

Sustainability managers, facilitators and champions and a collective identity of becoming more sustainable in response to sustainability goals

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Abstract

Sustainability discourse pervades social, economic and political system. There has been a boom of recent research into sustainability, covering different research questions and themes. Yet there still remains little empirical research which explores the way sustainability is promoted in the policy discourse and how it is interpreted in practice by individuals and firms. We adopt narrative identity work to examine the ways in which sustainability managers in the UK construction sector construct different self-identities in response to the grand narrative of sustainability promoted at the sector. Based on conducted workshop with 15 participants and subsequent narrative interviews, we demonstrate how these different self-identities and a collective identity arise and inform responses to the grand narrative of sustainability. We highlight narrative identity work as central to the enactments of responses to the sustainability discourse.

Keywords: discourse, grand narrative, narrative identity, identities, sustainability

Introduction

Countries worldwide (e.g. Norway, France, UK) are heavily promoting ‘sustainability’ discourse to respond to the climate change which has emerged as the major social, economic and political challenge. Much deeper, faster and more ambitious response is required to release social and economic transformation needed to achieve sustainability goals (The sustainability development goals, 2019). 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).

Since 2010, EU directives have guided the construction sector towards sustainability in European countries. The 2030 agenda and sustainability development goals offer new opportunities for the construction sector. 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 (Construction 2025: Strategy, 2013). The tasks set for companies in the wider construction sector in the UK are to (1) decarbonise their own businesses; (2) provide people with buildings that enable them to lead more energy-efficient lives; and (3) provide the infrastructure that enables the supply of clean energy and sustainable practices in other areas of the economy (Low Carbon Construction: Innovation & Growth Team, 2010). Whilst industrial policy and targets are in place to push the UK construction sector firms and individuals to be more ‘sustainable’, it remains unclear how they respond to this grand narrative. Construction sector firms have shown a variety of responses to the discourse of sustainability. Leading large construction firms are actively branding themselves as ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’; Sustainability has become a central value and component of work practices; new job titles such as ‘sustainability managers’, ‘environmental managers’ are being created; new sustainability strategies have been developed and actively promoted on the websites and social media. Yet there remains an absence of empirical research on how sustainability is interpreted by sustainability managers and the self-identities and informal they ascribe to themselves in its promotion. If sustainability managers are indeed pivotal in encouraging the sector to achieve sustainability goals the lack of empirical research of this nature would seem to comprise a significant shortcoming.

In this article, we focus on this interaction process between the grand narrative of sustainability promoted at the industry level and the reactions of sustainability managers of the UK construction sector. Our research question is:

What are the different identities that sustainability managers and firms in which they work enact in their engagement with the grand narrative of sustainability in the construction sector policy?

We focus on a specific group of specialist sustainability managers, environmental managers and other managers with associated job titles employed within large UK construction firms. These managers are responsible for identifying and evaluating business opportunities and threats that may eventuate from climate change, and enacting strategies and practices of response (Wright et al., 2012). These individuals and firms are particularly relevant in

exploring the ways individual and collective identities are discursively constructed and policies and practices are influenced and shaped.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on narrative identity work in relation to the social construction of individual and organisational identities through stories of sustainability. Second, we explain the research design, the data collection and analysis process. Our analysis demonstrates different identities that sustainability managers and their firms ascribe to themselves in response to the climate change and sustainability ‘grant’ discourse. We then discuss our results in relation to the reviewed literature with the emphasis on narrative identity work in action. Finally, we summarise our findings and suggest future research agenda.

Narrative identity work

In this article we define identity as conveyed internally within firms and socially constructed by individuals (Yanow, 1996). Self-identity refers to an individual’s sense of ‘self’ (Alvesson, 2010), whilst collective identity refers to the ways people refer to themselves as members of we-group with shared values (Kantner, 2006). We build upon this research and argue that narratives have important implications for shaping the internal identity of firms and individuals. Our argument builds upon Ricoeur (1983) who sees narratives as attempts to impose order which seek to bring coherence and plausibility to disparate experiences and tend to be characterized by performative intent. Performative narratives are often repeated in organizations because repetition serves to stabilise particular meanings (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Abolafia (2010) demonstrates the ways elite policy makers use plotted, plausible and repeated narratives to shape the reactions of those in their environment. Such narratives are said to become formalised when they are reproduced on corporate websites or published in corporate literature. Narratives are also constructed with the intent of shaping organisational actions thereby bringing into existence a social reality that did not exist before (Brown, 2006).

In contrast to the formalized performative narratives of those in power, there is emerging work on counter-narratives defined as “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance to, either implicitly or explicitly to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews, 2004). Focusing on counter-narratives enables us to capture some of the political, social and cultural complexities and tensions in organising. Using a counter-narrative lens implies a number of theoretical assumptions on organizing: (a) constituted in communication and storytelling, (b) a site of struggle over meaning and identity (c) engaging a polyphony of voices, from

organizational members and broader environment. The counter-narrative lens therefore highlights the struggles over meanings, values and identities that take place in organising. Organisations are of course full of such contradictions, and narration and storytelling are essential means of dealing with them (Boje 2011, Gabriel 1995, 2000).

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.

Porter et al. (2018) examine the communication practices by which climate change scientists and skeptics in Netherlands debate about climate change as part of the three authoritative moves: bridging (e.g. create shared framing of the problem; create roles for both positions), (de)coupling (e.g. disassociate from opposing positions’ interpretations of the problem; disassociate from opposing positions; participation) and resisting (e.g. cast doubt on legitimacy of bridged actors’ roles; cast doubt on bridged actors’ framing of the problem). Porter et al. (2018) call for further research into the realities that actors in the climate change debate face when creating interdependencies in the field of dialectical opposition.

Heizmann and Liu (2018) conducted the multimodal discursive analysis of a sustainability leadership centre in Australia, demonstrating how its identity narratives reproduce individualist ideals of leadership. They found that ‘sustainability leaders’ are fashioned via a Buddhist narrative through which they traverse three stages: calling, awakening and transforming. Heizmann and Liu (2018) highlight that little attention has been given to the interplay between the discursive activities of sustainability actors and the broader power/knowledge relations to which these contribute.

Bordass and Leaman (2013) have suggested a mechanism connecting a collective identity and action: they proposed a set of elements for a ‘new professionalism’ specifically orientated towards a more sustainable future. They highlighted the need for a shared vision across the built environment professions, together a greater use of post-occupancy evaluation (POE) in the form of ‘Soft Landings’ (i.e. a strategy adopted to ensure effective transition from

construction to occupation). In addition, they raised questions in terms of who should be responsible for the resulting knowledge base. As they conclude:

“Today’s tasks for building professionals include adding much more value with fewer natural and financial resources and not just minimizing negative consequences but helping to bring about regenerative change. Truly sustainable solutions require a broad view, responsiveness to context and attention to detail. Better outcomes also require innovation: Purposeful and painstaking improvement to processes, techniques and technologies, based on knowledge of what actually works in practice and what needs improving, or abandoning” (Bordass and Leaman, 2013: 5).

Their argument for a new professionalism is grounded on the assumption of agency – the capacity of construction professionals to reflect on their education and practice, and to seek out and effect change.

In addition to project teams in construction, organisations play a central role. In the context of agency in organisations, Bonham (2013) argued that government clients are key agents for leading and motivating change in the creation of a more sustainable built environment through the piloting of new professional practices. She defined communication and collaboration as essential characteristics of new professional roles within construction, and for the government client in particular. Clearly a number of new professional roles associated with sustainability in the built environment have emerged and these include environmental managers, sustainability consultants, corporate sustainability practitioners, etc. We would further argue that different mechanisms of communication, such as discourses, narratives and stories, influence changes to – and are influenced by changes in - new professional roles and practices. In this context, construction professionals and their stories of everyday experiences can show how a dominant narrative of zero-carbon is lived in practice, at work and outside work. Common discourses around zero-carbon, energy efficiency, building physics and green buildings are evident from communications materials produced and promoted by the built environment organisations. Thus narratives, stories and discourses may constitute a mechanism through which agency is exerted within and between organisations, and transformation is achieved.

However research approaches to discourses and narratives may overlook agency. Zhao et al. (2016) examined zero carbon building from the perspective of business model innovation. While they acknowledged that business models for zero carbon buildings are influenced by political, social and environmental conditions, the ways those who work on zero carbon buildings respond to the business models were omitted from their work. Sergeeva and Lindkvist (2019) further argued that the reduction of carbon emissions requires understanding of consequences at global, national, industry and firm levels and showed how these levels are connected to each other. We would emphasise that the self-identities of professionals, their experiences and practices play an important role in influencing and responding to the zero-carbon agenda. Key industry players, including owners and suppliers, may practice innovation and can be willing to go beyond the expectations of policy. These firms respond to the zero-carbon agenda at the industrial policy level by formalising their sustainability strategies; using innovative and sustainable technologies; creating new job roles with sustainability and innovation in their titles; and creating an environment and culture of sustainability and innovation that is built into their firms' and individuals' identities. In these ways, organisations may act as critical agents of change.

In another organisational study, Wright and colleagues (2012) identified and labelled multiple identity narratives which may be mobilised by sustainability managers faced with addressing the challenges of climate change. Examples include: 'green change agent', 'relational manager' and 'committed activist'. They argued that such identities are continuously constructed through interaction with others and uniquely situated in different contexts. Their argument therefore centred on individual agency at work in organisations, through identification and labelling of self-identities such as change agent. We would argue further that collective identities may be formed in the context of agency and sustainability in the built environment. A collective sense of being and becoming 'green' and 'sustainable' creates a collective identity that drives and motivates individuals to make changes in their personal work practices and everyday life. Collectively, change towards a more sustainable future becomes increasingly feasible as collective agency builds on individual agency. We can conclude that organisations change constantly, through continuous processes of interaction between organisational strategies and narratives, and individual agency and experiences.

Research process

We use insights and methods borrowed from narratology to obtain a better understanding of innovation narrative interaction. Narratology is the theory and study of narratives (Czarniawska, 1997, 2016); it is a form of qualitative research that uses field texts, such as biographies, reports, field notes, conversations, interviews, pictures, video and symbols as the unit of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratology embraces narratives as both the method and phenomena of study (Clandinin, 2007). Building upon the work of Vaara et al. (2016), we identify, examine and compare narratives of sustainability at government, project-based firm and individual levels within a single project-based construction sector. Although narratology has made significant advances in organisational and management studies (Chaidas, 2018; Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004; Czarniawska, 1997), scholars have not yet unleashed its full potential. The main method in narratology is open ended and unstructured interviewing techniques which allow the interviewees to tell narratives, and subsequently the interviewer to interpret and identify the narratives told. Most organisation studies using a narrative approach involved the collection of narratives through interviews in which narrative accounts from respondents are elicited.

Our study focuses on sustainability managers addressing individuals' responses to the sustainability discourse. We conducted the workshop "Visioning of sustainability: Changing professional identities and the imperatives of climate change" with 15 sustainability managers (including Environmental Managers, Heads of Environment) and other participants responsible and interested in sustainability (Consultants, Directors) and subsequent individual narrative interviews with sustainability managers in the UK construction firms. Respondents were recruited by targeting leading construction firms in the UK which are actively engaging in promoting sustainability grand narrative. The interactive workshop has been organised by the authors and lasted half a day. We have delivered PowerPoint presentation (41 slides in total), with some prompts that led to a discussion. Some of the key messages for discussion included: Stories are how we shape the world the way we understand our lives and identities; the material realities of sustainability are continuously shaped and re-shaped by the narratives we mobilise. Some questions we asked during the workshop include: From which discourses are you drawing from when mobilise narratives and stories? How do you balance between your own sense of self and the various work and non-work contexts in which you find yourself? How do you develop different identities in negotiating between discourses and your sense of self? Particular emphasis was given to the way they sought to bridge between narrative about sustainability goals and their own day-to-day experience. The described empirical research

sought to explore the informal roles and self-identities which sustainability managers ascribe to themselves in making sense of sustainability.

Narrative interviews are specifically designed to encourage respondents to tell self-narratives and stories about their experiences in their own way (Mishler, 1991). They are usually comprised of narrative-generating questions which encourage the interviewees to talk about the phenomena under study. We have conducted narrative interviews with the participants. The interview questions included open-ended questions: Tell me about your view on sustainability? How do you practice sustainability? Tell me about yourself and your response to sustainability goals? What is your vision for the future?

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. A coding protocol was adopted which distinguished between grand narrative of sustainability and individual stories.

We also obtained all the government reports on construction sector sustainability over the last 30 years from publicly available websites. We used NVivo 12 software to code and identify themes. This allowed us to build up an overview of the content of the textual government-driven innovation narratives and how it has changed over time. Table 1 outlines the initial key narratives identified from the reports using NVivo software.

Emerging findings

Table 1 The content analysis of narratives about the need for innovation to improve performance in the UK construction sector reports and professional institutions

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| Narratives identified |
| “Sustainability is equally important. Increasingly, clients take the view that construction should be designed and costed as a total package including costs in use and final commissioning.” (Egan, 1998) |

“Property developers who hold and manage the property are more likely to be concerned about whole life cost and building sustainability into the design and construction phases.” (Wolstenholme, 2009)

“A major new driver of this approach is the requirement for environmental sustainability, e.g. for site waste management plans and for energy efficiency to reduce associated carbon emissions.” (Wolstenholme, 2009)

“Our industry must become a sustainability leader and adopt carbon efficiency into all our processes. Our failure so far to link ourselves in the public’s mind with one of the major issues of the day, namely climate change, is a huge missed opportunity for our industry.” (Wolstenholme, 2009)

“An industry that has become dramatically more sustainable.” Industrial Strategy: Construction 2025, 2013)

“The same principle could be applied to clients who procure construction work in a short-termist or irresponsible manner which harms the future sustainability of the industry and in reality, client’s own ability to rely on the construction industry in the future.” (Farmer, 2016)

“It will help to improve the environment through significantly reducing costs of retrofitting these technologies within existing buildings, reducing their energy consumption and increasing their sustainability.” (Construction sector deal, 2018)

“The UK is already a leader in developing and exporting new construction standards. It developed the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEM), the world leading sustainability assessment method for projects, infrastructure and buildings.” (Construction sector deal, 2018)

As evident from Table 1, there is a consistent emphasis on improving the image of the construction industry. Over time, there has been some changes in the content of sustainability narratives at the industry level. Whilst there is a consistent narrative about the importance of sustainability, the word ‘sustainability’ has been used in different context with different meanings ascribed: in relation to whole life cycle of a project (Egan, 1998; Wolstenholme, 2009), environmental sustainability and associated reduction of carbon emission (Construction

sector deal, 2018; Wolstenholme, 2009), industry as a sustainability leader (Farmer, 2016; HM Government, 2018; Wolstenholme, 2009).

The Director, External Affairs and Strategy at Institute of Civil Engineers has reflected on the dynamic nature of narratives set by the government:

“If you think about it in constructing narratives, perhaps 3-4 years ago, or even longer, industry was placing a lot of hope around organising around the carbon and sustainability as driver of change. To me digital almost replaced that. Because the challenge before the financial crisis was about carbon, it certainly was driven by government. The challenge now seems to be about productivity and the performance of the asset. And the challenge is driven by the government. Post-Brexit, post-financial crisis, you need to be more competitive. Narratives have been driven from above, politics, and it shifted, the digital piece has replaced the carbon and sustainability piece. It is not have gone away completely. It is still there. Digital seems to be functioning in a way that carbon used to be functioning 5-10 years ago, some of the industry people have organised themselves to drive industry change; or a justification to drive industry change. Learning legacy is a sort of master narrative. I think learning legacy kicks underneath carbon and digital. We know that if you a project-based sector you always going to have problems absorbing and observing knowledge from project to project. This is sort of well established. There are lots of papers on that. I think learning legacy is trying to address that means to an end really. The problem is collaboration is not there, the learning legacy gets created and damped because the structure of the industry does not really change or really get absorbed.”

The above quote demonstrates the shift in the content of narratives over the years as set by the government. It is evident that the role of narratives is recognised as being top-driven by the government and policy. The content of grand narratives has changed from carbon and sustainability agenda to digital, with some recent emphasis on learning legacy. Learning legacy aims to share the knowledge and lessons learned from construction projects within the UK construction sector. For instance, all major projects in the UK construction sector has formalised documents on learning legacy, including research reports, case studies, example tools and templates.

Table 2 shows some examples of stories shared by participants in response to the grand narrative of sustainability promoted at the industry level.

Table 2. Stories that address sustainability and low carbon agenda

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|---|--|
| <p>Job role and organisation of interviewee who articulated a narrative of innovation</p> | <p>Stories of innovation that address sustainability and low carbon agenda articulated by the interviewee</p> |
| <p>Head of business development and marketing, Specialist contractor firm, UK</p> | <p>‘Design solution to reduce waste’: A group of ten people taken from different areas of the company (e.g. designers, commercial people and operatives with special skills) set up a continuous improvement team. They were given a brief to come up with the design solution that would reduce waste for up to 20% on site. They came up with the design that is 20% less waste. A lot of work had to be done after the innovation was presented to the company. They had to go to external organisations, like building research establishment, to get the innovation estimated and proved. This design solution is now rolling out in the UK and internationally.</p> |
| <p>Property services director, Register provider and a registered charity, UK</p> | <p>At the moment we have a whole climate changing initiatives: carbon reduction, emissions reduction in the UK. I think what we did is there were a lot of organisations saying: ‘We can meet this agenda, but we spend lots of money’. So, innovation was to say: ‘We are going to meet these targets, but we are going to spend as little money as possible. We are going to engage with the supply chain. We are going engage with the residents. We are going to show that you can do, if not the same, but we get quite close to something we spend less money, which is sustainable, repeatable in the long term’. That was project that has received an award ‘first ever innovation in practice’. We have changed the whole culture of our organisation in terms of whole thinking about sustainability, thinking about how we construct things, thinking about our residents. We did it on our own, getting the construction side to push it forward to the point that our organisation was picked as one of a hundred from around the world.</p> |

The above stories of successful innovations in building projects demonstrate the ways they have addressed the sustainability agenda set at the industry level. Innovation champions and leaders play an important role in promoting innovation in the construction industry through stories. They actively engaged in inter-personal relationships across project boundaries to build innovative capabilities at firm and project levels. The interviewees saw themselves as champions and they actively promote their narratives of sustainability-oriented innovations. They are passionate and proud of described innovations. The second example of innovative project is particular remarkable in winning the industry award. This clearly demonstrates a consistency between textual narratives and voiced stories.

Defining sustainability

Most participants refer to three sustainability pillars: environmental, social and economic when define sustainability. Some put more emphasis on environmental, some on social aspects:

“It’s what construction does to support the environmental issues and part of it is waste management. So it’s design, how do we improve the design, how do we improve the constructability, so there were a number of things that we looked at as saving costs but now they are more on a sustainable environment that supports future generations rather than what we do now. So it’s more holistic and includes other things like design, like managing the risk of waste, managing the risk of...” (Project Manager, Construction firm)

In the above quotations there is an emphasis on continuous improvement, future vision for becoming a more sustainable environment.

“I suppose right now I’m particularly interested in the social aspects of sustainability because I see there is in many ways, the environmental stuff which is what I’ve been involved for a long time now for about – well, nearly 30 years since I started at university, I feel that we know what we need to do and it’s a case of implementing that, but I think we’re just starting to understand the social elements it seems to be the next phase really. And because I worked in commercial property I strongly believe there is real opportunity for a lot of our clients who are trying to do the right thing and trying to rebuild or to build some trust with the wider public with the wider stakeholders, and I think that’s where the social elements of sustainability very much comes into play. And you might have heard terms like social value and the value that

development and property investment can actually bring to places.” (Consultant, Construction Management Firm)

In the above quotation the social aspects of sustainability refer to social value. There is also a sense of visioning, future-oriented view on social aspects of sustainability.

Another perspective on sustainability was viewing it as an imperative narrative. This aligns with the title of the interactive workshop:

“Sustainability is about that sort of engagement and getting people interested. And I’ve seen almost a third generation of people coming into the industry and I’ve seen the changes, and I think part of it there’s a kind of almost like a no-brainer – that’s really poorly phrased a bit clichéd – but there’s this acceptance that there is this imperative.”

The interviewee argued that sustainability has become an important narrative, a clichéd word, over the years. It has become popular, and professionals in the industry are engaging with this narrative. Sustainability is seen as important and influential, and was often seen as being about behavioural changes:

“I think sustainability is about changing our behaviour, in all senses of how do we have a concrete that's less carbon intensive? Sustainability's gone from being important to influential stakeholders, certain politicians, certain scientists, it's becoming a popular topic. So, your Sky cycling team has 'save the oceans', it's become a mainstream narrative, not just a technical narrative or a political narrative, so it's risen.” (Project Manager, Infrastructure firm)

The emerging findings from the workshop and subsequent interviews indicate a strong sense of collective identity of being and becoming ‘more sustainable’ as industry, firms and individuals. There have been also some emerging findings about individual self-identities. For example, one participant sees himself as facilitator of sustainability. A number of participants see themselves as sustainability agents who are responsible and actively engaging in related activities.

Individual self-identities

In talking about sustainability practices and work activities and broader engagement with climate change, our participants presented themselves with self-identities. From our analysis

of the data two self-identities were labelled by our respondent as ‘facilitator’ and ‘champion’ of sustainability. These self-identities pertained informal roles that were adopted and for particular audiences.

Facilitators of sustainability

One of the self-identities presented by our participants was that of the ‘facilitator’ of sustainability, an individual who guides and ensures the team works effectively towards meeting the sustainability goals in an organisation and through professional networks. Participants emphasised their commitment to meeting carbon agenda in the construction industry and their life at home. The Environmental Manager from large owner and operator infrastructure firm saw himself as a facilitator of sustainability who is aiming to embed a low carbon efficient approach into project work:

“The bit that gets me out of bed in the morning is this piece about trying to embed a low carbon resource efficient approach into the delivery of a project. What does that actually mean? I’m trying to make sure that when we build... let me give you an example, let’s talk about the runway, in building the runway I’m trying to make that runway use as few materials as possible, to make sure that the carbon impact of constructing that runway is minimised as far as possible and that when it’s in operation I want it to be resource efficient so it doesn’t use any energy and it’s very carbon efficient, that’s what I’m trying to do.”

He further described his role of working together with project team towards common objectives and achieving lower carbon emission:

“So this is where my role as a facilitator comes in, I need to work with that project team and I deliberately say the project team because I’m including the project manager, the costs manager, the engineers and designers, the construction manager, the procurement people, they all have a role to play. So I’m working with all of those to try and say, right, resource efficiency, low carbon etc.”

He reinforced the need for talking with different professionals different language, so that there is a shared understanding:

“Coming back to the role of facilitator, the best sustainability practitioners are people that are able to engage with other professionals and the way that you do that is by talking to people in

their own language. If you're a procurement person then I'm going to talk to you about how can we save money on this project, how can we make procurement more efficient, what can we do. If you're the construction manager, I'm going to talk to you about, right, we can save time here if we did this and this this has an impact on your schedule, and we can change your site with this."

Underpinning the self-identity and informal role of the 'facilitator' of sustainability, interviewees provided examples of the activities they undertook as sustainability and environmental managers and consultants. They have to speak the language of professionals with whom they work and engage to achieve shared understanding towards achieving common sustainability goals.

Champions of sustainability

Many interviewees saw themselves as champions of sustainability, as agents who are actively supporting sustainability agenda among colleagues, responding to the sustainability goals. One example is shared by the consultant from a construction management firm who is proud of his achievement and shared his vision for the future:

"One of the reasons that I've enjoyed my career in construction has been because I can show people, my family, friends, whatever, as we go around the place I can point out things and say, "Well I did that," or, "I was involved in that," or, "I know the people that did that," or, "My business did that bridge or that building." Because I think those things are impressive. So that's where I came from. We've played our part in getting on top of the climate change challenge. So we've continued to provide all of the infrastructure, whether that's housing or roads, or transport, whatever it is that society needs we continue to provide that, but we're doing it in a way that is sustainable. So we've got our heads around what the problem is, recognising we've got a big part to play in helping to solve it and we've done that. So that's what we are doing, and we won't do it in my working lifetime but we'll know whether we're making progress or not in my working lifetime. So that's my vision for the future, to see how we are playing our part in solving that problem." (Consultant, Construction Management Firm)

Many interviewees were keen to talk about visioning future-oriented sustainability narrative. Another example from an advocate of sustainability who reflected on his championing role in creating a network of champions:

“So when we launched sustainability as, I suppose, as a consultancy service, what we did was we started to meet, and I championed it because I founded the consultancy, but in order to make it work I work with and found champions within the business that weren’t all in offices and in different disciplines. And what I found with that was, and we did it through a training programme, so we devised training programme with the College of Estate Management which we then rolled out, so this is 2007/2008, we rolled it out to the whole business, and it was black and white in terms of engagement, people either did it and just went all in and really did it amazingly and really engaged with the programme, or just didn’t do anything. But by doing that, what was evident was that something like 60 to 70% of all the professional staff within TFT actually embraced it. So it wasn’t too bad, but that gave me then a platform, because I had a network of champions, and then I think about where we are today and we’ve got a bigger team of specialists in key offices really around the UK to reflect our offices, and, in addition to that, we’ve got that champions. So, in a way, it’s partly my own theory, but I do start to see that and I’ve seen that echoed and mirrored in other organisations, so bigger organisations and yes, I have dedicated teams, but smaller organisations now are at least having somebody who’s responsible who might not have a sustainability background but they are that person, that go to person who if they don’t know they know somebody. So I think we almost have that sort of hybrid of having some specialists plus people who are champions and the goods. And I see the advocacy of it growing because, as I mentioned earlier, we’re seeing it through generational changes. My children in primary school they’re learning about sustainability and what it means - I didn’t really start learning about it until I was at university, so it’s just part of how they are and how they’re wired, they see it with the climate strikes.” (Consultant, Infrastructure firm)

As evident from the above story, champions of sustainability thought to promote sustainability both within their organisations and outside of work by forming a network of sustainability champions, as well as in their family life and at home. There is a strong sense of being proud of what has been achieved by them and a sense of personal commitment to sustainability.

Collective identity of becoming more sustainable

The empirical data from the workshop and individual narrative interviews have demonstrated a strong sense of a collective identity (‘we’), the sense of shared understanding of sustainability and shared values. They very often talked about shared mindsets and common values. Here are examples that show a strong sense of a collective identity:

“I think if you went to some industry event about sustainability in a particular topic I think in general sustainability practitioners, as in the people that are trying to improve the sustainability of their projects and their organisations, I think you could almost put together like a collective output or collective outlook rather so I think everyone is... so massively generalise, I’d say on the whole people are always trying to learn more, always happy to share what they’ve done and are on the whole, where they can, happy to engage with industry initiatives to try and make things better. If you put all that together it then becomes a, we, as the industry.” (Environmental Manager, owner and operator infrastructure firm)

The above quotations places emphasis on a culture of continuous improvement and learning in the construction sector and people’s willingness to share and engage with industry sustainability initiative.

“So we need to look at all this impact that we have for future generations and then form something sustainable that if someone makes a decision and says okay we’re going to build buildings that will last 30 years and so this is what we’re going to do then. So they know that and thought about it, and that’s how we have sustainable construction.” (Project Manager, Construction firm)

In the above quotation the emphasis is put on the notion of ‘sustainable construction’ and the and impact of sustainable construction on future generations of individuals.

“I’ve just seen a huge change of paying saying we need to do certain things, we need to make sure that sustainability is a priority for the businesses, so the way we’ve structured the business reflects, the way that we work with the other disciplines within the firm it’s a work in progress but it’s very much the next phase of development about engaging with people and ingraining a different approach a more sustainable approach to our day jobs.” (Consultant, Construction Management Firm).

As evident, the participants stressed that sustainability has to be in a priority for the organisation and the need to engage people with a more sustainable approach in their daily lives.

“The whole carbon agenda and the climate change emergency is, you know, a top three thing on everybody’s minds. And so I think we are looking to drive innovative solutions that will

deliver progress on productivity, on industrialisation, on low carbon and sustainability, and that's kind of reflected in our four priority areas.” (Programme Director, Infrastructure owner and operator organisation).

As shown in the above quotations participants talked about climate change agenda and sustainability as priority areas, and their reflection for a sustainable approach to day job and industry as a whole. There is a strong sense of a collective need for a response to the sustainability and climate change imperative.

Discussion

The analysis of industry reports shows that there is a consistent narrative about the need to improve the image of the construction industry and the journey of the industry of becoming more sustainable. There have been also some changes in the narrative about defining what sustainability means at the industry level: in relation to whole life cycle of a project, environmental sustainability and associated reduction of carbon emission, and industry as a sustainability leader. The participants often referred to three pillars when defining sustainability: environmental, social and economic. They also often defined sustainability as a popular and influential narrative. These counter-narratives demonstrate the recognition of the sustainability managers of the policy narrative and their personal perceptions. In this article we contribute to narrative identity work by demonstrating the ways sustainability and environmental managers engage with the industrial sustainability goals in their work practices and life experiences (Heizmann and Liu, 2018; Porter et al., 2018).

The empirical data demonstrate the ways sustainability managers make sense of sustainability and constructing their self-identities and collective identity in response to the sustainability goals. The empirical evidence shows a strong sense of a collective identity of shared vision about sustainability. This is consistent with Bordass and Leaman (2013) who emphasise the need for a shared vision across the built environment professions. Most often the participants refer to ‘we’ as a collective towards achieving sustainability goals. We have demonstrated how environmental manager saw himself as a facilitator of sustainability in his role of engaging with different professionals and achieving the sustainability targets. We have shown how consultants saw themselves as champions of sustainability and create a network of champions. 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”. We are in agreement 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. Issues of narrative identity work will inform our individual and collective decisions and actions.

Project managers play vital roles in integrating the sustainability agenda into the whole life-cycle of a projects from its initiation through to completion (Martens and Carvalho, 2017; Silvius and Schipper 2014). Project managers strive to enhance collaboration among all project team members working towards a project mission. Projects themselves are vehicles of bringing different professionals together forming a collective identity (Sergeeva and Zanello, 2018) and sustainability can become part of conversations and activities performed in projects.

Conclusion

Sustainability discourse pervades social, economic and political system. The UN sustainability goals provide a foundation for industries and firms to achieve these goals. Construction industry plays an important role in achieving the global sustainability goals. Construction professionals more generally are seen as agents of change and agency can lead to modification of structural rules. Personal commitment and values, and self-identity more generally, can contribute to and shape collective identities, including professional, organisational and team identities, which inform group or social sense-making and framing. The past can be reconstructed and can influence present agency, and so stories, narratives and discourses may operate as processes for transformation.

We contend that sustainability lends itself to interpretation from a narrative perspective. Understanding sustainability as an imperative narrative to which individuals and firms respond by their practices and actions opens opportunity for better understanding of the meaning and enactment of sustainability by professionals. It also has important implications for constructing individual and collective identities.

In the context of built environment projects, it is important to pay greater attention to the whole life-cycle from a point when a project is envisaged through feasibility, design, delivery and operation. Throughout a project life-cycle, changes are inevitable (e.g. timeframe, cost amendments, people joining and leaving) with different actors involved in the process. Such a

view reinforces change as a social activity with many professions involved in projects (e.g. project managers, architects, specialist suppliers). This provides a basis for understanding the ways in which sustainability is conceptualised and enacted from the agency perspective. If the quest for sustainability is indeed to become an essential dominant narrative then it needs to become central to the identities of all those involved in projects, including end users. We emphasise that agency does not operate in a vacuum and agency is in constant tension with complex and multiple contextual constraints. Weak legislation, political pressures, maintaining existing structures, prevailing discourses and many other factors constrain the exercise of agency. A focus on agency must not lead to a reductionist, individualistic approach. More holistic approach provides a broader understanding of sustainability discourse and its interpretations.

In order to build on the relatively small base of knowledge on agency and sustainability in construction, a number of topics and research questions can be proposed:

- More multidisciplinary research and multilevel understanding of the individual and organisational responses to the global sustainability agenda are needed. For example, psychologically informed studies could provide complementary insights into organisational and project management studies on agency and sustainability.
- Examination of ‘success stories’ viewed through the lenses of agency and structure could illuminate the processes through which transformation has been accomplished. Organisational change would be of particular interest here – building on the suggestions above, how do organisations become agents for change towards sustainability?
- Research exploring the lived experiences of professionals who practice sustainability in their professional roles offer potential. Ethnographic and diary studies may be particularly valuable here.
- There is potential in investigating the role of materials and buildings as agents. How are particular materials or building forms interpreted as more or less sustainable, what implications does this carry, and what scope exists to re-interpret such meaning?
- The materiality of the built environment in itself creates a story about value creation through the life-cycle from initiation to operation to demotion. Further research is recommended to explore the symbolic nature of materiality and the creation and re-creation of value over time. For example, there is work emerging on the development over time of the symbolic nature of megaprojects.

- Finally, recognising the recent publication of *The Future We Choose* (2020) by Christina Figueres, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change 2010-2016, with Tom Rivett-Carnac, future visions – positive or negative – may exert strong influence. More research is needed on visionary and future-oriented narratives, constructed at different levels, which allow individuals, groups and organisations to connect in ways that emphasise, facilitate and extend their agency for a sustainable future built environment.
- We demonstrate the ways construction professionals respond to the policy discourse in the context of sustainability narratives, equally there are other popular and emergent narratives that merit further detailed investigation: value co-creation, sustainability and digitization, health and wellbeing.

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