**Chapter 4**

**Emotional work as a necessity: a psychosocial analysis of low-carbon energy collaboration stories**

Rosie Robison

**Keywords:** Affect; Narratives; Sustainability; Defended subject; Thematic analysis.

**Abstract**

The urgent challenges of climate change and encouraging (more) sustainable consumption call for effective collaborations between stakeholders. However political and professional contexts often prioritise delivery of outcomes (the ‘what’) over process (the ‘how’). Indeed, even when external engagement or internal communication processes are carefully planned the actually ‘doing’ of them may still be hard, and at times emotionally intensive, work. This is where psychosocial theories offer significant insight; however, to date, they have been primarily brought to bear on caring and health professions rather than sustainability. Through a psychosocial analysis of collaboration stories gathered within a major project on low-carbon energy challenges across Europe, this chapter explores this emotional work. Results will be of practical interest to those looking to understand, encourage and undertake collaborative working for sustainability.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, energy and climate change challenges have come to be accepted as requiring significant insight and intervention at a human and societal level i.e. the ‘technological fix’ will not be enough (Sovacool 2014). These so-called ‘wicked’ problems –which involve many interconnected elements – have prompted greater consideration of how to bring together multi-stakeholder interests and increase collaborative working (Büscher and Sumpf 2017). Different branches of the sustainability-related social sciences are therefore actively exploring questions of collaboration linked to governance, city-level partnerships, and engagement, amongst other areas. There is thus a clear desire – in both theoretical and practical terms – to understand how to design such collaborations most effectively in order to tackle interlinked sustainability issues in a coherent and long-term manner.

However, the target-driven culture within which such collaborations operate often pull toward a focus on delivery of outcomes (the ‘what’) over process (the ‘how’). Indeed, even when process is deliberately considered upfront – for example integration of stakeholder engagement and internal communication tools into the delivery of low-carbon projects[[1]](#footnote-1) – the actually ‘doing’ may still be hard, and at times emotionally intensive, work. By explaining the principles behind and then undertaking a psychosocial analysis of collaboration stories related to meeting low-carbon energy challenges, this chapter explores this emotional work (by which we mean our emotional engagement with others and managing our own emotions). I argue this type of psychosocial analysis helps us better recognise the experiences, behaviours and reactions of others as mirroring our own to some degree, disarming unhelpful ‘us and them’ thinking. Indeed it is interesting to note that a number of chapters of this book look at different angles of professional work within the sustainability sector and this is a new and exciting extension in the psychosocial field.

Narrative techniques in data collection and analysis can also help us effectively explore collaborative working for sustainability. They are increasingly being used to explore human and social aspects of sustainability, since they are seen as offering both ways of (1) interpreting *meaning*, and generally going beyond one-way communication of scientific ‘facts’; as well as (2) including ‘authentic’ voices and thereby better understanding different (and potentially marginalised) groups. When undertaken in group settings, narrative methods may also be (3) a collaborative tool in themselves, bringing together multiple voices. Specific to the current chapter, the narrative technique of ‘storytelling’ has gained in popularity recently, including use with technical (e.g. engineering) communities. Major recent UK and European initiatives include the Energy Biographies project, Task 24 of the International Energy Agency, the Stories of Change project, and a (highly subscribed) special issue on storytelling in the journal *Energy Research & Social Science* in 2016.

However, it is important to remember that consideration of factors *beyond* what people explicitly say or do – such as emotion, affect or intersubjective dynamics, key areas of interest in psychosocial work – is not the mainstream in social science sustainability work and is also not inherent in all narrative analyses. Indeed in most cases storytelling and narrative techniques invoked in energy research do not include any special attention to emotion, with other benefits brought to the fore[[2]](#footnote-2). Some storytelling projects however are finding themes such as emotion, affect and atmosphere to be particularly pertinent (Rohse, Day & Llewellyn, n.d.), and call for these to be more readily acknowledged as a very real part of energy transitions. We discuss these more next.

**Psychosocial research, narratives and emotional work**

The drastic reductions in carbon footprints being targeted in many countries imply fundamental changes for individuals and societies. However, when challenged to make profound changes to our lives, health and social care researchers and therapists have known for decades that we are very capable of acting in contradictory ways. We may say one thing and do another (ambivalence), hide less desirable aspects of what we think or do from ourself and others (self-deception/defence). Further, when we hold anxieties or fears about change we may mould the information we receive to fit those ideas and justify not changing (denial). We do much of this without being cognitively aware we are doing it, although we can develop ways to recognise these patterns. Far from being surprising ‘irrationalities’ to criticise others for, these are normal parts of human experience.

***Narrative psychosocial methods and analysis***

How then can we include consideration in our analyses of these elements which are often left unspoken or hidden from even ourselves? This is a central question in psychosocial research.

In the psychosocial tradition, psychosocial narrative enquiry may be used in particular to enable unconscious elements to surface. Methods (and accompanying analysis procedures) which focus explicitly on ‘narrative’ include the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) as developed by Wengraf (2001), and the Free-Association Narrative Interviews of Hollway and Jefferson (2000). Their proponents describe these methods variously as“provocation[s] of storytelling” (Wengraf 2001, p.111) or aimed at “eliciting stories” (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, p.35) and similarly in this chapter I use the terms narrative and story fairly interchangeably. It is worth remembering that not all qualitative research interventions explicitly invite stories. Asking “how can we engage people with climate change?” for example does not invite a story in the way that “can you tell me about a time when you discussed climate change with a friend of family member?” does – however participants may and often do respond to all types of questions in a narrative form.

I outline here then three core ways in which psychosocial *analyses* of narratives may attempt to go ‘beneath the surface’, and in this way differ from some other types of qualitative analysis:

1. *Listening to the told story:*Psychosocial analyses of storytelling seek to directly attune to *how* stories are told, and explore what this reveals about emotional position. When we deliberately focus on listening to the ‘told story’ (i.e. as told by that particular person, at that time), the range of possible responses also expands. Rather than confronting the content of what is said in an interview setting (“why did you do that?”), we could choose to respond more to the underlying tone (“it sounds like you feel…”); when underlying conflicts are present this may be more effective in helping the conversation move forward. This kind of technique has been developed in both addiction therapies and climate change work, termed ‘rolling with the resistance’ by Miller & Rolnick (2003). Throughout this process, the listener is recognised as an active part; if a speaker senses they are not being listened to this will directly impact on the narrative (Wengraf 2001) and the researcher’s human response to the story also feeds directly into the analysis process. Listening to others’ stories, and picking up on emotional cues of the teller either verbally or non-verbally, also involves reflexivity about our own emotions, attitudes, and behaviours.
2. *Revealing unconscious defences through stories:* The ‘defended’ subject (Hollway & Jefferson 2000) and the related theory of the organisational or social defense (see a useful explanation in Mnguni 2010) describe our capacity to psychologically protect ourself (unconsciously) from anxieties through strategies which, when looked at in the abstract, may seem highly irrational. Such strategies, which a psychosocial analysis will seek to recognise, include: splitting and projection - creating caricatures where certain people/structures/groups/times are seen as wholly good or wholly bad, and can thus be blamed or held up; interpretation of new information in a selective way (including ‘forgetting’ information) to fit our existing beliefs; holding on to contradictory (i.e. ambivalent) ideas for example related to what we ‘deserve’ (or what society owes us) whilst overlooking our own impact on others.
3. *The framing of stories in society:*A further aspect of narrative/storytelling analysis concerns noting the framing of narratives, and how stories can be used to reinforce or challenge the status quo (Little & Froggett 2009). This present study was not looking at stories created or told in the public domain, however the stories were arguably a means of ‘safe challenge’ in a group-working environment, and indeed this is often advocated as a strength of the method (Mourik, Robison & Breukers 2017). An important observation (from psychosocial research and elsewhere) concerns the dominance of a linear ‘problem-action-solution’ structure to the stories propagated in very many social contexts, notably in justifications of political decisions. Little & Froggett (2009) align this with a strong focus on success and failure in many modern cultures. This is a clear example of how the way we, as individuals, tell our stories is not simply a product of our ‘rationality’ (or lack of it) but is also of social context, and this is also something a psychosocial analysis aims to be sensitive to.

***Emotional work***

Given how narrative, story-based research may help uncover emotional elements of experience as described above, they seem a fruitful approach to explore emotional work. Emotional work or emotion work (Hochschild 2015) is a fairly broad term which encompasses the management our own and others’ emotions. Within this, emotional labour refers more specifically to actively modifying or managing the presentation of one’s emotions, for example a nurse taking the time to listen and empathise with a patient when they themselves are dealing with a difficult personal issue. Most notably, emotional work and emotional labour has been explored extensively for health workers and caring professions (e.g. Angus & Greenberg 2011, Ogińska-Bulik 2005) however it has been explored in other contexts including socio-emotional learning aspects of education (Blackmore 1996) and organisational studies (Lawrence 2014).

Whilst there is not an extensive literature looking at emotional and affective aspects of collaborative *sustainability* work, a number of innovative PhDs have begun to demonstrate their relevance through in-depth working with organisations. Thus Mnguni (2008) directly explored the “psychodynamics of collaborating for sustainability” (p.39) between four institutes working together in Melbourne to deliver education for sustainability programmes. She writes that she “seek[s] to alert people working in the domain [of sustainability] to some of the practices that, while appearing rational on the surface, may in fact be counter-productive” (p.41) looking in particular at defensive aspects. Mnguni asks how we can develop a more “mature relatedness” and be able to work through tensions, rather than aspiring to entirely smooth collaborations and then have things fall apart when that fantasy is broken. In another PhD study Reger (2017) undertook interviews with volunteers across 30 community energy schemes in the UK, and in particular highlighted that “the emotions involved in running CESs should not be omitted from academic discussion” (p.241). She discussed the fears and anxieties participants held about ensuring they delivered on their parts of projects (particularly which may involve friends and have material implications for others) as well as the sense of enjoyment, pride and building relationships as being core parts of the reasons for their involvement.

**Methods: story collection and psychosocial analysis**

The stories discussed in the present chapter focussed on collaborative working in low-energy projects. They were created at a workshop run in November 2017 in Cambridge as part of the SHAPE ENERGY (Social sciences & Humanities for Advancing Policy in European Energy) project – see Robison et al. (2018) for details of the full workshop series across 17 European cities. Each workshop explored local energy challenges, and the Cambridge event aimed to *“bring together invited stakeholders concerned with the future of housing in Cambridge to discuss local targets, and pathways to meet these”* including *“identify[ing] where multi-stakeholder collaborations for local low-energy housing initiatives have been most productive/challenging, and discuss some of the reasons for this”*. There were 28 participants from local policy, local business, community groups and NGOs, and universities.

***The stories***

The SHAPE ENERGY ‘flavour’ of storytelling needed to be replicable across multiple contexts, and led by novice facilitators in some cases. To this end a full storytelling facilitation guide (and 2-day training event) had been produced in the previous months (Mourik, Robison & Breukers 2017). In particular, the main storytelling elements were fairly structured. Thus in the Cambridge workshop, the first storytelling session invited participants to write down a personal experience related to collaborative working (in most cases in low-energy housing projects) which was then shared in small groups. Prepared templates for this suggested a ‘beginning/middle/end’ structure. The second storytelling session used a ‘story spine’, and groups worked together to imagine ‘visions’ which responded to challenges they’d identified from the individual stories earlier. A story spine is a set of beginning of sentences which can then be completed. In this case they ran along the following lines: “In order to respond to *[issue from earlier session]…”, “*between 2018 and 2022, the following projects were run…”, “However, problems / conflicts arose …”, “And particular groups worked to address these by…”. Examples of two of the collaborative stories in full can be found in Robison et al. (2018).

***Accompanying materials***

Data gathered on the day included: 27 stories from individuals (one co-facilitator did not write down a story; I wrote one of the 27) plus notes written by participants related to the stories they heard from others, 4 collaborative sets of stories (these had been written up by myself from flipchart notes made on the day, and sent to the group facilitators for their input), videos of a few attendees telling their ‘stories’, participant observation notes of the plenary session taken by myself and another member of the SHAPE ENERGY consortium, reflective notes I wrote in the evening immediately after the workshop, and brief emailed reflections from 6 other co-facilitators on their group work. Also included were two internal project reports (one descriptive - what happened, one reflexive - how it happened) which I wrote in the two weeks after the workshop.

***The analysis process***

For the present chapter I went over the above material several times, mindful of the following analytic tools as identified through the psychosocial review work outlined earlier: (i) the overall emotional picture the stories conveyed (how they were told), (ii) potential defences they revealed, and (iii) how the stories reproduced or challenged wider social structures of the sustainability professional. I was trying to ‘listen’ to the participants and often pictured the person concerned (which also involved remembering non-verbal impressions from my extensive interactions with participants before, during, and in some cases after the event), and I deliberately identified the main impression each story made on me. I asked myself questions like: “how would I feel in that situation?”, “what do they seem to be finding hard?”, as well as “what might I say to this person, to tap into how they feel, and keep the conversation going?” In a few cases I built on this latter question to exchange short follow-ups with participants (primarily via email), which also fed into the analysis. Overall, this process facilitated greater consideration of the *whole* stories, rather than solely focussing on small segments of text (which thematic content analysis often pulls us toward).

**Findings and discussion**

In the descriptive internal project workshop report (mentioned in the *Accompanying materials* subsection) I highlighted that the following elements for ‘successful collaborative working’ were identified repeatedly by participants:

* Multi-stakeholder buy-in early on, and sufficient resources in the set-up phase for detailed data gathering
* Developing a shared vision and managing differences in vision
* Generating agreed metrics and clear mechanisms for sharing data
* Considering the many interconnected elements of sustainability (‘joined up thinking’)
* Utilising educational methods and/or engagement with other groups

However, results from this type of “tell it like it is” thematic analysis (Hollway & Jefferson 2007 p.56) do not necessarily teach us much about *how* to achieve these outcomes, or what to do if (when) things don’t go smoothly. Further, it reflects more what participants profess to believe is important rather than what participants actually prioritise and do when faced with real situations (cf. discussions of ‘espoused theory’ vs ‘theory in use’ from Argyris [1976]).

In particular, it is noteworthy that this initial analysis did not raise up the question of emotional work *at all*, precisely because it is not often conveyed explicitly in what people say. This is particularly true in a setting where people are presenting their professional selves (ironically thus also undertaking emotional work by presenting or repressing certain parts of the self): yet this is precisely the setting in which research and policy agendas are so often constructed. As we shall see, the following sections uncover important elements of collaborative project work which are thus very often missed out of such conversations.

***‘Beneath the surface’ analysis part 1: Unspoken emotional work***

 In this section I discuss four emotional work ‘tasks’ in collaborative projects which were invoked: (1) stepping outside our own defensive boundaries, (2) empathising despite stress, (3) continuing in the face of a lack of acknowledgement, and (4) containing anxieties. These tasks share a commonality in that they are rarely spoken about and may not even be directly recognised by the person doing them.

First then, a repeated sentiment within the stories was the importance of seeing the bigger picture, and some frustration at others’ inability to do this:

 *“No-one achieved what they had wanted to. More discussion at the start would have helped, with a real awareness of different values & needs from the project.”*

 *“[it was] sparked by a comment .. ‘[there is] not the mentality in Cambridge or funding to achieve’ quality design of green infrastructure – lack of joined up thinking”*

At the same time though as projecting these limitations onto others, I got a strong sense of participants giving signals or hints about the limits of *their own* sphere of influence. It was contained in the way job roles were defined, responsibilities were described, and a sometimes resigned attitude to external factors. In my notes, I indicated how participants’ *“professional identity allows discussion of projects in a distanced way”*, so they themselves did not always even appear as part of the story. When I read one story, for example, developments which I knew to be highly distressing for those involved and leading to job losses in some sectors (I used the words ‘toxic’ in my own notes) were reported in a very measured way such as *“inconsistent policy environment”* or *“original timescales too short”*.

Drawing clear boundaries around what is our responsibility and the options open to us can help ‘defend’ us, and past work in organisational studies has explored how managers in similar roles and situations may perceive very different sets of choice options (Stewart 1982). But these defences can be problematic when there is a need to ‘step up’ to deal with new or unexpected tasks, which is what participants were explicitly calling on others to do. Indeed, a key question in psychosocial work related to climate change is arguably how we can take greater ‘ownership’ of problems, and therefore of solutions, without feeling defeated by them. The collaborative visioning stories, which had fewer constraints (since no one actually had to commit to do them), often aspired to get lots of organisations involved, go the extra mile, and work together for some higher purpose. When we step outside our defensive boundaries in this way we may be ‘putting ourselves out there’ both emotionally and professionally by saying we are willing to take some extra responsibility, and self-care may be particularly important to avoid issues such as burnout.

 Linked to this, it was clear that a time-pressured or stressed environment is perhaps the surest way to ensure people retreat into their own perceived responsibilities, rather than consider stepping outside them:

 *“They were all quite aware, I felt, of the different values, but they were victims of the process and its timing as much as of anything else.”*

 *“Due to project pressure … I felt project members sometimes took the tenants for granted, or made assumptions”.*

Here is described an ambivalence: both an awareness at a cognitive level (e.g. of the different values of different groups), but at the same time an inability to incorporate this into future actions. Taking the time to understand or empathise with others despite project pressures involves emotional effort, since we may have to set aside our own anxieties about getting the work completed, having to change our own plans, and so forth. Stress directly impacts on our ability to do this, and organisational norms (where deadlines and targets take precedent) are also designed to discourage this.

A third element was related to a lack of acknowledgement and not feeling valued. In one of the stories told within the group I was facilitating, the teller gave a strong sense of resignation that a lot of the effort put into developing a very low-carbon housing development was not perhaps, in the end, valued by the occupants:

 *“What ‘value’ is placed on low carbon homes? – not sure in social housing it is recognised by end user.”*

It was clear that the response of the users mattered to this person, possibly more than that of colleagues or bosses. This type of lack of acknowledgement can be quite hard to bear, and similarly felt like a situation where a defensive boundary may easily be put up: why – as a highly capable person – would you expose yourself to working in areas where you do not get recognition for your efforts? Interestingly, I observed two related but distinct responses to this type of situation. The first involved exploring what those stakeholders *would* value instead, and moving focus to those areas (thus potentially adjusting the overall ‘vision’). The second, in contrast, involved identifying which benefits of the existing vision were priorities for the target group. Thus, in the latter case, one participant had chosen to focus on the goodwill there was toward non-carbon saving related benefits of the project they were leading:

 *“For some it was more the social angle, fuel poverty, rather than carbon reduction.”*

This strategy had involved working to contain the anxieties (noted here as worries) of other groups:

*“there were some involved who initially could not see the benefits of the project or who were worried that implementing the guidance would create more work … [but] … there was a very clear desire within the organisation to deliver healthy homes that have a positive impact on residents’ health and wellbeing.”*

Another participant saw this type of emotional management of anxieties as critical:

*“[Managing people’s emotional responses] is a top three priority,* ***probably the most important priority in many projects****when dealing with a diverse group from different sectors...  People who represent an organisation/area/group of stakeholders can feel under immense pressure when comparing themselves to others in a group situation.  I have to consider what their primary preference or need is and navigate a solution that includes it or at least a manageable and acceptable way to address it.” (bold added)*

Further, another participant – when asked – readily listed over 20 specific ‘fears’ they recognised as held by different stakeholders they worked with, linked to e.g. being seen as fair, professional reputation, future contracts and financial implications, public scrutiny, etc. To cope with others’ anxieties about things which had not yet happened, participants had to demonstrate their own commitment in actions as well as words. They had to be a reassuring and constant presence, especially in the face of changing external circumstances (e.g. policy changes) or changes in personnel.

None of this emotional work can be undertaken without support, and in emotionally effective teams members recognised this and felt able to both ask for and give such support; this involves being willing to reveal some degree of vulnerability, trusting this will not be exploited. Again we note that this type of skillset was not mentioned as an explicit priority although it was hinted at in terms of good and flexible leadership, which one group particularly focussed on.

***‘Beneath the surface’ analysis part 2: Constructive challenge***

In this section I talk about emotional work which may be more directly apparent than that discussed in the previous section, and an issue often discussed at the workshop: how to deal with challenge (or conflict) within teams as well as externally. After highlighting the disconnect there can be between the outward impression of a project and actually ‘living’ it, I discuss a strategy commonly advocated to avoid challenge (1) early vision building, before moving on to one which was observed (2) external blame, before finally discussing (3) creating a strong underlying purpose whilst remaining open to changing course.

Recognition of achievements and having some sense of key measures of ‘success’ helps when one is working to keep a team all pulling in more or less the same direction. Many participants therefore had key facts and figures at their fingertips, demonstrating the scale and/or success of their projects:

 *“444 one-hour tours were made by 207 visitors to 13 houses”*

 *“It is a current project and going well, the time to identify & engage nearly 300 stakeholders”*

 *“…some 100 schools took part. With tens of thousands of bulbs sold.”*

Success measures were also evident in more qualitative (rather than quantitative) ways in how people talked about the competency of their teams and the credentials of their contacts; all of this was not done to ‘show off’ but rather to build legitimacy.

 However this presentation of positive impacts of course does not capture everything going on for people actually working within a team. In some stories the contrast between the ‘external face’ of the project, and the reality of working within it, was brought to the fore:

 *“Everyone over-committed and worked too many hours … the construction company was difficult to work with, ended up being sued .. and produced houses that the occupants had lots of complaints with… Externally facing the project ironically received multiple awards.”*

Indeed, in the reverse situation, some implied the disheartening impact of missing targets even when the team had fought hard to maintain the overall vision:

 *“Deciding what is a reasonable reason to miss the target … was challenging and somewhat subjective… It is important to have the flexibility to allow for failures where intent has been made to hit the target.”*

Few of the stories presented by participants were ‘plain sailing’; indeed the ones that came closest to this were those where the teller gave the least away about their own feelings regarding the project. A key point here then is that there is a tension between presenting a positive face, and yet acknowledging that there may be times when constructive challenge (management of conflict, changes of plan, etc.) within a team is needed. How a project deals with disagreement and change is perhaps as or even more important than its list of ‘achievements’, in particular when considering the legacy it leaves for future projects including in terms of capacity building. Indeed the five priorities the participants themselves explicitly identified (at the start of the *Findings and discussion* section) all essentially call for strategies to manage or engage with differing views.

This desire is despite of (or perhaps because of) the fact that it has become increasingly hard, in our performance indicator culture, for organisations to discuss challenge and conflict openly. There is an extensive literature around the damaging effect of policies which discourage institutions from admitting any mistakes or failings at all and how this may have perverse effects by stifling the very outcomes they seek to encourage (Hoggett 2010). This can be the case even when framing ‘problems’ as always having neat ‘solutions’, which has become the norm in policymaking and programme implementation, which includes sustainability initiatives.

How, then, did the storytellers themselves explain that they dealt with (or aspired to deal with) challenge or disagreement? Here, the collaborative stories do provide particular food for thought, since we deliberately designed the framework (the story spines) to ask people to imagine problems which might arise and plan for how to deal with these. Indeed considering our own storytelling method design reflexively we see that we ourselves replicated the dominant ‘problem – action – solution’ narrative in our story spines, and although we left space for the ending of the story to be more ambiguous, many did choose to close on a note of resultion.

The most commonly invoked mechanism (highlighted clearly in all four collaborative stories) was stakeholder involvement at an early stage. This was seen as somewhat of a panacea for avoiding all future problems:

 *“consensus at the beginning is crucial, perhaps through running a ‘visioning exercise’ at the beginning of projects to make sure everyone is on the same page.”*

However there was not much discussion of how to achieve such consensus, and there seemed to be a great deal of faith that this would set the project on a course to avoid all conflict whereas of course increased stakeholder engagement does not automatically eliminate objections. In one collaborative story there was more reflective consideration of how this could be problematic or indeed not actually achievable:

 *“various problems/issues arose, including… how exactly to be inclusive and engage ‘everyone’ through dialogue.”*

A second, more defensive strategy, when faced with conflict is displacing blame outside the immediate team (as also highlighted earlier). I have talked elsewhere (Robison & Jansson Boyd 2013) about the ‘no blame’ approach to sustainability issues. By focussing attention on external issues – the technology, the finance, the timescales, or of course groups outside of those immediately present – we can avoid confrontation and keep good relations with the people who we need to continue working with. Of course this is understandable, however it does not provide a mechanism to hold others to account, in an empathetic way, and thus does not always allow the conversation to move forward. This was clearly recognised by one facilitator when discussing the group work:

*“.. we began pointing fingers at particular actors for their responsibility in creating the transition challenge. We first pointed to policy-makers… then tenants and households looking to buy a home, blaming them for not demanding sustainable refurbishments and housing design respectively. Then we began blaming the landlords .... The process continued. Going around in circles in the blame game prevented us from moving forward in imagining concrete projects that could be carried out.”*

Whilst much has been written about ‘in-group and out-group’ psychology, blame can also be a channel for our own feelings of shame at not having been able to avoid current challenges. When we think we have failed in some way, we are likely to be particularly exasperated by others’ failings (projection).

Aside from perfect agreement from the start of a project, or displacing blame onto other parties, a more constructive strategy related to taking strength from developing an underlying purpose. When I dug deeper into this through a follow-up conversation with one participant, it seemed that it was not so much about a consultation process of trying to come up with a compromise which suited all, but rather developing a degree of trust in their own underlying purpose:

*“It was just a case of… [pause] reinforcing WHY you’re doing it. These are our residents, we are responsible for their health and wellbeing. Getting these arguments clear ahead of time. And if this increases the initial work upfront, to focus on the outcomes… I did get a bit ‘short’ with some people [who were creating barriers] ... We were lucky because the impetus came from [senior staff who were] able to quieten some of the negative language. By saying, for example ‘for goodness sake, stop worrying!’ which is something I wouldn’t dare to say.”*

At a first reading, this reflection might seem to be a dismissal of emotional issues (‘stop worrying!’), however when related to me the sense this story gave was of that senior staff member being highly supportive of their colleagues, and not being afraid to call out excuses for lack of action. In addition, it is yet another acknowledgement that anxiety can be a major stumbling blocks in projects.

Constructively challenging decisions and actions is notoriously difficult, and direct challenge – trying to ‘reason’ people into different courses of action – which can be a first reaction may not be the most effective route if underlying anxieties are present. Within the psychosocial design of the Carbon Conversations group work, Randall (2015 p.8) advocates that *“empathising with the feeling while at the same time not accepting the excuse often helps people unfreeze their old patterns and experiment with new ones”.* Within a collaborative project – in order to avoid people simply dismissing us as having our own ‘agenda’ – we also need to be open to allowing challenge *to ourselves*. Self-esteem (in part generated through emotional support from others) allows us to contain defensive reactions when challenged. I would also argue that the very type of analysis conducted here helps us avoid ‘us and them’ defensive thinking through highlighting the commonalities of our emotional experience.

The accounts also show how our approaches to conflict are hugely bound up in our professional practices and structures, for example the seniority of staff making a tangible difference to what they were allowed to say. Although several of our participants were operating in a relatively independent or consultant capacity, all had to fit within the larger system, and thus negotiate between acting as they are expected to within that system, and asserting their personal feelings of what is desirable. We are all aware of the examples when professional expectations (e.g. flying to project meetings) conflict with the messages we are advocating, yet feel unavoidable. Again, the balance between maintaining underlying purpose and openness to other viewpoints is a critical one.

**Conclusions - emotional work as a necessity**

Much of what I have discussed could relate to collaborations in many contexts, however these are important issues to highlight in the low-carbon or sustainable energy context in part since energy (and climate change) have long been seen as primarily technical domains. This means emotion is often overlooked, where it is more taken for granted in e.g. health work. When using a psychosocial analytic approach with these sustainability-related collaboration stories, skilled emotional work is seen as a necessary part, which often involve navigating fine balances between our own and others’ emotions. Listening to the ‘told’ stories and recognising defences offered significantly more detail than a content analysis in terms of the everyday actions needed in order to actually manage e.g. ‘differences in vision’. These included recognising others’ fears, acknowledging the efforts of others, noting how stress can limit empathetic response. Considering the stories’ framings we also directly saw the tensions created through the need to adopt a somewhat falsely positive external face to projects.

A critical point, of relevance for future studies, is that although emotional work was not identified upfront by participants (and thus would not be readily developed from a thematic content analysis), when reflected back to participants (through sending follow-up questions) its relevance *was* directly recognised. This reemphasises both how methodologies themselves determine what types of results can be found, and how we are still in the early days of awareness over the importance of emotional management. How do these results practically help us? Not all sustainability professions will want to (or should) suddenly pursue a professional accreditation in emotional work, but it arguably should be given greater prominence in designing projects. Expertise in this domain is not always included in job descriptions or recognised professionally. It is not an aim of low-carbon energy policies to help develop emotional skills, and some may even experience it being actively defended against in some settings.

One criticism of these in-depth qualitative techniques is their lack of scalability, given the enormity (and urgency) of the challenges faced. Psychosocial researchers may for example conduct multiple interviews with the same person over several months. This chapter therefore also offers a contribution in that it reports on the use of a method which has been ‘scaled’ to a certain degree. The stories analysed were prompted using a relatively structured approach, and the amount of time given to their telling was not extensive. Did this attempt at scaling work? Gathering data in a narrative format has certainly allowed a far deeper post-event analysis related to the feel and emotion of the responses, but also facilitated more nuanced and reflective discussion between participants at the workshop itself, particularly for the collaborative visioning stories. The psychosocial analysis undertaken for this chapter was however only made possible through my personal contact with the participants, and thus some degree of human interaction is a necessity.

The results suggest that – rather than placing faith in building perfect consensus at the start of a project – it may be a combination of hundreds of small actions and decisions (to acknowledge, to empathise, to recognise both others’ and our own excuses, to seek support, to press on) which add up to a collaboration which more successfully deals with this emotional work. These small actions are rarely captured in an interview or one-off setting and diary work (coupled with some form of personal interaction) of those undertaking active projects could be a fruitful next step. A final challenge is that in all of this is that, to be successful, emotional support must feel genuine. It is the colleague who notices you are struggling and makes a deliberate effort to help. Whilst creating compulsory tick boxes (new ‘targets’) may therefore be counterproductive, it *is* possible for institutions to foster cultures where it is ok to show this vulnerability and accept support, and this must be a greater part of the conversation around low-carbon energy transitions.

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1. Examples could include low-carbon housing developments, cycling infrastructure projects, or fuel poverty or energy savings campaigns. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, within the ERSS special issue on storytelling and energy much more prominent frameworks (than emotion) included imaginaries, participatory engagement/vision building, the Multi-Level Perspective, media analysis (including discourse analysis and framing), and social practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)