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The Individual-Care Nexus: A Theory of Entrepreneurial Care for Sustainable Entrepreneurship

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Abstract: Sustainable entrepreneurship has recently been identified as a promising force to push a sustainable business paradigm shift. A key challenge for researchers and practitioners is thus to understand and promote such practices. However, critics have argued that sustainable entrepreneurship research is heavily reductionist, in the sense that it assumes an independent and rational entrepreneur, with an exclusive focus on entrepreneurial individuals and opportunities. In this paper, we problematize these assumptions and offer an alternative theory of sustainable entrepreneurship based on ethics of care. We introduce the individual-care nexus, where individuals are assumed to be dependent, emotional, and relationally connected. This theoretical development leads to new ways to more accurately grasp the nature of motivations, emotions, traits, and practices in sustainable entrepreneurship. We illustrate our theory with an empirical case of a sustainable entrepreneur within the Green IT movement in Sweden between 2012 and 2017. We argue that our theoretical take on entrepreneurship can both advance research in sustainable entrepreneurship and provide sustainable entrepreneurs with a better understanding of their practices and a new vocabulary.

Keywords: Sustainable entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship; ethics of care; mothering; Green IT; Sustainable ICT; emotions; motivations; traits; care practices

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1. Introduction

Sustainable entrepreneurship, or ecopreneurship, has recently been identified as a promising force to push a sustainable paradigm shift in our predominantly unsustainable business and entrepreneurship landscape [1–6]. While we are largely optimistic towards this development within the entrepreneurship field, we suggest that much contemporary research on sustainable entrepreneurship relies on flawed assumptions and understandings of entrepreneurial persons and their practices. Critical scholars have argued that sustainable entrepreneurship research is normative and overly optimistic [7,8], and reductionist, since it shares the strong focus on entrepreneurial individuals and opportunities with conventional entrepreneurship research [9–11]. These assumptions and understandings need to be problematized [12] in order to support sustainable entrepreneurship practices. For this purpose, we follow a stream of qualitative and theoretically driven entrepreneurship research [13–19], inspired by philosophy [20–22].

As the business landscape is changing quickly, we need to adopt our theories accordingly. The main contribution of this paper is thus an alternative theory for sustainable entrepreneurship, the individual-care nexus. The individual-care nexus is based on ethics of care [23,24], which offers a relevant conceptual apparatus based on assumptions of the human subject radically different to those in sustainable entrepreneurship research. Ethics of care is a well-established theory in ethics, but still not in entrepreneurship studies, providing us with an elaborate and well-developed framework with which we have re-conceptualized sustainable entrepreneurship. An initial trigger for this approach was that we found traces of care in the entrepreneurial endeavors that we studied empirically.

The dimension of the individual in the individual-care nexus destabilizes the sustainable entrepreneur. Rather than seeing her as stable and in control, making rational sustainable choices facing a set of alternatives [25], she is construed as an emotionally driven human being bound up in relations with human and non-human actors on which she is dependent. In the care dimension, our framework throws light on care as a central entrepreneurial practice [24,26] that forms the basis of everyday sustainable entrepreneurship activities. Through care, the sustainable entrepreneur establishes and maintains various relationships with stakeholders that the entrepreneur cares about, to values, ideas and ideals, and to the venture that she has created. Sustainable entrepreneurship practices are shaped in interactions between the one-caring entrepreneur and the cared-for actors in these relationships.

The individual-care nexus implies a shift in research focus towards the nexus of the caring relations upon which the sustainable entrepreneur is currently dependent, and the caring practices carried out in these relations. This focus allows for a different understanding of motivations, emotions, and traits, and their relation to entrepreneurial practice. Furthermore, it provides researchers with a new vocabulary to describe individual sustainable entrepreneurs and the practices in which they engage. This vocabulary decouples care from strictly private issues to the public sphere, in line with Tronto [27] and Mol et al. [28]. It also provides nuanced accounts of sustainable entrepreneurship that are not rationalized to fit into a dominant business discourse. While the paper is mainly theoretical, we also respond to Hawk's [29] call for more empirical studies of caring practices in business and to Hechevarría et al. [30] who call for studies on how ethics of care is practiced by men, through case study research [31,32] of sustainable entrepreneurship within the Swedish ICT industry.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we present a review of research conducted within the field of sustainable entrepreneurship and problematizes some of its flawed underlying assumptions. In Section 3 we present ethics of care and use it to build our theory of sustainable entrepreneurship, the individual-care nexus. In Section 4 we present our methodological approaches for the empirical study, which follows in Section 5. In Section 6 we analyze our empirical narrative based on our theory. In Section 7 we conclude the paper and outline the implications of our theory for future research on sustainable entrepreneurship.

2. Problematizing Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Sustainable development is seen as one of the most important and complex challenges of the 21st century. Researchers and policymakers have recently pointed out that a sustainable paradigm shift can potentially be pushed within the business landscape by new entrants rather than by incumbents [1]. Within the last two decades a 'new breed' [33] of entrepreneurs have emerged, in this paper collectively referred to as sustainable entrepreneurs, who see the environmental and social aspects of their practice as their 'core objective and competitive advantage' [34]. In addition to creating economic value for the individual sustainable entrepreneur and society [35], such entrepreneurs are expected to also create social and/or environmental value [1,36–39].

Despite the huge potential of and need for sustainable entrepreneurship, we argue that assumptions and understandings of sustainable entrepreneurship in research are largely based on research from conventional entrepreneurship studies. We find this surprising, since research on sustainable entrepreneurship often aim to critique conventional entrepreneurs for being unsustainable [8]. One of the main examples of this is the adherence to the so-called individual-opportunity nexus [9–11], i.e., that entrepreneurship researchers should focus on the discovery and exploitation of opportunities by individual entrepreneurs [40,41]. What is fundamentally problematic with this perspective is the underlying atomistic assumption of the sustainable entrepreneur as stable, independent, and rational [42]. It posits an individual ontologically separated from the world and the opportunities in it, which prevents us from taking relational aspects into consideration. Furthermore, it pays virtually no attention to entrepreneurial practice [43]. The adoption of such an "institutionalized line of reasoning" [12] has implications for how individuals and opportunities are understood within sustainable entrepreneurship. In the following pages, two central aspects of the sustainable entrepreneurship phenomenon are problematized, i.e., the 'individual', the 'opportunity', and how they are related in practice.

2.1. The 'Individual' In Sustainable Entrepreneurship Research

The conventional entrepreneur is often described as an 'unusual and extraordinary figure with levels of achievement orientation, optimism, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, cognitive skills, and tolerance for ambiguity above the ordinary' [44]. This figure is seen as motivated by among other things desire for wealth [45], independence, self-efficacy [46,47], and drive [48]. Thus, there is an underlying assumption of the entrepreneur as a rational and independent being [44,49]. The role of for example emotions has recently been highlighted in conventional entrepreneurship research, often however, with an exclusive focus on emotions related to the strong, positive affect of entrepreneurial passion [50–52]. The role of negative emotions is often marginalized [53–55]. This exclusive focus on positive affect and emotions can be derived from an overly optimistic view of entrepreneurship in mainstream research [56].

What differentiates sustainable entrepreneurs from conventional entrepreneurs is, according to the sustainable entrepreneurship literature, that they in combination with traditional business traits and motivations also possess 'strong underlying green values' [4,57], 'social and cultural values' [2,58] and strong 'ethical reasoning' [59]. They are 'highly concerned', feel 'personal obligations', take on 'high responsibility', are 'open-minded', and 'seek positive change' [8]. Sustainable entrepreneurs are often construed as eco-heroes [7,56], reinforcing heroic and overly positive representations of entrepreneurs and their practices in discourse and narratives [60,61]. Despite the fact that sustainable entrepreneurship researchers acknowledge that sustainable entrepreneurship is an emotional endeavor [62], as sustainable entrepreneurs tend to express high degrees of 'green emotion and commitment' [63,64], the role of emotions and affect for sustainable entrepreneurship practice is heavily understudied. Similar to the positive tone within mainstream entrepreneurship studies, emotions are exclusively discussed in relation to passion and positive commitment to environmental or social causes. Furthermore, this research tends to reinforce the dichotomy between reason and emotion [49]. Kuckertz and Wagner [62] for example, conceptualize emotions as 'factor[s] operating alongside rational elements'. Poldner et al. [42] accurately suggest that this perspective is potentially harmful to our understanding of sustainable entrepreneurship, and can be derived from the strong paradigm of rationality within the research field.

2.2. The 'Opportunities' in Sustainable Entrepreneurship Research

The entrepreneurial process is conventionally seen as the recognition and exploitation of opportunities [9–11]. Opportunities are either seen as pre-existing and discovered in a particular market context, or as created through an iterative shaping and development process [65,66]. When seen as created, the 'the opportunity resides totally in the individual's mind' [67] with the help of the entrepreneur's particular set of beliefs and knowledge [35]. Another explanation is given by Dimov [65] who claims that opportunities are shaped by the entrepreneur in a process of engaging with different social actors. The exploitation process is often less discussed in conventional entrepreneurship literature, perhaps because of the general disinterest in entrepreneurship practice [43].

Sustainable entrepreneurship researchers tend to see opportunities as pre-existing rather than created [34]. The general perception is that new entrants have a plethora of opportunities to exploit, as incumbents have yet to adapt to an increased customer demand for environmentally friendly products produced under fair circumstances [4], i.e., an imperfect market leads to the emergence of sustainability-related opportunities. Pacheco et al. [68] are offering a slightly different explanation by arguing that individual sustainable entrepreneurs create opportunities in their pursuit to change the unsustainable 'rules of the game'. While these two explanations are different, they build on assumptions of a rational and independent sustainable entrepreneur who through her possession of both traditional business values and traits and sustainability-related values aims to exploit pre-existing opportunities.

Similar to within the conventional entrepreneurship literature, the opportunity exploitation phase is not discussed very frequently. Phillips [7] argues that this process is probably more complex within sustainable entrepreneurship than within conventional entrepreneurship, as sustainable entrepreneurs have to move in and between different groups consisting of actors with conflicting values. This suggests that relational aspects of sustainable entrepreneurship practice deserve a closer examination.

3. Ethics of Care: Towards a Theory of Entrepreneurial Care

In the literature review above, we have described how sustainable entrepreneurship researchers have unreflectively adopted certain assumptions from mainstream entrepreneurship research. On the individual level, this has implications for, among other things, how the role of emotions and entrepreneurial motivations and traits are understood and conceptualized. These reductionist conceptions fail to represent the complex nature of sustainable entrepreneurship that we are familiar with through empirical observation: a basically relational practice. In order to counteract these tendencies [22], and to present relevant and interesting alternatives [12], we turn to ethics of care in this section.

Ethics of care is not built upon the traditional assumptions of the independent and rational ethical subject, assumptions that we have now shown are also prevalent in sustainable entrepreneurship research, but rather on the view of human beings as dependent, emotional, and relationally connected. In contrast to traditional ethical theories, ethics of care views human existence as interconnected and dependent [23]. It emerged as a response to the 'male bias' in traditional ethical theories [23,24,69], and sees caring relationships as the basis of moral action. While ethics of care is often described as a feminist ethics, many now agree that it has moved beyond a 'woman only' ethical framework [29,70,71]. Within ethics of care, care is described as a complex, relational and processual practice [27,72]. The caring relation has been described by Nel Noddings, who has provided ethics of care with its philosophical foundations, as one between the caring subject (the 'one-caring') and one who is cared for (the 'cared-for') [24].

The cared-for is usually thought of as a vulnerable human being who needs and responds to the care of the one-caring. However, Noddings opens up for the possibility that the cared-for can be an idea or object. She holds that the while a non-human cared-for cannot 'receive the caring' [24]—i.e., recognize the efforts of the one-caring—aesthetic engagement in projects, ideas, or objects can be very similar to mutual caring relations, and some ideas or objects can seem as receptive and responsive as human beings. While Noddings [24] describes such a relationship as asymmetrical, Mol et al. [28] highlight the potential of symmetrical caring relations between humans and non-humans. In the same manner, Gabriel [73] and Sims [74] describe caring relations between communities and an academic journal and organization respectively. The locus of care has thus been extended from the private towards the public sphere, where it can act as a guiding principle in for example business and peace politics [27,72].

As a practice, care involves engrossment, motivational displacement, commitment, and confirmation by the one-caring [24]. When engrossed in the cared-for, the one-caring moves away from the self and sees and feels with the cared-for. In a state of motivational displacement, the one-caring performs actions largely or solely determined by the perceived needs and wants of the cared-for. Commitment means steadfastness to the caring relationship, through good and bad times, and confirmation implies that the one-caring sees the cared-for in the most positive light, in his full potentiality. While caring actions are seen as rational responses to a perceived need by Noddings [24], she argues that the basic, caring relationship is not, as 'neither the engrossment of the one-caring nor the perception of attitude by the cared-for is rational; that is, neither is reasoned' [24]. Furthermore, as highlighted by Gherardi and Rodeschini [75], the one-caring does not necessarily have to be human, but can also be a collective body, such as a community.

Ruddick [26] introduces the concept of 'mothering', explained as particular caring practices carried out by mothers rearing children. Generally, these practices are responding to three vital needs of the child: 'to preserve their life; to foster their growth; and to instill processes that allow a child to become acceptable within a community' [76]. Similar to Noddings, Ruddick holds that maternal love is a mix of many feelings, 'among them: infatuation, delight, fascination, pride, shame, guilt, anger, and loss' [26], and that a mother's emotions can vary greatly over time. Ruddick maintains that it is the emotional base of mothering that allows for reasoned, caring actions to be enacted and evaluated.

Ruddick also suggests that mothers are shaped through caring practices, and so they develop certain traits. For example, when monitoring their children's activities and their environments for potential threats to the children's wellbeing, they develop vigilance. When they learn that they cannot ward off all unpleasant consequences for their children, they develop the trait of humility, and so on.

In the following section, we will let the theoretical insights from ethics of care inform the individual-care nexus for sustainable entrepreneurship research.

The Individual-Care Nexus for Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Rather than focusing on independent sustainable entrepreneurs pursuing pre-existing or created sustainability-related opportunities, the individual-care nexus implies that sustainable entrepreneurs should be understood and studied as dependent individuals whose emotions, motivations, and traits affect and are affected by engagement with caring practices and relations. When the needs of cared-for actors in these relations change, the one-caring entrepreneur and the nature of her entrepreneurial practice will change. Thus, the theory is processual as motivations, emotions, traits, and care practices are dynamic and temporal. Below, we present a graphical illustration of the proposed framework (Figure 1).

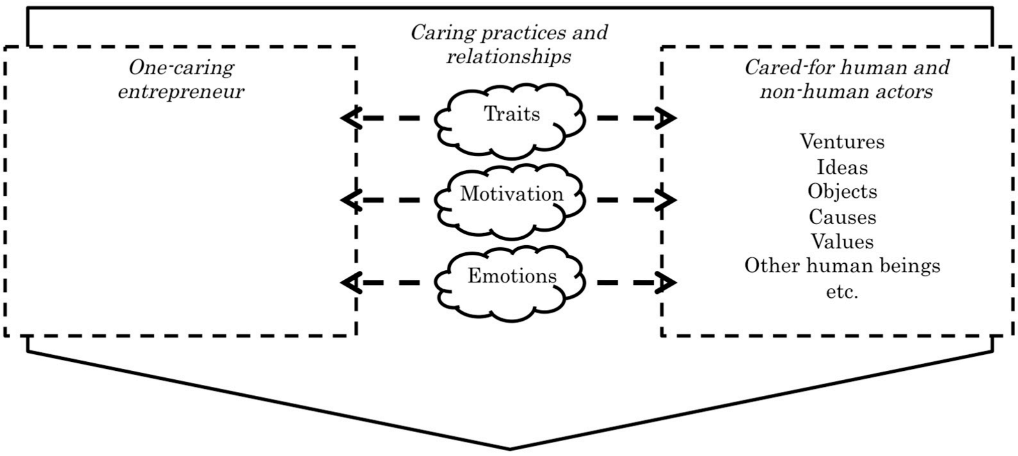

Figure 1. The individual-care nexus for sustainable entrepreneurship.

Turning to the dimension of the individual one-caring entrepreneur, it is clear that a caring sustainable entrepreneur is very different from the one described in mainstream research on sustainable entrepreneurship. Rather than being a rational triple-bottom-line profit seeker able to take into account economic, social, and environmental factors in order to create environmental and/or social value, we can imagine an entrepreneur who is engrossed in a cared-for stakeholder, value, or a venture, and carries out actions largely dependent on this other's needs. In such a relation, the entrepreneur not only cares for the other, but by being engrossed almost becomes the other as she 'moves away from the self' [24] and 'sees and feels with the other' [24]. This perspective, which posits a caring sustainable entrepreneur, has implications for the role of motivations, emotions, and traits in sustainable entrepreneurship.

Emotions are essential components in the individual-care nexus. We see sustainable entrepreneurs as emotionally dynamic by nature, with emotions spanning from infatuation and delight to anguish and anger [77]. Noddings argues that caring actions performed in a state of motivational displacement result in emotional response, while Ruddick sees that caring, reasoned action is enacted and evaluated on an emotional basis. In other words, emotions are a both a subjective response and a precondition to reasoned action. In line with Reckwitz [78], we maintain that emotions are intrinsic to sustainable entrepreneurial practice and manifested in the individual. We can conclude that caring has both rational and irrational aspects to it [24], and the emotional base does not make the actions of the one-caring irrational per se. Just like with emotions, we see motivation as situated within the practice and dependent on the relations with which the sustainable entrepreneur is engaged. Motivation is thus inherently dynamic, not only because the one caring changes but also as the situation of the cared-for changes. Concerning traits, in contrast to discussions about self-efficacy in conventional entrepreneurship, the sustainable entrepreneur develops an attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of oneself and others, and similarly a sense of vigilance in protecting the cared-for from various threats. The sustainable entrepreneur has a sense of responsibility, not only in identifying a cared-for stakeholder, idea, or venture, but also in taking the step to tend to their needs over time. She is committed to the cared-for and does not leave it when times are bad. Commitment, in this sense, separates the sustainable entrepreneur from the well-known 'serial entrepreneur' in mainstream discourse. She constantly needs to acquire the competence to care for the subject, and also keeps being responsive to the subject's changing needs. Confirmation, as mentioned by Noddings, is used to see the cared-for in its most positive light, to see its potential. Ruddick further points out that the one-caring needs to be aware that it is impossible to completely protect the cared-for, and Noddings notes that caring actions often fail to achieve their purpose. Thereby, the sustainable entrepreneur is developing a posture of humility to one's limits, as they are aware of the fact that their actions are not always sufficient or successful.

Turning to the dimension of caring practices and relationships—i.e., how entrepreneurial care is performed—in the individual-care nexus, we are inspired by Tronto and Ruddick [26,27]. Tronto discusses the human urge to find something to care about, which can be contrasted with the rationalized conceptualization of opportunity recognition. Ruddick emphasizes mothering practices and concludes that they always involve responding to three vital needs of the child. In contrast with how opportunity exploitation is conceptualized within the sustainable entrepreneurship literature, we argue that the care dimension of individual-care nexus is responding to the needs of the entrepreneurial venture, among other things. A similar theorization has been developed by André and Pache [79], who argue that processes of social entrepreneurship are often based on care for a particular social cause. After a section on methodology, we will use our theory to illustrate aspects of care in an empirical case.

4. Methodology

For the illustration of our theoretical framework, we have conducted case study research [31] on the development of Green IT in Sweden between 2012 and 2017 by one sustainable entrepreneur in particular, Nick. A case study is an empirical inquiry investigating 'a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' [31]. Our research approach has been abductive, implying neither a move from theory to empirics nor the other way around. Rather, it implies an iterative process where we have moved back and forth between theoretical frameworks and empirical settings. Such an approach has allowed us develop our theoretical framework simultaneously as we gain new and refined understandings of the empirical settings investigated [80]. This approach for case study research is suggested by Dubois and Gadde [80] when aiming for theory development.

Another reason why we have chosen the case study method is because care in entrepreneurship research is a novel concept, and therefore theory development can take place while the empirical research is ongoing and indeed, as a consequence of empirical findings. The case study approach offers the possibility to adopt a flexible, open empirical approach [80], which is more difficult with large scale quantitative research. Yet another reason to adopt this case study method is that it allows us to pay attention to the dynamic organizational context in which our entrepreneur is active, focusing on the relations which are formed between the entrepreneur and different actors in this context, and the practices in which the entrepreneur is engaging [81–83] in order to maintain and attend to these relations, suggested by among others Steyaert [84], Verduijn [15], Hjorth [16], Olaison [18], and Hjorth et al. [19]. We suggest that studies aiming to grasp sustainable entrepreneurship by means of surveys will only be able to capture a snapshot of a complex and dynamic process of constant change (cf. Elfving et al. [85]). We have thus provided a 'thick', in-depth description of entrepreneurial care. Although we have used a range of sources to produce the case study, we have been inspired by a narrative approach, which pays attention to the analysis of the stories primarily of the respondents, not the least Nick's story about the fate of the GIT Model. Gartner [86] argues that stories are told in particular contexts and by particular storytellers, and that when a story is subject to a narrative approach, insights can be gained as to 'what is really being said and why', but also to 'what was not said which might be'. While aspects of care were indeed sometimes explicitly addressed by some of our respondents, they were often rationalized [28], thus intentionally or unintentionally left out. However, a narrative research approach allows for reflection upon what was rationalized or intentionally left out of the interviews [87]. By including the voices of the respondents, and describing the phenomenon not only with abstract scientific concepts but also with unedited, raw quotes from their realities, a deepened and more lifelike understanding can be gained.

Data Collection, Analysis and Presentation

The empirical data has been collected while being active participants in the technical committee for the development of the Green IT standard SS-123 at SIS (Swedish Standards Institute), and from participant observations of several GIT Model meetings between 2012 and 2014. Moreover, we have carried out 28 in-depth interviews with Nick and his former colleagues, partners, and customers between 2012 and 2017. In addition, material found online such as news articles, Facebook posts, and relevant posts on the involved organizations' websites has been studied. Names of most persons, organizations, standards, and models have been anonymized.

In the first round of interviews was conducted in 2012. Here, we aimed to identify the main players of the Green IT movement in Sweden. The ICT branch of a Swedish employer organization involved in Green IT initiatives was initially approached, and from there we continued our identification process through snowball sampling. The majority of our initial interviewees identified Nick as a key player in the Swedish context. The second round of interviews, also conducted in 2012, focused on the entrepreneurial initiatives that Nick was currently involved in, including the Green IT Model, the Green IT Index, and the SIS standard. We interviewed Nick's present and former colleagues at WCCO and Nexus, his consultancy partners, and representatives from the standardization committee, and two of Green IT Model's customers. The third round of data gathering in 2012 included not only interviews but also participant observation and active participation. The first author of this paper followed three of Nick's consultancy partners when they carried out the GIT Model seminars at two governmental agencies. Both authors were present at WCCO when Nick was carrying out GIT Model analyses. We were both part of the technical committee of the SS-123 development project in 2012 and 2013. During these years we spent much time at the SIS and WCCO headquarters in Stockholm. The second author was actively contributing to the standardization work, including revising drafts and working closely together with Nick. The first author conducted a fourth round of interviews in 2015, where consultancy partners, customers, and former colleagues were interviewed over telephone about their experiences with Nick and his innovations. We kept in touch with Nick until 2017—long after his innovations had been disbanded.

Following Dubois and Gadde [80], we let the analysis of the empirical data evolve simultaneously as the empirical fieldwork and the development of the theoretical framework. Generally when conducting case studies, there is a 'frequent overlap of data analysis with data collection', as highlighted by Eisenhardt [88]. While an inductive approach to case studies would imply a more linear process moving from collection to analysis of data, an abductive approach naturally implies an iterative process, moving back and forth not only between the theoretical frameworks and empirical settings, but also between data collection and analysis [80,88,89]. This means that while interview transcripts were thematized, a coding procedure per se never took place, as this would imply a rather rigid and strict process [42]. Rather, an iterative and interpretive method was used, where themes evolved in tandem with the development of the theoretical framework [90].

The empirical data is presented in this paper as narratives presented as episodes, or vignettes. This is done to highlight specific events where aspects of care were central. As Gartner [86] emphasizes, such narratives cannot be completely objective, and thus we need to be reflexive and appreciate our role as narrators when we present them. It is important to emphasize that the events that we have experienced and the stories that we have had told to us by interviewees are highly subjective, which means that we cannot claim that the narratives presented in the following section present an objective truth, neither about this case of sustainable entrepreneurship in particular nor about sustainable entrepreneurship in general. The narratives below should rather be seen as an empirical illustration of the individual-care nexus.

5. Sustainable ICT Entrepreneurship in Sweden: The Case of Nick and the Green IT Model

In the early 2000s, Nick was in his forties and had just left his job at a major Swedish bank for Nexus, a three-man company analyzing business trend within the ICT sector. Their main innovation at the time was an online survey called the IT Barometer. Nick himself was mainly interested in organization change, an interest that he had cultivated not only during his years working at the bank, but also while he was studying law, business, and information science years earlier. In his own words, he had assembled a 'mental toolbox', containing models and methods that could be used to highlight and combat inefficiency in organizational practices. Concepts such as agile and lean were vital to this toolbox, and imbued much of what he did, both professionally and in his free time.

5.1. Episode 1: The Birth of the Green IT (GIT) Model and the Transformation of Nexus

In 2007 Gartner Institutes announced that Green IT, practices of environmentally sustainable computing, would be the next major ICT buzzword [91]. And indeed, the emergence of Green IT marked a tipping point for the entire ICT sector. Given Nexus' interest in new business trends, they were quick to pick up this new concept: 'It was a cool IT trend, and you also save energy and the environment and all that jazz. It felt fun and exciting!' (CEO of Nexus, January 1, 2012). Soon the ICT branch of a large employer organization that wanted a software solution that could be used to engage their members in Green IT contacted them. Nexus came up with a simple self-assessment tool called the Green-o-Meter. The model, which was based on the algorithms from the IT Barometer, consisted of five basic questions and could be used to assess the 'Green IT readiness' of any organization in the service sector.

Green IT had a truly transformative power on Nexus, more so than any previous IT trend. The CEO of Nexus (1 January 2012): 'I have been working with IT trends for the last 12 years, but I have never seen anything like Green IT'. They started developing a new tool, the Green IT Index, which assessed the awareness of Green IT issues in public and private organizations in Sweden. Nexus was now fully committed to Green IT. Nick was also quite intrigued by the novelty of the concept and the opportunities that it could potentially offer. His understanding of Green IT was slightly unconventional, most likely because of his interest in organizational change and efficiency. Most companies interpreted Green IT as the acquisition of energy-efficient ICT equipment. While he saw this as an important first step, he also realized that environmentally sustainable ICT practices were often more efficient than unsustainable ones, and that organizational change was required in order to implement them. However, he shared his colleagues' disinterest in sustainability issues: 'Putting 'Green' in there made it easier to enforce important organizational changes' (Nick, 23 January 2012).

Based on this understanding, Nick saw an opportunity to develop a model based on radically different assumptions than the conventional approach, the Green IT Model: 'Organizational change and efficiency is what I am interested in. This model can be used to point out where you can make changes with very little effort and achieve efficiency as a result' (Nick, 8 October 2015). It provided their clients with an assessment of different organizational practices, including but not limited to ICT practices, and suggested activities that would make them more efficient and thus sustainable. When Nick started to market the model, particularly among public organizations, the interest was significant. During this early period, Nick mobilized a community of consultant partners who would promote GIT Model and practically provide GIT Model services to their customers. In 2009, everything pointed in the right direction: Nexus was positioned as the Swedish champion of the most important IT trend globally, and Nick its key stakeholder with a particular interest in organizational change and efficiency.

5.2. Episode 2: The Search for New Homes

Already the following year, the GIT Index revealed that the interest in Green IT was declining among Swedish ICT professionals, and the sentiment that Green IT was a fad spread quickly. One explanation was that Green IT lacked a clear definition and was susceptible to green washing schemes. Another explanation was that Green IT was still too framed in terms of ICT hardware and software, and that many organizations had ended their Green IT initiatives as soon as they had acquired more energy-efficient equipment and applications. The community of consultants mobilized by Nick could notice the diminishing interest from the market. A former auditor said: 'no one wants to talk about [Green IT] anymore ... if I would say 'Green IT' now, they would call me an idiot' (Former auditor, 15 September 2015). There was still some demand from public organizations but private organizations demanded more sophisticated—and in a sense more mainstream—models and certifications such as ISO 26000 and ISO 14001. The other senior members of Nexus lacked the personal engagement for the GIT Model, and started to work on other projects as soon as the market lost interest in Green IT. In short, the context in which the GIT Model was embedded was becoming uninterested on the verge to hostile. When Nexus was dissolved the same year, Nick became the sole caretaker of the model. He expressed that he felt responsible for the model, but realized that he alone would be incapable of keeping it alive and relevant. As his old communities were crumbling, he started to approach new ones.

In order to attract new attention to the model, his approach was characterized by explaining the perceived diminishing interest in Green IT among ICT professionals as a paradigm shift: 'Green IT is not dead, it has developed into something much bigger' (Nick, 23 January 2012). He argued that Green IT had matured, and was now a major concern for the whole organization. Given the results from the GIT Index, this was unlikely but not impossible. However, it was exactly what his model, focusing on organizational change, would need to survive and thrive. After extensive negotiations with different actors, he eventually sold the model to WCCO – a subsidiary to a Swedish trade union most known for an international environmental standard for ICT hardware – later that year. He accompanied as a consultant with a three-year contract. While WCCO was a well-reputed organization within Green IT, Nick knew right from the start that they had a distinct focus on ICT hardware, a focus that he himself strongly opposed. However, they expressed an interest in learning more about the organizational aspects of Green IT, and Nick was not in a position to be picky. He sought to 'set up an organization within WCCO ... that would take care of and nurture [the model]' (Nick, 18 October 2016) by their hardware certification initiative. From WCCO, the model would gain legitimacy, and Nick could tap into an even larger community of actors interested in Green IT, in which the model could be maintained. He imagined that he could now spend more time caring for the model, developing and refining it, while WCCO's consultant partners would focus on sales, marketing, and delivery.

Another issue that required Nick's attention was the fact that many customers had started to question the relevance of the GIT Model compared to more sophisticated international standards. He thus started to investigate the possibility of developing a brand-new Green IT standard, the first of its kind, at the Swedish Standards Institute (SIS): 'I had two alternatives; to adapt the GIT Model to an existing standard, or to create a new standard based on the GIT Model. I chose the latter' (Nick, 23 January 2012). Nick's main motivation behind this move was to suggest the GIT Model as an assessment tool for the new standard that would, just like the hardware certification, in turn 'nurture the GIT Model' (Nick, 8 October 2015). In October 2010, Nick had assembled the technical committee of the Green IT standard SS-123, consisting of 14 participants representing private and public organizations. Nick opened the first meeting by emphasizing that Green IT should be approached as an organizational issue, and not only as a question of sustainable ICT hardware and applications. While the technical committee was sympathetic towards this approach, they questioned the relevance of the standard already during the first meeting, as it too would then compete with more sophisticated and well-known standards. The committee suggested that the SS-123 could be a plugin to ISO 14001, with a particular focus on ICT. Since the GIT Model would still be able to help organizations comply with the standard, Nick agreed. Another discussion was whether or not 'Green IT' would be used in the name of the standard, as it being a fad could have implications. 'Sustainable ICT' was considered an alternative, and later decided upon. As 'sustainable' is much more inclusive than 'green', Nick saw this as an opportunity to justify that aspects not directly related to environmental and technical aspects, such as management and organizational change, could be included in the standard. However, in order for the GIT Model to be useful as an assessment tool, he thought that he would eventually have to rename the model as soon as the standard was released.

During the second meeting, the workgroup was assigned a chair. Naturally, Nick had expressed his interest in this position during their first meeting. He was also very committed to the cause, perhaps more so than any other participant. The project manager (15 September 2015) said: 'Nick was a driving force. It felt genuine. You can tell if it's only a business interest'. However, as concerns had been raised whether it was suitable that a chair had business interests within the field – which Nick indeed had – he now instead recommended Nancy from WCCO. Although Nancy was now also involved in the GIT Model, she was considered neutral. Nick thus had to step down and adopt a more passive role.

5.3. Episode 3: The Death of the Green IT (GIT) Model and the Struggles of the SS-123

Until 2012, Nick had been working very hard to keep the GIT Model alive within its new organizational context. As mentioned in the previous episode, WCCO had initially expressed a mild interest in a more comprehensive approach to Green IT. However, they started to realize that GIT Model in its current form was too broad. Furthermore, he never received the additional resources required to set up the internal organization that he sensed that the GIT Model would need. The network of consultant partners also started to crumble shortly after WCCO had acquired the GIT Model, due to a lack of demand also from public organizations. They were unable to sell the model, and the few partners that managed to sell it used it solely as a 'trendy door opener' (Former auditor, 15 April 2012). While 'the perspective that Nick raved over [could] be seen in many of the [consultants] carrying out the Green IT Model' (Former auditor, 15 April 2012), they could not provide the same 'vivid, ... captivating and engaging' (Nancy, 3 November 2012) experience: 'Nick [ran] a one-man-show!' (Nancy, 3 November 2012).

WCCO soon scrapped the partnering model, and Nick was now forced to both market and sell the GIT Model, as he was – according to former partners – possibly the only person who could do it. Nick: 'I was alone all the way, had no one to work with' (Nick, 27 July 2017). 'If [WCCO] had been more committed and persistent, this would have worked' (Nick, 18 October 2016). He argued that WCCO and its partners failed to take care of the GIT Model in a suitable way. He was angry and disappointed, and because of the above-mentioned problematic circumstances he decided to quit WCCO in 2012, one year ahead of time. WCCO released a streamlined version of the GIT Model without Nick in 2014, but decided to scrap the model completely later that year due to the general lack of interest.

Meanwhile, the standardization process was starting to slip through Nick's fingers: 'The ball was not rolling, I had to constantly run after and kick it' (Nick, 18 October 2016). While he had been forced to adapt a more passive stance, he argued that many of the other participants failed to manage their responsibilities, and in the end, Nick and a small number of other committed participants had to complete the standards out of unfinished drafts. Nick commented that the final version did not live up to his expectations, and that his perspectives were missing in the final version: 'It hasn't reached its potential. ... It could have been a 1:1 relation between the standard and the GIT Model' (Nick, 8 October 2015).

While Nick was mainly interested in how the SS-123 could nurture the GIT Model, it was clear that the other participants of the workgroup had intentions that effectively counteracted this. First, 'Appendix A. Good Examples', initially consisting of reworked examples from the GIT Model written by Nick, was significantly shortened and later on integrated in the main text. Second, while GIT Model was mainly marketed towards public organization, 'Appendix B. Guidance for Public Agencies' was reformulated as an appendix on procurement. Third, while an assessment tool would be developed as soon as the standard was released, the GIT Model was never seen as a candidate: '[The CEO of WCCO] was present, but he didn't even mention [the GIT Model]!' (Nick, 27 July 2017).

5.4. Epilogue

In 2014, SS-123 was finally released. However, SIS did not actively market the standard, and many participants of the technical committee had lost interest and did not promote the standard within their respective networks. While it sold quite well during the first month, most customers requested an international version. The standard was proposed as an international standard to ISO. The new project manager of the workgroup called for a follow-up meeting in April 2017, but the meeting was postponed due to a lack of interest. No further progress has been achieved in this process (as of August 2019).

Although the successful period of the GIT Model was very brief, Nick's intrinsic relation to the model had great consequences for the community. A former auditor commented that the GIT Model was 'an eye-opener', and that it 'legitimized [issues related to ICT and sustainability]' (Former auditor, 9 October 2015) within the industry. It became a centerpiece of the Swedish Green IT movement and there are remnants of it not only in the SIS standard, but also in people who remember the emotional drive and commitment of Nick. This is certainly an extraordinary achievement for any sustainable entrepreneur; especially considering this one had virtually no prior experience with or interest in sustainability issues.

6. Analysis

While the above presented narratives to some extent speaks for themselves we will in this section go deeper in our analysis of certain aspects related to the individual-care nexus. We will first focus on the individual, Nick, and aspects related to and manifested in him in particular, namely motivation, emotions, and traits. Then we will turn to the care aspect of the nexus, and discuss care practices and relations.

6.1. The Dimension of the 'One-Caring Sustainable Entrepreneur'

First, we can discern that motivation for participating in entrepreneurial endeavors is much more complex than the sustainable entrepreneurship research community assumes. Rather than being motivated by inherent, 'green values' throughout the entrepreneurial journey, Nick's motivation was strongly related to the changing situation of a cared-for innovation, in which his ideas and values had been materialized. In the first episode we followed Nick during the good, early days of the GIT Model. Everything was pointing in the right direction for Nexus, and what motivated him was essentially to imbue Green IT with his ideas of efficiency and organizational change. In the two later episodes, his motivation changed. In order for his innovation to stay relevant, he had to maintain the relevance of his ideas despite a declining interest from the market as a result of Green IT turning out to be a short-lived fad. Now, the main motivation shifted towards keeping the GIT Model alive in a thoroughly hostile environment. By now Nick's colleagues and partners started to talk about the model as 'Nick's baby', and turning to Ruddick we can indeed see that he also treated it as such: He was tied to its fate and committed to it, even after he had transferred the formal responsibility of the model to WCCO. On several occasions, he was bracketing his own self-interests and paid full attention and attended to GIT Model's needs in states of engrossment and motivational displacement. Rather than being guided by his 'green values', this basic motivation was what allowed Nick to become one of the most important Green IT entrepreneurs in Sweden to this date.

Second, we can conclude that elements of strong, positive effect and passion is easily discerned in the case of Nick's sustainable entrepreneurship. Several respondents emphasized his strong personal commitment to the GIT Model, and the committee members in the development of the SS-123 described the same passion. However, these positive emotions were mixed with more negative ones, as the situation of the cared-for venture changed, which furthered his entrepreneurial efforts. These emotions were closely linked to the state of the GIT Model in his entrepreneurial practice, and to the actions he was taking to care for it. Nick was pronouncedly frustrated and angry when the communities he approached to nurture the model constantly counteracted his initial plans. WCCO did not prove to be the friendly community that he sought, and he felt guilty that he had transferred the formal responsibility to them. He also deeply regretted that he put his trust in the standardization process and for delegating responsibility to people that cared little for the GIT Model. He saw it as his responsibility complete the final version of the standard, although he was no longer formally in charge. He remembers this as a period of emotional difficulties: stress, anger, anxiety and disappointment in his own and others' abilities. These negative emotions, manifested in Nick, triggered his persistence and kept him motivated to struggle and care for the GIT Model, thus having a performative impact on the entrepreneurship practice.

Third, the individual-care nexus suggests that there are traits present that are usually not discussed within entrepreneurship research such as vigilance, humility and the understanding of one's limits, as well as responsibility and responsiveness [24,26]. While a 'personality approach' to entrepreneurship research has been criticized (see e.g., [92,93]) for all the right reasons, we do not claim that either of these traits are necessarily beneficial or leads to entrepreneurial success. Rather, we acknowledge that such traits are developing through commitment to caring relations and that the research community largely ignores them. These traits are first discerned during the second episode, when he had to transfer the formal responsibility of the GIT Model to WCCO, whose strong techno-centric approach to Green IT he opposed. Now, his ideas became embedded in a community that he did not control, and he no longer had exclusive rights on how his ideas were interpreted and used. While it allowed him to keep his model alive, at least short-term, it was a sign of humility, and vigilance and responsibility for his creation. When he could see that concerns that could potentially ruin the credibility of the standard arose internally within the technical committee of the SS-123, he personally nominated another candidate. This was a sign of responsiveness towards the GIT Model and demonstrated an understanding of his own limits. During the third episode, when he was no longer formally in charge for neither the standardization work nor the GIT Model, he was still attentive and responsive to their needs, keeping up with the processes, following them at a distance.

6.2. The Dimension of 'Caring Practices and Relationships'

We have described in the empirical narratives how Nick's entrepreneurial actions were decided by his responsiveness towards the needs of the GIT Model. In the first episode, when his customers and partners were interested in making sense of Green IT as an organizational issue, its needs were easy to meet. Nexus was a supportive environment positioned as a champion within the global trend of Green IT, and his consultancy partners were able to sell the model without much effort. As soon as the Green IT discourse changed, Nexus—now fully committed to Green IT—was disbanded. To prevent the model facing the same fate, Nick had to introduce it to new communities, build up interest and engagement and maintain the relevance of his ideas through confirmation. While such practices are not unheard of within the entrepreneurship literature, they are often rationalized rather than seen for what they really are, i.e., central aspects of care.

In the second episode we could see how Nick reached out to WCCO and SIS and hoped that they were friendly communities that could nurture the model and foster its growth [26]. He set out to convince WCCO of the potential and importance of GIT Model's proactive perspective, as a compliment to their certification work. He argued that the model deserved a separate organization within WCCO, and that these two parts would nurture each other. While WCCO failed to make GIT Model work, Nick started to doubt the competitiveness of the GIT Model. However, he always tried to see it in its most positive light, confirming it, and hoping that people would eventually see its 'true potential'. He also managed to convince SIS that his proactive approach to Green IT was relevant, but the members of the technical committee never shared Nick's care for the GIT Model. Nick carefully crafted the initial drafts of the standard so that they shared the essence of the GIT Model, but the standardization process turned out to be a successive cleansing of the standard from the GIT Model. Nick desperately brought up the relevance of the GIT Model during several committee meetings, but the model never became a serious concern for the other stakeholders. Instead, they counteracted his intentions and picked the model apart, rather than providing for and nurturing it.

7. Concluding Discussion and Implications for Future Research on Sustainable Entrepreneurship

In this paper, we have argued that sustainable entrepreneurship research is based on the assumption of an independent rational entrepreneur, highly motivated by and committed to environmental and/or social issues. Researchers are clinging on to an assumption of a stable entrepreneur, with inherent values, traits, and motivations. Rather than relying on these conventional assumptions, we have problematized them and drawn upon ethics of care to argue for new conceptualizations of sustainable entrepreneurship. Out of this conception, we have developed an alternative theory of sustainable entrepreneurship, the individual-care nexus, which better describes this phenomenon in a quickly changing business landscape. Our theory has implications for how motivations, emotions, traits, and entrepreneurial practices are theorized. In this concluding discussion, we will summarize our theoretical argument, our main contributions and also draw out the implications for future research.

We have argued that rather than seeing motivations as existing in the individual entrepreneur as stable, resulting from values, skills, and knowledge that the entrepreneur possesses, our theory suggests that sustainable entrepreneurs are engrossed in, and motivationally displaced by, other human and non-human stakeholders, causes, and ventures in different dynamic relations. Given that the entrepreneur is always fundamentally dependent on these relations, entrepreneurial motivation is also intrinsically dynamic, as caring relations constantly emerge, change, and dissipate. This means that while entrepreneurial motivation may include for example environmental consciousness at one point in time, it does not necessarily do so at another. Basically, it depends on the nature of the caring relations in which the sustainable entrepreneur is currently involved. Furthermore, our case discerns motivators not usually discussed within the sustainability literature, which are not directly linked to either sustainability or business values. Just because many sustainable entrepreneurs often claim that they have underlying green values does not necessarily mean that they are motivated by these values at any given moment in time. Rather, a sustainable entrepreneur might be motivationally displaced, as Nick in our empirical narratives, by a love for structure and orderliness and for one's ventures and ideas, and work hard for them to flourish and thrive, but within the field of sustainability. A future challenge for researchers interested in issues related to sustainable entrepreneurship motivation is to study how motivation changes over time vis-à-vis how her different relations evolve.

Our nexus further suggests that sustainable entrepreneurship has a strong emotional base. The role of emotions has been overlooked in studies on sustainable entrepreneurship [42], despite it being described as an intrinsically emotional endeavor [62]. While the performative effect of positive affect on entrepreneurial practice, such as entrepreneurial passion, has been recognized, negative and neutral emotions such as frustration, anger, and anxiety have been marginalized [53–55,94]. In the individual-care nexus emotions are seen as the results of caring actions [24], but also as the basis on which reasoned action is enacted and evaluated [26,95]. This shift in perspective allows us to challenge the false dichotomy between reason and emotion [96] within entrepreneurship studies emphasized by Goss [49]. Our theory goes in line with Reckwitz [78], who emphasizes that emotions do not belong exclusively to the individual in which they are manifested, but more importantly to the practice in which the individual participates. We urge sustainable entrepreneurship researchers to pay attention to the plethora of emotions present in entrepreneurial practice and how they are manifested within sustainable entrepreneurs over time, but perhaps without discussing them in relation to rational or irrational aspects of decision-making. Neither should they be too quick to link examples of failed entrepreneurship [97] to periods of negative emotions and vice versa. Instead, they must acknowledge that all kinds of emotions are evoked by, and have a performative effect on, entrepreneurial practice. As a reference, see Maimone and Sinclair [98] on the role of an 'emotional climate' as a catalyst of change.

By engaging in caring practices, the sustainable entrepreneur is using and developing certain traits or mental habits traditionally not emphasized in entrepreneurship research, such as vigilance, humility, and a humble understanding of one's limits [26]. Mol et al. [28] argue that words used in the public sphere, where entrepreneurship belongs, often fail to reflect aspects of care. This may imply that many entrepreneurs rationalize so-called 'private-sphere traits'—such as those described above—into a more rationalistic and masculine discourse [44]. This goes in line with research that argues that successful entrepreneurs of all genders are often well versed in traditional feminine traits, and more in touch with their 'feminine side' than they or the research community care to admit [99]. Researchers need to be able to identify such traits and evaluate their effect on entrepreneurial practice. Moreover, we need to understand that they are not inherent properties of the sustainable entrepreneur, but they develop and change as the situation of the cared-for other changes.

Our nexus furthermore suggests that we should rethink the entrepreneurial practice. Our conclusions here are twofold. First of all, as we have emphasized in the previous paragraphs of this concluding section, we have to understand that emotions and motivations manifested in the individual entrepreneur can never be separated from entrepreneurial practice. Rather, these aspects are determined by the relations upon which the entrepreneur is dependent, and on the entrepreneurial practice. While the combination of motivations, emotions, and traits are manifested in the individual, it is unique in every step of the entrepreneurial process and linked to what the entrepreneur does, i.e., to the caring relations in which he or she is involved. This means that not only does entrepreneurial motivations, emotions and traits affect the entrepreneurial practice, but also vice versa. Second, based on Ruddick's concept of mothering, we claim that practices of care are central to the entrepreneurial process; to keep a venture related to a stakeholder or idea alive, nurturing it, and maintaining it in friendly relationships and communities. This conceptualization adds to the conventional understanding of opportunity exploitation, where the process is often described in rationalistic terms [96]. Similar to emotions and traits, mothering practices are often seen as existing exclusively within the private sphere [27]. A 'maternal standpoint', as suggested by Ruddick, could prove valuable also for sustainable entrepreneurs in the public sphere [26]. This should be investigated further in future research. Also, based on this conclusion, a question for future research could be to investigate the effect of parenthood for sustainable entrepreneurship from a perspective based on care. As this paper is explorative and theory driven, its main limitation is that it is not able to in any way quantify aspects of care in sustainable entrepreneurship, neither in this particular empirical case, nor in general. However, such aspects could be certainly explored in future research.

Lastly, we want to point out that many entrepreneurs are capable storytellers and shape societal discourses and narratives [100,101]. Thus, we invite sustainable entrepreneurs and researchers to use a vocabulary of care, nuancing contemporary discourses and narratives, rather than adhering to the dominant rationalized, masculinized, and heroic representations [44,60,61]. We further urge researchers and to accede to alternative theorizations and discourses to be able to better understand and promote sustainable entrepreneurship in a changing business landscape. In this paper, we have shown that the individual-care nexus is one such theory, and entrepreneurial care one such discourse, that could prove fruitful for this purpose.

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