

## Narrative identities associated with sustainability-oriented innovation

*Problem: What specific IM problem does the submission focus on?*

There has been a boom of recent research into sustainability-oriented innovation, covering different research questions and themes (Geradts and Bocken, 2018; Watson et al., 2019). Yet there still remains little empirical research into the ways sustainability-oriented innovation is practiced by professionals. We adopt narrative identity theory to explore the ways in which professionals in the UK built environment construct collective identity of becoming more innovative and sustainable and individual self-identities in response to the broader discourse of sustainability-oriented innovation promoted by the government. We have conducted the collaborative workshop “The visioning of sustainability: Changing professional identities and the imperatives of climate change” with 15 professionals across various UK built environment organisations (clients, suppliers, consultants, megaprojects) and subsequent narrative interviews with them individually. We found that across these different professionals and their organisations there is a strong sense of a collective identity of becoming more innovative and sustainable, and associated self-identities (e.g. facilitator, agent, champion of sustainability-oriented innovation). We highlight narrative identity work as central to the enactments of sustainability-oriented discourse.

*Current understanding: What is known about the problem, who and how it has been tackled before?*

Countries worldwide (e.g. Norway, France, UK) are intensively promoting sustainability-oriented innovation discourse in the built environment to respond to the climate change which has emerged as the major social, economic and political challenge. The need to respond to climate change is an influential grand discourse driving the targets set by different industries, new forms of regulations, challenging our understanding of ourselves as individuals and the context within which we are situated (Wright et al., 2012). As such, in the UK Construction 2025 strategy sets the target of a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in the built environment by 2025, and the UK Climate Change Act sets the target of reducing emissions by 80% by 2050. Whilst industrial policy and targets are in place to push the UK built environment firms and individuals to become more sustainable and innovative, it remains unclear how they respond to this grand narrative of sustainability-oriented innovation. We adopt the definition of sustainability-oriented innovation from

Geradts and Bocken (2018) as 'green' initiatives and improvements for environment and society at large. In their study through interviews with managers at various companies recognised for their sustainability activities they found a close connection between individual and corporate purpose. They suggest essential elements for promoting sustainability-oriented innovation: a clear direction to translate a purpose into action, budget and resources to pursue the goals, room for collaboration between different organisations, positive reinforcement of employees. Building upon their work, this research study contributes to better understanding of the ways in which professionals in the UK built environment construct collective identity of becoming more innovative and sustainable and individual self-identities in response to the broader discourse of sustainability-oriented innovation promoted by the government.

The theoretical position adopted in this research builds upon the work of Ricoeur (1983) who conceives narratives and narration as meaning making through time and individual experiences. Narratives thereby generate unique discursive spaces which may unfold over time to create shared discursive spaces. The present, past, and future is experienced thereby through a unity of perpetual referring, meaning that our reflection is influenced by our currently experienced moments in time and the future moments we may be anticipating. Narratives and narrating play important role in constructing collective and individual identities. As argued by Brown (2006, p. 732) "an understanding of identity informed by narrative, I suggest, provides an additional interpretative lens that may open up new avenues for identity research, and assist scholars in their efforts to develop insightful theory". He argues that the identities are best regarded as continuous processes of narration where the narrator and the audience formulate, edit, applause and refuse various elements of the narratives. This is consistent with Ricoeur's (1983) idea of narrative identity takes into account the processual nature of narrative and its intimate and inextricable links to other human processes of identity, knowledge, consciousness and reality. We highlight that narrative identity is central to individuals by providing a sense of continuity between who they have been and who they are becoming.

Relevant work includes Wright et al. (2012) identified and labelled multiple identity narratives of sustainability managers who presented themselves as such in response to the broader engagement with climate change discourse: "green change agents", "relational manager" and "the committed activities". They argue that identities are dialogical as they are constructed through interaction with others; and situated as they are dependent on available discourses pertaining to specific cultural and social contexts in order to form an understanding of the self. Sergeeva and Green (2019) demonstrate the tendency of senior

executives to oscillate between coherent persuasive narratives and more personalised stories in searching for meaning of innovation and constructing informal roles and self-identities (maverick, honest John/Jane, organisational storyteller, organisational scriptwriter, portrayer of pride). We build upon the previous work and explore the ways professionals in the UK built environment construct collective and individual identities associated with sustainability-oriented innovation.

*Research question: What is submission's goal?*

In this article, we focus on this interaction process between the grand narrative of sustainability-oriented innovation promoted by the government and the responses of professionals of the UK built environment. Our research question is:

*What are the collective and individual identities that professionals enact in their engagement with the sustainability-oriented innovation discourse promoted in the built environment policy?*

*Research design: How precisely & in detail was/will the work be executed-describe the methodology/approach*

We focus on professionals of the built environment (sustainability managers, environmental managers, innovation managers and other managers who practice sustainability-oriented innovation) employed within UK built environment. These professionals are responsible for identifying and evaluating business opportunities and threats that may eventuate from climate change, and enacting strategies and practices of response. These individuals and firms are particularly relevant in exploring the ways individual and organisational identities and images are discursively constructed and policies and practices are influenced and shaped.

We have conducted the collaborative workshop “The visioning of sustainability: Changing professional identities and the imperatives of climate change” with 15 professionals across various UK built environment organisations (clients, suppliers, consultants, megaprojects) and subsequent narrative interviews with them individually. Respondents were recruited by targeting leading construction firms in the UK which are actively engaging in promoting sustainability-oriented innovation discourse. Narrative interviews are specifically designed to encourage respondents to tell self-narratives and stories about their experiences in their own way. They are usually comprised of narrative-generating questions which encourage the interviewees to talk about the phenomena under

study. The interviews were transcribed in full, thereby aiding subsequent analysis. The analysis method comprised repeated detailed reading of the transcripts, with a focus on flagging points of commonality and points of difference. NVivo 12 software was used for coding and identifying themes.

### *Findings: Outcomes and results*

The content analysis of the UK government reports demonstrates that there is a consistent narrative about the need for sustainability-oriented innovations in the built environment. There have been some changes in the content of the narrative of sustainability-oriented innovation over time. The word ‘sustainability’ has been used in different context with different meanings ascribed: in relation to whole life cycle of a project; environmental sustainable innovation and associated reduction of carbon emission; industry as a sustainability and innovative leader. The findings from the workshop and narrative interviews show that there is generally an alignment with the government narrative about the need of sustainability-oriented innovations in the built environment. Emphasis was given to economic, social and environmental impact of sustainability-oriented innovations. There has been a strong sense of a collective identity among professionals of becoming more sustainable and innovative industry. This was evident from phrases such as ‘we’, ‘our goal’, ‘collaboratively’ etc. There has also been sense of constructing self-identities by interviewees in response to the broader narrative of sustainability-oriented innovations. For example, one interviewee saw himself as a facilitator of sustainability-oriented innovation in his firm. A number of interviewees saw themselves as agents and champions of sustainability-oriented innovation. They shared some examples of sustainability-oriented innovation and their active roles.

### *Contribution: What will the outcomes and results add to current understanding or theory in the IM community*

This paper responds to the call for more research into narratives of sustainability-oriented innovation (Adams et al., 2016; Geradts and Bocken, 2018; Watson et al., 2019). If we accept that ‘most organisational realities are based on narration’ (Weick, 1995: 127), then indeed narratives serve as a means by which the interviewees sought to make their experiences meaningful. If this being the case, it can further be suggested that narratives help the interviewees reduce what was often perceived ambiguous events to relatively memorable and

plausible accounts. By looking back at past events and experiences, the interviewees construct preferred narratives of sustainability-oriented innovation. They also constructed visioning narratives of sustainability-oriented innovation.

*Practical implications: Who will practically gain what add in which way from the findings*

Based on the empirical findings we have suggest some practical implications. First, companies need to have a clear visioning narrative about sustainability-oriented innovation that can take many different forms – anything from the new or improved products, processes, business models or services that bring benefits to the environment or the society at large. The visioning narrative needs to be articulated to everyone in the company so that there is a common vision and a sense of collective identity of becoming more sustainable and innovative. Companies should continuously recognise the importance of facilitators, agents and champions of sustainability-oriented innovations. Environmental and societal value creation will very much depend on self-identities of professionals and collective identity.

References:

- Adams, R., Heanrenaud, S., Bessant, J., Denyer, D. and Overy, P. (2016). Sustainability-oriented innovation: A systematic review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 18, 180-205.
- Brown, A. D. (2006). A narrative approach to collective identities. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(4), 731-753.
- Geradts, T. H. J. and Bocken, N. M. P. (2018). Driving sustainability-oriented innovation. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 60(2), 78-83.
- Ricoeur, P. (1983). *Time and narrative*. (K McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sergeeva, N., & Green, S. D. (2019). Managerial identity work in action: Formalised narratives and anecdotal stories of innovation. *Construction Management and Economics*, 37(10), 604-623.

Watson, R., Wilson, H. and Macdonald, E. (2019). Reconciling our differences: Making partnerships for sustainability-oriented innovation work. *Academy of Management Annual Meeting Proceedings, 1*, 13559.

Weick, K. E. (1995). Sensemaking of organizations. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications.

Wright, C., Nyberg, D. and Grant, D. (2012). “Hippies on the third floor”: Climate change, narrative identity and the micro-politics of corporate environmentalism. *Organization Studies, 33*(11), 1451-1475.