used by our interviewees to variably cope with the tensions of their identity work.

Discussion

Our findings show that sustainability managers' identity work is paradoxical and informed by multiple competing discourses. Previous studies have indeed highlighted how sustainability managers experience contradictions in their work, for example related to the need to pursue conflicting goals or because of their relatively marginal position inside organizations (Wright et al. 2012; Wright and Nyberg

Table 3 Overview of the metaphors used by interviewees to cope with the tensions of identity work

Business-oriented sustainability manager	Bridging metaphor	Values-oriented sustainability manager
Hyena[a] (Nadia)	Activist in a suit[a] (Renato)	Paladin
(not being a) Do-gooder[a] (Nadia, Antonio)		"*Massimo:* I always try not to go below a certain standard. Because you usually have paladins who champion certain values inside the company, then there are the respectful ones, and then maybe those who just reluctantly conform. If you're a paladin you're ready to expose yourself to defend certain values…
(not being a) Talking cricket		*Interviewer:* So you think you're a paladin?
"At the beginning I did not get many positive answers from the management and I risked being a bit like the Talking Cricket, you know… in Collodi's tale. And you can't be the Talking Cricket in a company like this… you can't stand there and say «don't do this and that because it's wrong». Because we all know how the Cricket ended in the original story… being squashed on the wall by a book. Eccentric story by the way" (Lucia)		*Massimo:* (laughing) Well, I don't want to say that there are crusades inside here but… well, that sometimes you need to keep steady and… hold onto your values"
(not being a) Monsignor		Don Quixote
"If I wanted to be a monsignor… dunno… I'd rather work for the Church. Sometimes I've done that because… some years ago I participated in the foundation of an ethical bank but, how can I put it, it's not really my role because… I think that in the end it's the results that matter and doing the best with what you have and not doing extraordinary things" (Nadia)		"It's not always possible to show a financial return on these initiatives. And in these cases you feel a bit like being alone tilting at windmills, sad but true" (Mara)
		Beautiful soul/human face of the company
		"It happens to me that I'm often considered a beautiful soul, as the human face of the company. And I'll tell you I don't dislike this reputation" (Matteo)
		The good person in a world of bad guys
		"You're always seen as the good one in the company. Well, always…it depends on the company you work for but, at least, you're the good person in a world of bad guys" (Matteo)
Insider sustainability manager	**Bridging metaphors**	**Outsider sustainability manager**
(not being a) Consultant[a] (Marco)	Virus[a] (Paola)	Stakeholders' voice[a] (Michele)
Part of the team[a] (Marco)	Undercover consultant[a] (Alex)	Activist
(not being a) Mercenary	Activist in a suit[a] (Renato)	"Just like an activist you bring issues to the company's attention and you hope they'll deal with them, 'cause you can apply only limited pressure" (Elisa)
"So.. in a company you usually have… I know it's a bad world but listen to what I say… those in the Roman army that they called… mercenaries. People who come and go… there's no loyalty in this. That's a choice of course, but not for our job. To me, the sustainability manager has to come from the inside and be a loyal member of the company"(Simone)	Border-crosser	
	"In this area you have to be able to… cross-borders to… create new connections, new relations. Both internally with all the company functions and externally. It's creative work, you create connections, especially between the internal and the external" (Matteo)	

Table 3 continued

Short-term focused sustainability manager	Bridging metaphors	Long-term focused sustainability manager
Hammer	Parent[a] (Mara)	Prophet/visionary who brings messianic visions[a] (Simone)
"You need to make things happen… of course I have a certain commitment now, but it's because I'm like a hammer: I always have new ideas and beat people with them" (Nadia)	Ferryman "I imagine my role here like that of a ferryman. Yes, I'd say that the sustainability manager is like a ferryman, who ferries the company across dangerous waters and towards sustainability" (Renato)	Runner[a] (Davide) Resilient material "One important characteristic is resilience. You have to be like a resilient material and resist the continuous shocks" (Cristian)
Prod/spur "In Italy, concepts like CSR and sustainability are still new, but here they're even more important than in other countries, I believe. Therefore you need to give them a constant visibility, be a kind of a prod… continuously spurring people" (Luca)		Aerial "It's essential to have this capacity to pick up signals, anticipate trends… be an aerial for your company so that then you're able to re-orient it in the right future direction. An aerial, the sustainability manager has to be an aerial" (Carlo)

[a] This metaphor has already been reported in the main body of the paper; we therefore invite the reader to refer to the previous pages for the corresponding full quotation

2012; Visser and Crane 2010). These contradictions are given voice in sustainability managers' identity work. In their identity work, these actors draw on multiple competing discourses and conceptions around managerial work and sustainability spread at the societal and organizational level (Watson 2008) to construct a sustainability-related image of their self. As similarly found for other managerial actors (e.g. Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014; Dameron and Torset 2014; Ellis and Ybema 2010), sustainability managers' identity work is thus characterized by tensions, because those discourses produce conflicting identity orientations and expectations connected to sustainability managers' role. In this sense, discourses are "a key to how paradoxes forms and operate" and "set the conditions for how actors appropriate contradictions" (Putnam et al. 2016, p. 77). Social actors can actively 'work' on these contradictions by expressing a variety of positions (Watson 2008; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014), as shown by the differentiated identity orientations that sustainability managers assume in relation to the three identified tensions (in particular, three orientations for each tension).

In sum, the three identified tensions in sustainability managers' identity work derive from general features of managerial work and, at the same time, are strictly linked to the paradoxical nature of CS (Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). While these tensions are not completely new to CS research, our contribution here is the empirical categorization of the three tensions at the individual level in sustainability managers' identity work. Differently from previous studies focused on one single identity tension (e.g. Lähdesmäki 2012; Ghadiri et al. 2015), we identified three tensions that affect sustainability managers' identity work, moving beyond the classic business/values divide which often characterizes CS research (Driver 2006). Moreover, the identification of multiple tensions is in line with the multiplicity of the discursive influences that characterize managerial actors' identity dynamics (Watson 2008; Cunliffe 2009; Putnam et al. 2016). The identification and qualification of these three tensions thus represents our first finding, which contributes to the literature by showing not only that CS is a paradoxical area of managerial intervention but that multiple tensions reverberate on the identity work of sustainability managers and need to be dealt with also at this level, with potentially important consequences for the work of these key practitioners.

Our second finding concerns sustainability managers' use of metaphors to cope with the tensions of identity work. Metaphors, here intended as the understanding of one concept in terms of another, by recalling a different and, in many cases, 'distant' semantic repertoire—enabled interviewees to offer synthetic representations of what it means for them to be a sustainability manager. We reported above

the 'hyena' recalled by an interviewee to express an instrumental and ruthless attitude in her work; similarly, 'the prophet' or the 'visionary' metaphors, belonging to the imageries of religion, are used by Simone to reinforce an idea of the self as focused on the long-term. Whereas some metaphors were used as positive sources of identification (e.g. the 'hyena', the 'prophet' or the 'runner' described by Davide), some others (like the 'Talking Cricket' or the 'mercenary' reported in Table 3) were used as negative sources of identification; they therefore worked as 'anti-identity' (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) metaphors which sustainability managers recalled to explain what they *are not* instead of what *they are*. This is because identity construction often proceeds through comparisons; it is a 'contrastive process' (Vaara et al. 2003) that leads to embracing or, alternatively, downplaying certain images of the self, thus expressing a tension between sources of identification which are perceived as opposed.

Metaphors can work as constructive or defensive strategies to cope with the paradoxical tensions of identity work. We indeed interpreted all the above-reported metaphors as 'polarizing', because their effect is to orient sustainability managers' identity work towards one pole of the paradoxical tensions, thus activating a defensive strategy which denies or downplay the other pole of the paradox (Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Smith and Lewis 2011). At the same time, we noticed some variation in interviewees' use of 'polarizing metaphors'. Consider for example the recurrent image of the 'do-gooder': whereas Nadia strongly distances herself from it, Antonio expresses a somehow more nuanced identity orientation by saying "Sometimes you find yourself playing the part of the do-gooder, although it was hard for me. Of course it doesn't mean that I'm not good…". Therefore, although drawing on certain shared images and discourses, interviewees make a personal use of them expressing subtle and nuanced identity positions, even when displaying a similar identity orientation in relation to a specific tension. To return to Nadia, moreover, the metaphor of 'the Monsignor'(see Table 3), sustained by drawing a parallel between her previous work experience in an ethical bank and the Catholic Church, seems to give her a chance to revise her identity position as merely business-oriented and anti-ethical. The inner ambiguity of metaphorical reasoning and the never complete overlap of meaning between the two concepts compared (Morgan 1980; Oswick et al. 2002), therefore, created the possibility for interviewees to rethink and refine their identity work, with the potential effect of mitigating the stark contrast between the two poles of a tension.

Besides 'polarizing metaphors', we also found that other interviewees made particular use of metaphors when trying to bridge two opposing representations of the self. These metaphors can thus be seen as 'constructive' coping strategies (Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Smith and Lewis 2011) intended to paradoxically bridge the two poles of an identity work tension. This is consistent with the finding of Kram et al. (2012), who, while studying the metaphors expressed in the identity work of individuals with a double scholar-practitioner professional identity, found that their interviewees used certain metaphors to bridge conflicting representations of the self and to reduce the dissonance deriving from identity struggles. These metaphors refer simultaneously to semantic repertoires commonly understood as opposites. Or, alternatively, they interpret common metaphorical images highlighting particular aspects in a way that makes it possible to maintain the tension paradoxically. We thus put forward the idea that 'bridging metaphors' (Ghadiri 2010; Kram et al. 2012) like the 'activist in a suit', the 'virus', the 'undercover consultant' and the 'parent' are cognitive coping strategies employed to accept and 'live with' the paradoxes of identity work (Lewis 2000; Clegg et al. 2002; Smith and Lewis 2011). By drawing on established discursive repertoires, interviewees were able by means of these metaphors to bridge domains traditionally conceived as opposed, thus expressing a paradoxical conception of the self. In the findings section we have also highlighted how the 'virus' and the 'undercover consultant' seem to bridge the tension in a way that points towards the second pole of the insider–outsider tension. This, we argue, is a result of the always personal and ambiguous use of metaphors that prevents a univocal interpretation of them (Gherardi 2000) and leads us to affirm that the use of metaphorical images by sustainability managers configures a continuum in their identity work. In this continuum, instead of three discrete positions (pole 1-paradox-pole 2), we can identify a number of 'prevalently polarizing' and 'prevalently bridging' metaphorical images that, in more constructive or defensive ways, all potentially help sustainability managers to deal with the paradoxical tensions of their identity work.

We found that two main types of metaphors were used to cope with the tensions of sustainability managers' identity work. From a paradox theory point of view, 'bridging metaphors' are preferable to 'polarizing' ones because they are strategies that accept and try to maintain the two poles of a tension simultaneously, instead of denying or downplaying one pole with respect to the other (Poole and Van de Ven 1989). Nevertheless, thanks to the inner ambiguity of metaphorical reasoning, both 'bridging' and 'polarizing' metaphors support managers in their identity work. In this regard, we agree with Vaara et al. (2003) that metaphors can substantially recreate social identities in innovative ways, and with Gherardi (2000), who maintains that, within a discursive community, metaphors have the potential to create new linguistic games that foster creativity and learning.

These considerations extend available knowledge on the individual-level coping strategies for dealing with paradoxical tensions. This knowledge has been recently developed in regard to the behavioural and cognitive coping strategies applied by managers, especially when performing their leadership functions (Smith and Lewis 2012; Zhang et al. 2015), but it is still underdeveloped in regard to the possible coping strategies related to the tensions of identity work. Hence our findings contribute to systematizing in a paradox theory perspective insights from previous studies which indicate metaphorical reasoning as a possible cognitive mechanism with which to cope with the tensions of identity work (Kram et al. 2012; Koning and Waistell 2012; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014). Moreover, they are consistent with the findings of those authors who have recently indicated metaphors as coping strategies for the tensions of CS at the organizational level (see the 'biophilic organization' proposed by Jones 2016) and, more in general, as useful tools for rethinking the role of organizations in relation to sustainability challenges (Jermier and Forbes 2016).

Main Implications

We illustrate here the implications of our empirical research by distinguishing them between different levels. At the individual level, the three tensions identified in sustainability managers' identity work are important for those managers since we know from paradox theory that the first step in elaborating a coping strategy is to recognize the existence of a paradoxical tension (Poole and Van de Ven 1989). Moreover, our findings on the strategies and metaphors used by these managers provide useful indications for developing identity construction processes that accept tensions instead of trying to ignore or resolve them. In our study, in fact, we were able to track several different metaphors that work as tension-specific coping strategies. This, we believe, represents a realistic and helpful depiction of how sustainability managers deal with the multiple tensions affecting their identity work. Our findings could thus help to reduce the emotional distress caused by the tensions of identity work highlighted by extant studies and also tracked in our research. Overall, our study provides 'empathetic insights and descriptions that can stimulate and facilitate' sustainability managers' 'reflections on who they are and what they do' (Alvesson et al. 2008, p. 14).

At the company level, as CS becomes an ever more significant career path (GreenBiz 2013), human resource departments are likely to be increasingly involved in efforts to recruit and retain sustainability managers. These departments can thus support sustainability managers' work with appropriate selection and training practices directed at hiring individuals that demonstrate an aptitude for paradoxical reasoning, or enhance that ability through dedicated training and education.

The paradoxical attitude of sustainability managers' towards identity work highlighted above is also important in relation to the implementation of CS programs in organizations. As noted by Wright et al. (2012), the recognition of tensions in identity work can lead sustainability managers to engage in micropolitical actions within their company in order to produce change. This change has been described by previous contributions as moderate, progressive, and based on small wins (Wright et al. 2012; Wickert and Schaefer 2015). A paradox perspective on identity work may instead have empowering effects (Gotsi et al. 2010) by pushing sustainability managers towards creative and innovative solutions. These solutions can be sustained, for example, by communication of the metaphors that bridge different conceptions of sustainability managers' identity work (like for example 'activist in a suit'). Sharing these metaphors within the organization might be a way to unite the organizational actors who believe that CS can widely transform business practices (that can identify themselves in the metaphor of 'the activist') and those with a more traditional view of business (represented by 'the suit'). This strategy has been already advanced in a study of ethical leadership by Koning and Waistell (2012), who suggest that shared metaphors can unite leaders and followers with different beliefs and orientations.

In addition, some scholars have recently advanced the idea that identity work has implications in institutional terms (Watson 2008; Creed et al. 2010). In particular, through the creation of new meanings and identities and their promulgation, institutional entrepreneurs can frame societal issues in a novel way (Creed et al. 2002) or expand the boundaries of their role to respond to institutional contradictions (Creed et al. 2010). This could be the case also of sustainability managers, given the importance that metaphorical reasoning assumes in their identity work and the generative power of metaphors in fostering action and new understanding of problems (Gherardi 2000; Vaara et al. 2003).

Finally, our results have implications also for management education. Indeed, although our interviewees seemed to remain largely consistent in relation to one tension, when considering different tensions, some of them manifested varied identity positions during the interviews (e.g. through the metaphor of the 'parent', Mara expressed a paradoxical short-/long-term focus in her identity work, whereas as regards the first tension presented, she claimed that her professional choices are largely driven by values considerations, therefore identifying with the values orientation pole). Moreover, thanks to the ambiguous

character of metaphorical reasoning, some interviewees were able to refine their position in relation to one particular identity tension (e.g. the case of 'the Monsignor' proposed by Nadia). This means that the sustainability managers that we studied did not perform a 'fixed' and definitive paradoxical or non-paradoxical form of identity work, suggesting that the ability to assume paradoxical identity orientations can be further developed and enhanced. Regarding business education, our results thus recommend taking seriously those scholars who put forward the idea of business schools as important environments for identity work (e.g. Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010), where struggles of identity like those reported here can be recognized and addressed. These institutions can thus help future managers to develop a paradoxical cognitive frame (Hahn et al. 2014) to tackle CS-related issues, including those affecting identity work.

Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

In our paper we have advanced an identity work perspective to look at the paradoxes of CS experienced by sustainability managers at the individual level. This directly responds to the call by Hahn et al. (2017) for novel theoretical and methodological approaches to research on CS. Our study nevertheless suffers from some limitations that can also be considered an agenda for future research.

First, in our research we identified three identity tensions based on a binary logic in order to describe the struggles of identity work. However, we know from paradox theory that paradoxes and tensions can also be conceptualized as conflicts among multiple goals (Putnam et al. 2016). Although we agree with Cunliffe (2009) and Ybema et al. (2009) on the importance of binary oppositions for individuals' identity construction, future research could provide different conceptualizations of the tensions affecting identity work based on the identification of multiple-pole tensions and paradoxes.

Secondly, given the diachronic nature of identity as a phenomenon unfolding over time (Ybema et al. 2009), the cross-sectional approach of this study limits our understanding of sustainability managers' identity construction and the evolution of the tensions and paradoxes that affect it throughout the life course. Therefore, the conduct of longitudinal studies adopting a similar theoretical frame represents an opportunity for future research. Moreover, longitudinal studies may help more account to be taken of contextual elements of the proximate organizational environment and personal characteristics that influence individuals' identity work, as demonstrated by other studies focused on a smaller sample of research participants (e.g. Sims 2003; Phillips 2013; Nyberg and Sveningsson 2014).

Thirdly, our study on sustainability managers' identity work exclusively relies on interview data. Although interviews are the technique most commonly used in identity scholarship (Alvesson et al. 2008), especially for those researchers embracing a discursive approach (Brown 2015), we acknowledge the limitations of this inquiry tool which provides de-contextualized accounts that do not allow investigation of the formation of identity 'in action' (Down and Reveley 2009, p. 386). We thus suggest that future research should consider sustainability managers' identity work in naturally occurring situations, adopting different conceptual frames like those of the dramaturgical (see Down and Reveley 2009) or conversational identity work (see McInnes and Corlett 2012) in order to analyse the influence of the social context on identity construction.

Beyond the research strategies that could overcome its limitations, we believe that our study opens up further avenues for future research. A first promising avenue might be exploration of the consequences of the adoption of a paradoxical approach to identity work by managers. Here, valuing the work of Hahn et al. (2014), who theorize a link between managers' predisposition to paradoxical thinking and their approach to dealing with CS issues, we encourage future research to explore the possible relation between a prevalently paradoxical stance in managers' identity work and their contribution to the development of CS at the organizational level.

Second, having shown the usefulness of paradox theory in the interpretation of sustainability managers' construction of identity, other researchers could adopt this theoretical lens more extensively when looking at sustainability-related identity work processes. A recent study by Allen et al. (2015), for example, shows that—differently from what we found in the case of sustainability managers—top managers do not experience identity tensions in relation to sustainability. Therefore, future research could consider other organizational actors or focus on particular organizational settings to determine whether sustainability causes tensions in identity work according to contextual factors such as the managerial level of the individuals under study, their positioning within the organization or their degree of involvement in CS policies and practices.

Third, considering the three tensions together, we found some coherence between the first pole of each tension as opposed to the group constituted by the second poles. Identity work processes focused on the former poles may result in the construction of an identity more in line with traditional conceptions of managerial work as intended to enhance business performance with a focus on the internal aspects of the firm and a short-term orientation. By contrast, identity work processes focused on the latter poles may result in an interpretation of managerial work more

oriented to values, attentive to the external context of the firm, and with a long-term focus. Further research could be designed in order to consolidate and extend this first interpretation and explore whether and how an overarching meta-tension affects the identity work of those individuals involved in the implementation of CS within organizations.

In conclusion, our study contributes to the literature on the paradoxical nature of CS while adding to an emerging field of studies that investigates tensions and paradoxes related to CS in organizational actors' identity work. The research effort generated two contributions: first, it showed how multiple paradoxical tensions reverberate at the individual level on sustainability managers' identity work; secondly, it highlighted the role of metaphorical reasoning in identity construction processes, explaining how metaphors work as strategies to cope, in defensive or constructive ways, with the paradoxical tensions that characterize sustainability managers' identity work. Furthermore, we have discussed the implications of our research at different levels. For these reasons, we believe this research piece represents an advance in research on CS, paradoxes, identity work and their relation.

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