



In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
Natalia Andrea Rodríguez-González

Will defend her prospectus

What Exactly Are They Talking About?
A Pathway Toward Understanding Sustainability

Thursday, March 5, 2020
2:00 pm
The Biomimicry Center,
College of Design South, CDS-126

Faculty, students, and the public are invited.

Supervisory Committee:
Scott Cloutier, Chair
Shirley-Ann Behraves, Member
Sarah Amira De la Garza, Member

Abstract

As society increasingly aims to safeguard the future of the planet, sustainability has become a shining beacon of hope to address local and global socio-ecological challenges. Yet, what sustainability is and represents might often feel abstract and open to differing interpretations depending on its advocates. Multiple interpretations of sustainability's values and goals have permeated the global community (Harris, 2007; Ihlen & Roper, 2014), with conflicting approaches to current and future socio-ecological crises. Subjected to these debates is the lay public, to which sustainability knowledge and practices might be limited to recycling, community gardens, consuming organic foods, or technological fixes such as changing light bulbs or installing solar panels (Noppers et al., 2014). While such processes and actions are important, fostering such a narrow perspective amongst the public could be systematically detrimental to global sustainability goals. Achieving a sustainable world depends on the understanding of attitudes toward and perspectives of sustainability and associated behaviors. Thus, it is imperative to address not only external sustainability challenges but also those that may limit an individual's understanding of and motivation to adopt sustainability standards in their lives.

As part of my Ph.D. dissertation, I propose an investigation of the understanding of sustainability and individuals' disposition to act accordingly. My research will be presented as three publishable academic papers. In paper one, I will focus on the framing of sustainability in the U.S. by national newspapers. My goal is to identify/analyze one of the many sources of discourse reaching the general public that may influence their understanding of sustainability. For the second paper, I will conduct a national survey to analyze sustainability worldviews and the values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape the understanding of the concept. Lastly, in paper three, I will focus on my personal experience as a member of the field of sustainability science. I plan to explore my own understanding of sustainability and my engagement with sustainability practices through an autoethnographic study. The expected outcome of this dissertation is a deeper understanding of individuals' comprehension of sustainability in the U.S. and how we, as sustainability scientists and scholars, might better inform the lay public with respect to achieving sustainability outcomes.