“I HAVE NEVER BEEN ENTIRELY SURE QUITE WHAT SUSTAINABILITY IS!” AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF MYAIRPORT’S DESIRE OF BECOMING MORE ‘SUSTAINABLE’

Paul W. Chan and Vivian Liang
“I HAVE NEVER BEEN ENTIRELY SURE QUITE WHAT SUSTAINABILITY IS!” AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF MYAIRPORT’S DESIRE OF BECOMING MORE ‘SUSTAINABLE’

Paul W Chan¹ and Vivian Liang²

ABSTRACT
The concept of sustainability has gained prominence in policy, practice and academic discourses. Much attention has been placed on rationalising attitudinal and behavioural change, and developing prescriptive tools, for securing a more sustainable future. However, successes have been limited. Inspired by growing research interest in locating the emergent and shifting, socio-material context of ‘sustainability’, the study presented in this article is based on an ethnographic case study of an international airport – MyAirport – and its ongoing efforts in becoming more ‘sustainable’. Through over 800 hours of participant observations yielding over 180 pages of field notes, and numerous formal interviews and informal conversations with participants at MyAirport, the multiple ways in which ‘sustainability’ is made relevant at MyAirport are traced. Competing tensions between various conceptualisations of ‘growth’ and ‘sustenance’ have also been articulated. Adopting Foucauldian notions of ethical conduct to interpret the findings, the conclusions highlight how prior knowledge shaped by education and professional knowledge serves to reinforce notions of the participants’ existence at MyAirport, i.e. to operate an air transportation system seamlessly. Consequently, ‘sustainability’ fails to capture the imagination of stakeholders as a reasonable, moral code of conduct. Implications for policy, research and practice are also discussed, with particular emphasis placed on shifting the attention away from producing codes of conducts, to exploring how individuals find pleasure in ‘sustainable’ and ‘sustainability’ work.

KEYWORDS: airports, ethical subject, Foucault, relevance, sustainability.

INTRODUCTION
Since its inception in the 1980s, the notion of ‘sustainability’ has crept into much of our everyday lives across the world. From the daily commute to work to the ways we consume in society, we are often fed with messages of anxiety about the imminent environmental crisis and how our carbon footprints are contributing to climate change in detrimental ways. Calls for acting on sustainable development have gained legitimacy in mainstream political, business and academic discourses. Within the field of engineering, there is certainly increasing acknowledgement of the sustainability agenda, once a myth and now beginning to be enshrined in a wealth of procedural knowledge such as professional codes of practice (Allenby et al., 2007).

At its core, the sustainable development agenda, which grew from the publication of the oft-quoted Brundtland report (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987), is about ensuring a good quality of life for everyone, now and in the future (UK

¹ Lecturer, School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering, The University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom, paul.chan@manchester.ac.uk.
² Doctoral candidate, School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering, The University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom, vivianwei.liang@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk.
Government, 1999). de Haan (2006) deconstructed this agenda, suggesting that the attention placed on sustainable development stemmed from a stark recognition of ecological crises confronting modern-day society and the quest to remedy social injustice that prevents equal opportunities for every human being across the world. Of course, resolving these environmental and social problems requires an understanding of economic perspectives as well (Pearce et al., 1989). High-profile reports such as the Stern (2006) Review serve to emphasise the economic imperatives of sustainable development, where arguments are rallied against inertia since any inaction would cost the global economy and in turn exacerbate related environmental and social problems. Thus, the sustainable development agenda is often colloquially referred to as the triple-bottom-line, ensuring the sustenance of profits, people and planet.

However, despite over thirty years of knowledge produced about the problem of ‘sustainable development’ and its measurement, there is still little consensus on what society can do about this. Knowledge about achieving the aspirations of sustainable development remains incomplete (Chan and Cooper, 2010). There are still many aspects that require considerable debate, especially in terms of the adequacy of interventions. For instance, there are still disagreements about inter-generational equity and how far interventions should be undertaken by the present generation (Neumayer, 1999, and; Ekins, 2003). Neumayer (1999), for example, reminded us that “both the natural and economic science of global warming is unable to provide unambiguous answers (p. 41).” Wackernagel et al. (2004) noted that it is certainly difficult to establish what good practices need to be adopted by the present generation, because “Present demand that damages future supply will only show up in future Footprint assessments, [which...] do not make adjustments for ‘good’ or ‘bad’ management practices (p. 276).” Therefore, societies are left to their own moral devices to cautiously trade off and determine the extent by which current consumption is checked in order to safeguard a more sustainable future (Neumayer, 1999; see also de Haan, 2006, and; Lombardi et al., 2011).

Indeed, there is still a lot of subjective interpretation over how society responds to the challenge of sustainable development. In a survey on managerial perceptions on sustainability published in the MIT Sloan Management Review, it was found that while many managers recognise the relevance of sustainability within their corporate strategies, it remains elusive as to what they must do to confront this contemporary issue (Berns et al., 2009). Consequently, much of the scholarly attention within and beyond engineering project management – inspired by the fields technological transitions and evolutionary economics (see e.g. Nelson and Winter, 1982; Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002, and; Genus and Coles, 2008) – have hitherto focused (rather productively) on developing methods for assessing the problem and identifying technical solutions (e.g. carbon accounting and emissions reduction), and generating policy prescriptions to regulate markets and behaviours (e.g. emissions trading and carbon neutrality). Such approaches have been guided largely by socio-technical perspectives, which consider how individual actions are co-determined by technological breakthroughs, market mediation and regulatory influences (see Rip and Kemp, 1998). Thus, the dominant view underpinning many of these studies is that human actions can essentially (and must) be altered through socio-technical regimes and policy prescriptions if ongoing destruction of the planet were to decelerate (Shove and Walker, 2007, and; Shove, 2010).
In this article, such essentialist, rationalist and interventionist ideas about ‘sustainability’ are questioned with a view to suggest the possibilities of treating ‘sustainability’ as an emergent and shifting concept. Rather than perceiving ‘sustainability’ as an end goal that is contingent upon the manipulation of individual choices and actions (see Shove, 2010 for a recent argument against this view), the research informing this article is based on an appreciation of the plurality of individual responses to ‘sustainability’. Thus, instead of normatively asking what must be done for individuals and individual actions to be ‘sustainable’, this inquiry takes a Foucauldian view (see especially Foucault, 1986) to ask how individuals become more sustainable subjects in society. In this article, empirical examples are drawn from an ongoing ethnographic case study of an international airport to illustrate just how a variety of actors in this context make sense of the ‘sustainability’ agenda. The central argument is that before any (new) codes of ‘sustainable’ conduct can be articulated (let alone prescribed), it is crucial to understand how individuals identify the relevance of ‘sustainability’ in the first place. Making ‘sustainability’ relevant rather than coercing change, it is suggested, holds a vital clue as to why there is apparently slow progress in advancing the ‘sustainability’ agenda.

The article is organised in three main parts. In the first part, the literature on ‘sustainability’ in engineering and built environment contexts will be saliently reviewed. This highlights a considerable amount of work that is centred on the development of tools and methods to account for ‘sustainability’ and produce sustainably-engineered products. It is argued that much of this extant work is aimed at standardising and technologising the notion of ‘sustainability’, and does little to consider how the material objects of these technological interventions are interpreted and enacted in practice (see e.g. Latour, 2005; Orlikowski, 1992, 2007; Suchman, 2007, and; Bresnen and Harty, 2010). It is through this call for emphasising socio-material accounts of change that this study is framed. In the second part, the ethnographic case of an international airport – hereinafter known as MyAirport – is described. The observations, documentary analysis and interviews/conversations with workers and managers provide rich information to provide insight into the many ways in which ‘sustainability’ is imagined, talked about and embraced in decision-making on developing infrastructure at MyAirport. In so doing, the findings reveal how actors at MyAirport make sense of and relate to the significance of ‘sustainability’. In the third part, Foucault’s ethical framework (Foucault, 1986) is drawn upon to explain the findings. Through this application, preliminary conclusions are made in answer to the fundamental question: just how can people working at MyAirport (and we as society at large) become sustainable subjects now and in the future?

The contribution of this article is two-fold. Firstly, existing research on ‘sustainability’ in have often been preoccupied by the production of material artefacts such as tools and methods for evaluation and prescriptive codes of conduct. Yet, success of the transference of these tools and procedures is somewhat limited. Thus, a fresh attempt to explain why these ‘codes of conducts’ fail to become relevant to project stakeholders is presented in this article. Secondly, and following on from the point about relevance, the application of Foucault’s (1986) ethical framework seeks to provide a more detailed of how individual desires relate to the quest of organisations and society becoming more ‘sustainability’. Foucault’s (1986) framework, it is argued, can be very helpful to identify how ‘sustainability’ can be more fruitfully made sense of, with far-reaching consequences beyond the single case of MyAirport presented in this article.
‘SUSTAINABILITY’ IN ENGINEERING PROJECTS: PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS IN CAPTURING SOCIAL CHANGE

Research into the pursuit of a sustainable future has generally sought to influence the ‘ABC’ of social change, including analysing how attitudinal (A) and behavioural change (B) and choices (C) that individuals make can help produce sustainable outcomes (Shove, 2010). Admittedly, attempts made in the field of engineering project management to explain how ‘sustainability’ can be achieved have also followed this trajectory. So, for instance, Meyers (2005) reviewed the attitudes of construction companies to the ascendance of the ‘sustainability agenda, and Yip and Poon (2009) surveyed the construction industry in Hong Kong to explore the trend of cultural shift towards sustainability. At the same time, researchers have also been concerned with examining changes in industry behaviours and practices, with special attention paid to waste reduction and minimisation of environmental impacts (see e.g. Kulatunga et al., 2006; Osmani et al., 2008; Tam, 2009, and; Holton et al., 2010). Others like Bossink (2007) have also tried to articulate leadership behaviours necessary for steering towards more sustainable production. Of the elements of ‘ABC’, the development of decision-support tools and methods of assessment and evaluation to influence choices made have attracted the greatest level of interest (e.g. Li and Shen, 2002; Christini et al., 2004; Ding, 2005; du Plessis, 2005; Robinson et al., 2006; Ugwu and Haupt, 2007; Mathur et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2009; Xing et al., 2009; Li and Yao, 2009; Lombardi et al., 2010, and; Brandon and Lombardi, 2011).

Thus, there seems to be a dominant view in engineering project management that the answer to a sustainable future lies in the search for policy prescriptions and systematic tools that can adequately assess the nature of ‘sustainability’ and identify appropriate interventions (see e.g. Whitmarsh et al., 2010). However, in finding a universal panacea to the ‘sustainability’ problem and normalising such approaches, there is an apparent lack of consideration of the numerous ways in which ‘sustainability’ problems and prospective solutions can be interpreted (Shove, 2011). Moreover, there is also an implicit assumption that making the transition from a presumably unsustainable present to a more sustainable future necessitates managerial actions (Shove and Walker, 2007), thereby further legitimising more rational, socio-technical approaches that proliferate in engineering sustainability. Indeed, the typical response appears to be more/better regulation and policy initiatives to stimulate technological innovation and greater degree of joined-up operations among key actors on the supply side (Rohracher, 2001; see also Geels, 2002).

Yet, change cannot simply be driven by top-down approaches nor brought about by such enlightened actors as policy-makers and industry professionals. Increasingly, there is growing appetite for investigations to go beyond the mere production and reproduction of systematic tools and methods (Chan and Räisänen, 2009) to consider how humans and artefacts interact discursively and materially to make sense of practices in organisations and industry (see Orlikowski, 1992; 2007, and; Suchman, 2007). This growing movement of examining how organisational realities are shaped through what Suchman (2007: 23) called the “contingent co-production” of a socio-material world can be seen to occupy the field of engineering project management (see e.g. Ewenstein and Whyte, 2007, and; Bresnen and Harty, 2010).

The contingent approach is worth noting in the context of ‘sustainability’ since it challenges essentialist ideas about the normative nature of the ‘sustainability’ agenda, and opens
up numerous possibilities in the way people in organisations and society conceptualise sustainability (see Ansari et al., 2011). It helps recover the voices of those that are found in the fringes of the dominant, technologising discourses. So, becoming ‘sustainable’ is not only sanctioned by elites in society or organisations (e.g. politicians, industry leaders, company Chief Executives etc.) nor brought about by breakthroughs in technological innovation (e.g. Rip and Kemp, 1998). Rather, users on the demand side, whose role in interpreting policy prescriptions and/or the use of technological innovations is often downplayed in the literature, play an important part too in the framing of ‘sustainability’ discourses (see e.g. Shove et al., 2008, and; Healy, 2008). More critically, the contingent approach to ‘sustainability’ avoids fixing ‘sustainability’ as a coherent and consistent concept, and emphasises its emergent properties. Thus, instead of defining the state of being ‘sustainable’, the contingent approach recognises that ongoing change of becoming ‘sustainable’ (Chia, 1995; 2002, and; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) necessitates a broader constitution of organisational life. Such breadth requires the appreciation of the messy assemblages that consist of multiplex associations between human actors and non-human objects (see e.g. Latour, 2005, and; Harding, 2007) as organisations make the journey towards becoming more ‘sustainable’.

FOUCAULT AND THE PURSUIT OF ‘SUSTAINABILITY’

Recent surveys of corporate attitudes to ‘sustainability’ have, indeed, exemplified the contingent nature of ‘sustainability’ (see Berns et al., 2009, and; Jones et al., 2010). Jones et al. (2010), for instance, reviewed documentary evidence to determine how US engineering companies have incorporated ‘sustainability’ concerns within their policies. They found remarkable differences in the way ‘sustainability’ is framed. So, product manufacturers tend to place more emphasis on environmental concerns, whereas engineering contractors put more primacy on social issues. Thus, these findings highlight the varying matters of concern (Latour, 2005) that different constituent groups in the engineering sector have about ‘sustainability’, and reinforce the notion that the ‘sustainability’ is not a stable, coherent and consistent concept but one that is fluid, shifting and emergent. The differing views illustrated in Jones’ et al. (2010) analysis also go to show the multiple ways by which the object of ‘sustainability’ can be appropriated through the discourses of corporate policies (see e.g. Foucault, 1975). So, product manufacturers are increasingly becoming more aware and accountable for the contribution of their production towards environmental emissions and engineering contractors tend to be operating in the coalface of managing community relations. Thus, it would seem reasonable that product manufacturers and engineering contractors would frame their understanding of ‘sustainability’ in the ways reported by Jones et al. (2010).

Shifting perspectives of ‘sustainability’ in organisations also epitomise Foucauldian notion of shifting power relations. For Foucault, power is not a thing that necessarily resides in individuals, but situated within an institutional network of relationships that govern and discipline human life (Foucault 1977a, 1977b; see also Burrell, 1988). Such disciplinary power serve to regulate the conduct of conduct, mediated through what Foucault called the regime of truth (Foucault, 1977b); such regime of truth is socially contingent on accepted and institutionalised knowledge at a given time and place. Two recent writings on the pursuit of ‘sustainability’ certainly demonstrate the contingency associated with Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power and regimes of truth. For example, Foster (2008) traced political discourses on environmentalism and environmental crises to illustrate how environmental issues have
increasingly served to discipline market-based principles and neo-liberal agendas. Gluch (2009), on the other hand, drew on several case studies in Sweden to reveal how environmental management remains a largely unacceptable practice in construction project organisations that are often subjected to the disciplinary power of traditional project management culture.

As Foucault (1986) stressed, it is not the codes of conduct but the conduct of conduct that matters. Thus, it is not simply sufficient to develop codes of practices for achieving ‘sustainability’ in organisations, but how the conduct of conducting sustainably is exercised. The contrasting perspectives provided by Foster (2008) and Gluch (2009) illustrate just how divergent the positioning and legitimising of ‘sustainability’ can be. Identifying the relevance of ‘sustainability’ is certainly a crucial aspect, and Foucault’s ideas about shifting power relations and the contingent nature of regimes of truth are particularly instructive here. So, in Gluch’s (2009) study, she analysed how environmental managers forged an identity within the construction project organisations they were operating in to enable them to persuade the project managers of the importance of sustainability. Indeed, to paraphrase Foucault (2010), the environmental managers in Gluch’s (2009) study “cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person (p. 43).” This assertion certainly resonates with prevailing thinking about the fluidity of identity in organisations (see e.g. Alvesson, 2010, and; Brown and Phua, 2011), since configurations of one’s self and their ethical behaviour is dependent on the framing of others. Foucault went on to add that “the role of this other is precisely to tell the truth (2010; ibid.).” Therefore, the unfolding of the identities of the environmental managers in Gluch’s (2009) study appears reasonable, since the ‘truth’ about sustainability remains incomplete (see e.g. O’Riordan, 2000, and; Chan and Cooper, 2010).

Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power and regimes of truth are helpful in arousing expansive accounts of how organisations might become more ‘sustainable’. However, in this article, it is suggested that the focus on power has led to relative neglect of another one of Foucault’s interest; that is individual desire. In his later writings, Foucault began to reclaim the human subject (see e.g. Barratt, 2008). Indeed, when Foucault (2010) speaks about the culture of the self and how one’s self is appropriated in the relationship to others, Foucault qualifies that this other person has to “tell the whole truth […] in a certain form which is precisely parrēsia, which once again is translated as free-spokenness (p. 43).” He mobilised the difficult notion of parrēsia to air his concerns about individual freedom and spiritual direction. Foucault is perhaps better known for his fascination with incarceration, repression and austerity in his writings about power (see Burrell, 1988). Yet, in The Use of Pleasure, he reflected on the austere measures of Greek prohibitions of sexual behaviours (e.g. the deviance of the “courting” of young men) to conclude that “this does not mean that the love of boys will no longer be practiced, nor that it will cease to be expressed, nor that people will no longer raise questions about it (Foucault, 1986: 253).” And so, this suggests that whilst positioning of one’s self might be shifting, individual desires are potentially more ingrained. In the pursuit of ‘sustainability’, the role of the self and individual desires is often neglected. Thus, the purpose of this article is to shed some light on how individuals make sense of the significance of ‘sustainability’ by mobilising empirical examples from an ongoing ethnographic case study of an international airport, MyAirport, and its aspirations of becoming a more ‘sustainable airport’. In the following sections, the background of, and methodological approach behind, the ethnographic case study of MyAirport are described before the critical findings are presented.
BACKGROUND TO THE CONTEXT AND METHODS OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE OF MYAIRPORT

The aviation sector is complex, made up of many activities undertaken by a wide-ranging network of actors (Jarach, 2001), involving interactive assemblages of people, materials and information (Knox et al., 2008). Within the aviation sector, airports play a significant part that provides essential infrastructure for the entire network of air transportation to function. The de-regulation of the sector and subsequent privatisation in the 1990s mean that the sector is becoming more commercialised and market driven (Jarach, 2001). Many airports no longer see their role as mere providers of infrastructure, but also increasingly concerned with such other revenue-generating activities as retail services.

The aviation sector certainly plays a significant role in global economic development (Button 2008, OECD 2012). At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need for airports to meet its environmental responsibility. In the then Labour government’s White Paper, The Future of Air Transport, published in 2003, a strategic framework supported amongst other things the issue of sustainability as a critical agenda in the aviation sector. The initial response to this white paper was one of resistance by the industry (including airlines, regulators and airports), which feared that the sustainability agenda would be counter-productive to efforts made on growing aviation capacity (Kaszewski and Sheat, 2004). The election of the Coalition Government in 2010 has, through its scoping document published in 2011, promised an overhaul to the aviation policy so that there is greater emphasis on getting the sector to address environmental issues such as climate change (Department for Transport, 2011).

This growing emphasis on environmental concerns and climate change opened up an opportunity for the research team to study how an international airport, MyAirport, is working to find a balance between the need to develop its infrastructure for capacity growth while concomitantly discharging its environmental duties. Access was permitted for the research team to enter the Environmental Department of MyAirport Group – the corporate parent of MyAirport – for the purpose of observing how MyAirport thinks and do ‘sustainability’. More specifically, the research team was concerned with how ‘sustainability’ was enacted through the approvals of infrastructure development projects at MyAirport. These sites of observation allowed the team to witness ongoing contestations and negotiations as decision actors at MyAirport sought to trade off between environmental, economic and social concerns when deciding on infrastructure development projects. This enabled the team to gain rich and deep insights into how actors at MyAirport negotiated order (Strauss, 1988) as they navigated through ‘sustainability’ concerns in signing off development projects. Given the complexities of both the context of the aviation sector and the fluidity of ‘sustainability’, the use of ethnography was deemed appropriate since it allowed the researchers to become embedded within the organisational practices of MyAirport, so that close observations of and involvement with the people at the coalface of MyAirport’s operations can be gathered (see Watson, 2011).

To capture the practices at MyAirport and explore how this related to ‘sustainability’, the ethnographic study was informed by a number of research techniques, including participant observations of daily life at MyAirport, regular recordings documented in a research diary, analysis of documentary evidence at MyAirport, formal interviews and informal conversations with many individuals spanning the Environmental, Engineering, Finance, and Terminal
Operations departments. The inquiry process revolved around a number of central questions as our observations and reflections unfold, including ‘What is being done here?’, ‘Who is involved?’, and ‘How and why are things happening in the ways they do?’ These questions were designed to be as open as possible, often aimed at getting individuals to talk about their daily lives at MyAirport, including their triumphs and tribulations. The research team also attempted to dispense with the constituent subject of ‘sustainability’ (see Foucault, 1980) wherever possible, although the participants were made aware that the research project revolved around ‘sustainability’. To date, over 800 hours of participant observations have taken place over 110 working days at MyAirport, yielding over 180 pages of field notes taken by the research team. Twenty formal interviews with managers from the various departments have also been recorded, transcribed and analysed, each lasting an average of around an hour. These formal interviews are also supplemented by many more informal conversations during the observations and walk-arounds, as well evidence from MyAirport’s documents. This dataset provides very rich empirical evidence to help the researchers (and participants) make sense of how ‘sustainability’ features in what MyAirport does through the working lives of our participants. This will be elaborated in the next section.

HOW DOES ‘SUSTAINABILITY’ FEATURE AT MYAIRPORT? SOME EMERGING ISSUES...

In this section, a sub-set of this rich but messy dataset will be used to present a number of emerging findings to analyse how ‘sustainability’ features in everyday occurrences at MyAirport. Four critical aspects guided the inquiry process, including ‘What’, ‘How’ and ‘Why’ things happened the way they did, and with ‘Whose’ involvement. From the analysis of the dataset, four emerging themes transpired, including the prioritisation of ‘sustainability’, identifying the self within ‘sustainability’ work, competing ends and organisational pluralism, and constant reframing of ‘sustainability’ will be presented in turn.

Moving forward: (how) is ‘sustainability’ prioritised?

‘Sustainability’ is often framed as a forward-looking, strategic issue to take organisations into the future (e.g. Berns et al., 2009; Jones and Goodrum, 2010, and; Ansari et al., 2011). At MyAirport, it is clear that sustainability is explicitly articulated in their strategy, as the Group Planning Manager explains,

“Sustainability is one of six, work stream in the strategy, and for each of the work stream, which are, if I can get this right, Aviation, Commercial, Property, People, Customer Experience and Sustainability, as the six main work streams in the strategy. Each of those work stream has got a project lead, which is somebody within the business that has that sort of the area as their primary reasonability”

However, it is worth noting that the strategy referred to in the above quote emanated from a previous senior management team led by the former Chief Executive who retired in June 2010. Since then, the new Chief Executive has launched his manifesto through a video message circulated throughout the organisation. The following is an extract from the transcript of the Chief Executive’s vision for MyAirport, with an emphasis on growing the business and related revenue:
“My hopes for the future is [sic] the same as it always has been. I am keen that we make [MyAirport Group] better firstly, and secondly we want to make the group bigger, so we will make the Group bigger by growing passenger numbers through the four airports, delivering the airport city…”  
*(Transcript from a video message by the Chief Executive)*

The absence of the ‘environment’ is notable. In this four-page transcript, the word ‘environment’ was only mentioned once by the Group Business Services Director, labelled as part of the “disparate” elements of “stuff we were doing (emphasis added).” The key message seems to be one of (re-)orienting MyAirport towards growing its capacity and downplaying environmental ‘sustainability’ and ‘social responsibility’, both of which are now subsumed within MyAirport’s (new?) strategy to gain business credibility as the senior managers desire for it to grow bigger and better:

“I would like to see us really get close to the business, and be helping drive both short term business growth and long term growth […] In terms of the improvement for our Corporate Social Responsibility, we need to bring together all the disparate elements that’s the stuff we were doing for the community and the environment, in terms of employment, turn that into a coherent strategy, use it to grow our reputation. And then through the corporate affairs team, in talking to local government and central government, we can enhance our reputation, making sure we are getting credit for the good work we were doing.”  
*(Transcript from the Chief Executive’s video message, extract of a section by the Group Business Services Director)*

Thus, it would seem that ‘sustainability’ is framed as an economic imperative rather than an environmental one, where the vision is for MyAirport to focus on growing in capacity and, arguably, revenue. Yet, as one attends to decisions made about investing in this capacity growth, a more complex picture of financial decisions transpires. Here, the response of the Programme Manager of Capital Expenditure (CAPEX) invokes a sense of sorting out priorities where the ‘environment’ again appears to be rather elusive as the emphasis is placed firmly on the renewal of airport infrastructure.

“[…] so we develop a sort of long list… a wish list almost of investment. We then look to sort of organise the structure… so we can prioritise into an ‘Approve’ list. Part of that process is to looking at the category of expenditure, so we look at sort of four or five main areas. There is regulatory expenditure, which are things we need to do to comply with all our regulatory requirements. Some are environmental, some which are security, some which are health and safety that sort of things. So, there is regulatory, then there are renewals. Renewals are things that have worn out and need a replacement of say, machinery, equipment or areas of the airport or whatever. Our major expenditure recently has been on renewals. Erm, that's our biggest area of expenditure.”

The foregoing quotes reaffirm earlier points made about the inconsistent and incoherent nature of the pursuit of ‘sustainability’. These competing positions – community, environment, local employment, business growth, renewals and so on – represent multiple ways in which sustainability discourses are appropriated (Foucault, 1980). Thus, ‘sustainability’, as conceived by senior and finance managers of MyAirport, is really more about sustaining the business activity, and not solely the business case, of running an airport. What this means for the way one attends to one’s self will be explored in the next sub-section.
Sustaining Selves: Reflections on how individuals frame their selves and ‘sustainability’ work

Throughout our fieldwork, a recurring observation points to the constant framing of one’s self and role identity at MyAirport. For example, consider this extract of an interview with an Environmental Assessor, who applied for the job at MyAirport’s Environmental Department because her lecturer at University “forwarded [the job advertisement] straight to me because she thought it reflected some of the things I had done in my work placement learning when I was at the university” undertaking an Environmental Science course.

Researcher: What was it like when you first started?

Environmental Assessor: It was completely different, obviously, I had never work in the airport before, erm, intimidating! Just the scale of the place, and the knowledge everyone had, and experience, compared to me, who was fresh out of Uni. I think I quite quickly got a swing of it, and thankfully, that role actually just started. It was a new role. The job was mainly focused on waste, and giving out some advice and that sort of things, which if I am honest, just didn’t keep me that busy.

But, when I actually started, I was told that the role would be split between supporting [colleague A] on waste management, operational side of things, and supporting [colleague B] on climate change. It became very evidently that I would say after that, there were just more and more of the climate change, which I very, very quickly took over.”

What is striking in this extract is the scope creep associated with ‘sustainability’ work, and the concern that waste management “just didn’t keep me busy enough.” Thus, ‘sustainability’ work is far from a rational mission. Rather, like any work, ‘sustainability’ work requires constant wayfinding in organisational life. For this Environmental Assessor, her journey of ‘sustainability’ work led initially to a role of assessing the carbon footprint at the airport using the ‘Carbon Trust Standard’. She then became involved in working on responses to media on climate change, before joining a Utilities Working Group whose aim was to reduce energy costs. This particular Environmental Assessor is, at the time of writing, now broadly involved in the wider project of helping individuals across MyAirport achieve carbon neutrality. So, whilst one might naturally associate environmental assessment with the pursuit of ‘sustainability’ embodied in carbon neutrality, our analysis suggests that sustaining work and keeping busy appears, for this individual, to be an equally legitimate cause.

In another interview with a longstanding member of the Environmental Department, who claimed the quote that gave this article the title “I have never been entirely sure quite what sustainability is”, he asserted that ‘sustainability’ was imagined by MyAirport back in the late 1980s as they had to (and still do) grapple with complaints about noise:

“Yeah, [my job scope has] fundamentally changed! In 1988 when I came here, noise was what it was all about. Erm, people complained, and meeting their demands was on the back of our desire to see growth of the airport since the 1970s. And that was the bulk of the airport business, and basically, we were told, we needed to do several things if we wanted to see growth. We used the word ‘Sustainability’, which hasn’t been invented. They wanted to be able to live in harmony with the local community, as far as the noise was concerned.”

So, sustaining harmonious community relations mattered a lot then, and now. Taken together with the visions of senior managers at MyAirport shown in the preceding sub-section, it would seem that ‘sustainability’ is not an intervention sanctioned by organisational elites, but an
emergent feature of everyday work and struggles. Of course, there are emblems of disciplinary power found in conversations about ‘sustainability’ work, such as the ‘Carbon Trust Standard’ and ‘carbon neutrality’. At the same time, we have also identified individual desires of ‘sustainability work; whether one relates to finding more work to do as in the case of the Environmental Assessor, or dealing with complaints of noise levels by local residents, ‘sustainability’ work is also about sustaining one’s self – role and identity – in the throws of everyday life at MyAirport.

Dealing with competing ends and organisational pluralism

In much of the literature on ‘sustainability’, there is a sense of the need to trade-off between the triple-bottom-line of environmental concerns, economic prosperity and social justice, with the rational desire to ensure morally positive outcomes (e.g. Lombardi et al., 2011). Yet, it is noticeable that the lofty aspirations of ‘sustainability’ – at least in terms of environmental protection and social justice – seldom feature in the accounts of the daily struggles of our observable subjects. Rather, ‘sustainability’ has much to do with the ability to sustain the human and physical resources to run an airport. Consider this quote by the Head of Engineering, who again emphasised the significance of “renewal”:

“I have three teams: there is an airfield maintenance team, the airfield systems team which generally looks after the lighting and the electrical side, and the water services team. They work on different shift patterns [...] There are a number of problems with that system. For example, as far as the air maintenance team, we have the same number of the resources on at the same time of the shift, irrespective of the time of year, or time of the day. So I have four guys – a maximum of four guys – who were in work on a wet November morning as I did on a July afternoon. Well, there is a lot more work for the airfield maintenance team to do in July. It is weather related and season-dependent. So, you know in the summer, we have a lot of grass cutting to do... erm renewal marking... a huge amount to do during the summer, but we don't have the resource to do it. And we have the same resource, same level of resource in the winter, when we don't have so much to do! My team is also responsible for all the snow clearance, and that was done on the voluntary basis. And whilst, we never had really problem about getting the ‘volunteers’ because we pay them, what we found in the previous winter was that after a certain number of days, the guys were just not wanting to come in because they were just knackered (tired), and couldn’t get enough bodies to do the snow clearance.”
(Head of External Engineering)

Just as sustaining work was significant to the Environmental Assessor above, sustaining workers was a critical point for the Head of External Engineering. Although the Head of External Engineering does engage in strategic negotiations about the future of MyAirport’s infrastructure development, ‘sustainability’ in this case refers to the ecological objects of grass and snow encountered as part of the daily grind of clearing the airfield (e.g. Suchman, 2007). For the Head of External Engineering, preserving the ecological landscape at MyAirport plays a secondary function to ensuring the sustenance of an operational runway. Often, ‘sustainability’ is often discussed in terms of decision-makers acting as rational, purposive actors to consciously trade off between competing concerns. Yet, the portrayal of the Head of External Engineering suggests that all he really desired was that MyAirport remained a going concern. His plea for more resources can be taken as a sign of a lack of value placed, by others, on the work of External Engineering. Valuing work done across various functional groups at MyAirport can be conflictual at times. So, while the Head of External Engineering considers the seasonality of maintenance work and how the nature and intensity of work differs during different time periods, the Programme Manager of CAPEX has an alternative view:
“a lot of these things are predictable. Because, we have a large site here with a lot of assets on it. Basically, over time it will degrade, and we need to replace them. And, we have a life cycle; we should be able to forecast when you actually spend the money to replace each of them, right? Say if the high voltage network last 15 years, you can forecast that 15 years... really! Erm, a lot of these is just about maintaining our current infrastructure we got here.”

For the Programme Manager of CAPEX, being far removed from the actual task of maintaining the external infrastructure at MyAirport, the work on renewing facilities is merely reduced to a rational, abstract notion of “a life cycle”. Yet, this life cycle contains various ebbs and flows that is only material to the Head of External Engineering and his team struggling to tackle a lack of human resources and exhaustion. Indeed, our observations reveal that a number of discursive interactions between members of different functional departments, often revolving around financial cost implications. In some instances, learning takes place so that one values the work that others do. For example, the Finance Manager recounted his early experience at MyAirport:

“Erm, at first, one of my first responsibilities when I came here was to look into some of the utilities billing problems. So, erm, I first started spending, obviously, quite a lot of time with engineers to get help on that. Because quite a lot of the issues are engineering issues really – you couldn’t spot the issues from the finance point of view. You can't really resolve necessarily... because you need to be going out, looking at the distribution, whether the meters are working, who is reading what etc.?" (Finance Manager)

In other instances, the interactions are all about making the rhetoric of work fit the notion of the “business model”. Consider the following quotes as participants describe the budget approval process of their respective work:

“It’s more and more challenging each year. We put our submission in October, November time, and they tend to look at it and say, “Well, do you really need that? And they challenge us to save even more by say, 10%. And I understand that. You know all the business – all the business model and all what we were doing – but it gets very difficult year on year, just keep saving, keep...” (Terminal Manager)

“Oh yeah, a bit of horse trading, a bit of argy-bargy, yeah, yeah...” (Head of External Engineering)

Reframing the Sustainability Agenda

Despite the dominance of the “business model” in our conversations with stakeholders at MyAirport, the extent to which this “business model” is materially real for our participants is unclear. Indeed, it remains uncertain as to whether our informants actually read any of the policy documents that elucidate the “business model”, or whether there is even such a thing as a singular “business model” in operation at MyAirport. We certainly observed a wealth of artefacts that embody MyAirport’s business model(s), ranging from policy documents, to ‘budget-challenge’ meetings, to video presentations by the senior management team, to the ‘public-engagement’ media (e.g. advertising posters) claiming progress of MyAirport in meeting the carbon-neutrality targets, and so forth. Yet, to what extent do people pay attention to these models is indeterminate. In one observation, it was noted that a video presentation by the senior management team was played on-the-loop, but with the voice muted. On the one hand, the various guises of the “business model” act as a regime of truth that serves to discipline the actors
(and their actions) at MyAirport (Foucault, 1977b). On the other hand, we also engaged in discourses surrounding this popular imaginary (Harding, 2007) of the “business model”. Consider this quote from the Programme Manager of CAPEX again:

“There is not such a policy or procedure as such. It's more basically just the way we do it. If I were to be honest, it was the previous Finance Director who sort of brought it in. And I have run it ever since, and now people find it useful. But if I were to go away, they will probably just do a long list straight. Erm, cost reduction also picks up things like... erm... some of our so-called carbon reducing schemes (because they fit in that area at the moment). The one that is sort of lower-hanging fruit, the easiest, the quick wins are things where we can reduce our energy usage. They tend to also be carbon reduction [...] Then we have Yield Enhancement, which is basically where we can make a investment, or increase the income to the business, without requiring an increasing passenger numbers. So a lot of retailer schemes or car parking scheme are in that area where we don't need to have growth for passenger numbers.”

A number of interesting points can be gleaned from this foregoing quote. Firstly, it would appear that the financial approvals process is an emergent process (Chan and Räisänen, 2009), made up as the organisation evolves. Secondly, the quote highlight a more nuanced perspective of what growth at MyAirport means. There are clearly inconsistencies between what the senior managers think (as outlined in their aspirations of “growing bigger”) and the view of the Programme Manager of CAPEX (and his personal desire to shrink passenger numbers). There is clearly a sense that participants desire growth in revenue whilst containing, or even reducing, growth in capacity. For our participants, sustainability is more about renewing the airport infrastructure in order to sustain the operational status quo. Much of the framing of ‘sustainability’ is done not through rational models of trading off, but by responding to immediate needs to providing a service to their ‘customer’. Examples include extension of infrastructure to accommodate the A380 aircraft for Emirates Airlines, development of a new control tower, additions and refurbishment of airline lounges for Virgin Atlantic and Etihad Airways etc. Proximity to their most crucial ‘customer’ seemed to be what helped our individual participants frame their daily lives and associated desires of ‘sustainability’ at the workplace.

The Head of External Engineering sums the operational imperative quite well:

“Operational impact as well is a big thing for us, because if something goes bang out there in the airfield, then the whole thing could grind into a halt. So, but those problems with the environment, health and safety erm reputation... yes! Those are big areas, but there is the operational issue that has the customer services impact.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings above, a number of concluding points can be made. First, rational assumptions of the ‘problem’ of sustainability and associated interventions found in the wealth of procedural knowledge reviewed at the outset offer only a limited view of how individuals frame (and act on) the idea and ideals of ‘sustainability’ (Shove and Walker, 2007). The empirical illustrations outlined in the preceding section suggest that ‘sustainability’ is less of a prescriptive code of conduct, and more related to the conduct of appropriation. Thus, the second concluding point highlights the crucial aspect of framing. As the findings indicate, individuals imagine boundaries around the problem of ‘sustainability’ juxtaposed against the familiarities of their immediate (work) context. So, we saw the Head of External Engineering talk about sustainability in terms of maintaining the smooth operations of the airfield, and the
Environmental Assessor relying on her prior knowledge on the academic study of Environmental Sciences as she found her feet working in MyAirport. At the same time, the incumbent Chief Executive and his senior management team proclaimed that his hope has “been the same as it always has been (emphasis added)”, i.e. to sustain the pathway of making MyAirport “bigger and better!” presumably since this is what senior managers ought to envision and achieve.

Yet, and this brings forth the third point, growth too is not a consistent and coherent ideal in organising activities at MyAirport. Opponents and sceptics of ‘sustainability’ have often pointed to dominance of the profit motive (see e.g. Foster, 2008, Gluch, 2009, and; Pesqueux, 2009; 2011). However, our empirical evidence paints a more subtle picture of the attainment of growth. For the Programme Manager of CAPEX, it is notable that growth in profitability could mean finding ways of generating revenue that would not require an increase, or even seek to reduce, passenger numbers. Indeed, growing passenger numbers, as desired by the incumbent Chief Executive Officer, is likely to bring about more problems for those at the coalface of customer service. Indeed, the capacity of the physical infrastructure of MyAirport was clearly a matter of concern for the Programme Manager of CAPEX. For others, growth was associated with the individual desire of ‘keeping busy’ as in the case of the Environmental Assessor who felt that waste management alone was simply not sufficient to make a day’s work. One of the Finance Managers interviewed also considered growth in terms of leading to greater expenditure, as he stressed,

 Apart from anything else, we are an infrastructure business really, so, erm, we spend money on... not things you usually expect to get two years’ payback on. You know you expect them to be around for 10, 15 years, so you kind of investing for the long term.”

 Of course, the varying discourses of ‘growth’ are neither mutually exclusive nor incompatible with the framing of ‘sustainability’. Indeed, our observations reveal how our participants are constantly keeping busy to sustain their livelihoods at MyAirport, driven in part by their individual and collective desire to sustain MyAirport’s operational function as an integral part of an air transportation system. At times, we have highlighted competing perspectives to show parallel lines of engagement by various actors in MyAirport (e.g. the view of renewal work by the Head of External Engineering and Programme Manager of CAPEX). At other times, these parallel lines seem to intersect through e.g. budget negotiations and cross-functional cooperative work. Of central importance in our empirical observations, however, is the role of individuals and their desires in framing ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable’ work. Thus, to return to a Foucauldian term, just how do actors at MyAirport become sustainable subjects?

 Through our findings, we have certainly seen how Foucault’s ideas of disciplinary power and regime of truth have played out in the ways ‘sustainability’ discourses are appropriated through growth and sustaining work. We have also seen how codes of conducts matter feature less prominently that the conduct of conducting ‘sustainability’. Foucault’s (1986) work on the performance of ethics is certainly instructive here. As argued earlier, his later writings focussed on the aesthetics of knowledge, in which he objected to rational codes of conduct coercing individuals into action. Rather, he espoused the need for focus on individual desires and pleasures to explain how individuals will themselves to the knowledge of their existence. In so doing, he has re-placed the human subject at the centre of analysis. Thus, to set in within the context of ‘sustainability’, its conceptualisation is not simply embodied in the various codes of
conducts found in the procedural knowledge proposed by numerous scholars in the field. Instead, following the Foucauldian perspective of the use of pleasure, understanding individual desires – as we have attempted to sketch above – would enable us to see how individuals liberate themselves from the doctrine of ‘sustainability’ (i.e. “business models” and carbon-related regulations that are doubtfully understood by participants), and embody practices of ‘sustaining’ in a variety of ways. By illustrating the multiplicity of the ways individuals at MyAirport think and talk about how their daily lives contribute to the aspirations of ‘sustainability’, it becomes clear the code of conducting oneself sustainably, at least in the sense of the triple-bottom-line, makes relatively less sense to the individuals we observed. For our participants, their contribution to the ‘agenda’, if any, is simply finding and getting on with their work at MyAirport. Of course, a ‘sustainable airport’ does seem paradoxical, and our findings certainly demonstrate that our participants tend to frame what they do as an airport first (i.e. seamlessly operating an air transportation system), before explaining how they do their work ‘sustainably’.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault (1986) noted a number of critical dimensions in which individual desires are exercised and moderated within an ethical frame, including:

- Determination of ethical substance, i.e. how does one constitute oneself as prime material of moral conduct?
- Mode of subjection, i.e. how does one recognise the code and obligate oneself to practise?
- Elaboration of ethical work, i.e. how does one bring oneself to comply with a given rule?, and
- Moral in circumstantial integration, i.e. accomplishment and establishing of a moral conduct that commits oneself to a certain mode of being.

To deploy these ethical dimensions to our empirical findings, we can clearly see how our participants constitute themselves mainly as prime material for delivering an air transportation service rather than in the ideal terms of ‘sustainability’. Thus, our individuals recognise only the ‘codes’ that they subsequently ‘obligate’ themselves to ‘compliance’ in ways that are observably contingent upon their prior knowledge framed by their professional backgrounds. So, an Environmental Assessor knows what s/he desires, and that relates to such issues as waste and carbon. Conversely, the Head of Engineering responsible for airfield maintenance knows more about the length of grass and the depth of snow on a runway than the carbon footprint of the aeroplanes that lie in the margins of the airport operator’s control. And the Chief Executive clearly imagines his responsibility of producing “business models” – albeit in multi-media forms – because this is what Chief Executives do! Therefore, the analysis presented in this article illustrates just how incoherent and incapable the ideals of ‘sustainability’ can be of becoming a reasonable moral code of conduct.

A number of critical implications arise from this analysis. From a research viewpoint, we have profited tremendously by being close to our participants through this ethnographic case study. Of course, as with any ethnographic work, there is a balance to be struck between capturing the depth of social relationships and social change, and the breadth of following the actors. Nevertheless, it is the hope that the study inspires other researchers to follow into our footsteps to investigate the multiple ways in which practitioners imagine about ‘sustainability’. It
would also be fruitful if researchers could reflect on Foucault’s ethical dimensions to identify the ‘codes’ we as researchers will to know.

From a policy and practice perspective, developing more codes of conduct might simply be a futile process. By liberating individuals from such ‘codes’, one might actually have the freedom to explore how individuals embody within themselves to have the will to desire knowledge about ‘sustainability’. Again, the methodological approach of adopting ethnography in organisational studies (Watson, 2011) might provide a useful pathway for policy-makers in government and corporations to develop such an understanding. In so doing, it is also critical to explore the role that prior knowledge, shaped through education and professional experience, play in stifling the pleasures of ‘sustainability’ work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) in the UK for funding the wider project (ref: EP/H004505/1) upon which this article is based. Gratitude is also expressed to our research participants for their generous participation.

REFERENCES

Ansari, S., Gray, B. and Wijen, F. (2011) Fiddling while the ice melts: how organizational scholars can take a more active role in the climate change debate. Strategic Organization, 9(1), 70 – 76.


