



Emotion regulation of sustainability professionals facing adversity

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Abstract

In this Group. Interaction. Organizations. (GIO) article, we view Norwegian regenerative farmers as sustainability professionals and explore their emotions and emotion regulation strategies as they face adversity at work. Working with sustainability is intense work as it implies addressing economic, sustainability, and social needs. Regenerative farmers experience heightened stress and strains due to limited resources in farming. We did a qualitative study based on participant observation and interviews and found that regenerative farmers reported emotions such as guilt, pride, frustration, joy, sadness, and loneliness in their work. They regulated their emotions by a) redefining and accepting problems as challenges; b) creating meaning from their work; c) seeking community through exchange of knowledge and care; and d) protecting their philosophy and practice. This study identifies how sustainability professionals might regulate their emotions over transitions to more sustainable practices. We found that it is essential to facilitate social connections between sustainability professionals for their wellbeing, and mental health.

Keywords Regenerative farming · Sustainability · Animal farming · Emotions · Emotion regulation

Emotionsregulation von Nachhaltigkeitsfachkräften, die mit Widrigkeiten konfrontiert sind

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel der „Gruppe. Interaktion. Organisationen. (GIO)“ betrachten wir norwegische regenerative Landwirte als Nachhaltigkeitsprofis und erforschen ihre Emotion und Emotionsregulationsstrategien, wenn sie am Arbeitsplatz Widrigkeiten gegenüberstehen. Die Arbeit im Bereich Nachhaltigkeit ist spannungsgeladen, da sie die kontinuierliche Bewältigung wirtschaftlicher, nachhaltiger und sozialer Bedürfnisse impliziert. Regenerative Landwirte erleben oft erhöhten Stress und Belastungen aufgrund begrenzter Ressourcen in der Landwirtschaft. Wir führte eine qualitative Studie auf Basis von Teilnehmendenbeobachtung und Interviews durch und stellten fest, dass regenerative Landwirte Emotionen wie Schuld, Stolz, Frustration, Freude, Traurigkeit und Einsamkeit in ihre Arbeit erlebten. Sie regulierten ihre Emotionen, indem sie a) Probleme neu definierten und akzeptierten; b) Bedeutung aus ihrer Arbeit schöpften; c) Gemeinschaft durch den Austausch von Wissen und Fürsorge suchten; und d) ihre Philosophie und Praxis schützten. Diese Studie zeigt auf wie nachhaltigkeitsfachleuten ihre Emotionen vor, während und nach dem Übergang zu umweltfreundlicheren während und nach den Praktiken regulieren können. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass es entscheidend ist, sinnvolle soziale Verbindungen zwischen nachhaltigkeitsfachleuten in Organisationen zu fördern, um das allgemeine Wohlbefinden dieser Gruppe aufrechtzuerhalten.

Schlüsselwörter Regenerative Landwirtschaft · Nachhaltigkeit · Tierhaltung · Emotionen · Emotionsregulation

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1 Introduction

European organisations increasingly prioritise developmental goals and sustainability due to international commitments (United Nations 2023). This heightened focus on sustainability has led to an increase in sustainability professionals. However, despite this progress, research shows the complexities of working on sustainability. These workers face challenges managing the interplay between economic, social, and environmental factors, known as the triple bottom line (Elkington 2004; 2013). Sustainability professionals derive meaning and passion from their environmental commitments (Russell and Victoria 2022). However, they also experience frustration with the slow pace of organisational climate mitigation efforts (Walker 2012). Consequently, regulative strategies are key to manage stress and complex emotions and prevent burnout (Russell and Victoria 2022). This is crucial to maintain efforts towards the UN environmental goals (United Nations 2023), and understanding emotional regulation strategies is imperative. Therefore, our study delves into the emotion experiences and regulation strategies sustainability professionals use in the unique context of regenerative livestock farms where individuals often bear significant responsibilities.

2 Theory and context

2.1 Emotions and emotion regulation in organisations

Emotions occur in a sensemaking process where people use their past experiences and bodily sensations in the present, to understand their surroundings, make predictions, and act appropriately (Barrett 2017). Thus, emotions are both specific to the individual and informed by context and are regulated accordingly. Emotion regulation refers to the ways that individuals may influence “which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience or express these emotions” (Gross 1998, p. 275).

Understanding emotion and emotion regulation in an organisational context is crucial because they influence behaviour that can impact organisational outcomes. Emotions have been found to affect decision-making (Holloway et al. 2021), the adaptation of innovations (Rieple and Snijders 2018), environmental behaviour (Russell and Victoria 2022), and productivity (Bukchin-Peles, 2022), where positive emotions can increase resilience during adversity (Tugade and Fredrickson 2007). Therefore, emotion regulation at work is essential for sustainable businesses.

2.2 Sustainability professionals—the case of regenerative farming

We focus on regenerative farming as an example of a small sustainability organization. We argue that regenerative farming is more sustainable than conventional farming as it aims to actively restore and enhance natural systems (Rodale Institute 2023). Conventional farms prioritise productivity and use monocultures and chemical pesticides. This contrasts with regenerative farms, which use organic farming practices, and go further to improve soil health, ecosystems, and social and economic standards (Newton et al. 2020). Common practices include holistic management (Syngenta Group 2023), and promotes farmer-led, socially, and economically sound choices (Savory institute 2020) to foster farming practices where the overall aim is to enhance wellbeing and resilience (Regenerativt Norge 2023).

Research has shown that conventional farming can be stressful due to economic and resource limitations (Vayro et al. 2020), and increases risks of mental health problems (Logstein 2016). Yet, little is known of regenerative farmers’ experiences. However, there is evidence that regenerative farming practices may enhance wellbeing (Brown et al. 2021) and quality of life (Qi et al. 2023). Sustainability focused farming may also provide farmers with protective factors for mental health such as environmental responsibility and job satisfaction (Brigance et al. 2018). Our study builds on this research by exploring the emotions and regulation strategies of regenerative farmers, a unique sustainability organisation.

3 Methodology

3.1 Norwegian context

Data collection took place from October to December 2021 in Norway. Fluctuations in the weather and challenging terrain mean that Norwegian agriculture mostly produces meat and animal by-products (Statistics Norway, 2024). Norwegian agriculture highly relies on government subsidies (Hemmings 2016), where only around 5% of Norwegian farms are certified organic (Bjørlo 2023), and even fewer use regenerative practices. Consequently, Norway has one of the lowest percentages of organic farms in Europe (Eurostat statistics explained 2023).

3.2 Data collection

Recruitment of regenerative livestock farmers was done through social media. To ensure that the farms recruited were committed to regenerative methods, we excluded non-

Table 1 Sample

Farm	Participants (Gender) Role	Data collection
1	Ada (female) Bent (male) Primary owners	5 days participant observations + interview
2	Cecilie (female) Dag (male) Primary owners	5 days participant observations + interview
3	Einar (male) Primary owner	Interview
4	Fredrik (male) Primary owner	1 day participant observation + interview
5	Eirik (male) One of two owners	Interview
6	Fiona (Female) Geir (male) Primary owners	2 days participant observation + interview
7	Herman (male), Jacob (male), Tor (male), Two managers responsible for their area, one trainee	Group interview
8	Henrik (male) Primary owner	3 days participant observation + interview
9	Kjetil (male) Janne (female) Primary owners	1 day participant observation + interview
10	Grete (female) One of two owners	1 day participant observation + interview
11	Hilde (female) One of two owners	Interview

certified organic farms, as this is a key part of regenerative philosophy (Newton et al. 2020). We used a purposive, heterogeneous sampling method (Etikan et al. 2015), to select farms that differed in location and livestock type, to gain a rich dataset. We used participant observation, which involved taking field notes that included description of the workday, the researcher's emotional experience and recalled or transcribed notes from conversations. This was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with farmers (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Participant observations lasted from 1–5 days (see Table 1), enabled the researcher to work closely with farmers, fostering a deep and contextual understanding of the emotional complexities in Norwegian regenerative farming. Data were collected from 11 farms (see Table 1). 14 of the farmers interviewed were owners, while the remaining were members. Farmers were largely male ($n=11$) and middle-aged (M age=46, ranging from 28–70). Interviews were 30–120 min and focused on daily routine, subjective experience of farm tasks (e.g., working with animals), and situations that might be emotionally difficult or motivating (see Appendix A). Probing questions explored rewarding aspects, challenges and how participants regulated or managed emotional experiences, along with experiences of support. Questions were adapted as issues emerged along with sharing impressions observed in the field.

3.3 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, as it is flexible and suited to analysing patterns across different types of qualitative data (Braun and Clark 2021). The analysis was primarily deductive and drew on social constructivism and emotions theoretical framework. This meant analysing semantic and latent content, examining what the farmers said along with a latent analytical process that was informed by the observation. The first step was extract-

ing parts of the transcripts and conversations from the field notes focusing on emotion experiences by farmers. The next step was to annotate the dataset to create initial semantic codes, which were then grouped under primary themes. The main themes were then created based on the latent meaning of primary themes and revised several times by the team. This process was done iteratively and collaboratively among the co-authors to maintain transparency in the analytical process. A key question was how the researcher could be best integrated in the farming context as a vegetarian without any farming experience, and the decision was to speak openly about this with the farmers. The researcher also took a common volunteer role on the farms, so farmers saw the researcher as a worker on equal footing. Becoming more embedded in this context prompted reflection on how the researchers' compassion for farmers may affect their analysis. To reduce potential bias, the researcher waited 5–6 months after final data collection to transcribe and analyse the data.

All names, places, and partners in the transcription were anonymised with pseudonyms. Approval by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) was obtained prior to the data collection.

4 Findings

Regenerative livestock farmers are fuelled by a passion for regenerative practices, navigating a complex emotional landscape. They faced frustration and anger from resistance, particularly from non-regenerative groups. Despite this, regenerative farmers express gratitude, finding satisfaction in continuously expanding their skills through collaborative work with nature. Some turn negative emotions into motivation for agricultural entrepreneurship, seeking economic security and fulfilment by exploring new paths in their work. Farmers regulated their emotions in four dif-

ferent ways: (1) by redefining and accepting problems as challenges; (2) by creating meaning from their work (3) by seeking community through the exchange of knowledge and care; and (4) by protecting their philosophy and practices.

4.1 Redefining and accepting problems as challenges

Many regenerative farmers approach farming issues as “natural” challenges rather than obstacles. By redefining them as opportunities for development and accepting natural fluctuation, they foster the potential for beneficial outcomes. Redefining problems is a regulatory action towards reducing the experience of negative emotions and reflecting their adaptive and growth-oriented approach to farm management. Cecilie gives one example. She expresses awareness of issues like feeling alienated and wishes for universal happiness. Her regulatory approach to maintaining wellbeing and care for her garden is to embrace challenges as “natural”.

Cecilie Farm 2: “(...) I just really want (pause) everyone to be happy. A place where you can be a weed. (...) Instead of seeking problems, I think there are no problems in a garden. There is essentially only communication.”

This might indicate that gardening encourages regulative strategies based on the farmer’s belief in regenerative practices. She highlights “weeds” not as problems to be fixed but as opportunities for care and communication. Gardening activities and the philosophy of “working with nature” that underlies regenerative farming may prompt a shift in cognitive understanding of problems to see them as challenges.

Farmers also employ redefining and acceptance strategies when discussing animal slaughter. For example, they express affection for their animals but accept slaughtering as inherent to their profession. Fredrik sees slaughtering dairy cows that have provided milk for a long time as a sad, unexpected event, as dairy cows usually are for milk, not meat production. Accepting the necessity of their slaughter while holding love for the animal involves redefining the act as a natural aspect of their work to manage these complex emotions.

Fredrik farm 4: “No, you have had animals that have functioned for a long time, that you have created a relationship with, it is sad to slaughter them, but it is a part of being a farmer. All animals will at some point be slaughtered. It is a part of the ‘game’, we just have to deal with it.”

Slaughtering is not just a job but an essential part of the farmer’s identity. Fredrik also shows how adopting an attitude of acceptance can facilitate progress by preventing fixation on the problem and allowing new ideas and practices.

4.2 Creating meaning from their work

When discussing challenging situations, farmers often emphasise their passion or commitment. This is an emotion regulation strategy that helps them understand why they choose to persist in a demanding profession. What might be considered meaningful varies between farmers. Farmers see it as “meaningful to produce food for people” (Farm 7 Herman), “see that the animals are doing well” (Grete farm 10) and create balance in nature by “animals and crop production together” (Dag farm 2).

Hilde uses her strong commitment as a way to manage negative experiences of “difference” in their area, which indicates a sense of meaning.

Hilde farm 11: “(...) With the other farmers in the area, it is demanding to know how to talk to, and not step on any toes or feel that we are quite alternative or at least newcomers (...). We are both quite convinced that what we are doing is good.”

Creating meaning and taking pride in “doing good” helps address emotions of loneliness and frustration stemming from feeling like an outsider in her community. Farmers can engage in meaningful and positive interactions with customers. Grete, Farm 10: “I get very proud; this is what I am passionate about(...) getting people more conscious about these things”. She expresses positive emotions about raising awareness of the conscious consumption of meat. This might work to regulate the intensity or duration of the emotional experience during the busiest time of the year and demonstrates that farmers create meaning as an emotion regulation strategy to change negative emotions into positive ones.

4.3 Seeking community through exchange of knowledge and care

Farmers seek to be part of a community to help navigate their daily challenges. A sense of community regulates emotional experiences of isolation on the farm through support networks and a sense of belonging. Connections with diverse social groups can mitigate emotional strains by allowing them to share challenges, seek advice and gain reassurance from people who share their unique circumstances. Einar (Farm 3) found that knowledge from more experienced regenerative farmers regulated his negative emotions and gave reassurance. Einar: “You just have to trust that

the new method is working (regenerative methods). It was quite difficult at times; a lot of calling people and asking what I should do.”

Emotion regulation through community was a common topic. Fredrik (Farm 4) says that “talking to my conventional neighbours” and actively “searching for and going on courses” on organic and regenerative practices is essential to reduce feelings of loneliness in the absence of nearby regenerative farms. Bent (Farm 1) also describes this need for relationships with conventional farmers: “(...) so you might find something that you have in common, that also might save some money by doing (...)” He finds common ground with the conventional farmer to create a local community, that provides him support, stating “I would not want to be without my (conventional) neighbours (...)”. By knowing “That it is not only me that is working the land (...)” he can feel a sense of belonging.

4.4 Protecting their philosophy and practises

The final theme from our data shows how farmers manage their emotions in response to resistance from conventional livestock farming communities through avoiding them or defending the philosophy behind regenerative practices, essentially a flight or fight strategy. Some farmers “defend” their farming practice in arguments with other farmers. To regulate frustration, the regenerative farmer chooses to “fight back” when encountering resistance from other farmers. Janne (Farm 9) explains this strategy “No, there is some bullying all the time. (...) You have to be prepared to defend yourself.” Einar (Farm 3) also stated: “I have felt obliged to defend organic (practices) in meetings”. He later explained that switching to regenerative practices increased his confidence in arguments, as “It is easier to defend now”, in comparison to when he was an organic farmer.

Erik (Farm 5) also talked about the resistance that he experiences from the local community. When asked if they often talk, Erik said: “no, the rural culture in the valley is quite intense, so conflict can arise quickly”, indicating an avoidance of situations that evoke specific emotion responses. Janne also displays this strategy by avoiding a local gathering organised by the national agricultural advisory, but feeling hopeless about the agricultural practices found in conventional farming. Janne: “(...) In the last meeting (...), it was all about pesticide spraying and stuff. I got so depressed that I didn’t attend the next time (meeting).” The example illustrates that regulatory strategies changes, it also shows how past experiences can influence future emotional responses.

5 Discussion

In this study, we found that regenerative farmers use diverse emotion regulation strategies according to situations experienced on the farm. They regulate their emotions in four ways: (1) redefining and accepting problems as challenges; (2) creating meaning from their work (3) seeking community through the exchange of knowledge and care; and (4) protecting their philosophy and practices.

The strategy of redefining and accepting problems as challenges emphasises proactive problem-solving that allows the development of new practices and sources of income. This links with literature on problem-focused coping in sustainability professionals (Russell and Victoria 2022) and farmers (Kurniyawan et al. 2023). Our study found that redefining problems can alter negative emotions. The reappraisal strategy allows farmers to accept the negative emotion and process it to allow for more productive outcomes. This could be attributed to farmers’ resilience as a mentally tough occupational group (Vayro et al. 2020). However, one could argue that the “finding balance” principle implemented in regenerative farming (Regenerativt Norge 2023) encourages beneficial emotional regulation strategies.

Creating meaning has been identified as intrinsic to sustainability professionals (Russell and Victoria 2022). This aligns with our study, which identified the creation of meaning as an emotion regulation strategy used actively by regenerative farmers in times of adversity. The autonomy of sustainability professionals in the farming sector provides the farmer opportunities to create meaning and further elaborate them. This might reflect how well this work aligns with their values or vision of life (Padel, 2001).

Adverse experiences, especially the isolation experienced as minority farmers, may motivate the need to connect with like-minded regenerative farmers who share perspectives and grasp the methodologies employed. However, our study finds that most regenerative livestock farmers actively fostered diverse connections, including animals. These communities helped regulate negative emotional experiences and promoted a sense of belonging in farming. Knowledge sharing enhanced production methods and their ability to deal with challenges collectively, contributing to the refinement of regenerative farming techniques and functioning as an emotion regulation strategy (Cofré-Bravo et al. 2019; Schreiber et al. 2023).

Alternatively, some farmers protected decisions by either defending them or avoiding conflict. This regulative strategy tended to be used by those who had more intense emotional experiences, like feelings of depression, in comparison to those who could reframe problems as challenges or opportunities. Resistance within the broader farming community prompted regenerative farmers to use avoidance strategies to prevent negative encounters. Situa-

tions like interacting with non-regenerative farmers, could evoke a feeling of attack, which triggers a “fight or flight” response. According to Gross (2002), a reappraisal strategy is often more beneficial than avoidance, as the latter suppresses the emotional expression but not the experience. Prolonged states of fight or flight negatively impact mental and physical wellbeing (Hussin 2008).

Our study highlights the suggested link between regenerative philosophy and emotional regulation. Regenerative farming encourages farmers to address issues within the farm’s ecosystem, such as managing weeds, by identifying imbalance and restoring harmony through targeted interventions (Regenerativt Norge 2023). As emotions often stem from a bodily imbalance (Barrett 2017), regenerative farming practices might indicate an emotional sensitivity that considers the farmer’s experience and thereby aids in emotion regulation.

5.1 Implication for theory and practice

This study contributes to the empirical literature of sustainability professionals and has practical implications for sustainability professionals. As this study indicates, regenerative farmers are proactive and creative in regulating emotions. These findings benefit regenerative farmers but may also apply to the broader agricultural community and sustainability professionals by encouraging a more wholesome work practice and emphasising the individual in an organisation. Furthermore, regenerative practices and holistic management techniques promote “balance” and may reduce sustainability professionals’ challenges. Sustainability professionals need to develop communities to discuss tasks and challenges. Management can support sustainability professionals by supporting regenerative practices that stem from holistic management strategies.

5.2 Limitations and future research

This study has provided valuable insight into an understudied field of emotion regulation of regenerative farmers. It did not investigate the challenges the regenerative farming community faced, how these varied between farming systems, and how emotion regulation strategies varied according to the challenges. Comparative studies in farming should be done to elaborate on the impact of context and to investigate if sustainability professionals have different regulative strategies to those working in similar roles that are not sustainability focused.

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6 Appendix

6.1 Interview guide in english

6.1.1 Description of the use of the interview guide for a larger project.

Numbers: symbolise the main question.

Letters: are the follow up questions if necessary.

Background:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - a) Age, education, family, upbringings, hobbies.
2. What does a typical workday/week look like for you?
3. How did you end up in the job/position you have today?
 - a. What lead you to take over the farm or start as a farmer?

Sustainable meat and sustainable principals:

1. What comes to mind when you hear sustainable meat?
 - a. What do you think this includes?
2. What is your thought on the sustainability measures that politicians plan to implement. How do you feel these affect you in your positing/work.

Motivation and Drive:

1. What does the job mean to you?
2. How do you experience working with animals/meat?
3. Are there any aspects of the job that you find particularly rewarding/motivating?

Barriers and Value Conflicts:

1. What are the negative aspects of the work?
 - a. A specific task or external factors
2. Can you tell me about an event at work situation you found challenging or uncomfortable?
3. How do you manage difficult situation at work- or work-related events?
4. Do you experience job tasks or aspects that go against your values?
 - a. How do you feel these values affect your work life?
 - b) What barriers do you face in your job- or work-related settings?
 - c) Do you feel these values create barriers in your work-day?

Conclusion and summary:

1. Do you have any concluding thoughts about the future of your profession?
2. Is there anything you like to add in closing, or something you feel that we did not discuss?

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Author Contribution All authors contributed to the study design. The first author, Vilde Johannessen, and authors Fay Giæver and Sally Russell aided the choice of theoretical concepts needed and method of analysis. The first author was responsible for the participants' recruitment, data collection, analysis, and original drafts preparations. Author Fay Giæver and Sophia Efstathiou aided in the development of the finalised labels of the themes. All authors provided feedback at different stages and contributed to the writing of this article with different levels of contributions, in line with their placement in the order of authorship. Author Sophia Efstathiou ensured that the article was in line with the research project funding this work, including insight on human-animal relationships in regenerative livestock farming.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest V. Johannessen, F. Giæver, S. Efstathiou and S. Russell declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical standards I declare that all the facts given above are genuine to the best of my knowledge and belief. For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies mentioned were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

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