
Dialogue and field-level organizing for sustainability

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Self introduction



- **Instructor**

 - **College of Business, University of South Florida**

 - **Teach graduate and undergraduate courses:**
 - **Strategic management**
 - **Corporate sustainability and sustainable enterprise**
 - **Climate change business strategies**
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Self introduction



- Do sustainability research:
 - Inter-organizational collaborations (Ph.D/ New Zealand-based study)
 - Individuals' attitudes toward corporate sustainability (US-based study)
 - Corporate sustainability strategies (India-based study)
 - Research grant to do field work in India
 - American multinationals' contributions to India's sustainable development
 - Looking for mentors and collaborators
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Today's paper

- Ph.D. dissertation
- Research on multi-stakeholder organizing for sustainability



Outline of today's talk

- Research context
- Research objectives and relevance
- Research question
- Theoretical framework
- Case studies
- Research methodology
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Lacuna and research contributions



Research context: Sustainability

- **“Development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”**

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)

- **A sustainable society has to satisfy competing requirements:**

- **Economic needs of residents**
- **Social and cultural needs of residents**
- **Natural environmental needs of all beings**
- **Economic, social and environmental needs of all beings who will inhabit our planet in the future**



Research objectives and relevance

- **Institutionalization of sustainable development will occur through multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration.** (Hart, 2007; Roome and Wijen, 2005; Starik & Rands, 1995)
- **However, we need empirical studies of practical processes that demonstrate how do they so.**



Research question



What are the mechanisms through which dialogue influences institutional change toward sustainable development?

Theoretical framework

- **Integrated theories on dialogue** (Bohm, 1996; Bakhtin, 1981 ; Freire, 1972; Gadamer, 1989; Habermas, 1984)

with

institutional theories (Davis, McAdam, Scott & Zald, 2005; Davis, Morrill, Rao, & Soule, 2008; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996; Phillips, 2003; Scott, 2002; Westwood & Clegg, 2003)



Dialogue (Communications scholars)

- **A communicative process** (Bohm, 1996; Bakhtin, 1981 ; Freire, 1972; Gadamer, 1989; Habermas, 1984)
- **Different from debate: winning or losing**
- ***“Subject-to-subject”* communication opposed to *“Subject-to-object”* communication**



Dialogue (Communications scholars)

- A win-win communication
- An ideal speech situation
- Exploring new issues
- Generating new and higher understanding
- Relating with others



Dialogue(Institutional scholars)

- **Dialogue contributes to institutional change**
(Zilber, 2008; Hoffman, 1998)
- **Dialogue is a “vital step in the continuum of institutional change and in the process of restructuring our social institutions”** (Hoffman 1998, p. 216).
- **But, “how” is it so, we don’t know.**



Investigate the efficacy of dialogue

- Examining “ideals” of dialogue vs. “practicalities” of dialogue with respect to institutional change
- In what ways are dialogues **effective** in bringing about institutional change toward sustainability?
- In what ways are dialogue **ineffective** in bringing about institutional change toward sustainability?



Institutional change

- **A process of generating a new and better social order as well as an outcome representing a new and better social order** (Philips and Malhotra, 2008; Lounsbury, 2005; Zucker, 1977)
- **Top-down as well as a bottom-up phenomenon** (Schneiberg and Soule, 2005)
- **Process of (re)generating and transforming institutions** (Fligstein, 1996; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983)

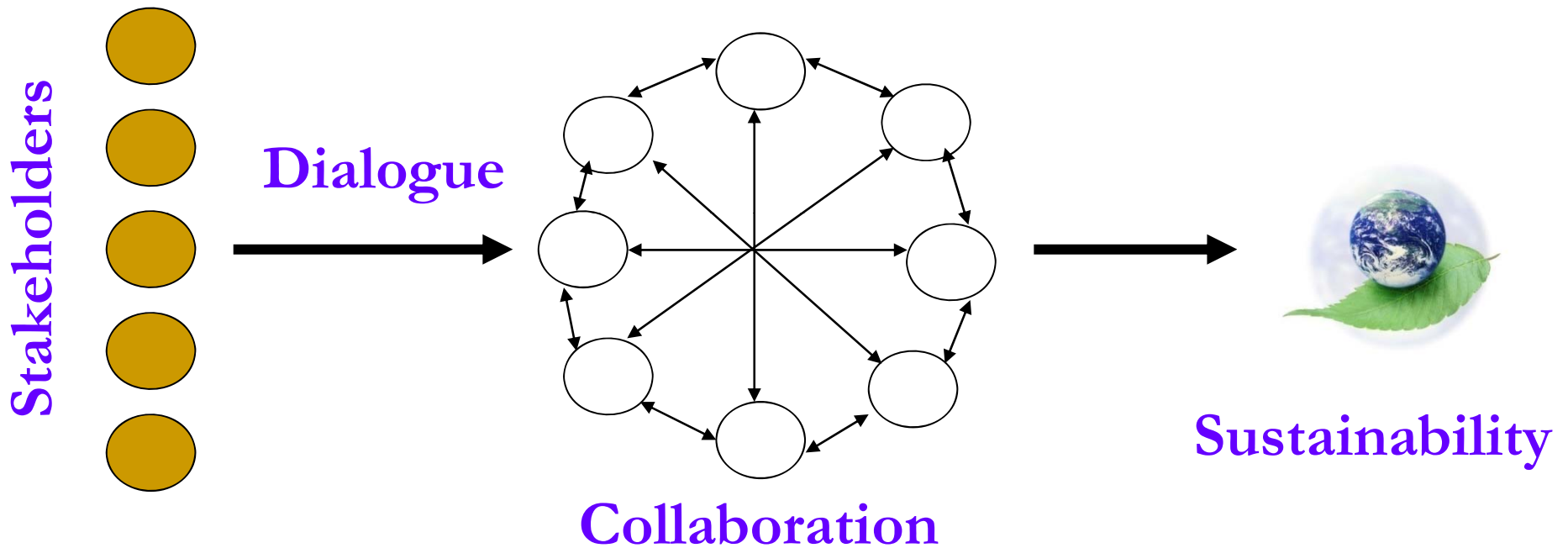


Institutions

- **Institutions influence collaborating individuals and organizations.**
- **They are normative, regulative and cultural-cognitive in nature, and are mutually dependent.** (Scott, 2001; Mendel, 2002; Hoffman & Ventresca, 2002)
- **Individuals, organizations and collaborations influence social movements and institutional change.**



Two studies of collaboration



Dialogue changes attitudes and societies.

(Freire, 1972; Misfud & Johnson, 2000; Bohm, 1998; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004)

Two institutional settings

- Strategic planning and implementation of sustainability in two regions of New Zealand
- *Study 1: Top-down* institutionalization
 - **Local government** forum
 - 15 senior strategy managers of 8 local government agencies in a metropolitan region
- *Study 2: Bottom-up* institutionalization
 - **Civil society** forum
 - 32 stakeholders from local government, business, and non-government agencies in a rural region



Different outcomes

- Two processes faced similar hurdles, but outcomes were different.
- The local government sustainability forum **survived** and met its basic objectives.
- The civil society sustainability forum **collapsed** within six months of its launch.

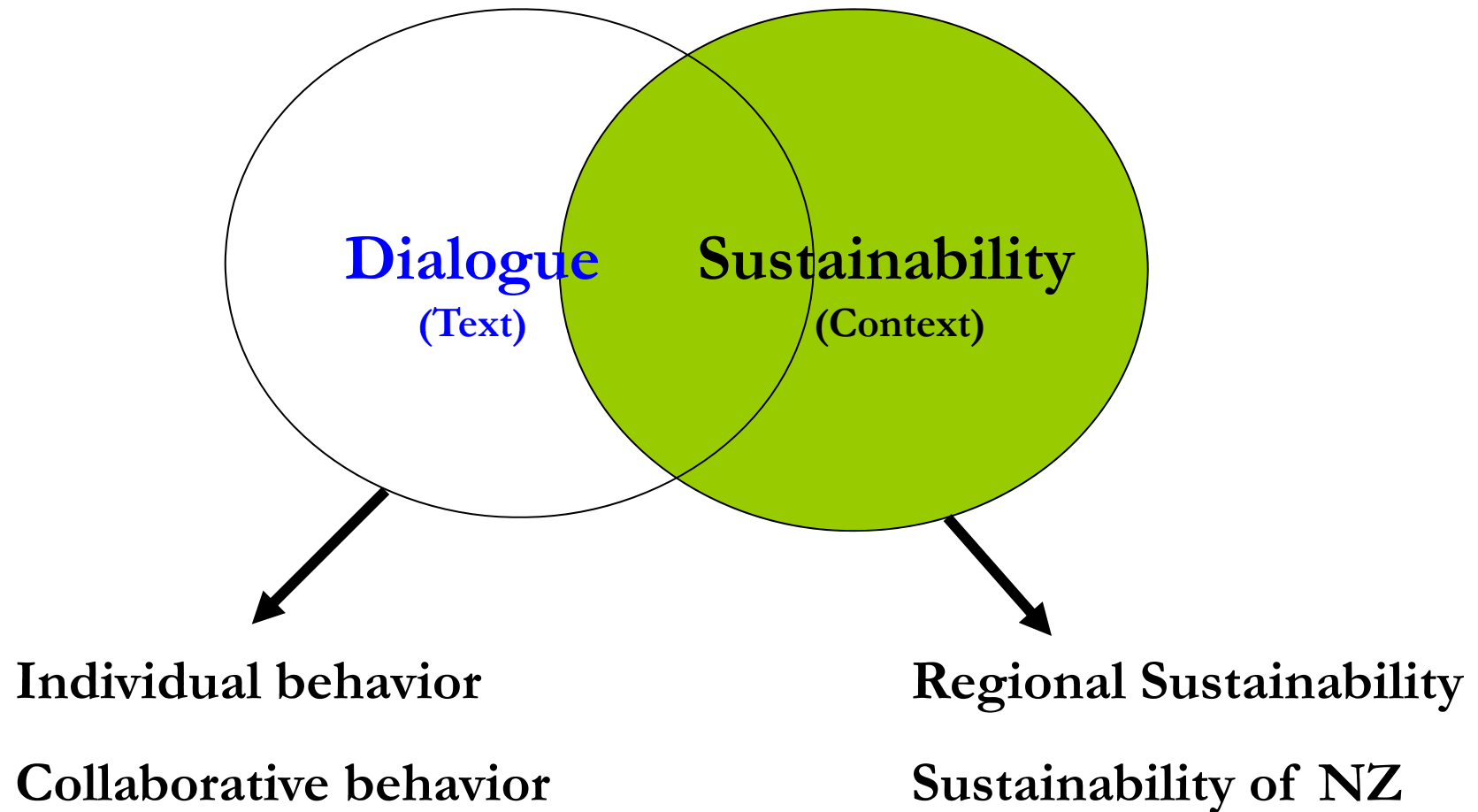


Methodology

- A critical-interpretive lens looks under the surface.
- 22 semi-structured interviews (30 minutes - 2 hours), and 15 meetings (1 - 2 hours) over two years
- Line-by-line analysis of 2400 pages of field notes, transcripts, and documents
- First, I identified themes in participants' experiences, and relationships among themes. (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
- Second, I discussed participants' experiences in terms of institutional and social movement theories. (Pentland, 1999)



Critical-hermeneutic analysis of data



Findings: Facilitates Understandings

- Participants developed deeper understanding of the conceptual complexity of sustainability.
 - Participants gained deeper understanding of the regulative and normative expectations on sustainable development.
 - Participants acquired greater appreciation of the roles of others and relationships in the movement.
 - Participants understood the regulative and normative complexities of institutional change.
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Findings: Facilitates misunderstandings

- Participants had different sustainability foci.
 - *For some, unsustainability was an economic problem. For others, it was a social or an environmental problem.*
- They were at different stages. Some were leaders, and others had not even started planning for sustainability.
- They used different terms and language to convey similar points.
- Some wanted to “talk” on sustainability first. Others wanted to “act” on sustainability first.



Quotes: Local government forum

- **“Our focus on social sustainability is very strong! Not that there is no focus on environmental sustainability. But it’s not the priority.”**
- **“There is a tendency for...these collaborations to be just a hell of a lot of talk...I don’t see anything new coming up. People just repeat the same old stuff!”**
- **“I think things have to be really bad for us to say O.K. we are just going to withdraw from it....Central government is taking a regional focus, so we have to try and make it work.”**



Quotes: Civil society forum



- **“I have a concern that the discussions are totally environmental, and we have social sustainability issues which need to be addressed!”**
 - **“We came here to do something and not to argue over words. I have given up. I am not coming here anymore!”**
 - **“This would be a long–term project to change the thinking in people’s heads. It won’t happen overnight.”**
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Findings: Different outcomes

- Lots of disagreements, confusions and frustrations in the two collaborations.
- The local government sustainability forum **survived** and met its basic objectives. It was accountable to the central government (regulatory/coercive pressures).
- The civil society sustainability forum **collapsed** within six months of its launch. It was not accountable to the government.



Conclusions

- Dialogue contributes to institutional change
- **Mechanism 1:** Initiates societal and organizational level changes favoring sustainability in a top-down manner
- **Mechanism 2:** Educates institutional actors about various facets of institutional change toward sustainability
- **Mechanism 3:** Nurtures relationships among institutional actors
- **Mechanism 4:** Breeds conflicts by offering actors opportunities to freely explore, express and defend their multiple viewpoints



Conclusions

- **Mechanism 5:** Creates an illusion of institutional change and gives institutional actors opportunities to superficially engage in the institutional change for building their reputation and enhancement of their legitimacy
- **Mechanism 6:** Initiates change in a bottom-up manner by challenging institutional actors' prejudices, practices and expectations on sustainable development
- **Mechanism 7:** Gives an indication of the nature and extent of institutional change adoption in societies and organizations



Conclusions



- Dialogue brings about subtle and incremental changes in institutions.
 - Dialogue cannot bring about fast and radical changes needed to achieve sustainability.
 - Dialogues accountable to regulations on sustainable development are less susceptible to breakdown than voluntary dialogues that do not face those coercive pressures.
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Lacuna and research contributions:

- Dialogic explanation of institutional change
- A “problem-driven” and human relational focus to explain institutional change (Davis & Marquis, 2005; Galaskiewicz, 1991; Wooten, & Hoffman, 2008) **toward sustainability**
- “Live process” focus to explain institutional change **vs.** the predominant longitudinal, industry-based, structural focus adopted by institutional scholars
- Institutional theoretical explanation of how dialogue contributes to sustainable development



Thank you for your attention



Please grill me and help me!
