



**UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO**

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCES

PH. D. PROGRAM IN LABOUR STUDIES - XXVIII COHORT

PH. D. THESIS

**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES**

**ON SUSTAINABILITY IN BUSINESS CONTEXTS:**

**PARADOXES, RHETORICS AND IDENTITIES**

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# INTRODUCTION

*To all those whom I love*



### **1. Research object: sustainability in business contexts**

In 1987 the Brundtland commission of the United Nations published a report entitled 'Our common future' on the global environment and development which introduced the term 'sustainable development' into policy and institutional circles. It was also the first policy document providing an overview of the globe which considered the environmental aspects of development from an economic, social and political perspective. Since then the terms sustainability and sustainable development spread in the public debate until becoming a common word in people's everyday language and experience.

It has been argued that business organizations play a role in addressing continuous global ecological, social and economical challenges and contributing to global sustainable development (Bansal, 2005; Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; WCED, 1987). The growing institutionalization of sustainability in business practices and processes is reflected in the academic debate on corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015; Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002; Shrivastava, 1995), corporate social responsibility (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012), corporate social performance (Gond and Crane, 2010) and corporate citizenship (Matten and Crane, 2005). Despite the relevance of this debate in current organization studies literature, there is no common accepted definition of sustainable development and the other related concepts at the firm level (Hahn et al., 2015; Dahlsrud, 2008; Bansal, 2005; Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002).

According to a recent review 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) for example, a term that seems to be more spread in the European continental context than the Anglo-Saxon rooted 'corporate citizenship' (Sison, 2009) thanks also to the regulative action of the

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European Commission<sup>1</sup>, has been defined in 37 different ways in the literature (Dahlsrud, 2008). This confirms the essentially “dynamic and contested nature” of the concept of CSR, whose meaning and application vary dependently on the “social, political, economic and institutional context” (Matten and Moon, 2008). Looking at the relation between the concepts, CSR and corporate sustainability are discussed by some authors as synonyms and by others as completely distinct concepts. In the latter case, corporate social responsibility is usually considered to be focused on social issues and sustainability on environmental issues (Carroll 1999; Dahlsrud 2008; Dyllick and Hockerts 2002; Schwartz and Carroll 2008). On the contrary, authors like Montiel (2008) have traced a significant convergence in the meanings attributed to the two constructs and call for a future integration of the two areas of scholarship. A third position is represented by those scholars (e.g. Strand et al. 2015; Okoye, 2009) who treat them as ‘umbrella construct’ in the sense of “a broad concept or idea used loosely to encompass and account for a broad set of diverse phenomena” (Hirsch and Levin, 1999, p. 200). The latter approach is intended to recognize the normative nature of these concepts, which are the results of political and administrative processes rather than scientific ones and, consequently, give raise to a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations (Burns, 2012; Pellizzoni, 2012).

Besides definitional issues, there seems to be a common denominator underlying the conceptions that aims to apply sustainability to business and management practices. In the literature there is indeed a broad consensus that business organizations need to address simultaneously economic, environmental and social aspects in order to become sustainable. These three sustainability dimensions or ‘pillars’ have also become known as the ‘triple bottom line’ (Elkington, 1994), based on the assumption that organizations

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<sup>1</sup> see [http://ec.europa.eu/finance/company-reporting/non-financial\\_reporting/ng/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/finance/company-reporting/non-financial_reporting/ng/index_en.htm)

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need to become not only economically viable but also ecologically and socially sustainable addressing the economic, social and environmental consequences of their operations at the same time.

In refocusing attention to issues related to ecological and human sustainability of business, the current institutionalization of sustainability within corporations creates a set of challenges for those working in business organizations that are likely to affect their everyday activities and their attitude towards work. The concept of 'triple bottom line' underlying sustainability ideally invites to reconsider the exclusive focus on shareholder value creation, which has found a powerful symbolic expression in the slogan by Milton Freeman that the only responsibility of business is "to increase profits for itself and its shareholders". Conversely, corporate sustainability is directed to re-balance the current dominance of financial performance by offering an opportunity to contribute to the social and environmental pillar of sustainable development and moving beyond a mere focus on economic rationality. Moreover, corporate sustainability is interesting to study because it confronts managers, employees and all the other stakeholders with a new reality that is intended to influence all the processes, levels and departments of an organization (van der Heijden et al., 2012).

Representing an attempt to reform mainstream business practices, corporate sustainability has been nonetheless object of criticism in itself by organization and management studies scholars. Many authors agree that managerial conceptions of corporate sustainability, CSR and the related accounting practices are still too unbalanced towards instrumental rationality which, reframing sustainability as eco-efficiency, minimize their impact reinforcing instead an approach to 'business as usual' (e.g. Palazzo and Richter, 2005; Young and Tilley, 2006; Milne and Gray, 2013). Hahn and Figge (2011) showed that also current research in corporate sustainability is

characterized by a restricted notion of instrumentality which systematically privileges financial organizational outcomes over environmental and social aspects. According to the authors, this is evident when looking at the proliferation of contributions directed to demonstrate the impact of sustainability on the economic performance of firms which follow ‘a business case paradigm’. Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) also label as ‘win-win’ those approaches that seek to demonstrate an alignment between economic, social and environmental goals. The problem with these approaches is that they do not acknowledge that sustainability represents a complex endeavor for business organizations because of the multiple goals it entails. What happens indeed when social and environmental sustainability come at the expense of economic sustainability? The critics of the ‘win-win’ approach argue that in all those cases sustainability actions are dismissed or even ignored in favor of those interventions that only assure an immediate financial return along with positive social and environmental impacts.

These brief considerations allow for a critical approach when examining current applications of sustainability in business contexts.

### **2. A critical approach to research on corporate sustainability**

The claim to conduct critical research directly leads to the question ‘what does critical means?’. This because, in matter of principle, all good social science is meant to be critical and it is hard to find any scholar willing to admit that his or her own research does not hold a critical attitude towards the object of investigation. Or how Andreski puts it, with reference to critical sociology: “an expression which in principle is a pleonasm, since all good sociology must be critical in the sense of insisting on probing and being ready to challenge current opinions. It is only because the main current of

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sociology has become apologetic that the justification for ‘critical sociology’ has arisen” (cited in Parker and Thomas, 2011, p. 422).

The starting point is then to acknowledge that critical scholarship challenges taken for granted assumptions about social reality. And it does so through a critically informed choice of theory in the recognition that any form of knowledge bears a politics, how authors in the sociology of knowledge have argued: any theoretical framework adopted while doing research is a form of ideology, a ‘worldview’ in the broad sense Mannheim intended it. Theories therefore are not simply an explanation of reality but they are also sets of instruction for looking at reality (Kuhn, 1962). In front of the plurality of available theories, Watson (1997; 2010) suggests to follow a pragmatic strategy, which entails drawing upon concepts and insights from various disciplines in order to build a conceptual framework that has the power to illuminate certain aspects of social life. Moreover, pragmatism in the choice of the theoretical and conceptual lenses to be adopted is even more important in front of ambiguous and under-theorized research fields, like organizational sustainability (Corley and Gioia, 2011).

Since Marx, one of the central tenets of a critical theory is the search for contradictions which are implicit in the social structure and its institutional forms (Carr, 2000; 2006). In his foundational work, Charles Wright Mills conceives the search for contradictions as a distinctive aspect of *the sociological imagination*. Mills exhorts social scientists to produce analyses of contemporary life which help people to become aware of the connections between ‘the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history’ (1970, p. 9), because people do not normally define the dilemmas and troubles they experience in terms of ‘historical change and institutional contradiction’. He calls therefore for researchers to look for links between people’s personal troubles and broader ‘public issues’, social structures, cultures and historical trends.

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Based on these considerations, a critical approach to research on corporate sustainability is conceived here as a research stance directed to challenge taken for granted assumptions such as that of the ‘business case’ or ‘win-win’ logic, and aimed to understand the challenges and dilemmas that organizational actors experience when dealing with sustainability issues in terms of structural contradictions embedded in contemporary modes of organizing.

In the last years, organization studies scholars have been able to articulate a dense bulk of arguments against corporate sustainability, moving well beyond the “rhetoric vs. reality cliché” that characterized early critical works (Christensen et al., 2013). Several articles have thus indicated the orientation of corporations towards sustainability as a hegemonic move (Newton, 2009; Forbes and Jermier, 2010; Tregidga et al., 2014) which reflects the capacity of the late advanced capitalism to absorb the critique and reinvent itself (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Looking at the organizational level, many scholars studied the work of managers in relation to sustainability, pointing out how managerial conceptions of corporate sustainability basically follow the (financial) bottom line (Banerjee, 2001; Crane 2000) and arguing that a ‘managerial capture’ of sustainability is ongoing, which aims to diminish it to a mere technical and accounting exercise for corporations (O’Dwyer, 2003; Spence, 2007; Smith et al., 2011). Another strand of research indicates the necessity for managers to abandon a business case logic in favor of a more complex vision that acknowledges the possible conflicts and tensions between the different types of sustainability (Hahn et al., 2014; 2015; van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015).

Managers and managerial work may offer indeed a sort of a crucial test where to examine the development and enactment of sustainable business practices. After the shareholders, managers form the next powerful group within the corporation and the



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relation between them has been described as an “agency relation” (Oviatt, 1988) which pushes managers to pursue as much as possible that maximization of profits auspicated by Friedman (Sison, 2009). One of the central tenets of managerialism, the ideology that have raised and accompanied the development of the contemporary managerial class, is indeed the rational means-ends calculation directed to minimize costs and maximize the economic value produced by the firm (Cunliffe, 2009; Klikauer, 2013). Because of their power positioning therefore, managers should not be able to escape a business case attitude to look at corporate sustainability. However, managerialism as an ideology is in constant evolution and continuously incorporates new elements, which makes it worth to study its current changes (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Management furthermore, does not represent a monolithic powerful entity; rather, it appears characterized by inner competition, conflicts and exposed to different pressures, as shown by Ram (1996). Studying corporate sustainability in relation to managerial work may therefore help to uncover some of the conflicts that characterize current attempts to incorporate non-traditional business goals, such as social and environmental ones, within the boundaries of the capitalist organization.

As a consequence, the research works which constitute this dissertation follow a rich tradition of research in organization and management studies that critically engage with managerial actors in order to make evident the tensions and contradictions that characterize contemporary business practices. Sustainability represents an ideal object of investigation due to the complexity and the challenges that it conveys in business environments. With a focus on the organizational and individual level, the general aim of the research pieces reported here is therefore to trace some of the conflicts and tensions that affects managers’ everyday work experience in relation to sustainability, and to connect them with broader common features of contemporary organizations.

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It is finally worth noting that in the context of this dissertation ‘sustainability’ is treated as an umbrella construct (Hirsch and Levin, 1999) and corporate sustainability and CSR as synonyms, in the recognition of the political and normative nature of these concepts which produces multiplicity of meanings, uses and interpretations (Burns, 2012; Pellizzoni, 2012).

These general considerations have been operationalized in three research projects which respectively investigate paradoxes in corporate sustainability policies and practices, the occupational rhetorics of CSR managers and the paradoxes affecting CSR managers’ identity work. In the following sections, the core concepts and theoretical frame of each research project are introduced and discussed.

### **3. Paradox theory as a conceptual lens to investigate corporate sustainability**

Paradox theory (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Lewis and Smith, 2011) is an increasingly established frame for research in organizational settings, as witnessed by the proliferation of articles, special issues in journals (such as the forthcoming one in *Organization Studies*) and dedicated streams and sub-sessions in conferences like EGOS and AOM. Authors in this stream appeal to a rich tradition of philosophical and scientific reasoning on paradoxes and built on a variety of different cultural sources to develop this theoretical frame.

Paradoxes were commonly used in ancient philosophy to express logical contradictions and insoluble puzzles. At the same time, paradoxes are also present in Eastern thought and religion as in the idea that opposites are complementary expressed by the TAO symbol. Looking at modern philosophy, Nietzsche expressed a paradox when describing the dialectic relation between the Apolline and the Dionysian spirits and their perfect balance realized in the Attic tragedy. In psychology, Jung made large reference to the

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concept of paradox to explain the contradictions of the human psyche. The history of modern physics is full of paradoxes, such as the double wave-particle nature of the light or the cat which is at the same time dead and alive in Schrödinger's famous mental experiment, so that the philosopher and mathematician Niels Bohr considered them essential for the progress of scientific knowledge.

Examples of the use of paradoxes and paradoxical thinking to express theoretical reflections can be also found in the social sciences tradition. At the beginning of the discipline of sociology, Durkheim expressed the basic paradox between the two epistemological poles of empiricism and constructionism in these terms: are sociological concepts just secondary constructs (a metavocabulary) for understanding the primary social constructions used by social actors or, can sociologists make true (objective) claims about social actuality? Durkheim's answer consisted in affirming the ontological 'dualism of the human condition', which at the same time acknowledges the inescapable antinomy between the individual and society but also establishes the means for understanding their relation (Hart and McKinnon, 2010). At the level of research practice, this puzzle is known as the observer's paradox, which expresses the challenge for researchers to produce valuable knowledge about the context in which they are inserted and that they are influencing through empirical work. This phenomenon is known as 'the Hawthorne effect' in the organization studies literature.

The notion of paradox has been widely applied also in organization and management studies. New institutional theory refers to the 'paradox of embedded agency' to describe the dialectic relation between individuals' construction of the same institutions that shape their behavior (Seo and Creed, 2002). According to Adler (2012), another example can be found in the sociological ambivalence of bureaucracy illustrated in Marx's theorization: bureaucracy in capitalist firms is simultaneously an enabling tool for

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organizing large-scale cooperation and a coercive weapon for exploitation. The relation between individual and their own work can therefore be understood in paradoxical terms: in modern society, work is both conceived as a means of self-realization and of oppression and alienation (Gini, 1998).

Taking inspiration from such a rich and diversified tradition of thought, some authors developed paradox theory as an integrated framework to look at organizational phenomena (Lewis and Smith, 2014). In a foundational work by Cameron and Quinn (1988), organizations are said to be intrinsically paradoxical and paradoxes to be a common and persistent feature of contemporary organizing. Since then, researchers have applied paradox theory to many different topics in organization studies: innovation (March, 1991), organizational change (Saboochi Nasim and Sushil, 2011), organizational identity (Fiol, 2002), individual identity (Gotsi et al., 2010), workplace flexibility (Putnam et al., 2014), scholar-practitioners relations (Bartunek and Rynes 2014), hybrid organizations (Jay, 2012) and corporate sustainability (e.g. Hahn et al., 2015; Slawinski and Bansal, 2015) to mention but a few.

These considerations could lead to a sort of ‘paradox-reductionism’ which, affirming that ‘everything is paradoxical’ in organizations, also undermine the explanatory power of this theoretical frame. In light of the pragmatic principle exposed above, it is instead important to consider paradox theory as one possible theoretical lens among others to look at organizational phenomena. Oswick et al. (2002) include the concept of ‘paradox’, intended as the juxtaposing of opposites, among the main tropes used in organizational sciences, aside with ‘metaphor’ (the most renowned), ‘metonyms/synecdoche’ and ‘anomaly’. They also invite to consider in combination these different forms of analogical reasoning, in order to allow the coexistence of different perspectives and create new theoretical insights. Paradoxes and paradox theory are then useful when

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considered together and in alternation with other theoretical perspectives to study organizations. On this the reflection on metaphors, the ‘master trope’ in organization studies (Oswick et al., 2002), can lead the way.

In *Images of Organization* (2006), Morgan explores the literature looking at the main metaphors used by organizational scholars and evaluating them in a comparative way. After a *diagnostic reading* the author argues, in which the commonalities between the studied organizational setting and the metaphorical term of comparison are illustrated, a *critical evaluation* needs to follow, that highlights the limits and the implicit assumptions of any particular view of organizations. Organizations are indeed, according to the author, ‘complex and paradoxical objects’, and there is no privileged point of view to look at them.

This reflexive attitude in the use of concepts corresponds to the position undertaken here in relation to paradox theory as a lens to look at organizations. In particular, paradox theory is used here to examine corporate sustainability and CSR, in accordance with authors that consider sustainability a problematic and paradoxical achievement in business organizations (Hahn et al., 2014; 2015; van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015).

Accordingly, paradox theory has been applied in the following research works to investigate green human resource management policies and practices (Chapter I) and sustainability managers’ identity work (Chapter III). Aiming to emphasize the critical potential of paradox theory for the study of sustainability in business settings, these projects have been directed to trace the tensions and contradictions experienced at the organizational and individual level and, to some extent, how organizational actors deal with these tensions. Following the pragmatic and reflexive attitude in the use of concepts adopted here, in the final part of the dissertation a critical evaluation of paradox theory and its application in these research works is given.

### **4. Analyzing managerial rhetorics about sustainability and CSR**

Similarly to ‘paradox’, the notion of ‘rhetoric’ enjoys a long tradition in the history of human thought. The theoretical dispute between Plato and the sophists, illustrated in the dialogue *Gorgias*, casted a negative light on the term, which is still present in nowadays common language. This because, according to Plato, the verbosity of young men obscured truth and public virtues causing the decay of the city of Athens. However, Aristotle soon rehabilitated rhetoric elevating it to the status of a discipline, aside, for example, to medicine and geometry. Aristotle was indeed aware of the importance of rhetoric for public speaking and, in particular, for philosophers, who must defend the public good also through their linguistic skills. Since its fundamental contribution, rhetoric was thus intended as the ‘art of persuasion’, highlighting the interactive dimension between speakers and their audience (Bonet and Suquet, 2010; Bonet, 2014).

The notion of rhetoric experienced a revival in the 19th century with the work of philosophers such as Russell, Wittgenstein, Austin, Rorty, and Burke whose theories are now widely recognized as part of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ (Bonet, 2014). This whole philosophical current reverberated on social sciences by challenging the subject-object dualism that characterized typically modernist ways of knowing and the conception of language as a mere representational device, affirming instead the inextricable connections between the subject, language and the world (Mumby, 2011). As a consequence, the interest for the role of language in organizations as well can be reconnected to the legacy of the linguistic turn (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Deetz, 2003; Mumby, 2011; Bonet, 2014). While recognizing the intersubjective character of social reality, its essential contribution in organization and management studies has been to examine the ways that particular identities, meanings and institutions are privileged

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over others, opening up possibilities for rethinking organizing processes and practices (Mumby, 2011).

Extant theoretical and methodological approaches to look at text and talk in organizations are usually summarized under the label “organizational discourse analysis” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000 and 2011; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). Despite its contribution to the understanding of relevant phenomena such as identity, change, strategy and institutionalization processes (Phillips and Oswick, 2012), this strand of organizational scholarship has recently encountered mounting criticisms. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) for example accuse that organizational discourse analysis studies are often characterized by a misleading view of the role of language, which is presented as all-encompassing (expressed in the discursive-reductionist affirmation ‘everything is discourse’) and all-powerful (summarized by the increasingly formulaic affirmation ‘language constructs reality’). This because, according to the authors, underlying these studies there is a Foucauldian conception of discourse<sup>2</sup> that subsumes and constrains everything, including the role of individual actors (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Kärreman, 2014). As a potential remedy to these criticisms, they thus suggest to ‘relativize the muscularity’ of language and recur to counterbalancing concepts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

One of such concepts could be the notion of rhetorics. As opposed to discourse, which operates at a macro-level and reflect extant power relations within society, rhetoric operates at the micro-level and is more intentional and agentic (Suddaby and Viale, 2011). Since Aristotle’s classical notion of rhetoric, it is indeed renowned that speakers strategically adapt their message depending on the audience and the situation. Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> Not all the authors agree with this critique of Foucault’s notion of discourse. For an alternative evaluation of the contribution of Foucault to organization and management studies see Bardon and Josserand (2010).

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given the relevance of language use for managers (Mintzberg, 1973), rhetoric seems particularly useful to analyze managerial work in relation, for example, to decision-making activities, coordination and informational work, sense-making processes and leadership styles that managers enact to influence others' ideas and feelings on particular topics (Bonet and Suquet, 2010).

As regards to CSR, Grant and Nyberg (2011) recently advanced a discourse-based perspective as the typical view from organization studies to investigate it. In this view, CSR is seen as a competitive arena in which various social actors leverage different meanings and conceptions to support their own cause (Grant and Nyberg, 2011; Christensen et al., 2011). Considering empirical contributions, many studies explored language use in and around CSR. For example, Kallio (2006) identifies three taboos in the academic literature -those of the amoral nature of business, of a continuous economic growth and of the political nature of CSR- that limit the critical potential of CSR. Grafström and Windell (2011) analyze the role of specialized business press in promoting certain selected representations of CSR. Examining the intervention of experts at the Spanish Parliament, Cantò and Mila (2008) study the establishment of CSR in Spain and its inherent conflicts due to the various agenda setters involved. At the organizational level, Coupland (2005) studies CSR as an argument in the context of a corporate web page making visible the tensions generated by the multiplicity of the targeted audiences. Large dissimilarities are identified also in the analysis of companies' sustainability reports by Ellerup and Thomsen (2007), depending on the relevant stakeholder and on the particular topic they address. Other authors have focused on the communicative strategies of corporations to counter disputes and problematic situations (e.g. Castellò and Lozano, 2011; Beelitz and Merkl-Davies, 2012).



One figure that seems to have suffered of scarce consideration so far in the literature is that of the CSR manager. In light with the considerations reported above, I adopted the concept of rhetoric to investigate how CSR managers' make sense of their own role and try to legitimize it in front of their colleagues. The study of their rhetorical strategies illustrated in Chapter II, is thus inserted in the broader context of the competition for resources and status in which managerial occupations are engaged inside organizations. Consistently with the contemporary notion of rhetoric (Bonet, 2014), CSR managers' occupational rhetorics (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007) are therefore to be interpreted as directed both in-ward, to the constitution of their own occupational identity, and out-ward, to the promotion of a positive and distinguished image of their occupation.

Overall, the investigation of these rhetorics is guided by the critical spirit recommended by Mumby (2011), who exhorts scholars to investigate public and shared meanings, in the attempt to reveal the uneasy coexistence of contradictory interpretations of the same object that lead individuals to a multiplicity of controversial subject positions.

### **5. Identity, identities and identity work of CSR managers in relation to sustainability**

Although interest about issues around identity and the self can be traced back to ancient philosophical and religious thought, it is with the raise of modern psychology that a systematic reflection began on the topic (Brown, 2015). At the origins of the discipline, a widespread assumption was that people have a stable essence or core that distinguishes themselves from others and predicts their behavior. This assumption, now called "psychological essentialism", is evident in the work of foundational authors such as James (1890). The 'essentialist' view on identity remained dominant throughout the

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20<sup>th</sup> century and many other influent psychologists have theorized the self in terms of “difference from the others” and “stability over time” (e.g. Erikson, 1968). The idea of the self as a stable essence have nevertheless come to be increasingly challenged from within and outside the discipline. Psychologists adhering to the social identity approach, for example, have highlighted the relevance of the social context and the multiplicity of identification and disidentification sources that influence the formation of multiple identities in individuals (Haslam, 2004). New theoretical approaches have thus lead progressively towards more processual views of identity (Schwartz, 2011).

It is important to note that the interest for identity as an object of investigation is not limited to the discipline of psychology. Many authors in the sociological tradition have theorized and researched on identity, starting from symbolic interactionists such as Cooley, Blumer, Mead and Goffman. Contemporary sociological reasoning about identity often refers also to the work of authors like Foucault, Giddens and Bourdieu (Brown, 2015). Identity is considered as a ‘critical cornerstone’ for contemporary psychological and sociological reasoning (Cerulo, 1997) and it has been described as a valid ‘integrative agenda’ for research in social sciences (Brown, 2001) or, at times, even a new distinguished discipline within social sciences (Coté, 2006).

As regards organization studies, the publication of Ashforth and Mael’s (1989) article introducing social identity theory launched something of a movement. Since its publication, an increasing number of articles have been devoted to studying people’s identity at work. These contributions have connected identity to a wide array of organizational phenomena –from mergers, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship and emotions to participation and project teams- so that Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 6) have described it as ‘an ostensibly new master signifier’. Watson (2008 and 2009) affirms that ‘identity’ represents a bridge between the individual,

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organizational and societal level of analysis. Moreover, the multidisciplinary character of identity scholarship fits well with the porous disciplinary boundaries of organization and management studies (Brown, 2015).

Consistently with the new conceptualizations of 'identity' in psychology, contemporary organization studies have adopted a dynamic and relational view on identity as a process that unfolds over time. Authors embracing a narrative and discursive approach, in particular, look at identity as the continuous casting and recasting of the self occurring mainly through the medium of language and subjected to a multiplicity of cultural influences (Ybema et al. 2009; Ellis and Ybema, 2010). As Alvesson (2010) notes however, it is not necessary to choose between a mainly fixed and a predominantly fluid conception of identity: both components are part of individuals' identity making because individuals are continuously engaged in the attempt to sustain and stabilize preferred views of the self. The concept of 'identity work' has thus emerged in the literature as the main theoretical construct to express such view.

In a study of North American homeless, Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) introduced identity work as 'the set of activities individuals engage to create, present and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept'. In the authors' contribution, identity work is mainly associated with the verbal construction of personal identities and is thus expressed in the 'identity talk' of their research participants, which is spontaneous, ongoing and negotiated during social interactions (*ibidem*, p. 1366). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) first applied the concept in a detailed case study of a manager's identity work and since then, it has been employed to study many different organizational actors in organization and management studies. Researchers have tended to emphasize the intentional character of individuals' identity work, which is conceived as a project, "the active work people do

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on their selves” or “how people strive to shape their identities” (Watson, 2008 and 2009), in opposition, for example, to the term “subjectivity” that depicts individuals identity-making as ‘subjected’ to various structural forces (Hoedemakers, 2009). In a recent review article (Brown, 2015, pp. 20-21), identity work has been indicated as ‘the most significant metaphor among many that may be useful in the analysis of identities construction in and around organizations.’

Accordingly, in the context of this dissertation, the concept of identity work is applied to study how CSR managers discursively articulate their identities in relation to sustainability (Chapter III). Managers have been indicated as a key group for the investigation of identity construction processes because they undertake considerable ‘identity work’ to reconcile the multiplicity of pressures they experience in their work (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Cunliffe, 2009; Watson, 2009). Moreover, the identity work undertaken by managerial actors is often described in terms of tensions, contradictions and conflicts (e.g. Sims, 2003; Clarke et al. 2009; Wright et al., 2012). Given also the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015), in Chapter III paradox theory (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011) is applied as a conceptual lens to look at the identity work of those managers who primarily deal with sustainability issues in their work. This contribution represents thus an innovative theoretical and empirical endeavor that attempts to bridge three strands of literature: paradox theory, research on corporate sustainability and identity work. The identity of CSR managers is already discussed to some extent in Chapter II, although in that case the level of analysis is at the group level and the focus is only indirectly on occupational identities via the investigation of their occupational rhetorics. Chapter III therefore represents a follow-up of the previous study, aimed at tracing individual variations in CSR managers’ identity work that was not possible to notice in the group picture.

### **6. Frame of the research path and structure of the dissertation**

A PhD thesis usually consists either of a collection of articles or a monograph. I soon discovered in my PhD career that developing conference and journal manuscripts is one of the most important arena for academic dialogue within a scholarly community. Since the beginning therefore, my intention was to write a collection of articles in order to participate to such dialogue. The knowledge exchanges I had in the last three years with members of the organization and management studies research community allowed me to continuously learn, refine my thinking process and possibly contribute to the thoughts and the research activities of other scholars. Most of all however, I believe they helped me to enter the ongoing debate within certain communities of inquiry, develop a personal research agenda and start to build an experience and an identity as researcher in the area.

During the past three years, I authored or co-authored a total of three papers, which have all been presented in international conferences and workshops. In addition, one of these paper has been accepted for publication, a second one is currently under review and I am planning to submit soon the third one to an international peer-reviewed journal. The most recent versions of these three papers are included in this dissertation and represent the main body of my PhD thesis.

As regards the structure and content of the dissertation, Chapter I is a study of environmental sustainability in relation to HRM. Through a multiple case study research design it aims to provide insights on how companies try to pursue environmental goals through their HRM policies and practices. It represents also a first conceptualization of the possible tensions and contradiction that arise when applying sustainability in business contexts. Chapter II is a study of the occupational group of CSR managers in Italy. The ways they describe their role and try to acquire legitimacy within business

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contexts is investigated through an analysis of their occupational rhetorics, paying particular attention to the conflict and inconsistencies manifested in CSR managers' talk. Finally, Chapter III represents a follow up study of the previous chapter that extensively apply paradox theory to the identity work performed by the same managers, in the attempt to track the strategies these managers adopt to cope with tensions of sustainability at the individual level.

These papers are both the result of research interests that I developed during my PhD career and of the research opportunities and constrains that I encountered in the past three years. Each paper that represents a chapter of this dissertation can thus be read as an individual study with specific research questions, theoretical framework, methodological concerns and contributions. In this sense they are in line with the 'postmodern' attitude of the *stud-ies* that characterizes the organization and management research field, as evident in the title of one of the leading publications in the area (*Organization Studies*) and as also typical of its most critical scholarship (Alvesson et al., 2009).

At the same time, whereas the research projects discussed in Chapter I, II and III of this dissertation each have their specific 'heart and soul', what binds them is their focus on sustainability as a complex and contradictory achievement in business organizations. Moreover they share the common interest of engaging with managers and analyzing managerial work as at the heart of those contradictory forces that characterize the current applications of sustainability in for-profit organizations. These common features of the research pieces reported here have been expressed in the general aim of this dissertation, which is to trace some of the conflicts and tensions that affects managers' everyday work experience in relation to sustainability, and to connect them with broader shared features of contemporary organizing.

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While doing this, it is important to note that the contribution of this dissertation is intended to be two-fold. On the one hand, the primary contribution of the dissertation is directed to the existing debate within organization and management studies around sustainability and CSR. Thanks to the qualitative research tools employed in my research activities, I have tried to inductively add on this growing strand of literature providing new concepts and opportunities for theorization. On the other hand, in every research project I conducted I have always tried to return the main findings and their interpretation to those managers who accepted to participate to these projects as research informants and interviewees. This has been done for example through their active involvement in the interpretation of preliminary versions of the findings in dedicated focus group sessions. Moreover, thanks to the support of the associations and foundations participating to the research projects, dedicated events were planned in which to present the main findings of the projects in front of research participants, representative of the companies where they are employed and, when possible, the wider public. In this, I share an actual preoccupation of current critical scholarship to be not only meaningful in scientific terms, but also *performative* (Spicer et al., 2009), providing to organizational actors, and to managers in particular, an opportunity to reflect on critical aspects of their sustainability-related work.

Finally, in the fifth and final part of this dissertation (Conclusions), I briefly summarize the three core chapters and examine how they together can make us better understand sustainability in business organizations. In this part I also return to the theoretical frames adopted in my research works and reflexively re-examine the pros and cons of the theoretical and design choices undertaken. These final reflections pave the way in the end to reason on possible avenues for further research that can extend the lines of investigation initiated here.

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# Chapter I.

## A paradox view on Green Human Resource Management: Insights from the Italian context<sup>3</sup>

“Meglio ripetere una verità già nota che cincischiarmi  
l'intelligenza con paradossi brillanti che fanno sorridere,  
ma non pensare”

Antonio Gramsci, in *La città futura*

“How wonderful that we have met with a paradox: now  
we have some hope of making progress”

Niels Bohr

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<sup>3</sup> A previous version of this paper has been presented at the AOM Conference in Philadelphia in 2014 and at the EGOS Colloquium in Rotterdam in 2014 as a paper co-authored with Marco Guerci and Mona Rahimian.

The current version of this manuscript has been accepted for publication in *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.



# **A paradox view on green Human Resource Management: Insights from the Italian context**

## **ABSTRACT**

Paradox – understood as a set of contradictory and incompatible poles all supported by apparently sound arguments – is considered to be a key element in modern organizations. As a result, paradox scholars argue that successful managers are those able to accept the tensions arising from the paradox and able to pursue all its constitutive poles simultaneously instead of choosing only one of them. Paradox theory has been recently applied to corporate sustainability and it is a theoretical approach that has been endorsed by influential authors also in the HRM field. In this context, this paper takes the still unexplored opportunity to apply paradox theory to green HRM. In particular, it explores the HRM-related paradoxes perceived by organizations developing environmental sustainability via human resource management. Adopting a comparative multiple case study approach, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were conducted in six Italian companies explicitly pursuing an environmental strategy. The findings encompass the main characteristics of the green HRM systems of the organizations analyzed and a list is provided of eight HRM-related paradoxes perceived by those organizations. For each paradox, we present and discuss its contrasting poles and the components of the HRM system that it affects. The implications of the findings for both green HRM research and practice are presented and discussed.

## **KEY WORDS**

paradox, environmental sustainability, green HRM, sustainable HRM

## CHAPTER I

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of sustainable HRM, defined as people-management practices that take the development of social, environmental and human capital into account, has emerged in contrast to strategic HRM, which is mostly focused on achieving economic goals and maximizing profitability (Ehnert 2009; Kramar 2013). Within the broad field of sustainable HRM, a growing stream of studies explores the relation between a set of specific HRM practices (called ‘green HRM’) and environmental sustainability. Indeed, developing employees’ commitment to and involvement in, green objectives has been found to be a key factor in realizing environmentally sustainable organizations (e.g. Renwick et al. 2013).

Notwithstanding the recent developments in the field, the present paper is based on the assumption that both green HRM research and practice have not yet explored the potential benefits arising from the adoption of paradox theory. Paradox theory – which conceives paradox as a set of two or more contradictory, incompatible and interrelated poles (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989) – has been applied by a growing number of organization studies. Indeed, organization theorists view paradoxes as constitutive elements of modern organizations and they assume that the coexistence of their multiple poles generates tensions which – depending on the coping strategies adopted by the organization – give rise to vicious or virtuous cycles (Lewis, 2000). Vicious cycles emerge when organizations focus on one single pole following an ‘either/or’ approach; these cycles are said to exacerbate tensions and are associated with missing alternative perspectives and organizational inertia (Smith and Lewis, 2011). By contrast, virtuous cycles emerge when organizations develop an awareness of paradoxical tensions and choose all poles of the paradox following a ‘both/and’ approach, even if this may be perceived as counterintuitive or unrealistic. The benefits of virtuous cycles range from

fostering radical and incremental innovation (e.g. Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009) to ensuring organization survival in the long run (e.g. Probst and Raisch, 2005; Handy, 1994).

In the HRM field, paradox theory seems to be a perspective that has characterized the work of such influential scholars as Karen Legge and Paul Evans, although it is not yet fully recognized by extant HRM research. This is because, in mainstream HRM research, paradoxical tensions have been mostly considered from a ‘fit’ perspective which assumes that they can and should be ‘solved’, instead of acknowledging the intrinsically contradictory nature of HRM activities (Legge, 1978, Evans, 1999, Boselie et al., 2009, Sheehan et al., 2013).

In regard to corporate sustainability studies, scholars have applied paradox theory in order to understand and improve sustainability-oriented practices by considering the multiple tensions that the concept – which comprises different dimensions and traverses different levels of analysis – brings to organizations and business leaders (Hahn et al., 2014 and 2015; Gao and Bansal, 2013).

Although it has been recently argued that paradox is a fundamental lens through which to theorize sustainable HRM (Ehnert 2009, 2014), it seems that green HRM has not yet taken the opportunity to apply paradox theory, given that the field is heavily concentrated on content and design issues (Jackson, 2012). Consequently, here we adopt a paradox theory to explore the paradoxical tensions that arise in the HRM area when companies decide to pursue environmental sustainability goals. In particular, the aim of this explorative article is to contribute to green HRM theory and practice by extending knowledge and comprehension of the HRM-related paradoxes that affect companies developing environmental sustainability via HRM.

This knowledge extension represents an opportunity for green HRM practice. The previous literature has highlighted several possible strategies for coping with paradoxes (Lewis 2000). What is relevant here, however, is that two of these strategies are not considered to be constructive: ‘ignorance’, i.e. not considering one pole of a paradox; and ‘denial’, i.e. assuming the two poles to be complementary instead of contradictory. These strategies are critical because they deny the existence of tensions and inhibit the learning opportunities generated by the emergence of paradoxes; “staying with the paradox” (Vince and Broussine 1996: 4) is indeed considered a key ability for the ‘modern manager’ (Poole and Van de Ven 1989) and the emerging tensions may give rise to change and innovation by “challenging actors’ cognitive limits, demanding creative sense-making and seeking more fluid, reflexive and sustainable management strategies” (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 395).

In accordance with these authors, we believe that the list of paradoxes identified in this paper will help practitioners working on green HRM systems to detect paradoxes and develop a constructive coping strategy and also to make more informed design choices as they recognize the potential downsides of their interventions. In parallel, the aim of the study is to contribute to the green HRM literature, because our findings – in line with those of other contributions to organization studies – support the idea that paradoxes are not sporadic accidents, but recurrent elements which affect the components of the green HRM system. This study is thus an attempt to conduct critical re-evaluation of the concept of ‘fit’ and to call for a more sophisticated approach to HRM-related tensions that takes account of the complexity, ambiguity and diversity that characterize contemporary organizations.

In pursuit of these objectives, the paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, presenting how and why paradox theory has been

adopted to understand corporate sustainability and HRM. This leads to formulation of the study's research objective and questions. Then, the method section describes the various phases of the empirical research process and all the related techniques, while the findings section presents the results of the study. Finally, we contextualize the research results in extant research, consider their implications for green HRM practice and discuss their limitations and possible future developments.

### 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The aim of this section is to explain why paradox theory is useful for analyzing environmental sustainability in general and green HRM in particular and to present the research questions addressed in our research. Accordingly, we organize this section into three parts: in the first we show the intrinsically paradoxical nature of sustainability in organizations; we then illustrate and discuss the application of a paradox approach in analysis of green HRM; we finally present the research objective and questions of the present study.

#### **2.1 The paradoxes of sustainability in organizations**

There are diverse definitions of the term 'paradox' in the management literature. Here we adopt the one proposed by Poole and Van de Ven (1989: 563): "paradox consists of two contrary or even contradictory propositions to which we are led by apparently sound arguments. Taken singly, each proposition is incontestable, but taken together they seem to be inconsistent or incompatible". The pervasiveness of paradoxes is said to be related to tensions perceived by organizational actors (Lewis 2000). This concept has several applications in organization studies and it has attracted substantial attention in the top-tier journals (e.g. Warner 2009; Smith and Lewis 2011; Yoon and Chae 2012).



Today, it is considered to be a key theoretical lens through which to study organizations (for instance, in 2013, *Organization Studies* called for papers on the paradoxes of organizational change and innovation). Indeed, paradox is seen as a core theme of post-modern organizational design (Child and McGrath 2001). The basic assumption is that dealing with paradoxes enables organizations to improve the efficiency of existing products and to promote radical and incremental innovation for future viability (Lewis 2000; Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009; Jansen et al. 2012). The literature shows that companies able to manage mutually exclusive, but at the same time desirable, elements are the ones most successful in the long term (Cameron 1986; Probst and Raisch, 2005). Similarly, the inability to deal with opposing forces is said to lead companies to failure (Handy 1994).

In the context of sustainability studies, corporate sustainability has been recognized as intrinsically paradoxical because it brings tensions into organizations (Gao and Bansal, 2013). In this regard, a recent paper (Hahn et al., 2015) identified four key sustainability-related paradoxes based on the following contrapositions: (i) personal versus organizational sustainability agendas, which refers to the broader paradox between individual agency and organizational structure (Barley and Tolbert, 1997); (ii) short-term orientation of the company's financial objectives versus long-run societal expectations regarding environmental protection and social security (Held, 2001); (iii) the need for firm-specific organizational responses to stakeholders' pressures versus the institutionalization of practices, which may affect sustainability-driven change with the risk of losing institutional legitimacy (Midttun, 2007); (iv) isomorphic pressure toward organizational efficiency versus a societal need for diversity that fosters the resilience of social and organizational systems (Schutz, 1999).

According to paradox theory, those four paradoxes may be sources of learning and innovation when organizations are able to live with the two poles of each paradox. Indeed, the suppression of one pole of a paradox fuels vicious cycles because the focus on only one pole resurfaces the need for the other (Lewis, 2000). This inhibits the creative energy embedded in the tension (Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003), so that organizational actors are paralyzed when they try to choose between the two poles (Smith and Berg, 1987). By contrast, developing constructive strategies is said to enable organizational actors to manage those paradoxes by conceiving them as potential sources of innovation and learning. For example, Kolk and Perego (2014) demonstrate how recognition and acceptance of the tension between financial (short-term) versus social and environmental (long-term) objectives leads companies to adjust variable pay systems to include both long- and short-term concerns. This encourages managers to actively learn new competencies and creatively think about new and more sustainable ways to do things.

Although the paradoxes reported by Hahn and colleagues (2015) have been conceived in relation to the broad concept of corporate sustainability (including the economic, social and environmental dimensions), a paradox framework can also be applied to gain deeper understanding of environmental sustainability *per se*. In light of the four above-mentioned paradoxes, we argue that companies pursuing environmental policies experience paradoxical tensions, for example related to: (i) the existence within the organization of different views on how and to what extent environmental sustainability should be incorporated in business processes; the propensity of organizational members to address environmental issues may be constrained by organizational practices, or the organization's commitment to environmental sustainability may be not welcomed by organizational actors (e.g. Bansal, 2003; Pearce and Doh, 2005); (ii) the difficulty of

balancing environmental objectives with business and social ones, for example regarding the issue of climate change, in regard to which previous literature has demonstrated that its ‘translation’ into financial metrics (such as carbon costs) by many companies narrows down the set of potential solutions and shortens the time-horizon (Slawinski and Bansal, 2012); (iii) the contraposition between the need to pursue radical innovation and at the same time to preserve institutional legitimacy, as in the case of electric vehicles, which, even if they represent a technological breakthrough, are still not common because they challenge the expectations and consumption patterns of specialized media and car-users (Bakker et al., 2012); (iv) the implementation of ‘standard’ green practices considered efficient by most of the stakeholders versus firm-specific practices that foster diversity – as in the agricultural industry, where many farmers implement similar green practices selecting the same crops and thereby reduce biodiversity and increase the social system’s level of resilience (Figge, 2004).

These tensions, together with decision-making under severe uncertainty and dealing with the lack of information, bring a complexity into organizations oriented toward environmental sustainability (Margolis et al. 2007; Matos and Hall, 2007) that can be analytically understood more deeply by adopting paradox theory (Ehnert, 2009, 2014; Hahn et al., 2014). At the same time, the practical management of those tensions can be more effective when they are addressed within a paradox frame. Regarding the first of the paradoxes discussed above, for example, organizations that ignore or deny the contrast between individual versus organizational agendas in relation to environmental sustainability experience high levels of conflict which may lead to poor HRM outcomes such as high turnover or absenteeism or low workforce engagement. By contrast, as paradox theory maintains, organizations that recognize this contraposition can manage it successfully by creating opportunities for members to pursue their personal agendas

(such as volunteering programs or green teams), or by establishing formal procedures that enable organizational members to integrate their personal agendas into the strategy-making process of the green organizational agenda. These initiatives – even if they are not designed to eliminate the individuals/organization conflict – give rise to higher satisfaction and motivation (Muthuri et al., 2009), as well as greater commitment to the organization’s sustainability agenda (Andersson and Bateman, 2000; Markusson, 2010). On recognizing the analytical and practical value of the application of paradox theory to environmental sustainability, researchers in several disciplines have empirically analyzed the paradoxes that environmental sustainability causes in organizations (see Kleindorfer et al. 2005 and Wu and Pagell, 2011 as examples of studies on the topic respectively pertaining to the disciplines of logistics and supply chain management). To our knowledge, studies that address this topic in HRM are still lacking. Given that environmental sustainability has proved to be an issue difficult to manage in organizations and that other managerial disciplines have applied paradox theory to study it, we intend to extend the application of this theoretical framework to green HRM research and practice. Consequently, we devote the next section to the development and discussion of a paradox frame in which to analyze green HRM.

## **2.2 Applying paradox theory to green HRM research and practice**

Paradox theory is present in and has characterized the work of, influential researchers also in the HRM research field, although not many scholars have formally referred to it. The seminal work by Legge (1978), for instance, outlines ambiguities in the role of HR managers that make HRM an intrinsically paradoxical field. In the 1990s, Evans (1999) extended this idea by contending that ambiguities are the reaction of individuals to paradoxes and dilemmas. He concluded that “ambiguity is the reactive face of the HRM

subject to the oppositions of duality” (p. 333). Evans consequently introduced “duality/dilemma/ paradox theory”, which assumes that complex organizations face opposing forces that need to be balanced dynamically. More recently, Boselie and colleagues (2009) have listed twenty paradoxes intrinsic to HRM, including HRM vs. personnel management, HRM vs. industrial relation and ‘soft’ HRM vs. ‘hard’ HRM. Furthermore, the paradoxical view of HRM has been supported by Sheehan and colleagues (2013), who showed how the role of HR managers has inherent paradoxical tensions.

The application of paradox theory in HRM research has provided a more problematic view of specific issues and it has helped HRM practice to move away from oversimplified solutions. For example, in a recent paper Putnam and colleagues (2014) have applied paradox theory to study workplace flexibility. They find that organizations able to conceive (and accept) the tensions arising from work and life – understood as two contradictory poles of a paradox – are more likely to satisfy the work and non-work needs of employees. On the basis of this finding, the authors provide HRM practice with in-depth recommendations on how to effectively design and support workplace flexibility interventions in organizations.

Despite the analytical and practical contributions of paradox theory, however, this theoretical approach has attracted only a few researchers in HRM. One possible explanation is that recent HRM research has mostly endorsed contingency theory, under-representing the need to consider paradoxes as constitutive components of modern organizations and HRM processes. Indeed, apart from some exceptions which have highlighted the need to develop dynamic configurations (Paauwe et al. 2013), the recurrent focus on fit – which can be traced back to the Harvard “map of HRM territory” (Beer et al. 1984) – assumes that paradoxes and tensions can and should be

‘resolved’. By contrast, the research studies reported here assume not only that tensions cannot be resolved by design (Evans 1999) but that they also are sources of new and more sophisticated HRM practices (Putnam et al., 2014).

Within the broad field of HRM, an area in which the application of paradox theory is still underdeveloped is green HRM, a matter to which recent HRM research and practice have devoted increasing attention, especially in the past decade. Indeed, several scholars have studied the relation between HRM and the firm’s environmental performance (e.g. Jabbour et al. 2008; Harris and Tregidga 2012; Jackson et al. 2012; Paillé and Boiral 2013) and HRM journals have devoted special issues to the topic (see *Human Resource Management*, 2012). Similarly, practitioners’ professional associations have dedicated publications to it (SHRM, 2011 and 2013; CIPD, 2012 and 2013).

Empirical research has shown that HRM practices can effectively contribute to improvement of the organization’s environmental performance. A recent review of research works by Renwick and colleagues (2013) confirmed that HRM practices affect the environmental performances of firms. Specifically, the authors adopted a synthetic representation by Jiang and colleagues (2012) of the key components of the HRM system, which – drawing on AMO theory (Appelbaum et al. 2000) – is conceived as composed of three main HRM policy domains: (1) the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) domain (i.e. recruiting, selection and training), (2) the motivation and effort domain (i.e. performance management, compensation and incentive) and (3) the opportunities-to-contribute domain (i.e. employee involvement, industrial relations and job design). Following this line of analysis, Renwick and colleagues (2013) showed that all the three components of the HRM system can improve organizational environmental performance by adopting environmental criteria in hiring and selection and conducting training and development programs on green-related issues (e.g. Jabbour 2013) – the

KSAs domain; by developing employee motivation and commitment to environmental management (e.g. Fernández et al. 2003) through formal and informal, monetary and intangible incentives (e.g. Berrone and Gomez-Mejia 2009) – the motivation and effort domain; and by offering opportunities to contribute to the sustainability debate within the company through individual and collective engagement processes (e.g. Harvey et al. 2013) – the opportunity-to-contribute domain.

Although the growing stream of research on Green HRM has largely extended the available knowledge, it still seems to have neglected the paradox theoretical approach. As in the broader field of HRM, the application of paradox theory to green HRM is a possible source of innovative analytical and practical insights. This opportunity has been recently acknowledged by Jackson (2012), who found that extant research on green HRM is mostly focused on content and design issues. Jackson consequently called for a “problem-focused agenda for research on workforce management and environmental sustainability” in order to recognize that “HRM practitioners negotiate solutions that optimize results against multiple and sometime conflicting goals, introduce changes while at the same time sustaining a sense of continuity, respond to signals that suggests that current conditions are changing and remain flexible enough to adjust to an unknown future” (2012 p. 420). The apparently ambiguous posture of HRM practice noted by Jackson is connected with the very nature of the idea of paradox, which assumes that organizations are webs of tensions where opposing poles simultaneously co-exist and mutually reinforce each other. We thus argue that paradox theory is a valuable theoretical lens through which to address the above-cited “problem-focused agenda” for green HRM and, at the same time, to provide HRM practice with data-driven recommendations.

Jackson also notes that “HRM scholars may recognize the need for internally consistent workforce management practices, but often they focus their research efforts on just one or two elements of the total system. Following the logic of ‘basic science’, they search for fundamental principles that apply across contexts. But this approach seldom produces clear answers to the questions that practicing managers must answer” (2012, p. 419). According to Jackson, if research on environmental sustainability and green HRM is to improve its relevance to practice, HRM researchers should focus on a wide set of green HRM practices, rather than on specific interventions, in order to endorse a systemic perspective that acknowledges the complexity and variability of experiences in organizations when managing sustainability issues. Similarly, Renwick and colleagues (2013, p. 10) emphasize the need to consider the workings of the entire HRM system instead of focusing on one or a few HRM practices. It is for this reason that in our study we focus on the overall green HRM system, rather than on a narrow set of specific practices – a perspective which we believe is much closer to that of practitioners in organizations.

### **2.3 Objective and research questions of the study**

In the review of the literature, we identified a basic knowledge gap as follows: both sustainability and HRM have proven to be paradoxical fields in organizations. Although this topic is addressed by several theoretical and empirical studies, it seems to be neglected by green HRM scholarship. In order to fill this gap, the present paper explores the paradoxes perceived by organizational actors when designing the HRM system intended to support the company’s development toward environmental sustainability.



The above-mentioned overarching objective of the study has been translated into the following two research questions, which guided the empirical work as well as the illustration of the findings:

- 1) Where did environmental sustainability impact on the HRM systems of the companies that we studied?
- 2) Are there and what are, the paradoxes that these companies encounter when implementing green HRM policies and practices and what were they?

### 3. METHODS

#### **3.1 Research design**

Because the aim of the research was to investigate the paradoxes related to the design of green HRM systems, we adopted a qualitative and interpretative approach (Schwandt, 1994). Previous studies had identified and theorized paradoxes through rich case studies (e.g. Leonard-Barton 1992; Westenholtz 1993). Similarly, our research was based on a multiple case study design in order to gain broad understanding of the topic and a robust basis for analysis and discussion of the results (Eisenhardt 1988; Yin 2003).

Qualitative research can be undertaken from a deductive or an inductive perspective. Deduction is when researchers work within a defined framework; whereas induction is when they see the development of relevant theory, new propositions and concepts as the purpose of the research project (Whetten 1989). In our research we sought to combine both deduction and induction because we believe, with Suddaby (2006), that new ideas arise from the combination of these two fundamental approaches.

Accordingly, we started by investigating the green aspects of the HRM systems of the companies studied. Then, when analyzing tensions and conflicts, we maintained an

‘open’ attitude toward the concepts and themes emerging from analysis of the interviews in order to formulate our own contribution to theory.

We decided to focus on the Italian context for two main reasons. First, in Italy, HRM is based on what is known as the European model (Mayrhofer et al. 2012), which, compared to the US model, has a stronger stakeholder orientation and is more deeply embedded in society and social awareness. Moreover, according to Albareda and colleagues (2008), in Italy the government plays a fundamental role in promoting environmental sustainability and leading companies toward social and environmental objectives through dedicated policies (Perrini et al. 2007; Russo and Tencati 2009; Habisch et al. 2011). Italian companies are therefore in a cultural and institutional context which motivates them to address social and environmental issues through a constructive and participatory dialogue with their stakeholders stimulated by the government’s action.

Within this national context, case selection was guided by the purposeful sampling method (Patton, 2002), which selects cases on the basis of their relevance to the research object and purpose. We centered our sampling procedure on the members of a private foundation that interconnects companies involved in social and environmental sustainability actions. The requirements for organizations to be included were: (i) a high mandate within decision-making processes on HRM-related issues; (ii) a significant commitment to environmental sustainability; (iii) relatively broad experience in green HRM. In order to meet these requirements, we mainly selected companies with Italian ownerships, because we wanted to collect opinions directly from planners of sustainability and HRM policies; we conducted exploratory analysis of the corporate websites of the foundation’s members to evaluate those policies and we were also supported by the board of the foundation, which drew on its deep knowledge of the

members to indicate those most engaged in green HRM programs. This procedure assured the relevance of the cases to the purpose of the research, as well as the interest and collaboration of participants. We selected ten possible participant companies, six of which agreed to take part in the research. The entire fieldwork lasted ten months, from March to December 2013. All the interviews were conducted directly in the offices or establishments of the companies. Table 1 at the following page summarizes the main characteristics of our sample.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The case studies involved the extensive interviewing of key organizational actors, coupled with the use of documentary evidence in the form of company reports, documents, corporate websites and other materials provided by interviewees. Before approaching each company, we generated background information and circulated it within the research team. The latter consisted of two senior researchers in HRM and organizational behavior, experienced in conducting research projects on HRM topics that involve multiple private-sector companies and two junior researchers at PhD level with previous experience of qualitative data collection and analysis.

When the companies were approached, we initially asked if we could conduct interviews with the HRM Director (HRMg), the Environmental Manager (EnvMg) and the Corporate Social Responsibility Manager (CSRMg). However, in some cases the specific role did not exist, or roles overlapped in the same person. The last column of Table 1 at the next page summarizes the number and order of interviewees for each company and their roles in the organization.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the companies and role of the interviewees.

Disguised company name*	Head-quarter	Ownership structure	Listed / Not listed	Countries where it operates	Number of employees worldwide	Industry	Key product/ services	Market/ consumers	Interviewees
A	Italy	Family Business	Not listed	4 countries in Europe and North America	5000	Paper Production	Kitchen paper, toilet paper, facial tissues	From households to companies	-Environmental Manager -General HR Manager also responsible for the CSR
B	France	Non Family Business	Listed	20 countries in Europe, Asia, the Americas	20000	Business Services	Consulting services and project development	From telecoms and media to defense, railway, automotive	-Communication Manager and responsible for the CSR -Environmental Manager -General HR Manager
C	Italy	Family Business	Not listed	20 countries in worldwide	3300	Healthcare / Chemical industry	Diagnostic imaging, drugs, health services	All people who need imaging, health services or drugs	-Environmental Manager -Manager in the CSR & Communication Dept. -General HR Manager
D	Italy	Family Business	Not listed	5 countries in Europe	1400	Iron and Steel Industry	Billets, hot/ cold rolled reinforcing steel, wire rod, electro-welded mash	Private/industrial building companies	-Environmental Manager -CSR Manager -General HR Manager
E	Belgium	Family Business	Listed	55 countries worldwide	29100	Chemistry Industry	Consumer goods, energy, paper, automotive, IT construction, agriculture	Consumer market and industrial customers	-CSR Manager -Country Manager -General HR Manager
F	France	Family Business	Not Listed	13 countries in Europe, Asia and North America	61000	Mass Retailing Industry	Gardening retailer, outdoor furniture, cleaning accessories	Households and construction companies	-Coordinator for Sustainable Development (matching CSR and Environmental Manager roles) -HRM Director

\*In the first column of the table we listed the company with their identification letters.

We organized the interviews so as to have the HRM director as the last interviewee. The interviews with CSR and Environmental managers covered aspects such as the implementation of sustainability policies in the company, current strategies and practices, responsibility for environmental matters and 'green' performances, the contribution expected from the HRM department and possible sources of tensions. In the HRM director interview we collected information on the key features of the green HRM system implemented by the company. We followed the above-illustrated representation of the HRM system based on AMO theory, distinguishing its specific components and their expected and actual impacts. In so doing, we referred to the general green HRM policies and practices applied in each company, without focusing on a particular category of employees in order to obtain a comprehensive representation of their green HRM systems. We concluded the interview by examining the paradoxes affecting those systems. We tackled this topic by deciding not to introduce the notion of paradox in our questions, but instead to rely on the common meaning of the term 'tension' as a sensitizing concept (Blumer 1954) with which to explore problems and potential conflicts inherent to green HRM.

The main data-gathering technique was the semi-structured interview (Drever 1997), which we applied by following the guidelines for the ethnographic interview (Spradley 1979). In this regard, the interview protocol was used as a flexible tool instead of a rigid scheme: we prioritized the natural development of the interviewees' discourses, adapting the interview track while performing it.

All the interviews were conducted in Italian in the presence of two researchers and they lasted between one and two hours. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English in a way that preserved their original meaning. The final empirical

documentation of our research resulted in 16 interview reports, which were supported by written documentation both self-collected and provided by the interviewees.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Our analysis procedure made general reference to the guidelines for applied thematic analysis as indicated by Guest et al. (2012). Accordingly, we organized the analysis into two steps.

First, we performed a structural coding process (Guest et al. 2012). This means that, based on our research questions and the literature review, the researchers shaped different categories and completed them for each company. Quotes and information about the green HRM system of each company were summarized in a contrasting matrix and examined using a case-oriented approach (Miles and Huberman 1994). Our initial purpose was to determine the impact of environmental sustainability on the HRM system of each company; the main results of this operation are summarized in section 2 of the findings and in Table 2 reported at page 67.

We then conducted a cross-case analysis to identify elements recurrent across companies. This analysis was based on the identification of themes: following Ryan and Bernard (2003), we inspected the transcripts for recurrent arguments, comparisons and metaphors, making large use of indigenous categories to code the text. We were particularly interested in detecting episodes that revealed problems in the companies' green initiatives and in the evaluation of their environment-related HRM practices by the interviewees.

In this phase, two coders worked separately in order to avoid thinking inertia. Each researcher drew up a list of paradoxes that were then discussed jointly by the research team. Once a shared definition of each paradox had been established, the researchers

again went through the texts, re-coding them. Problems and inconsistencies were resolved by basing the interpretation on the identification of ‘exemplar quotations’. These quotations were included in the description of the paradoxes (section 3 of the findings) and helped to anchor the research results (Guest et al. 2012). The triangulation of analysis (Denzin 1978) also helped to enhance the reliability of the results, because only one of the coders was also present during the interviews. The entire process was supported by the Atlas.ti 7 qualitative data analysis software.

We finally organized a focus group with seven of the managers interviewed, to whom we presented our data interpretations. On this occasion, the HR managers acknowledged the explanatory capacity of paradox theory in helping them diagnose the tensions characterizing the green HRM systems of their companies. Although the aim was not to seek confirmation or disconfirmation of results, this further interview session enabled us to refine our analysis and integrate the findings on the basis of the practitioners’ feedback (Bloor et al. 2001).

The research findings are presented in the next section. We first introduce the key features of the green HRM systems that we studied and then present the paradoxes characterizing those systems.

## 4. FINDINGS

### **4.1 Key features of the green Human Resource Management system(s)**

A considerable part of our research was devoted to understanding what kind of HRM-related actions companies put in place in order to support the organization’s environmental performance. For this purpose, part of the interviews explored the extent to which the various components of the HRM system were devoted to green purposes by the companies.

The practices that emerged from the interviews are now described (and summarized in Table 2 at page 67) following the above-presented representation of the HRM system proposed by Jiang and colleagues (2012).

#### **4.1.1 Knowledge, skills and abilities**

*Recruiting.* All the HR managers interviewed recognized the positive impact of communicating sustainability plans to potential applicants, especially to young and educated ones, because younger people are considered more sensitive to environmental matters. Among the HR managers interviewed, only the HR manager of company F did not communicate green actions to the labor market because, he argued, “the strategy of the company is focused more on implementing green plans than communicating them”.

*Selection.* The HR managers took two approaches to designing selection processes to support environmental performance: (i) including environmental sustainability-related issues in interviews and reflecting on them during the selection process to check candidates’ sensitivity and alignment with the company’s view (companies A, D and E); (ii) including environmental sustainability-related issues in interviews but focusing only on technical skills and not on environmental sensitivity when selecting candidates (company B). In fact, the HR managers did not consider a ‘green credential’ to be a discriminatory criterion for hiring: this happened only in the case of technical roles requiring environment-related skills and knowledge as essential components of the job requirements. Interestingly, company B remarked that its focus in the selection process on ‘green’ technical skills for specific positions was due to the fact that, in many cases, Italian and European public administrations, which represent a significant market for the company, require their service providers to declare, in commercial proposals, the



extent to which the employees with key roles in the project possess environment-related competencies or certifications.

*Training.* While some HR managers organized environmental training only for specific positions related to environmental issues (company C), others arranged training for all employees (companies A, D and F). Notably, all the companies that provided extensive environment-related training to large proportions of their employees (A, D and F in our sample) took advantage of public funds devoted, by local, national or European public policies, to the support of employee competence development on green-related issues. Moreover, because selection and training practices were considered jointly when developing the necessary skills, a company may invest more in the selection process and less in training, or vice versa. For instance, company E's HR manager declared that they had decided to focus on environment-related skills in the selection process in order to avoid investing in environmental training.

#### **4.1.2 Motivation and effort**

*Performance Management.* The HR managers of companies B and C stated they were interested in measuring only those environmental performances that enable cost reduction. Nevertheless, it was also possible to find individual or unit performance targets aimed at improving organizational environmental performances (companies A, D, E and F).

*Incentive and compensation.* The companies had introduced both monetary and non-monetary incentives to motivate employees in regard to environmental plans (companies A, C, D, E and F). They sometimes employed creative forms of symbolic reward, such as the planting of a tree for each employee, 'employee of the month'

prizes, or even chances for employees to attend a week-long WWF (World Wildlife Fund) camp (company F).

#### **4.1.3 Opportunity to contribute**

*Employee involvement.* The companies sought to increase the participation of their employees in environmental sustainability plans by using suggestion boxes, conferences, meetings, sustainability reports and social networks (e.g. the company intranet). For example, whereas companies A and D used suggestion boxes to involve employees in sustainability processes, rewarding suggestions according to the level of their applicability, company E used its intranet as a tool through which employees could exchange views on environmental sustainability.

*Job Design.* Environmental tasks were never included in job descriptions, with the exception of special technical positions or responsibility roles (e.g. site managers for companies in the chemicals and steel industries, like A, C and E).

In sum, among the different components of the HRM system, we found that all the HR managers in the companies that we studied had adopted performance measurement practices to enhance environmental performance. Moreover, interviewees from five out of six companies stated that they applied recruitment, selection and incentives policies to foster the environmental sustainability goals of their companies. Finally, we found that the job description was the tool least used to improve environmental performance, because only three companies had job specifics and these specifics were only for positions directly related to environmental responsibilities. The details of each company's green HRM practices are presented in Table 2 at the next page.

CHAPTER I

Table 2. Different practices of green HRM systems.

	KSA			Motivation and Effort		Opportunities to contribute	
	Recruitment	Selection	Training	Performance Management	Compensation/ Incentive	Involvement	Job Design
A	ES* practices and performances are used for attracting applicants	ES sensitivity is a criterion in the selection process	Environmental training for all departments and employees	Measuring different green behaviors	Monetary and non-monetary bonuses	Using suggestion box, periodic meetings, international programs related to environment	For specific elements on ES
B	ES practices and performances are used for attracting applicants	Technical skills are only considered	Environmental training only as a part of other technical trainings	Measuring only cost reducing green activities	-	-	-
C	ES practices and performances are used for attracting applicants	-	Environmental training only for certain roles	Measuring different green behaviors/ activities but mainly the cost reducing ones	Monetary bonuses	Using informal channels to gather suggestions from workers	For managers and engineers especially those in production and research area
D	ES practices and performances are used for attracting applicants	ES sensitivity is a criterion in the selection process	Environmental training for all departments and employees	Measuring different green behaviors/activities	Monetary and non-monetary bonuses	Using suggestion box	-
E	ES practices and performances are used for attracting applicants	ES sensitivity is a criterion in the selection process	-	Measuring different green behaviors/activities	Monetary bonuses	Using social networks, involving staff in the process of self assessment/continuous improvement, assigning dedicated days to ES	For specific elements on ES
F	Not using ES for employer branding and recruiting	-	Environmental training for all departments and employees	Main focus of ES criteria is for specific positions	Monetary bonuses	Assigning projects/ideas to employees to work on that for 8 hours	-

\*ES: abbreviation for Environmental Sustainability

## **4.2 Eight paradoxes that occur when Human Resource Management meets environmental sustainability**

In this section, we report on the paradoxes emerging in relation to the design of green HRM systems. Analysis of our cases identified eight paradoxes, each of which is reported below. We present the sound but contradictory arguments that characterize each pole and support these arguments with examples and quotations from the interview data.

### **4.2.1 Green performance vs. other social and economic performances**

Setting environmental goals along with other goals (economic, social and human) puts companies in a complex situation and may bring a paradox to light. The first pole concerns employing HRM to improve environmental plans. However, fostering environmental plans increases the possibility of financial shortages and may be detrimental to other plans. Thus, the second pole of this paradox entails using the potential of HRM to enhance financial and social performances.

Because it was undergoing a major restructuring, Company B is an example of company where there has recently been an open conflict between environmental performance and social and financial performances. The general HR manager seemed to have a strong position on this issue:

My policy is “people come before everything”, even sustainability. If we have to make cuts, we first cut all the rest and only at the end, if necessary, we cut people. But you also have to include the other themes in this process because, for example, regarding sustainability, the working environment is crucial for employee satisfaction - [HRMg, B]

The interviewee was aware that sustainability has implications for company life: for example, relative to employee satisfaction and work performance. Hence HR managers

cannot entirely avoid this dimension and they have two main strategies with which to contribute to the greening of their organizations:

- (1) focusing on green performances when they do not imply costs for the company;

Our company is more concerned with cost reduction; it enables us to pursue our initiatives but without using any resources... and the imperative is always not to increase costs... - [HRMg, B]

- (2) implementing green performance when the company has no other priority;

It is not easy to talk about sustainability when we are reorganizing production. There is a heavy climate in the company whereby some projects are seen as accessory - [CSRMg, C]

This paradox occurs at a very basic level of the HRM system: managers encounter it when they want to set the direction and objectives of the green HRM system. The companies that we studied were strongly committed to environmental sustainability; they therefore all expressed the desire to improve environmental performance. Nevertheless, when there were other issues at stake, these companies preferred to pursue environmental sustainability goals as 'accessory' ones and to prioritize other objectives.

#### **4.2.2 An open vs. a closed green HRM system**

Environmental sustainability poses the following question for managers: what is the context of our actions? Is it HRM policies and practices, the entire organization, or should external actors also be involved? When structuring the boundaries of green HRM systems, companies should pay attention to the emergence of the following paradox.

On the first pole, companies could undertake actions directed at external parties like the employers' association, non-profit associations, public administrations, suppliers or even

customers. The second pole of the paradox consists of strategies centered on the internal dimension of organizations.

The ambitious recruitment plan of company D represents a case of an ‘open’ HRM system:

Five years ago, when many elderly workers took early retirement, the company was devoid of skills: fresh intake had to remedy the losses. [D]’s managers decided to develop a recruitment program in collaboration with local technical high schools. They started to select outstanding students willing to undertake a dual training program [...] the selection was supported by a work psychologist, who helped the company to assess candidates’ attitudes toward environmental and safety issues. At the end of the project, all the trainees were hired... - [HRMg, D]

The project “was a success”, concluded the interviewee, because it enabled the company to create a trust relation with the new employees, as well as with the local community and its educational institutions.

Although actions of this kind positively affect relations with the organization’s external context, they may also present some difficulties. For example, the environmental manager of a pharmaceutical company (C) explained that customers are used to glass bottles as drug-containers, but glass is not environmentally friendly, because it entails high costs and is not recyclable. A possible solution proposed by the interviewee was to provide training and information to customers while extending the boundaries of the green HRM system. “But it is hard to change the mentality” she concluded, explaining why the company decided to not undertake any further initiative in this direction.

Another difficulty occurs when partners pay little attention to environmental aspects. Whilst a partnership, with a supplier for example, can be useful, companies often encounter the problem that other organizations lack technical knowledge or commitment; in other words, companies may have few internal tensions whereas external resistance may be huge.

By choosing the first pole, HR managers can also have an impact outside the company boundaries, although in many cases there is high external resistance. The alternative is to focus on the internal workforce, relying for example on training instruments and intervention on work practices. A 'closed' HRM system forgoes the creation of synergies and collaborations with a wider range of actors outside the organization, thus limiting possible difficulties but also its scope and margin of action.

#### **4.2.3 Focusing the green HRM system on everyday work vs. symbolic events**

HRM was often depicted in the interviews as a 'soft function', by which is meant that it especially concerns cultural aspects such as the fit between company values and employees' values, their sensitivity and attitudes toward certain topics. Nevertheless, organizations also have a 'hardware' consisting of rules, procedures and work habits.

Consequently, sustainability can assume one or other of these two faces. This paradox has to do with the degree of formalization and integration of the green HRM system in the organization. At one pole there is a conception of sustainability as a mainly cultural dimension manifest in speeches, slogans, symbols, yearly meetings, or resounding initiatives. At the other pole, environmental sustainability is widespread in the organization because managers integrate it into everyday work through regulations and procedures.

HR managers must address this paradox when formalizing green HRM policies and practices: should they act at the level of the symbolic representation of the company, or should they be more focused on the concrete work activity? The HR manager of C described the issue in these terms:

I think there is a small gap between corporate culture and the concrete organization with its procedures... although the cultural level somehow compensates for this procedural inadequacy. It

is sometimes difficult to move from initiatives to policy because our company style is liquid, fluid and it is difficult for us to structure our initiatives - [HRMg, C]

When the cultural aspect of sustainability prevails, it creates enthusiasm and involvement, reinforcing the company's values and its public image. At the same time, it is a signal that sustainability needs periodic recall in the minds of everybody; otherwise it will be overlooked. It is for this reason that the HR manager of company F hoped for a gradual evolution toward greater integration of sustainability into "everyday business":

Communication and involvement are really important, not only in relation to sustainability and we have to balance symbolic situations and everyday business. The company can consider itself mature when there is no longer a need for celebratory occasions with high emotional value, such as the annual sustainability day - [HRMg, F]

On the other hand, this is how the CSR manager of E illustrated the shortcomings of a highly formalized green HRM system:

We do many things, but sometimes you lose the general sense of what you are doing: in the end, you do not know if your actions have had a positive impact at the global level or any impact at all... [CSRMg, E]

Although simplifying and overemphasizing certain aspects, communication and symbolic events provide all employees with a 'general sense' of their environmental efforts. But managers should also help to integrate environmental sustainability into the organizational routine, in order to influence concrete work practices. In conclusion, when defining the formalization of green HRM systems, companies need constantly to balance "symbolic situations and everyday business".

#### **4.2.4 Collective vs. individualized green HRM practices**

Every company is a mixture of employees with different characteristics, interests and perspectives: these often represent a problematic aspect of organizations. In other



words, internal diversity gives rise to a paradoxical situation. Companies in which explicit messages and strategic statements connect visions and missions to environmental goals are aware that those messages have different audiences. This paradox emerges when setting the level of standardization of the green HRM system.

At one pole there are undifferentiated messages and practices that clarify ambiguities regarding strategic environmental plans. The alternative strategy is to focus on the attitudes of employees and assign suitable practices to different categories.

For example, in company C environmental efforts were directed at all employees without considering their position and organizational level.

Not all of the middle managers are fully committed to ES and we take the risk of sending ambiguous messages to all workers: it might be that an employee is strongly committed to environmental sustainability, whereas his or her direct supervisor is not committed at all... - [HRMg, C]

Neglecting different orientations and positions may affect the way in which supervisors manage their subordinates, causing misunderstandings and failures.

For example, the HR manager of company D explained that, while younger people are more sensitive to environmental plans, older workers “for reasons such as age and monoculture” regard environmental plans as unnecessary. The company decided to deal with this inconsistency by differentiating HRM practices in relation to the different age groups. We have already illustrated (paradox 2) the company’s ambitious recruitment plan, which injected young, environmentally sensitive employees into the organization. Regarding senior employees and workers, they decided instead to intervene on work practices, modifying the layout of workplaces and introducing rules and procedures on safety and waste disposal: because they could not impact on the inner beliefs and values of this part of the workforce, they decided to act on concrete work behaviors in order to reduce the inconsistency within the company.

The universal approach is simple to manage and effective in the case of strong homogeneous company cultures and when there is a shared commitment to sustainability goals at all company levels. Conversely, it fails to address different values and interests of employees when internal heterogeneity is high. The individualized approach instead needs more time and preparation, but it is successful in taking advantage of potential capabilities of even those employees who are not green-oriented.

#### **4.2.5 Value-free vs. value-based employee involvement**

In the management of HR, some choices must be made with regard to how much a company wants its employees to be engaged in sustainability efforts and what kind of involvement they should have in the realization of environmental plans.

Employee involvement may be on a purely instrumental basis defined in the employment contract and supported by the benefit system. Or it may be rooted in personal attitudes that mobilize employees' values and sensitivity. This paradox operates at the level of motivations and opportunities for employees to participate.

An example of value-free, transactional involvement is provided by company F, which operated in mass retailing. This company had implemented a system of sanctions to induce store-level collaborators to collect waste packaging in the proper manner. Value-free involvement mechanisms can reach all the employees in the organization, not only those already committed to environmental sustainability. A system of control and sanctions of this kind is effective in reducing deviant behavior and free riding, although it does not assure a workforce truly committed to environmental actions.

It is important to have employees aligned with the organization's overall vision and mission. It is for this reason that some companies (A, C, E) declared that they sought to verify candidates' 'green orientation' during job interviews. However, when managing

their personnel, a further process of involvement raised the risk of creating new expectations and demands for companies:

There's fear and uncertainty in every change process. Many people do not do their best because they do not know where the change is leading. There's also a fear in activating people: they may become more critical and ask always for more if the company shares some problems or doubts... - [HRMg, F]

The same risk was identified by the CSR manager of E, who stated that when she asked someone for their opinion, “they [would] come back and ask me for feedback”. This is because people are not easily satisfied and “always want to know the result of their contribution”.

The paradox is essentially related to whether a company prefers ‘activated’ employees, accepting the implications of raising their motivations and expectations; or whether a company prefers value-free employee involvement. Benefit/sanction systems reinforce an exclusively instrumental attitude toward sustainability goals; but at the same time, they are less problematic from the managerial point of view and more effective in reaching the workforce as a whole.

#### **4.2.6 Top-down vs. bottom-up change processes**

In our research we found that the nature of environmental sustainability implementation can be traced back to either top-down or bottom-up change processes. Strategic and structured actions pertain to top-down practice, meaning that they start from top management and then follow the process structured by top managers. By contrast, companies can obtain involvement, commitment and participation through bottom-up processes, which arise mainly from employees and then spread to the upper levels of the organization.

There are many reasons that induce companies to choose top-down practices: for example, the influence of top management decisions, the possibility of cost reduction and clear evaluation of interventions or the possibility to implement prompt corrective actions. For example, company E, had decided to opt for a general top-down approach to sustainability; the CEO said that this was necessary because otherwise there would have been no significant improvement in the company's environmental performance.

One problem with this approach is that it places a great deal of stress on results, even though when companies undertake an action, the results are not certain and information is never complete.

When colleagues devise a project, a doubt remains: can we manage to balance people, planet earth and profits? The goal is ambitious, the project goes in the right direction, with data on the reduction of carbon dioxide and waste... but one may wonder how much the model actually affects global balances. It is a virtuous path, but to what extent can you affect this balance?-  
[CSRMg, E]

Moreover, when companies follow this pathway, it seems that they have difficulties in creating commitment:

The main challenge is creating commitment. This is the most difficult thing needed to start the project, because it requires a substantial initial investment and it is hard to manage involvement -  
[CSRMg, E]

Alternatively, management can support the emergence of ideas by creating spaces and opportunities for employees to participate. In this regard, company E also tried to stimulate suggestions and change initiatives from the employee level. This bottom-up approach was characterized by "less pressure" and "more spontaneity" in the words of the interviewee. Nevertheless, there were some other weaknesses:

We organized forums where people could discuss environmental sustainability. We were trying to reduce impacts at the individual level, including private life, but some saw it as an intrusion,

because they saw a disproportion between individual and business impacts. These topics are delicate and may cause employee complaints - [CSRMg, E]

The advantage of top-down initiatives is that they are more effective and controllable, although they may suffer from a lack of commitment. Bottom-up processes are more spontaneous; but when they are in place, it is difficult to undertake a consistent set of environmental actions or to frame them in integrated environmental reports and branding activities, because the lack of a clear direction may lead to ambiguous outcomes, disagreement or even rejection.

#### **4.2.7 Centralization vs. decentralization of the green HRM system**

Managers know that environment-related plans require not only resources and funds but also consistency in their implementation and the involvement of all departments. In light of these requirements, a key question is whether the company should have a separate centralized environmental department or environmental professionals working in all departments (decentralized structure). This question concerns the structuring of green HRM systems and it directly affects the criteria defining all the three HRM policy domains (i.e. knowledge, skills and abilities; motivation and effort; opportunities-to-contribute).

A centralized environmental department enables companies to undertake explicit and distinct environmental actions and to have specialized employees whose abilities, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined for the other departments.

On describing the relation with the HRM department of her company, the head of the environment department of company C said:

The contribution of the HR results in strongly supportive action. For example, when communicating to employees the results of environmental performances such as waste collection, recycling, energy savings ... - [EnvMg, C]

Nevertheless, centralized structures may pass on problems from one department to another, complicating company structure and decision-making. Another problem of centralization is that the environmental competences of the HRM department may not be enough to guide employees:

In terms of supportive training, the HR plays a passive role, since the environment department proposed the environmental training and the HR only agreed with them -[ENVMg, C]

Companies need culture, time and training to become decentralized. However, this strategy is attractive for organizations because it decreases the misconnection between departments. A concrete example of decentralization is provided by the role of the sustainability development coordinator (SDC) in company F. The definition of this role emphasizes the fact that sustainability development is considered to be common responsibility in the company.

Our slogan is: everyone is responsible for every responsibility! [emphasis]. Responsibility thus refers to good suppliers, transport, people management, customer contact, products marketing, support in the use of increasingly green products, impact in the area where the store is located, waste disposal [...] every business unit works to reinforce the sustainability process - [SDC, F]

Company F, which operated in mass retailing, had a highly decentralized structure. Since the beginning of its sustainability strategy, established in every store had been 'green teams' which devised and pursued their own environmental initiatives. An emerging problem was that realization of these initiatives was strongly dependent on the willingness of local actors like store managers.

In conclusion, decentralized structures are more difficult to achieve and stakeholders within and outside the organization may consider the environment to be a secondary concern because there is no central authoritative interlocutor. Centralization instead assign clear tasks and responsibilities to specialized managerial figures, but it increases

internal disconnection because other departments can only play a supportive role in the development and realization of environmental plans.

#### **4.2.8 Role of the HR manager: personal credibility vs. professional credibility**

The last paradox has to do with the degree and form of involvement of employees in the greening of their companies and it focuses on those actors in the organization who work directly on the HRM system: HR managers and their staff. This paradox is related to the personal positioning of people working in HRM departments with regard to environmental sustainability. The issue at stake is this: is it preferable to have ‘technical’ support, based mainly on the company’s requirements and operating through the classic HRM tools; or to have the ‘personal’ involvement of HR managers which overcomes the boundaries of their professional and working lives?

The two poles are well exemplified by the opposed positions of two interviewees. According to the HR manager of B, “beyond ethics and an ideal commitment to improving the world, which are part of every individual, the role of the HR manager should be distinct...”, because – the interviewee further explained – it is not part of this role to promote environmental sustainability at the company level.

Another interviewee instead preferred a more ‘exposed position’ from the point of view of his private life and everyday choices:

The most difficult thing was changing personal behaviors in order to reach congruence between what is said and done in lifestyles, especially in the domestic and private sphere. Because in order to spread a green message I must be believable [emphasis]. So, me and my family, we decided to make purchase choices such as getting rid of the car, paying attention to water and energy consumption, etcetera. This enabled me to see myself as a reliable interlocutor and as carrying forward environmental efforts for my company in a vigorous way - [HRMg, F]

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According to the first interviewee, a ‘professional approach’ focused on specific HRM tools strengthens the position of HR managers and gives them more power in supporting sustainability policies along with other organizational objectives. By contrast, the second interviewee thought that the personal example of HR managers in the promotion of sustainability at company level, although less systematic, was more effective in “carrying forward environmental efforts” in regard to himself and the employees.

In the first case, the HR manager is a ‘professional supporter’ of sustainability, helping to design a technically optimal green HRM system involving recruitment, training, job design, benefits, etc. In this way HR managers support the greening of their organization by doing what they know best: HRM. The other option is to overcome role boundaries by bringing personal values into work, so as to heighten the effect of green HRM interventions with the personal examples and beliefs of HR managers.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In the previous section we presented: (i) the features of the green HRM systems implemented in each organization, considering respectively ability-enhancing practices (recruiting, selection, training and development), motivation-enhancing practices (performance management, incentive and compensation) and opportunity-enhancing practices (employee involvement and job design practices); (ii) the eight paradoxes that we identified in the companies analyzed when HRM meets environmental sustainability. In this section, we discuss the knowledge advances of the research findings.

In regard to our first result (i.e. the green HRM practices implemented by the organizations studied), those organizations had a broad set of implemented practices. We found that the organizations selected engaged in practices similar to those



considered by previous studies (referring in particular to Renwick et al., 2013). For example, five out of the six companies analyzed had green practices covering all three components of the HRM system, i.e. green HRM practices enhancing abilities, motivations and opportunities. The exception was by company B (a global company operating in the consultancy industry) which did not implement any practice included in the opportunity domain. This confirms that the practicing managers whom we interviewed operated on a highly diversified set of green HRM policies and practices, experiencing the complexity and interrelation of sustainability-oriented interventions in organizations. Therefore, following Jackson (2012), we argue that, by analyzing the overall green HRM system rather than a limited set of HRM practices, our study derived a picture of green HRM close to the concrete everyday experience of practitioners in organizations.

Moreover, in relation to the relevance of the national and institutional context, we showed how these companies implemented green HRM practices in order (i) to fulfill explicit commercial requirements imposed by public administrations in relation to the green-related competencies that key employees of their service providers are required to possess or (ii) to take advantage of public resources supporting extensive training activities on green-related issues.

Besides these observations relative to our first findings, we consider this study's essential finding to be that paradoxes characterized all the companies analyzed. Moreover, paradoxes were found to be pervasive in all the components of the green HRM system. Indeed, paradoxes were apparent in relation to the objectives of the green HRM system (paradox 1), its boundaries (paradox 2), its formalization (paradox 3) and standardization (paradox 4). Paradoxes were also found in relation to specific practices within the green HRM system, such as promoting employee green abilities (paradox 7),

motivation (paradox 7) and opportunities (paradoxes 5, 6 and 7). Finally, it emerged that even the role of the HR manager becomes paradoxical in environmental sustainability-oriented companies (paradox 8).

These findings extend the previous literature in two directions.

First, although our results concern the experience of a limited number of companies, they show that sustainability in general and environmental sustainability in particular, are intrinsically paradoxical and convey paradoxes to organizations – as has been illustrated by several contributions in organization disciplines. As a consequence, we argue that the adoption of paradox theory as a lens through which to study sustainable HRM represents a fertile and insightful perspective, as theorized in the recent contributions by Ehnert (2009, 2014).

Second, this study contributes to the development of a more realistic and problematizing view of the concept of fit by integrating – and contextualizing in the HRM field – management studies on paradox theory. Indeed, Cameron and Quinn (1988) state that considering paradoxes enables researchers to understand the complexity, ambiguity and diversity of organizations. Moreover, Eisenhardt and Westcott (1988: 170) claim that “the contribution of paradox to management thinking is the recognition of its power to generate creative insight and change”. Agreeing with studies that consider a ‘fit’ solution and polarized notions to be an oversimplified interpretation, our study shows that ‘fit’ (i) is a complex task, because both poles of the paradoxes identified are attractive; (ii) is multi-level, because there are many paradoxes at different levels of green HRM systems; (iii) is dynamic, because it changes over time according to the priorities of organizations and their stakeholders. As a result, we draw attention to the two following questions: (1) can we really expect companies to have a perfect fit; in other words, is it doable? and (2) because many scholars such as Quinn et

al. (1994) and Denison et al. (1995), refer to paradoxes as learning opportunities, can we really suggest that companies should constantly seek the perfect fit? Our findings support the idea that adopting a fit perspective in green HRM is problematic, because it may not account for the paradoxical tensions that seem to be persistent in green HRM systems and because it may cause companies to miss the learning opportunities that those paradoxes offer.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS FOR GREEN HRM PRACTICE AND CONCLUSION

The previous discussion brings us to the main managerial implications, as well as the limits and possible developments, of this study. From the standpoint of green HRM practice, we highlight the implications for two specific types of practicing managers.

First, we believe that our findings are important for managers designing green HRM systems ‘from scratch’ because they can help those managers to make more informed design choices by considering the potential downsides. For example, a company might decide to mobilize its workforce toward environmental sustainability by developing more green-oriented values and organizational culture, rather than by incorporating it into standard procedures. Our findings – in particular paradox 5, ‘value-free versus value-based involvement’ – suggest to such a company that this choice has the potential to activate employees’ motivation on green issues. At the same time, however, without a system that sanctions free-riding behavior, the company is taking the risk not to ‘onboard’ the employees not sensitive to these topics. The list of paradoxes can thus be useful to warn practitioners of the possible ‘B-side’ of each design choice when arranging the green HRM system of their company. We argue that this warning function is particularly important in a growing field like green HRM, where there is the risk of applying oversimplified solutions, for example supported by global HRM consultancy

firms or of diffusing a ‘best-practicism’ mindset supported by success stories disseminated by non-scientific publications.

Second, the paradoxes illustrated can help managers working on existing green HRM practices to develop a constructive reaction to possibly emerging paradoxes. Indeed, we know from the previous literature that there are two possible reactions to paradoxes. The first reaction is to control/suppress the paradox, which means assuming a defensive position in an attempt to avoid it. The alternative reaction is to cope with/explore the paradox; this allows managers to consider paradoxes as opportunities that enable them to profit from tensions (Eisenhardt and Westcott 1988; Lewis 2000; Ehnert 2009). The development of the latter reaction is fostered by recognition of the paradox and the related tension, as well as the view of them as “normal” rather than as “exceptional” elements of organizational life (Lewis, 2000). From this perspective, the paradoxes presented here can be used by practitioners operating in environmental sustainability-oriented companies to recognize the paradoxes in their green HRM practices and to consider them as ‘normal’, in order to develop context-specific constructive coping strategies.

Finally, we recognize that green HRM is a relatively new and effervescent area of research and practice and that application of a paradox view is an innovative contribution in this area. Therefore, like any other, this study suffers from some limitations that, given its exploratory nature, can be considered an agenda for future research. One limitation concerns the size and features of our sample, because we targeted six big environmentally-committed companies, with relevant experience in green HRM and operating in the Italian context, which has cultural and institutional peculiarities in regard to environmental sustainability. Future research (especially quantitative studies) could investigate, on a larger and differentiated sample, what

organizational, cultural and institutional variables are associated with specific green HRM paradoxes. Secondly, our research involved only designers of environmental sustainability plans (i.e. HR, CSR and environmental managers) and not other organizational actors that are the ‘users’ of those plans, such as employees or line managers. Moreover, our interviews generally referred to green policies and practices applied to the whole workforce. Because HRM systems are usually differentiated for different groups of employees (e.g. Dierdoff and Morgeson, 2013), further research is needed to explore what are the paradoxes perceived by different occupational groups within organizations. Thirdly, we restricted our study to identification of the paradoxes without describing the coping strategies adopted by the organizations studied to deal with them and their outcomes: this also represents an avenue for future research.

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## CHAPTER I

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# Chapter II.

## CSR managers talk: occupational rhetorics of an emergent managerial specialism<sup>4</sup>

“Whenever there is persuasion there is rhetoric and  
whenever there is rhetoric there is meaning”

Kenneth Burke, in *A rhetoric of motives*

“La menzogna non è nel discorso, è nelle cose”

Calvino, in *Le città invisibili*

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<sup>4</sup> A preliminary version of the findings of this study has been presented to the CSR Manager Association on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in a dedicated event hold at the Catholic University of Milano. Selected findings has been presented also at the ‘Saloon of CSR and Social Innovation’ at the Bocconi University on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. A preliminary version of these findings has been published as a research report in Italian by the CSR Manager Network and is now available at <http://www.csrmanagernetwork.it/>

A preliminary version of this manuscript has been presented at the EGOS Colloquium in Athens and at the AOM Conference in Vancouver in 2015.

The current version of this manuscript is in preparation to be submitted at *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.



**CSR managers talk:  
occupational rhetorics of an emergent managerial specialism**

**ABSTRACT**

CSR is often depicted as a major challenge to current business practices. As a consequence, those individuals holding CSR-related roles in organizations have recently been indicated as privileged examples of change agents. In this paper we undertake an occupational perspective to look at those managers who are primarily in charge to develop and implement CSR initiatives: CSR managers. We focus in particular on their occupational rhetorics, which correspond to idealized images of the occupation these managers use to represent their work in front of themselves and their colleagues. On the basis of a multi-methods research process which included in-depth interviews, observation at public events and meetings and focus group interviews, we identify five broad rhetoric repertoires: “the motor of change”, “the business-oriented”, “the fatalist”, “the idealist” and “the bookkeeper”. The primacy of the first two repertoires leads us to draw some conclusions on the magnitude and type of change CSR managers are more likely to foster in current business practices.

**KEY WORDS:**

CSR, change agents, occupation, rhetorics

## CHAPTER II



1. INTRODUCTION

CSR is often depicted as a major challenge to current business practices (Mullerat et al. 2005; Aguilera et al. 2007; Visser, 2011). The type of change CSR implies in organizations however is difficult to qualify, because of the ambiguous nature of the concept. In the last thirty years, CSR has been in constant evolution (Carroll, 1999, 2008) so that scholars have described it as a ‘moving target’ (Churchill, 1974) and an essentially ‘embryonic and contestable’ concept (Windsor, 2006). From a research standpoint, this constant evolution has made of CSR an unstable arena of exploration (Lockett et al., 2006). CSR literature is today highly fragmented because of the several disciplines that focused on the topic and the different levels of analysis adopted (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). CSR can thus be considered an ‘ambiguous phenomenon’ because it holds or is attributed “several incoherent meanings and fragmentation, and is not possible to decide which one is the best” (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003, 978).

Such ambiguity has led to the development of a considerable critique. Critical scholars, while highlighting its functional role for corporate profit-maximization (Banerjee, 2008; Luke, 2013), affirmed that CSR represents merely an expression of neo-liberal market ideology (Shamir, 2004; Richter, 2010) or, at best, a simple form of window-dressing for corporations (Rasmus and Montiel, 2005; Ählström, 2010).

The debate over CSR and its possible impacts has recently shifted its attention to the role of individual actors because, as Aguinis and Glavas (2012, 953) argue, “although CSR takes place at the organizational level of analysis, individual actors are those who actually strategize, make decisions, and execute CSR initiatives”. Various mechanisms have been advanced to explain the contribution of individuals to CSR-inspired change interventions. For example, in a theoretical piece Basu and Palazzo (2008) illustrate the role of leadership style and organizational sense-making. Haack et al. (2012) show how

the implementation of a CSR project is the result of a struggle between ‘internal activists’ and ‘antagonists’ that compete on a narrative and rhetorical ground. Christensen et al. (2013) affirm that managers’ discourse about CSR is a positive communicative genre that, despite the existence of an inevitable gap with actual business practices, can bring about positive transformations. Consequently, there is a rather widespread consensus in considering those managers who hold a CSR-related role as a privileged example of change agents, individuals that can foster sustainability in business contexts (Visser, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2012).

Building on these contributions, Wickert and Schaefer (2015) affirm that CSR managers are ‘protagonists of a cause’ inside organizations and can be mobilized by critical researchers through appropriate engagement strategies. Their claim is part of a wider debate that counterpoises on one side, critical scholars who seek an active engagement with practitioners (Spicer et al., 2009; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) and, on the other, authors who are more disillusioned regarding the capacity of managers to positively affect corporate behavior (Felming and Banerjee, 2015; Cabantous et al., 2015).

Despite this attention towards CSR and its advocates, there are few studies that empirically investigated the role of CSR practitioners in organizations. CSR managers represent today an emergent occupational group that is trying to get legitimacy and recognition within business contexts. In our piece we use insights from sociology of professions and occupations to investigate the raise and affirmation of this new managerial specialism. We look in particular at how CSR practitioners rhetorically constitute their own role and how they ascribe particular positions to themselves and CSR in organizations. This will help to understand how they interpret CSR-driven change, casting some light on the nature and magnitude of change CSR managers are likely to foster in business contexts.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### **2.1 CSR managers: an occupational group struggling for affirmation**

CSR and sustainability are nowadays a flourishing industry and an area of specialization for a growing number of professionals working within and across firms' boundaries (Brés and Gond, 2014; Christensen, 2015). Whereas some contributions focused on specialized CSR consultants, highlighting their role in the creation of a market and commercialization of CSR solutions (Windell, 2007; Brés and Gond, 2014), little attention have been paid to those managers who are primarily in charge to implement CSR initiatives 'from the inside' of organizations. The ever more-spread role of 'CSR manager' represents in this sense a new, emergent managerial specialism and a possible occupational outcome for individuals undertaking an executive career.

Managerial specialisms are the result of a process of division of expert labour that characterized corporate hierarchies in the last century (Reed, 1996; Muzio et al. 2013; Brock et al. 2014). Armstrong (1986, 26) defines them as "relatively self-conscious specialisms which compete at a group level for access to the key positions of command". This view is consistent with the system of professions illustrated by Abbott (1988), in which professional groups are engaged in a continuous competition in order to affirm their jurisdiction over certain areas of expertise. In his classic work, Abbott refuses to take an essentialist stance defining a fixed number of traits or a precise evolutionary path that univocally distinguish professions from occupations. The author's theorization allows instead for a more dynamic consideration of a broad range of occupational and professional phenomena and, for these reasons, it has been recently indicated as a useful theoretical resource to look at the progressive specialization of managerial work (Bureau and Suquet, 2009; Muzio et al., 2013).

Therefore, although managerial specialisms are not a ‘profession’ in the traditional sense of the term (Reed, 1996), they nevertheless represent occupational groups that compete for legitimacy and status<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence, members of these groups need to continuously affirm their capacity to solve essential problems of business organizations, in order to gain resources and influence within the bureaucratic structures they inhabit (Reed, 1996; Wright, 2008; Muzio et al., 2013).

On this matter, the rhetorical strategies employed by members of occupational groups play a major role. Through rhetoric for example, professionals operate what Abbott (1988) calls ‘reduction and diagnosis’: they reduce a larger problem into more specific problems that are subsequently related to their own area of expertise. This process of rhetorical contestation is directed to present the solutions a particular group offers as the most appropriate, in opposition to the alternative solutions advanced by other specialized groups. In a study on health and safety staff professionals, Daudigeos (2013) shows that the use of a variety of rhetorical resources was fundamental for these professionals to acquire the power and legitimacy necessary to build the case for new organizational practices, thus initiating change in prevailing organizational logics. Researchers have also found that notions of ‘professionalism’ and ‘being professional’ are often invoked by members of occupational groups as rhetorical resources to boost their status in different settings (Alvesson, 2013). Among managerial specialists, this has been observed in the case of consultants (Kitay and Wright, 2007; Kipping, 2011), project managers (Hodgson, 2005) and HR managers (Watson, 2002; Alvesson, 2013). Regarding HR managers, a dense bulk of studies investigated how the evolution in practitioners’ jargon signals a shift towards more business-oriented interpretations of

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<sup>5</sup> Consistently with the considerations reported above, in the text I refer to the ‘CSR manager’ role as an occupation or a managerial specialism. Whenever the term ‘profession’ is used in relation to CSR managers, it is done in the common language sense (similarly to what done in Watson, 2002, about HR managers), with no reference to the notion of ‘profession’ typical of a certain sociological tradition.

their role. This evolution was mainly directed to achieve central and ‘strategic’ positions for HR managers inside organizations and had relevant consequences for the recent developments of their occupation and those affected by it (Watson, 2002; Wright, 2008; Keegan and Francis, 2010).

How Suddaby and Viale (2011, 435) note, rhetorics play a central role in how occupational groups reproduce their ‘social, cultural and symbolic capital’. Language is indeed ‘a crucial weapon’ for occupational and professional groups so that their members can be considered ‘skilled rhetoricians’ (*ibidem*). Moreover, rhetorics operate at the micro-level emphasizing the intentionality and agency behind social actor’s strategic use of language (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Suddaby, 2010). Members of specialized managerial functions, who are engaged on a daily basis in justifying their actions and decisions in order to strength their position in the corporate hierarchy, are particularly susceptible to the strategic use of rhetorics. This is consistent with those authors that highlight the role of language in managerial work and the importance for managers to acquire distinct linguistic skills (e.g. Du Gay et al. 1996; Watson, 2002; Sturdy et al. 2006; Cunliffe, 2009). Building on these insights, we adopt the concept of occupational rhetorics (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007) to guide our research on the raise and affirmation of a new specialized managerial figure: the CSR manager. Its definition and key theoretical features are discussed in the following section in relation to our research object.

## **2.2 Investigating CSR managers’ occupational rhetorics**

Fine (1996, 91) defines occupational rhetoric as “the process of fitting work into a meaning system”. The author affirms that a single occupation can be related to multiple occupational rhetorics, which represent ‘repertoires of meanings’, ‘bundles of images’

workers use to represent their work. Occupational rhetorics are basically idealized images to which managers try to align their work behavior and self- and colleagues' perceptions of their work: they are both in-ward and out-ward directed, aimed to persuade both the self and others, in accordance with contemporary theorizations of the notion of rhetoric (Bonet, 2014).

Rhetorical images are particularly salient for those occupations that fit into organizations in multiple ways, because the variety of pressures and demands of organizational life expands the range of the performed activities and, consequently, the modes of self-representation. Ambiguity in the definition of an occupational domain is said to foster the plurality of occupational rhetorics, especially for those performing in front of a wide public with a lot of responsibilities (Fine, 1996).

Whereas Fine's original work investigated restaurant cooks, Kitay and Wright (2007) applied this conceptual frame on the case of management consultants. They found that different rhetorics are likely to be displayed by consultants in different situations: "members of occupations do not present a singular vision of themselves and their work but use rhetorics in a complex and situationally contingent manner" (ibidem, 1635). The authors also observed that the repertoires of images underlying different rhetorics can be not entirely consistent revealing tensions within an occupation. The choice of occupational rhetorics as a sensitizing concept for research has thus the advantage to catch contradictory meanings and potential tensions pervading occupational areas characterized by high ambiguity, such as CSR.

According to Fine (1996, 91) occupational rhetorics are tactics of impression management through which those who practice an occupation 'attempt to revise the conceptions which their various publics have of the occupation and of the people in it'. Similarly, for Kitay and Wright (2007) occupational rhetorics are used by members of an

occupation in response to structural constraints such as the lack of legitimacy, in order to promote a positive image of the occupation and its contributions.

At the same time, rhetorics are an expression of occupational identity, which is always a situated and multiple identity, the result of identity work in the many different contexts where members of an occupation are placed (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007). Far from being a purely individual and psychological matter, occupational rhetorics are indeed 'public and shared', just like the meanings they entail (Mumby, 2011). Through rhetorics thus, occupational identities result involved in the competition for status and resources between occupational groups. Alvesson (2013) notes for example that HR/personnel managers have long been trying to embellish their occupational identity to ameliorate their position in organizations. In sum, it is possible to affirm that occupational rhetorics, while reflecting occupational identities, have both a subjective and a structural component (Kitay and Wright, 2007) or, how Fine (1996, 111) puts it, they are simultaneously 'a social psychological and sociopolitical phenomenon' used to achieve identification and status by members of an occupation.

An occupational lens focused on the investigation of occupational rhetorics presents thus the advantage to consider specialized managerial actors as part of broader occupational groups, which compete to achieve resources and power within the business contexts where they work. In addition, it accounts also for the role of individual members and their contribution to the formation and maintenance of a positive image of their occupation. Both these aspects are particularly relevant in the case of new emergent managerial specialisms, such as that of CSR manager, who are urged to establish a positive and distinguished occupational identity and communicate it (Kitay and Wright, 2007). As a result of these considerations we ask: what are the occupational rhetorics mobilized by CSR managers? Through the study of occupational

rhetorics, our aim is to investigate how these managers construct and legitimize their position in business contexts.

Our research interrogative is in line with Suddaby and Viale (2011, 431) who exhort scholars to investigate the ‘micro (often individual) level at which professional identities, talents and attributes are constructed and reproduced’ and, more in general, with all those interested in studying the individual meaning making operated by members of an occupation in relation to their work activity (e.g. Cohen, 2005; Kitay and Wright, 2007). As Kitay and Wright (2007) argue, the study of occupational rhetorics requires an appreciation of the structural and organizational circumstances that surround a particular occupational practice. At this purpose, we review below the existing literature on CSR managers, in order to delineate some relevant features and circumstances of CSR managers’ work in organizations.

### **2.3 CSR managers’ occupational rhetorics in context**

CSR managers have been object of few empirical studies so far: partial exceptions are the articles by Tams and Marshall (2011), Haack et al. (2012) and Strand (2013). With a research interest in individuals operating in emerging fields such as corporate responsibility and social entrepreneurship, the first contribution considers CSR managers an example of “responsible career”: individuals who seek to have an impact on broader social and environmental issues through their employment choices. Haack et al. (2012) illustrate how the process of implementation of a CSR standard at the organizational level is the result of a narrative struggle in which employees working in the CSR department play the part of ‘protagonists’, as opposed to other employees and groups that are ‘antagonists’ of CSR interventions. Focusing on the composition of top management teams, Strand (2013) argues that having a position of CSR manager at that



level helps to embed CSR in company procedures and routine. Despite providing valuable insights, these contributions however are devoted to study generic individuals committed to CSR principles regardless their organizational role, or focus on the dynamics of implementation of CSR at the organizational level dealing only indirectly with the work and role of CSR managers.

Further knowledge about this emergent managerial role can be derived from surveys and periodic studies developed by national ‘professional’ associations, dedicated research centers or consulting societies. The ‘Profile of the profession’ elaborated by the Boston College (2010, 26) declaims that CSR managers’ “backgrounds and responsibilities [are] as diverse as the challenges they face. But those varied backgrounds also demonstrate a common trait of embracing change”. Similarly, the Australian Center for CSR (ACCSR, 2007), as well as the Italian CSR Manager Network (2012), report a long list of activities which goes from ‘community partnership’ to ‘employee engagement’, ‘CSR measurements and reporting’, ‘sponsorships’, ‘CSR communication’, ‘participation in external ratings’ and much more.

Overall, there are two general features characterizing CSR managers’ work that appears relevant for the study of their occupational rhetorics. A first element emerging both from the practitioner-oriented and the academic literature, is the marginality of CSR managers in organizational contexts. Professional reports often highlight the lack of resources in terms of budget, time, team size and position within the company hierarchy, that characterize CSR managers’ work (e.g. ACCSR, 2007; Boston College, 2010). Similarly, Haack et al. (2012) and Wickert and Schaefer (2015) affirm that those engaged in CSR projects considerably struggle to pursue these initiatives, because of the opposition of those colleagues who are more business-oriented. This feature adds to the more general structural context of competition for status and resources between

occupational groups, reinforcing the necessity for CSR managers to achieve recognition and legitimacy for their role within business organizations.

A second feature, emerging mainly from the practitioner-oriented literature, is the high indeterminacy of CSR managers' role, which entails a multiplicity of activities and responsibilities. This can be explained by the fact that CSR represents a new domain of managerial specialization and its jurisdictional boundaries are not yet well defined (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Moreover, as already highlighted, CSR is an ambiguous concept which carries a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations (Carroll 1999 and 2008; Windsor, 2006). Such ambiguity significantly affects the ways members of occupational groups attach meanings to their work, consequently expanding the rhetorical repertoire at their disposal (Fine, 1996).

In sum, the picture of CSR managers' work we get from the existent literature is that of a highly diversified managerial occupation, which includes a variety of backgrounds, tasks and responsibilities and suffers considerable marginality in business contexts. Moving from these general exploratory observation, we undertook an empiric investigation of CSR managers' occupational rhetorics. While looking at their occupational rhetorics, we are particularly interested to understand how CSR managers intend the CSR driven change in organizations and how they consequently interpret their role in relation to that change. This will help to cast some light on the type of change CSR managers are likely to pursue in current business and managerial practices.

### 3. METHODS

We centered our fieldwork on the members of the CSR Manager Network, the Italian 'professional' association of CSR managers which had at the time of the research a total membership of a hundred and nine practitioners.

This way we avoided definitional issues while adopting an in-group definition of CSR manager, which means that we interviewed people who call themselves “CSR manager” and recognize each other under the same label. This is of particular importance for an occupation which boundaries are not well-defined, which is present in organizations with varied job titles and is often overlapped with other roles and responsibilities (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015; see also the ‘Job title’ column of Table 3 ‘Profile of respondents’ at the next page).

Moreover, associations with an occupational basis like this hold an important role in advancing the cause of occupational groups (Muzio et al., 2011). For example, as demonstrated by Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) in the case of North American accountants, they represent important arenas in which the occupational identities of their members are rhetorically shaped and promoted. Before starting the data collection process, we run a preliminary investigation consulting previous research reports and other documentary material available to the CSR Manager Network.

The main data-gathering technique of the research was the semi-structured interview. In the period between March and November 2014 we realized 26 interviews with CSR managers operating both in national and multinational companies. We differentiated our interviewees on the basis of their age, gender, role seniority, managerial level and position, and the size and industry of the company where they were employed. These criteria were not directed to achieve statistical representativeness, but rather to collect differentiated voices and perspectives on the occupation of CSR manager. Thanks to informal contacts and indirect relations, we also included in the sample four interviewees who were not members of the Network. A profile of the respondents can be found in Table 3 at the next page.

CHAPTER II

Table 3. Profile of respondents.

Male/ Female	Age	Organization type	Job title
M	40-45	Airport service provider	CSR manager
M	50-55	Food retailing	Internal audit and CSR officer
M	55-60	Supermarket chain	CSR and External Relations director
M	30-35	Transports	CSR officer
M	55-60	Semi-public municipal services provider	Head of CSR and Sustainability
M	55-60	Building and infrastructures	CSR and Energy manager
M	35-40	Small business in food distribution services	CSR manager
F	35-40	Delivery company	CSR manager
M	50-55	Banking industry	Head of Corporate identity, Quality and Sustainability
F	40-45	Insurance company	Sustainability officer
F	45-50	Chemical industry	CSR manager
M	45-50	Oil and Energy industry	CSR manager
M	40-45	Energy industry	Head of CSR
F	35-40	Telecommunications	Sustainability manager
F	55-60	Oil and Energy industry	Head of CSR and Sustainability
F	40-45	Delivery company	Sustainability & Communication manager
M	45-50	Manufacturing	Sustainability manager & Marketing director
M	50-55	Semi-public municipal services provider	CSR director
M	45-50	Telecommunication	Sustainability & Reporting director
M	55-60	Insurance company	CSR manager
F	40-45	Tourism industry	Sustainability and Public Relations director
M	35-40	Automotive	Head of Sustainability
M	60-65	Banking industry	CSR manager
F	40-45	Building and infrastructures	Head of CSR and Communication
F	50-55	Food & beverages	CSR director
F	40-45	Business services	CSR and Special Projects director

The interview track was divided into three sections, the first exploring how the interviewee became a CSR manager, the second focused on the current work, its tasks, responsibilities and difficulties and the final part oriented to the personal aspirations and the possible future evolutions of the role. We realized the interviews following the guidelines for the ethnographic interview elaborated by Spradley (1979): the interview protocol was intended as a flexible tool of inquiry and we prioritized the natural development of the interviewee discourse, adapting the interview track while performing it. Except one that was conducted by phone, all the others were face-to-face interviews. The interviews lasted between one and two hours, were full-recorded and transcribed soon after their realization.

Further data was gathered from the participation to two public conferences held in Italy in October 2014, where several CSR managers discussed their work in public. These conferences are yearly meeting dedicated to CSR which are held in Milan respectively in a local University and in a corporate foundation: they have a varied public mostly from the corporate world, but also journalists, academics and NGOs representatives. Finally, researchers participated to one meeting of the CSR Manager Network board, which is formed by the CSR managers of six big companies operating in Italy. In all these occasions researchers took notes of the rhetorics used by CSR managers. These notes were transcribed and form part of the empirical documentation of our study.

Data analysis and data collection proceeded together and iteratively, coding and recoding the texts on the basis of the themes emerging from the fieldwork. Both the authors run the analysis separately, periodically discussing problems and inconsistency in the interpretation of the data: this permitted to triangulate the analysis process building a common understanding of the empirical documentation. The total number of interviews was determined by the principle of data saturation: we concluded the realization of

interviews when we recognized that no new themes or substantial changes were added to our previous interpretations of the data. In the examination of the empiric material, researchers run a thematic analysis. Following the definition of ‘theme’ given by Ryan and Bernard (2003), we looked for recurrent arguments and expressions in the transcriptions. We found it particularly consistent with our aim of tracking the occupational rhetorics of CSR managers because they consist basically in recurrent images these managers use to represent their work (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007). We first proceeded inductively making large use of «indigenous categories» to code the text (Bernard and Ryan, 2010) and operating thus at a low level of abstraction from the data (1st order concepts). In a second stage, we grouped first-level codes in broader categories identifying five occupational rhetorics so that, for example, ‘someone who seeks alternative solutions’ and ‘desirous to have an impact’ became part of the ‘motor of change’ type, whereas the ‘CSR manager is a business person’ and ‘importance of a background in economics’ substantiated the ‘business-oriented occupational rhetoric. While conducting and analyzing the interviews, data saturation was helped by the fact that interviewees used different argumentations at the same time, allowing the researchers to collect quotations for multiple rhetorics during a single interview. The whole analysis process was supported by the software for qualitative data analysis Atlas.ti, which was also used to coordinate and compare the work between the two coders.

We finally organized four focus group sessions with both interviewed and non-interviewed managers, where we presented a preliminary interpretation of the data. These sessions extended the research participants to further 19 CSR managers. Although the aim was not to seek confirmation of our interpretations, the focus group interviews lead us to refine them on the basis of practitioners’ feedback (Bloor, 2001).

#### 4. FINDINGS

In the analysis of our empirical documentation we identified five occupational rhetorics. Every rhetoric is presented below in the interviewees' words and then discussed in relation to the other occupational rhetorics identified.

##### **4.1 The “motor of change” CSR manager**

This is by far the most spread occupational rhetoric among CSR managers, present in almost all the individual interviews we undertook with a great amount of codes and quotations connected to it. It highlights how CSR managers positively describe themselves as change agents both within their company and the society more in general. It emerged since the very first interview with the CSR manager of an airport service-provider company:

The CSR manager for me is a change agent. Beyond all their available tools like, the sustainability report, the code of conduct... at the end this stuff need to produce change... often in a rather conservative environment. Consider that the majority of my colleague are here since ever, they never worked for another company. They started here, they grew here, they had a career here, they have always been here so they don't have a lot of change in their blood. Furthermore, many of them come from the line so, being CSR manager here is a tough challenge, a rather demanding task.

The idea to challenge organizational inertia is often recalled in CSR managers' talk. As stated by another interviewee: “the right expression is a motor of change... you need to bring-in fresh air, alternative ways of doing things and therefore you need to be a... a facilitator, a person who creates connections”. Consequently, CSR managers present their work as a relational one and social skills are indicated among the most important. Other common expressions to convey this image are the CSR manager as “people person” and “opinion leader”, individual who pursue a change in company culture and mentality through their social and relational skills.

However, CSR managers do not conceive company boundaries as the limit of their capacity “to have an impact”. The idea of pursuing a broader social change is a constitutive element of the responsible careers studied by Tams and Marshall (2011). It emerges evidently in the words of a CSR manager of a big Italian company in the energy industry, who explained how once she had the chance to have a political career, but she preferred to remain in the corporate world because she thinks it is more effective:

For me, working in a big company like [this] on these topics is much more incisive on reality than undertaking a political career, I mean... it's true that going to the parliament, becoming a deputy is really something, but I'm not sure I'd have had the same impact as much as I have it here.

Being “the motor of change” a metaphor per se, a further image belonging to the same rhetoric is proposed by one interviewee who stated “we are yeast, yeast that makes the dough grow. Without us there remains only water and flour and you can't eat them, you need yeast”.

This occupational rhetoric represents a kind of wishful thinking through which CSR managers try to pose their role at the centre of corporate life and CSR at the heart of processes of social change. This set of arguments results in line with those contributions that depict CSR as a major challenge to current business practices (Mullerat et al. 2005; Aguilera et al. 2007; Visser, 2011). Due to its repeated use and the emphasis given during the interviews, it emerges clearly that CSR managers draw on this rhetoric as the principal discursive resource to present their work in valuable terms.

#### **4.2 The business-oriented CSR manager**

The business-oriented CSR manager is another very popular rhetoric among CSR managers. It includes arguments like the fact that CSR is a source of competitive advantage and consequently CSR managers, as any other manager, have to maximize the



economic benefit for the company and limit the costs of their initiatives. When recurring to this set of images, CSR managers affirm their greatest aspiration is to find the business case, the ultimate proof that pursuing CSR policies increases the profitability of organizations. The importance to emphasize the monetary value of every CSR initiative was repeatedly claimed by CSR managers also during the public meetings attended by the researchers.

As a consequence, interviewees often argue that it is important to hold strong competences in economics and business administration:

We have a person here who manages... social issues but... since she's not very used to deal with numbers she has some limitations. I mean, every time we come to performance indicators, business models, it's evident she lacks basic competences in business administration. Even reading a balance sheet is a problem for her. Luckily we are a big structured company and she can rely on other competences doing her best in our division... let's say she uses her expertise in other areas, such as managing the relations with NGOs. However, according to me a certain sensitivity to deal with numbers is necessary, because our approach should be to speak the language of business keeping always in mind the business case for CSR. It's not easy but we should, right?

For the business-oriented CSR manager, numbers are the common language within the company, that can be used in front of colleagues and the board to stress the relevance of their work. In this sense, sustainability reports represent powerful tools. As explained by the CSR manager of a delivery company, the necessity “to translate projects and initiatives into numbers and to account for them” is useful to have a measure of the “real weight of CSR on the overall company effort”. This is in line with Wilhelm and Bort (2013) who note how managers, trying to build an image of themselves as rational actors, use figures and numbers to account for their actions in a convincing manner.

A further image we reconnected to this rhetoric is that of the “scientific” and “methodic” CSR manager:

## CHAPTER II

I tried to give a scientific-methodological approach to CSR initiatives. This presents us as people who take seriously their work, who operate with a certain rigour because it's not that we're here to waste money.

As noted by Hay (2013), managers recur to this idea of 'scientific rigour' to emphasize their expertise in solving managerial troubles and to deny the complexities of managerial practice.

Moreover, as explained by one interviewee, CSR manager have to be pragmatic: "the most pragmatic aspect of a company is the product. Therefore you need to demonstrate your impact on products and on the relations with clients". Pragmatic aspects are usually presented as opposed to a "more vague and ineffective academicism", that includes "ethical" and "theoretical" arguments. Part of the same occupational rhetoric and common to many interviewees, is indeed a certain aversion to talking about ethics. This is substantiated by taking distance from negative images like "the monsignor", emphatically affirmed by the CSR manager of a bank or, the Talking Cricket of Carlo Collodi's Italian novel *Pinocchio* who, as recalled by one interviewee, ends up badly in the original book, being crashed by the protagonist at the beginning of the story.

The idea of rationality and strong orientation to business is not a specific argument of CSR managers: the image of managers as rational business-oriented agents is indeed part of a dominant representation which pervades all the modern management practice, research and education (Hay, 2013; Cunliffe, 2009). When CSR managers draw on this rhetoric, they assimilate their role to that of any other manager, in the attempt to be seen as legitimate interlocutors within business organizations. At the same time, this occupational rhetoric implies a sanitization of all the subjective, ethical and reflexive aspects of CSR managers' work, which are presented as abstract and ineffective.

### 4.3 The fatalist CSR Manager

Affirmations like “today, only forty percent of the Italian listed companies have a CSR department, tomorrow it will be a hundred percent” illustrate the strong faith interviewees show about the future of their occupation. CSR is often presented as a necessity, an obligatory path for companies which would otherwise succumb if they fail to implement it. However, when contrasted with their marginal position, CSR managers recognize that not all the companies are already entirely committed to CSR principles. CSR managers decide sometimes not to react to the resistances they experience in their work, as metaphorically illustrated in the following piece of interview:

I do like the Indian who waits for the corpse of its enemy to pass down the river. Sooner or later it will happen, I see this coming, this new way of reasoning is a necessary path and... of course I cannot force a CFO to think like me now but, there will be evident signs, so clear and so strong, that some day they'll get back to me and ask “support me”, you know? At the moment I don't have the necessary strength to convince them but they will be convinced by external signs and... I have evidences this dynamic is happening now.

In CSR managers' talk, current resistances and obstacles are justified by saying phrases like “we are in a transition phase”, “the business is not yet mature”. Nonetheless they exhibit a strong confidence in the future success of their work. At the same time, this rhetoric portrays the CSR manager as someone who has a strong patience because, how noted by an interviewee in the automotive industry, “this is a very long way to go and we don't know how much time it'll take”. Accordingly, other images associated with this occupational rhetoric are that of the CSR manager as an *avant-garde*, a *fore-runner*, “a visionary who brings messianic visions”.

Because of its components of passivity, we labeled this set of arguments as the “fatalist” CSR manager. The “wait and see” stance that characterizes it is particularly evident in the metaphor of “the Indian” reported above: when the persuasive capacity of CSR managers fail, like for example in front of a reluctant CFO, they simply prefer to step

back and wait, because “it’s only a matter of time”. The fatalist rhetoric is in contrast with the occupational rhetoric of the “motor of change”, which instead depicts CSR managers as having an active role in the ongoing change processes. This passivity in CSR managers’ representation of their work can be reconnected to a vision of CSR which is more compliant with the reasons and the rhythms of business organizations (Shamir, 2004).

#### **4.4 The idealist CSR manager**

The pressures and challenges of bringing alternative ways of doing business also result in a less attractive rhetoric of the CSR manager as an heroic idealist who fights to promote a value-oriented vision in organizations. We found that only few interviewees, especially those with low role seniority, recur to this imagery to represent their work. The following extract is taken from the interview with a CSR manager who is also internal auditor in a railway company:

Our job is... promoting values, legality and transparency in our company. Although my activity here is very limited: it is difficult to promote certain topics because sensitiveness is lacking. Some colleagues don’t even know what social responsibility is. My boss told me once “you’re a good person, you’re a believer but I’m not sure if anybody else care about it here”. He was very frank telling me that nobody cares. Two years ago I was given this role because I looked for it somehow, I cut it out when I was in the ethic committee, but I don’t think my company would have gone the same way without me.

Interpreting the CSR manager role as a “mission” is another image that we attributed to this rhetoric, as well as the idea of “being the paladin of certain values inside the company” expressed by a young committed CSR manager, who worked before as consultant in the same area.

Showing a similar value-laden orientation, another interviewee affirmed the importance of consistency between personal and professional values and the primacy of “emotions” and “empathy” in her work:

One of the biggest risks for CSR managers is to get hypocrites, to not believe any more in values... and sometimes working in a company can lead you to such a miserable end. You need to show attention for others, empathy is important. And you need to be passionate... for me, emotions, sensitiveness... are at the centre of my professional life.

Regarding emotions, CSR managers often describe their work as self-fulfilling but frustrating. Consistently with the professional literature on CSR managers, frustration is commonly linked to the marginality of their position, which is perceived to be strongly dependent on top management support: “there are very depressive moments like... well, when there are changes at the top level and you understand that your work is under threat, that you probably have to restart from zero”.

The idealist rhetoric presents thus a negative connotation: although all interviewees generally recall the importance of values and sensitivity in their work, most CSR managers (and especially senior ones) distance themselves from this rhetoric not accepting to be identified as “heroic idealists”. Many interviewees instead associate negative images to it, such as “the nuisance”, “the schoolteacher” who pretends to give a lesson of morality to colleagues, or “the alien” who lives outside organizational reality. During focus group interviews, the image of the idealist was indicated as an early stage of development corresponding to “the childhood” of the CSR manager occupation. Not surprisingly, the adult stage was indicated in the more realistic and business-oriented interpretation of the role. The presentation of the ethical and idealistic aspects of CSR managers’ occupation under a negative light results complementary to the positive rhetoric of business-orientation and many interviewees recur to the idealist rhetoric only to oppose it to the preferred image of the business-oriented CSR manager.

CSR managers perceive indeed an “ethical” conception of CSR as “old-fashioned” and therefore useless or even counterproductive for the advancement of their occupation. This finding is consistent with those authors that observed an evolution in the discourse around CSR, which in recent years shifted from the language of ethics and philanthropy to that of business, progressively relegating ethics “in the backseat” (Fleming et al., 2013).

#### **4.5 The bookkeeper of CSR**

During the interviews, sustainability reporting was often described as the precondition of CSR managers’ work: whenever this fundamental activity does not take place, the very sense of the CSR manager’s presence in an organization is called into question. Nevertheless, we found that among our research participants, a singular type of negative occupational rhetoric was connected to the reporting activity:

I don’t like the idea of being presented as the person who only draft the sustainability report, it would be highly diminishing. Although in most of the cases the CSR manager’s activity is strongly related to it [Interviewer: why you say so?] Because if this document is simply conceived as something you have to do and not as a means to implement new projects, something that was already planned and therefore you have to keep on with it... and it could be that it is not even spread, promoted nor pushed...it becomes a mere clerical job.

This is surprising since the realization of the company sustainability report is recognized as one of the most characterizing activities of CSR managers’ role and it could thus work as a solid base to build a specialized occupational identity. Nevertheless, when reporting becomes a well-established part of organizational routine, interviewees often connect negative images to it. In a long tirade, the CSR manager of an insurance company explains why:

The most difficult thing for me is reporting because it’s absolutely exhausting to prepare the plan, define the budget, collecting the data, the final balance... to do everything. Moreover, people

cannot stand you when you demand the information, do the monitoring... it's an incredible effort and nobody enjoys to give you the data. In addition, at the end the result never fits well, is not attractive or nobody cares. Yourself as well, when looking at it... it disgusts you. Reporting is the worst evil, I want to get rid of it... I hate it! [emphasis]

The motifs of distress are related to the overload of work, the adversarial interactions with colleagues and the outcome of the process which is described as unattractive and useless.

Beyond the vivid words of the interviewee, sustainability reporting is portrayed as something that diminish the role of CSR manager to a bureaucratic job: “the risk is that it gets a technicality, an exercise, something someone has to do and then it gets to the CSR manager’s desk” another interviewee affirmed. The evolving rules and constraints of sustainability reporting indicated by international organisms such as the GRI are also under accuse: norms and procedures are “a wonderful swamp” that risk to trap CSR managers. There is also awareness that the report is scarcely read both outside and within the company.

Similarly to the managers studied by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2004) who rhetorically downplayed the administrative part of their work, CSR managers describe reporting as a clerical task, something that obfuscates the image of their occupation. Moreover, such an intolerance towards norms and procedures recalls an ‘ideological rejection’ of regulation (Fougère and Solitander, 2009), which is consistent with a voluntary, self-regulated approach to CSR (Shamir, 2004). We summarized these images in the occupational rhetoric of the ‘bookkeeper of CSR’, a term that was derogatorily used by interviewees to compare their role to that of an administrative employee. However, reporting can also be a means to support CSR managers’ argumentation with numbers, as illustrated in the ‘business-oriented’ occupational rhetoric. Reporting, being the most complex task accomplished by CSR managers, is thus embraced with a “love and hate”

attitude which finds expression in contrasting occupational rhetorics: on one hand it is loved because it legitimizes CSR managers' work providing numerical evidence of its contribution; on the other, it is hated because it relegates CSR managers' role to a niche and mainly administrative task which diminishes the value and status of their occupation.

### 5. DISCUSSION

In this paper we have collected the voices and perspectives of CSR managers on their occupation. Assuming the occupational rhetorics conceptual frame, we have traced the most recurrent images these managers use to represent their role of CSR advocates in organizations. Analyzing a great variety of images, we were able to reconstruct five broad repertoires that we called the 'motor of change', the 'business-oriented', the 'fatalist', the 'idealist' CSR manager and 'the bookkeeper of CSR'. Although it is possible to connect some of the research participants to one specific rhetoric which prevails in their talk, we found that all the CSR managers we studied recur to multiple rhetorics in the attempt to provide a positive image of their occupation.

Considering the five different occupational rhetorics identified, we found that the 'motor of change' is a very popular register among CSR managers: a bundle of images that depicts their role as fundamental for organizational and social change processes. The business-oriented CSR manager is another largely spread rhetoric, which represents CSR managers as rational and scientific managers devoted to increase the profitability of their company. Accordingly with the 'pragmatic turn' in CSR evidenced by Cederström and Marinetto (2013), when CSR managers self-portrait in these terms, they stress the concreteness of their work avoiding to take into consideration "abstract problems" such as ethical ones. Moreover, as noted for the akin managerial figures of environmental managers (Catasùs et al., 1997; Crane, 2000), this rhetoric is accompanied by a negation



of the ethical dimension in CSR managers' work, reinforcing the idea of the 'amoral nature of business' (Kallio, 2006). The possible contrast between the 'business-oriented' and the 'idealist' occupational rhetorics is thus limited in CSR managers' talk, since only few of them accept to self-represent as heroic idealists. This rhetoric is indeed usually considered as a negative cluster of images, which is used to explain what CSR managers *are not*, rather than *what they are*. What we called 'fatalism' is a rather spread register which depicts them as sort of 'patient believers', although this appears in contrast with the idea of CSR managers as 'motor of change'. The alternative use of these two repertoires seems related to the nature and type of resistance opposed to CSR managers' work: when their persuasive capacity fails, CSR managers simply prefer to step back and wait for "the maturity of business". Finally, the 'bookkeeper of CSR' is an occupational rhetoric linked to the sustainability report, although the representation of this managerial accomplishment is not univocal. The negative connotation of the bookkeeper rhetoric is due to a mainly administrative representation of their role, which relegates them to a marginal and technical task. Moreover, we interpreted it as an 'ideological rejection' of regulation (Fougère and Solitander, 2009), which is perceived as something that further distance CSR managers from core business processes. CSR managers reject thus this representation, preferring instead to stress those aspects of reporting that proof the economic value of their contribution through the business-oriented occupational rhetoric.

When considered all together, CSR managers' occupational rhetorics display inconsistency and conflict. However, CSR managers seem not to be bothered by this, because they apply occupational rhetorics in different moments making a strategic use of them (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007). In accordance with what observed by Mintzberg (1994: 313) about managers more in general, CSR managers 'revel in

ambiguity', strategically leveraging the multiplicity of meanings that characterize CSR in order to legitimize their role.

Looking at the most idealized rhetoric we identified, CSR managers primarily depict themselves as 'motors of change': 'change agents' who work to advance the cause of CSR inside organizations. This rhetoric is a form of impression management through which CSR managers try to prefigure a central role for themselves in processes of social and organizational change. At the same time, being a managerial position relatively recent and not well established in organizations, CSR managers have to constantly seek the support of the top management and other managerial actors. As affirmed by one of our interviewees, they essentially do it by "speaking the language of business", thus recurring to the business-oriented occupational rhetoric. CSR managers also rhetorically downplay all the images that portray them as idealists or individuals devoted to charitable activities ("the monsignors"), because these images delegitimize their role reinforcing instead the idea of their deviant position within business organizations. Through the fatalist occupational rhetoric CSR managers depict themselves as 'patient believers' who wait for the business to reform itself, suggesting that they are aligned not only with its fundamental logics but also with its pace of change. The set of negative images summarized in the rhetoric of the bookkeeper also expresses a certain intolerance of CSR managers in relation to procedures and regulation. The fatalist and the bookkeeper occupational rhetorics therefore relate to a mainly voluntary, self-regulated conception of CSR, which fully responds to traditional business logics (Shamir, 2004; Fougère and Solitander, 2009).

A similar business-*motif* has been found in the study of the language adopted by other managerial figures, such as environmental managers (Crane, 2000; Catusès et al., 1997) and HR managers (Wright, 2008; Keegan and Francis, 2010). The case of the latter

managerial occupation is particularly illustrative since HR management as well, as CSR nowadays, has been indicated as an ambiguous area of managerial specialization (e.g. Keenoy, 1999) and HR managers have long been struggling to acquire a 'strategic' position within organizations. Moreover, in the past HR managers as well have been described as change agents (Storey, 1992). However, Wright (2008) notes that the occupational group of HR managers had first to demonstrate that they are valuable 'servants of power' contributing to solve essential business problems, before getting any recognition or influence inside organizations.

The same consideration seems to apply to CSR managers, who are more worried to present themselves as ordinary managers, company men and women devoted to the economic well-being of their company, than affirming a distinguished image of their occupation emphasizing the specificities of their CSR-related work.

### 6. CONCLUSION

CSR is said to be a major challenge to dominant business practices and, consequently, CSR managers have been indicated as privileged examples of change agents (Visser, 2011; Van der Heijden et al., 2012) and possible points of engagement for critical scholars (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). However, despite the fact that CSR managers actually depict themselves as 'change agents', it seems that they are more likely to foster continuity in current business practices, instead of triggering change by challenging common assumptions such as 'the profit imperative' or the 'desperate need of the business case' for CSR. Occupational rhetorics are indeed strictly linked to occupational identities, which significantly constrain the self-interpretation of a certain occupational role: those who adopt specific occupational identities may 'often find it difficult to think and act outside the parameters' (Alvesson, 2013, 166). Moreover, even assuming the

idea of a ‘cynical stance’ of CSR managers (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) in relation to their talk, their occupational rhetorics contribute to reproduce a win-win conception of CSR, which denies the problematic aspects of contemporary capitalism while stressing only the positive implications of CSR initiatives for companies’ economic value-creation (Cederström and Marinetto, 2013; Fleming et al., 2013).

Evidently, CSR managers’ occupational rhetorics respond to the exigency to find legitimacy for their work and therefore advance CSR influence and position inside business organizations. At the same time however, the idea of CSR promulgated by these managers loses its critical potential in favor of those arguments most functional to competitiveness and economic value-creation.

It has already been noted how the constant look for the business case implies the risk of overlooking the interests of the very stakeholder groups that could best be served by ‘real’ social responsibility, being a signal of the ‘managerial capture’ of CSR (O’Dwyer, 2003). We then wonder, together with Dobers and Springett (2010), how can counter narratives and challenging arguments emerge in the context of an increasingly managerialized CSR? Some authors rely on the effect of critical-reflexive managerial education (Hay, 2014; Fleming and Banerjee, 2015) or on the emergence of alternative cognitive frames inside organizations (Hahn et al., 2014; Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Far from proposing a solution, we advance the idea that CSR managers, because of the need to constantly legitimize their role advancing the status of their occupational group, maintain only a limited capacity to trigger change. In alternative, we suggest those within and outside the academia who are interested in radically transforming current business and management practices, to shift their attention on other actors active in the CSR arena, such as social movements and NGOs, as partly the CSR scholarship is doing (e.g. Joutsenvirta, 2009; Dempsey, 2011).

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# Chapter III.

## Exploring paradoxes in CSR managers' identity work<sup>6</sup>

“Io non so se la coscienza moderna sia veramente così democratica e scientifica come oggi comunemente si dice. Non capisco certe affermazioni astratte. A me la coscienza moderna dà l'immagine d'un sogno angoscioso attraversato da rapide larve or tristi or minacciose, d'una battaglia notturna, d'una mischia disperata, in cui s'agitino per un momento e subito scompaiano, per riapparirne delle altre, mille bandiere, in cui le parti avversarie si sian confuse e mischiate, e ognuno lotti per sé, per la sua difesa, contro all'amico e contro al nemico. E' in lei un continuo cozzo di voci discordi, un'agitazione continua”

Pirandello, *Arte e coscienza d'oggi*, in *L'umorismo e altri saggi*

“Perhaps no other animal is so torn between alternatives. Man might be described fairly adequately, if simply, as a two-legged paradox”

John Steinbeck, in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*

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<sup>6</sup> A previous version of this paper has been presented at a pre-AOM Conference workshop in Vancouver in August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

Selected findings of this project has been presented at the ‘Saloon of CSR and Social Innovation’ at the Bocconi University on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

The present version of the manuscript is currently under review in *Journal of Business Ethics*.



## **Exploring paradoxes in CSR managers' identity work**

### **ABSTRACT**

Both sustainability and identity are said to be paradoxical issues in organizations. In this study we apply a paradoxical framework to examine the identity work of those managers who hold sustainability-related roles in organizations. Analysing 26 interviews with CSR managers, we identify three main tensions affecting their identity construction process: the goal tension, the time tension and the space tension. When dealing with these identity tensions, some interviewees express a paradoxical perspective in the attempt to accept and maintain the two poles of each of them simultaneously. It emerges in particular that metaphorical reasoning can be used by CSR managers to bridge contrasting representations of the self. We read these findings in terms of paradox theory, highlighting and discussing their implications for both research and practice.

### **KEY WORDS**

corporate sustainability, CSR, paradox, identity work

## CHAPTER III

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate sustainability is said to be a complex achievement, because the multiple goals that it entails and the multiple means available to achieve it cause tensions in organizations at different levels. A paradox theoretical framework has thus recently been advanced to consider sustainability issues in organizations (e.g. Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). Paradox theory (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011) conceives those tensions as ubiquitous and persistent forces. Hence, this theory does not suggest resolving tensions by selecting one of the contradictory poles that generate them; rather, it encourages actors to paradoxically accept and engage with the emerging tensions, employing a holistic and dynamic 'both/and' mind-set.

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., 2012a). Surprisingly, it seems there is a lack of contributions that have explicitly adopted paradox theory to conceive and explore managers' identity work and its tensions. This would particularly apply to the case of those individuals who hold managerial roles dedicated to sustainability in organizations, because of the paradoxical nature of this domain of managerial intervention. Accordingly, our research is a study of paradoxes and tensions of identity work in relation to sustainability: we investigate the tensions affecting CSR managers' identity work, and how they paradoxically deal with them.

Reports produced by professional associations and consultancy companies confirm the increasing interest of business in CSR and sustainability: the number of executive positions in the area is growing (GreenBiz, 2013; Weinreb Group, 2014), and CSR has

ascended the corporate ladder to reach the top managerial levels (Strand, 2013). However, attempts to apply sustainability in business contexts have been disputed by many critical voices because of their ‘masked’ economic interests (e.g. Forbes and Jermier, 2010; Banerjee, 2011). At the same time, these attempts encounter the internal resistance of those who hold a more traditional view of business (Wright et al., 2012a; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). Individuals who work to embed sustainability in business contexts, like CSR managers, are thus likely to be perceived as ineffectual or even retrogressive by critical observers (Crane, 2000; Banerjee, 2001), whereas ‘defenders of the status quo’ may suspect them of being too radical and borderline (Wright et al., 2012a). Moreover, although annual reports on the ‘state of the profession’ depict CSR managers as highly satisfied because of the vocational character of their work (e.g. Acre et al., 2012; GreenBiz, 2013), previous research has show how they experience high frustration, feeling torn between multiple individual and organizational goals (Wright et al. 2012a and b; Visser and Crane, 2010). Building on these insights, we contribute to extant studies on this emergent managerial figure with a novel theoretical perspective that integrates corporate sustainability, identity work and paradox theories.

The empirical results reported in this paper are based on a narrative and discursive conception of identity which is consistent with the definition given by Giddens (1991, p. 53) of ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography’. Accordingly, we stimulated discursive accounts of identity work through 26 narrative and semi-structured interviews with CSR managers. Analysing the interviews, we identified three tensions affecting their identity-construction process: the goal tension, the time tension and the space tension. In terms of dealing with these tensions, some CSR managers situate their self on one pole of each tension, whereas others express a paradoxical identity work embracing both poles. We found, in particular, that in several



cases CSR managers resort to metaphors in order to bridge conflicting representations of the self. Overall, we believe that these findings contribute to the literature in three ways: first, by showing that tensions of corporate sustainability reverberate at the individual level on CSR managers' identity work; second, by naming these tensions and identifying metaphorical reasoning as a possible way to paradoxically cope with them; and third, by presenting paradox theory as an integrative framework within which to examine the struggles of managers' identity work.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first review the literature on identity work and the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability 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 some of our interviewees. The findings are then discussed in light of the literature and their contributions to it. Finally, we present research implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### **2.1 Paradox theory: a new frontier for research on 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. Several research contributions connect identity to a wide array of organizational phenomena, so that Alvesson et al. (2008, p.6) have described it as 'an ostensibly new master signifier'.

Many different approaches are available to research on identity: Alvesson (2010) suggests that this is because issues around subjectivity are difficult to investigate and, as Dunne puts it, 'the self lacks the substantiality and discreteness of an object which is

amenable to direct description or explanation' (cited in Alvesson, 2010, p. 195). Among the extant approaches, and paralleling the development of new conceptualizations in psychology (for an overview see Schwartz et al., 2011), contemporary organization studies have adopted a dynamic and relational view on identity. This relational view of the self as performance situated in discursive practices has produced the notion of identity as a discursive accomplishment (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Ybema et al., 2009). Storytelling and identity talk (Ybema et al., 2009) are said to be tools with which individuals construct a sense of the self in the everyday flux of events. Moreover, individuals express varied beliefs and commitments based on multiple affiliations that becomes salient in different moments and situations. They thus display varied identity positionings in their talk that are consistent with the notion of 'situational identity' (Zimmerman, 1998). Finally, since identity can be understood as a discursive accomplishment, the way in which it is accomplished becomes more important than the produced identity *per se* (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004).

The concept of 'identity work' in this sense 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 more '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 coherent narrative of the self. In a recent literature review, Brown (2015, pp. 20-21) affirms 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), 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.

Owing to the multiple competing pressures experienced in their 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’ to reconcile 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., 2012a), 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., 2012a). 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).

Surprisingly, despite the mounting evidence on the importance of tensions and conflicts in managers' identity construction, few studies have explicitly adopted paradox theory (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011) to examine the identity work of managerial actors. Although the authors do not directly refer to the notion of 'identity work', the study by Dameron and Torset (2014) on strategists is a partial exception: by applying a paradox framework to analyse managers' discursive constructions of identity, they were able to identify the main tensions that affect the identity construction of strategists, qualifying the realm of strategy as 'the art of balancing tensions' (Dameron and Torset, 2014, p. 310). Conversely, the article by Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014) investigates the paradoxes which the discourse on authentic leadership conveys to leaders' identity work. The article uses the notion of paradox as a conceptual lens but without formally referring to the theoretical frame provided by paradox theory.

Our study is an attempt to merge 'identity work' and 'paradox' theories through a study of managers' identity construction. We argue, together with Gotsi et al. (2010), that paradox is a useful theoretical notion to complement the concept of identity work because it highlights the pervasiveness of tensions in the construction of identity. We

focus our study in particular on CSR managers, since sustainability has been proved to be a paradoxical domain in organizations as well as the identity work undertaken by managerial actors.

## **2.2 Studying CSR managers' identity work through a paradox lens**

Corporate sustainability is typically defined as the need for companies to manage their triple bottom line in order to balance at the same time their environmental, social and economic performances (Elkington, 1998; 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 and colleagues (2015) have recently advanced a paradox theoretical framework within which to consider corporate sustainability. This framework is intended to supersede a win-win vision of sustainability as always beneficial for both the company and all its stakeholders, recognizing instead the multiple complexities and conflicts characterizing sustainability in business organizations (Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015).

Paradox theory relies on complexity thinking as opposed to rationalist and linear 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 its opposed elements are conceived as interrelated and inextricable poles that interact in a simultaneous and dialectic way. 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, regarding sustainability in organizations, 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). On considering practitioners, Hahn et al. (2014) suggest that managers with a paradoxical cognitive frame can recognize the inherent contradictions of corporate sustainability 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.

Sustainability is said to be an issue that conveys paradoxes at three different levels i.e. systemic, organizational and individual level (Hahn et al., 2015). However, it seems that the literature on the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability has to date given little space to the conflict and tensions experienced at the individual level. In particular, as far as we know, there is no mention of the identity struggles of those actors who deal with sustainability in their everyday work. As demonstrated by contributions in other fields of management studies (see Dameron and Torset, 2014, in the field of strategy, and Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014, regarding leadership), the notion of paradox can be fruitful to investigate the identity construction of managerial actors, especially when related to a paradoxical fields like sustainability and CSR (Hahn et al., 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015).

As regards the individual level, previous contributions show how sustainability and CSR managers experience tensions in relation to their work activity. In a study on their identity work related to the discourse on climate change, Wright et al. (2012a) show how, drawing on multiple and conflicting discursive resources, sustainability managers

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 depending on the context and situation in a way reminiscent of the ‘surfer’ identity worker described by Alvesson (2010). In a related article (Wright and Nyberg, 2012b), the authors focus on the emotional distress experienced by sustainability managers 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 CSR 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. However, none of these contributions have explicitly adopted paradox theory, and only one of them has focused on the identity work undertaken by individuals engaged in sustainability-related roles in organizations.

The present research article investigates CSR managers’ identity work. In doing so, it adopts a problematic and conflicting view of identity in accordance with most of the studies on managerial actors’ identity work. Recalling Alvesson’s categorization (2010), in our study we refer as a heuristic device to the image of the ‘struggler’ identity worker who faces multiple conflicts, dilemmas and contradictory forces in the effort to produce a positive and distinct conception of the self. In particular, following the emergent stream of research on paradoxes in corporate sustainability (Hahn et al. 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015), we adopt paradox theory by using the notions of ‘paradox’ and

'tension' as conceptual lenses through which to explore CSR managers' discursive construction of identity. Since a paradox is a cognitive and social phenomenon that is enacted in everyday discourse and used by social actors to give sense to their world (Lüscher and Lewis, 2006), this is also consistent with the narrative and discursive approach to identity assumed in this study.

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

### 3. METHODS

This study is constructivist and interpretive in nature (Schwandt, 1994). We position our research article within the rich research stream on the discursive construction of identity (Musson and Duberley, 2007; Watson, 2008 and 2009; Koning and Waistell, 2012; Wright et al., 2012a; Hay, 2014). Identity as a research object is thus approached here as a continuous casting and recasting of the self through discursive practices (Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

In accordance with 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 and because they permit the development of a personal narrative (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 the Italian professional association called 'CSR Manager Network' which connects around a hundred practitioners who work as CSR and sustainability managers in organizations. In the period between March and November 2014, we conducted 26 interviews with CSR managers operating in both national and multinational companies (for a profile of respondents see Table 3 at page 108). 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. This research piece is the ideal prosecution of the previous research project which studied the raising occupational group of CSR managers in Italy, and which also involved focus group interviews, observations and document analysis. Although data from all these sources are not reported here, we think that this research contribution benefits from insights from the research project of which it was part. Moreover, the repeated interactions with research participants in the context of the broader project contributed to assuring the familiarity with interviewees that is necessary for the discussion of personal and identity-related issues (Maclean et al. 2012; Koning and Waistell, 2012).

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 CSR managers' identity work. To structure the interview guide, we relied on the insight provided by McAdams (1996, p. 298), who affirms that

self-narratives 'integrate the individual's reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future, rendering a life-in-time sensible in terms of beginnings, middles and endings'. 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 narrate how they became CSR 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 twenty minutes to more than one hour, was highly unstructured, since it consisted of a single open-ended question and was attentive to following the discursive flow of the interviewee (Atkinson, 1998). It also allowed us to create an atmosphere of confidentiality and trust with the research 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 five or ten year forward and discuss whether and how they saw their future work in relation to CSR. 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 some participants (six) preferred to be interviewed in a public place. All the interviews lasted between one and two hours, were full-recorded and transcribed.

Our theoretical background required a data analysis technique that would facilitate exploration of the interviewees' identity construction. This required three different stages. 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, leaving aside those that referred to a general idea of sustainability or to how sustainability was enacted at the company level. We then explored the selected interview passages to identify expressions of conflict, tension, and discomfort felt by the interviewees. In this round of analysis, we used the notions of 'tension' and 'paradox' as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) to go through the transcriptions and detect possible identity conflicts. While examining the empirical documentation, we noticed that interviewees made large use of metaphors to refer to themselves and their work. We then ran a third 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 (only one participating also in the interviews) performed a thematic analysis on the transcriptions. The researchers met regularly to discuss their interpretations of the data: problems and inconsistencies were solved through the identification of 'key quotations' (Guest et al., 2012). These quotations helped the researchers to anchor the research results, and they are 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 a narrative of the self, and we coded the transcriptions using concepts and categories (identity work, tension, paradox, metaphor) that are mostly part of the researchers' understanding of reality. Consistently with our interpretive and constructivist epistemological stance, we are 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 CSR managers’ identity work and with most of the scholarship on the discursive construction of identity (Brown et al., 2015). The use of a narrative and discursive approach to study 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 developing our own interpretations, we nevertheless tried to remain ‘reflexive and skeptical’ about the data and our relationship with them (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) in the attempt to understand ‘the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The triangulation of the analysis between two researchers, for example, was undertaken for this purpose.

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

### 4. 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.

[CSR manager – banking group]

We found that our interviewees discursively construct their identity by contrasting different elements. These oppositions are structured in pairs and represent the three identity tensions that we identified researching on CSR managers' identity work. Several interviewees deal with tensions by situating their identity on one of their two poles, whereas a 'happy few', like the strategists studied by Dameron and Torset (2014), express a paradoxical identity work embracing those contrasting poles simultaneously. In the following section we provide data for each of the identity positioning in relation to the three identified tensions. The final paragraph of the section is devoted to the cognitive coping strategy used by some interviewees to paradoxically cope with the tensions of identity work.

#### **4.1 The 'goal' tension: business orientation vs. values orientation**

When analyzing CSR 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 vision of managerial work as oriented to profit maximization and financial performance. When interviewees chose this pole, they affirm that their main goal is to increase the economic sustainability of the company. They consequently downplay ideal and ethical considerations, which are presented as 'impractical', 'vague' and irrelevant to their work. This pole is consistent with the image of the *rational* sustainability manager described by Wright et al. (2012a). 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. We labeled this tension the 'goal tension' because, when interviewees discuss business and values-orientation, they often refer to them as their 'ultimate goal'.

*The business-oriented CSR manager.* When situating themselves on this pole, interviewees reject the idea of being ‘do-gooders’. The CSR manager of a big insurance company emphasizes this by saying that she is not ‘a monsignor’, further elaborating 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 CSR 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.

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 on which CSR managers draw in their identity-work, as shown by another interviewee:

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.

Business-oriented CSR 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 toward 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 by the CSR manager of a construction company:

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

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

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Sustainability today responds to a peculiar condition of mine, the especial attention I give 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.

Another interviewee, who had suffered from health problems, affirmed how, after that episode, she had found 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 and reading, to the centre of her professional life. She consequently asked her superiors for a new role as CSR 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.

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 CSR 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.

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

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 CSR 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.

#### **4.2 The ‘space’ tension: organizational insider vs. outsider**

Space is an important dimension along which the paradoxes of corporate sustainability can be situated and understood (Hahn et al. 2015). This dimension is understood here in an abstract sense as individuals’ self-perceived proximity to/distance from the organizational reality and its members. We found, in fact, that our interviewees experience a ‘space’ 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 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 source of distress because of the contrasting feelings deriving from the need to be internally recognized and the satisfaction that they obtain from their relations with the social context outside the firm. The space tension experienced by CSR managers can be expressed by the sense of ‘liminality’ which affects the identity work of other actors operating across organizational boundaries, such as marketing and supply chain managers (Ellis and Ybema, 2010).

*The organizational insider CSR manager.* Because they are in a position close to top management levels, CSR managers usually consider themselves full organizational members and construct their identity accordingly, for example by making comparisons with consultancy work. Here is how the CSR 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, CSR 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 CSR manager acts on the organizational culture from the inside.

For the 'internal' CSR manager, 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 CSR manager of a food retail company. The interviewee narrates an anecdote about having a discussion with a NGO representative who treated him as 'the bad, dirty fast food company representative'. The episode triggered identity work to accommodate personal beliefs with a negative representation of the self:

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.

*The outsider CSR manager.* Affirming a varied and distinctive career background is one strategy through 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 sustainability issues. A CSR manager recounted how, for example, in her career she had continuously shifted between roles 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.

Moreover, as also argued by Wright et al. (2012a), it seems that these managers suffer a certain lack of internal recognition and legitimacy because of their sustainability-related role. 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 CSR, 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.

*The paradoxical perspective on the space tension.* CSR 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 the space tension, proposing themselves as mediators between the different interests involved in the company's activity thanks also to their personal sensitivity:

We're placed in a boundary point because we have to listen carefully to the world outside, reporting it in the inside, and at the same time listen 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.

### **4.3 The 'time' tension: focus on the short term vs. long term**

Another paradoxical dimension of corporate sustainability equally experienced in CSR managers' identity-work is time (Hahn et al. 2015). Sustainability is conceived as a managerial issue with broad horizons and a long time of implementation (Slawinski and Bansal, 2015). Consequently, CSR 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 sustainability. This continuous deferral and the depiction of the self as a ‘forerunner’ is in contrast with the pressures exerted by the organizational environment and the ambition of CSR managers to have an impact on current business practices. We called this tension the ‘time tension’ because CSR managers 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 the objectives that corporate sustainability entails.

*Short-term focused CSR manager.* The need to pursue immediate results is something that CSR 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 interview 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.

Discussing the resistances that he faces with colleagues, the CSR 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 the capacity to produce short-term results:

The CSR 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.

*Long-term focused CSR manager.* CSR managers are also aware of the long-term horizon typical of sustainability in organizations. This is why interviewees often describe themselves as ‘patient believers’, ‘prophets’, and the like. When situating on this pole,

CSR managers 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.

*The paradoxical perspective on the time tension.* Some interviewees also express the need to balance a short-term and a long-term focus, introducing a paradox perspective on the time tension affecting their identity-work. The difficulties of this subtle balance 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 veery 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.

#### **4.4 Metaphors as cognitive mechanisms to cope with the paradoxes of identity work**

On going through the transcriptions, we noticed that the CSR managers made large use of metaphors to describe themselves; metaphors that can thus be related to their identity work. We reported above the 'hyena' recalled by an interviewee to express an instrumental and merciless attitude in her work; similarly, 'the prophet' or the 'patient believer' metaphors, belonging to the imageries of religion, are used to reinforce an idea

of the self as focused on the long term. In all these cases, metaphors were employed by interviewees to situate themselves at one pole of the tension. Interestingly, we also found that metaphorical images were used to bridge conflicting representations of the self.

In the literature, 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 regard to identity scholarship, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) affirm that metaphors play an important role in identity work. In their study of ethical leaders' identity talk, Koning and Waistell (2012) indicate that metaphors, in joining meanings together, are able to 'articulate' identity across time. Kram et al. (2012) specifically studied the metaphors expressed in the identity work of individuals with a double scholar-practitioner professional identity. They found that interviewees used certain metaphors to bridge conflicting representations of the self and to reduce the dissonance deriving from identity struggles. In a similar vein, Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014) found that leaders resort to 'metaphorical selves' to accommodate conflicting identity claims.

On the basis of these insights, we interpreted metaphors as cognitive coping strategies (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989) to paradoxically deal with the tensions of identity work. We focused in particular on the metaphors that provide a bridge between the two poles of each tension, since authors in the paradox theory tradition suggest that 'living with the paradox', rather than trying to resist or avoid the tension by downplaying one of its two sides, is a better strategy to deal with paradoxical tensions (Lewis, 2000; Clegg et al., 2002; Smith and Lewis, 2011). These metaphors of paradoxical identity work are presented below, first in the words of the interviewees, and then connected with the three identified tensions.

*The 'activist in a suit' metaphor*

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. It can thus be connected to the business vs. values-orientation tension as well as to the organizational insider vs. outsider tension because of the (partial) identification with the image of the political activist.

*The 'undercover consultant' and the 'virus' metaphors*

I don't think it's the right way to say it but I think that a CSR 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.

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.

We connected these two metaphors of paradoxical identity work to the organizational outsider vs. insider tension. 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.

*The 'parent' metaphor*

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 CSR

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managers is to lead the company along the path to sustainability, although this means that one day they will disappear.

This metaphor refers to a 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, 2013). However, in order for this to happen, CSR managers must accompany their organizations ‘along the path to sustainability’. We interpreted this metaphor as a strategy to cope with the time tension because, although it is only in a distant tomorrow that CSR managers will achieve their goal, in order to do so they have to prove that they are ‘good parents’ in the everyday life of the organization.

### 5. DISCUSSION

This research piece investigates the tensions affecting CSR managers’ identity work and how these managers paradoxically deal with these tensions in the effort to build a sustainability-related image of their self. In response to these research questions, in the previous section we identified three tensions that can affect CSR managers’ identity work, a paradoxical perspective on the tensions expressed by some of these managers, and a possible way to cope with the tensions based on metaphorical reasoning. These findings are now discussed in relation to their contribution to extant research.

Our results find resonance in the broader management and sustainability literature. Indeed, the first tension - i.e. the goal tension: business VS values orientation - is similar to what Phillips (2013) found in the case of ‘ecopreneurs’, who appear caught between the competing discourses of business and environmental activism. We understood this tension as related to the conflicting goals inherent in corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015), which convey tensions in the identity work of those individuals who try to

reconcile them. The second and third tensions concern two fundamental dimensions of corporate sustainability: space - organizational insider VS outsider - and time - focus on the short VS long term - (Hahn et al., 2015). Regarding space, CSR managers provide reasonable arguments to describe themselves both as organizational insiders and outsiders. This is similar to the condition of 'liminality' experienced by marketing and purchasing managers who, being like CSR managers positioned close to the company's borders, are described as 'boundary-bricoleurs' because their identity positioning continuously shifts between the internal and the external side of organizations (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). In relation to time, CSR managers appear torn between the urgency of providing rapid results of their work and the long-time sustainability initiatives require to display their impact. This last identity-related tension can be seen as a repercussion of a typical tension that characterizes sustainability in organizations; in fact, it is in accordance with recent articles (Slawinski and Bansal, 2015; Slawinski et al., *forthcoming*) that identify a tension between short- and long-term orientations which affects how managers deal with sustainability issues by treating them as two mutually exclusive conceptions of time.

Considering the three tensions together, we noticed some similarities and differences between the poles of the tensions identified. In particular, we found some coherence between the first pole of each tension (business orientation, organizational insider, focus on the short term) as opposed to the group constituted by the second poles (values orientation, organizational outsider, focus on the long term). Identity work processes focused on the former poles may result in the construction of an identity more in line with the traditional conception of managerial work that is 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 of the



tensions may result in a novel interpretation of managerial work more oriented to values, attentive to the external context of the firm, and with a long-term focus. We understood these two patterns as expressions of an underlying meta-tension between continuity and change that is considered to characterize sustainability in organizations. Organizational change, in fact, has been described by many authors as a paradoxical achievement (Srivasta and Fry, 1992; Leana and Barry, 2000; Saboohi and Sushil, 2011) presenting at the same time elements of continuity and discontinuity. The process of embedding sustainability in corporate contexts, with the aim of producing some change in them (Millar et al., 2012; Hahn et al. 2015), paradoxically exhibits both elements of continuity and change. As a result, a possible overall interpretation of the tensions identified is that the struggle between continuity and change that underlies sustainability at the organizational level conveys tensions at the individual level which reverberate on the identity work especially of those individuals who are primarily in charge of implementing sustainability like CSR managers.

In sum, the three identified tensions in CSR managers' identity work derive from general features of managerial work and, at the same time, they are strictly linked to the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). Moreover, they can be interpreted as the consequences of a meta-tension between continuity and change that pervades sustainability as a paradoxical achievement in organizations. The identification and qualification of these three tensions represents our first finding, which contributes to the literature by showing not only that corporate sustainability is a paradoxical area of managerial intervention but that tensions reverberate on the identity work of CSR managers as well.

In terms of coping with the tensions, we found that CSR managers express a variety of identity positionings: they usually situate their self at one pole of each tension, although

some of them are able to undertake a paradoxical perspective on identity work embracing simultaneously the two poles. These varied identity positioning strategies were evident in the interviewees' use of metaphors. Interestingly, we found that interviewees made particular use of metaphors when trying to bridge the two opposing representations of the self: we thus put forward the idea that metaphors like the 'activist in a suit', the 'virus', the 'undercover consultant' and the 'parent' are cognitive coping strategies directed to accepting and 'living with' the paradoxes of identity work (Lewis, 2000; Clegg et al., 2002; Smith and Lewis, 2011). This extends available knowledge on the individual-level coping strategies for dealing with paradoxical tensions. This knowledge has been recently developed in regard to the behavioral 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 coming from previous studies which indicate metaphorical reasoning as a possible cognitive mechanism to cope with the tensions of identity work (Kram et al., 2012; Koning and Waistell, 2012; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014). Together with the already explored behavioral and cognitive strategies, the use of metaphors as strategies to cope with the tensions affecting identity work thus enriches our understanding of individual-level reactions to paradoxical tensions.

Finally, by adopting a paradox theory perspective we were able to study CSR managers' identity work while tracking the tensions and paradoxes that affect our interviewees' discursive identity construction. Our third contribution concerns the idea that identity scholarship in organization studies can be effectively complemented by paradox theory. This integration has been already successfully performed by Gotsi et al. (2010) in the

study of creative workers' identity work. Building on that achievement, our study shows that paradox theory makes it possible to track the tensions affecting the identity construction of workers holding managerial positions, and conceive them as poles in a continuous dialectical interaction that characterizes the process of identity work undertaken by managers. This is thus a promising avenue for future research on managers' identity work that will be further supported in the following sections.

### **5.1 Research implications**

We illustrate here the implications of our empirical research by distinguishing them between different levels. At the individual level, the three identified tensions in CSR 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 those managers able to accept the two poles of each tension simultaneously provide useful indications for developing identity construction processes that accept tensions instead of trying to ignore or resolve them. Authors in paradox theory, in fact, indicate the capacity to accept and "live with the paradox" as the preferred coping strategy in order not to exacerbate the tension (Lewis, 2000; Clegg et al., 2002; Smith and Lewis, 2011). In this sense, our findings could help to reduce the emotional distress caused by the tensions of identity work highlighted by extant studies and also identified in our research. Overall, our study provides 'empathetic insights and descriptions that can stimulate and facilitate' CSR and sustainability managers' 'reflections on who they are and what they do', in accordance with the possible outcomes of research on identity indicated by Alvesson (2008, p. 14).

At the company level, as CSR and sustainability become ever more significant career paths (GreenBiz, 2013), human resource departments are likely to be increasingly involved in efforts to recruit and retain CSR managers. These departments can thus support CSR 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 CSR managers' towards identity work highlighted above is also important in relation to the implementation of sustainability programs in organizations. As noted by Wright et al. (2012a), the recognition of tensions in identity work can lead these managers to engage in micro-political 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., 2012a; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015). A paradox perspective on identity work may have positive and empowering effects (Gotsi, 2010) pushing CSR managers towards creative and innovative solutions which escape the duality between the total absence of change and more radical transformations. These solutions can be sustained for example by the communication of the metaphors that bridge different conceptions of CSR 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 sustainability can widely transform business practices (that can identify themselves in the metaphor of 'the activist') and those who hold 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 how shared metaphors can unite leaders and followers with different beliefs and orientations.

Finally, our results have implications also for management education. They highlight the importance of developing, in management education programs, processes to support CSR managers in dealing with identity tensions. Regarding business education, our results suggest taking seriously those scholars who put forward the idea of business schools as relevant environments for identity work (e.g. Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010), where struggles of identity work 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 sustainability-related issues, including those affecting identity work.

## **5.2 Limitations, future research and conclusion**

Our study is a theoretical and empirical endeavor to combine the notions of paradox and identity work in a study on CSR managers' discursive construction of the self. We have merged two streams of literature, paradox and identity work theories, that until now have barely talked to each other. As a consequence, our study 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 conflicting goals (for an example in the area of Sustainable HRM see Ehnert, 2009). 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 CSR 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 Svenningsson, 2014).

Thirdly, our study on CSR managers' identity work exclusively relies on interview data. Although interviews are the most common technique in identity scholarship (Alvesson, 2008) especially for those researchers embracing a discursive approach (Brown, 2015), we acknowledge the limitations of this inquiry tool. Down and Reveley (2009, p. 386), for example, state that interview-based studies of identity work provide de-contextualized accounts that do not allow investigation of the formation of identity 'in action'. We thus suggest that future research should consider CSR 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. First, having shown the potential of paradox theory in the interpretation of managers' construction of identity, other researchers could adopt this theoretical lens more extensively, especially 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 CSR 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 sustainability policies and practices. A second promising avenue for future research might be the 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 sustainability 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 sustainability at the organizational level.

In conclusion, our study makes three contributions. First, it contributes to the literature on the paradoxical nature of corporate sustainability with research showing how tensions reverberate at the individual level on CSR managers' identity work and how those tensions can be framed in a broader meta-tension between continuity and change. Second, it identifies metaphorical reasoning as a possible way to paradoxically cope with the tensions of identity work. Third, it contributes to identity scholarship presenting paradox theory as an integrative framework to examine the struggles of managers' identity work. Furthermore, we have discussed the implications of our research at different levels. For these reasons, we believe this research piece represents a starting point for future research and theorization both on corporate sustainability and identity work.

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## CHAPTER III

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### **1. Summary and contributions of the research path**

In the introductory part of this dissertation I have delineated, on the basis of the extant literature, the possible tenets of a critical approach to investigate sustainability in business organizations. This approach consists basically in a rejection of common assumptions associated with sustainability and CSR in for-profit organizations, such as the ‘win-win’ and the ‘business case’ arguments, in favor of an exploration of the possible conflicts and tensions arising from their implementation. I operationalized these principles in the three empiric contributions that constitute the central part of this dissertation. In this section, I briefly reconstruct and summarize the research path accomplished and discuss its more general contributions to the literature on sustainability in organization and management studies.

Chapter I is a multiple-case study of companies who affirm to be strongly committed to environmental sustainability. As a consequence, they try to orient most of their processes, departments, levels and everyday operations towards environmental goals. In this regard, the HRM system of these companies seems to play a major role and we found that many different green HRM practices are devoted to sustain a greater environmental sustainability in their business processes. At the same time however, because of the multiple goals that characterize both corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2015) and HRM systems (Jackson, 2012), a series of tensions emerged that affect the green HRM systems of these organizations. Following the guidance of paradox theory (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011), these tensions have been conceptualized as eight paradoxes.

The essential finding of this study is that paradoxes characterize all the companies studied and were pervasive in all the components of the green HRM systems analyzed. Besides the specific contribution to the HRM literature, this study supports the idea that

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sustainability is a paradoxical accomplishment in organizations, that conveys tensions and contradictions at many different levels. In the conclusion of the chapter, it is argued that in their everyday work managers need to take into account these tensions, trying to deal with them instead of uncritically downplaying conflicts in favor of a positive, win-win conception of corporate sustainability. While conducting this research project it also emerged the key role of CSR managers as champions of sustainability in organizations, which is also advanced in the literature (Strand, 2013 and 2014; Haack et al., 2012; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015).

In Chapter II therefore, I chose to focus on the emergent managerial figure of the CSR manager. Accordingly, I designed a study of the occupational group of CSR managers in Italy, focused on how the members of this occupation conceive their role in relation to the change that sustainability is supposed to bring inside organizations. As theoretical lens in this case it has been applied the concept of occupational rhetorics (Fine, 1996; Kitay and Wright, 2007), which correspond to idealized images the members of an occupation use to represent their work in a favorable manner in front of themselves and their colleagues.

On the basis of a multi-methods research process which included in-depth interviews, observations at public events and meetings and focus group interviews, the study identifies five broad rhetoric repertoires that highlight the diversity and the ambiguity that surround the work and role of these practitioners in organizations. Overall however, the large prevalence of business argumentations in their talk due to the exigency to get legitimacy for their role, aside with the rhetoric of change that traditionally accompanies CSR and sustainability in organizations (Aguilera et al. 2007; Visser, 2011; Van der Heijden et al. 2012), lead to the conclusion that these managers are more likely to foster continuity instead of change in current business practices. The

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study of CSR managers' occupational rhetorics moreover, showing their will of homologation to a dominant image of managerial work, support the claim that rhetorics in organizations do not challenge the way things are, rather they have an important role to play in maintaining the status quo (Carter and Jackson, 2004).

Whereas Chapter II focuses at the group level and tries to account for the shared representations of the role within the occupational community of the CSR managers, Chapter III further zooms-in at the individual level and investigates the identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2015) operated by these managers. The topic of identity was already incorporated in the original research project, including some more personal questions in the interview track aimed at encouraging identity talk (Snow and Anderson, 1987) in the interviewees. Accordingly, a part of the empiric documentation of the previous study were selected and re-analyzed in light of the literature on identity work and paradox theory.

The identity work performed by CSR managers has been conceptualized in this paper in three tensions: the 'goal tension' (between a prevalent business-orientation or a values-orientation), the 'space tension' (between a conception of the self as an 'organizational insider' versus the perception of being an 'outsider') and the time tension (between 'a self focused on the short-term' versus 'a self focused on the long-term'). It was found that CSR managers react in a varied way to these tensions, in some cases embracing one pole of the tensions, in some others expressing a paradoxical identity work. In particular, the metaphors advanced by our interviewees to talk about themselves were found to be powerful expressions of this varied identity positioning.

The study concludes with the opening of a possibility for agency at the managerial level by the recognition that these tensions and contradictions reflect on managers identity work and can possibly foster action by stating them explicitly and acknowledging them.

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Although each respective chapter presents its particular use of data sources and analysis, overall I qualitatively researched sustainability in business organizations involving a variety of managerial actors as research participants. Taken together, the empiric works included in this dissertation are based on 42 individual interviews, 5 focus group interviews that involved further 26 research participants, observations of managers in public settings such as meetings and conferences which occurred in three occasions and a great amount of document analysis that was accomplished before every company visit and interview appointment. This variety of sources constitutes the empiric documentation of the research papers reported here and inform the contributions to theory that are formulated as a final result of each research paper.

Because the specific contributions of each study are discussed in the previous chapters, I will here focus briefly only on what can be intended as the more general contributions of this research path. The research works included in this dissertation move from the general assumption that CSR and sustainability represent complex and contradictory accomplishments in organizations; for this reason, I adopted theoretical frameworks that allowed me to track the contradictory nature of sustainability in business contexts. The first contribution of this dissertation is therefore the conceptualization of a series of tensions and contradictions that characterize corporate sustainability at various levels: in the green HRM systems of organizations, in CSR managers' talk and in their identity work. In this sense the dissertation represents a theory building effort that moves from difficulties and conflicts experienced in concrete organizational settings, to develop theoretical insights in a relatively 'young' field of investigation such as organizational sustainability (Corley and Gioia, 2011).

The dissertation also investigates possible ways through which managerial actors react and try to cope with these tensions. On this, the interpretative guidance provided by

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paradox theory in Chapter I and III results particularly useful because it distinguishes between different types of coping strategies (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000) that are more or less suitable to deal with paradoxical tensions in organizations. In Chapter II it is instead discussed how CSR managers recur to a multiplicity of meanings to support their own role inside organizations, strategically leveraging the ambiguity that characterizes sustainability in business contexts. Such ambiguity has recently been recognized as a positive resource by some scholars (Guthey and Morsing, 2014; Christensen et al., 2014), which can be used by different organizational actors and stakeholders to foster alternative and innovative conceptions of CSR and corporate sustainability. In the case of CSR managers however, it seems that this ambiguity results mainly in an apology of the status quo and in a conception of CSR and sustainability which is consistent with a vision of 'business as usual'.

In sum, the dissertation adds to an existing body of literature that highlights the limits of current approaches to CSR and sustainability in organizations, which appear too much instrumental, rationalistic and business-oriented (Palazzo and Richter, 2005; Young and Tilley, 2006; Milne and Gray, 2013; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). The three studies that constitute the core chapters of the thesis show indeed that many different tensions and contradictions characterize specific aspects of sustainability in business contexts, namely green HRM policies and practices, CSR managers' occupational rhetorics and their identity work. As a consequence, in the dissertation it is argued for the emergence of more balanced, alternative and challenging views of sustainability in business contexts, which should be embraced also at the managerial level in order to be effectively implemented in organizations.

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### **2. A critical evaluation of sustainability and CSR as research objects**

The empiric contributions included in this dissertation confirm that contemporary conceptions of sustainability in business organizations are dominated by uncritical, one-sided and managerialistic approaches which tend to neglect the existing tensions in favor of a positive, one-sided and win-win representation of corporate sustainability. Managerial actors in organizations, even those who are in charge to champion sustainability and CSR principles, seem to play a major role in reproducing and reinforcing this dominant view (Crane, 2000; Banerjee, 2001; Grant and Nybeg, 2011). Critical scholars have already denounced the negative consequences of a ‘business case’ approach to sustainability in organizations, which risks to overshadow the interests of those stakeholders that could best be served by ‘real’ corporate responsibility resulting only functional to traditional business logics and goals (O’Dwyer, 2003; Banerjee, 2003; Shamir, 2004). In light of these considerations, one might then wonder why is it still necessary to pursue a research agenda on corporate sustainability and CSR in organization studies, whether these phenomena do not represent a challenge but rather a source of legitimacy for current business and managerial practices? Moreover it could be argued that, as Van Oosterhout and Heugens (2008) do, CSR is just an “epiphenomenon” with scarce explanatory power and no relevance for other classical objects and theories of organizational scholarship.

In accordance with the pragmatic approach to the use of concepts and theories undertaken in this dissertation however, I believe that the value of constructs depends on the use of them it is made both in organizational contexts and research. This is true especially in the case of sustainability and CSR, given the strong normative component of these concepts (Matten and Moon, 2008; Burns, 2012), whose meanings and use therefore vary greatly depending on the situation and the social actors involved.

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Many other scholars have highlighted the usefulness of engaging with sustainability and CSR as research objects. Lockie (2012), for example, affirms that the conflicts and contradictions that characterize sustainability are a perfect ‘grist’ for the ‘mill’ of social sciences. At the level of organization and management studies, Grant and Nyberg (2011, p. 536) encourage researchers to investigate how CSR is conceptualized, idealized and articulated in organizations, in order to track how certain conceptions are ‘naturalized’ and made acceptable at the expense of alternative versions and voices. Kuhn and Deetz (2008) suggest that exploring and developing a democratic model of stakeholder communication, could help to find alternatives and foster innovative decision making in organizations. Similarly, Christensen et al. (2007, p. 453) affirm that fostering the dialogue between management and other stakeholders, such as employees and social movements, may help the language of sustainability, even when co-opted, to shape new management practices through the ideals and prescriptions enfolded in its rhetoric. According to Ehrenfeld and Hoffman (2013), research on corporate approaches to sustainability may help to understand how organizations can be a bit less unsustainable, rather than actually addressing global sustainability challenges. Finally, continuing the reasoning and research on sustainability in business organizations and its related concepts can also help the exploration of complementary-alternative conceptions such as “corporate social irresponsibility” (Lin-Hi and Müller, 2013) and “de-growth” (Jermier and Forbes, *forthcoming*).

In order to continue this intellectual effort, it results fundamental to reflect on the research path accomplished to identify new innovative opportunities for research and theorization.

### 3. Concluding reflections

Methodological and theoretical limitations of the different specific studies of this dissertation are discussed in dedicated sections in the previous chapters. Here I want to report some general meta-reflections that accompanied my research work and can help to re-examine the explicative potential of the research projects accomplished, in line with the orientation to reflexivity that characterize organization studies (Fournier and Grey, 2000; Alvesson et al. 2008) and, more in general, social sciences (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Melucci, 1998). Reflexivity has indeed been defined as research that “turns back upon and takes account of itself” (Alvesson et al. 2008, p. 480), in the awareness that any knowledge production process is situated and that the researcher concurs to shape, instead than discovering, research fields as well as objects (Calàs and Smircich, 1999). I find that a reflexive attitude is particularly in line with the general pragmatic and constructionist stance that characterize my own research work. Moreover, it responds to the initial evaluative intent I expressed in the Introduction (see page 21), which is inspired to the work of Gareth Morgan (2006) on metaphors.

As regards the theoretical frames adopted, one first reflection concerns paradox theory and its implications for research. In the introductory chapter of the dissertation, I have highlighted how paradox theory is now a widely accepted frame which has been applied in the study of a number of topics in management and organization studies so that some authors now refer to it as a meta-theoretical frame (Lewis and Smith, 2014; Schad et al. *forthcoming*). Paradox theory represents a sophisticated body of knowledge with an elaborated vocabulary and set of assumptions and with a lively research community connected to it, as I could experience during the international conference and dedicated workshops I attended. Thanks also to the insights derived from the participation to



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these events, I applied paradox theory in two of the projects of this dissertation (Chapter I and III).

My personal experience is that paradox theory has a good explanatory power to look at contradictory phenomena, although I acknowledged since my first study on green HRM practices that it holds strong functionalistic premises. These are evident especially in relation to paradoxical coping strategies to deal with tensions and their possible effects, which are often described in terms of ‘virtuous circles’ (Lewis, 2000), ‘learning opportunities’ (Vince and Broussine, 1996), ‘creative solutions’ (Lewis and Smith) and other positive outcomes at the organizational level. I believe that this implicit functionalism might result counterproductive in many situations, for example by reinforcing managers’ instrumental attitude towards certain topics through the appealing promises offered by paradox theory. Moreover, the perfect binary structure of the concept of paradox (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989), which poses at the same level of desirability the poles of a tension, may run the risk to assimilate goals which holds different ideological and value assumptions, such as business and ethical ones, in a sort of paradox-relativism that assume that all goals are compatible and, ultimately, equivalent.

For these reasons, I came to reconsider the critical potential of paradox theory at its current state of development (for an overview see Schad et al., *forthcoming*), which appears more focused on finding accommodating solution instead of tracking contradictions. I believe thus that paradox theory can be applied in a much more fruitful way in strands of literature such as identity and identity work in organization studies, which presents a strong component of ‘critical-reflexive’ research approaches (Clarke et a., 2009) and results therefore less vulnerable to functionalist thinking, as I tried to demonstrate in the study reported in Chapter III.

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Differently, in Chapter II I applied the concept of occupational rhetorics to investigate how CSR managers represent their role and try to legitimize it inside organizations. In this case I struggled with a vast literature presenting a variety of approaches to look at discourse and rhetorics in organization studies (for an overview see Phillips and Oswick, 2012). As for many other studies of language use in organization and management, the risk of focusing on linguistic practices is to incur in discourse-reductionism and its ‘muscularization’ as denounced by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000 and 2010). I therefore adopted a broader theoretical frame inspired to sociology of occupations and professions, to counterbalance the potentially excessive emphasis on the linguistic level of analysis. This theoretical combination allowed me to track some relevant contradictions in the way CSR managers conceive their role, and explain them in light of the precarious position of these managers inside organizations and, more in general, in the occupational structure constituted by the various managerial specialisms.

While detecting contradictions and speaking them out not trying to solve them, I believe that this research work has a more critical charge in relation to its research object, if compared to the other two included in the dissertation. In my experience, this is also confirmed by the fact that when presenting and discussing findings with research participants, managers were far more willing to accept the “neutral language of paradox theory”, instead of openly acknowledging contradictions in their work in relation to sustainability.

The above reported considerations are undertaken here in the spirit of a multi-perspective reflexive practice (Alvesson et al., 2008) which acknowledges that, as Morgan (2006, p. 5) makes clear, [‘we] have to accept that any theory or perspective we bring to the study of organization and management, while capable of creating valuable insights, is also incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading’.

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As regards the relation with research participants, I always maintained an open and dialogic attitude with those managers who accepted to collaborate to my research work. For example, I tried not to overshadow their voices and perspectives involving them in the analysis and discussion of preliminary versions of the findings of my studies. This, I believe, responds to that demand of multi-voicing practices that characterizes reflexive research approaches (Alvesson et al., 2008). Moreover, although I do not think that all the managers I met in the three years of my PhD would agree with the content of this dissertation and its representation of sustainability in business contexts, I engaged many of them both individually and publicly in the presentation of my research results. I consider these moments an essential part of the research process that can help to foster the *performativity* (Spicer et al., 2009; Wickert and Schaefer, 2015; Cabantous et al., 2016) of critical scholarship in organization studies and it is my intention to maintain this research practice also in my future research activities.

Some final considerations are devoted to the research design choices of the contributions included in my dissertation and cannot therefore be considered limitations but, rather, avenues for future research that could further the lines of investigation initiated here. First, in my research work I chose to focus only on for-profit organizations because I believe it is in such contexts that sustainability results more contradictory. Nevertheless, it would also be interesting to investigate sustainability issues in alternative organizational contexts such as NGOs, public administrations or social movements, to see if different actors in these organizations experience the same or, alternatively, different tensions and contradictions in relation to sustainability and how they try to deal with them. Second, I focused in my research work on managers and managerial conceptions of sustainability, because of the pervasiveness and influence of management as an institution in contemporary organizations and society. Nevertheless,

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a desirable integration would be to consider the position and point of view of employees in relation to corporate sustainability policies and practices. Finally, the analyses reported here are focused mainly on the organizational and individual level, with only a background attention to the macro-institutional context. One way to fill this gap could be to leverage the growing literature on institutional logics in organization studies to explore which are the dynamics between different logics entangled in attempts to pursue sustainability goals at the company level.

These few cues represent of course a collective research agenda, which is already partly ongoing in organizational scholarship (see for example the numerous sub-tracks dedicated to CSR and organizational sustainability included in the EGOS and AOM annual conferences), but also a personal research agenda that highlights my will as researcher to continue to investigate organizational sustainability.

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## Acknowledgements

As any human accomplishment that it is worth of some consideration, this PhD thesis is the result of a collective and collaborative effort in which many people played a role. Although the usual disclaimer applies as all remaining mistakes are mine, I am indeed indebted to a great number of colleagues and friends, without whose help this dissertation would never have materialized and whom I therefore wish now to thank.

First of all, thanks to my supervisor Marco Guerci whose backing has been incredibly close and constant in these last three years, always pushing me to undertake new enriching professional experiences. Marco has been a mentor and an example in several occasions and made me feel a peer and a colleague since the very beginning: for this I will always be grateful to him, for having taught me what it means to be ‘a researcher’.

Secondly, I would like to thank all the members of the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milano whose support and encouragement I always felt. Thanks also to all my fellow colleagues of the Graduate School in Social and Political Sciences, who represent a young, highly effervescent research community and a group of friends who are always ready to share advices and help each other.

Thanks a lot to all the members of the Department of Management and Organization Studies of the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam who hosted me there for four months and, in particular, to Prof. Christopher Wickert, for his sympathy and his friendly advice. Similarly, thanks to Prof. Stefan Sveningsson of the Department of Business Administration of the University of Lund, who hosted me for one month making me feel at home and introducing me to the amazing discussions that are always ongoing there. As a whole, my experience as a visiting PhD student has been great and I think it will influence positively my research work and attitude still for a long time in the future.

Thanks to the financial support of my department, I had the opportunity to present preliminary versions of parts of this dissertation in many occasions: at the EGOS Conference in 2014 and 2015, at the European doctoral workshop in Industrial Relations in 2015 and at the AOM Conference in 2015. I wish to thank all the scholars that participated at the same sub-sessions as me and provided invaluable comments and

feedback that helped to improve the quality (and sometimes the clarity) of the papers that are part of this dissertation.

Overall, these three years of PhD have been an incredible journey that provided me with unique opportunities and satisfaction. Thanks therefore to all the friends and colleagues who took part to this period of my life and contributed to make it so positive and enriching.