Change contagion: Exploring the role that social interactions play in increasing support for corporate sustainability

by

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Declaration

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Date: March 2023

Abstract

Pressure is mounting for businesses to shift towards sustainability by serving nature and society. My study explores the role of social interactions in increasing support for corporate sustainability, particularly in the context of ongoing crises in the macro environment. I build upon institutional change, change agent, and social-symbolic work literature. Institutional change literature provides insights into exogenous and endogenous change processes. Literature on change agents highlights the role of individuals who seek to change the institutions in which they operate. Social-symbolic work provides a framework of analysis for how people negotiate social meanings.

While prior literature acknowledges the importance of social interactions in driving institutional change, there is limited research on how precisely interactions contribute. My qualitative study investigates how social interactions influence support for institutional change. It analyses the spread of the sustainability agenda in corporate organisations in South Africa during several crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using a grounded theory methodology, I collected and analysed primary data from semi-structured interviews and a focus group. 18 change agents participated in my research. 13 change agents were directly employed by eight different corporations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, and the remaining were employed by other organisations along the value chain, such as in suppliers.

I found that social interactions play a major role in furthering the sustainability agenda in two ways. First, there are three ways agents challenge the values of someone who is not a change agent: *value association* (pointing out where sustainability and corporate values align), *value relocation* (contextualising a non-corporate value into the corporate space), and *value shifting* (facilitating a person's introspection). Furthermore, a crisis catalyses this by disrupting the routines of the non-agent, leading to anxiety, which change agents could creatively leverage to accelerate change contagion. Second, change agents use social interactions to drive sustainability transitions through negotiating with one another on what sustainability means. I termed this process *value negotiation*. Value negotiation legitimises and operationalises sustainability transitions, thereby accelerating change contagion.

My research builds upon existing scholarship. First, it introduces the concept of change contagion, which scholars can use in the future to analyse how ideas spread between people. Second, it articulates the role of social interactions in driving institutional change by describing the mechanisms which lead to the permeation of change agency. Third, it adds to social-symbolic work literature, particularly to our understanding of value work, as it introduces the concepts of value association, value relocation, value shifting, and value negotiation. Last, it provides insights into the how crises provide opportunities that can be leveraged by change agents to accelerate institutional change and catalysing change contagion.

My findings also provide practical insights. Firstly, it recommends the positioning of agents throughout the value chain, linking them together through spaces where they could interact with one another. Second, my study shows how sustainability teams can harness crises to further corporate sustainability transitions. Finally, my findings provided some tools and techniques agents could use to help spread change agency.

Opsomming

Die druk neem toe dat besighede hul fokus na volhoubaarheid verskuif deur tot diens van die natuur en die samelewing te wees. My studie ondersoek die rol van sosiale interaksies in die daarstel van groter ondersteuning vir korporatiewe volhoubaarheid, veral in die konteks van voortdurende krisisse in die makro-omgewing. Ek bou voort op institusionele verandering, die veranderingsagent, en die literatuur rakende sosiaal-simboliese werk. Die literatuur oor institusionele verandering verskaf insigte in eksogene en endogene veranderingsprosesse. Literatuur oor veranderingsagente beklemtoon die rol van individue wat poog om die instellings waarin hulle funksioneer te verander. Sosiaal-simboliese werk verskaf ’n ontledingsraamwerk vir die manier hoe mense sosiale betekenisse beding.

Terwyl bestaande literatuur die belang van sosiale interaksies in die dryf van institusionele verandering erken, is daar beperkte navorsing oor hoe presies interaksies daartoe bydra. My kwalitatiewe studie ondersoek hoe sosiale interaksies ondersteuning vir institusionele verandering beïnvloed. Dit ontleed die ontplooiing van die volhoubaarheidsagenda in korporatiewe organisasies in Suid-Afrika tydens verskeie krisisse, waaronder die COVID-19-pandemie.

Ek gebruik ’n begrondeteorie-metodologie vir die insameling en ontleding van primêre data via semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en ’n fokusgroep. Agtien veranderingsagente het aan die navorsing deelgeneem. Dertien veranderingsagente was regstreeks in diens van agt verskillende korporasies wat op die JSE Sekuriteitebeurs Suid-Afrika genoteer is, terwyl die oorblywende agente in diens van ander organisasies in die waardeketting was, byvoorbeeld by die leweransiers.

Ek het gevind dat sosiale interaksies ’n belangrike rol speel by die bevordering van die volhoubaarheidsagenda, naamlik op twee wyses. Eerstens is daar drie maniere waarop agente die waardes uitdaag van iemand wat nie ’n veranderingsagent is nie: *waarde-assosiasie* (om uit te wys waar volhoubaarheid en korporatiewe waardes ooreenstem); *waardehervestiging* (kontekstualisering van ’n nie-korporatiewe waarde in die korporatiewe ruimte); en *waardeverskuiwing* (wat ’n persoon se introspeksie fasiliteer). Verder kataliseer ’n krisis dit deurdat die roetines van die nie-agent ontwrig word, wat tot angs lei, en veranderingsagente kan dit kreatief benut om die oordrag van

verandering te versnel. Tweedens gebruik veranderingsagente sosiale interaksies om volhoubaarheidsoorgange te dryf deur met mekaar te onderhandel oor wat volhoubaarheid beteken. Ek noem hierdie proses *waarde-onderhandeling*. Waarde-onderhandeling regverdig en operasionaliseer volhoubaarheidsoorgange, en versnel sodoende veranderingsoordrag.

My navorsing bou voort op bestaande kundigheid. Eerstens stel dit die konsep van veranderingoordrag bekend, wat vakkundiges in die toekoms kan gebruik om te ontleed hoe idees tussen mense versprei. Tweedens verwoord dit die rol van sosiale interaksies in die dryf van institusionele verandering deur die meganismes te beskryf wat tot die deurdringing (permeation) van veranderingsagentskap lei. Derdens dra dit by tot die literatuur oor sosiaal-simboliese werk, veral tot ons begrip van waardewerk, aangesien dit die konsepte waarde-assosiasie, waardehervestiging, waardeverskuiwing en waarde-onderhandeling bekendstel. Laastens bied dit insigte oor hoe krisisse die geleenthede bied wat deur veranderingsagente gebruik kan word om institusionele verandering te versnel en veranderingsoordrag te kataliseer.

My bevindinge verskaf ook praktiese insigte. Eerstens beveel dit aan dat agente in die hele waardeketting geposisioneer word, en dat hulle met mekaar verbind word in ruimtes waar hulle in wisselwerking met mekaar kan wees. Tweedens dui my studie aan hoe volhoubaarheidspanne krisisse kan inspan om korporatiewe volhoubaarheidsoorgange te bevorder. Ten slotte verskaf my bevindinge ’n aantal instrumente en tegnieke wat agente kan gebruik om veranderingsagentskap te help versprei.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CEO	chief executive officer
CSI	corporate social investment
ESG	environmental, social, and governance
JSE	Johannesburg Stock Exchange
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
SMME	small, micro, and medium enterprise

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

For the introductory chapter, I provide a broad overview of my study. First, I detail the background of my research, which includes a description of the academic conversation that I am joining. From there, I provide the problem statement and research questions. I outline my research scope by providing delimitations on what my study will be researching. I then provide an overview of the research methodology and design adopted for this research. Next, I provide an overview of my findings and their practical recommendations. Finally, I highlight the underlying rationale of my study, speaking to its theoretical and practical purposes. I end the chapter with a summary.

1.2 Background

Scholars and the public alike have historically lambasted corporations for their exploitative and unsustainable processes, which have led to environmental degradation and the inequitable treatment of people (Marcus, Kurucz & Colbert, 2010). Researchers have argued that symptomatic treatment of these problems fails to address the core problem: the corporate paradigms that prioritise shareholder returns and reinforce exploitative processes (Marcus et al., 2010; Ergene, Banerjee & Hoffman, 2020). In order to mitigate socioecological damage, corporate organisations must embed sustainability in their operations and undergo a deep paradigm shift towards serving nature and society; one which is founded on authentic internal shifts at the individual level (Marcus et al., 2010).

Scholars sometimes refer to individuals who champion sustainability as change agents. Change agents are people who seek to change the institutions that they are in (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Literature has explored how people become change agents, such as Seo and Creed's (2002) paper on why agents challenge the institutions that conditioned them. Scholars have also explored how change agents work to change their institutions, such as Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum's (2009) paper on institutional entrepreneurs' strategies to affect change. Often mentioned but less explored is the role of social interactions in change agency. Battilana et al. (2009) and

Ruebottom and Auster (2018) have noted the importance of social interactions and networks in mobilising people and instilling the values of change agency in others.

Social-symbolic work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019) provides a valuable framework to explore how social interactions contribute to the spread of change between individuals, as well as drive change throughout organisations and institutions. Some studies using this framework have explored the role of social interactions in instilling values of sustainability (Barberá-Tomas, Castelló, de Bakker & Zietsma, 2019). Others have analysed how networks of individuals enact organisational and institutional change (Gehman, Treviño & Garud, 2013). Despite literature indicating that social interactions are an integral tool for change agents (Battilana et al., 2009; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; DeJordy et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021), there has been limited research on the tactics used by change agents and how these tactics may differ between different people over time or depending on the context. For example, some papers have examined how change agents interact and collaborate with one another (Gehman et al., 2013; DeJordy et al., 2020), whilst other scholars focused on the recruitment of new agents (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018). Yet, there has not been a comprehensive examination of how change agents use social interactions to drive institutional change.

While current studies on social-symbolic work provide some valuable insights, they tend to focus on specific institutions and discuss specific issues, such as Barberá-Tomas et al.'s (2019) research, which analysed online discourse surrounding some photographs. Furthermore, they have yet to account for the role of crises in driving social-symbolic work, providing an opportunity for further research (King & Carberry, 2020; Langley, 2021). Traditionally, literature on institutional change has characterised crises as exogenous events that shift institutions (Meyer, 1982; Micelotta, Lounsbury & Greenwood, 2017). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have begun to revisit how individuals use crises to further institutional change (Langley, 2021). One of the main questions that emerges from these studies pertains to how change spreads between people in the context of a crisis. It would be useful to investigate the role of the individual in driving larger institutional change during times of crisis. Investigating this provides greater clarity on how institutional change occurs, as it focuses on the 'social' aspect of social-symbolic work. It can provide greater details on how relationships and interactions help construct, maintain, and change institutional arrangements. It could also provide practical insights for change agents who seek to drive change but struggle to understand how to use social interactions to do so.

1.3 Problem statement

The purpose of my research is to explore the role that social interactions play in institutional change, and how the context of crisis affects this. Although literature has argued for the importance of social interactions for transmitting change agency and shifting institutions (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), there are limited attempts to articulate the underlying mechanisms taking place. Further, scholarly discourse post-COVID-19 has argued for a re-examination of how a crisis can cause institutional change (Langley, 2021). Thus, my research will contribute towards this understanding, with a particular focus on social interactions occurring in the corporate sector.

1.4 Research questions

The main research question is as follows:

- How do social interactions influence support for institutional change?

This question directly speaks to the spaces in literature where further research could bolster knowledge on this theme. I will answer it in the context of organisational and corporate sustainability. The following sub-questions will further assist me in answering the overall research question:

- What does the process of change contagion between individuals in organisational settings look like?
- How does the context of macro-crises affect change contagion in organisations?
- How do change agents in an organisation use social interactions to advocate for and further corporate sustainability?

These sub-questions each aim to provide greater nuance to the issue. The first question looks solely at social interactions and how they can lead to the development of a new change agent. The second question aims to account for how crises may affect this process, as scholars have argued that this theme needs to be further explored in social-symbolic work (Langley, 2021). The third and final sub-question assesses the overall role of social interactions in organisations for driving change, such as through networks of communication, which scholars have argued to be important in change efforts (DeJordy et al., 2020).

1.5 Rationale for the study

My research intends to add to growing discourse surrounding institutional change literature. It seeks to build on existing literature on change agency by articulating the role of social interactions in the spread of change between individuals. It also adds to social-symbolic work literature by developing a deeper understanding of how social interactions help shift institutions. Furthermore, this research provides insight into how the context of a macro-crisis affects how change contagion unfolds, therefore adding to the literature that seeks to revisit how crises lead to institutional change.

My research also intends to provide practical recommendations for sustainability change agents and corporations to implement. Throughout my data collection rounds, my participants voiced their concerns, uncertainties, and hopes for what my research will do to help them in their efforts to affect change. Therefore, I hope that my findings will provide strategic insights – for both the individual and the corporation – on how to best drive institutional change.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

My study has two key boundaries: it looked at sustainability change agents in the corporate sector and its associated value chain; and it only looked at organisations based in South Africa. These delimitations frame the context of my findings and the answers for my research. The purpose of these delimitations is to provide precision to the research.

Firstly, the focus of my study was on sustainability change agents operating in a corporate space and how they utilise social interactions to drive institutional change during times of crisis. Therefore, I looked at participants along the supply chain of corporations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). Therefore, my findings may not be applicable to all scenarios wherein change contagion may occur, such as in households.

Secondly, my study focused on corporations and organisations based in South Africa. There is a possibility that differences in the cultural, historical, and current context of another country may impact how change contagion occurs there.

1.7 Research methodology and design

I conducted my research using two research paradigms: the constructivist and relational paradigms. The constructivist paradigm was useful to help me understand how my own perspectives and lens affected my research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Recognising and working with this inherent bias allowed me to better understand the influence I may have on my research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I coupled this understanding with literature on how to conduct research during times of crisis, to account for how my own experiences of the crisis may affect my research, and how best to harness the opportunities that crises provide, to gather valuable data (Langley, 2021). The relational paradigm helped me understand and characterise dynamics, such as agency and power, as relational rather than inherent (Emirbayer, 1997).

I utilised a grounded theory methodology, which is an abductive, reiterative research approach (Suddaby, 2006). This allowed my data and literature to inform one another repeatedly throughout my research, which helped me understand and analyse my data, as well as guide further data collection. Grounded theory allowed me to investigate how individuals engage in furthering the sustainability agenda in the corporate space in a time of crisis. As my research is set in the context of South Africa, the country faced a set of crises surrounding the time of my research, including the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread looting in the provinces KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Gauteng, concerns of increasing water scarcity, and worsening socioeconomic indicators.

I used multiple sampling techniques. First, I sought to have proportional representation of corporations in different sectors, which required the collection of corporations and their respective sectors. I contacted individuals along the supply chain of corporations listed on the JSE. These individuals were people whom I determined to be change agents based on indicators such as their sustainability-related job titles and participation in sustainability groups, which marked them as being actively working towards changing institutions. I also used a snowball sampling approach, wherein participants referred me to other possible participants.

I used three key qualitative data collection techniques: semi-structured interviews; focus groups; and content analysis. My semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to provide insights on their experiences in advocating for sustainability. The focus group discussion presented some preliminary findings to gain deeper insights from my participants. Content analysis helped me prepare for and shape my questions for the semi-structured interviews. This was useful to ensure that my semi-structured interviews would provide valuable information, as well as mitigate the power imbalances that can occur when talking to business professionals (Langley & Meziani, 2020).

I analysed my data by coding for themes and patterns using a software called ATLAS.ti, memo-ing emerging insights, and using mapping data techniques to understand relationships and dynamics. Data analysis occurred between data collection rounds. This is in line with grounded theory, as it allows data to guide the research trajectory.

There are some clarifications of meanings that I must establish to ensure there is no confusion going forward. For the purposes of my research, I used the following terms to describe certain elements of my research:

- **Agents:** a change agent.
- **Non-agents:** someone who is not a change agent.
- **Change contagion:** the spread of change agency.

1.8 Findings and recommendations

I found that social interactions play a major role in furthering the sustainability agenda in the corporate sector by spreading change agency, and through change agents negotiating with one another to define sustainability. The process of change contagion occurs through an agent's efforts to challenge the values of someone who is not a change agent. The perceived credibility of the agent affects this process, and the agent seeks to improve their credibility through social interactions. Simultaneously, the social interactions serve as spaces where the agent can challenge the non-agent's values. Agents do this through *value association*, *value relocation*, and *value shifting*.

I also found that a macro-crisis, such as an ecological, economic, or social crisis, could catalyse this by disrupting the routines of the non-agent, leading to their heightened level of anxiety. Agents proactively and creatively used this opportunity to accelerate change contagion.

Lastly, I found that agents interacting with one another negotiated the values of sustainability, so that they could create agreed-upon organisational and institutional values. I termed this process as *value negotiation*. Value negotiation legitimised sustainability transitions, which in turn could help accelerate change contagion. Further, I found that the location of an agent throughout the value chain affects how they can affect change in the organisation. I discuss how linking change agents throughout the value chain allows for greater value negotiation, and therefore can accelerate the corporation's sustainability transition through aligning the corporation's sustainability strategy.

This research builds upon existing scholarship on change agency and social-symbolic work. First, it introduces the concept of change contagion, which scholars can use in the future to analyse how ideas spread between people. Second, it articulates the role of social interactions in driving institutional change by describing the mechanisms which lead to the permeation of change agency. Third, it adds to social-symbolic work literature, particularly to our understanding of value work, as it introduces the concepts of value association, value relocation, value shifting, and value negotiation. Last, it provides insights into the how crises provide opportunities that can be leveraged by change agents to accelerate institutional change and catalysing change contagion.

My findings provide practical recommendations. Firstly, senior sustainability leaders may find it useful to create a strategy that positions agents throughout the value chain, whilst also linking them together through spaces where they could interact with one another. My research found that this strategy is the most conducive to rapid change in a corporate setting. Second, my findings provided insights on how sustainability teams could harness crises to further corporate sustainability transitions. They can do this through proactively and creatively using the heightened emotions of a crisis to engage with non-agents. Finally, my findings provided overall tools and techniques that agents could use to help spread change agency, such as how to determine the purpose of an interaction and what tactics of persuasion can be used.

1.9 Chapter summary

This introductory chapter sought to provide an overview of my research and motivate for its relevance. First, I discussed the background of the research. Literature on corporate sustainability, change agency, social-symbolic work, and crises have all informed my research. I found opportunities to build upon the existing knowledge of institutional change.

From this, I developed my problem statement. I argued that there is a need for research to investigate how change agency spreads between individuals, how social interactions play a role in institutional change, and how the context of a macro-crisis affects these processes.

Following this, I defined my main research question, which asked what the role of social interactions are in furthering the sustainability agenda in an organisation. Three sub-questions were presented to help me answer this main research question and better understand how the process of change contagion looks between individuals in organisational settings, how the context of macro-crises affect change contagion in organisations, and how change agents use social interactions to advocate for and further corporate sustainability.

I addressed the delimitations of my study, which means that I set boundaries for what I would and would not be examining. I decided to focus on the corporate sector, and only looked at corporations based in South Africa. The former means that my findings may not be as applicable to other spaces or sectors, such as how change contagion may unfold in the household. The latter means that there is a possibility that change contagion could unfold differently in countries outside of South Africa.

I then provided an overview of my research strategy. I undertook my research using constructivist and relational paradigms, and a grounded theory methodology. I employed a mixed methods sampling method of proportional representation and snowballing. I collected data during several rounds, using three qualitative data collection techniques: content analysis; semi-structured interviews; and focus groups. My data analysis comprised of coding and mapping my findings. I also clarified the three key terms that my research uses: agents; non-agents; and change contagion.

From there, I gave a brief overview of what findings emerged from my research, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of these. I found that there are different types of interactions that help further sustainability, and that the purposes and mechanisms behind these differ. This includes agent and non-agent interactions, where the purpose is to help the non-agent go through introspective processes that may lead to them becoming another agent. This is the process of change contagion. I also found that crises can catalyse change contagion. Crises disrupt the routines of people, leading to heightened anxiety, and therefore they are more willing to engage in conversations that directly or indirectly speak to the crisis. Therefore, agents successfully accelerated change contagion during a crisis through proactive and creative ways to interweave a crisis in their messaging. The other interaction is between agents, where the purpose is to negotiate the meanings behind sustainability, and therefore enable them to enact material change. This leads to some useful insights for senior sustainability leaders, sustainability departments, and other sustainability agents throughout the value chain.

Finally, I motivated for the rationale of my study. I argued that my research adds to existing literature pertaining to institutional change by deepening academia's understanding of how change can spread within people. Furthermore, my research provides practical insights that may assist change agents in their efforts to drive sustainability transitions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Institutional change literature provides a plethora of frameworks and theories that help explain how institutions shift and transform over time. In this section, I introduce institutional change literature before going on to delve into change agency and social-symbolic work literature. Institutional change literature provides some insights on how crises and individuals can affect change. Change agency literature explores what creates change agents and how they act to drive change. Social-symbolic work literature explores how institutions are negotiated between people over time.

Drawing from social-symbolic work and change agency literature, I argue that there is greater need to explore the role of social interactions in driving institutional change. Studies have shown the importance of social interactions (Battilana et al., 2009; Gehman et al., 2013; McDonnell et al., 2017; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Only a few studies, such as Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019), have sought to explore the processes which cause change agency to spread via social interactions. However, these examples provide specific scenarios. For example, Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) examined the role of digital interactions discussing images. My study seeks to add to this field by identifying processes more broadly applicable to different circumstances and modes of social interaction.

2.2 The role of exogenous events and individuals in institutional change

Institutions are the cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that provide purpose and guidelines for people’s behaviour (Scott, 1995), and institutional change is the radical transformation and/or incremental development of these features over time (Micelotta, Lounsbury & Greenwood, 2017). Whereas traditionally, scholars perceived institutional change as caused by exogenous events, more recent research has emphasised the role played by the intentional efforts of individuals (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Micelotta et al., 2017). This section will succinctly unpack these two perspectives on institutional change and discuss how the literature of each has shifted in recent years. From that, I will highlight an opportunity to build upon existing theories.

2.2.1 The role of exogenous events in institutional change

Traditionally, scholars perceived institutional change as largely driven by exogenous events, such as a crisis or change in regulations, to which people and organisations react and adapt (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Micelotta et al., 2017). Exogenous events – particularly crises – were still characterised until recently as the main forces that institutions had to adapt to, irrespective of the will of individuals (Meyer, 1982). Scholars did acknowledge the usefulness of crises to propel long-term institutional changes, though this was often characterised as part of the process of an adjustment of institutional routines to adapt to the crisis (Meyer, 1982).

COVID-19 has reignited scholarly interest in this role of crisis, leading to the argument that institutional change occurs because of people acting during a crisis to challenge institutional arrangements (Langley, 2021). Scholars have argued that crises reveal the fragility of institutions, therefore compelling people into action (King & Carberry, 2020; Amis & Greenwood, 2021). For example, COVID-19 resulted in heightened awareness of social inequities, as it has exacerbated inequality, unemployment, food insecurity, and a myriad of other social injustices (King & Carberry, 2020; Amis & Greenwood, 2021). King and Carberry (2020) argued that by making injustices more visible, COVID-19 emboldened people to engage in more widespread activism with already existing movements, such as in that of Black Lives Matter.

The current academic discourse tends to characterise the disruptive context provided by crises, which provides the foundation for people to challenge the dominant paradigms in society (Langley, 2021). As such, Amis and Greenwood (2021) point out that the COVID-19 crisis shone a new light on existing demands for more social justice, transparency, and sustainability. In particular, the pandemic provided an opportunity to re-evaluate and challenge the taken-for-granted beliefs and practices that underpin institutions in times of stability (Amis & Greenwood, 2021). However, this opportunity for re-evaluation is often transient, as people have shown themselves to be capable of quickly re-establishing routines and normalcy (King & Carberry, 2020; Langley, 2021).

2.2.2 The role of individuals in institutional change

Despite the value of renewed attention to exogenous events in institutional change, it is important to understand the role played by the intentional efforts of individuals, which became the focus of institutional change literature from the 1990s (Micelotta et al., 2017). In this regard, theoretical frameworks such as that of inhabited institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) provide valuable insights on the role of individual actors acting purposefully and strategically to influence the institutional arrangements that they are a part of.

Hallett and Ventresca's (2006) inhabited institutions approach offers an alternative to the more structuralist conceptualisations of institutions and institutional change. In their paper, Hallett and Ventresca (2006) argue that structural conceptualisations do not allow for a detailed understanding of how people's behaviours and organisational patterns participate in shaping an institutional arrangement. The authors (2006) instead advocate for a more people-orientated approach. Within a people-oriented approach, structures still influence how individuals behave and what they are capable of doing, but the agency and autonomy of individuals is recognised and emphasised (Meyer & Vaara, 2020). Consequently, Hallett and Ventresca (2006) conceptualise institutional change as occurring due to the build-up of changes enacted by individuals, emphasising the importance of using various scales of analysis. These changes may appear more accumulative than transformational, though they can radically change an institution (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Notably, it is increasingly common for scholars to characterise much of institutional change as incremental and emergent rather than a switch between one state of routines into another (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

By moving people to the centre of the analysis, an inhabited institutions approach allows for a deeper consideration of experiences, ideas, social interactions, and influences that underpin actors' engagement to institutional change. Thus, this conceptualisation of individuals is not restricted to their organisational roles or institutional field (Bertels & Lawrence, 2016). An inhabited institutions approach recognises that individuals have complex relationships to different institutional contexts, and acknowledges the role of identity, social interactions, and individual biographies in the construction and negotiation of routines (Bertels & Lawrence, 2016). As such, actors are not just the "carriers" of the institutions that condition them, but also the "shapers" of these same institutions, as individuals both are conditioned by and assign meanings to institutional arrangements (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006:288).

Building on the idea of individuals' complex relationships, Bitektine, Haack, Bothello and Mair (2020) proposed the idea of inhabited actors. Bitektine et al. (2020) argued that actors carry the meanings, ideals, and beliefs of various institutions in their interactions. This occurs as actors identify with different institutional roles, such as within a particular career and as being a parent

(Bitekine et al., 2020). An actor can therefore have multiple institutions acting upon them at once, some of which may conflict with one another. Patriotta (2020) argued that the concept of inhabited institutions lends itself to analysing the individual's internal processes that lead them to engage in institutional change, as their internal narration and the mediation of their numerous identities influence their behaviours.

Institutional work literature has also drawn attention to the intentional efforts of actors to disrupt, maintain, or create institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), previously thought "as beyond actors' control" (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012:224). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006:215) define institutional work as "the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions." Emphasising the role of individuals' agency, institutional work literature has led to an intricate knowledge of "*how* institutional work occurs, *who* does institutional work, and *what* constitutes institutional work" (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013:1025).

Institutional work has provided valuable insights into different types of work that were "largely unknown or unexpected just a few years ago" (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012:223). This includes value work (Gehman, Treviño & Garud, 2013), identity work (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010), emotion work (Voronov & Vince, 2012), and boundary work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). These forms of work all involve actors who engage in purposeful and strategic efforts "to manipulate some social-symbolic facet of the context in which they operate" (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012:224).

Both the literature on inhabited institutions and on institutional work have a strong focus on the agency of people. This agency is what maintains and changes their institutions (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012). To better understand the role people play in institutional change it is thus helpful to look into literature surrounding change agency, in particular why and how people engage in change agency.

2.3 Conceptualising change agency

A foundational part of this literature is the idea of agency. The seminal work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provides an in-depth exploration of what agency is. Scholars in both inhabited institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) have used this definition and understanding of agency to inform their respective frameworks. Emirbayer and Mische (1998:970) defined agency as:

> "The temporally constructed engagement of actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through interplay of habits, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms these structures in an interactive response to change historical situations."

Though abstract, this definition provides key insights on the nature of agency. Agency is determined by the differences between a person and others, meaning that it is relational and exists in time-specific, cultural, and positional contexts (Emirbayer, 1997). Agency is also the active engagement with institutional arrangements to reform and transform them (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Furthermore, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) characterise agency as having three key qualities: iterational; projective; and practical-evaluative. The iterational element describes how agency reproduces and transforms institutional arrangements; the projective element characterises the symbolic construction of new narratives and futures; and the practical-evaluative element addresses the needs of the present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Therefore, agency often is a balancing act between addressing the past and present whilst pushing towards future recreation of institutions. This speaks to the temporal and rationally developed nature of agency, as defined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of agency helps to address the 'paradox of embedded agency:' how can people change institutions when they are conditioned by them (Seo & Creed, 2002)? The paradox speaks to tensions between structuralist perspectives in neo-institutional theory and agency theory (Seo & Creed, 2002). Structuralist perspectives have emphasised how institutional arrangements condition individuals. As such, they explained the reproduction of institutionalised practices, but did not account for how institutional arrangements change (Seo & Creed, 2002). On the other hand, agency theory in neoclassical economics has overemphasised the role individual choices in shaping institutions (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2005). Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of agency address the paradox of embedded agency by providing a more nuanced interpretation of agency that accounts for the role of embedded individuals in institutional change efforts (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2005).

2.3.1 Why do individuals engage in change efforts?

Change agents epitomise the notion of agency. Change agents are persons who challenge the institutional arrangements within which they are situated (Micelotta et al., 2017). They are often equated with other terms, such as institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al., 2009), activists (Scully & Segal, 2002), and tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). These terms capture specific types of change agents. For example, there are change agents who are leaders in institutional change efforts, such as institutional entrepreneurs, who take on a key role in driving institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009). In contrast, tempered radicals exist within an organisation that they disagree with and may engage in change efforts that are less explicitly in leadership roles (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). The term change agents, on the other hand, covers a larger group of people through the definition of anyone who challenges institutional norms (Micelotta et al., 2017).

Individuals who experience contradictions between the institutional beliefs/ideals and their reality may engage in institutional change, thereby becoming change agents (Seo & Creed, 2002). Indeed, contradictions can kindle moments of personal reflection, which accumulate into a person taking action. People may thus become change agents in order to alleviate their internal conflict (Summers-Effler, 2002). In particular, individuals who have been marginalised by institutions may benefit from changes to institutions that limit their opportunities or contradict their internal values (Seo & Creed, 2002). Some studies have examined the microprocesses that occur in these circumstances, detailing what leads to individuals engaging in active efforts to change the institutions. They have shown that individuals within an organisation with contradicting values to the organisation negotiate their conflicting interests through complex microprocesses that seek to mediate their internal conflict (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). A person engages in change in the hope of long-term emotional gains (Summers-Effler, 2002).

Recently, there have been studies exploring why non-marginalised individuals can also become change agents. These non-marginalised change agents benefit from institutional arrangements and yet, when faced with a contradiction between their values and the behaviour of the institutional arrangements, may undertake a process of reflexivity that leads to them becoming a change agent (Feront, 2021). People may even actively seek out these contradictions, thereby proactively seeking this process of reflection (Dalpiaz, Rindova & Ravasi, 2016; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018). Being able to manage the negative feelings that emerge from such experiences is key to these processes (Feront, 2021).

Literature has started to explore how other people influence a person's path towards becoming an agent. The beliefs and values of others play a key role in how a person develops their own beliefs and values (Haidt, 2001). The recruitment and mobilisation of other change agents is a key activity in a change agent's efforts for driving institutional change efforts (Gehman et al., 2013; DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca & Creed, 2020). In that context, scholars have argued that social interactions are key for helping people reflect upon their experiences and embed themselves within social movements (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019). This means that social interactions appear to play a role in facilitating reflection, feeding into an individual's internal conceptualisation of values and meanings. Though this is a valuable insight, there is still potential to further examine the role that social interactions play in the creation of a change agent.

2.3.2 How do individuals engage in change efforts?

Research has sought to explain the methods used by change agents to challenge institutions. A highly influential paper by Battilana et al. (2009) explores how change agents challenge institutional inertia. The authors acknowledged two important features that characterise embedded agency: field characteristics; and the agent's social position (Battilana et al., 2009).

Field characteristics, which include the agent's context, such as crises and the degree of fragmentation in the field's discourse, can have a major impact on the agent's ability to act (Battilana et al., 2009). As discussed earlier, times of crisis can lend to opportunities to enact long-lasting institutional change (Meyer, 1982). Meanwhile, if there is division in the field on the discourse surrounding how to enact change, then the agent would need to divert some of their energy and resources to negotiate these diverging views (Battilana et al., 2009). This process of alignment enables more widespread mobilisation and directionality in change efforts (Battilana et al., 2009). Indeed, interorganisational alignment is a key tactic change agents use to decrease fragmentation (Scully & Segal, 2002; DeJordy et al., 2020). Furthermore, change agents tend to position themselves in strategically valuable positions, such as throughout the supply chain, to mediate the interests between different parties and push for supply chain alignment (Touboulic, Matthews & Marques, 2018). This works to align all parties under a clear overall strategy, with the intention of increasing the rate of institutional change (Touboulic et al., 2018).

The agent's social position determines the willingness of others to accept the changes they propose through affecting the agent's perceived legitimacy (Zilber, 2002; Battilana et al., 2009). Studies show that successful change agents work to accumulate legitimacy over time, which leads to increasing their capacity to influence change in an organisation or institution (Argento, Culasso & Traunt, 2019; Williams, Edwards, Angus-Leppan & Benn, 2021). Change agents do this through tactics such as upselling their agendas, providing tangible success stories, and building their own career (Argento et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2021).

In sum, according to Battilana et al. (2009), change agents work to affect their field characteristics through negotiating between diverging perspectives, and put in considerable effort to improve their own credibility so that they can wield more influence over institutional change efforts.

2.3.3 The role of social interactions in change agency

Literature on change agents and institutional change has begun to focus on the dynamics and importance of social interactions in instilling change. Social relations form part of the backbone of institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Therefore, successful change agents create networks and mobilise people to their cause (Scully & Segal, 2002; Touboulic et al., 2018; DeJordy et al., 2020).

Literature has shown that recruiting and mobilising change agents is important for driving institutional change. It further has demonstrated that people determine their values through their social networks and interactions. Change agents put considerable effort into recruiting and mobilising other change agents, often using interorganisational networks in order to do so (Scully & Segal, 2002). Indeed, groups are more likely than individuals to challenge the status quo of the institutions that they exist within, which makes recruitment and mobilisation integral to driving institutional change (Fine & Hallett, 2014).

Research into emotions and intuitions have also revealed the importance of social interactions not only to recruit and mobilise people, but also monitor the values and actions of group members. For instance, social interactions have been evidenced to play a key role in guiding long-term career decisions during times of emotional distress, and without supportive social interactions people are likely to exit their organisation or cause (Fassauer & Hartz, 2016). Additionally, moral judgements and decisions are determined largely by social perceptions over rationality (Haidt, 2001). Consequently, the values that a person’s peers have can determine their own judgement on what is moral and what is not (Haidt, 2001).

Gehman et al.’s (2013) study provide further insights into how values become institutionalised through social interactions. The authors found that seemingly top-down strategies of value recreation were rather a legitimisation stage of existing trends and efforts. Gehman et al. (2013) found that networks of stakeholders were responsible for negotiating, advocating for, and practising these values. This process unfolds through a reiterative process of stakeholders communicating and networking with one another; strengthening their ties so that they can better verbalise their values and push for institutionalised change (Gehman et al., 2013).

Emerging research is increasingly drawing attention to how social interactions create new change agents. Examples of this include work by Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) and Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis and Courtois (2020). These two papers investigated show how those advocating for sustainability in organisations use social interactions to create new sustainability advocates, as well as how these advocates work together to drive organisational change.

In sum, the literature has highlighted the importance of social interactions in recruiting, mobilising or creating new change agents, and how this is integral to driving institutional change (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019). Yet, the specific mechanisms of this spreading of change agency – which I term ‘change contagion’ in my research – has been less studied. I now turn to research on socio-symbolic work to gain insights into how the spreading of change occurs.

2.4 Social-symbolic work and the spreading of change

The literature social-symbolic work provides a useful foundation for analysing the processes that lead to the transmission of change agency through social interactions (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). This literature offers a framework to analyse how people undertake negotiations of social meanings at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). As such, social-symbolic work literature provides multiple scales of analysis when examining how institutional change occurs (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). This section will provide an overview of social-symbolic work and motivate why it is a useful theoretical framework to use when examining how the transmission of change agency unfolds. From there, I proceed to argue for the use of the social-symbolic work framework for analysing how social interactions spread change agency.

2.4.1 Defining social-symbolic objects and social-symbolic work

Social-symbolic objects, such as an organisation or set of values, require social-symbolic work through routines, behaviours, and negotiation to create and maintain them (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). While people take these social-symbolic objects for granted, these objects create structures that affect the opportunities which different people have (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Social-symbolic objects comprise of “a combination of discursive, relational and material elements that constitute a meaningful pattern in a social system" (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019:24).

An example of a social-symbolic object is the nation state. Discursive, relational, and material elements constitute the social-symbolic object of a nation. A flag, anthem, constitution, laws, and the name of the country define a nation discursively. Relationally, the relationship that people within the nation have with one another, their heritage, and the various ethnic and cultural groups constitute a nation's identity. Further, the nation's relationships to those of foreign nations and international bodies help define and legitimise the country's existence. Government buildings, borders, landmarks, and cuisine, meanwhile, are examples of how people define a nation materially. These features are all maintained and changed over time by people, and this process is social-symbolic work.

Social-symbolic work is the "purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects" (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019:31). Social-symbolic work can maintain, transform, and destroy the social-symbolic object. To undertake social-symbolic work, individuals must communicate with other people, which leads to a perpetual negotiation of meanings and routines (Gehman et al., 2013). Shared understandings, paradigms, and behaviours are what maintain a social-symbolic object (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In contrast, challenging these understandings, paradigms, and behaviours can lead to the social-symbolic objects changing (Gehman et al., 2013; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). This is what social-symbolic work entails.

2.4.2 Levels of social-symbolic work

Lawrence and Phillips (2019) identity three levels of social-symbolic work: institutional; organisational; and the self. Objects and symbols affected by institutional work can be, for example, laws, qualifications, and regulations (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Organisational work targets the maintenance and changing of organisations, such as corporate strategies, marketing, and value statements (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Williams et al., 2021). Self work pertains to the individual's definition of themselves and how they maintain or change their internal beliefs, assumptions, and values (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Williams et al., 2021).

These levels of social-symbolic work interconnect with one another. For example, an individual may internalise institutional and organisational symbols into their conceptualisation of themselves (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Bitekine et al., 2020). A person can hold multiple internal identities, which can even contradict with one another (Bitekine et al., 2020).

Connecting self, organisational, and institutional work can be strategic, but also can be an unconscious daily activity (Bitekine et al., 2020).

People create connections between social-symbolic objects through four overarching techniques: enactment; abstraction; translation; and inversion (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Enactment is the process of taking an object from one location and using it in another, such as a doctor using the institutionally agreed definition of a doctor to build an identity (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Abstraction is the use of lived experiences with a social-symbolic object, such as negative experiences in the financial sector causing a person to change career paths (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Translation takes one object and transforms it into another, such as taking scientific knowledge and communicating it concisely to the layperson in a booklet (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Lastly, inversion changes the meanings of an object, such as the reclaiming of slurs by marginalised communities (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

2.4.3 Emotions and aesthetics in social-symbolic work

Scholars have built upon social-symbolic work by introducing and exploring the importance of emotions and aesthetics in the creation, maintenance, and changing of institutional arrangements (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019; Pradies et al., 2020). Invoking emotions through symbols and aesthetics can cause significant shifts within a person's understanding of themselves and the institutional arrangements that they exist within (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019; Creed, Taylor & Hudson, 2020). Resonance accelerates this process; resonance, in this literature, is described as a physiological sensation to an experience that makes it poignant and meaningful to the person(s) (Creed et al., 2020).

Emotion-symbolic work has gained increased attention in social-symbolic work literature. Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) undertook a study using a social-symbolic object – a photograph of a dead bird with plastic in its stomach – to evoke powerful emotions in an organisational setting. The authors examined the reactions of actors, who then engaged in communication with one another. Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) focused on the emotions voiced by individuals during their communication. The authors found that these emotions eventually led to the actors becoming social entrepreneurs, who are a type of change agent. Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) used these findings to develop the model of emotion-symbolic work, which linked how social entrepreneurs spread a symbol to help targets become embedded in the cause, leading to emotional energy arousal of the targets and eventually the targets becoming social entrepreneurs themselves (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019).

Literature on aesthetics' role in social-symbolic work has gained traction in recent years. "People's aesthetics guide what they attend to and how they engage and evaluate what they encounter in the world" (Creed et al., 2020:433). Creed et al. (2020) argued that aesthetics determines what types of sensory stimuli cause resonance in a person, which they argue is what leads to profound paradigm shifts through a person's self-narration. Giorgi (2017) had a similar perspective and argued that resonance is a key influencing factor in shifting a person's paradigms.

McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory (2017) isolated three key factors leading to resonance: events/items with both familiar and novel attributes; heightened emotions; and group contexts. Applying this to the photograph of the bird, the familiarity of the plastic items – such as a bottle cap – inside of bird, a place which participants unanimously understood as somewhere it should not be, evoked resonance. The picture thus revolted participants, who were able to extrapolate it to their own actions and experiences onto the image. Next, these heightened emotions resulted in individuals searching for solutions, which led to an increased chance of encountering resonance because the individuals were seeking it out in the form of searching for answers (McDonnell et al., 2017). Last, people are likely to look to others – particularly those who they perceive as being credible – to share and further amplify their resonance (McDonnell et al., 2017). In Barberá-Tomas et al.'s (2019) study, participants interacted with one another online to voice their feelings surrounding the image. This process of sensemaking and building a shared experience has similarities to the interactionally created resonance that McDonnell et al. (2017) articulate. The inclusion of group context suggests that social connections play an important role in a person's own internal processing and narration of their experiences. Therefore, aesthetics and resonance are features that can help in my analysis of symbols and social interactions in this research.

2.4.4 How change agents take part in social-symbolic work through social interactions

Social interactions are a vital part of the process of social-symbolic work. Social-symbolic work takes place in interactions between individuals with different agendas through the negotiation of meanings surrounding social-symbolic objects (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019). Furthermore, studies have shown that social interactions increase the likelihood of experiencing resonance compared to people undergoing solitary reflection (McDonnell et al., 2017). Therefore, it is useful for social-symbolic work to examine the role of social interactions in changing social-symbolic objects, such as institutions.

Social interactions are spaces for social-symbolic work because they allow for the negotiation of social-symbolic objects. Value work is an example of this. Gehman et al. (2013) examined the organisational value work that took place in the recreation of organisational values. Organisational values, in this research, is the social-symbolic object. Gehman et al. (2013) found that value work entails people building networks to negotiate and enact values in spaces.

Other papers, such as by Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019), also examined how social-symbolic work occurs in social interactions. In their paper, the authors explored how social-symbolic work facilitates the creation of social entrepreneurs. Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) found that there is a complex process of reflection that occurs between the change agents and targeted individuals, wherein the targeted individuals become embedded into the social movement. Notably, Barberá-Tomas et al.'s (2019) study this looked at one case study and at the issue of plastic pollution. It could be useful to explore how social interactions may be different when people discuss other topics, such as discussions surrounding biodiversity or human rights. Furthermore, examining how these social interactions may change over time could further deepen our understanding of how people gradually become change agents.

Though literature has shown that social interactions play a key role in social-symbolic work, there is limited research on *how* they do so and how the macro context may influence outcomes. In this context, it would be useful to investigate how social interactions spread social-symbolic work, and how a crisis may influence this process. A key question that emerges from the literature is: How do social interactions influence support for institutional change? My research will build on current literature to explore a model for change contagion, as well as investigate other ways in which social interactions drive institutional change in a time of crisis.

2.5 Chapter summary

This literature review sought to explore the field of institutional change and motivate for research examining the role of social interactions in the process of institutional change.

Institutional change literature traditionally analysed change that emerged from exogenous events, such as crises or regulatory changes (Micelotta et al., 2017). The 1990s saw a greater emphasis on examining change driven by individuals (Micelotta et al., 2017). The dichotomy between exogenous events and individual action has been brought into question in recent years, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. An individual's agency appears to play a significant role in shifting institutions, especially during times of crisis (Langley, 2021). Building on this, I explored change agency in greater depth.

Change agency offers a rich array of analyses and literature to draw from. Change agency speaks to people who may wish to change their institutional routines, and a change agent actively strives to do so. Literature on change agents has explored why people become change agents, how these change agents drive change, and the importance of recruitment of other change agents to enact change. Furthermore, although the literature on change agents has repeatedly emphasised the importance of social interactions and relationships in driving institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009), there has been limited research on the specific mechanisms underlying change agency that spreads through a social interaction.

Social-symbolic work has explored how advocates push for organisational and institutional change (Pradies et al., 2020). Social-symbolic work literature provides frameworks of how people negotiate the meanings and routines surroundings social-symbolic objects. The framework has multiple scales of analysis (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Social-symbolic work also touches on the role that aesthetics and stimuli play in this process (Creed et al., 2020). Social interactions are key for negotiating the meanings of social-symbolic objects, leading to the recruitment of more change agents (Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019). However, studies on the recruitment of other people to a cause have been sparse. These studies have primarily focused on specific levels of social-symbolic work, such as the self or organisation. The field could therefore benefit from a comprehensive look at how social interactions are used by change agents to create new change agents and propel institutional change.

A key question that emerges from my review of the literature is: How do social interactions influence support for institutional change? Authors such as Battilana et al. (2009) and Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) have articulated the importance of social interactions. As literature has also shown, context, such as macro-crises, have a significant impact on how institutions change (Micelotta et al., 2017). Therefore, my study seeks to explore the role of social interactions in furthering institutional change, particularly during crises.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section details the research methodology that I employed to answer the questions which arose from my literature review. I present my research paradigms, methodology, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and the ethical considerations of my research. From there, I vet my research's validity and reliability using qualitative data standards. I explain how I ensured that it is as reliable and valid as possible. Finally, I discuss the methodological limitations of my research before summarising the chapter.

3.2 Research paradigm

All research operates under paradigms. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994:107), a research paradigm can be defined as:

> "a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts."

A research paradigm informs the data collection and analysis process through grounding the study in a particular set of understandings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For my research, I determined that the constructivist and relational paradigms best suited and guided my study. I used two paradigms to guide my research, because they addressed different challenges which I expected myself to face during my research. The constructivist paradigm addressed how I interpreted the experiences of my participants, particularly weaving the context of crisis into my understanding of the data. The relational paradigm, meanwhile, helped me look at the phenomenon of social interactions in a relational manner. In particular, it helps me to surface issues of power, credibility, and agency and their role in the unfolding of social interactions.

3.2.1 Constructivist paradigm

The first consideration for my research's paradigm was whether to use an objectivist or subjectivist approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bryman & Bell, 2014). An objectivist approach assumes that the research will provide absolute truths (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach is most effective for research in the hard sciences, wherein there are clearly defined variables in controlled environments (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In contrast, subjectivist research promotes the plurality of truths in a world of infinite variables (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Subjectivist research does not seek to isolate variables and place them in controlled environments, as the researcher considers context as valuable in understanding how phenomena occur (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A subjectivist approach lends itself to the social sciences, such as organisation studies (Bryman & Bell, 2014). As my research is concerned on how change contagion takes place outside in the real world, the subjectivist approach is more appropriate.

Using a subjectivist approach, I adopted constructivist paradigm. Constructivism acknowledges that social phenomena and their meaning are continually being negotiated by social actors through social interactions (Bryman & Bell, 2014). It is further anchored in the idea that researcher's accounts of reality are constructions that represent versions of social reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This position recognises that the researcher's perspective and context influence how they gather, analyse, and communicate research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through this, constructivism acknowledges a researcher's bias and context in their attempt to understand their participants, and therefore how this may affect the findings. I found that a constructivist paradigm was most appropriate for my research, as it equipped me with tools for engaging with my data in a manner which best helped capture my participants' perspectives whilst noticing my own biases and influence on the findings.

3.2.1.1 Researching during a crisis using a constructivist paradigm

I gained a deeper understanding of the value of the constructivist paradigm through the waves of crises that occurred in South Africa and globally during my research in 2021 and 2022. Langley (2021) argues that social scientists must not attempt to exclude major international and/or national crises in their research, but rather accept this major contextual factor in shaping both the data gathered and how the researcher analyses it. Langley (2021) argued that researchers should interweave their personal sensemaking of a crisis during the entire research process. This speaks to a heavily constructivist paradigm, as it embraces the subjectivity that accompanies the researcher and their participants, and strives to work with it instead of attempt to ignore its existence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Given the timing of my research, my participants often discussed institutional change in the context of crisis. I must acknowledge that participants reflected questions within their current context, and I will interpret them according to mine. This is not a weakness of my study, but rather an opportunity to explore how individuals enact change during times of crisis.

3.2.2 Relational paradigm

While the constructivist paradigm assisted me in understanding how context and subjectivity influence my findings, I found that there was a need to further deepen the research paradigm which I sought to undertake. I decided to combine the constructivist paradigm with a relational paradigm. Like the constructivist paradigm, a relational paradigm acknowledges the importance of a plurality of truths (Walsh, Böhme & Wamsler, 2021). However, it further adds another dimension in how to understand the formation of concepts, ideas, and meanings in social sciences (Emirbayer, 1997; Walsh et al., 2021). The relational paradigm had a major impact on how I undertook every step of my research.

First, the relational paradigm guided how I view change contagion, which is to say that it is not simply an output of an inter-action, but rather a continuous engagement over time; often between agents with differing viewpoints. Emirbayer (1997) articulates the shift from a substantialist to a relational approach. The substantialist approach assumes that all systems can be broken up into units and variables with stable and inherent characteristics (Emirbayer, 1997). This logic underpins two perspectives: that of self-action and inter-action. Self-action assumes that there are divisible units that have an intrinsic nature when isolated (Emirbayer, 1997). This implies that agency is a trait that individuals either do or do not have, which goes against the contextually and temporally defined understanding of agency as described in the literature review (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In comparison, the inter-action perspective assumes that two divisible units are static until they interact with one another, after which they change into a new static state (Emirbayer, 1997). This echoes the traditional perspective of organisational change, which is highly critiqued in recent literature for its oversimplification of how change unfolds (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Particularly relevant for my research is to avoid an inter-action approach when looking at social interactions, which entails the analysis of inputs and outputs, and to look rather at patterns over time (Emirbayer, 1997). The relational approach argues, instead, that researchers cannot reduce complex systems to discrete entities with intrinsic natures (Emirbayer, 1997; Walsh et al., 2021). Societies, according to Emirbayer (1997:288), are “nothing but pluralities of associated individuals”. This means that there are constant exchanges that form, maintain, and change societal institutions (Emirbayer, 1997); much like how institutions are conceptualised by Hallett and Ventresca (2006).

Secondly, the relational paradigm can be applied to a range of scales, from the individual to the institutional, which suits the use of social-symbolic work in my research, and therefore helps answer my research question (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Emirbayer (1997) argues that the relational paradigm requires analyses that consider micro, meso, and macro scales: micro is largely internal, psychological processes; meso are social interactions; and macro is the networks of institutions arising from these interactions (Emirbayer, 1997). These interlinkages between the person, social interactions, and institutions speak to my research.

Lastly, the relational paradigm significantly affected how I define terms such as agent and power. The relational paradigm redefines several key concepts in the social sciences. For example, agency develops through the relationship that the individual has with their surroundings; including cultural context, historical context, and other individuals (Emirbayer, 1997). In other words, it is not an intrinsic characteristic of a person, but something that arises due to their positioning within a system. This carries weight in my research, as it contests that the categorisation of ‘agents’ and ‘non-agents’ does not align with the relational paradigm. Therefore, participants who I identify as agents are to be identified through their context instead of an exact measure of what constitutes an agent.

3.3 Grounded theory methodology

The methodology used for my research is that of grounded theory, which is a form of qualitative research that works to dismantle the academic preconceptions of researchers by allowing the data to build theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). Grounded theory researchers conduct a preliminary literature review, that they review throughout their research process (Suddaby, 2006; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). In doing so, this avoids the problem of grounded theory research not adding to prevailing knowledge in academia (Suddaby, 2006). The theoretical hallmarks of grounded theory today are the avoidance of hypotheses and over-reliance on extant theories (Suddaby, 2006).

I wanted my research to add to the existing discourse surrounding change agency and institutional change, not necessarily to test or challenge the literature. This made grounded theory highly appropriate because of its abductive nature. Grounded theory is also a highly iterative research methodology (Suddaby, 2006). I collected data in rounds, between which I analysed data and referred to literature to iteratively mould the next round of data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This process is why scholars consider grounded theory to be heavily abductive (Suddaby, 2006). Abductive research considers both the data and theory to be contestable, and therefore negotiates both to build upon theory with empirical data (Locke, Golden-Biddle & Feldman, 2008).

3.4 Research methods

In this section, I detail how I sampled participants, collected data, and analysed the data. I provide a table explaining my various participants, give an overview of my three methods of data collection, and discuss my data analysis process, which includes some of the coding that I used.

3.4.1 Sampling

To answer my research questions, I selected change agents along several corporations' value chain to interview. I identified agents through indicators such as their job description, participation in sustainability advocacy groups, and relationships to other agents. I utilised multiple sampling methods, adapting my sampling strategy depending on the needs of my research. I protected my participants by ensuring their anonymity as individuals and as the entity that they are employed by.

First, I collected a list of the top 100 JSE-listed corporations using the Iress database (IRESS, n.d.). I undertook a stratified sampling approach, which randomly selects a sample based on a proportional representation of the population (Zikmund, Babin, Carr & Griffin, 2013). Using Excel, I randomly selected 30 corporations based on the proportion that their sector took of the top 100 JSE-listed corporations. I went along this list, searching for contact information for each corporation, and sending emails to any publicly available email addresses to recruit participants. Furthermore, I contacted individuals using LinkedIn, and determined agents through their networks, groups they were involved with, and descriptions in their profiles.

Second, I utilised a snowballing sampling strategy, which allowed participants to refer me and my study to other possible participants (Zikmund et al., 2013). Typically, recruited participants do this after an interview. To ensure that there is no coercion, I directly contacted possible participants and clarified that there are no consequences for not participating, and that their participation or lack thereof cannot be revealed to anyone. Snowballing is how I located most of my non-corporate participants but was also invaluable for finding corporate participants within the same organisation.

Third and last, I looked to other participants along the value chain. I did this because, as my research unfolded, I found that my own conceptualisation of a corporation was highly reductionist. According to my participants, forces along and outside the value chain all contributed immensely to change contagion. As such, my search for agents expanded to include individuals who are located within these various forces along the supply chain and in associated organisations.

In total, I had 18 participants. 13 of the 18 participants were directly employed by eight of the top 100 JSE-listed corporations in South Africa. These participants included those in corporate social investment (CSI), environmental, social, and governance (ESG) departments, as well as other operational units. The eight corporations included three from the financial sector, two from the food sector, two from the energy/mining sector, and one from the communications/marketing sector. Table 1 (shown on the next page) lists my participants, their position in their corporation or along its value chain, descriptions of the participants' role, and what data collection activity they participated in. Participants under A work in the agricultural sector, participants under C work in the communications sector, participants under M are under the mining and energy sector, and participants under O work other spaces, such as being a researcher or journalist.

Five participants existed on the periphery of corporate activities. These individuals often provided unique and valuable experience or knowledge. For example, A2 and A3 were employed in the agricultural sector as ground-level biodiversity experts on farms supplying corporations. Their input highlighted key insights on structural power imbalances, and the true impact of corporate policies on ground-level activities.

C1 was a copywriter at a small, micro, and medium enterprise (SMME), which is outsourced by businesses of varying sizes for marketing needs. C1 assisted in fleshing out the marketing perspective after several participants criticised the field for being damaging to sustainability initiatives.

M3 was an employee in a government-owned corporation, and actively participated in cross-organisational networks. This complemented the discussions surrounding government and inter-organisational network collaboration on sustainability transitions, which featured heavily in discussions with my primary participants.

O1 was a journalist who participated in the focus group with two of my primary participants, with the purpose of adding an external voice and making the conversation more dynamic.

Lastly, O2 is a biodiversity researcher and business consultant. The purpose of speaking to O2 was to a gain broader insight into the inclusion/exclusion of biodiversity in corporate management, which was a recurring issue that emerged during interviews.

Table 1: Participants selected for the research

Participant	Relation to Corporation	Individual Description	Participated in	Time
A1	Employed by food corporation.	Operations manager	1 interview	59 minutes
A2	Employed by private farm supplying food corporations.	Biodiversity manager	1 interview	1 hour 32 minutes
A3	Employed by private farm supplying food corporations.	Biodiversity researcher	1 interview	52 minutes
A4	Employed by food corporation.	Internal ESG auditor	1 interview	1 hour 6 minutes
A5	Employed by food corporation.	Senior sustainability manager	1 interview, 1 focus group	1 hour 13 minutes, 1 hour 5 minutes
A6	Employed by food corporation.	Operations manager	1 interview	42 minutes
A7	Employed by food corporation.	Senior sustainability manager	1 interview	1 hour
C1	Employed by marketing SMME used as an outsourced service.	Copywriter	1 interview	1 hour
C2	Employed by communication/ marketing corporation.	ESG specialist for corporate clients	1 interview	57 minutes
F1	Employed by financial corporation.	Senior sustainability manager	1 interview	1 hour 1 minute
F2	Employed by financial corporation.	CSI manager	1 interview, 1 focus group	58 minutes, 1 hour 5 minutes
F3	Employed by financial corporation.	Middle-senior manager	1 interview	1 hour 4 minutes
F4	Employed by financial corporation.	CSI manager	1 interview	1 hour 3 minutes
M1	Employed by energy/mining corporation.	Senior sustainability manager	1 interview	57 minutes
M2	Employed by energy/mining corporation.	Internal ESG auditor	1 interview	56 minutes
M3	Employed by energy/mining government entity.	Operations manager	1 interview	1 hour 12 minutes
O1	Employed by business in the media sector.	Journalist	1 focus group	1 hour 5 minutes
O2	Researcher and consultant to corporations.	Biodiversity researcher	1 interview	32 minutes

3.4.2 Data collection

In line with grounded theory, my data collection included several rounds. There were three data collection techniques that I employed: content analyses; semi-structured interviews; and focus groups.

After participants confirmed that they were willing to be interviewed by me, I undertook conent analysis of any publicly available documents or websites on their corporation or other relevant employing institution. The purpose of the content analysis was to analyse and code corporate sustainability policies, as well as to mould interview questions and prompts, and to locate any areas of interest or concern. Furthermore, preparatory research on an organisation balances power dynamics in the interview, particularly when speaking with business elites; thus allowing for more transparent communication (Ma, Seidl & McNulty, 2021).

After the content analysis, I conducted the semi-structured interview with the participant. These interviews ranged in time between 40 and 90 minutes, with most lasting 60 minutes. Appendix A provides some broad interview guidelines that I used to help with my interviews. I aimed to use the interventionist approach, as described by Langley and Meziani (2020), wherein the researcher aims to help the participant reflect on their own roles and narratives. To do so, my first interview questions pertained to their role in the corporation and their journey towards sustainability; as shown in Appendix A. Once I completed an interview, I would write out a memo to reflect on it. I would then transcribe and analyse the interview as well as the memo before returning to my recruitment efforts.

The final data collection technique I employed was that of a focus group. For this focus group, I had two primary participants and a third ‘outsider’ to triangulate the conversation. I presented my preliminary findings and prompted reflective discussions between the three participants. This provided greater depth to my information and helped increase the validity of my findings through member validation and triangulation, which I will discuss in greater depth in section 3.6. It provided clarity on topics which my interviewees disagreed on, such as the role of settings. The three different perspectives and personalities of the participants generated interesting discussions and debates, which provided deeper insights to my findings. This focus group lasted 60 minutes. I transcribed and analysed the focus group session. I found the process of focus group analysis detailed by Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech and Zoran (2009) to be especially helpful, as I could map the reflections of all participants.

3.4.3 Data analysis

Data analysis occurred after each round of data collection, in accordance with the grounded theory approach (Langley, 1999). There are five phases of data analysis, which are nonlinear (Yin, 2011). These are summarised by Yin (2011) as:

1. Compiling a database.

2. Disassembling the data, typically through coding.
3. Reassembling data.
4. Interpreting data.
5. Drawing conclusions.

Usually, researchers analyse qualitative data through coding, which is the labelling of analytic themes (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Bryman and Bell (2014) provide eight steps for coding, all of which are influenced by previous rounds of data collection:

1. Turning data into transcripts, field notes, and similar items.
2. Studying these accounts.
3. Creating a database.
4. Coding the data line by line.
5. Comparing codes.
6. Developing categories.
7. Writing memos.
8. Developing analytical frameworks using data and literature.

During my data analysis process, I took note of how I was personally implementing these steps to best achieve coherent and meaningful answers to my research questions. I found that I had six parts to my data analysis process for this study: preparing; inputting; sifting; mapping; reflecting; and articulating.

Although content analysis did not provide great insight into the mechanisms leading to change contagion within a social interaction, it played a major role in my preparation phase. After inputting all the documents and/or images relevant to the business of my participant into ATLAS.ti, I coded key themes and created a summary in the description of each document. These key themes were used to help guide my interviews, and then the focus group. I took notes during the interviews and focus group and converted these into memos around an hour after speaking with the participants. Alongside inputting these into ATLAS.ti, I transcribed the discussions, thus re-listening to the audio with detail. I added these transcripts to the database as well. Table 2 provides an example of my codes, in particular the codes used that sought to answer questions pertaining to my research's first sub-question. These codes will show up in sections 4.2.1 to 4.2.3.

The process of sifting entailed deep, line-by-line coding on ATLAS.ti. Reading through transcripts and memos, I would code the data, first distinguishing which parts of the data spoke to certain sub-questions. As the codes became more plentiful and rich, I added descriptions in their comments and re-worked the categorisations. The sifting phase inevitably reached a point of saturation, wherein I felt that I had depleted the toolset provided by ATLAS.ti.

Table 2: Example of some codes for sub-question 1

Code	Description	Example quotations
Non-agent's perspective	*Educational/knowledge background* Specialisations and qualifications affect a person's basic understanding. *Values/Priorities* Their values and priorities must be understood to see how to translate/transfer values. *Non-corporate roles and spaces* Many times, the things which cause genuine change do not even happen in the workspace, but through the person's personal life experiences.	*Educational/knowledge background* • "But anyone who understands biodiversity at a deeper level understands that there's no such thing as like an easy solution to complex natural problems." – A2 • "I think a challenge might be where we engage individuals are referred to as dissidents, [those who] do not believe in climate change." – M1 *Values/Priorities* • "They're not interested essentially in the sustainability credentials, they just said, this is a business opportunity." – A1 • "Those spheres [biodiversity and ecology] have always been separated from commercial agriculture, which is, with the main objective to make money through the yield." – A2 • "For the most obvious ones, if you talk about soils, for agriculture, generally people understand that soils need to be healthy to have to have good yield for longer. But weirdly enough, people who live in this very optimistic world of I can keep hammering this soil for as long as I can. And hopefully, by the time I've completely depleted it, there's some technology that's going to save me." – O2 *Non-corporate roles and spaces* • "Is it because you've had 15 meetings with that person? Or is it because you've shown them evidence of what another bank is doing? Or is it because they, you know, 15-year-old niece came home, and she just done a great project school, that was finally the thing that tweak that that sparked the change. It's very, very difficult, I think, to kind of put your finger on it and say, 'Okay, well, we were the reason for that change.'" – F1
Agent's status	Job title, qualifications, experience, age, gender, ethnicity, and other social definitions of power.	• "You've got to have a degree of credibility, and credibility is built. And obviously, when you're younger, you can still have credibility, but it's looked through from a different dimension." – A1 • "I remember I had a colleague… who was saying to me, 'why are you in sustainability? I mean, I can do the work that you do.'" – A4
Message sculpting	*Localisation and narration of facts* Apply facts (with evidence and real stories/examples) to the context of the non-agent; tap into the non-agent's values and priorities; provide leverage points of change and opportunity for the non-agent.	*Localisation and narration of facts,* • "It's [the specialisations] utterly disconnected. And that's part of the carbon footprinting course, and the carbon foot printing guide [to teach other team members]." – A3 • "I think maybe an example that is like, helping clients with the net zero journeys, if we're able to distil that journey into little, achievable milestones. I think that would help because sometimes I think the just transition, this idea of it is sometimes feels very far away and blurry, and what does that really look like? What does that look like for each individual company?" – C2 *Immersion* • "I think the fear for most people on earth is actually snakes, and you can go and test the theory with anybody, just go and talk to them about snakes. I mean they will recall something and be like 'oh what snakes?'" – A3

	Immersion Through immersion into a setting, the non-agent can experience emotional arousal (the emotion can be practically anything), especially when interacting with others.	• "One of the most successful ways we have to get the penny to drop with some of our bankers is taking them on field trips… and I think that that's sometimes in the sustainability world, you the touching, feeling, getting the dirt and your fingernails is quite an important part of what I started talking about in terms of changing one's paradigms and one's frameworks." – F1 • "If you want to break through to someone or trying to convince him about something, you have to go with this model, you have to go and demonstrate it and you have to go and test it in front of them and tell them 'Okay, guys, this is what the earthworm does.'" – A3
Relationship building	The agent must be able to harness a plethora of interactional spaces to build nuanced working relationships; over-reliance on just one type of space is less effective.	• "You've got different stakeholders that you're eventually going to formally present into that have different interests, you will almost want that informal discussion to be quite focused on the element that's important in that one individual. And you can do that with all the individuals will eventually formally present, but in the formal presentation, then you've got to cover all of the aspects, right? That I want to everyone. Typically, you would want to be playing to the most senior person in the room who's going to make the decision eventually, in terms of how you order, the points that you want to raise." – A6 • "If we've had a meeting, and someone needs to drive me somewhere else, those are usually the settings… Like transitions between formal and informal; when we've had a formal conversation and that, like in transition to wherever we're going next, then it's like, we actually have a little bit more of a breakdown on ourselves. We'll say like, I know this came up in the meeting, but like, this is how I actually feel. And then I can say how I actually feel." – A3 • "I think it would be difficult if I was a new person arriving at the team in this work from home scenario, it would be quite difficult. Because you haven't got the lived experience of no comradery and friendship from the office." – F2 • "If you're trying to make a point with a particular group, if it's a group of leadership, for example, about if you if you take them out of their normal environment and put them into a place where they get to experience the reality of either the outcome." – A7
Value association	Locate a value equivalence for sustainability in the non-agent's priorities to affect behaviour.	• "If I'm speaking to a hardnosed capitalist, Adam Smith mentality… speak to that, that capitalist nature of a person." – F3 • "It [cost-based arguments for sustainability] makes it harder to make an argument for other initiatives and other directions that also seem necessary, but then aren't as cost efficient… I feel like there's some aspects where there is a foundational trade-off between costs and sustainability, sometimes." – A2
Value shifting	Instilling a value into the non-agent to align their deeper values with that of the agent's.	• "I just think that if you keep bringing stuff up and keep influencing people, even indirectly, around the information, at some point, that change, the good will come." – A6 • "I'm also not naive about what businesses are in our businesses journey, what the challenges are that these guys have faced, I've often put myself in their shoes and gone, what would I do? And how would I negotiate out of it? So I spent a lot of time thinking about how I frame things with them." – A7
Value relocation	When both creating a value equivalence whilst instilling sustainability values.	• "You need to rotate your crops and that fits in with in sustainability we call it regenerative agriculture, so that you basically save the soil for future generations." – A5 • "Quite a watershed moment for me was having children." – A7 • "I would try to hone that on… that generational component… 'Who are you planning to leave this farm to like your children and your children's children? What kind of success do you want for your children's children who are going to have this farm in 80 years?'" – A2

By this point, the data often appeared chaotic and scattered, and patterns were hard to find. To make sense of the data, I then adopted process of mapping. The goal of this mapping exercise was to transfer the information into a form where I could visualise the data in a coherent manner, and therefore start to spot patterns. I found that doing this on the desktop was not conducive. In one of my journal entries, I wrote:

> "Staring at a screen, clicking between tabs on ATLAS, does nothing to help me reflect on everything. I'm only processing the information visually, staring at black-and-white walls of text with the occasional colourful highlight. If I want to use the entire capacity of my brain, I need to wake it up with other senses."

I resolved to start my mapping process using post-it notes, paper, pens, and headphones. I re-listened to each audio file using my phone and wireless headphones. As I did, I hopped from paper to paper around my apartment, scribbling on post-it notes and categorising them by assigning them to papers. Once done with an audio file, I condensed its information into a few post-it notes covering a theme each. I continued until I coated both sides of several A4 papers with my summaries. Though the findings I drew from this were not conclusive, this key step in my mapping helped me transition into a space where I could draw out patterns in the future instead of being bogged down in details. Photo 1 shows an example of my mapping process.

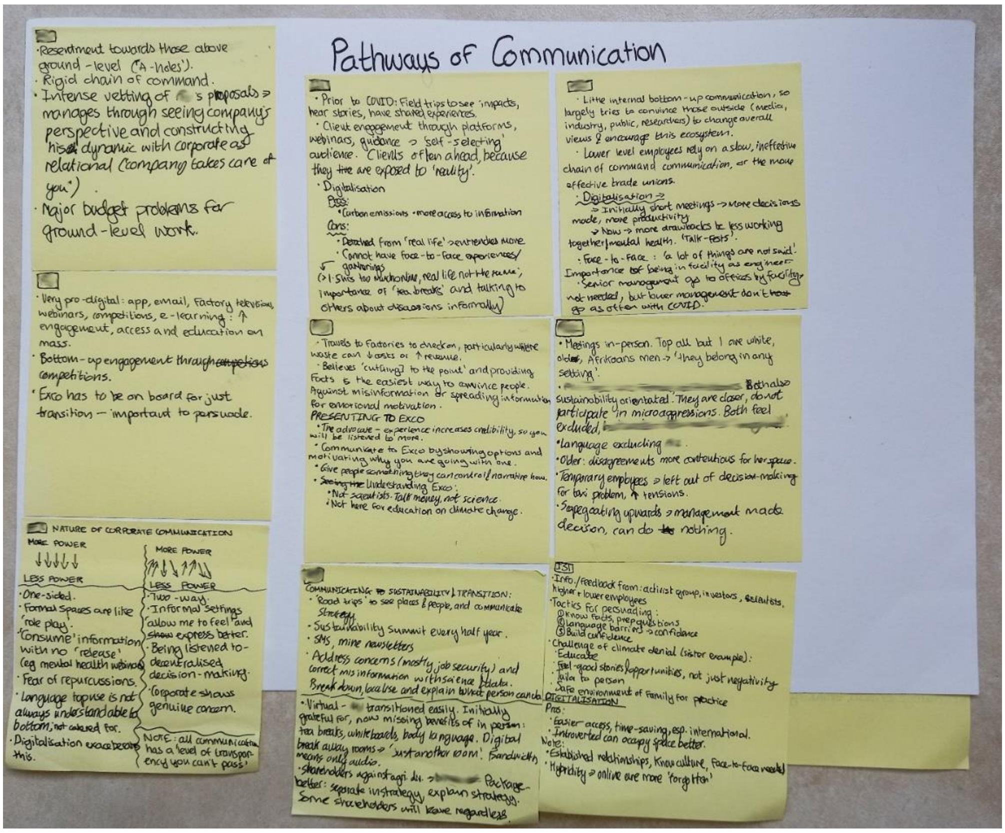

Photo 1: Example of my mapping exercise

Once I completed my mapping, I reflected on my notes, memos, codes, and maps through journaling, returning to literature, creating tables, making posters, and creating updates to my supervisor. This provided more detail to the maps that I had created, helping me point to specific quotes and better motivate my findings. Clear mechanisms and patterns became more apparent as I reflected on my data. For example, I noticed in my mapping that there were the different ways agents sought to change the values of non-agents – through association and shifting. I referred to my quotes to back up this pattern, and discovered that there was a third process, which I termed value relocation.

Finally, I had to articulate my findings. Most useful for this process was discussions with my supervisor, peers, and friends with no prior background in the social sciences. I sometimes glossed over niceties that seemed intuitive to me but were not evident to others. Articulation through written and verbal communication to others helped me create well-argued and clear conclusions. I presented my preliminary findings on four occasions to participants, peers, and students, gaining valuable feedback.

3.5 Ethical considerations

My participants could provide information about their personal experiences at the workplace. Although this was entirely voluntary, and no outlines for the interviews or focus group explicitly requested this, this possibility of sensitive matters made my research higher risk.

I created two informed consent forms, which are shown in Appendices B and C. The Research Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University approved both forms. The forms provided an outline of my research, explained to participants why I had contacted them, promised anonymity, and clarified that the participants could exit the research at any point.

My research anonymised the participants and their employers to ensure that they would face no consequences to their careers for speaking with me. This anonymity also encouraged honesty. When I contacted potential participants via snowball sampling, I would directly email them to clarify that they were under no obligation to participate in my research, and that the individuals who referred me to them would not be informed of their participation or lack thereof. Lastly, I ensured that the informed consent forms were signed prior to scheduled meetings.

My data collection took place during 2021 when there were restrictions in place in South Africa due to COVID-19 and I could not therefore justify in-person data collection. I therefore primarily targeted people with reliable internet connection. Furthermore, it is likely that even if there had been no pandemic and restrictions on in-person interactions, many of my interviewees would have opted for online interviews and focus groups due to their geographic location and the time efficiency provided by virtual meetings.

3.6 Reliability and validity of my study

While science places reliability and validity at the core of the pursuit of gathering knowledge, articulating what these characteristics mean for qualitative research has been a topic of debate (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Reliability and validity, both internal and external forms, respectively, have limited application in how qualitative research is conducted (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Therefore, researchers have argued for the use of other, similar characteristics to vet knowledge gathered via qualitative means. These characteristics of the research indicate the trustworthiness of the study and comprise the following traits: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2014). I will now discuss how I engaged with each in my research.

3.6.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility describes data collection and gathering that ensures the information collected accurately reflects the participants’ viewpoints (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Useful tactics for ensuring credibility is through respondent or member validation and triangulation (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

I undertook to ensure credibility through follow-up emails and invitations to speak again with members. I communicated my preliminary findings to participants who accepted invitations to discuss the findings. This is an example of member validation.

Secondly, I triangulated the findings through the content analysis process, as well as the focus group. The focus group also served as a way to gain member validation through presenting preliminary findings.

3.6.2 Transferability

Due to the small sample sizes associated with qualitative research and importance given to context, the exact replicability of the data is impossible (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Therefore, transferability requires a detailed account of the data and its context, to allow for easier transferring to research (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

Interviews in my study were set in the backdrop of ongoing crises, which are a commonplace occurrence for South Africa. Using Langley's (2021) recommendations on researching during crisis, I embraced the context and emphasised how it has shaped my findings. My findings also mention other cultural and historical contextual factors that likely influence my data.

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research is achieved through comprehensive records, memos, and peer conversations to vet the findings and ensure consistency (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Peer conversations are 'auditors' of the findings, providing other perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

To achieve this, I journaled extensively, and I engaged with peers regularly throughout my research process. Near the end of my research, I presented preliminary findings to peers and would-be change agents in a lecture. This dialogue was especially helpful in ensuring that my research is dependable.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is actively mitigating biases that the researcher may have (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Though complete objectivity is not possible for qualitative research, endeavours to recognise biases and correct them assist in lowering the impact that the researcher's perspective has on the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2014).

Firstly, I ensured that I did not define an agent of sustainability by what sustainability agency means to myself, as I could be classified as this type of change agent. Although my respondents often had very different perspectives on sustainability, my definition of what an agent is remained as something relationally determined instead of a person who fulfilled whatever pre-conceptions I have on what a change agent is. Secondly, the repeated listening to the interviews and focus group helped ensure that I did not remember incorrectly and assume what my participants were saying. Lastly, the member validation process assisted in rectifying my assumptions.

3.7 Reflexivity

Qualitative research requires considerable efforts of reflexivity to ensure that an individual is able to process and understand data in a manner that takes into account their own biases and perspectives. Drawing on work by Locke et al. (2008) and Rouse and Woolnough (2018), I worked to improve my reflexivity in research. I journalled extensively throughout my research. The memos I created after talking with my participants offered significant insights into how I understood the conversation we had. As I transcribed, re-watched, and re-listened to the discussions, I would note down how I may have misinterpreted information. My intention for this process was to understand my own perspective's influence on the data, and work to truly capture what my participants were saying.

There were some key elements in my perspective that I had to work with to make sure that they did not detract from understanding my participants. These elements were my own change agency, the role I took on as a researcher, and my nature as an outsider to the corporate space.

Under academic definitions of a change agent, I would be categorised as such. This means that I am actively engaging in conversations and efforts towards sustainability. Many change agents have vastly different views to mine on how to achieve sustainability. The purpose of my research was never to define sustainability, and therefore I had to work to compartmentalise my own opinions, and not challenge agents on their definitions of sustainability, as that would not provide useful insights for my research questions.

My role as a researcher has a significant impact on how the participants engaged with me. Some participants voiced concerns surrounding how honest they could be, despite the consent form guaranteeing anonymity. It is likely that my role as a researcher meant that some participants, whether consciously or unconsciously, framed information in a manner that their employer would want them to. I countered this by trying to speak to multiple people within the same corporation and using content analysis to verify their statements.

Finally, as a student, educator, and researcher, I am an outsider to corporate spaces. This has both benefits and drawbacks to how I conduct research. In one sense, it helped mitigate my own biases on how corporations should behave. This is unlike my biases that stem from being a change agent. In that sense, I did not need to work as hard to enter the research without preconceptions. However, there are experiences, tacit knowledge, and sectoral jargon that I was less familiar with, and therefore I researched business jargon and strategies, such as value chain sustainability. This was to prevent me from misunderstanding my participants.

3.8 Methodological limitations

There are a few methodological limitations in my study that readers should take into consideration when understanding my findings and their implications.

First, my sample size is only 18 participants. Although this is a moderate size for a study of this nature, more participants could have provided further insights.

Second, of these 18 participants, I was only able to conduct thorough member validation through a virtual meeting with two. Although I informed participants of the opportunity to partake in member validation, few were able to dedicate time to this. It would have been valuable to have more opportunities to discuss my preliminary findings with participants through more focus group discussions.

Third, my participants were all tertiary-educated, and therefore there was limited insight on the tactics used by those with a high school degree or less. These individuals typically make up the bulk of employees in South Africa (Stats SA, 2022), particularly in sectors such as energy, mining, and food. Despite my efforts to speak to these individuals, they were difficult to reach. Future research on this topic could benefit considerably from greater inclusion of corporate change agents who are at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy.

3.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I articulated the methodology of my research. I justified a combined use of constructivist and relational paradigms. The constructivist paradigm allowed me to acknowledge my subjectivity and did not attempt to rectify for contextual influences. It is especially appropriate for qualitative research conducted in a time of crisis. The relational paradigm allowed me to view concepts such as power and agency as relationally determined, instead of inherent. This was particularly useful for identifying change agency and analysing the underlying relativity of terms.

Next, I motivated for and described grounded theory methodology, which is an iterative approach, allowing for several rounds of data collection and analysis. This grounded theory approach is consistent with an abductive reasoning process, allowing the researcher to progressively integrate and reflect on the literature based on emergent findings.

I then discussed the methods I used for sampling, data collection, and data analysis. I used a proportional representation and snowballing sampling method to reach 18 participants. I then undertook rounds of data collection that included content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Finally, I explained my data analysis process, which entailed the use of ATLAS.ti for coding, post-it notes to map emerging processes, and communication with peers and change agents to ensure my interpretation of the data stayed true to their experiences. I used literature on qualitative research techniques to guide me in the data collection and analysis process.

I opted to use the qualitative requirements for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. I discussed each in turn, addressing how I ensured that my research reached each requirement using methods such as follow-up emails, triangulation, peer reflections, and journaling.

In line with qualitative research techniques, I discussed how I engaged with reflexivity during my study. The purpose of this was to notice and manage my biases and influences on the data collection and analysis process. I used journalling to uncover the key areas where misunderstandings could arise, and thus worked to mitigate these.

Finally, I discussed the methodological limitations of my study. There were three limitations: the sample size; only having an in-depth validation session with two participants; and having no representation of employees without tertiary education.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

To reiterate, the overarching research question of my study is: How do social interactions influence support for institutional change? I investigate this question looking at the spread of the sustainability agenda in corporate organisations in South Africa during several crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021 and the KZN/Gauteng lootings that took place in South Africa in July 2021.

For the purposes of clarity in this chapter, I make a distinction between an 'agent' and a 'non-agent.' This distinction is a simplification, as there is a continuum of agents and non-agents. As Chapter 3 detailed, my research participants all fulfilled the definition of an agent for the purposes of this research: a person advocating for sustainability in the workplace. Non-agents, meanwhile, were identified through social interactions. When an agent interacted to persuade another person to become an advocate for corporate sustainability, then I identified the interlocutor of the agent as a non-agent.

Three main themes emerged from my investigation. Firstly, I found that agents interacting with non-agents helped facilitate and narrate the non-agent's personal journey in understanding and internalising sustainability values, which in turn could lead to change contagion; a non-agent becoming an agent due to interacting with an agent. The effectiveness of this narration depended on the agent's credibility and their interpersonal skills, which included their ability to sculpt a message and build trusting relationships. Agents used three key tactics to challenge and change the non-agent's values: value association; value relocation; and value shifting. Further, agents proactively incorporated the anxieties and experiences of macro-crises in their interactions to catalyse the process of change contagion. However, this technique was less effective once the period of disruption is over. This did not mean that the crisis had come to an end, but rather that routines were adapted and reinstated, therefore alleviating these anxieties in the non-agent.

Secondly, I found that agents expended considerable energy interacting with one another to collaborate on and negotiate the implementation of sustainability values. Agreements on meanings between organisations help develop definitions, measurements, and shared visions, which in turn give momentum and clarity to the movement. Social interactions and networks between organisations were integral for this process. It also created a climate where sustainability was legitimised and normalised, which in turn fed back to increasing change contagion.

Third and lastly, there is a mixture of agent-agent and agent-non-agent interactions in a corporate space. Corporations may find it useful to locate and position agents throughout the value chain, including in periphery roles, such as suppliers or customers. Spaces dedicated to these agents to interact with one another assisted with negotiating what sustainability means for the corporation, as well as with energising the agents.

4.2 Changing values: Interactions between agents and non-agents

The first thematic finding is that of how agents interact with non-agents to create new agents. This, therefore, directly addresses the underlying causes of change contagion.

4.2.1 Establishing credibility: The agent's social status and non-agent's perspective

I found that the agent must gauge their own perceived credibility to effectively use social interactions to persuade the non-agent. Credibility was not something inherent in a person, but rather relationally determined. Indeed, agents determined their credibility by considering their relative standing (their social status), as well as how the non-agent ascribed credibility (the non-agent's perspective).

The agent's social status

I found that the social status of an agent plays a significant role in how willing the non-agent was to listen to the agent. When interacting with the agent, the non-agent took into consideration – consciously or subconsciously – the agent's social status relative to theirs. The higher the perceived status of the agent, the more likely the non-agent listened to them. Factors influencing this arose from power differences between the agent and non-agent, such as organisational hierarchies, education, age, gender, race, or cultural background. The agent would adjust their behaviour depending on their social status relative to the non-agent. For instance, if the agent's social status was lower than the non-agent's social status, then the agent was less likely to speak transparently. This was to prevent further loss in credibility, and potentially improve credibility over time through relationship building.

A2 provided a concise example of how her social status affected her engagements with non-agents. She discussed how her superiors treated her, as well as how she adjusted her behaviour to avoid being categorised as an outspoken "hippie" by her predominantly older, male superiors.

> "My boss said, 'that's [women asking too many questions] why we normally don't invite women [to meetings].' And, of course, everyone but [the only person of colour in the meeting] laughed… I don't think from any of their perspectives that they are purposefully [trying] to make me uncomfortable, but maybe they're [people in privileged positions] just not as self-aware. And they don't have to be, because they're the people that feel like they belong in any setting… Sometimes they'll be speaking in English, but then they'll shift to Afrikaans when there's maybe something they [don't want me to know]." (A2)

In this example, A2's non-agent superiors excluded her from conversations and moderated her behaviour through sexist jokes and switching languages. This reaffirmed power differences and, in doing so, communicated A2's perceived lower social status, and therefore her lower credibility. A2 further described how she thus adjusted her behaviour substantially by speaking less and omitting opinions or criticisms that could further antagonise her in the eyes of the non-agents. Despite some successes in her engagements with these non-agents, she described shifting the non-agents' views as feeling "insurmountable" due to these power differences.

Though not always as explicit as A2's instance, an agent with a lower social status to the non-agent would often face similar experiences. A4's colleagues, for example, dismissed her due to her being part of the sustainability branch of the corporation, which was perceived as less valuable than their operational parts. She described how other employees often saw those in sustainability as less important to the corporation, and that this affected the ability of an agent from these departments to be heard. Furthermore, she reflected on how intersections – such as being a woman – compounded this effect, causing the agent to have to work harder to prove their credibility.

Conversely, there were also several instances where the interviewed agent had more power than a non-agent. For instance, A1 and F2 both cited their respective experience and seniority as giving them considerable advantages when engaging with non-agents. Additionally, A6 stated that having a high-ranking sustainability officer in her corporation has given the field greater credibility within the corporation.

<u>The non-agent's perspective</u>

Participants stated that their target's point of view played a major role in whether the agent could persuade the non-agent. I will refer to this determinant as the non-agent's perspective, which agents gauged through considering the non-agent's educational background as well as their personal agendas.

Educational backgrounds often led to miscommunications and misunderstandings, which participants such as F3 and A2 voiced as being major hinderances to advocating for sustainability. A solution to this problem was the establishment of "common ground" (F3). Much of this work was discursive, and could come in the form of training programmes, brochures/brooklets, and interdisciplinary mediators. F3 argued for establishing a "rulebook" that prevents misunderstandings by clarifying terminology and frameworks. He also stated that a common problem in the corporate sphere is an unwillingness to ask questions when in doubt.

When I inquired why there was an aversion to asking questions, several participants answered that people have a fear of appearing incompetent in the workplace. F1 stated that overcoming this fear of judgement and ridicule is key to fostering an environment where there is interdisciplinary cooperation. Building trust was conducive to abating these fears. F1 motivated for the use of field trips to establish a shared experience, which built trust in co-workers and therefore led to greater willingness to be vulnerable. F2 and F4 motivated that daily workplace interactions also built trust between co-workers. Both participants expressed that they could easily voice their concerns, questions, and opinions because their workplaces did not penalise them for doing so, nor dismiss their ideas immediately.

Agendas, on the other hand, pertain to a person's own priorities and goals. This can include, for example, an agenda to achieve personal financial success. This affected how the non-agent viewed the value of the agent. For example, a non-agent who valued financial gains over sustainability would likely have little interest in engaging with sustainability conversations. Agents would adapt their tactics to appeal to these agendas, which in turn fostered more positive views in sustainability; thus giving the agent more credibility.

I found that even everyday priorities, such as how long someone hoped to remain in the corporation, played a significant role in a person's agendas towards sustainability. M3 stated that high employee turnover had a major impact on engagement on sustainability initiatives. He explained that high employee turnover led to a lack of personal investment in the corporation and its people, which led to lacklustre conversations.

I also found that misinformation and climate denial has further influenced the personal agendas of some non-agents. M1 spoke in-depth about his concerns surrounding this issue:

> "I think a challenge might be where we engage with individuals who… do not believe in climate change. We've now got fake news that's out there on social media about climate change… You have to be a bit more persuasive, and not too technical in your engagement." (M1)

M1 emphasised throughout his interview that sustainability is rooted in science. This is perhaps why he expressed concern over how to communicate with climate denialists, as they disregard the credibility of science. This therefore means that using scientific backing is ineffective for these individuals, whilst it is integral to science-believing non-agents. M1's methods of persuasion thus changed drastically when speaking to such individuals; he employed more interpersonal skills and tailored the message to be more appealing to these non-agents. F4 shared similar experiences and stated that positive narratives around sustainability were more productive in persuading these individuals than using shock-value or overly fact-based arguments.

4.2.2 How agents use communication techniques and settings in interactions: Message sculpting and relationship building

Once an agent has gauged their credibility by assessing their own social status and the perspective of the non-agent, they adjust their interactions accordingly. I identified two facets to these interactions: *message sculpting* and *relationship building*. Message sculpting is how the agent communicates facts in a way that is relevant, meaningful, and engaging to the non-agent. Relationship building, meanwhile, is about developing a trusting relationship with the non-agent. Interestingly, I found that agents built genuine relationships through interacting with non-agents in a plethora of settings over time, which created a multifaceted relationship.

Message sculpting

Though the factual reliability of the agent's argument was vital, participants emphasised that the delivery of the information ultimately determined whether they are listened to. As F2 explained: "You can actually have someone who's very experienced, but… their delivery of the message might actually undermine [their message]." For the purposes of this study, I will refer to this process as message sculpting. I isolated two techniques used by the agents in this process of message sculpting: localisation and immersion.

Localisation is the act of applying broader issues to a non-agent's life. The purpose of localisation is twofold: to motivate for the relevance of sustainability to the non-agent and their respective corporation; and to provide leverage points and strategies for change. The process of localisation helps the non-agent understand an issue and empowers them to act, as evidenced by the following extract:

> "Sometimes when we talk about systems, people get so lost about the interconnectedness of everything, and then it's hard to know where you can act. So, I think having very good tools and language around speaking about a system… [and] still being able to talk about leverage points in a system [helps]. So even in this blob of a system, what are the leverage points that you as a business can be thinking about?" (O2)

Use of real-world examples assisted agents in localisation. These were most helpful when they were comparable to the local scope of influence of the non-agent. For instance, A2 and A7 compared South Africa's agricultural sector to that of other nations. They pointed out how climate change and mono-cropping have negatively impacted agricultural sectors in these nations, highlighting similarities and areas of concern. Examples could also be in the form of experimental, small-scale programmes that corporations fund. F1, for instance, argued that funding high-risk programmes through subsidiaries provided clear examples of scalable sustainability initiatives.

Immersion further aided in the process of localisation. The purpose of immersion was to embed the non-agent into the system. It disrupted the routine of the non-agent by placing them in an unfamiliar but relevant space – such as a board member visiting a supplier's farm. F1 poignantly described this as follows:

> "One of the most successful ways… to get the penny to drop… is taking them [bankers] on field trips… In the sustainability world, touching, feeling, getting the dirt under your fingernails is quite an important part… of changing one's paradigms and one's frameworks" (F1)

She explained that there is great value in senior managers seeing how their choices affect people on the ground. According to her, experiences that were rich with sensory stimuli tended to remain in the non-agent's memories, which would in turn affect their decision-making in the future.

Other participants employed similar tactics, including when engaging with different types of stakeholders. A3, for example, used emotionally charged symbols, such as a snake, to draw and hold attention during community education programmes. He explained that invoking emotions in people through this method was an effective way to gain and hold their attention.

He further said that such tactics created long-lasting memories that affected the non-agents' future behaviour.

<u>Relationship building</u>

I found that interpersonal skills, such as understanding others' perspectives, allowed participants to voice their opinions or ideas without judgement or dismissal. Showing a capacity to be pragmatic and building a network of workplace friendships were valuable skills that agents utilised in advocating for change. However, unexpected complexities arose when considering the settings in which the interactions take place over time, such as informal or formal settings. This was where the most fruitful findings repeatedly manifested in the data.

For effective relationship building, people needed to adapt their interpersonal skills to settings. Prior to starting my research, I had speculated that some settings would be superior to others in catalysing change contagion. Instead, I found that all types of settings can be advantageous. Astute agents leveraged each space to foster relationships, build trust and motivate for change.

Table 3 shows four types of settings that participants commonly brought up. For each type of setting, I listed its features and briefly summarised the interpersonal skills utilised in each situation. The four types of settings are categorised as: formal; informal; once-off; and digital spaces.

Table 3: Adapting interpersonal skills depending on the setting within which the interaction takes place

Setting	Features	Adapting Interpersonal Skills
Formal	• Protocol-heavy • More scrutinised • Less creative • Typically conversing to several individuals in a single interaction	The formal setting is an accumulation of other settings, with the purpose of implementing rigid rules, policies, and strategies.
Informal	• Creative • Personable • Dynamic • Reflective	Informal/transitionary settings allow for greater transparency, one-on-one discussions, and are opportunities to gain better insight on co-workers' opinions whilst building comradery.
Once-off	• Experiential • Memorable • Novelty • Immersive	Oftentimes, these settings place individuals in situations that they are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with, which allows for greater vulnerability because everyone is assumed to not be knowledgeable about the space. Shared experiences in these spaces can remain with a team long after the once-off experience.
Virtual	• Often trite • Resource for knowledge sharing • Lowers hierarchical power imbalances • Enables flexibility for individuals	The virtual setting can be a difficult terrain to build comradery in. However, some agents were able to adapt to the digital space, and emphasised its opportunities for a more personal, less hierarchical, and more accommodating experience.

It became apparent that formality was not necessarily disadvantageous to change contagion, therefore countering my preconceptions. The experiences of the formal setting varied considerably between different participants. Formal settings tended to hinder persuasion for individuals who felt disempowered by the rigid, often hierarchical nature of formality. Meanwhile, others expressed the importance of formality as a setting to "prove [one]self" (O1) and affect change through the official buy-in of superiors. A6 recognised the importance of formal spaces occurring between informal settings to solidify an agreement. In the following extract, she demonstrated a unique and reflective approach to using different spaces to make them complement one another:

> "You've got different stakeholders that you're eventually going to formally present to. They have different interests. You will almost want that informal discussion to be quite focused on the element that's important in that one individual… Typically, [in the formal space] you would want to be playing to the most senior person in the room who's going to make the decision eventually, in terms of how you order the points that you want to raise" (A6)

I understood A6 here as conceptualising formal agreements as an accumulation of informal discussions and relationship building. "[Informal settings] are the backbone of everything" (A7), creating the foundation of workplace culture and interpersonal understandings, which in turn shape how formal interactions play out. Different settings, therefore, can feed off one another, and agents who realised this were able to deftly weave a coherent, persuasive, and personal narrative throughout the settings.

Further, my findings indicated that informal spaces were key in creating synergy in a workspace; increasing efficiency, building trust, lowering perceived power imbalances, and fostering creativity. Informality is inherently nonlinear; it may occur through spontaneous interactions, over small exchanges between desks, in the lull before a meeting, during a designated lunch hour, or simply through making quips during teamwork. The dynamic and low-stakes nature of informality lends itself to allowing for more transparent, personal exchanges. For example, A4 explained, "those little humanistic moments [in informal settings are] so much better for me to express myself than it is under a formal setting… I can actually relate to [my superior] as a human being."

Next, the once-off setting could be in the form of on-site field trips, educational programmes, conferences, or similar spaces intended to occur somewhere outside of the regular work environment. Participants explained that once-off settings could be opportunities for relationship building as well as immersion. These settings could thus provide opportunities for reflection, vulnerability, emotional engagement, and sensory stimulation. The novelty of the once-off setting means that they are likely to remain in the memories of the non-agent and they can feed into the non-agent's internal narration. Furthermore, once-off settings could improve the relationship between agents and non-agents through the creation of memories and shared experiences. As F1 explained, "you've got that common experience… [so it is] easier to pick up the phone and then make joint decisions together, even more courageous decisions together, because you have built some level of relationship."

Lastly, while virtual settings often draw polarising views, I found a nuanced reality. Due to COVID-19, digitalisation of the workplace has become the norm. Initially, I had assumed that virtual settings would hinder change contagion. However, contrasting opinions quickly manifested, leading me to a more nuanced perspective on digitalisation.

Drawbacks of digitalisation were plentiful. Firstly, new employees found it challenging to find their place through virtual settings. Established employees did not report major relationship losses due to digitalisation, though most agreed that there were less informal exchanges and more monotonous "talk fests" (M3). Many of the participants also stated that their workplace's norm was to have the webcam turned off, making interactions more impersonal. The cumbersome nature of digital communication also meant that conversations tended to be highly one-sided and unstimulating. A5, for example, explained her experience of the virtual setting as follows: "I'm consuming, consuming… there's little opportunity for me to just talk." A7 suggested using innovative techniques, such as providing a physical activity for people to do together whilst in the call, to create a more dynamic and engaging virtual experience.

Despite these concerns, there was also a favourable tone when discussing digitalisation's future role in the corporate space. Unsurprisingly, participants praised the greater knowledge accessible as a result of digitalisation, arguing that it is a positive for facilitating change. This included affordable or free digital conferences and the use of corporate apps to communicate information. Some individuals also felt empowered by the virtual setting to speak more openly, as it alleviated some of their social anxiety. Additionally, participants described the virtual space as a useful tool for making senior management more accessible through direct messaging, and this worked towards lowering perceived power imbalances.

The virtual setting may have dominated business at the height of the pandemic, but, as other settings are being reintroduced, the experience of the virtual setting has allowed for major shifts in workplace values and culture to occur. F2 provided an insightful example of how her workplace used a once-off, informal space to make sense of and narrate the employees' experiences during the pandemic. Through reflecting with one another, employees were able to express their concerns and build stronger relationships. Further, F2 argued that the digital space has created greater transparency and authenticity between co-workers because "your cat walks across the screen, the child comes in, the courier guy shouts." There have also been more authentic discussions about mental health in the workplace, particularly due to superiors being open about their own struggles.

In-person interactions are returning to the workplace, but the acceleration of digitalisation has permanently affected social interactions. Although digitalisation has many limitations, I found through my research that there are significant benefits that can arise if it is utilised creatively. Digitalisation can facilitate change contagion through the provision of new avenues of communication and by kindling deeper relationships with the assistance of other settings.

In sum, each setting has advantages and opportunities that agents can leverage to build a nuanced and trusting relationship with a non-agent. In doing so, they can speak more transparently and better assist in the reflection processes that non-agents go through on their journey towards becoming an agent. The most effective way to use settings is therefore not to focus on one or two above others, but rather provide a range of settings for individuals to interact with one another. This works to improve workplace relationships and allows for the agent to better present sustainability to non-agents.

4.2.3 Changing the values of the non-agent: Value association, value relocation, and value shifting

The intended results of message sculpting and relationship building is the changing of the non-agent's values to align with the sustainability agenda. It is the final process in creating another change agent.

I identified three tactics used by change agents to challenge and change a non-agent's values: value association; value relocation; and value shifting. I will discuss each in turn.

Value association

Often, agents would associate sustainability with already existing corporate values for the non-agent; a process which I termed value association. As corporations often prioritise financial benefits, this was usually the targeted value that the agent used to associate sustainability initiatives to.

Several participants were strong proponents of using value association because it was relatively swift in changing behaviour. That is to say that there were often clear correlations between an interaction and results because of how quick this mechanism can act. F3 opined, “If I'm speaking to a hardnosed capitalist… speak to that capitalist nature of a person.” By creating an association between sustainability and financial gains, agents “changed the narrative” (A1) surrounding sustainability. This dispelled sustainability as being anti-business and made it more attractive to non-agents.

Though value association can be effective in changing the non-agent’s behaviours in the short run, it has its limitations. “[Sometimes] there is a foundational trade-off between costs and sustainability” (A2) and therefore this tactic did not drive initiatives with limited financial benefits. Furthermore, without a fundamental change in the person’s worldview, the non-agent would continue to make future decisions that align with their values instead of that of the sustainability agenda. For instance, A6 expressed concerns that insincere sustainability initiatives would not prevent exploitative practices geared towards short-term goals on maximising bottom-line profits. Issues like greenwashing would also persist if the non-agent maintained their existing values, as this was perceived to reap the benefits of the “sustainability bandwagon” (C1) without earnest sustainability endeavours.

Value relocation

Whilst value association targets existing corporate values of the non-agent, value relocation takes the non-agent’s non-corporate values and positions them inside of the business. Value relocation naturally requires more relationship building than value association.

The most common example of value relocation was the use of family-related values. A2 stated that she would ask owners of the farm “What kind of success do you want for your children's children who are going to have this farm in 80 years?” Furthermore, A7 narrated that having children was the primary driving force in her own journey in sustainability. Drawing upon such values in family-orientated individuals seemed to be an effective and commonly used method of value relocation.

Provided that the agent used value relocation with care and once enough relationship building has taken place, this could be a poignant way to change the non-agent’s values. However, it is not without its limitations. It can be difficult to locate and reposition these values effectively.

F1, for example, pointed out that some non-agents may prioritise their own wealth *because* of their non-corporate values, instead of in spite of them. She goes through the logic of such a person, explaining, "why would [they] make those [sustainability] decisions… that means that [they're] taking home less, which will mean that [they've] got less [for their] children."

Value shifting

To address the shortfalls of value association and value relocation, agents facilitated changes in the non-agent's underlying values; a tactic which I described as value shifting. Most participants voiced that this was their end goal when engaging in interactions.

Value shifting often required a repetition over time of key points across the individual's various institutional and non-institutional roles. Although some social interactions catalysed value shifting, it remains a fundamentally nonlinear, long-term process. F1 discussed the difficulty of determining causation in value shifting:

> "Is it because you've had 15 meetings with that person? Or is it because you've shown them evidence of what another bank is doing? Or is it because their 15-year-old niece came home, and she has just done a great project; that was finally the thing that sparked the change? It's very, very difficult, I think, [to] put your finger on it and say, 'Okay, well, we were the reason for that change' " (F1)

Notably, when I asked interviewees what their journey in sustainability was, they would narrate it in a manner that mimicked F1's description. Their own reflections on their lived experiences drove their change in values. Such experiences included having children, serendipitous career opportunities, engaging with artwork, visceral moments of disgust towards pollution, and interacting with others who cared about sustainability. It would therefore appear that value shifting is less about directly locking horns with the non-agent, and more about helping facilitate and narrate this process of reflection.

4.2.4 How agents use crises to catalyse the recruitment of non-agents

Given the timing of the interviews – during the pandemic, KZN/Gauteng looting, and growing unemployment and food insecurity – it is unsurprising that participants spoke often about crises. This provided an opportunity for me to explore how change agents use the exogenous event of a crisis in their efforts change organisations and institutions. The insights given by participants on how these crises affect change contagion are uniquely valuable. This section discusses the findings relating to how surrounding macro-crises impacted change contagion. Agents showed that they used crises to motivate for sustainability proactively and creatively.

I found that a crisis diverts people's attention; though the extent of this is dependent on how disrupted an individual's daily life is by the crisis. Crises, regardless of them being rooted in social, economic, or ecological systems, were at the crux of many arguments for sustainability. As A4 explains, crises are "very useful in helping make sense of what sustainability is about." Participants most often used examples of crises that affected non-agents directly. They discussed more distant crises – such as floods in other nations – briefly and with little passion. Comparatively, they eagerly discussed 'nearby' crises, such as COVID-19, the threat of Day Zero[1], and the KZN/Gauteng looting, with much more depth and introspection. Therefore, I found that a crisis is most impactful when it affects the person's daily life.

I will define what a crisis means for this research in relation to daily routines. What became apparent in my data was that participants understood crises as disruptions of routines, and the emotional and behavioural adjustments that occur over time as a result of this disruption. Therefore, I analysed a crisis in terms of routines changing over time. I found three main phases: maintenance of routines; disruption of routines; and the adaptation and reinstatement of routines.

Maintenance of routines

Prior to a crisis occurring, motivating for change surrounding a particular issue relevant to the future crisis could be very challenging. Many participants characterised crises as an accumulation of pre-existing problems in a system leading to the disruption of daily routines. Yet interest levels were incredibly low prior to the crisis because "[people] think [crises] might never happen to [them] anytime soon" (A4). Furthermore, as O2 explained, individuals were likely to be much less knowledgeable about the issue prior to a crisis. He discussed how the threat of Day Zero led to people in the Western Cape gaining some basic understanding of where water comes from and how water scarce South Africa is, whereas beforehand there was greater ignorance. The primary emotion surrounding a future crisis can therefore be described as disinterest, as it may seem "far-fetched" (A4) and therefore irrelevant.

I want to emphasise that the maintenance of routines is not devoid of disruption. Pre-existing crises, many of which will persist well into the following crisis, would hold less attention once

[1] During the Cape Town water crisis of 2015-2018, the City of Cape Town used the term 'Day Zero' as a shorthand descriptor of when dams would reach levels below that which is necessary to supply water to through plumbing. Fortunately, through water restrictions and community efforts, the City of Cape Town and its population was able to prevent Day Zero.

another crisis overshadowed it, as "the next crisis comes along and nullifies the importance of the previous one" (F3).

Disruption of routines

A crisis can lead to reflections of chronic socio-ecological problems/crises, which agents would use to narrate non-agents' value shifting. For instance, F2 discussed the emotional reactions she and others had during crises. "You can feel the tension on society keenly from increased homelessness," she described before relating socioeconomic inequity to the KZN/Gauteng looting that occurred in 2021. As numerous participants explained, discussions occurring during a crisis gravitated toward the crisis or related issues, because a crisis creates a strong emotional backdrop for all interactions.

Due to the anxiety felt by non-agents, behavioural changes may be more accepted in a time of crisis, though long-term behavioural and systemic changes were more challenging to get traction on. There is "a short-term spike [of interest] and then we rope in risk people, and then everybody disappears" (F3). F3 recommended "[jumping] on that opportunity [of a crisis drawing attention] and get the decision made there because there's an appetite in the crisis to do that." Meanwhile, O2 argued that "the main [goal during a crisis] is not necessarily to get massive behavioural change because that's normally temporary; but it's to inject a lot of information about that particular topic [when you] have got everyone listening." Both participants voiced the importance of seizing the opportunity of a crisis when it occurs to get approval for projects and educate people, respectively.

This highlights a key difference in localisation versus immersion. A2, for example, discussed ecological crises in other nations and compared this to what may happen in South Africa due to an invasive pest. This is a process of localisation, as it applied distant events to the context as an argument for finding solutions to this impending crisis. However, she later went on to explain how relating the COVID-19 pandemic to pest invasions was especially helpful in explaining the complexity of pest control, and thus arguing for a plethora of solutions rather than relying on one method alone. She explained that "the vaccine is [not] the end-all-be-all, now we already have variants… so these kind of [pest] invasions are similar to pandemics in that sense." A2 thus argued that experiencing a crisis such as COVID-19 developed a non-agent's systems thinking, which she applied to other biodiversity and ecological systems.

Adaptation and reinstating of routines

I found that the level of engagement and reflexivity waned not when a crisis ended, but when routines were adapted and re-established to incorporate the crisis because this effectively normalised a crisis. A6, for example, described how people are "over [COVID-19]" and have adjusted their behaviours to create a new daily normal even when new waves hit the country. F2 also discussed this phenomenon, "systems re-establish [and] one hopes that systems re-establish with new patterns." Therefore, even if a crisis is ongoing, society can incorporate it into a new normal routine. Thus, the 'after' phase of the crisis with respect to engagement levels during social interactions is not when the crisis resolves or disappears, but rather when it ceases to be a major disruptive force in routines.

Nonetheless, a crisis still affects a person's internal narration of their experiences. Several participants referred to crises that had passed years ago, such as Cape Town's Day Zero. Despite the crisis having occurred years ago, its occurrence impacted a person's life experience and made its future return seem much more possible. O2 discussed how the memory and lessons of a crisis lives on in individuals. He argued that a past crisis can still be useful, particularly if the crisis' return is a looming threat. Therefore, once society re-established routines, a non-agent's baseline engagement surrounding a crisis is higher than what the engagement was prior to the disruption.

This is an especially important consideration in the South African context. Several participants voiced how South Africa has managed to incorporate "grossly unacceptable [problems]" (A6) into its conceptualisation of normal. Poignantly, F2 opined "normal is the crisis" in South Africa; poverty, inequality, unemployment, malnourishment, and a plethora of other dire problems are not seen as crises because they do not disrupt the daily routines of the privileged. F3 meanwhile described the psychological toll that comes from living in a country with so many daunting, urgent issues. He expressed that "we [people in South Africa] are on edge all the time… if everything [every problem] is important, nothing [no problem] is important, because you can't deal with everything at the same time." South Africa is a country riddled with an endless list of crises; not just in the sense of routine disruption but in the sense of urgent, life-threatening problems, such as hunger and poverty. This is a contextual factor that lies underneath all conversations surrounding sustainability. It is one that elicited strong emotions of helplessness and frustration from the participants. In the South African context, this makes gaining traction on normalised crises, such as poverty and unemployment, especially challenging, as those with power are able to shield their routines, which thus shielded them from the emotional toll of a crisis.

4.3 Negotiating values: Interactions between agents

The second thematic finding that emerged from the study pertains to how agents interacted with other agents to implement change. Whilst agent to non-agent interactions had a persuasive nature to them, agent to agent interactions were more of a process of collaboration and negotiation to make sense of sustainability values and align the sustainability agenda. The purpose of these interactions was for agents to come to agreements on what actions to take.

Participants explained that interorganisational networks of agents provided benefits of knowledge sharing, increasing the capacity to mobilise in crises, overcoming bureaucratic stagnation, opportunities for collaboration, and alignment on sustainability objectives. This affects the macro-level context through shifting dialogue in sectors, driving regulations, and legitimising the movement. This section will discuss the nature of social interactions in these networks of agents.

4.3.1 Networks of allies: Agents collaborating with one another to further sustainability

Participants emphasised the importance of individual relationships in interorganisational networks to gain traction for sustainability transitions. F2 reflected, “It's always personal relationships… you talk about a company, but the reality is, it's a person you've met who represents a company.” A5 and F2 pointed out the importance of informal and once-off settings in developing these relationships, owing much of their network to nonlinear and spontaneous interactions, such as sitting beside a person at a conference. Some digital conferences have attempted to recreate this, though only one participant spoke favourably of these experiences.

These networks also enabled collaboration with other agents across organisations; creating momentum for sectoral change. This can be in the form of explicit collaboration between organisations, but also by utilising well-established incentives, such as competition. Competition in the private sector is an especially useful tool in motivating change. F1 described how corporate sustainability teams across the sector use competition to drive change contagion in their corporations.

> "We got phone calls from others [sustainability teams] to our team in the sector saying thank you [for your radical sustainability strategy], because now we've got something to hold up to say, this is now the base, and we're going to come back at you and we're going to beat you on this. And we're like, hallelujah, beat us on it." (F1)

This is an example of how collaboration between agents can appear like competition. So long as the end goal is to improve the sustainability of the corporation, then this is a collaborative approach towards sustainability between agents.

However, agents primarily used social interactions between one another to negotiate meanings of sustainability. This also aims to drive corporate sustainability, so it is a facet of collaboration; though it is often quite tense. Nonetheless, negotiating values was shown by participants to be an important part of driving sustainability.

4.3.2 Points of contention: Agents negotiating with one another on the meanings of sustainability

The most surprising facet of interorganisational networks was the process of alignment. Even amongst the agents I spoke to, there was considerable disparity between their conceptualisations of sustainability. This misalignment manifests itself in several ways, and this negotiation of meanings and frameworks is necessary to legitimise the movement and build sectoral momentum.

Misalignment of values between agents was a major concern raised by participants. It resulted in diverging, sometimes counterproductive approaches to achieving corporate sustainability. The lack of clarity in the meaning and values of sustainability was a hinderance to the movement's progress, as it throttled the implementation of the sustainability values. Furthermore, diverging discourse negatively affected change contagion by creating confusion and a lack of directionality. Aligning values through negotiation resulted in clear definitions of sustainability, which added legitimacy to the movement, therefore increasing the likelihood of change contagion. Therefore, agents expended considerable time and energy on negotiating these values. I will discuss some key points of contention voiced by participants in this section, and how my participants sought to resolve these misalignments through social interactions.

Ethics and politics

Agents negotiated with one another on the ethical underpinnings of sustainability. One manifestation of this misalignment within the network is when agents characterise sustainability as an opportunity rather than a value. This can lead to profit-orientated behaviours, which fail to affect change swiftly and equitably. A1 brought up this issue when discussing the price premium that suppliers place on vegan products, which he stated is cheaper to produce than animal-based products.

> "[Businesses think] 'If I can make money out of it, and help on the sustainability agenda, why not?' But the question is, how much money should you be making? What is a decent economic profit that you should be making out of this?" (A1)

A1 went on to argue that, in the context of South Africa's poverty and malnutrition, this price premium on food is especially egregious. He motivated for sustainable products to not be exclusive, as it is beneficial for both the environment and welfare of society for them to be accessible. C1 echoed these concerns surrounding corporations insincerely pursuing sustainability, leading to greenwashing.

This type of misalignment also appeared in scientific and political spheres. Lobbying of industry interest groups "muddy the waters" (A1), making it difficult for agents to persuade non-agents. A1 argued that, without an external, unbiased institution to act as a moderator, there tended to be lobbying of industries – such as glass and metals – which resulted in legal disputes and biased reports about which materials are the most sustainable. A1 stated that industries do this for profit, instead of determining genuinely sustainable solutions. Such actions hinder agents' ability to act on unbiased scientific information, and stalled initiatives that targeted systemic problems of unsustainability in the marketplace.

Measuring sustainability

Participants, such as A5 and M2, said that corporations prefer the term 'ESG' to 'sustainability', as it provides a more specific, measurable definition, which is highly valued by management. A5 explained: "Sustainability: the word is almost obsolete, they now go for ESG." This is an illustration of how corporations demand frameworks to measure sustainability. Agents thus attempt to negotiate and agree upon these frameworks.

Several participants expressed concerns about measurements and frameworks, as there are many standards and options. This can cause challenges in communication and decision-making for senior management, shareholders, and other stakeholder groups. M2, for instance, stated:

> "If you look at the annual financial report… they have a clear way of how they report [it]… Now you do sustainability reporting… the JSE listing requires you to do [this rating standard] … this investor wants [to look at a rating agency]… and then you have European

> investors… that's becoming a real pain in my world: sitting with an audience or analysts that sit in [Europe], that analyse South African companies." (M2)

Shareholders, senior management, auditors, consumers, and regulators desire comparability. Creating these measurements was a way to concisely communicate information. Simultaneously, participants voiced the importance of context for a corporation, which measuring frameworks may struggle to capture. For example, M2 expressed disdain for international audiences losing contextual information when gauging a South African corporation's success. Comparability versus contextuality appear to be the primary tension-point in creating reports and frameworks surrounding sustainability. C2 explained this further:

> "I think there are some issues with standardisation, in terms of companies wanting to have a very standard way of reporting… because the readers… want to… see the comparability across industries. But realistically, it's so complex… I find that sometimes you have to use those frameworks in a way that's contextually relevant to your business." (C2)

As M2 and C2 demonstrate, these measurements are a way for people to understand what sustainability is meant to look like. It does this through drawing on the familiarity of financial goals as well as the contextualisation of measurement standards. This adds a degree of accountability to the meanings of sustainability.

Prioritisation of issues

Another challenge raised by agents is the lack of inclusion of ecological systems in dialogue surrounding corporate sustainability. Corporations demonstrated a firm grasp of issues such as carbon foot printing. Meanwhile, more complex topics, such as biodiversity, were rarely brought up during my data collection. O2 explained why it may be difficult for businesses to incorporate biodiversity into their strategy:

> "As I understand, they [corporates] don't have that [standards/frameworks for biodiversity] at the moment. And they're working towards it. So, a corporate always claims to be doing a lot more on sustainability, but when you dig into it; yeah, it's that they're thinking about it mostly." (O2)

Furthermore, my participants said that ground-level employees primarily managed issues surrounding biodiversity and ecological systems. These employees have limited status and sway examples of this are participants A2 and A3. As a result of excluding biodiversity, corporations can make decisions that are counter to the longevity of the business and are inefficient. O2 provided an example of how corporations tend to tackle sustainability problems one-by-one, leading to initiatives that are beneficial for one aspect (such as emissions) but counter to others (such as biodiversity). Without the explicit incorporation of advocates for biodiversity and ecology in corporate strategy, such errors can be costly and slow sustainability transitions.

The alignment of values and meanings in sustainability requires inclusive negotiation between many agents, as well as a moderating institution or organisation. I found that most participants supported government market intervention to help incentivise change, and some went further to argue that the government should play a role in defining the meanings of abstract terms such as 'just transition'. Yet, participants still wanted the corporate sphere to collaboratively create these meanings with the government and other organisations; "otherwise it's government fighting against industry all the time, and that hasn't proven very fruitful" (M3). This emphasises the importance of agent-agent networks reaching beyond just the corporate sphere.

4.3.3 Agent-agent social interactions and change contagion

To clarify, social interactions between agents did not lead directly to change contagion. Rather, social interactions between agents focused on collaboration and negotiation to act out values on an organisational and/or institutional level. Negotiating definitions, measurements, and values helped agents drive a sustainability agenda, so that their efforts had real, material results. Therefore, social interactions between agents played an important indirect role in supporting the sustainability transition.

Moreover, social interactions between agents fed back into change contagion, as non-agents felt more inclined to join in on the sustainability growing movement. The interactions provided legitimisation and directionality for the agenda. "The world is moving at such a rapid rate that you almost need to be deaf-blind to not get the power of this agenda," explained F1. This shows that interactions between agents can cause shifts in the broader discourse, and this in turn affects the recruitment of new agents. Non-agents may feel a need to keep up with changing paradigm shifts for fear of the sector leaving them behind. When the discourse around sustainability transitions paints it as an inevitability, then non-agents are easier to recruit because the decision to advocate for sustainability becomes "a no-brainer" (M3).

4.4 Social interactions building up to corporate change

The third and final thematic finding related to the role of change agents is the corporate strategy. In particular, I found that where change agents are located in the value chain and how they are connected to each other matters. I also found that an agent's position in a corporation directly influences their ability to enact change contagion.

4.4.1 A strategy to locate and connect agents in the value chain

Participants repeatedly argued that there should be agents throughout the organisation to maximise their impact. Intuitively, agents in different roles in the corporation each provide their own resources, perspectives, interests, and knowledge. This increased the "system knowledge" (F1) of agents who collaborate with one another. M1 concisely motivated for this approach:

> "[We help] everybody to be on the same wavelength with the board… that everybody's on the same mindset… we don't perceive that it [the transitions to renewable energy] will impact people's jobs, because we take everybody with us as we transition [and] as we implement [the] strategy." (M1)

M1 argued that an inability to address the concerns of employees hampers a corporation's ability to transition with minimal financial and welfare costs. Therefore, it is in a corporation's best interest to engage with all stakeholders and ensure that sustainability strategies are well communicated and align with stakeholder expectations.

However, at a different point in the interview, M1 reflected on his corporation's comparatively poor communication with shareholders, which led to significant financial losses. M1 stated that the "packaging" of their sustainability strategy to shareholders caused this, which better communication could have prevented. This echoes an important takeaway in this section: a corporation may find value in locating agents beyond just their employee list. This includes shareholders, suppliers, and customers. Each agent provides insights and leverage points that build the knowledge and drive for change. And, as M3 argued, it is also vital for there to be directionality for especially expensive investments for the most high-polluting sectors. As such, harnessing and communicating with agents throughout the value chain can mitigate losses and better motivate for radical implementation strategies.

For this strategy of locating agents throughout the value chain to be effective, there should also be communication between these agents. Oftentimes, a corporation had sustainability committees, but these were comprised of primarily senior level management. Similarly, conferences and similar interorganisational spaces catered for individuals with considerable organisational authority. This effectively excluded many active and potential agents from dialogue with other agents. This isolation had two negative effects: increasing the likelihood of misalignment; and a loss of emotional energy.

Firstly, due to their size, corporations faced the challenge of diverging or misaligned initiatives surrounding sustainability. A5 was particularly passionate about the alignment of sustainability initiatives in a corporation, as oftentimes there are “silos” of sustainability initiatives with little coordination between them. Similarly, A7 expressed concerns with communication channels hindering agents from speaking to one another. She explained that her corporation had a social enterprise subsidiary and main operations branch that were both passionate about regenerative agriculture; however, there was no meaningful communication or mobilisation between these two groups. Thus, these explicit and inclusive spaces for agents in a corporation would serve to assist in the process of alignment of a sustainability strategy.

Further, agents being located throughout a corporation were likely to lead to challenges with regards to their motivation and emotional energy. Participants who were more isolated in their workplace from other agents tended to report more negative experiences and be disillusioned than those who were not as isolated. When I asked how participants viewed the corporation’s attitude towards sustainability, I found that participants were more likely to answer by reflecting on their interactions with workplace associates rather than the corporate sustainability mandates. Although some participants would bolster their arguments with the corporation’s sustainability credentials and measurements, others expressed scepticism towards their corporation’s reporting. This suggests that people gauge the values of their corporation more so through their social interactions than by looking at company policies or reports. F2 pointed out why she may have a positive view in comparison to those who may be in other parts of the corporation:

> “Because I work in [a] social development [team], my space is very positive [and] embracing of the corporate responsibility to engage deeply and meaningfully in social development. I haven’t often come across people speaking disparagingly of it.” (F2)

I found that agents’ social interactions had major effects on their emotions and motivation. For instance, when asked what challenges he faced in advocating for sustainability, A3 admitted, “sometimes it can be attitude, and I'm not excluding myself.” Meanwhile, participants who had more exposure to other agents – such as F2 and F4 – did not voice such feelings; instead recounting generally positive social interactions relating to sustainability. It thus would be beneficial for a corporation to provide inclusive sustainability spaces for all agents along the value chain because this can help hinder the emotional depletion of agents.

4.4.2 The opportunities of agents across different positions in the value chain

An agent's position in a corporation heavily impacted the nature of their change contagion. This sub-section will provide some of the participants' examples on what agents in various parts of the value chain contribute to corporate sustainability.

Organisational authority

The most common differentiation between types of agents pertained to their respective placement in the traditional organisational hierarchy. This largely applied to internal employees. Participants would distinguish between senior, middle, and ground-level employees when discussing this topic.

Perhaps the most expected finding was that senior managers were the most able to cause sweeping, radical changes. F1 recounted that her corporation's chief executive officer (CEO) "decided one night [that] we are going to become carbon neutral." She used this as an example to illustrate how senior management can transform an organisation using their authority. She further described that these actions were "symbolic signals" of change to all employees in a corporation.

Indeed, senior management often served as symbols who narrated the values, strategy, and direction of an organisation. Sustainability advocates in senior positions emboldened agents throughout the organisation by openly voicing their agendas. For instance, A6 commented on her corporation's sustainability officer: "[His] whole view on sustainability is awesome. The way he incorporates every aspect for us as a company, I think is amazing." Similarly, A4 argued that "if management buys [into sustainability], then… people grab it and run with it." Lower-level employees were likely to mimic the actions of senior leadership. For example, F4 and F2 both recounted how senior management's altruistic actions inspired other individuals in the corporation to behave similarly. Senior management is therefore perhaps the most poised to cause change contagion in individuals they may not even directly interact with, due to their positions, which make them symbols of a corporation's values and ideals.

Meanwhile, participants argued that the role of middle management was also integral to the spread of change agency in a corporation. Middle managers may manage operations in a factory, work in human resources, or do other jobs that require the negotiation of top-level strategies and day-to-day realities. F3 argued that middle management is key for driving sustainability transitions in an organisation:

> "There's a big debate whether you need top-down buy in or bottom-up [advocacy]. And, frankly, it's that that middle section… where the ball gets dropped… our directors or the CEO [do the] ribbon cutting and photo op, everybody claps and it's in the media and yay, good for you. The problem is, then it needs to be implemented… and everything shouldn't go up seven levels before there's a decision to be made" (F3)

Middle management, according to F3, is integral to the implementation of the ideals and symbolic communication of senior management. Capacity to implement sustainability initiatives influences a middle manager's ability to be a sustainability change agent. Capacity relates to their resources (such as time and budget), as well as their authority to act. Limited resources evidently made it more challenging to implement sustainability initiatives, with middle management participants voicing their concerns surrounding highly finite resources. Further, middle management often feel that they must defer to their superiors' decisions, which limits their authority and ability to become agents, as "at some point, there's a top-level person that has to be aligned [to sustainability]" (A6). C2 reflected on how a lack of flexibility and authority can hinder change contagion:

> "I think sometimes you can see an internal struggle where… [agrees] with [your argument], but… they have an internal sort of shield that they can't climb because their hands are tied… they need to go and get buy-in from their superiors" (C2)

Though there was comparatively less data on ground-level employees' experiences and leverage points, a common tactic that they used was mobilisation. M3 explained that the onerous and ineffective process of communicating along the chain of command caused employees to use mobilisation tactics to voice their opinions. Ground-level employees usually used trade unions and community representative groups for this. This was not only to quicken the speed of which their communication reaches someone of considerable authority, but it also counteracted ground-level employees' comparatively limited organisational authority as individuals.

Communication from the top- to ground-floor employees was described as impersonal, due to its delivery targeting a mass of people. A4 cautioned that paper-based or digital communication channels are highly one-sided, and therefore ground-level employees cannot engage in conversations surrounding sustainability. This one-sided form of communication can cause noteworthy problems in the process of decision-making, as contextual information can be lost. "People that made decisions… weren't involved at all and were just sitting comfortably by their fire" (A2). Directly speaking to individuals seems to be an easy solution and is perhaps why M1 promoted the use of field trips to bring senior management to speak with employees. However, whether these initiatives allowed ground-level employees to deeply engage with and add to the corporate sustainability transitions could not be determined by my data.

Departments and operational units

Participants often argued that sustainability requires specialised expertise in multidisciplinary teams. "We… need [the] financial and the marketing [departments]" (F3) to help develop the field of sustainability in the corporate sphere. Therefore, participants argued that there needed to be sustainability leaders within these specialised units, who had to work together under an aligned strategy.

One method of creating leaders throughout business units was to implement training programmes. F4 argued for developing agents through sustainability training courses tailored to the person's specialisation. For F4's corporation, this required outsourcing training programmes. Meanwhile, A7 cautioned against creating obligatory courses run by teams who lacked a meaningful relationship in the corporation. She said:

> "I think mandating anything… generally doesn't result in the desired outcome, as opposed to taking people on a journey and trying to find a personal connection along the way… The more immersive way that that can happen, the better. Because the minute you get a personal connection to something, action will happen. Outside of that, it's words on a page that [gets filed away] in our minds, and we walk out of that particular meeting or training session, and we never think about it again" (A7)

A7 used the words "journey" and "immersion" to capture a deeper shift of paradigms through placing a person's story inside of the system; this, according to A7, is necessary to instil values of sustainability. This illustrated the importance of value shifting in the process of educating a person. Training programmes should thus be reconceptualised as moments that enable value shifting through narrating the experience and allowing for voluntary self-reflection.

Suppliers and outsourced contractors

A "consortium" (M3) of agents throughout the value chain is necessary to implement major sectoral change, and thus participants argued that agents located upstream in suppliers or outsourcing bodies were an important part of driving corporate sustainability. There were two types of suppliers which emerged from the findings: those who are less equipped to handle sustainability transitions; and those who the corporation perceived as being guides for sustainability transitions.

Some suppliers struggled with navigating sustainability and applying it to their business. "We are not a big organisation; we actually got a small agency," C1 explained. To meet the requirements of their clients, suppliers may only superficially implement sustainability initiatives. For example, A2 described: "there's pressure with regards to solar and social development, but those are more like add-ons because [business customers] aren't criticising monocropping." The costs of shifting operations or even gaining accreditation can be enormous, which is why M3 motivated for corporations to actively communicate and collaborate with agents from these suppliers.

Alternatively, corporations outsourced some organisations for consulting or auditing. In such a role, the outsourced organisation is the more experienced actor. C2 described that such a role can be powerful through "[helping] corporate set those targets that align with a just transition." The use of sustainability education programmes was also commonplace, but M7 critiqued these as being temporary disruptions with limited deep learning. M7 suggested that it would be beneficial to not view outsourcing expertise as a once-off payment, but as an ongoing relationship between individuals in the corporation and those in the outsourced party.

Customers

With regards to agents who are customers, I found that the manner through which corporations engaged with agents who were customers differed drastically depending on sectoral context. I will briefly discuss three types of customers and how corporations approached them, respectively: business customers; financial clients; and households.

When a corporation's main customers are major businesses, then there is often downstream pressure to meet sustainability requirements. However, this pressure was conceptualised more as a contractual obligation than a process resulting in deeper paradigm shifts. A2 argued that this meant that the corporation was more likely to simply meet the necessary obligations but not go beyond these. Furthermore, O2 said that some business customers are unlikely to have stringent requirements, and so some businesses would rather change their customers to those with more lax policies.

Financial corporations engaged the most with clients to drive sustainability, though these were usually clients who were starting a business. This is because the financial sector is in a unique position where they can significantly shape the marketplace in the long term through who they invest in, according to my participants. F1 discussed how her corporation utilised their customers by creating platforms and networking events for them to present their innovations. She explained, “We have clients that come on to a panel, talking about what they're trying to do in that area... [and] they’re not ‘man on the street’ type of clients; they’re business clients.”

Household consumers were not engaged with to such a degree, aside from addressing issues of post-consumption waste and providing packaging information. A1 emphasised that providing the most affordable, quality product/service for the household consumer remains the focus of marketing and design teams, and that sustainability is of a much lower priority. Yet C1 argued that corporations have shaped what consumers want. She argued, “Why do we need the most amazing, fantastic packaging that's not always environmentally friendly? Because the consumer… [has] been told over the years [by marketing], ‘this is what we need and what we want.’” Corporations therefore shape consumer demand through consumer communication efforts. From this, more sustainability-orientated engagement with household consumer agents through marketing and consumer relations may provide innovative solutions. This reconceptualises the possible role of marketing by changing it into a dynamic way to communicate with consumers.

Shareholders

Lastly, corporations have increasingly looked to shareholder agents to help guide sustainability transitions. As the owners of a corporation, shareholder interests take priority in corporate decision-making. Although shareholder activism has provided some pressure on corporations to shift their behaviours, my findings showed that some corporations were actively taking the initiative to collaborate with their shareholders on sustainability transitions.

To engage with agents who are shareholders, corporations would make an active effort to directly speak with them and hear their viewpoints. Participants such as F4 argued that shareholders play an integral role in “[holding the board of directors] accountable for the promises they make in terms of those long-term targets.” She argued for using direct communication with shareholders. “We engage regularly with a series of stakeholders, which the investors are just one of them, to say, what do you want to see? How do you want us to calculate [sustainability] so that it’s meaningful for you?” (F4). In doing so, this mitigated financial risks resulting from shareholders disagreeing with corporate sustainability strategies, and engaged with and created shareholder agents.

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of the findings that emerged from my research. I outlined the three thematic findings relating to my research. Firstly, I found that interactions between agents and non-agents could result in change contagion, depending on an agent's credibility and a non-agent's willingness to listen to the agent's point of view. Agents gauged their credibility through determining their relative social status and the non-agent's perspective. The agent would adjust their behaviour accordingly. Using messaging and relationship building techniques, the agent engaged with the non-agent by providing them with meaningful information and a trusting relationship. With this, the agent then used three tactics to challenge the non-agent's values: value association; value relocation; and value shifting. Value association would point out where there was a win-win opportunity for sustainability and the non-agent's priority, such as profit maximisation. Value relocation positioned the non-agent's non-corporate values, such as family, into the corporate space. Value shifting was enabling the non-agent to undergo introspection, which the agent would facilitate through social interactions. These efforts sometimes led to the non-agent becoming an agent through their re-evaluation of their findings.

This process of change contagion was catalysed during a macro-crisis. Before a crisis, non-agents tended to view narratives surrounding the potential crisis as irrelevant to their lives and occupations. Disrupted routines caused a spike in anxiety, which increased non-agents' willingness to engage. Agents used this opportunity to catalyse change contagion through messaging techniques that narrated the crisis in the context of their sustainability agendas. This heightened attention given to the crisis waned as routines were adapted and reinstated, and as the routines alleviated the anxieties. Even if the crisis persisted, non-agents showed a tendency to become jaded over the crisis or associated topics. Therefore, a crisis became normalised by the re-establishment of routines.

Second, my findings showed that agents interacting with one another is a key driver for sustainability transitions through the negotiation of values. Intuitively, these networks of agents help mobilise sectors. More surprisingly, an important aspect of these interactions is the negotiating of disagreements between agents. This negotiation sought to define the values on institutional and organisational levels, so that the agents could act on the values. This institutionalisation of values develops the legitimacy of the sustainability movement, therefore feeding back into change contagion.

Lastly, my findings revealed the importance of an agent's position in the value chain for driving sustainability transitions. Senior managers appeared to have more capacity to do this, but there was limited evidence that employees were empowered to push for sustainability throughout the corporation. Without leveraging both internal and external agents throughout the value chain, sustainability transitions were less aligned, leading to inefficiencies and sluggishness. To remedy this, several participants advocated for a strategy of locating agents throughout the value chain and connecting them in a space that remedied power imbalances. This would increase corporate-wide alignment, harness a wide range of skillsets and knowledge, and help keep up the emotional momentum within agents. I then provided an overview of some of the ways in which agents located in different parts of the value chain leveraged their position most effectively.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

With my findings articulated, I now proceed with unpacking their academic and practical implications. To do this, I begin with a discussion section, which will answer each of my research questions in turn. I will use this discussion to reflect on not just my findings, but how they compare and add to existing academic knowledge.

Once I have answered the research questions, I move on to look at the theoretical implications of my research. My research introduces and articulates the concept of change contagion, provides an overview of social interactions' role in institutional change, adds to literature and understandings surrounding value work, and offers insights into how change agents proactively and creatively use the disruption of macro-crises to accelerate change contagion.

Next, I discuss the practical recommendations that emerge from my research. This section speaks directly to change agents who occupy various parts of the value chain and organisational hierarchy. This includes senior sustainability leaders, sustainability departments/teams, and individual sustainability advocates located in any part of the value chain.

Following this, I outline the limitations of my research. My research only looks at South African-based corporations, its limited member validation, its focus on the perspective of the agent, and all participants being tertiary-educated and holding some managerial power in their position.

Lastly, I provide suggestions for further research that could further develop our understandings of change contagion. First is undertaking a more intimate longitudinal study on change contagion, which may take the form of a case study. Second is examining how bottom-up change contagion unfolds. Last is researching change contagion in non-corporate spaces.

Finally, I give my closing reflections on this study. I touch on why I started this study, and how I hope it will help provide useful tools for both corporate change agents and researchers.

5.2 Discussion: Answering my research questions

This section seeks to provide clear answers for each of the sub-questions for my research, and then the overall research question. I do this through examining both the findings and literature. In line with grounded theory methodology, I compare and contrast the findings and literature and articulate how my research builds upon existing knowledge in a meaningful way (Suddaby, 2006).

5.2.1 What does the process of change contagion between individuals in organisational settings look like?

My study shows how change contagion occurs between an agent and a non-agent, through social interactions. During social interactions, the agent tailors their message to their interlocutor and uses their relationship building skills to build credibility. In my study, these techniques allowed the agent to influence how another person valued sustainability. Prior literature has identified these efforts as value work (Gehman et al., 2013). This form of value work aims to initiate an introspective reflection on the part of the non-agent; a process often referred to as self work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

My study reveals four significant insights in relation to how value work unfolds and what may affect contagion outcomes. Firstly, I show how value work occurs between individuals, and how this in turn affects the self work of a person. Research on value work has highlighted how people negotiate and enact values on the organisational and institutional levels, such as in Gehman et al.'s (2013) paper. However, there has been less attention given to how value work occurs between individuals, and how this in turn affects the self work of a person. My findings shed light on this by articulating how value work surrounding corporate sustainability occurs through *value association*, *value relocation,* and *value shifting*, and how three types of value work feed differently into the non-agent's introspective self work. *Value association* here is understood to be when an agent appeals to the non-agent's existing priorities by pointing out where there are win-win situations in being sustainable and running a corporation how the non-agent wants to. *Value association* creates positive associations with sustainability but may not lead to the non-agent engaging in self work. In this instance, non-agents are likely to continue to make decisions based on their existing values and priorities. *Value relocation* is when an agent positions a non-corporate value into the corporate space, most often in the form of family and the future wellbeing of the world. *Value relocation* may lead a non-agent to engage in self-work depending on the quality of relationship and the level of trust between the agent and the non-agent. *Value shifting* is when an agent helps the non-agent go through their process of self-reflection and self-narration. *Value shifting* can lead to self work on the conditions that the non-agent experiences a significant event or witnesses something poignant for them.

Secondly, I found that an agent's social status or credibility affects how they engage in value work. In particular, I found that credibility is largely determined by the perspective of the non-agent, which may evolve over time. Literature has identified the agent's social status or credibility as a factor influencing their ability to enact change and mobilise others (Battilana et al., 2009; Argento et al., 2019). However, I found that credibility is not an inherent characteristic of a person but rather determined between people, through interactions (Emirbayer, 1997). The perceived credibility of the agent is fluid, shaped through social interactions as the agent tries to engage the non-agent. For instance, in my study, the scientific knowledge of an agent did not serve their credibility when interacting with a climate change denialist. Faced with this situation, agents avoided relying on their scientific knowledge and instead built their credibility by developing personal relationships that enhanced trust.

Thirdly, my study emphasises the importance of making information relevant and understandable for non-agent, and that social interactions are key for introspection. Prior research by Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) had already shown that people need to feel a personal connection to the information shared in order to be emotionally moved. Further, the authors determined that social interactions helped feed into the introspection of the non-agents, which could in turn lead to them becoming agents. My findings confirm this and adds further details. I found that messages had to be localised to be relevant to the non-agent, and that immersion into a novel space further assisted in igniting moments for deep reflection. I found that social interactions between people in these spaces helped facilitate introspection. This is an important insight as it cautions us against a narrow focus on the message of change while neglecting the inter-personal dynamics at play.

Finally, my study shows how different settings influence change contagion. Settings refer to the spaces where social interactions take place. In my study, settings were either in-person informal, formal, or once-off, or took place virtually. Researchers have yet to analyse how settings influence the uptake of change agency. For example, Barberá-Tomas et al. (2019) primarily focused on social interactions through virtual dialogue. In contrast, my research provides details on different settings. Surprisingly, I found that different settings had different strengths and weaknesses, and the most successful agents were able to harness all types of settings in a way which complemented them.

Informal settings were characterised by having lower stakes and having higher spontaneity, which enabled more transparent, reflective communication. *Formal settings* were protocol-heavy, and offered an opportunity for agents to deliver thorough, persuasive pitches. Formal settings provided accountability, so non-agents would have to deliver on promises made. *Once-off settings*, such as going to a supplier's farm or attending a conference, provided novelty. This novelty can place the non-agent in a more vulnerable position, which can allow for more opportunities for reflection. Further, I found that the novelty of a space stimulates the person's senses and emotions, which provides opportunities for them to have moments of resonance. These moments can become part of how they narrate their personal journey. *Virtual settings* connect people who are geographically distant. Although virtual settings have challenges that make them trite and awkward, agents could still leverage some opportunities. First, there were creative ways to make virtual settings more engaging, such as providing activities for people to do together. Second, virtual settings enabled a degree of intimacy when those on the call were in their own homes. Nonetheless, I found that the virtual setting did not offer the same in-person relationship building opportunities as what was possible in-person in the workplace.

5.2.2 How does the context of macro-crises affect change contagion in organisations?

My study shows that a macro-crisis temporarily acts to catalyse the process of change contagion. When routines are disrupted, non-agents face a temporary increase in anxiety, which can lead them to be more willing to engage around the topic of the crisis. Agents deftly use this opportunity to drive institutional change by engaging in educating people, getting projects approved, and using the crisis as an example for other similarly complex issues. However, as routines are adapted and reinstated, a crisis becomes normalised, even if it persists. The normalised routines alleviate the anxieties of the non-agent, and therefore lowers their engagement potential.

This finding is consistent with prior literature that highlights how the routine disruption generated by a crisis initially leads to higher engagement levels, which progressively decreases over time as routines are adapted and reinstated (King & Carberry, 2020; Langley, 2021). According to this body of research, a crisis can reveal the fallibility and faults of institutions and can therefore accelerate institutional change (Langley, 2021). Further, a crisis tends to accelerate existing movements, including seemingly unrelated movements, instead of initiating them (King & Carberry, 2020). My study concurs with this, finding that crises are most impactful in change contagion when they disrupt the routines of the non-agent, but adds that this may be due to the heightened emotional state triggered by the disruption to the routines.

Indeed, in my study, increased level of anxiety increased the willingness of a non-agent to engage with others in search for solutions, guidance, and reassurance. The role of emotions also helps to explain why people's engagement wanes over time (Langley, 2021). As the crisis becomes normalised through the adaptation and reinstatement of new routines, people's anxiety levels also decrease, which lowers their willingness to engage.

Figure 1 illustrates the three main phases of routines surrounding a crisis and how they affect the emotions and engagement potential of the non-agent over time. First, we see that a pre-crisis situation offers low engagement potential, as non-agents often do not see the applicability of a future crisis to their routines. Second, when a crisis disrupts the person's routines, the anxiety it causes represents an opportunity for engagement and may lead to traction on projects that touch on some aspects of the crisis. Third, as routines are adapted and reinstated, the engagement potential drastically wanes, but stabilises at a level of engagement higher than in the pre-crisis situation because the person has experienced the crisis first-hand. The person will likely feel the emotion of jadedness even if the crisis persists.

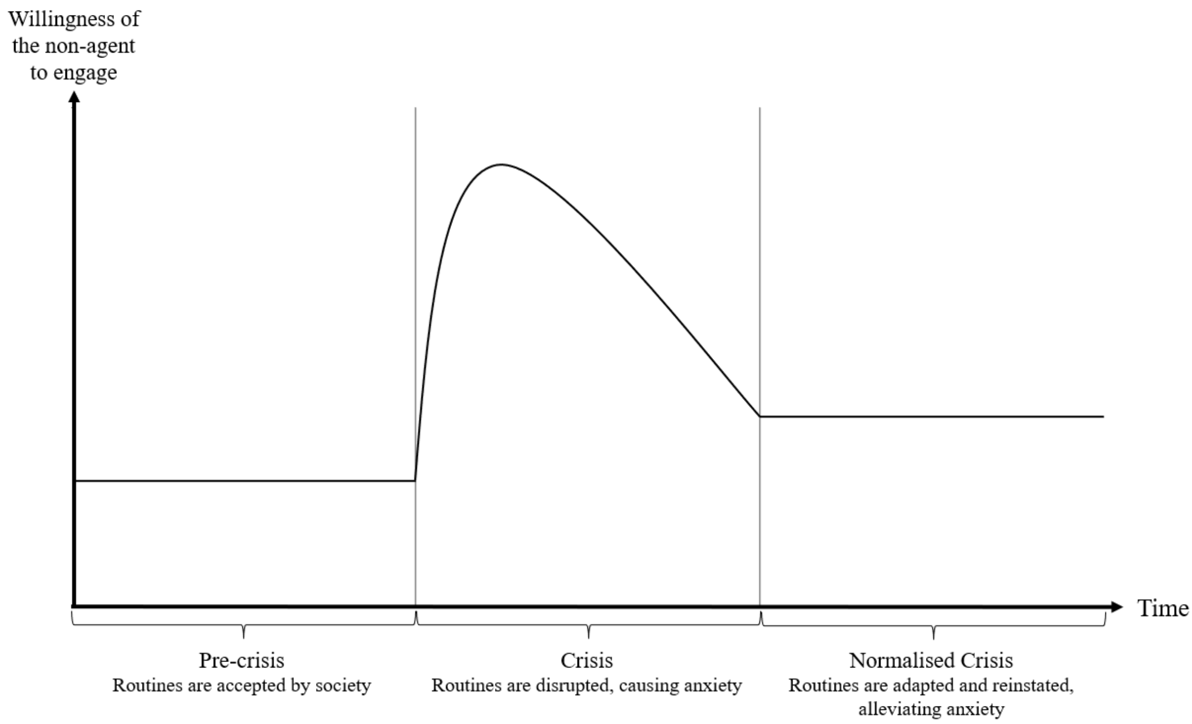

Figure 1: How a crisis affects a non-agent's willingness to engage over time (Source: Author's own)

In relation to how the context of macro-crisis affects change contagion, my research also found that agents, instead of being purely reactive to a crisis, were highly proactive in using crises as an opportunity and tool. Astute agents utilised the heightened emotions of the crisis to help non-agents catalyse their internal value work. Literature on the role of agents during a crisis has been sparse, with some papers categorising the impact of agents and crises as separate modes of institutional change (Micelotta et al., 2017). My research showed that agents are highly active in leveraging crises. They use a crisis to educate people, as well as to motivate for signing off on projects and initiatives which were stalling. Further, agents sometimes draw examples from the crisis to motivate for something that may seem unrelated, such as comparing the complex transmission of COVID-19 to that of an invasive pest species.

5.2.3 How do change agents in an organisation use social interactions to advocate for and further corporate sustainability?

My study highlights that, alongside change contagion efforts towards non-agents, agents work together to define and enact organisational and institutional values, interacting within networks of other agents. This is another form of value work (Gehman et al., 2013). These efforts create legitimacy in the agents' cause, help refine definitions and negotiate understandings, and serve to articulate real, measurable goals that organisations and institutions can strive towards. It therefore affects the organisational narratives surrounding sustainability, which can help to further catalyse change contagion.

In relation to this question, my research has three key findings that build on prior literature. My first key finding provides strategic insights on the role of emotional energy in supporting the work done by networks of agents. Previous studies have emphasised the importance of harnessing networks of agents spanning entire supply chains (Touboulic et al., 2018), as well as interorganisational networks (DeJordy et al., 2020). Other scholars, such as Summers-Effler (2002), have highlighted the importance of emotional energy in change efforts. My study links prior findings by showing how emotional energy affects the work of agents and how networks of agents can leverage emotional energy to accelerate the rate of change towards sustainability. First, my participants agreed that positioning and empowering agents throughout the value chain was necessary. Second, those isolated from networks reported that they battled with a loss of drive for championing sustainability. Therefore, I concluded that networks of agents throughout the organisation were useful not only in value chain alignment, but also in rekindling emotional energy.

Figure 2 illustrates the possible corporate strategy for leveraging agents throughout the value chain. The characterisation of the value chain is adapted from Porter's (1986) value chain model, which is the industry standard, so that it is intuitive for corporate strategists. The first step is to locate agents throughout the value chain. I represented each part of the primary and supporting activities of the value chain with people in hierarchies, as some will have more power than others within their section of the value chain. Intuitively, management and hierarchies are inherent in all activities aside from the shareholders. However, some shareholders will have more ownership than others, and therefore power dynamics still create a hierarchy. Agents are located at every part of the value chain, represented by the red circle outlining some figures.

The second step is to connect these agents through the provision of spaces that enable them to communicate with one another. The purpose of these spaces will be to improve alignment of the value chain and help them regain emotional energy. These spaces will also seek to dismantle hierarchies and power imbalances to increase transparency of the communication.

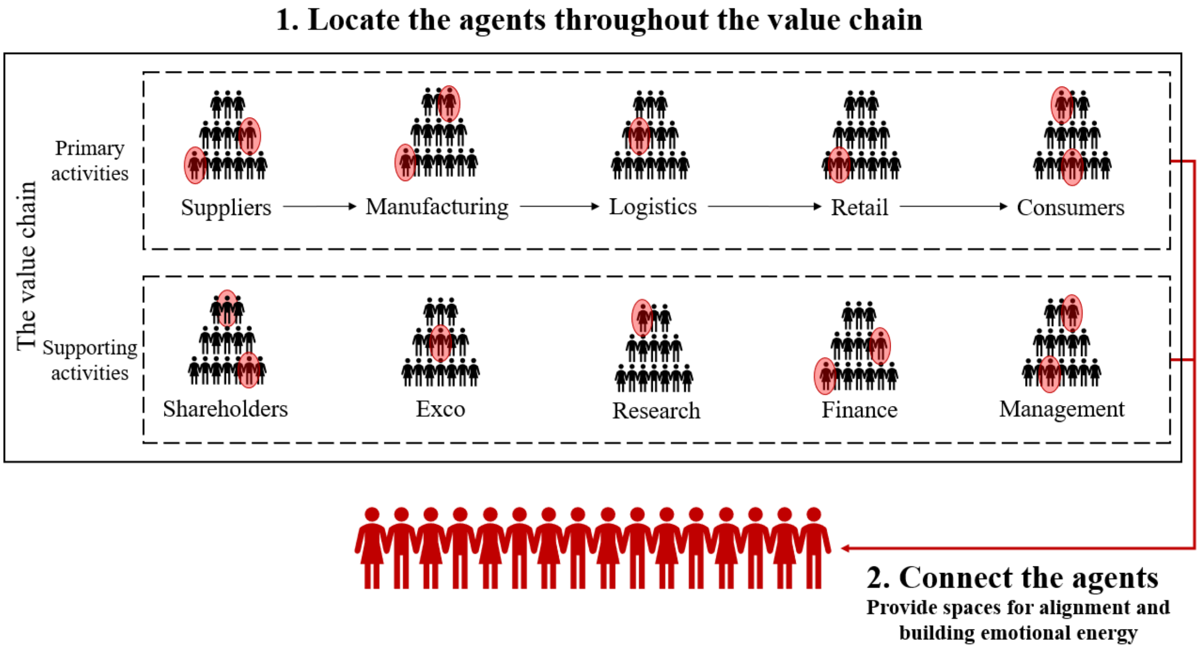

Figure 2: How to strategically leverage agents throughout a corporation's value chain (Source: Author's own)

My second key finding highlights the differences in interactions between an agent and non-agent, and between agents. Previous studies, such as Gehman et al. (2013), have distinguished between agents, and those who resist or are indifferent to change – non-agents. However, there is limited analysis of how the interactions between these two types of people differ from one another. My study contributes to this literature by clarifying the differences when an agent interacts a non-agent versus another agent. This is valuable, as it distinguishes that there are considerably different mechanisms at play between these two types of interactions. This is a useful insight for both practitioners and scholars. Practitioners can determine the nature of the social interactions, and therefore what tactics would be useful for it. Scholars can determine when literature examines an interaction between agents, or an interaction between a non-agent and agent, so that there is more clarity on how research feeds into one or the other.

My third and final key finding is that interactions between agents are imperative for value work on an organisational and institutional basis. Gehman et al. (2013) explored value work between a network of stakeholders throughout an organisation, and how this accumulates into practising the values. The authors describe a process of siloed stakeholder groups forming a network to make sense and articulate their values, and how this leads to the routinised enactment of these values. My study confirms that agents undertake a process of networking to articulate and define values. I found that agents do this through value negotiation, with the goal of enacting values in real material ways. This is valuable because it argues that social interactions between agents is imperative to institutional change. Too much focus on change contagion ignores the importance of defining sustainability in creating real change. Thus, agents need spaces of interaction to work on these definitions.

5.2.4 How do social interactions influence support for institutional change?

My study shows how agents use social interactions to drive sustainability transitions. Agents help non-agents reflect on their values, which is a form of value work (Gehman et al., 2013). Crises can catalyse this process through the disruption of routines and subsequent, temporary increases in anxieties. Agents use networks of social interactions along the value chain to align the organisational/institutional values, as well as rekindling lost emotional energy. This enables them to define and enact organisational and institutional level values. This helps change the societal narratives surrounding sustainability, which can catalyse change contagion.

With this finding, my study emphasises the importance of multi-level analysis for social-symbolic work, and further determines that social interactions are a key medium for social-symbolic work. Lawrence and Phillips (2019) define the social-symbolic levels of analysis as the self, organisational, and institutional work, which interlink with one another. My study confirms that these levels of analysis are interconnected spaces in which social-symbolic work takes place, and that the different scales affect the nature and outcome of the social-symbolic work. In particular, my study shows how value work permeates all levels of analysis: self; organisational; and institutional work. Self work often occurs as a result of value work between an agent and non-agent, which can result in the non-agent becoming an agent. Organisational and institutional work occur mostly as a result of agent-to-agent interactions, as they negotiate institutional and organisational definitions of sustainability, which will subsequently affect the material realities through setting clear goals, standards, and regulations.

Figure 3 illustrates how an agent uses social interactions to drive their sustainability agenda in the corporate space. The phases are reiterative and can feed back into each other. Phase 1 provides the context of a social interaction between an agent and a non-agent. The agent participates in a social interaction with a non-agent. The willingness of the non-agent to listen to and engage with the agent is determined by the agent's credibility and a macro-crisis, respectively. The agent's credibility is determined by the agent's relative social status to the non-agent, and the non-agent's perspective. Social status includes factors such as age and organisational hierarchy. The non-agent's perspective is the lens through which they see the world. For example, an extreme climate denialist will not respond to a message heavily rooted in scientific knowledge because they discredit the scientific community's credibility. Over time, the social interactions between the agent and non-agent can change the agent's credibility – for better or worse.

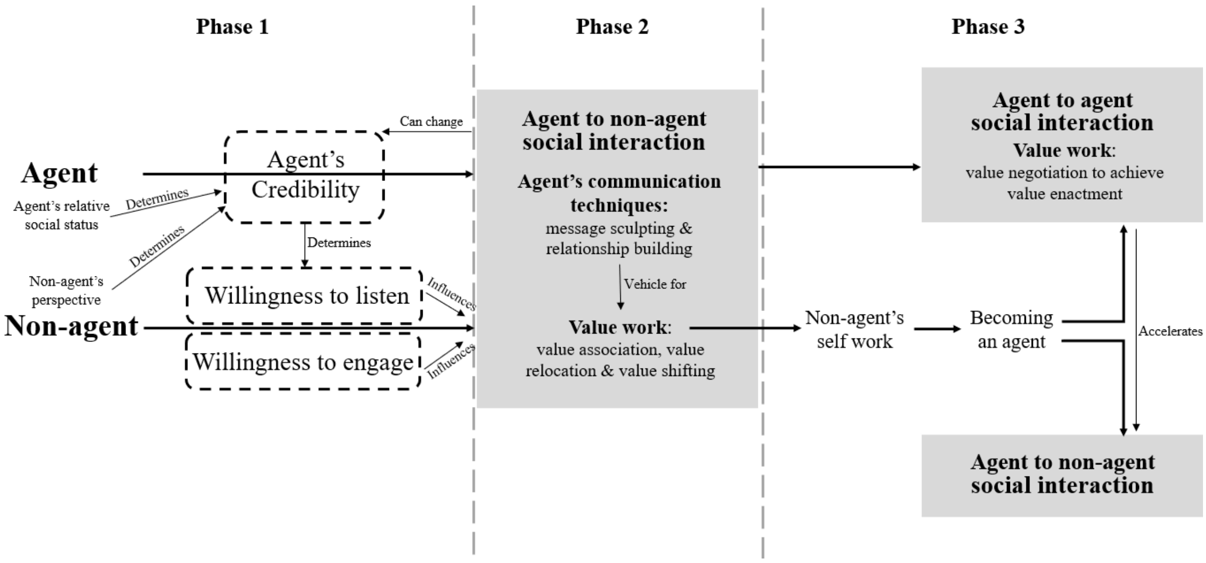

Figure 3: How agents use social interactions to drive their sustainability agenda (Source: Author's own)

Meanwhile, the crisis phase determines the non-agent's willingness to engage on issues surrounding sustainability. I detailed these phases in Section 5.2.2, and Figure 1 depicted this. The crisis phase that causes routine disruption causes anxiety, which increases the willingness to engage, and can catalyse the process of change contagion that occurs in phase 2 shown in Figure 3.

Phase 2 describes what occurs in the social interaction of the agent and non-agent, which can lead to change contagion. The agent uses the communication techniques of message sculpting and relationship building. Message sculpting is the delivery of information through localisation and immersion. To reiterate, localisation contextualises a sustainability issue in a manner that is relevant to the non-agent, and immersion is the placement of the person within the system through having them experience the ‘reality’ of a situation, such as going to a supplier’s factory or farm. Relationship building, meanwhile, accumulates over time through interacting with a person in different settings, such as formal, informal, once-off, and digital settings.

These communication techniques serve as vehicles for value work between the agent and non-agent. This entails value association, value relocation, and value shifting. Value association links sustainability values with those already held by the non-agent, such as profit maximisation. Value relocation brings non-corporate values into the corporate space, such as appealing to the future wellbeing of the non-agent’s children. Lastly, value shifting is the existential reflection and narration of the non-agent’s emotions and experiences to challenge corporate values. These three tactics all contribute to challenging the non-agent’s values.

Phase 3 describes what can occur after repeated social interactions between an agent and non-agent. All forms of value work can help a non-agent undergo a process of introspection, known in academia as self work, which can in turn lead to the recruitment of a new agent. This new agent participates in interactions with non-agents as well as existing agents. The processes of the non-agent and agent interactions remain the same as described in Phases 1 and 2. However, interactions with other agents have a different nature and goal than the agent and non-agent interactions. All agents agree on the importance of sustainability, but their various biases result in different specific values. Therefore, in order to enact their values – i.e., make material changes – there is a need for a process of value negotiation. Agents negotiate values with the intention of reaching some organisational and/or institutional level definition, framework, measurements, or policies. With these, they can engage in value enactment. This value negotiation process helps legitimise the sustainability agenda, and this can therefore provide a context that helps accelerate future change contagion.

5.3 Theoretical implications

Introducing the concept of change contagion

Scholars have articulated the process of a non-agent becoming an agent in terms of the individual's own self work, but I found that there was room to explore the role of social interactions. Thus, I introduce the idea of change contagion, which occurs when agents interact with non-agents, and non-agents subsequently become agents.

My research provides an in-depth analysis of what mechanisms occur in change contagion. This is detailed in Sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2. In sum, I found that an agent's credibility (determined by their social status and the non-agent's perspective) and the phase of a crisis influenced the non-agent's respective willingness to listen and engage with the social interaction. Agents use *message sculpting* and *relationship building* as vehicles to engage in value work with the non-agent. The techniques agents use in value work are *value association*, *value relocation*, and *value shifting*. A non-agent can then engage in their own self work, which can ultimately lead to them becoming an agent. Thus, change contagion has taken place.

Articulating the role of social interactions for institutional change

Scholars have highlighted the importance of social interactions in institutional change (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; Barberá-Tomas et al., 2019); however, literature provides limited explorations into their specific roles and functions. Therefore, my findings articulated the role of social interactions in institutional change and detailed the differences between agent-non-agent and agent-agent interactions.

Building on value work

My research contributes to existing knowledge on value work by articulating how value work occurs at the self, organisational, and institutional levels, and how social interactions play a role in this. To reiterate, the value work that occurs in social interactions, which aims to stir self work in the non-agent, are as follows:

- ***Value association:*** When an agent appeals to the non-agent's existing priorities by pointing out where there are win-win situations in being sustainable and running a corporation the way that the non-agent wants to.
- ***Value relocation:*** When an agent positions a non-corporate value into the corporate space, most often in the form of family and the future wellbeing of the world.

- ***Value shifting:*** When an agent helps the non-agent go through their process of self-reflection and self-narration, often following the non-agent experiencing a significant event or witnessing something poignant for them.

Agents interacting with other agents undergo value work as well, though the focus then is on the organisational and institutional values. To enact values in a material way, agents should work to first agree on meanings and definitions. This is a process I called:

- ***Value negotiation:*** When agents interact with one another with the goal of defining organisational and institutional values.

<u>Expanding the role of agents during macro-crises</u>

My research shows that agents are proactive during a crisis and use the opportunity to quicken changes. Crises play a major role in the process of change contagion, as it affects the routines and emotions of the non-agent. Non-agents engage more willingly with conversations surrounding the crisis and associated topics. Agents, aware of this, tailor their message to speak to the anxieties of the non-agent. Thus, agents use the crisis to hasten the process of change contagion.

5.4 Practical applications

My research provides three useful practical applications for individuals who wish to further corporate sustainability transitions. First, I provide some strategic insights for senior sustainability leaders, then for sustainability departments and teams, and finally for change agents throughout the corporate value chain.

<u>Insights for senior sustainability leaders</u>

Senior sustainability leaders who have an influence over sustainability policies could see benefits from employing a strategy similar to the one detailed in Section 5.2.3. My findings showed that having change agents advocating for sustainability throughout the value chain of an organisation was integral to affecting real, material change. Without this, change agents can find it challenging to gain buy-in at all parts of the value chain, therefore curtailing deeper, systemic change in how corporations operate.

Senior sustainability managers can locate change agents and bring them into a network where they can easily communicate with one another. Spaces dedicated to these change agents provide opportunities to better mobilise and negotiate on sustainability. These change agents would bring forth their knowledge and experience into the discussion on what sustainability should mean for the organisation. This process can result in the alignment of sustainability strategies throughout the value chain, and the inclusion of issues that corporations often leave to the wayside, such as biodiversity.

Furthermore, spaces dedicated to change agents connecting with one another can help replenish the emotional energy of those who are usually in spaces with few other change agents. Rekindling passion for sustainability advocacy can help maintain active change agents throughout the corporation, so that they are unlikely to give up their efforts.

Insights for sustainability teams and departments during times of crisis

Sustainability teams and departments can use a temporary increase in engagement of a crisis to link the crisis with sustainability.

Crises provide an opportunity to emphasise the importance of social and ecological justice. Alongside this, crises cause routine disruption, which increases the anxieties of people. The reinstatement of routines can alleviate anxiety, even if the crisis persists; for example, poverty has been normalised in South Africa's routines.

The disruption phase of a crisis allows for an opportunity where sustainability departments can increase awareness and gain buy-in through project approvals. They will likely find success in acting promptly and creatively, so that there can be some long-term gains. When crises are normalised through reinstating routines, the sustainability department can still use the crisis to narrate the corporation's journey in sustainability.

Insights for all change agents in a corporation

Change agents throughout the value chain can benefit from learning how they can enact change through social interactions. In my research, participants often voiced difficulty in determining what works. I hope that my findings can provide a practical guide on how change agents can drive sustainability.

A change agent could find value in determining the purpose in an interaction – to negotiate the meanings of the cause, or to persuade a person to the cause. These two purposes have significantly different underlying mechanisms taking place, with persuading a person to a cause being more complex and multifaceted.

When the purpose is to negotiate the meanings of the cause, change agents can keep in mind that this is an effort to make sense of what sustainability means on an organisational and institutional level. It is useful for creating goals, frameworks, and causing material change in the real world. Coming to these agreements not only aligns the movement, but it also helps legitimise it, which can in turn accelerate the persuasion of others to join the cause.

When the purpose is to persuade a person to their cause, my findings can impart some useful insights to change agents. Firstly, credibility is not just determined by inherent social status indicators, but primarily through how the other person assigns credibility to the change agent. The change agent will need to adjust their behaviour accordingly. For example, if a person seems hostile towards scientific knowledge, a change agent's qualifications and use of scientific knowledge to back their arguments will not be effective.

Secondly, a change agent can use messaging and relationship building to help in persuasion efforts. Messages can be effective when they localise information to make it relevant to the other person. Furthermore, immersing a person in a relevant space with sensory stimuli can be highly effective in accelerating the person's process of change. For example, participants in my research often used road trips to take office workers into spaces, such as a supplier's farm. This created novel experiences with rich sensory stimuli, which can become moments for introspection, memory creation, and the narration of a person's own sustainability journey. Next, relationship building in the workplace entails interacting in different settings to gain a nuanced view of a person, and change agents can leverage different spaces to gain a deeper understanding of a person.

Third, a crisis can be a powerful force for change during the periods where it causes the most routine disruption. A change agent can proactively and creatively use this opportunity to educate and get buy-in for a cause.

Fourth and finally, my findings outline the tactics of value association, value relocation, and value shifting. Change agents can be aware of these three types of tactics and use a mixture of these efforts to challenge a person's values. Value association points out where sustainability and corporate values align, such as lowering costs. This tends to result in quick decisions towards sustainability. Although it adds nuance to what sustainability can entail, it does mean that the future decisions of the person will continue to be made with the same logic they had, and in some cases sustainable choices conflict with corporate values. Value relocation, meanwhile, finds a non-corporate value of a change agent – such as family – and positions it in the corporate sphere. Sustainability can speak to preserving the non-corporate value, and therefore the person may feel inclined to adjust their corporate values. Lastly, value shifting directly seeks to change the person's values. Change agents tended to do this through engaging with the person through reflection of experiences.

5.5 Limitations of the study

There are four key limitations of my study. First, my study only examined the value chains of South African-based corporations. Therefore, the findings are more applicable to corporate settings, rather than, for example,–change contagion that occurs between household members. Further, the South African context may mean that a similar study in another country may find differences for what helps facilitate change contagion.

Second, I was only able to host a thorough member validation meeting with two of my 18 participants. It would have been valuable to have more opportunities with participants to engage in member validation.

Third, my study focused on primarily the agents' perspectives on social interactions. Consequently, the perspective of current non-agents may be less developed. I tried to address this limitation through spending time discussing the agent's own personal journey towards becoming advocates for sustainability. Nonetheless, my study did lack an in-depth look at how non-agents perceived change contagion.

Lastly, my participants were all tertiary-educated and held positions that provided them with some managerial status. Therefore, my research did not explore how employees with the least amount of power, such as miners or farm workers, engaged in change contagion. This limitation was largely brought on by the inability for my research to be face-to-face, meaning that my participants all had to have the resources for virtual calls. Corporations' aversion to bad publicity potentially also made the senior personnel less inclined to offer up opportunities to speak with employees low on the organisational hierarchy.

5.6 Further research

There are three possible avenues that would add to my research. Firstly, a longitudinal case study on change contagion taking place over several years, focusing on one organisation, may provide further insights on how change contagion unfolds and confirm and/or counter my analysis, particularly with regards to the influence of time. This could include mixed-method methodology, allowing for check-in interviews and questionnaires to measure how change contagion has occurred. Furthermore, observational research of interactions could be highly beneficial for deepening an understanding of the mechanisms surrounding change contagion.

My research did not focus on bottom-up initiatives in the corporate space, which could be a useful avenue for future research to explore. It could be insightful to explore how bottom-up change contagion transpires in the corporate value chain, as power and special differences may mean that bottom-up initiatives might use different tactics.

Lastly, examining change contagion in non-corporate spaces could be an exciting path to research. This research could consider other types of organisations, such as small- or medium-sized businesses, or even in personal spaces such as within and between households. These different spaces may have considerably different factors and mechanisms that underly change contagion.

5.7 Closing reflections

When I completed my Bachelor of Commerce, I felt an acute disillusion to the business world. There was a chasm between the textbooks and the world outside of the lecture halls. I felt that education had given me an instruction manual on how to maintain the world, when I had hoped that it would provide me with a toolbox for trying to change the world for the better. Thus, I pivoted to pursue postgraduate studies in sustainable development in search of this toolbox. Yet, throughout 2020, I often thought back on my peers during my Bachelor's degree, and even back in high school. Many of my peers did not share my anxieties surrounding our education's role in perpetuating the routines that have led society to our current state. These peers are now out in the world, with many pursuing corporate careers, and even boasting about 'selling their soul' to finance.

It is perhaps this realisation that drew me to examining change agency, and in particular change contagion. For our institutions to undergo true transformation, people throughout our society must undergo a deeper, individual paradigm shift (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). In the corporate world, this can feel especially challenging, as many of my participants voiced.

Literature on change agency and social-symbolic work transformed my own conceptualisations of the world. The rich, exciting research has accumulated into expansive fields, which stand poised to offer deep insights into how people maintain and change institutions (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Langley, 2021). Following COVID-19's global shockwave, researchers reignited their search for understanding the role of macro-crises in changing institutions (Langley, 2021). These two developments in academia inspired me to pursue my Master's in the field of change agency and institutional change. Also poignant was the lack of social interactions that occurred during lockdowns. This social deprivation highlighted the integral role that socialisation plays in our wellbeing, as well as the functioning of society.

I want my research to feed back into both the practical and academic spheres. Firstly, I hope that my research will add useful insights for literature on institutional change. My study aimed to participate in the discourse in the field, which has developed significantly in just the last few years. My research does this through articulating how social interactions play a role in institutional change, particularly in times of crisis.

I further hope that my research can serve to provide some tools of change for corporate change agents. Many of my participants held frustrations that I could resonate with. Many felt that institutions seem to be unchangeable, and crises seem to be unending. Yet, through stories of hope and success, I pinpointed patterns that guided me towards developing an understanding of the role of social interactions in institutional change. I sincerely hope that my findings will be useful for change agents, particularly the participants, without whom I would not have been able to conduct my research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Appendix B: Consent Form for Interviewees

Appendix C: Consent Form for the Focus Group

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Change as a Contagion

E van Achterbergh

Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to answer some questions for me. So, before I begin, I want to briefly reiterate what my research is about, and give some basic definitions, so that we are on the same page. My research aims to explore the role in which social interactions play in the spread of sustainable practices and views in a corporation. Social interactions in my study pertains to any form which interactions may take place between people – informal to formal, face-to-face to virtual, verbal to text-based.

To begin with, could you please outline your role in your organisation?

What does sustainability mean to you?

Exploring the nature of the social interaction.

1. What has been your overall experience as a sustainability advocate in a corporation?
2. What challenges do you face when persuading others in the workplace to adopt more sustainable practices?
3. What tactics do you use to increase the uptake of a sustainability perceptive in your corporation?
4. What role do facts and data play in your persuasion of people?
5. What role do interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence play in your persuasion of people?

Exploring the context of the social interaction.

1. How would you describe your workplace culture?
2. Do you feel like you are in the minority or majority in conversations about sustainability?
3. Does your corporation encourage conversations about sustainability? If yes, then how do they do this?
4. What types of spaces are most conducive for these conversations about sustainability?
5. How does the sector you work in influence people's perspectives on sustainability?
6. Is there a lot of cooperation between your corporation and external institutions, such as NGOs or other corporations, when it comes to the issue of corporate sustainability? If so, how does this affect the uptake of sustainable practices? Do you believe that interpersonal relationships between people within these organisations is helpful in catalysing corporate sustainability?
7. It is possible that digitisation will become more commonplace in the workplace. Do you believe that this is a good step towards increasing corporate sustainability, or may it hinder the uptake of sustainable practices?

Exploring the process of change contagion.

1. When speaking with people, what emotions do they have towards corporate sustainability? How do these emotions change over time?
2. Do people you are able to persuade have incremental shifts in their perspective, or a bigger 'ah-ha' moment?
3. Have you adapted your tactics of persuasion over time? If so, how?

4. Have you created or inspired other sustainability advocates, who have a job description different to yours? If so, how have they influenced your corporation's uptake of sustainable practices?

Appendix B: Consent Form for Interviewees

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are invited to take part in a study conducted by Elzé van Achterbergh, from the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University. You were approached as a possible participant because you are part of a sustainability department/team at a JSE listed corporation.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate the role in which social interactions play in facilitating or inhibiting a change towards corporate sustainability within a corporation.

2. WHAT WILL BE ASKED OF ME?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview, wherein you will be asked questions pertaining to successful and unsuccessful instances of spreading change through social interactions with others. This interview will last one hour, and will be video and audio recorded for transcription purposes. It may take place on MS Teams, Skype or Zoom, depending on the preference that you have indicated to the researcher.

3. POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The interview would occur during work hours. One hour of your time would have to be taken to complete the interview. The interview will not run over the scheduled time unless you, the participant, explicitly state in the interview that you would like to go over time. Another possible risk is costs to you, the interviewee, if you use a metered connection. Though a video call would be preferred, if this cost is too great for you, the interview can take place via an audio-only call.

4. POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO THE SOCIETY

Your corporation and possibly South African corporations as a whole could benefit from the findings of this study, as it helps address the problem of institutional inertia (i.e., the phenomenon of institutions struggling to change) in the field of corporate sustainability. These findings could also help inform the field of corporate sustainability and improve methods used to facilitate corporate change.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no payment for participation in this study.

6. PROTECTION OF YOUR INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY AND IDENTITY

Any information you share with me during this study and that could possibly identify you as a participant will be protected. This will be done by using passcode-protected folders and files for all of the data collected. The recordings of the interviews will be transcribed. The videos will be erased once the thesis has been submitted.

All of the data collected will only be shared with my supervisor, Cecile Feront. Cecile Feront and myself may each be able to use the anonymised gathered data in future research. This research will be relevant to topics about corporate sustainability, corporate culture and change agency.

The data will be anonymised through not using your name or the corporation's name in the findings. If empirically significant, your corporation's sector and some very broad personal identifiers (such as gender) may be brought up in the analysis.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you agree to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequence. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The researcher may withdraw you from this study if no more participants are required for this study.

8. RESEARCHERS' CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Elzé van Achterbergh, and/or the supervisor Cecile Feront.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

As the participant I confirm that:

- I have read the above information and it is written in a language that I am comfortable with.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been answered.
- All issues related to privacy, and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide, have been explained.

By signing below, I ________________________________ agree to take part in this research study, as conducted by Elzé van Achterbergh.

______________________________________ ______________________

Signature of Participant **Date**

DECLARATION BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

As the **principal investigator,** I hereby declare that the information contained in this document has been thoroughly explained to the participant. I also declare that the participant has been encouraged (and has been given ample time) to ask any questions. In addition I would like to select the following option:

	The conversation with the participant was conducted in a language in which the participant is fluent.
	The conversation with the participant was conducted with the assistance of a translator (who has signed a non-disclosure agreement), and this "Consent Form" is available to the participant in a language in which the participant is fluent.

Signature of Principal Investigator **Date**

Appendix C: Consent Form for the Focus Group

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

You are invited to take part in a study conducted by Elzé van Achterbergh, from the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University. You were approached as a possible participant because you are part of an employee at a JSE listed corporation.

10. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate the role in which social interactions play in facilitating or inhibiting a change towards corporate sustainability within a corporation.

11. WHAT WILL BE ASKED OF ME?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a virtual focus group, wherein you will be in a group of 4-6 participants, all from your corporation. A few prompts pertaining to corporate sustainability will be given. This focus group session will take place over one hour, and will be recorded for transcription purposes. It may take place on MS Teams, Skype or Zoom, depending on the preferences indicated by group members to the researcher.

12. POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The focus group session would occur during work hours. One hour of your time would have to be taken to complete the focus group session. The focus group session will not run over the scheduled time unless you, the participant, explicitly state in the focus group session that you would like to go over time. Another possible risk is costs to you, if you use a metered connection. A video call would be preferred, if this cost is too great for you, it is recommended that you do no participate in this focus group session.

13. POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO THE SOCIETY

Your corporation and possibly South African corporations as a whole could benefit from the findings of this study, as it helps address the problem of institutional inertia (i.e., the phenomenon of institutions struggling to change) in the field of corporate sustainability. These findings could also help inform the field of corporate sustainability and improve methods used to facilitate corporate change.

14. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no payment for participation in this study.

15. PROTECTION OF YOUR INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY AND IDENTITY

Any information you share with me during this study and that could possibly identify you as a participant will be protected. This will be done by using passcode-protected folders and files for all of the data collected. The recordings of the focus group sessions will be transcribed. The videos will be erased once the thesis has been submitted.

All of the data collected will only be shared with my supervisor, Cecile Feront. It may in future be reused in other research which she or I conduct.

The data will be anonymised through not using your name or the corporation's name in the findings. If empirically significant, your corporation's sector and some very broad personal identifiers (such as gender) may be brought up in the analysis.

16. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you agree to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequence. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The researcher may withdraw you from this study if no more participants are required for this study.

17. RESEARCHERS' CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Elzé van Achterbergh, and/or the supervisor Cecile Feront.

18. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

As the participant I confirm that:

- I have read the above information and it is written in a language that I am comfortable with.
- I have had a chance to ask questions and all my questions have been answered.
- All issues related to privacy, and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide, have been explained.

By signing below, I ________________________________ agree to take part in this research study, as conducted by Elzé van Achterbergh.

____ ______________________

Signature of Participant **Date**

DECLARATION BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

As the **principal investigator,** I hereby declare that the information contained in this document has been thoroughly explained to the participant. I also declare that the participant has been encouraged (and has been given ample time) to ask any questions. In addition I would like to select the following option:

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______________________________________ ____________________

Signature of Principal Investigator **Date**