THE ROLE OF ROLE EXPECTATIONS

EXPLORING HOW SUSTAINABILITY MANAGERS CONSTRUCT THEIR ROLE IN LIGHT OF COMPETING ROLE EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract:

As organizations increasingly are expected to operate beyond the computations of financial benefit and incorporate social and environmental elements in their strategies, there has been a rise in Sustainability Managers (SMs). Positioned at the center of organizations' sustainable transitions, SMs face multiple competing demands on how to act. However, the role has been problematized as vaguely professionalized with unclear delineations of responsibilities. Despite that, micro-level insight into competing role expectations and the shaping of role focus has been largely overlooked. Through 12 qualitative in-depth interviews with SMs in Swedish-based companies across industries, this thesis investigates how SMs construct their role in light of competing role expectations. By taking a role theoretical lens, three core misalignments of role expectations were identified: conflicting values, ambiguous legitimacy, and conflicting and overloaded strategic expectations. This study further uncovers how these conflicts inform SMs' work and conceptualize the dynamics of adjusting role behaviors to reduce incongruence. The ability to enact different roles based on context was shown to reduce conflictual experiences. Also, SMs with more experience perceived less incongruence, seemingly merging their view with that of their organizations over time. In contrast, SMs forced to change their self-concept endured feelings of discontent. To avoid a scenario where sustainable change is hindered by competing expectations, the authors aim to shed light on underlying dynamics and encourage an active and collective approach in shaping the SM role.

Keywords:

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Definitions

Table 1. *Definitions*

Concept	Definition
Sustainability Manager	The most senior position in the organization handling sustainability issues (Carollo & Guerci, 2018).
Sustainability	"Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p.16). In this study, the concept is understood as composed of complex dynamics and interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic elements (Bansal, 2005; Hahn et al., 2015).
Corporate Sustainability	Typically defined as companies' effort to balance their environmental, social, and economic performances (Bansal, 2005; Hahn et al., 2015).
Role	The position or purpose that someone or something has in a situation, organization, society, or relationship (Anglin et al., 2022).
Role Expectations	Preferences regarding things the person should do or avoid doing, and ideas about what the person should be, should think, or should believe (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Abbreviations

Table 2. *Abbreviations*

Term	Abbreviation
Sustainability Manager	SM
Chief Sustainability Officer	CSO
Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive	CSRD
Corporate Sustainability	CS

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2015, the United Nations decided on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 agenda for global action towards a more sustainable future (United Nations, 2015). The crucial role of businesses in the sustainable transition has led to the notion of Corporate Sustainability (CS), typically defined as companies' efforts to balance their environmental, social, and economic performances (Bansal, 2005; Hahn et al., 2015). Organizations today are increasingly expected to operate beyond the narrow computations of financial benefit and incorporate social and environmental elements into their strategy (Sasse-Werhahn et al., 2020). Consequently, there has been a rapid rise of sustainability-dedicated roles, often referred to as Sustainability Managers (SMs)[1]. In 2021, more SMs were hired than in the previous five years combined (Farri et al., 2023), and having an SM has even been acknowledged as a requirement by many investors (Bolter, 2022). Although more focus seems to be placed on integrating sustainability into organizations, research shows that performance development has plateaued in Sweden since 2015 (Arvidsson & Dumay, 2022).

SMs are core people in the sustainable transition of companies, however, the role has shown to be vaguely professionalized, leading to struggles in delineating their responsibilities (Borglund et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2019). Being faced by competing demands is inevitable in most managerial positions (Gaim et al., 2018), but is especially interesting to understand in the context of the emerging SM role who is at the center of reconciling tensional commercial and social goals in organizations (Carollo & Guerci, 2018). Viewing sustainability as composed of complex dynamics and interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental elements (Bansal, 2005), sustainability work provokes conflictual situations which prompt sensemaking of how to act (Brès et al., 2019; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). Yet, little is known of the competing expectations the SMs face and how it informs their role focus. By conducting 12 qualitative interviews with SMs in Swedish companies, this study aims to explore individual perceptions of competing role expectations and how it shapes the SM role.

1.2 Prior Research and Research Gap

The expansion of the SM role has gained traction in contemporary research (Borglund et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2019; Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Enrico et al., 2023; Hahn et al., 2014; Kanashiro & Rivera, 2019; Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Nyberg,

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[1] There are multiple titles for SMs used in literature, such as Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) (Perkins, Serafeim, 2015, Peters, Romi & Sanchez, 2019, Fu, Tang & Chen, 2020), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Officers (Risi, Wickert, 2017), and more. In this study, the term SM denotes all the above.

2012). With inconsistent results, quantitative research has aimed at understanding whether adopting an SM increases sustainability performance (Peters et al., 2019; Fu et al., 2020). From a functional perspective, research has also elaborated on the role and its strategic potential in the organization (Perkins & Serafeim, 2015), as well as its structurally optimal position in relation to the top management (Strand, 2014).

Although individuals are those who strategize, make decisions, and execute (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013), micro-level qualitative research on SMs is scant (Borglund et al., 2023). Scholars have initiated an exploration of tensions, giving rise to identity struggles and a reflection of meaningfulness for those inhabiting the role (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Enrico et al., 2023). Furthermore, Borglund et al. (2023) illustrated how the SM profession lacked *professional logic*, defined in the paper as "the beliefs and action-guiding principles that tend to shape cognitions and behaviors of SMs in their professional role" (Borglund et al., 2023, p.60). What unites SMs is merely a shared vision to improve sustainability in business (Brès et al., 2019). Building on this, an interesting avenue for research emerges in diving deeper into the potentially differing role expectations placed on the SM.

This study thus aims to respond to the call for returning to role theory and shed new light on role dynamics in emerging roles such as SMs (Alvarez & Svejenova, 2021; Brown, 2020). While some research has been conducted on tensions in sustainability work (Carollo & Guerci, 2018), the role theoretical perspective can reveal other challenges in the SM role that are key to understand to further improve the work of SMs.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The main purpose of this research is to investigate what role expectations are placed on SMs that could provoke conflictual situations in their work. By improving the understanding of role dynamics in the emerging and vaguely professionalized SM role, the authors aim to identify how competing role expectations interact in constructing the role and guiding SMs' focus. Thus, the research question is:

How do Sustainability Managers construct their role in light of competing role expectations?

1.4 Delimitations

Firstly, the research will be limited to Swedish-based companies. Sweden was ranked third in the SDG Index ranking in 2022 (Sachs et al., 2022) and has been at the forefront of adopting sustainability managers in organizations, making it a suitable context (Bolter, 2022). Secondly, while the study does not focus on any particular industry, the study is limited to companies affected by the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), a regulation affecting all large and all

listed companies to disclose information on their sustainability performance. These companies are targeted as they have a central role in the sustainable transition (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, these large companies in Sweden are also at the forefront of adopting SMs (Bolter, 2022). Furthermore, not delimiting to any specific industry has proven a valuable concept for capturing different dynamics of the SM role (Borglund et al., 2023; Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Enrico et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2012). Lastly, as the SMs' tasks range across the entire sustainability spectrum, there will be no delimitations to any specific part of sustainability, such as environmental protection or social equity.

2. Literature review

This section will cover relevant intersecting research, and further frame the research gap. Firstly, an overlook of tensional experiences inherent in sustainability work is explored. Secondly, current research on emerging roles will be covered, followed by contemporary research problematizing the SM role in various ways.

2.1 Tensions in Sustainability Work

Research on sustainability tensions in business contexts are defined as stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices and moving forward in organizational situations (Putnam et al., 2016). Scholars have identified three primary types of tensions experienced in relation to sustainability: (1) Strategic tensions (Hahn et al., 2015), (2) Intertemporal Tensions (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015), and (3), Instrumental and Moral Tensions (Hahn et al., 2016). Strategic tensions refer to contradictory, yet interrelated demands embedded in an organizations goal (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Profit driven organizations often experience tensions in their balancing of environmental, social, and economic performance (Hahn et al., 2015). Intertemporal tensions are related to short-term vs. long-term focus, where needs today compromise with those of tomorrow (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). Third, companies' exclusive focus on economic gains might collide with moral initiatives to bring about social change (Hahn et al., 2016).

In recognition of tensions, two prominent cognitive frames have been identified, the business case frame and the paradox frame. Managers with a business case frame aim to align the three pillars of economic, environmental, and social performance, thereby rejecting the notion of tensions. Furthermore, the target of pursuing environmental or social pursuits is linked to profit maximization. On the other hand, managers with paradox frames acknowledge and accept the tensional objectives and perceive them to be interrelated yet conflicting demands that can transform into one another (Hahn et al., 2014). These managers can depict different sustainability objectives simultaneously, even if they are conflicting (Hahn et al., 2015). The complexity of sustainability has opened up an arena for emerging roles such as the SMs, which will be further explored below.

2.2 Emerging Roles and Conflicts

With todays' fast-paced organizational environment, the last few decades have been characterized by emerging roles in the top management team. These Chief "X" Officers (CXOs) are assigned to deal with contemporary issues in the organization, and commonly to create value, develop strategy, and enable transformation. Examples are Chief Digital Officers and Chief Sustainability Officers, or as referred to in this research, SMs. Some roles have managed to entrench their identities and gain legitimacy in organizations, such as the Chief Financial Officers, whereas other roles still struggle with fleeting and anxious role identities. Without role purpose,

the CXOs endure role conflict and ambiguities about what tasks to focus on and how to gain organizational status. SMs have been qualified to belong to this category, yet no research has investigated their perceived conflict and how they navigate it in shaping their role (Alvarez & Svejenova, 2021).

2.3 Problematizing the Sustainability Manager Role

2.3.1 Sustainability Managers, Tensions, and Identity Conflicts

As illustrated in 2.1, there are tensions inherent in organizational sustainability work (Hahn et al., 2015). Micro-research has explored complications for SMs working in tensional environments, such as how different discourses around climate change interact with the social identity of SMs. To cope with identity threats, SMs strive to create a coherent narrative of themselves and their careers, highlighting the importance of identity work (Wright & Nyberg, 2012). Later research has also taken a paradox perspective to explore tensions perceived by SMs (Carollo & Guerci, 2018). Tensions between long-term versus short-term perspectives, business versus values-oriented activities, and feelings of being an organizational insider versus organizational outsider were revealed. As paradoxes are understood as tensions that will persist over time, SMs turned to metaphors to reconcile the opposing poles in their identity work (Carollo & Guerci, 2018).

Other research has explored effects of greenwashing in the role. SMs who perceived their company to greenwash and self-identified with sustainable values were adversely affected in terms of job satisfaction, work performance and commitment (Westerman et al., 2022). Lastly, researchers have aimed at understanding how SMs shape meaningfulness in their work relating to the tension between commercial and social/environmental goals (Enrico et al., 2023; Visser & Crane, 2010). Enrico et al. (2023) showed how SMs shape meaning and purpose in different ways throughout their career, initially finding meaningfulness in social values, however with time progressing to prioritize commercial organizational goals. The primary focus on tensions highlights the importance to apply new theoretical lenses to explore challenges of competing role expectations.

2.3.2 Defining the Sustainability Manager Role

Some researchers have claimed that, unlike traditional professions, there is a *vagueness* in the professionalization of SMs (Borglund et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2019). Arguably, as SMs lack general professional action-guiding logic, they may conceive professional situations differently. Instead, the role can be seen as a meta-construct of the competing market-, bureaucratic-, and sustainability logic (Borglund et al., 2023). What unites them has been concluded to be the drive to make businesses more sustainable (Brès et al., 2019). Whereas the sustainability logic tends to guide behaviors characterized by concerns for issues such as social justice and environmental preservation, the market logic operates through the motivation to achieve competitive advantage, efficiency, and profit (Kok et al., 2019).

Some researchers have however aimed to classify SMs with regard to who they are and what they should do. Wiengarten et al. (2017) discuss several reasons for appointing SMs, such as improved reputation, increased understanding of CS, and integrating sustainability into the business. On the one hand, some consider SMs ineffective and having hidden economic interests (Banerjee, 2011), while others perceive them to be too radical and activistic (Wright et al., 2012). In all, research points to conflicting expectations of the role, where people in sustainability work positions are torn between conflicting goals on both a personal and organizational level on who they should be and how to act (Borglund et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2019). This thesis therefore aims to explore the competing expectations placed on SMs in organizations and how this informs their role construction by applying a role theoretical lens.

3. Theoretical Framework

As this study investigates role perceptions from an individual perspective, role theory was deemed to add explaining value to the data (Ahmad & Taylor, 2009; Brown, 2020). Role theory is pertinent to this study as previous research has illustrated that competing role expectations are placed on SMs (Borglund et al., 2023). The primary framework that will be used is a model by Neale and Griffin (2006), which due to its dynamic nature is a valuable extension to traditional, more static role theory (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

3.1 Role Expectations and Role Stress

Work roles and role expectations provide consistency and stability to organizations as they guide behaviors (Hogg, 2000; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Neale and Griffin (2006) explain roles as constituted by expectations and perceptions of the role holder and how these, in turn, relate to and determine behaviors. Three interrelated components are claimed to influence the role holders' perceived expectations. Firstly, the role holder has a collective understanding of what the role entails, captured by a *role schema.* Secondly, the perceived organizational demands on the role are referred to as the *system requirements.* Lastly, a person's *self-concept*, i.e., their sense of self, affects how the role is perceived. When faced with role-relevant events, this will be interpreted by the role holder with reference to all three role components (Neale & Griffin, 2006).
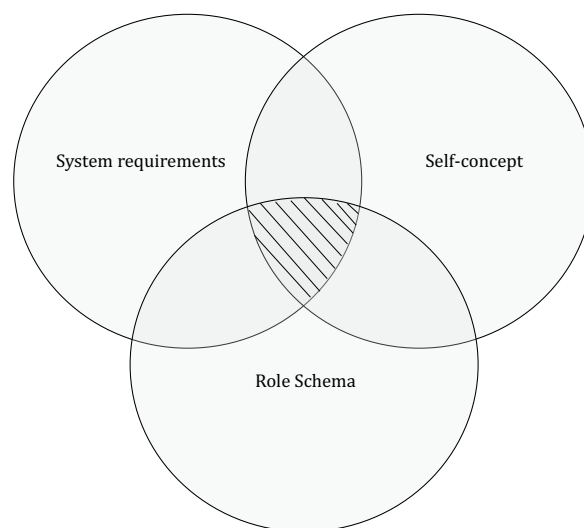
Note: Adapted from "A Model of Self-Held Work Roles and Role Transitions," by M. Neale and M. Griffin, 2006, *Human Performance, 19*(1), p. 25. Copyright 2006 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Figure 3.1. *Neale and Griffin's model of role perceptions*

Figure 3.1 captures how behaviors in a role are influenced and can be positioned differently in relation to the three role components. Preferably, perceived role expectations are aligned with system requirements, self-concept, and the role schema, as visualized in the shaded area. Contrary to the shaded intersection, there are competing expectations that cause conflict, discomfort, and stress for the individual (Neale & Griffin, 2006). Role theory separates role conflict, ambiguity, and overload, which collectively is referred to as role stress. Role conflict occurs when role expectations are inconsistent and where compliance with one makes it difficult to fulfill the other (Marginson & Bui, 2009). Role overload occurs with high volumes of work and a perceived time constraint to fulfill expectations. Role ambiguity follows when there is little to no information about role expectations or if they lack clarity (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006). Role stress has been shown to negatively affect various outcomes such as work commitment, job satisfaction, and performance (Anton, 2009).

The three role components in Figure 3.1 are not static, but can be disrupted by competing expectations, provoking the need for both phycological and physical movement of behaviors (Neale & Griffin, 2006). Mitigation of misalignment can be achieved by adjusting the role components, making as many as possible in the intersection of the three role components (shaded area in Figure 3.1). This position is proposed to result in maximum efficiency and minimal stress, while the other positions outside of the shaded area trigger a perceived loss of control (Ashforth et al., 2000). Below, a deeper exploration of the three role components will be covered as well as their adjustability.

3.1.1 Role Schema
The role schema explains an individual's pre-determined understanding of a role as they enter it, influenced by stereotypical role descriptions and portrayals in media. The role schema guides prototypical behaviors rather than atypical, as it includes behaviors believed to be typically exhibited by the role holders to gain legitimacy. They can also be seen as cognitive structures that define the role more generically and are constructed based on experience in the role. The more years of experience and contexts where the role has been enacted, the more complex the role schema will be and the less adaptable the individual will be to changing it. If the person has no experience, the role schema will be lower in complexity and thus more moldable. It can be shaped through job training, observation of other role holders, and socialization with society. With time, the role schema tends to get closer to that of the organization (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

Neale & Griffin (2006) argue individuals could internally nominate expectations associated with social roles such as teachers or doctors. However, in an exploration of the professional logic of SMs, Borglund et al. (2023) found that no independent SM logic exists. Indicatively, for this model, the role schema of SMs might be low in

complexity and vaguely defined. This can, in turn, lead to SMs being influenced to a greater extent by the employing organization or *system requirements,* explored in the next section.

3.1.2 System Requirements

System requirements are the demands of the organization and are based on the individuals' perception of the employing organization. It is enforced by formal demands such as job descriptions of work tasks and organizational rules, but also informal demands from expectations and norms. Role-holders tend to be motivated to adhere to system requirements when possible (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

The system requirements can be changed. If the role holder has high autonomy, role-making can be enacted, meaning that the work is shaped to suit the role schema or self-concept better (Troyer et al., 2000). The perceived ability to carry out expected behaviors might also influence the degree to which system requirements are aimed to be changed (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

3.1.3 Self-concept

Self-concept can be defined as a cognitive map that filters and structures information about the self (Bargh, 1982). Thus, behaviors in a role will be influenced by the individual's sense of self, which is determined by individual facets such as attitudes, traits, facts, and biographical data that the person identifies with. It is about the perception of themselves in relation to beliefs and values about their own abilities and characteristics they relate to the role (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

Individuals prefer to exhibit self-congruent behaviors, meaning they are aligned with the self-concept, but the perceived self-image can be shaped within organizations and contexts. Although it might lead to discontentment, individuals can incorporate behaviors into their self-concept that reduce incongruence in a role. Some individuals can change their behavior and self-concept to suit different situations, which is referred to as having a cognitively complex self-concept (Neale & Griffin, 2006). Additionally, after repeated performance, rewards, and positive evaluations when enacting a behavior, individuals tend to over time feel ownership and thus incorporate it into their self-concept (Pierce et al., 2001).

3.2 Theoretical Critique and Discussion

Neale and Griffin (2006) argue that the limitations of the model are how role components are represented as binary sets, categorizing behaviors as either required or discretionarily, prototypical, or atypical, and congruent or incongruent with self-concept. Suggestively, a more comprehensive way of viewing it would be through a three-dimensional model allowing for more fluidity in behavioral expectations: viewing these components as continuous properties. However, the binary nature of the role components still enables the identification of competing

role expectations and how it informs SM's role construction, which is the focus of this study. Although general in scope, the model covers relevant aspects influencing role perceptions. While some role research focuses on large transitions, such as changing jobs or being promoted, (Nicholson, 1984) this model has been claimed to be suitable for smaller, everyday micro-transitions as well, such as those triggered by competing goals in the daily work of SMs, making it suitable for this study (Ashforth et. al 2000).

4. Method

4.1 A Constructivist and Interpretivist Research Paradigm

This research takes a constructivist ontological position, which assumes that the interviewees' experiences are social constructs in continuous development. It further stipulates that individuals' perceptions of reality are driven by social entities and cultures. This challenges the objectivist notion that social phenomena exist independently from human interaction. The construction of a role can be seen as an individual's experience of expectations placed on them, as well as a process of managing the sense of self that is shaped based on perceptions of reality. Here, the authors take an interpretivist epistemological stance. The interpretivist stance will assist as the aim of the study is to understand experiences, meanings, and behaviors, the why and how, in the SM role (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.2 An Abductive and Qualitative Method

Furthermore, the study adopts an abductive method, where empirical data and theory shaped the process in parallel. The research aim was initially broadly defined as a desire to further understand challenges in the SM role. Before setting a research, question and initiating the primary data collection, the authors conducted two expert interviews with prominent researchers in the field to validate the research gap. Deciding to investigate competing role expectations and role constructions, the formulated research question called for a qualitative approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Semi-structured and conversational interviews were used to enable a more in-depth understanding and capture hidden issues that might not have been expected in advance while also controlling the comparability of the interviews (Belgrave & Charmaz, 2012). Moreover, a cross-sectional adaptation was used, which enabled an analysis of various contextual and individual factors among the interview subjects, such as their years of experience, gender, industry, etc. (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.3 Data Sampling and Collection

The first step in the data sampling was to identify SMs in Sweden and filtering for companies covered by the new EU directive CSRD. Additionally, purposive sampling was utilized by screening the LinkedIn profiles to get a sample with a diverse representation of industries, gender, years of experience, and educational backgrounds among the SMs (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). 46 relevant SMs were contacted via e-mail (see appendix 1), and 14 interviews were booked. Two interviews were cancelled last minute, and the remaining 12 were conducted with an average time of approximately 38 minutes. The sample consisted of 7 women and 5 men; however, gender of interview subjects is excluded to ensure anonymity. An overview of the sample is summarized in Table 4.1. (See appendix 2 for additional interview details).

Table 4.1. *Interview sample overview*

Interview	Name * [1]	Industry	Sustainability Experience * [2]
1	Anna	Healthcare	Low
2	Bea	Real estate	High
3	Cecilia	Professional Service	Medium
4	Denice	Architecture	High
5	Emma	Beauty	High
6	Felicia	Industry	Medium
7	Gia	Transport	Low
8	Isa	Tech	Low
9	Joanna	Architects	High
10	Katy	IT	Low
11	Lucy	Food	High
12	Mia	Real estate	Medium

*Note [1]: *Name is arbitrary and does not state gender or interviewee's name to ensure anonymity.*
*Note [2]: *Low refers to 1-3 years, Medium refers to 3-8 years, and High refers to 9+ years of sustainability experience.*

Due to the busy schedules of the interview subjects 10/12 interviews were held online, yet all were offered to conduct them in person. The interviews were in Swedish, to ensure the SMs felt enabled to speak as freely as possible. The transcripts were kept in Swedish during the coding and analysis to avoid misinterpretations and then translated carefully in the thesis. Moreover, initiating the interview by asking about the story of their career aimed to start pleasurable discussions that increased comfort (Belgrave & Charmaz, 2012). The interview questions were based on the used literature and theoretical framework of role perceptions (Neale & Griffin, 2006). To avoid leading questions, the authors excluded keywords to the investigated topics such as "conflicts" and "role construction". Rather, indirect questions were asked (see appendix 3). After each question topic, the interviewees were asked validating questions to ensure the essence was captured (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.4 Data Analysis

After 10 interviews, the authors sensed a saturation of the data and initiated an analysis of the interview transcripts available. The remaining 2 interviews were conducted to test the preliminary analysis. As no new findings or explanations for the research question appeared, the data was deemed to have reached adequate saturation (Saunders et al., 2019). To generate unanticipated insights and findings, a thematic analysis of the data was initiated (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004).

Analyzing the data in the first step was two-fold, focusing firstly on identifying what competing expectations the SMs perceived in their role and secondly, what attributes and focal areas they ascribed as important in their role. The overall coding generated around 30 first-order concepts. By applying a role theoretical lens, second-order themes emerged, which were then classified into aggregated dimensions that assisted in answering the RQ. An overview of the coding and analysis can be seen in Figure 4.1.
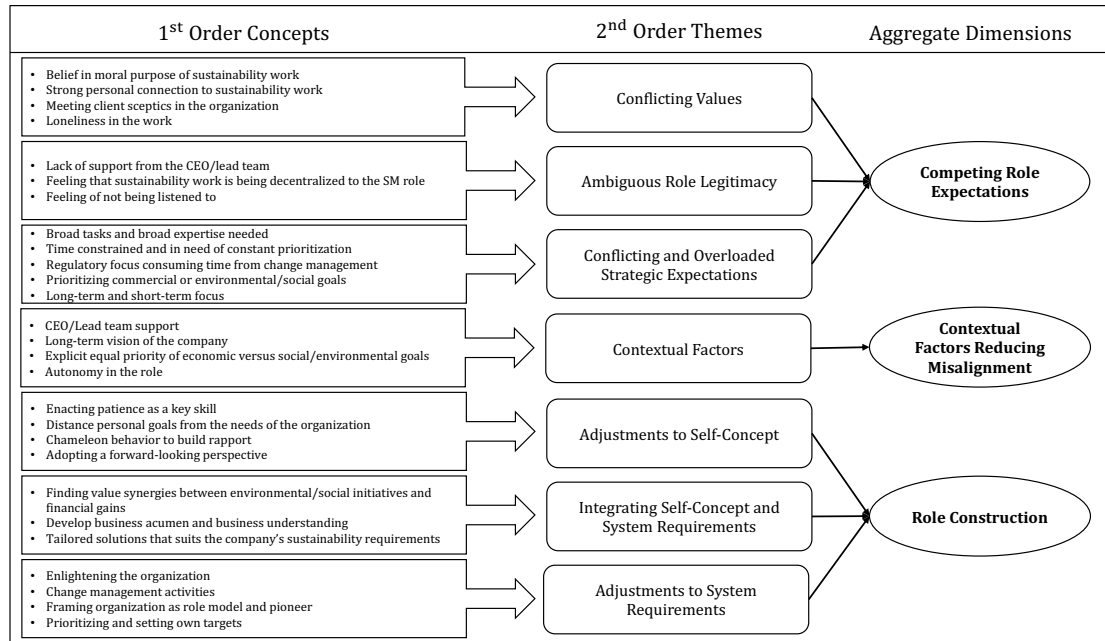
Figure 4.1. *Overview of Data Analysis (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

4.5 Research Quality and Method Criticism

4.5.1 Trustworthiness

To improve the trustworthiness of thematic qualitative analysis, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability, were considered throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017).

Firstly, *credibility* in qualitative research needs concern as the author's own interpretations of reality might affect the interpretations of the interview subjects. Reflexivity was ensured by reflecting on factors such as the authors' educational background as business students and their interest in sustainability. In the interviews, clarifying questions were asked to validate the interview subjects' viewpoints. Moreover, to avoid confirmation bias, the analysis of the data was conducted separately before any discussion internally of the material. Then, the authors went over the data again by reorganizing until consensus on fair representation was achieved. Another critique of the credibility is that there was no prolonged engagement with the interview subject, increasing the risk of biased and non-transparent answers in the interviews. There is also a risk of shareholder value

bias, wanting to highlight competitive sustainability advantages to position themselves favorably to external parties (Nowell et al., 2017). However, the rights and anonymity of the interviewees were highlighted to reduce discomfort. Secondly, weaknesses in the *dependability* of the results have been acknowledged by stipulating delimitations of the study, sharing a transparent and developed research method, as well as including thick empirical material and overviews of data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Thirdly, due to the cross-sectional design and the individual focus in a particular context and time, weaknesses in *transferability* to other contexts are acknowledged. Conducting 12 interviews with SMs in Swedish companies, the organizational cultural *milieu* is limited. In addition, with increasing regulation and sustainability focus, changes in the work of SMs can be expected in the upcoming years, indicating that transferability is decreased (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Lastly, the *confirmability* of interpretivist research is lower as the interpretations of the authors might affect objectivity. Confirmability was increased by receiving and incorporating feedback from students and supervisors throughout the process to reveal potential biases of the authors. In addition, the transparency of the data analysis was shared to illustrate the author's interpretations and show sign of good faith in the process (Nowell et al., 2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004).

4.5.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations have been taken to ensure fairness of the study. To ensure the integrity of the interviewees, avoid potential harm and social pressure, and incentivize authentic and truthful responses, it was clearly stated the rights and complete anonymity of the interviewees. The participants were also informed of the option to end the interview at any point or remove their consent without further explanation. Additionally, to avoid misrepresentation and deception, they were offered to review all citations used. Lastly, the purpose of the study was made clear, and all respondents signed a consent form to assure confidentiality and that their participation was handled in accordance with GDPR. Any questions or clarifications regarding the purpose, privacy, data responsibility, or compliance were also openly encouraged at the beginning and end of the interviews (Saunders et al., 2019).

5. Empirics

The empirical data revealed differences in perceived role expectations, contextual factors reducing conflict, and divergence in what the SMs ascribed as important role focus. Following the structure of the data analysis in Figure 4.1, the empirical section will be structured as follows. Firstly, it shows the competing role expectations. Secondly, it illustrates contextual factors reducing the misalignment, followed by the constructed role focus.

5.1 Competing Role Expectations

5.1.1 Conflicting Values

Some of the SMs expressed a personal and moral purpose in working with sustainability and a strong self-identification with sustainable values which caused distress in their personal life. In conjunction with perceived sustainability doubts in the organization, conflicting perceptions surfaced. There was not always a shared belief that sustainability should be prioritized, and SMs expressed how regulation was needed in finding common ground.

> *"I can be transparent and say that I suffer on a personal level from my climate and environmental commitment, it keeps me awake at night. It is an honor to work with these issues (...) You may come across, I won't say climate skeptics, but people who are not at all as concerned." - Cecilia*

> *"I am not so patient after a while. It feels like they don't care and then you just get angry (...) I see an incredible difference when you can make the CSRD argument. Then they ask what would happen if you don't comply and I can say that we can't continue operations, so we have to do this." – Anna*

5.1.2 Ambiguous Role Legitimacy

Being included in, or close to, the top management team while perceiving a lack of support caused ambiguous situations for the SMs around their legitimacy. Facing role expectations to embed sustainability into the strategy but not being listened to caused ambiguity of how to act. A low interest from the rest of the organisation to contribute to the sustainability work and a feeling of the sustainability work being outsourced to their role were brought up as issues causing frustration.

> *"The problem is that everyone expects us to do everything. And the issues are far too complex for one person to solve... It is impossible to do things as good as they should be." - Anna*

Although initiatives were taken to develop an understanding of sustainability in the organization, the true priority of the issues was questioned from the viewpoint of the SMs as they had to repeat the same messages multiple times.

"Even though I've worked here for 22 years and been head of sustainability for 10 years, last week, for example, I only got to talk to the board about what the benefits of sustainability really are. And then you can only feel, oh my God, I've been working on this for ages."- Joanna

"I have to say it [the same thing] ten times. In the role you constantly need to kind of update the organization." – Bea

Some SMs also perceived that they spent too much time explaining why sustainability is important rather than focusing on how they can improve.

"It [sustainability work] demands a little perseverance from time to time... That's not where the focus should be, it should be how we do it, not why we do it." – Cecilia

5.1.3 Conflicting and Overloaded Strategic Expectations

Most managers were united around the fact that an SM should work with long-term transformation and strategic leadership. However, multiple conflicting demands from the organization appeared to make it harder to focus on their preferred tasks. This also resulted in perceived overloaded expectations and insufficient time to fulfill all tasks. When asked if there were any challenges in the SM role, many answered:

"To prioritize. It's also a matter of sometimes having to take the time to really get to grips with issues, in order to be able to make these priorities. And it can be difficult to find enough time..." - Mia

"You have to be good at prioritizing between different fields because it is such an incredibly broad scope." - Gia

Often, SMs raised the issue of spending time on short-term obligations such as building expert knowledge in a broad set of areas and regulation on sustainability reporting.

"I am supposed to fix everything and answer all the questions and solve all the sustainability issues that could ever come up (...) The role is very broad. There is so much, and sustainability is an incredibly large topic. Each part is a science." – Anna

"Short-term priorities are usually those that you just have to do. But this is not necessarily what makes it more sustainable. You have to do it because you may

have reporting requirements, funding requirements. Quite simply, different stakeholders' requirements." - Felicia

5.2 Contextual Factors Reducing Misalignment

5.2.1 Long-term Vision

Among the SMs perceiving fewer competing role expectations, certain contextual factors were identified. A long-term vision of the company was claimed to be a critical factor in simplifying their work, reducing conflicting strategic issues such as commercial and social goals.

> *"We take a long-term view. That's how you must look at it when building sustainability. He [the CEO] is not interested in us delivering next quarter. His vision is that you grow something early that then bears fruit. People just go and think, how can I take as little risk as possible? Then you become slow. We try to have the courage to make bold decisions." - Emma*

Lucy described a similar situation where she contrasted her company's long-term vision to how hard it usually is in other profit-driven companies with short-term views.

> *"Sustainability work often then becomes - no, not this quarter, the [other] investments cannot be moved out of the room for that now. So, then it is much more difficult to make major sustainability investments that are still profitable in the long term." - Lucy*

5.2.2 Lead Team Support

Another factor influencing role stress was the degree of support perceived by the CEO and the lead team. In organizations with explicit terms that sustainability should be seen as equally important as financial targets, the legitimacy issues were reduced.

> *"We have received clear messages from the board that environmental issues are just as important as economics for us." - Denice*

Other SMs framed their organizations as role models in their industries. Emma expressed how some initiatives are not without economic risk but could result in a more long- term sustainable business model. In this example, a bold decision led to changes in the industry where suppliers adapted their offerings and competitors followed suit:

> *"We began to think about whether we should go out to all suppliers and ask what postcodes could you deliver fossil-free to? Then we realized we could reach 99.6% of the Swedish population with an acceptable delivery option... So*

we decided to do that. This meant that [a major supplier] could not join. This led to us removing [the supplier] ... There was an outcry in the industry." – Emma

5.2.3 Autonomy to Prioritize and Set Own Goals

When asked if the expectations placed on them felt reasonable, some SMs with high degrees of autonomy to prioritize and set targets felt less overwhelmed to meet the company's needs.

"The requirements clearly feel reasonable, but at the same time, it's me who has formulated them." - Joanna

"There is an incredibly rapid development, and it is important to keep up and dare to prioritize. I try to set reasonable expectations for myself." - Emma

5.3 Role Construction

5.3.1 Adjustments to Self-Concept

When constructing their role focus, SMs mentioned various needs to change and adapt their self-concept to better fit the expectations of the organization. Prominent themes were the need to develop patience, distance the self from work, and to speak in the same language as others in the organization. Firstly, patience was mentioned as a key skill to possess in order to be able to enact the role of an SM.

"When it comes to sustainability managers, it's all about patience... A lot of patience." – Joanna

"I get a lot of stupid questions. 'I have said this 10 times, yes there will be a law next year, it is called CSRD'. You have to be patient and understand that it (sustainability) is not a priority, understand that it will be wrong." - Anna

Secondly, some managers revealed actions of self-distancing, separating their work goals from their personal values, and expressed it as necessary in the role.

"You must distinguish between what are my personal goals as [interviewee name], and what I can expect that I can ask the company to do in that way." – Isa

"When I speak, it's not me personally, it's for the organization, that we move forward." - Joanna

Thirdly, acting as a "chameleon" to build rapport and engage people in the organization with sustainability issues was mentioned.

"You need to understand how to get a finance manager on board with this. Or how to get a communications manager on board. Or whatever it is. And everyone has very different perspectives, you could say. But to make the biggest changes, you need to be able to talk in the same language as a CFO or CEO." – Isa

5.3.2 Integrating Self-Concept and System Requirements

Many SMs constructed the need to develop a business focus to assist in enabling change. They ascribed value to finding financial synergies and highlighted that change is hard if the business opportunity does not exist.

"That's what I see as my part in this, trying to find business in it to enable a greater change. It is often the case that if you do not find the business in it, it is extremely difficult to go through, as well as making a major change." – Bea

"If you want to get the sustainability work going, then it is important to somehow find the link to the economic value." - Mia

Katy similarly argued that customer demands were central arguments in their sustainability efforts and framed it as a competitive advantage to come through with initiatives.

"What are the customers' requirements? How can we meet them? And can we provide a unique selling proposition in this in some way to the customer? We always emphasize our sustainability work when we respond to quotations and so on. That we are at the forefront. That we are good at this." – Katy

5.3.3 Adjusting System Requirements

Multiple ways of adjusting the system requirements were mentioned, where prominent themes were enlightening, tailoring, and challenging. Some managers did not aim to meet the expectations and needs of their company but rather to change them by enlightening the organization about the importance of sustainability.

"And then I also try to help our managers so that they understand why this [sustainability] is important. Being able to educate and communicate in a good way is very important." – Felicia

"I spend quite a lot of time explaining. Because I want the recipient to feel ownership. And know why it does what it does." - Lucy

Several also illustrated the need to make tailored solutions suiting the organizational needs to enable change.

> *"Some managers may think that we have set a little too high a target and they see it as almost only debilitating. (...) Sometimes they think that it's not inspiring but too heavy. And then it's not really good either."* – Joanna

Others expressed the need to focus more on challenging and giving courage to the organization in the process of becoming more sustainable, even though it might affect the profits.

> *"It is an important role to be able to inspire and give hope and courage to the organization. So, you can dare to make these tough decisions that may also affect the business."* - Denice

> *"In the role as a sustainability manager, you have to be a bit brave and dare to challenge both your management and board. And show that what we make a lot of money on today will not be possible to make money on in ten years' time."* – Mia

6. Analysis

The empirical section outlined the competing role expectations, contextual factors reducing misalignment, and differences in how the SMs constructed their roles. The analysis, therefore, aims to explore in depth *why* these expectations are perceived as conflictual, guiding forces explaining differences, and consequently explaining *how* different role focus were constructed.
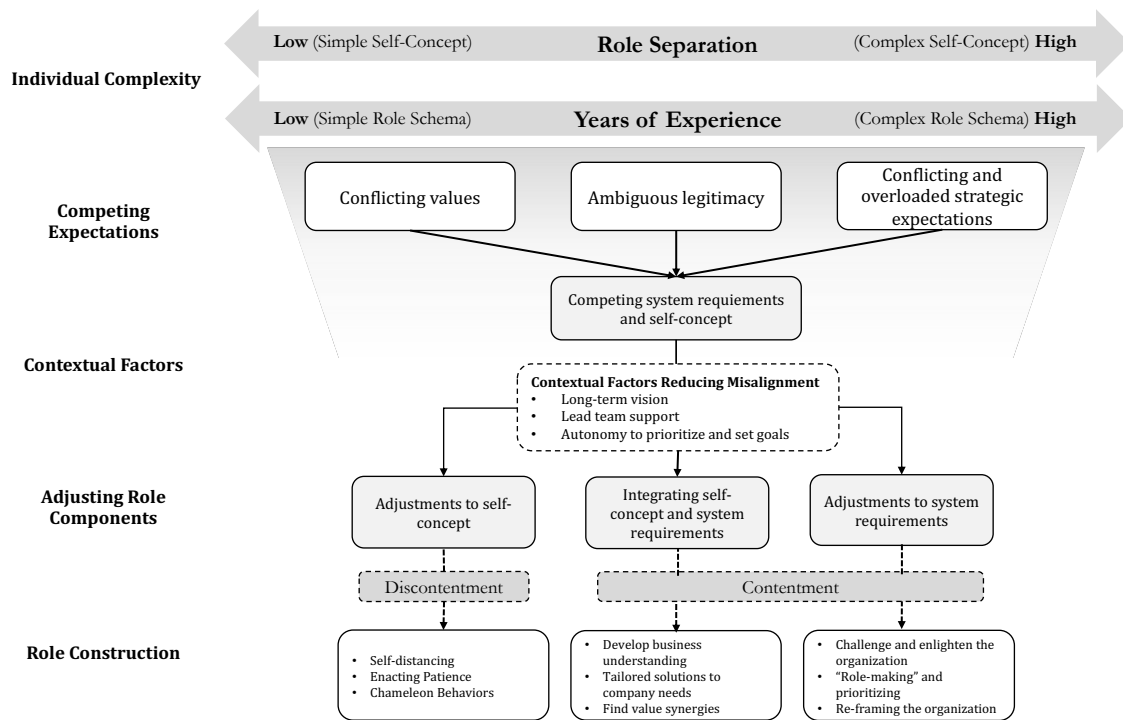
Figure 6.1. *Analytical Overview of Findings (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

Figure 6.1 outlines the findings from the analysis. This section is structured to guide through the analysis figure by: (1) investigating *why* competing expectations were perceived as conflictual in the organization, (2) Exploring theoretical mechanisms affecting the perception of role expectations, (3) How contextual factors interacted to reduce misalignment of expectations, and (4) *how* SMs constructed their roles by adjusting role components to reduce misalignment.

6.1 Competing System Requirements and Self-Concept

Figure 6.2. *Competing System Requirements and Self-Concept (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

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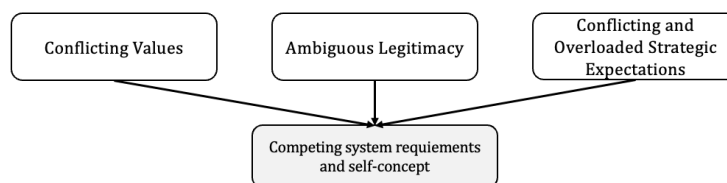Figure 6.2 gives an overview of the competing role expectations between the self-concept and system requirements causing ambiguities, conflicts, and overload in the role. The first one, *conflicting values,* was found to be a conflict between the SMs who strongly identified with ethical sustainability values as opposed to their organization. When perceived symbolic expectations were placed on them through regulatory focus or unambitious goals, SMs sensed *conflicting values* between their personal values and the company's instrumental view on sustainability (Neale & Griffin, 2006). This was perceived as a *role conflict* for the SMs, being unable to satisfy both their personal role expectations to bring about social change and those expectations of the organization (Marginson & Bui, 2009; Tubre & Collins, 2000).

Another consequence of the competing role expectations was *ambiguous legitimacy* in the role. Many SMs assigned to the top management team appeared to have a self-concept of being a leader. However, perceived feelings of not being listened to, having to explain the same thing multiple times, and not receiving support from the lead team, gave rise to ambiguous role expectations around their legitimacy. The SMs explained a need to focus on explaining why sustainability was important rather than how it could be implemented, as well as focusing on building expert knowledge to convince. Simultaneously, the formal expectations perceived to be placed on them were to embed sustainability into the strategy and culture, causing ambiguous situations (Neale & Griffin, 2006). This can therefore be understood as *role ambiguity*, in that the SMs were approached with high expectations from their surrounding organization while receiving little trust to fulfill those expectations (Marginson & Bui, 2009; Tubre & Collins, 2000).

Lastly, *conflicting and overloaded strategic expectations* were identified. The conflictual role perceptions were primarily an issue of prioritizing various strategic efforts and feeling overloaded in their work. Close to all SMs mentioned the broadness of the tasks, and the inability to serve all areas included in their work by themselves. The conflict occurred as the system requirements forced an extended focus on short-term instead of long-term work, and profitability instead social change. This can be understood as a combination of role conflict and role overload, being highly time constrained and forced to prioritize in the role, while also facing conflicting expectations causing role conflict (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006; Tubre & Collins, 2000).

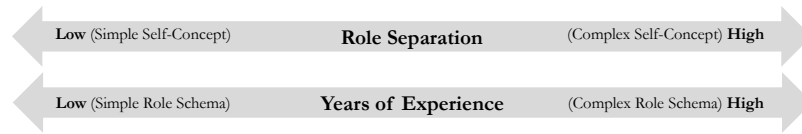## 6.2 Complexity of Role Schema and Self-Concept

Figure 6.3. *Individual Factors Affecting Perception of Competing Expectations (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

Comparing the interview subjects, the complexity of the role self-concept, i.e., the ability of the SMs to enact multiple roles as opposed to creating one coherent sense of self, and the complexity of their role schema, i.e., their years of experience in the role, affected how the SMs perceived competing expectations as summarized in Figure 6.3.

Firstly, multiple SMs shared how distancing personal goals from the goals of the organization was necessary. By doing so, these SMs illustrated a *complex self-concept,* and ability to enact different roles in private life and at work. These SMs also perceived less of a values conflict, as opposed to SMs with *simple self-concepts*. With a *simple self-concept*, the SMs aimed to reconcile their personal values with those of the organization, causing frustration when failing to do so (Neale & Griffin, 2006).

Secondly, the more years of experience and the more *complex role schema,* the less conflictual they expressed the role expectations. As the SMs have been claimed to have a vaguely defined role schema *qua professional*, one can interpret this as the role schema being developed in the organization, thus merging with the culture and needs of the organization over time (Borglund et al., 2023). This illustrates a new dynamic in emerging and vaguely professionalized roles, which might be increasingly shaped by their organization (Neale & Griffin, 2006).
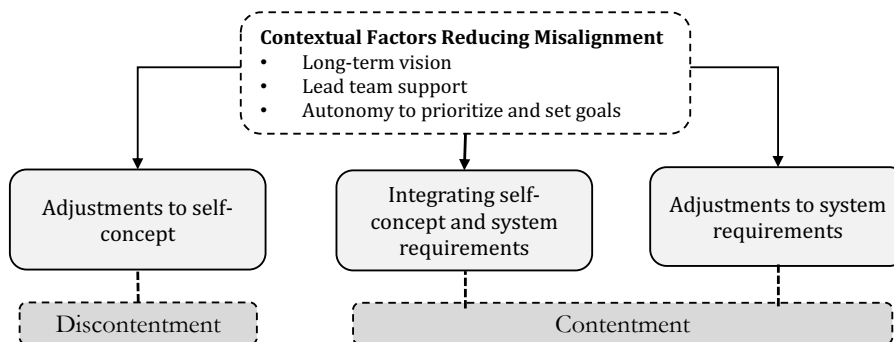
6.3 Contextual Factors Reducing Misalignment

Figure 6.4. *Factors Reducing Misalignment (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

In the interviews, certain contextual factors stood out as limiting much of the perceived role stress of the SMs as seen in the top of Figure 6.4. With a long-term vision of the company, *strategic conflicts and overload* were significantly reduced as the SMs could focus on long-term change management rather than short-term obligations and financial targets. Additionally, with support from the lead team, the SMs did not perceive *ambiguity around their legitimacy* struggle, nor did they perceive *conflicting values.* Lastly, with higher autonomy, the SMs could reduce *overload in expectations,* and prioritize the strategic issues that they deemed most urgent and important (Troyer et al., 2000).

When faced with competing role expectations, however, behaviors and attitudes are to the extent possible adapted to reduce incongruence (Neale & Griffin, 2006). Consequently, varying degrees of adjustments to the self-concept, the system requirements, and an integration of the two were identified. The different role component adjustments found are seen at the bottom of Figure 6.4. In line with role theory, SMs' feeling pressured to primarily adjust their self-concept were also experiencing more discontent expressing feelings of "anger" and "frustration". Opposingly SMs enabled to primarily adjust system requirements by high autonomy and support were more content (Neale & Griffin, 2006). The varying types of adjustments to role components differed for the SMs depending on the situation.

6.4 Constructing the Role

This section will dive deeper into how SMs adjusted role components to reduce misalignment in light of competing role expectations. Additionally, it will cover differences in when and what types of role component adjustments occurred, tying back to the analysis above. As seen in figures 6.5-6.7, the circles zoom in on the role construction processes (bottom of Figure 6.1). An arrow into the system requirements, or self-concept, denotes incorporation of that behavior to the role component, while an arrow out indicates removal of that behavior.
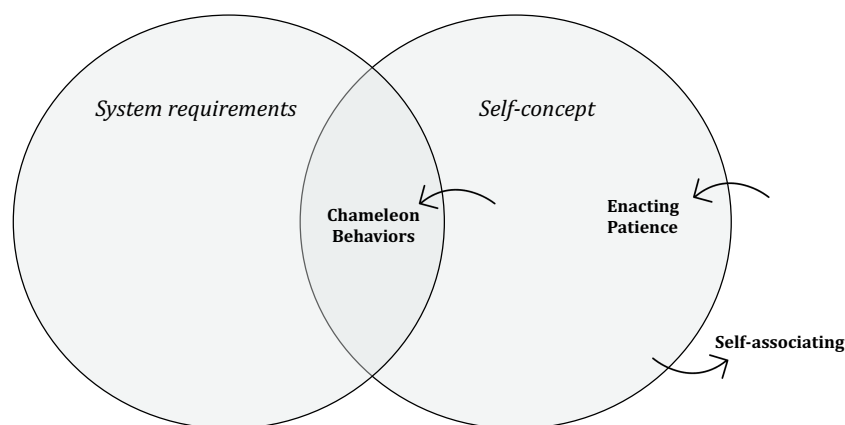
6.4.1 Adjustments to Self-Concept

Figure 6.5. *Identified Adjustments to Self-Concept (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

SMs adjusting their self-concept were usually perceiving the *values conflict* and *ambiguous legitimacy* more strongly, and generally had fewer years of experience in the role*.* In lack of support and long-term vision, the work was made more challenging for the SMs. SMs with lower *self-concept complexity* aimed to maintain their self-concept as ethical individuals while accommodating to system requirements that were perceived as unambitious. Although acknowledging the fact that more work was needed to achieve real, sustainable change, they adopted a self-concept of being *patient*, as seen in Figure 6.5. By viewing the self as patient, strength was given in times when the organization did not change as fast as desired. SMs with higher *self-complexity* contrastingly reduced *self-associating* behaviors at work, as seen in Figure 6.5, indicating that they enacted one role at work, and another in their private life. In that way, potential unambitious requirements of the organization caused less incongruence for the SM. Lastly, *chameleon behaviors,* were adopted primarily in response to the *ambiguities in legitimacy* and are also illustrating higher *self-complexity* (Neale & Griffin, 2006). Aiming to gain legitimacy in the organization, SMs imitated the behavior of other leader roles to build rapport. As an example, they could explain the economic value of sustainability to the CFO, while adopting a people-centered approach when talking to the Human Resource Management.

6.4.2 Integrating Self-Concept and System Requirements
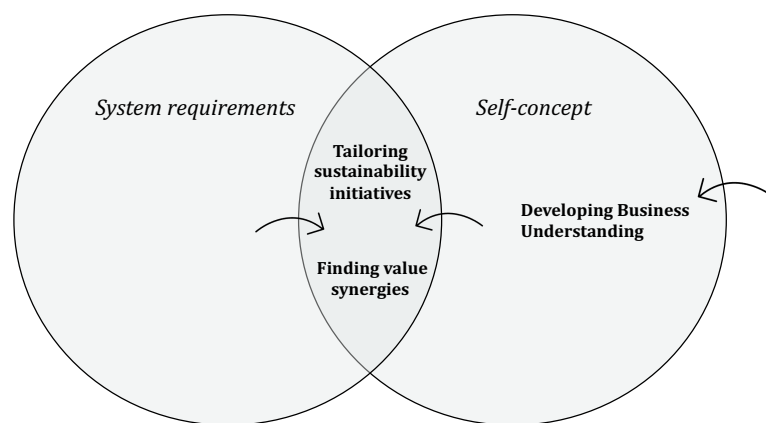
Figure 6.6. *Identified Integration of Self-Concept and System Requirements (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

A second set of constructed role behaviors aimed to integrate the self-concept with the system requirements. These behaviors were most common for SMs perceiving *ambiguous legitimacy.* Many SMs expressed how business understanding was essential to enable change, resulting in them focusing on developing business knowledge if they did not have a business background, as seen in Figure 6.6. By doing so, they could also *tailor sustainability initiatives* to what was reasonable and pragmatic in the context of their organization. Focusing primarily on *finding value*

synergies between the economic gains in sustainable progression, the work focus intersected with both system requirements and the self-concept (shaded area in Figure 6.6). Thus, some SMs seemingly used this as an active strategy, while others, perhaps more unconsciously, ascribed it as important. Being positively rewarded for finding financial value synergies in sustainability in terms of gaining legitimacy and support might unconsciously steer the managers to eventually incorporate it into their self-concept (Pierce et al., 2001).

6.4.3 Adjustments to System Requirements

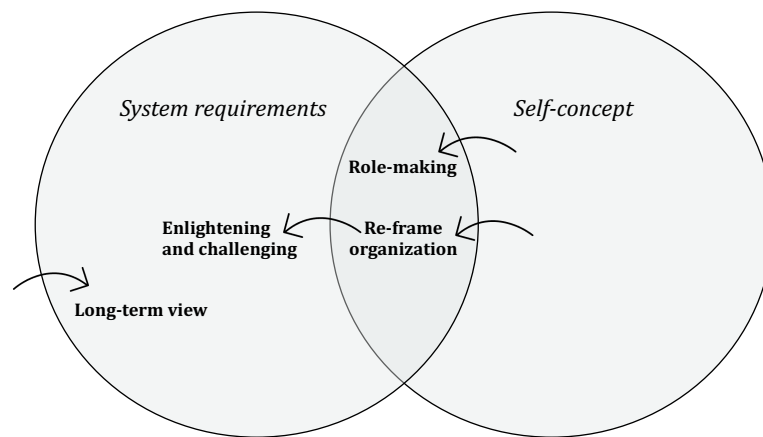**Figure 6.7.** *Identified Adjustments to System Requirements (Eriksson & Sanner, 2023)*

Lastly, multiple behaviors aimed to adjust the system requirements that caused role stress. The pure adjustments to the system requirements were primarily aimed for in conjunction with perceived *conflictual and overloaded strategic expectations.* SMs with the autonomy to prioritize and set own goals, i.e., *role-making,* were able to reduce stress from *overloaded strategic expectations,* as seen in Figure 6.7. in the shaded area (Troyer et al., 2000). Moreover, the *strategic conflict* of reconciling commercial and social goals was reduced by *enlightening and challenging* their organizations old ways of working. SMs expressed that this often demanded some willingness of their organization to remove focus on short-term profits and focus on a *long-term view* (Figure 6.7). To build courage, SMs re-framed their organizations as role models and pioneers in the industry to build up for change in system requirements (Neale & Griffin, 2006). *Re-framing* and *challenging* behaviors were less prominent among SMs perceiving *ambiguous legitimacy* and *conflicting values,* who instead constructed a more supportive and accommodating role.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answering the Research Question

This study has investigated how the emerging SM role is shaped by competing role expectations. By analyzing and interpreting data from 12 qualitative interviews with Swedish SMs, the authors aim to answer the research question: *How do Sustainability Managers construct their role in light of competing role expectations?*

The findings are divided into two parts, firstly answering *why* competing role expectations were perceived and, secondly, *how* the SMs constructed their roles differently. Firstly, both conflicting, ambiguous, and overloaded role expectations were placed on the SMs, with three primary issues identified: *(1) conflicting values, (2) ambiguous legitimacy, and (3) conflicting and overloaded strategic expectations.* Furthermore, *why* the role conflicts were perceived was narrowed down to misalignments between the self-concept and the system requirements. Differences between perceived misalignments can be related to the SM's *self-complexity* and their years of experience in sustainability-dedicated roles. SMs with higher *self-complexity* expressed an act of self-distancing and ability to enact multiple versions of themselves in different situations, which reduced role stress. Moreover, the group of SMs with many years of experience perceived less of *conflicting values*, whereas SMs with fewer years of experience more frequently expressed it.

Based on these findings, the study illustrates *how* the SMs construct their roles in light of competing expectations by adjusting role components. Depending on contextual factors such as support from the lead team, the long-term vision of the company, and autonomy in the role, the SMs engaged in integration and adjustments to their self-concept and system requirements to reduce role stress. The research concluded three generalized dynamics in which SMs perceiving *conflicting values* felt pressured to adjust their self-concept, causing discontentment in the role. Secondly, the group who expressed *ambiguous legitimacy* engaged in business-minded behaviors, aiming to integrate the needs of the self-concept with the system requirements to gain legitimacy. Thirdly, SMs with high *autonomy* reduced *strategic overload* by role-making, and engaged in challenging and re-framing behaviors when the company had a long-term vision and offered support.

7.2 Contributions

This thesis offered insight into how role theory presents itself in emerging roles, with no explicit role schema guiding role expectations. It adds to the growing body of research on challenges in sustainability work and contributes to an improved understanding of the dynamic interaction of role expectations in shaping roles with vague professionalization and lack of professional logic (Alvarez & Svejenova, 2021; Borglund et al., 2023; Brès et al., 2019).

The conflicting values and strategic role expectations identified in this research share similarities to what previous research has defined as strategic tensions (Hahn et al., 2015) and moral versus instrumental tensions (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). However, this research also revealed how overloaded, as opposed to tensional, strategic expectations can be a source of role stress. Furthermore, the study revealed ambiguities in role legitimacy experienced by SMs. Hahn (2014) claimed that individuals with a business case cognitive frame, i.e., believing that sustainability correlates with financial gains, were less complex in their understanding of sustainability as they neglected the tensions between the two poles. In contrast to the findings of Hahn (2014), the findings of this thesis illustrate that adopting business case sustainability might also be explained as an active strategy to gain legitimacy in organizations with low tolerance and a lack of interest in changing their ways of working. By developing a business mindset, they enabled some improvements that might have been disregarded otherwise.

Enrico et al. (2023) found that as over time, SMs purpose and meaningfulness in work were less centered around environmental/social goals and more around financial targets. In light of the findings in this study, it can also be viewed as a reflection of the influence of competing expectations and the organization's importance in shaping the role over time. In contrast to current identity research on SMs (Carollo & Guerci, 2018), this study also illustrated the importance of role identity work, however also portrayed drawbacks such as discontentment when feeling pressured to adjust the self-concept.

7.3 Practical Implications

From the viewpoint of SMs, these findings can increase awareness of challenges and possibilities to reduce stressful role experiences. By active reflection, SMs could construct their role intentionally based on the needs of the organization. As change is hard to force on someone, the ability to adapt role focus might enable greater change by "pushing" the organization one step at a time. However, not acknowledging this dynamic, there is a risk of simply accommodating unambitious needs and not driving change.

Furthermore, companies can utilize this and turn their strategic lens inwards and re-evaluate what sustainability support is needed, whether it be regulatory or change management. By being transparent and reflective with role expectations, improved alignment and reduced role stress can be achieved. Failing to align role expectations might result in lower job satisfaction, lower commitment, and higher intentions to quit (Westerman et al., 2022). Based on this, a cumulative effect could become a situation in which SMs with the best abilities to enhance sustainability in organizations leave the firm. With a plateauing sustainable development in organizations (Arvidsson & Dumay, 2022) and uncertainties regarding the

efficiency of the SM role (Fu et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2019), the findings of this thesis reveal necessary considerations to enable better circumstances for change.

7.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although the findings in this study present relevant explanatory insight into how and why SMs perceive competing expectations as problematic and construct their role thereafter, the purpose was not to reach a holistic or generalized conclusion. There might be other competing expectations perceived, and more ways to construct the role not identified in this study. From a contextual perspective, the study was based on interviews with 12 Swedish SMs in a spread of industries. Specific interpretations of sustainability and the perceived system requirements could relate to the Swedish organizational culture of low hierarchical barriers and high collaboration between organizational levels (Schwab, 2019). Thus, future research could conduct a similar study in other geographical areas to reduce contextual bias. Another limitation is the timeline. Given this thesis revealed that SMs with more years of experience perceived different types of conflicts, there is reason to believe that a longitudinal study could reveal interesting dynamics that shape the role over time. Other potentially rewarding future studies could explore the role transition of sustainability managers getting promotions and entering an executive level position. This could respond to the call for more research on how the SM role develops over time (Borglund et al., 2023; Perkins & Serafeim, 2015).

7.5 Conclusion

As companies embarked on their sustainability journeys and the SM role expanded, issues with inefficiencies and delineation of responsibilities surfaced. In the center of the sustainable transition, SMs must reconcile and deal with competing demands in their work. The aim of this study was to shed light on how SMs constructed their role in light of these competing expectations, to further understand challenges in advancing the role. The study illustrates how multiple competing role expectations causes ambiguity, conflict, and role overload. In emerging and vaguely professionalized roles such as the SM role, role expectations from the organizations were shown to strongly interact with the individual's constructed role focus. The SMs have been generalized to be responsible for strategic sustainability implementation, increasingly argued to deserve a spot in the top management team. However, as the needs and ambitions of sustainability work in organizations differ largely today, ranging from regulatory focus to more transformational change, the SM role might benefit from remaining fluid and dynamically shaped. Different SM qualities identified in the study could each serve their purpose depending on where in the sustainable transition their organizations are. By adopting an active and transparent alignment of expectations, the SM role could thrive, with less role stress and improved performance. Changes and efforts to align expectations could, therefore, have significant effects on the sustainable development of organizations.

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9. Appendix

Appendix 1. E-mail to Potential Interviewees

Dear *[employee of company X],*

We are two students at the Stockholm School of Economics who are currently writing our bachelor's thesis in management. Our research aims to contribute to an increased understanding of sustainability dedicated positions, and the opportunities and challenges present in the role.

Since Sweden is at the forefront of this, you have a unique opportunity to contribute to an improved understanding of how to develop sustainability work in organizations going forward, and we are convinced that your insights would be very valuable for our research.

We would therefore like to invite you to participate in a 30–45-minute interview, online or live, to discuss your perspectives on the challenges and opportunities associated with your role in the company. Both yours and your company's participation would of course be anonymous, and the study is conducted in line with GDPR.

We understand that your schedule is full, so we are very flexible with the time and location of the interview, both on and off office hours. The idea is to hold these interviews during weeks 11-13, and we would be very grateful if you could spare approximately 30-45 minutes for this.

Thank you for considering our request and let us know if you have any questions!

Best regards,
Emmy & Ludvig

Note: Email has been translated from Swedish to English.

Appendix 2. Table with Additional Interview Details

No.	Code Name	Time	Date	Place	Position*
1	Anna	33:28	2023-03-15	Video Conference	CSO (1)
2	Bea	29:31	2023-03-21	Video Conference	CSO (1)
3	Cecilia	35:12	2023-03-22	Video Conference	CSO (1)
4	Denice	32:53	2023-03-22	Video Conference	CSO (1)
5	Emma	58:41	2023-03-23	Office	SM (1)
6	Felicia	33:47	2023-03-27	Video Conference	SM (2)
7	Gia	41:02	2023-03-27	Video Conference	CSO (1)
8	Isa	39:52	2023-03-28	Video Conference	CSO (1)
9	Joanna	42:34	2023-03-28	Video Conference	CSO (1)
10	Katy	30:53	2023-03-30	Video Conference	CSO (1)
11	Lucy	35:38	2023-03-30	Video Conference	SM (2)
12	Mia	44:29	2023-03-31	Office	CSO (1)

The parenthesis refers to seniority. (1) Reports directly to CEO. (2) are two managerial levels below the CEO.

Appendix 3. Interview Guide

Introductory Questions:
1. Could you tell us a little bit about your professional background?
   - Where/what did you study?
   - Is your current role your first sustainability dedicated role?
2. How would you describe your role in the company?
3. What does sustainability mean to you?

Key Questions:

Clarifying questions asked after key questions:
- *Why/why not?*
- *Why do you think that is?*
- *In which ways?*
- *Can you describe with an example?*

Role Schema:
1. Has the role as an SM been as you expected it to be?
2. What is your view of a good SM today?
   - Potential follow up questions:
     - Has your view changed?
     - What do you believe has affected your view of what a good SM is?
     - Do you believe anyone could become a good SM?
3. Do you perceive the common understanding of SMs to be accurate?

4. What expectations do you perceive society places on your organization's sustainability work?
5. Do you believe other SMs have a similar view as you?

System requirements:

1. How would you describe the sustainability work in your company today?
    - o Potential follow up questions:
        - ▪ Are you where you would like to be?
2. What do you perceive as the biggest opportunities in your role?
3. What do you perceive as the biggest challenges in your role?
4. What expectations do you perceive others in the organization place on you?
    - o Potential follow up questions:
        - ▪ Expectations from the top management team?
        - ▪ Expectations from employees?
5. Do you perceive these expectations to be reasonable?
6. How do you experience your relationship with other managers?

Self-concept:

1. What are the primary reasons you chose to work as an SM?
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. Are there any strengths you believe assists you in your role?
4. Are there any weaknesses you believe disturbs you in your role?
5. Are you doing anything actively to improve in your role?
    - o Potential follow up questions:
        - ▪ Does your organization support you in this?
6. Do you have a role model?
7. What do you view as you purpose in life?

Additional questions:

1. How do you view long term versus short term work in your role?
2. What do you view as your purpose in the organization?
3. How do you relate to other SMs?
4. If you could give advice to a newly hired SM, what would you have said?

Final Questions:

1. Is there anything you believe we have not asked that you would like to add?
2. Do you have any final questions about the research before we end this session?

Note: *Questionnaire has been translated from Swedish to English.*