

# Challenging Assumptions of Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship

*Exploring the Complexities Beneath the Surface*



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Thank you!

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## ABSTRACT

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<b>TITLE</b>	Challenging Assumptions of Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship – Exploring the Complexities Beneath the Surface
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<b>PURPOSE</b>	The purpose of this thesis is to explore the feasibility of the emergent concept of sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE), a concept linking the notions of sustainability and corporate entrepreneurship (CE). We thus engage in discovering how organizational actors describe, perceive and understand sustainability, CE as well as their relationship.
<b>RELEVANCE</b>	Sustainability and CE have received vast attention lately both in business and research; yet, the concept of SCE linking these two notions is still in its infancy and lacks perspective. Our empirical study therefore provides an in-depth understanding of the concepts sustainability and CE, raises awareness for their potential complexities and allows reflecting on how a linkage between these elements may manifest in organizational practice.
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	This research encompasses a qualitative study, conducted from an interpretative perspective. Fourteen semi-structured interviews form the foundation of our empirical material.
<b>FINDINGS</b>	This study illuminates high levels of fragmentation in the way organizational members perceive and understand the terms sustainability and CE as well their relationship. Further, an organization's context seemingly strongly influence the organization and the resulting presence, practice and nature of sustainability and CE.
<b>CONTRIBUTIONS</b>	We contribute to the holistic picture of the phenomenon SCE by adding an interpretative perspective, allowing us to critically challenge five assumptions that theoretically underlie its conceptualization. We challenged SCE's assumptions that: employees have a common understanding and perception of sustainability and CE; that these understandings are in line with SCE theory; that the three dimensions of sustainability can be balanced; that the SCE-presumed link between the two concepts is feasible; and the objective that sustainability leads to CE. By doing so, we present implications for practitioners confronted with sustainability and CE, as well as for scholars researching in the field of SCE and the general relationship between sustainability and CE.
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	Sustainability, corporate entrepreneurship (CE), sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE), perceptions, fragmentation, organizational context

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*“I believe in the complexity of the human story, and that there's no way you can tell that story in one way and say, 'this is it.' Always there will be someone who can tell it differently depending on where they are standing ... this is the way I think the world's stories should be told: from many different perspectives.”*

*(Chinua Achebe, 1994)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1. Background of Study

“Sustainability = Innovation”

(Nidumolu et al., 2015, p. 64)

The above quote condenses the increasing trend and prominence in organizational and management research proclaiming that sustainability has become the key driver of innovation. Today, as stakeholders increasingly demand transparency from organizations not only regarding environmental accountability, but also in terms of social behavior and economic performance, organizations must respond to society’s changing awareness of sustainability issues. At the same time, enhancing the firm’s growth and long-term success – often sought for through innovation and entrepreneurial activities – are underlying pressures for many (Miles et al., 2009; Zadek, 2004). Indeed, as Nidumolu et al. (2015) argue “the quest for sustainability is already starting to transform the competitive landscape, [forcing] companies to change the way they think about products, technologies, processes, and business models” (p. 57). This growing significance of sustainability issues, linked with the need for increased entrepreneurial thinking and innovation, thus heavily influences organizations. That the challenge of sustainability and need for change and innovation has indeed likewise arrived in the business world becomes apparent when visiting organizations’, and particularly consultancies’, webpages; for instance, Accenture (2017) warns that “pursuing business as usual is not only no longer acceptable”, expressly underlining that “green is the new gold.”

Certainly, also the management literature is brimming with conceptualizations of more ‘sustainable’ ways of doing (innovative) business, as “the assumption that entrepreneurship associated with sustainability promotes some of *the* future innovations, has gained momentum” (Provasnek et al., 2016, p. 2). The literature of linking certain aspects of sustainability with entrepreneurship includes notions like ‘ecopreneurship’ (Berle, 1991; Blue, 1990; Schaltegger, 2002), ‘social entrepreneurship’ (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Prahalad and Hammond, 2002), or ‘sustainable entrepreneurship’ (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). Yet, these streams of thought show limitations in their approach to the varied demands that existing organizations increasingly face: being socially, environmentally as well as economically sustainable *all at once*, while staying competitive in the globalized world.



Yet, despite the growing interest in sustainability and the recognized potential of entrepreneurial corporate environments, research on linking sustainability – taking into account environmental, social and economic concerns *all at once* – with *corporate entrepreneurship* (CE) is still in a nascent stage. The concept sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE), as proposed by Morgan P. Miles, Linda S. Munilla and Jenny Darroch (2009), may hence be seen as a consequent response of scholars to these mounting demands on organizations. Their “new framework – sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE)” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 68) is built on this exact linkage between sustainability and CE and serves as the foundation to this emergent stream of research (Provasnek et al., 2016).

According to Miles et al. (2009), “SCE can offer an alternative path for value creation and competitive advantage” (p. 68), while the authors further position their SCE framework as “the critical choice for managers to make” (p. 75). From this standpoint, Miles et al. (2009) raise practitioners’ attention through framing the adoption of SCE as desirable and beneficial. Further, through presenting consequences for “managers who have embraced SCE” (p. 69) and through drawing upon examples of organizations that in certain areas apparently ‘adopted’ SCE, Miles et al. (2009) create the impression of SCE being a feasible, implementable and manageable model. Yet, given that further literature portrays sustainability and CE – hence, the basis of SCE – as significant but complex and far-reaching concepts, we see a need to explore the feasibility of SCE. Such an exploration is of particular importance, since SCE-related literature thus far has focused on the concept’s theoretical construction and no qualitative, empirical data regarding the question of how the feasibility of SCE may actually unfold in complex organizational contexts has been gathered and analyzed by scholars.

## **1.2. Research Purpose and Relevance**

The previous section has already hinted towards the two drivers which inspire the purpose behind our study: firstly, the research gap which results from a lack of empirical studies and the nature of the theoretical construct of SCE, and secondly, the generally increasing importance of combining sustainability and entrepreneurship in both business and research.

Literature falls short in empirical insights into SCE as – to our knowledge – no qualitative and only one quantitative study have been conducted to explore SCE (Provasnek et al., 2016). Existing research thus focuses on the development of the theoretical construct of SCE and its

presumed role in business contexts. Furthermore, taking into consideration the unsettled scholarly debates around what sustainability and CE may actually mean, we put forward the idea that the individual concepts sustainability and CE could be complex, ambiguous, broad and therefore ‘messy’ concepts. As SCE is built upon these two concepts, we assume that this potential complexity may influence the nature of SCE in practice. Additionally, organizations – where SCE supposedly shall take place – are subject to a multiplicity of demands, interests, and thus, display a complex organizational context. This multifaceted work environment may also have implications on the feasibility of SCE.

We therefore aim to contribute to the debate around SCE by exploring the feasibility of the concept. We do so by explicating a rather missing methodological approach to SCE – namely in form of a qualitative examination – which allows scholars, as well as practitioners, for empirical insights and a profound understanding into the feasibility of the theoretical foundation underlying SCE. These insights may encourage and empower scholars to further develop the model SCE, which currently is still in its infancy and lacks perspective.

Consequently, reaching the purpose of exploring the feasibility of SCE encompasses dismantling the concept and understanding the foundation underlying SCE. As SCE is rooted in a presumed linkage between the notions of sustainability and CE, we engage in discovering how employees describe, perceive and understand sustainability, CE as well as their relationship. Our empirical study therefore further provides scholars and practitioners with a more in-depth, holistic understanding of the concepts of sustainability and CE, raises awareness for their potential complexities and allows reflecting on how a linkage between these elements may manifest in organizational practice, as previous research has to a large part neglected exploring empirical perspectives on this acclaimed connection.

Our object of research, Big Company, is an enterprise in the energy industry – an industry, which largely is influenced by customer preferences, societal demands, technological developments as well as national and supranational policies and obligations. Hence, Big Company seems to be subject to a multiplicity of influences, potentially leading to sometimes contradicting demands and directions. Further, from the organization’s public presentation, we obtained the preliminary impression that it focuses extensively on leveraging sustainability matters and pushing for innovation. As it is our ambition to study an organization where not

only the organizational context provides us with valuable insights into its influences on organizational reality, but also where sustainability and CE apparently are present, Big Company strikes us as being an interesting case to examine.

Moreover, sustainability and CE have received vast attention lately both in business and research. In line with scholars presently researching on sustainability, CE and SCE, we regard these topics and their linkage as highly important for organizations today and in the future (Provasnek et al., 2016). For instance, the scientific evidence for climate change has urged policy makers worldwide to push forward sustainability-matters in the private as well as public sector (Pachauri et al., 2015). Also, corporate sustainability initiatives – such as ‘Global Compact’ by the United Nations – call on companies to “align strategies and operations with universal principles on human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption [to] take actions that advance societal goals” (UN Global Compact, 2017). In our case, for example, Big Company is influenced by national and supranational requirements regarding (‘green’) power production, while society, customers as well as internal stakeholders interfere with the organization’s direction too. Additionally to the push for sustainability, CE has been identified by scholars and practitioners as a source for innovation and business success (Provasnek et al., 2016). Consequently, we see the combination of both – sustainability and CE – not only as an important but also necessary approach for companies to prevail in the long-term.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

As highlighted previously, we see the need for a deeper understanding of the feasibility of SCE and a case that explores how its underlying elements are actually perceived and understood in an organization that claims to be entrepreneurial and sustainable.

Therefore, we defined the following research questions to guide our empirical investigation:

1. *How do employees perceive and understand the notions of sustainability and CE?*
2. *Which relationship between the elements sustainability and CE do employees see?*

#### **1.4. Composition of Thesis**

We approach answering these questions as well as our research purpose through this thesis' six chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Empirical Material and Analysis, Discussion and Conclusion.

Following this brief introduction, chapter 2 aims at giving a concise overview of the conceptualizations of sustainability and CE – which are crucial for the reader when dwelling upon the topic of SCE –, followed by a presentation of the pertinent literature on the emergent concept SCE and the presumed link between sustainability and CE. In order to fully understand our following argumentation and analysis, we specifically provide insights into the inconsistencies and complexities of the current research and the unsettled scholarly debate in the consulted literature concerning the aforementioned concepts and their definition.

Subsequently, the detailed method and methodology section (chapter 3) allows us to position our research through presenting the reader the underlying ontological and epistemological foundations, as well as exemplifying our interpretative stance that has guided our qualitative study. This chapter also allows us to reflect on the concept SCE and the challenges its indistinct nature imply.

Following, in chapter 4 we examine our research questions and lay out and analyze our core findings from our interviews. Yet, prior to diving into the empirical material, we provide the reader with an overview of our studied organization – Big Company – and its setting, as to better understand the following presentation of the interview findings and our interpretation thereof. Besides highlighting the fragmented understandings and perceptions that the concepts of sustainability and CE seemingly create, we further portray the diverse perceptions of organizational members towards a relationship between sustainability and CE. Lastly, we found that a multiplicity of factors seemingly strongly influence the organization and the resulting presence, practice and nature of sustainability and CE.

Following, based on our findings in chapter 4 and our theoretical research in chapter 2, chapter 5 will then discuss and problematize the feasibility of SCE based on the inherent ambiguity and complexity of the concepts sustainability and CE, engendering different perceptions and understandings by individuals, and successively hampering a coherent linkage between

sustainability and CE. Subsequently, chapter 5 seeks to challenge in particular five assumptions underlying the theoretical construct of SCE; we critically question and challenge:

- (1) the model's assumption that organizational members have a common understanding and perception of the concepts of sustainability and CE;
- (2) the model's assumption that this common understanding is then in line with the definitions as presented in SCE, namely sustainability as defined by Placet et al. (2005) and CE as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011);
- (3) the model's assumption that the three sustainability aspects – environmental, social and economic – can be balanced;
- (4) the model's assumption that a link between sustainability (as defined by Placet et al. (2005)) and CE (as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011)) is feasible; and,
- (5) the objective of SCE, depicting that sustainability will eventually lead to CE and innovation.

Afterwards, we here reflect on the implications of our critical review of these assumptions. We suggest that complexity lies beneath SCE's appearing straightforwardness of which scholars and practitioners should be aware of in order to approach it with profound insights and an undeceived perspective to look beyond and beneath the concept's straightforwardness.

To round-out the critical discussion on the five aforementioned assumptions of SCE, the main points of this study are consolidated in the conclusion (chapter 6) and the resulting theoretical and practical implications are emphasized. Namely, we suggest that further research into the field of SCE and the inclusion of perceptions and organizational context into the conceptualization are essential; and propose practitioners to develop awareness for the complexities of sustainability, CE and their relationship and that the creation of orientation may be a decisive factor. Further thoughts shall provide a reflection on the nature and implication of SCE in particular and conceptual frameworks in general, highlighting that far-sightedness and caution in dealing with conceptual frameworks that incorporate complex concepts are crucial.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

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Sustainability and (corporate) entrepreneurship are popular concepts among researchers; and while research on these phenomena has been fairly broad – yet inconsistent – organizational researchers are more and more drawn to linking these two notions, sharing the common consensus that sustainability combined with entrepreneurship is crucial for organizational competitiveness and success (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010). Yet, despite a growing interest in linking sustainability and entrepreneurship by both scholars and practitioners alike, little theorizing has led to frameworks or models based on corporate settings of larger organizations. Hence, the conceptualization of sustainable *corporate* entrepreneurship (SCE) is in a nascent stage (Provasnek et al., 2016). This chapter in the overall research process allows us to: focus our discussion on the pertinent scholarly debates that engulf sustainability and CE studies as well as SCE theory; and, more specifically, situate our research questions and chosen methodological approach.

The literature review will firstly discuss the notion of sustainability (chapter 2.1), focusing on its uncertain and inconsistent nature as well as debates and popular propositions in research. We will use a similar approach for outlining the pertinent literature on the notion of CE (chapter 2.2). Lastly, we will turn towards the streams of research linking sustainability and CE, focusing in particular on the emerging model SCE, its current theoretical construct and underlying assumptions (chapter 2.3).

### **2.1. On Sustainability**

The following section will provide theoretical insights into the concept of sustainability. Thereby, we will carve out that the term is complex and ambiguous, as it is subject to various understandings, approaches and convictions. We will further attempt to explain what is meant by the term, touch upon its increasing relevance in business and how it may unfold within a business context.

#### **2.1.1 The Complexity of Defining Sustainability**

One of the most prominent approaches to the notion of sustainability is a statement in the report ‘Our Common Future’, also known as the ‘Brundtland-Report’, that describes a development as sustainable if it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the

ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987, p. 16). This report brought ‘sustainability’ to the international political agenda (Lozano, 2008). Although being almost 30 years old, this conceptualization is still frequently used, in order provide a broad idea what is meant by a sustainable development and some regard it as the prevailing definition of sustainability (Ben-Eli, 2012). The definition itself, however, remains a bit vague in terms of specifications (Ben-Eli, 2012). Many scholars and practitioners have therefore and since then, explored and developed theoretical approaches regarding the concept of sustainability. Up until today, there are various definitions, approaches, practical and theoretical concepts circling around the phenomenon, leading to and mirroring the various convictions and ideas behind it (Provasnek et al., 2016). The lack of a single generally-accepted definition (Provasnek et al., 2016) is being seen as both weakness and strength, as it mirrors the complexity of the subject (Missimer et al., 2017a). To exemplify the diversity of theoretical approaches, we highlight two definitions; Ben-Eli (2012), for example, defines sustainability as:

*“a dynamic equilibrium in the processes of interaction between a population and the carrying capacity of its environment such, that the population develops to express its full potential without producing irreversible adverse effects on the carrying capacity of the environment upon which it depends” (p.7).*

Placet et al. (2005) define sustainability as:

*“environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic prosperity for both the organization and its stakeholders. In a successful sustainability-focused business strategy, these three goals will be interrelated and supportive of each other” (p. 32).*

These two quotes showcase the various facets of how sustainability can be approached. Yet, the definitions of Ben-Eli (2012) and Placet et al. (2005) show traces of vagueness and leave room for interpretation. Among the various perspectives, the ‘integrative’ approach, taking into account social, economic and environmental concerns has gained wide acceptance and quite prominently represents sustainable approaches in literature and practice (Gao and Bansal, 2013; Lozano, 2008; Provasnek et al., 2016). The most prevailing concept among those is the ‘triple bottom line approach’ which emphasizes that a corporation and its environment need to consider the economic, environmental and social dimensions in its operations. Below the triple bottom line, the three dimensions of sustainability – i.e.



environmental, social and economic – are interrelated and do influence each other by various means. A separation of one of the three aspects is hereby not possible (Amini and Bienstock, 2014). It should be noted that the link between economic, social and environmental aspects is subject to various perspectives and often is portrayed as some sort of a ‘system’ (Morrish et al., 2011) which is challenging to ‘balance’ (Jamali, 2006).

Even though there are various specifications, we would like to summarize that sustainability deals in a wider sense with the challenge to ensure that future generations should not be jeopardized in meeting their needs and that the most common way to portray sustainability, relates to a ‘integrative’ view on the social, environmental and economic aspects, which influence each other – and only if all of them are considered, something can be regarded as sustainable. However, it is vital to be aware that the absence of one clear, commonly agreed on definition creates space for interpretation and different points of view. Although this demarcation above may provide orientation, space for interpretation remains for everybody and every institution dealing with sustainability to define what sustainability requires in the specific context and which activities are needed to be sustainable. That brings up the question, why sustainability has received increasing attention in business contexts and is more and more integrated into organizational operations and strategies, given its difficult conceptualization and interpretation.

### ***2.1.2 The Increased Relevance of Sustainability in Business***

During the last years, there has been a dynamic momentum in the importance of sustainability. Governments, customers, NGOs and other stakeholders increasingly demand accountability and responsibility from companies, relating to social and environmental aspects of their activities (Miles et al., 2009). Hence, stakeholders nowadays are more closely examining the consequences of business activities, often resulting in the ambition to reduce negative environmental and social impacts, by coming up with solutions to address those problems (Atiq and Karatas-Ozkan, 2013). Additionally, companies are stimulated to increase the performance and commitment in relation to products and people, which relates to performance, endurance, efficiency, lower environmental impact or even environmental protective aspects (Fairfield et al., 2011; Morrish et al., 2011; Provasnek et al., 2016). Subsequently, some scholars do not even portray sustainability as an option to choose



anymore, but as an “imperative” that drives corporations these days in order to legitimize their existence (Morrish et al., 2011, p. 163).

### **2.1.3 The Translation of Sustainability into Business Contexts**

Given the difficulty to define the concept precisely, two key challenges arise: firstly, how to translate sustainability into practical operations within a business context, and secondly, how and whether it can be measured.

Various scholars have determined approaches to promote and implement sustainability within organizational settings (Baumgartner, 2014; Zollo et al., 2013). Baumgartner (2014), for instance, presents an approach on how companies can become more sustainable. According to Baumgartner’s (2014) idea, sustainability can be of various levels – namely a normative, strategic or operational management level – depending on the vision that the organization follows regarding sustainability. Here, the operational management includes aspects such as ‘logistic and material management’, ‘production’, ‘maintenance’, ‘marketing’, ‘communication and PR’ and ‘human resource management’. Under the category ‘normative management’, Baumgartner (2014) then groups aspects such as ‘vision’, ‘policy and mission statement’ and ‘organizational culture’. Lastly, ‘strategic management’ encompasses aspects that relate to the planning of the sustainability strategy (Baumgartner, 2014). Nevertheless, such approaches, like Baumgartner’s (2014), neither make explicit what ‘sustainability’ means for these aspects (e.g. what a ‘sustainable’ product is), nor when an organization has ‘reached sustainability’ in these levels.

Turning towards measurability, Cohen et al. (2008) point to the idea that sustainability performance can be measured against the achievement of social, environmental, and economic objectives within a company over time, and within as well as outside of industries. Today, various indices have been identified that intent to measure and compare the sustainability performance in order to create transparency for interested stakeholders (Hubbard, 2009). However, those indices have to be viewed critically; while they can help to measure certain activities, they not necessarily tell whether the measured value is ‘sustainable’ or not.

While companies are challenged to adapt to these external expectations regarding environmental and social concerns, they must still perform financially in terms of growth, revenue and profit (Miles et al., 2009). However, the need for sustainable business

performance is also seen as source for innovation and competitive advantages (Morrish et al., 2011). Some claim that it may lead to financial benefits in the organizations and portray sustainability activities as a stimulus for leveraging opportunities, creating innovation and subsequently achieving corporate entrepreneurship (CE) (Gao and Bansal, 2013; Morrish et al., 2011). Nevertheless, one should be careful to propose such a clear positive relationship between sustainability and innovation and financial performance of a company, as those relationships are subject to ongoing research and at times opposing results.

## **2.2. On Corporate Entrepreneurship (CE)**

Throughout the last decades, ‘corporate entrepreneurship’ (CE) has more and more become a popular concept among researchers, who have reviewed, specified and praised its scope in vast amounts of literature. Unsurprisingly, as the cauldron of CE academic and pop literature tends to share the common consensus that entrepreneurial activities are highly important for organizational competitiveness, effectiveness and future viability, the notion of CE has attracted broad interest among scholars and researchers alike (Elfring, 2005; Frank, 2009). Yet, despite the consistent research and scrutiny that CE has been subject to, literature is riddled with incoherence and lacks a common understanding of what CE actually ‘is’.

Thus, the following section will first concisely discuss the uncertain and complex nature of CE research, before delving into outlining the differing propositions of what CE entails and ‘is’, as presented across the pertinent literature. Lastly, we will argue for the need for an interpretative approach to the complexities of CE in order to close in on the actual nature and evoking understandings of CE.

### **2.2.1 Complexity and Incoherence in Research**

Most of the researchers dealing with the quest of theorizing and defining CE accept that the conceptualization brings about complexity, ambiguity and incoherence (Audretsch et al., 2015; Ferreira, 2002; Gautam and Verma, 1997; Hornsby et al., 2002; Miles and Covin, 1999; Sambrook and Roberts, 2005). Ferreira (2002) specifically identifies that CE as a research subject matter is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, leading to definitions that are extremely diverse, broad and uncertain. “For despite the growing interest in corporate entrepreneurship, there appears to be nothing near a consensus on what it is” (Ferreira, 2002,

p. 2). Resulting from the conflicting and ambiguous viewpoints surrounding CE, “the archetypal forms in which corporate entrepreneurial actions are often manifested have not been consistently or clearly delineated in the literature” (Miles and Covin, 1999, p. 47) – in turn leading to confusion over the nature of the construct and an overall lack of coherence across research. Miles and Covin (1999) argue that this disintegration may be due to CE researchers regarding different attributes as necessarily present when labeling a firm entrepreneurial, whilst Sambrook and Roberts (2005) even further critique the minimal focus on the complex nature of those attributes associated with CE in current studies.

Moreover, it seems that the vast majority of CE research (Morris et al., 2011; Miles and Covin, 1999; Pinchot, 1985) has rather sought to further establish and classify the theoretical phenomenon of CE – trying to rid the concept of its inherent ambiguity – instead of openly exploring its uncertainty and the various perceptions through empirical research (Sambrook and Roberts, 2005). Consequently, it could be claimed, that this attempt to ease ambiguity in relation to CE is rather *preventing* the emergence of a developed state in CE literature and a deep-rooted understanding of the phenomenon. The low levels of explanation and the inconclusive state in literature “in spite of the substantial number of studies and reviews conducted across numerous disciplines, suggest that the challenge rests in the complex, context-sensitive, nature of the phenomenon itself” (Wolfe, 1994, pp. 405–406).

### **2.2.2 Understanding Corporate Entrepreneurship (CE)**

In order to understand the drivers and assumptions behind CE, we must first take a brief look at its parent: ‘start-up entrepreneurship’. In the general talk of entrepreneurship, our discourse tends to focus on entrepreneurs in start-up businesses: the exploration of radical ideas; risk-taking attitudes and trial-and-error phases; the ability to quickly act, react, and in turn innovate; and value-creation (with immense financial rewards) where none existed before (Beaver, 2002; Thornberry, 2001). Organizational growth into large organizations – and the emergence of needed structures, planning, hierarchy, bureaucracy and process complexity – may erode many of the characteristics that previously described ‘start-up entrepreneurship’ in the reader’s mind; yet, it is essentially the same outcome that large companies turning towards CE seek: innovation and value-creation leading to sustained competitiveness (Beaver, 2002; Miles and Covin, 1999; Thornberry, 2001). Hence, *corporate* entrepreneurship can then, in a

first and general attempt, “be defined as start-up entrepreneurship turned inward” (Sambrook and Roberts, 2005, p. 142) and as a remedy to the rigidity, stagnation, staleness and inertia that is often associated with the innovation approach of large organizations. In general, CE is understood as an approach to innovating and entrepreneurial thinking in a larger, corporate context, where the entrepreneurial efforts affect individuals as well as organizational and interorganizational system settings (Miller, 1983; Turró et al., 2014).

As acknowledged, in order to diminish the ambiguity surrounding the conceptualization of CE, the bulk of research attempts to set propositions around its scope, definitions and implications. Subsequently, the label CE has been attached to manifold, and sometimes divergent, organizational phenomena. Despite evident contradictions and inconsistencies, few imprecise, yet distinguishing features and recurring characteristics manifest in the diverse definitions of CE. These major streams of thought arguably are centered on three common theoretical themes in CE literature, namely:

- (1) CE encompasses the situation where an established organization enters a new business. This creation of new business within an existing organization, often called ‘corporate venturing’, is well-described in the writings of, for instance, Burgelman (1983), Block and MacMillan (1993) and Guth and Ginsberg (1990);
- (2) CE takes place when an individual or a group of organizational members champion new ideas within the organizational context – a phenomenon popularized by Pinchot (1985) under the term ‘intrapreneurship’. Research here has focused on individual CE characteristics (i.e. what are typical personal attributes of corporate entrepreneurs), yet many of the proposed frameworks on personal attributes lack empirical evidence to support their classifications; and
- (3) an organization engages in CE when the entire organization’s operations and outlook are permeated by an ‘entrepreneurial orientation’ and posture. Here, the firm *per se* acts entrepreneurial on a firm-level rather than individual members or exclusive ‘parts’ of the organization. Nonetheless, inconsistencies persist among CE researchers when delineating which attributes (e.g. product innovation, risk-taking behavior, proactiveness etc.) must be present in an organization in order to label it entrepreneurial (Miles and Covin, 1999; Miller, 1983) or when debating the implications of what actions can be termed entrepreneurial (e.g. strategic renewal,

business rejuvenation, organizational redefinition, process innovation). Further, this field of research heavily focuses on the process of CE (i.e. how CE is accomplished) and CE's potential for competitive advantage, whilst here too, empirical evidence is broadly missing and gaining a holistic understanding of the organizational context largely is neglected.

Overall, these three streams of thought underline that there is no standalone 'type' of CE in organizations, but that it may take on various facets, perspectives and approaches. As Miles and Covin (1999) argue, these phenomena do not depict inherently mutually-exclusive constructs, "but may co-exist as separate dimensions of entrepreneurial activity within a single organization" (p. 48).

### ***2.2.3 The Need for an Interpretative Line of Thought***

Traditionally, as highlighted previously, scholars have focused on the organizational perspective of CE, while the exploration of the individualist perspective only recently has gained increased interest. However, although this stream of research suggests "that organizations would benefit from understanding the personality of the corporate entrepreneur" (Sambrook and Roberts, 2005, p. 146), studies emphasize the correlation between the 'individual characteristics, qualities and entrepreneurial action' and 'overall organizational competitiveness'. Eventually, then, much of the research on the individual's level acts as an extension for its organizational counterpart – giving the individual a mechanistic sense by exploring and leveraging certain needed personal qualities – instead of deeply exploring the *views* of actors (Bodewes, 2002; Müller and Becker, 2013). Hence, we believe that this weak, unsubstantiated (and misleading) research into the individual's perspective rather contributes to the complexity and lack of a common understanding of CE. Further, this exemplifies the need for an interpretative approach to exploring CE and how the individual gives subjective meaning and sense to the CE discourse and the concept in practice. Instead of focusing on CE as a given construct that is simply 'out there' with various classifications, this study therefore aims at taking on the micro perspective of individual perceptions and understandings of CE and delving into the point of view of actors involved. This approach is supported by Bodewes (2002), noting that if "inconsistencies result from unsatisfactory definitions then we should start by examining the way we define our constructs and variables" (2002, p. 221).

As noted earlier, many scholars as well as practitioners endorse CE “as a potentially viable means for promoting and sustaining corporate competitiveness” (Miles and Covin, 1999, p. 47) – this praised and grandiose notion of CE leading to organizational success has plagued CE research ever since its conceptualization. As Miles and Covin (1999) acknowledge: “with ambiguity surrounding the nature of the corporate entrepreneurship construct, it is not surprising that a general understanding or theory of why corporate entrepreneurship often creates competitive advantage has failed to emerge” (1999, p. 48). This underlines the critical debate relating to a causal relationship between CE and organizational performance. Specifically, this narrow focus on the theoretically-acclaimed linkage between the use of CE and organizational competitiveness has navigated research towards classifying CE as the silver lining, steering the explorations of the concept more and more away from reflecting on its complexities and studying CE’s actual existence. Thus, CE research ultimately failed to dive deeper to entangle the complexities of CE: to explore, recognize and understand the role of everyday individual understandings and context-sensitive perceptions of organizational members – yet at last, this is what our thesis seeks to address.

### **2.3. On Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship (SCE)**

While for a number of decades (corporate) entrepreneurship was viewed as a way of creating competitive advantages and growth, recent generations of entrepreneurship research have more and more focused on including sustainable development science (Dean and McMullen, 2007; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). While this linkage between the concepts sustainability and entrepreneurship has gained momentum and resulted in numerous streams of thought, we are particularly interested in the emerging concept of ‘sustainable corporate entrepreneurship’ (SCE), given its promising scope and nascent conceptualization, while lacking a vast amount of empirical research. The following sections therefore aim at providing insights into the popularity of linking sustainability and entrepreneurship, leading to the emergence of SCE, and outlining the theoretical construction of that said concept.

#### **2.3.1 Connecting Sustainability and Corporate Entrepreneurship (CE)**

“Social and environmental issues have become imperative for businesses as well as governments on an international level” (Weidinger et al., 2013, p. 4). Plain-spoken, Weidinger et al. (2013) capture how global discussions at an ever increasing rate about climate change,

global warming, scarcity and depletion of natural resources, as well as social upheavals and advancement have disrupted the (business) world (Atiq and Karatas-Ozkan, 2013; Menon and Menon, 1997). With the pursuit of sustainable development as a broader societal goal and as an increasingly urgent public policy priority, policy makers, scholars as well as entrepreneurs and corporate leaders themselves have begun questioning their own role in that changing (business) environment (Parrish, 2010; Saha and Darnton, 2005). While initial actions resulted in corporate social responsibility (CSR) approaches, organizational growth and the quest for reaping the opportunities which sustainability may provide have more and more come into scholars' and practitioners' focus, calling on entrepreneurial activities paired with certain sustainability goals (Hockerts and Wüstenhagen, 2010). This resulted in a multiplicity of research and streams of thought such as 'ecopreneurship' (Berle, 1991; Blue, 1990; Schaltegger, 2002) or 'enviropreneurship' (Menon and Menon, 1997), 'social entrepreneurship' (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001; Prahalad and Hammond, 2002) or 'sustainable entrepreneurship' (Cohen and Winn, 2007; Dean and McMullen, 2007; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011; Weidinger et al., 2013).

Yet, these streams of thoughts have their limitations: given the complexity of the concepts of sustainability and entrepreneurship, these conceptualizations of linking sustainability and entrepreneurship are extremely broad and dispersed, with every study emphasizing distinct attributes and factors of the two concepts. For instance, sustainable entrepreneurship in one study may imply bringing "into existence 'future' goods and services [while taking into account] economic, psychological, social, and *environmental* consequences" (Cohen and Winn, 2007, p. 35; emphasis in original), while others simply equate the term sustainability with long-term economic organizational success through entrepreneurship (Mungule and Van Vuuren, 2016). Thus, as this example shows, commonalities between the substances of the various constructions are rare, yet still allow for certain high-level typological observations. Firstly, the sustainability-entrepreneurship constructions in general either revolve around achieving social goals (i.e. 'social entrepreneurship') or solving environmental problems (i.e. 'ecopreneurship' and 'enviropreneurship'). Secondly, within the wide range of sustainability and entrepreneurship research, sustainable entrepreneurship probably has been given the most attention and often aims at combining social and ecological impacts in its ventures – yet, the concept is set in the context of start-up ventures. Thus, these streams of thought either neglect



the ‘full range’ of and ‘integrative’ perspective on sustainability principles (Savitz and Weber, 2014) or the extent of entrepreneurial activities to larger organizations. Consequently, our research focus is on another emergent phenomenon: sustainable *corporate* entrepreneurship (SCE). Supposedly, SCE embodies a concept that allows existing business entities and organizations to leverage CE activities combined with sustainability – taking into account the economic, social and environmental dimension *all at once* – as opportunities for sustainable innovations (Miles et al., 2009; Provasnek et al., 2016).

### ***2.3.2 Taking a Closer Look at Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship (SCE)***

As the initial sections of this chapter indicate, the fragments of sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE), namely sustainability and CE, have independently of each other been researched and analyzed quite excessively. One basic hurdle to both phenomena is, however, that both concepts are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, and a multitude of definitions, while generally-accepted definitions of the terms are lacking.

Nonetheless, Miles et al. (2009) have made an attempt at combining both notions into the multidimensional construct SCE. To state the essence of SCE in one clear sentence:

*“SCE is the process of leveraging innovation of an organization’s products, processes, strategies, domain, or business models to discover, assess and ultimately exploit attractive economic opportunities created by latent and manifest environmental problems and / or social responsibility issues.”* (Miles et al., 2009, p. 69)

Hence, augmenting the sustainability definition of Placet et al. (2005), which emphasizes sustainability as “environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic prosperity for both the organization and its stakeholders” (p. 32), Miles et al. (2009) regard each of the sustainability components as important, and thus, differentiate SCE from the previously outlined streams of thought like ‘ecopreneurship’, ‘enviropreneurship’ or ‘social entrepreneurship’. Moreover, SCE’s scope seemingly is underpinned by a CE typology proposed by Morris et al. (2011): here, CE radiates around multiple elements such as product, process, strategy, domain and business model – ultimately, all shall lead to innovation within existing organizations (see figure 1 below). This assumption is therefore in line with the third stream of thought as presented earlier (see *Understanding Corporate Entrepreneurship (CE)*,



chapter 2.2.2), which regards CE only as present if an entrepreneurial orientation and posture permeate the whole organization.

Before diving into more details concerning the substance of SCE, we find it worthwhile to first position and characterize the nature of the concept. SCE's initial conceptualization was first published in the *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, where publications "have important implications for business practice" (*International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 2017). Miles et al. (2009), in a descriptive style, portray the importance that sustainability and CE have gained within society and business. Besides theoretical insights, they also draw upon examples from companies to illustrate how sustainability and CE have shaped and influenced business operations. By drawing on those insights and the potential of both concepts, the authors combine them and propose a new conceptual framework, namely SCE. Miles et al. (2009) claim that SCE may lead to organizational competitiveness and success and portray the concept "as the critical choice for managers to make" (p.75). In order to support their claims that come across as 'recommendations' in a 'prognostic style', they outline examples of companies that – according to the authors – show traces of SCE and thus "demonstrate how SCE can offer an alternative path for value creation and competitive advantage" (p.68). Statements like the previous hence create a sphere of desirability and attractiveness around the concept, drawing the reader in. From the aforementioned aspects, we carefully conclude that the model is rather a management concept than a pure scientific concept, 'inspiring' managers to realize this 'strategic choice' for organizational success and giving the impression that SCE can be adopted by managers. We will further reflect on the complex status and nature of SCE in the following *Method and Methodology* chapter.

Overall, according to Miles et al. (2009), an organization can be classified as having 'adopted' SCE "if there is evidence of all three sustainability components – responsible environmental management, social accountability, and long-term economic performance – as well as the presence of significant innovation with respect to the firm's products, processes, strategies, domain, or business model" (p. 69). Further, Miles et al. (2009) assert that not only must all three components of sustainability be present, but they also should be given equal importance, refraining from promoting one component at the expense of the others. This requires firms to be able to "balance the often conflicting goals of economic viability, environmental



Figure 1: Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship after Miles et al. (2009)

stewardship and social accountability” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 69). Only then, when an organization fully conforms to sustainability principles, can sustainability “lead the organization into new profitable ventures, along with creating value for all stakeholders” (Atiq and Karatas-Ozkan, 2013, p. 10).

SCE can therefore be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, where all components of sustainability and CE are interrelated and supportive of each other, and where a balance must be kept in order for the organization to remain innovative and sustainable on a full scale (Miles et al., 2009). Yet, it remains unclear how this balance unfolds – does it imply that both concepts must constantly be present and balanced out, or rather, that sustainability and CE are generally equally important in the practice of SCE (but that they may happen sequentially)? Looking at the visualization of the model (see above), we interpret this ‘balance’ as the latter, as the conceptualization illustrates innovation (and thus CE) at the core of the model and as the ultimate goal of organizations (Miles et al., 2009).

Consequently, SCE encompasses rather complex and ambiguous phenomena, based on the assumption that sustainability and CE can be – despite their individual complexity – united into one phenomenon. However, after a careful engagement with the model and digging deeper into its conceptualization, we realized that several assumptions underlie its conceptualization, which are not explicitly stated, yet raise questions within the reader. In the following, we outline a few of these assumptions which caught our eye; SCE presumes that:

- (1) sustainability and CE are important;
- (2) it is possible to state and assess when sustainability and/or CE is present within an organization;

- (3) organizational members have a common understanding and perception of the concepts of sustainability and CE;
- (4) this common understanding then is in line with Placet et al.'s (2005) definition of sustainability and Morris et al.'s (2011) demarcation of CE, as SCE postulates these definitions as foundational for SCE;
- (5) the three pillars of sustainability – i.e. environmental, social and economic matters – can be balanced;
- (6) it is possible to define when these three pillars of sustainability are in a balance;
- (7) the link between sustainability (as defined by Placet et al. (2005)) and CE (as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011)) is feasible;
- (8) this link between sustainability and CE is beneficial;
- (9) SCE adopts the objective that sustainability will eventually lead to CE and innovation.

Taking these assumptions, our study aims at exploring individuals' perceptions and understandings around these notions and assumptions. We therefore question if, how and to what extent Miles et al. (2009) theoretical assumptions unfold in organizational reality, hence, providing a reflection on the scholars' framework.

### **3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY**

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The following chapter informs the reader about our methodological approach and defines our philosophical grounding which lays the foundation of this thesis. We further reflect on the nature of the concept of SCE and discuss the research design and research process, including data collection and analysis. Lastly, we reflect upon the quality and credibility of our research design, process and analysis of findings.

In order to answer our research questions appropriately, we saw the strong need to explore the understandings and perceptions of the employees within a seemingly sustainability-centered and CE-focused organization. This need was furthermore underlined by the nature of the concept of SCE. As it is built upon CE and sustainability, two concepts which are portrayed by scholars as being quite complex, we additionally assumed that insights into the employees' understandings and perceptions are important and decisive. We therefore chose a qualitative and interpretive approach to adequately explore the perceptions and understandings of organizational members. Taking into account and acknowledging the limitations of this research method and the sample, we nevertheless were convinced that an abductive approach would provide us with theoretical guidance while leaving enough space for the empirical material to 'speak for itself'. We conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews at Big Company with employees who voluntarily participated in our study. The answers to the openly-framed questions were transcribed, later analyzed and finally compiled to overall topics which we will present in the fourth chapter.

#### **3.1. Philosophical Grounding**

In order to adequately investigate our research questions, we saw an interpretive approach as most fitting, as we aimed at exploring opinions, perceptions, understandings, and meanings by employees within a seemingly sustainability-centered and CE-focused organization (Prasad, 2005). As we embarked on the interpretivist tradition, we took on an active role in the production and analysis of rich, descriptive data which we gathered from our research objects (Merriam, 2002). This, however, translated into a strict carefulness when it came to the attribution of any 'objective truth', as we needed to be aware that the empirical material was part of a reality as constructed by the interviewees. We needed to furthermore take into

account that our own subjectivity could not be completely switched off, and hence, the material could not be analyzed completely objectively (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003).

On a personal note, the chosen topic, SCE, is of particular interest to us as authors and researchers based on our previous academic studies of sustainability (Nicolas) and entrepreneurship (Lea) and our passion for these phenomena; the study of SCE allows us to combine our individual knowledge bases and to emancipate these into – to us – unknown areas. Thus, we entered the research process with knowledge of the individual concepts sustainability and CE due to our previous studies; we further acquired an understanding of the theory on sustainability, CE and SCE prior to starting our research and critically assessed the (objective) history and context of the studied organization. It was our foremost aim to remain open-minded and unbiased about the empirical material we gathered during our research process.

Subsequently, we adopted a qualitative, abductive approach, which carries characteristics of both deduction and induction and allowed us to exploit our theoretical preconceptions, while combining this understanding with the perceptions and insights we gathered from our empirical material (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). This created back-and-forth movement between prior understandings and empery – thus following the iterative spiral of the hermeneutic circle – constrained us from being too naive (or biased) in our interpretation of the findings, while providing a valuable understanding of the whole phenomena (Alvesson, 2003; Prasad, 2002). Practically, this meant for us that we needed to see and understand the empirical insights (i.e. our interviewees' answers) in the context in which the interviewees provided that answer. Only by doing that, we could find a way to reveal the meaning and draw findings and conclusions. Furthermore, the insights we gained from our interviews affected the pre-understanding that was influencing us when conducting the next interviews; this meant that the insights we gained developed our understanding and therefore the upcoming interviews. An example of such influence could be that after the first interviewee pointed out that CE may not necessarily be beneficial, we were more critical towards the concept and also sensitized to more easily filter and grasp subtle criticism within our interviewees' responses.

### **3.2. Reflections on the Nature of the Concept of SCE**

It is imperative to elaborate and reflect at this point on the nature and status of the concept of SCE. As touched upon in the *Literature Review*, the concept to us is rather a management concept than a pure scientific concept, as it incorporates recommendations in a ‘prognostic style’ which portray SCE as a strategic choice for managers that can lead to competitive advantage for an organization. However, we found it hard to achieve a precise demarcation whether SCE encompasses a scientific or management concept and the exact intention of the model is therefore difficult to grasp.

Regardless of this challenge, the conceptual framework of SCE quite comprehensibly and reasonably links together CE and sustainability. Through the visualization the authors provide orientation and create the impression of a certain degree of straightforwardness. This, together with the highlighted importance of CE and sustainability and the claim that SCE may lead to competitive advantages raises scholars’ and practitioners’ attention. Nevertheless, the literature revision outlined the vagueness and unclearness that surround CE and sustainability. Therefore, we need to advice carefulness. The model of SCE could give the impression that a combination of both concepts is easy to achieve, but, as the underlying concepts are extremely complex, the straightforwardness of the model could be misleading and irritating. The intention of our interviews hence was to explore how employees understand and perceive CE, sustainability and the relationship between both. In order to dive deep into individuals’ perceptions and understandings, we looked for a methodological approach that would allow us to achieve that – subsequently exploring the matter through an abductive, qualitative approach with an interpretative perspective.

### **3.3. Research Design and Process**

#### ***3.3.1 Collection of Empirical Material***

Our primary sources of data were semi-structured interviews with employees that are supposedly touched by sustainability and/or CE in their daily work. Our contact person at Big Company asked people within the field of sustainability, innovation and CE if some would be willing to participate in the project. The interviewees therefore were contributing voluntarily. Since semi-structured interviews allow to “obtain descriptions of the life world of the

interviewee with respect of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon” (Kvale, 1996, pp. 5–6), this technique thus fit well with our interpretive approach. Not only did this method allow us to gather more in-depth opinions about the employees’ individual challenges with sustainability and/or CE, it also provided us with a holistic, more valuable understanding of the organizational context necessary to investigate the feasibility and implications of the phenomenon SCE – thus, being in line with a hermeneutic research approach (Prasad, 2005).

Throughout our study, we conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes. One interview served as a pilot interview, but was still included into our overall analysis, as there were no changes made in the interview design for the upcoming interviews. The other thirteen interviews were conducted during three days at Big Company’s headquarters. Five interviews were conducted via telephone, the remaining eight in person. Per request of Big Company, every interviewee received the topics to be covered beforehand. We were aware that this could lead to a situation in which the employees could prepare ‘perfect’ answers. In order to avoid that, we tried to ‘detect’ textbook or ‘corporate’ answers and framed questions differently in order to reveal the true understanding and to uncover if they in fact meant and understood what they were talking about.

All interviews were conducted by both of us in a ‘two-on-one-format’, i.e. two researchers and one interviewee. This always allowed one of us to reflect on the next question, the interviewee’s reaction and the process of the interview, while the other was conducting the interview. Furthermore, this gave us the opportunity to alter the course of the interview, if one of us felt that the other became, for example, too narrow-minded at one point. We refrained from constructing a strict order of who would ask which questions; rather, and in line with the design of semi-structured interviews, we kept the interview as an open dialogue between us and the interviewee, allowing both of us interviewers to raise questions when we found something interesting. Further, the two of us communicated with each other during the interview and therefore could make sure that we covered all questions and subject matters we wanted to touch upon with each interviewee and did not forget anything. The questions we asked related to the concept of CE and sustainability, as well as the link between both. Every interview started with a short introduction which we used to inform the interviewee about the purpose of the interview, their anonymity and where we asked them if we could record the interview. In order to make the interviewee feel comfortable and to better understand their role

at Big Company, we then first prompted our interviewees to tell us about their work and position within the organization. Throughout the interview process we posed questions relating to what sustainability means to them, if they experienced challenges when working with sustainability or what they perceived as key drivers for sustainability at Big Company. Further key questions included ‘Do you feel like an entrepreneur in your daily work?’ or ‘How does sustainability influence how you approach new ideas?’. Additionally, we inquired our interviewees to elaborate on the ownership structure, the contested nuclear power production and the general organization’s settings, as we wanted to discover if and how these factors influence sustainability and innovation within Big Company. Our last question aimed at revealing how the employees perceived the relation between CE and sustainability. It is vital to mention that our questions were posed in a very open manner, thus leaving room for our interviewees to touch upon both their understandings as well as perceptions in their talk; hence, our questions were not focused on only uncovering perceptions or understandings as we were seeking to explore employees’ thought processes, experiences and insights into sustainability, CE and their relationship in general.

While it is the aim of this thesis to explore the feasibility of the concept of SCE, we nevertheless decided to not explicitly ask the interviewees any questions literally containing or naming the concept of SCE. We did that, as we were concerned that interviewees would provide positive answers (i.e. that they know the concept or portray it as beneficial), in order to create the image of a company that is at the forefront in regards to sustainability, CE and related concepts. We are convinced that by asking about the underlying concepts of SCE, namely CE and sustainability, we could in fact better explore and scrutinize the relationship between both. This motivation resulted in questions that intended to reveal the assumptions, perceptions and various understandings that build the foundation for SCE. Therefore, the questions we asked in different forms basically encircled this concept, but never literally used the word SCE, as this could taint our results.

Generally, the interviews went quite well and we did not experience substantial difficulties. Naturally, some interviewees were more talkative, compared to others and some needed some time to ease a bit prior to answering the questions. As every participant had been informed beforehand, the atmosphere was open and marked by interest on both sides. We had the impression that after a short while all employees felt comfortable and seemed to talk frankly



about the questions we presented. After each interview, we took notes and exchanged our impression, findings and observations regarding aspects that only subtly had been communicated, e.g. through body language.

### ***3.3.2 Analysis of Empirical Material***

The gathered data was fully analyzed after we had conducted all our interviews. Here, the underlying idea was to approach the data through being guided by the knowledge that we obtained and gained through the literature review. The process of data analysis basically followed the order of: firstly, sorting; secondly, reducing; and thirdly, arguing (Rennstam, 2017). Practically, this process unfolded as following: firstly, we transcribed all our conducted interviews. Secondly, taking one interview transcription at a time, we then went through the transcription and summarized each statement or paragraph in short sentences, condensing what the interviewee had talked about – this step was performed by both of us individually, thus allowing each of us to enter the interview and our own thought process without preconceptions. Thirdly, we summarized those insights in form of so-called ‘initial codes’, a process called ‘coding’ (Rennstam, 2017). Each initial code was attributed several quotes from the interview, thus allowing us to also later in the process ascribe quotes to our rephrased findings. These initial codes were quite close to the data (e.g. the spoken word), but in the upcoming steps, we created more abstract and broader codes, topics and themes (Rennstam, 2017). Hence, fourthly, similar ‘initial codes’ were grouped together as ‘focused codes’, consequently reducing our empirical material to more compact, precise findings. Fifthly, we grouped these focused codes into ‘overall topics’. After this step, we had fourteen interviews with three to five ‘overall topics’ each. Then, finally, we created an overview with all the interviews and their respective ‘overall topics’ that we had identified, in order to see where topics overlapped and to eventually find our ‘overall themes’ and arguments for this thesis. In the end, when our ‘overall topics’ had been identified, we grouped them according to ‘overall themes’ that basically comprise all of our findings. Those overall themes are: sustainability, CE, the link between CE and sustainability, organizational context, and lastly, fragmentation.

The theory and our background – including studies and practical experiences – guided us in the process of interpreting what the interviewees stated. In discovering themes, we looked for repetition, transition, metaphors, similarities and differences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Following Alvesson (2003), and in order to provide a credible interpretive study, throughout the whole process we challenged ourselves to keep a reflexive attitude towards the data and to continuously view it from various angles. Reflexive attitude to us meant that we did not take every word of the interviewee for granted, but constantly challenged internally what they had emphasized. We did that, as we were aware that each interviewee is subject to an individual context in which they give answers that could also be intended to present them in a certain light or need to fit their role in the organization. For instance, an employee working with technology and digitalization may rather give more weight to the increasing digitalization than an employee working in another department. In the course of the interpretations we were careful not to slip into categorizing answers into terms and classifications that are common to be found in the literature dealing with the topics at hand and intended to keep a “good trade-off between theoretical inspiration and openness toward empirical material” (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, p. 968). This translated into the ambition to avoid both a blind pursuit of attempting to categorize something into an existing theoretical framework and a naïve acceptance of statements by the interviewees (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003).

In order to understand how employees perceive and understand the notions of sustainability and entrepreneurial thinking, their connection, complexities, and existence in the messy organizational context, we further intended to explore whether broader discourses exist in our empirical data. Although we have not conducted a full discourse analysis, examining how the topics sustainability and CE were being talked about and articulated, gave us the possibility to explore how the interviewees’ perceptions and understandings are related to their context, and thus aided us in our interpretation (Puckett, 2016).

### **3.4. Reflexivity and Quality**

Several aspects are imperative to be mentioned as they influenced our discoveries and findings.

To begin with, we took on an interpretative approach and analyzed *one* organization. Thus, we cannot generalize the findings to all energy companies, not speaking of organizations in general. Each organization is subject to a unique organizational context, relating to aspect such as products, dimensions, business models, heritage, national or international exposure, management, ownership, performance, just to mention a few. Nevertheless, we can say that

energy companies of a similar size to our case study are subject to the same disruptive forces and trends, as we will outline in the following chapter. That means that we can carefully assume that interviewees in other energy companies that are similar in size and structure would provide insights that go into the same direction. Nevertheless, we cannot take organization- or industry-specific insights and translate them into generalizable aspects that influence every company in every industry that deals with entrepreneurship and/or sustainability. This to us is a very important limitation to be mentioned at this point.

Additionally, we need to state that the sample of interviewees that we talked with was not completely random and further limited in size. As we were undertaking a qualitative study, this limitation needed to be accepted; further, we had to be aware that (1) the statements and answers that we received could differ depending on who we interviewed, and (2) that not every employee within Big Company may explain and portray the phenomena and organizational reality the same way as our interviewees did.

The interviewees received a few questions and the topics we aimed to cover prior to the interview. We are aware that this gave the employees time to prepare answers to our structured questions which they might not have answered in the same way, had they not been given the opportunity to prepare. We perceive this to be a limitation in regards to our findings. Nevertheless, it was requested from Big Company to provide the structured questions which we knew we would ask every participant within our semi-structured interviews.

Another important limitation was the conviction that employees perceive reality differently and construct it according to personal and organizational characteristics. This influences the way they portray sustainability, CE and everything surrounding those topics. We needed to accept that the employees create narratives around these notions that are subjective and not necessarily representative for all organizational members. Nonetheless, keeping that in mind, we used those insights to translate them into findings, subsequently allowing us to relate them to the theory that we presented and analyzed. For instance, if interviewees struggled to put into words what sustainability meant to them, we did not generalize that, but took it as a finding hinting towards the concept's complex nature. Hence, this non-generalizability and the constructivist nature of reality brought along limitations in our study.

Overall, throughout our research process, we were strongly aware of those aforementioned limitations and challenged ourselves to keep them in mind through constantly probing ourselves as well as our results.

## **4. EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND ANALYSIS**

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Being guided by our research questions and our interpretative standpoint, the following chapter will lay out our empirical findings. For a better understanding into how the phenomena sustainability and CE were studied in this thesis, we will, however, firstly provide insight into the organization from which we gathered our empirical material as well as its organizational context.

Diving into our empirical material, most obviously the notions of sustainability and CE were illustrated from a multitude of perspectives, highlighting broadness and complexity in how both concepts may be perceived and understood by organizational members. Hence, this overall inconsistent framing of the concepts sustainability and CE reflected the theoretical ambiguity and complexity that plagues scholars and researchers as well. Nonetheless, it became evident that our findings are not completely irregular and sporadic but allowed for a certain degree of order; acknowledging the multiple dimensions and complexity of both the sustainability and CE concepts, we were able to group certain elements in the so fragmented perceptions and understandings of our interviewees into empirical themes, which generally encircle how employees understood and framed the concepts, how they related to the concepts and what they described as driving the concepts. Based on the perceived and framed complexity of the notions of sustainability and CE, also their relationship was understood diversely. Finally, taking a closer look at an organization's context, we found that a multiplicity of factors seemingly strongly influence the organization and the resulting presence, practice and nature of sustainability and CE.

### **4.1. Our Case Study: Big Company**

We believe that the environment in which an organization operates influences how employees judge and perceive the reality around them. The studied organization – Big Company – is an enterprise operating in the energy sector, producing energy based on renewable, nuclear and fossil resources. Big Company highlights its commitment to sustainability with an extensive sustainability report and various information that point to activities relating to it. Furthermore, Big Company prominently publishes information creating the image of an innovative organization that values, pushes and supports innovation and entrepreneurial activity. We

obtained this information from the organization's homepage. As Big Company underlies a multitude of societal and governmental pressures and some of our findings may display sensitive data, we will keep our object of research as anonymous as possible, only outlining 'facts and figures' that are truly relevant to our study.

Over the last years, the global energy sector has been, and still is, subject to several megatrends, especially: technological breakthroughs, climate change and resource scarcity, shifts in economic power and accelerating urbanization (Jørgensen, 2005; Rojey, 2009; United Nations et al., 2014). Those trends have started to result in changing customer behavior, the need for new production service models as well as distribution channels, fierce competition and strong governmental influence displayed in local, national and supranational policies (European Commission, 2017; Pachauri et al., 2015).

All those factors will and already have heavily impacted the way energy companies are doing business these days. Their purposes, business models, operating models/capabilities, HR models and financial performances are influenced. The 14<sup>th</sup> PwC Global Power and Utilities Survey (2015) reveals that 97 percent of senior managers expect a medium or high amount of disruption in the main home markets by 2020. All regions, except for North America, claim that the public regulation is the strongest driver behind this energy transformation. However, it is generally expected that the regulatory push will after some time transform into a customer pull. 47 percent of survey respondents say that there is a medium to high probability that distributed generation could shrink the role of some power utility companies to providers of back-up power (PwC, 2015). 60 percent of those being asked, report that their main home market will be more than 50 percent transformed by the year 2030. This then translates into the conviction of 70 percent expecting a significant or very significant market model change by 2030. Lastly, 78 percent of respondents predict greater competition and especially competition from outside the energy sector. Overall, that relates to organizations from the IT/telecom sector, brands from the retailing or online sector as well as smart- and micro-grids, local generation and local storage. They all have started to and already compete with the classical energy providers, such as Big Company. A clear picture is drawn: new market models and new business models will emerge and will establish themselves resulting from the energy transformation – current business models will be affected (Rojey, 2009). 89 percent of the respondents believe in a medium to high probability of a "flat and declining role for power

utility companies and current central grid-based energy systems” (PwC, 2015). Both chance and risk are being seen in the transformation of the energy sector. One thing seems certain, however: energy companies are subject to major trends which will change the way of business. This can mean both chance and opportunity, but also threat and difficulty. Independently of that, the energy landscape changes with a strong momentum (Jørgensen, 2005).

Regarding our case, Big Company, the following characteristics become apparent: Big Company claims to be sustainable and engages in various efforts to achieve sustainability. The energy mix of our organization nevertheless, in our opinion, is subject to discussions and objections, as the fossil-based and nuclear energy generation is not perceived to be sustainable by everyone. Furthermore, as sustainability is subject to many different understandings, opinions and perceptions, we assume this is being reflected in the organizational reality of employees. The energy sector is currently undergoing massive changes which can be both an opportunity but also a threat. It seems that energy companies are affected from so many sides and stakeholders, that they, in fact, are under great pressure. In order to succeed, they need to find ways to deal with the changing environment and translate it into a space for opportunity. Big Company claims to be doing that through publicly stressing its focus on sustainability and emphasizing its innovative mindset. We therefore regard Big Company as an interesting case to study.

#### **4.2. The Themes of Sustainability**

In the following part, we present our findings dealing with the perceptions and understandings relating to the first phenomenon of our research – sustainability. After a comprehensive analysis of the transcribed interviews, we identified three major themes: the first theme relates to the uncertainty surrounding the concept of sustainability and the inability to describe in own words what is meant with this concept. The second theme pronounces how employees display an attitude marked by enthusiasm and inner conviction for sustainability and its benefits. Lastly, the third theme reveals the skepticism which some employees attribute to the concept of sustainability and the critical mindset they portray when it comes to the practical application of it.

However, none of our interviewees expressed that they do *not* perceive sustainability as a significant matter. Independent of which relationship, understanding or conviction the participants demonstrated regarding the concept of sustainability, everyone seemingly recognized, accepted and highlighted the importance of sustainability. Although some employees claimed that sustainability does not need to be omnipresent, they still perceived it as a significant issue. We regard this as a central finding, as it conforms to the perception that sustainability in society has become an important and urgent concept that is present in people's minds, even if precise knowledge and understanding about it are missing at times and the concept as such is frequently criticized.

#### ***4.2.1 Uncertainty and Complexity Surrounding Sustainability***

The first theme outlines that sustainability for some interviewees is surrounded by uncertainty. This became apparent as some of the interviewees struggled to precisely define how they understand sustainability and what it means for them and their daily work. Frequently, participants claimed that sustainability is decisive, yet could not fully explain why and how. Often, the term 'sustainability' was used in a way that it could have taken on various meanings. In addition, the employees provided varied reasons for their personal drive of sustainability. Overall, this gave us the impression that uncertainty, vagueness and complexity surround the concept.

First of all, interviewees mentioned different aspects that, in their eyes, drive sustainability within Big Company. These drivers can in general be divided into two sources: (1) intrinsic drivers that lie within the individual employee, and (2) corporate commitments, external demands and further drivers that push for sustainability within the corporate setting.

Many interviewees displayed a strong personal conviction for sustainability matters; for instance, Anna told us that she "*wanted to work in the energy sector, because it is so relevant for sustainability*" as the latter would be a major challenge for today's generation. As we witnessed a broad internal commitment and passion for sustainability within many participants, the following chapter *The Enthusiasm for Sustainability* will dive deeper into these intrinsic drivers. However, many employees pointed towards other drivers that are pushing for sustainability within Big Company. Ben, for example, asserted that it is generally "*the responsibility as a company*" to be sustainable and that the employees need to show



commitment in this regard. For George, it was the CEO and Big Company's strategy that put sustainability on the agenda. Contrarily, other employees presented 'company-external' aspects that they perceived as driving the perceived relevance of sustainability within Big Company. Anna, for instance, emphasized that *"most trends today are moving in the way of sustainability"*, while Ethan claimed that Big Company needs to create *"awareness within our customers about what sustainability means."* George revealed that he thinks that society drives the presence of the topic within Big Company.

*"It is the society that shapes [our direction]. Imagine, let's say, in a theoretical word, that our CEO says: "I don't mind about sustainability." People would say: "well, you cannot say that." You are in conflict with society" (George).*

From the above statements, it becomes obvious that the reasons for the sustainability focus at Big Company are manifold and not traceable back to only one root cause; different employees saw various factors to be pushing the topic in the organization's setting. It seems that the internal organizational understanding is fragmented; this suggests that for Big Company's organizational members it is not clear where the organization's focus on sustainability stems from. This could influence how sustainability is understood and pursued by the employees of Big Company: for example, if an individual is internally driven by a conviction for sustainability, their motivation to pursue sustainability within a corporate environment may be different than if an employee does not have this intrinsic drive, but has to follow sustainability based on external demands, such as regulatory obligations.

Besides the diversity of perceived sources for the importance of sustainability within Big Company, the complexity of the term itself and its substance became obvious from our interviews. When being asked what sustainability means, interviewees frequently evaded relating to the substance of sustainability and rather paraphrased their personal understanding by giving broad, vague answers. For Fabienne, for example, sustainability meant *"living in a sustainable way and using sustainable energy."* Initially, her answer sounded logic, but it remained completely open, how she understood the concept and what she interpreted as 'living in a sustainable way'. Fabienne's vague response thus demonstrates the difficulty of precisely framing the term sustainability, a struggle we witnessed across multiple interviewees.

Some, nonetheless, were initially able to give precise definitions of how they understood sustainability, but similarly to Fabienne, later were also struck by the difficulty of the sustainability concept. Anna and Ben, for example, started to elaborate on the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability, but later in their talk only focused on the environment and highlighted that for Big Company the protection of its ecological surrounding is of a particular importance. This is demonstrated by the following snippets from Anna's interview:

*“I mean I know that that's the mission of sustainability of economic, social and environmental pillars. That's my view of sustainability [...] I think that the clear direction right now is that we are trying to go for more sustainability, a more climate-friendly, more environmentally-friendly [direction]” (Anna).*

Others reacted in a similar way. Ethan, for example, related the sustainability concept to economic aspects by stressing that if the costs are higher than the revenue, the outcome is not sustainable:

*“[Sustainability] means what sort of things I need to check when I am designing a feature, for example – how should it work, what's the most efficient way of doing this, and how do I sustain it – because if it is costing us more than it gives us from a financial point of view, then that is not sustainable, right?”*

Those answers show that even if interviewees illustrated sustainability as being based on three pillars, they seemed to give importance and weight to one aspect. This raises two assumptions: firstly, through consciously giving special importance to one aspect only, employees could be convinced that for some reason one of the three pillars needs special attention or focus. Secondly, we assume that the concept of sustainability, and especially the idea of balancing the three pillars at once, is too difficult for a practical and operative application in the daily corporate life. This leads to a conscious or unconscious simplification strategy of elaborating on only one aspect to grasp the concept.

Again others, like Ben, did not even mention the balancing of the three aspects, but naturally related sustainability to environmental matters:

*“Yeah, so in the sense of sustainability, yeah, try to minimize the CO<sub>2</sub>-footprint, do things smarter, try to help people to really save energy – all those kinds of things.”*

Hence, it seems to us that sustainability for some of the interviewees was still associated with only one aspect of the three pillars, namely the environment. Interestingly, some interviewees even created dimensions of the term that went beyond the widespread integrative model with the three pillars. Ethan, for instance, associated sustainability to user experience and Dylan developed the term to evaluate the technical performance of energy installations. This cannot be judged to be false, but it underlines that the concept is not limited in its sense but is subject to constant development and personal interpretation. The example of nuclear power production mirrors the manifold positions that exist around sustainability. For some employees, this way of energy production should be abolished as it is perceived dangerous and the waste harmful for generations to come. Others judged it as environmentally friendly and reliable. Fabienne pragmatically commented this by saying *“people act differently.”*

Additionally to having diverse understandings of the term sustainability, some employees admitted that the position of Big Company in relation to sustainability is unclear and not understandable to them.

*“But I have to be honest, we are still searching. Because now I say we want to be CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral in year X – this was not clear one year ago. And if you would have asked me about our strategy, for a lot of people this was a little bit unclear” (Ben).*

We propose that this may be one of the reasons why some participants then highlighted the difficulty of relating their own work or that of colleagues to aspects of sustainability. When asked about how sustainability is integrated into his work, one employee responds:

*“Ehhm, I wouldn’t say directly; I think it is more this trying to create awareness for sustainability through our services and within the company as well” (Ethan).*

Overall, we gained the impression that sustainability is often used as some kind of a ‘buzzword’, which was always articulated, when someone wanted to describe something positive – a positive state, goal or ideal. This then translated into the creation of new dimensions of sustainability, as the examples of Dylan and Ethan seeing technical feasibility as a sustainability-influencing factor demonstrated.

#### 4.2.2 *The Enthusiasm for Sustainability*

The second theme surrounds the identified enthusiasm for sustainability. Under this theme, we group the aspects that outline that some interviewees perceive sustainability to be a very important factor and that they are strongly committed to it by an internal drive.

A lot of employees attributed a high importance to the concept of sustainability. Anna claimed that *“most trends today are moving in the way of sustainability”* and Chris added that he highly appreciates Big Company’s decision to pursue sustainability with commitment. Generally, we found that for a lot of employees, the topic of sustainability was a motivational factor to start working for Big Company. Anna and Michelle, for example, stated that they *“wanted to work in the energy sector, because it is so relevant for sustainability.”* Further, Chris shows his personal passion for sustainability by proclaiming that sustainability is *“really something that intrinsically motivates”* him and that the environmental aspect of sustainability made him join Big Company. However, besides these literal statements regarding commitment and motivation, there are also other statements that revealed how personal passion and importance were attributed to the topic. One hint for that was, for example, how interviewees framed the concept sustainability: some talked about the concept in a way that showed that they had familiarized themselves with the topic and critically grappled with the meaning of sustainability, yet still displayed their positive understanding of sustainability. Jessica and Anna, for example, explained that the mission of sustainability is linked to the *“economic, social and environmental pillars.”* Anna then even talked about the Brundtland-definition, which truly showed that she is familiar with the topic of sustainability, as we do not regard this definition to be common knowledge.

*“And using today’s resources and developing the world today without compromising the future. That Brundtland-definition is my view of sustainability” (Anna).*

Additionally, for us, another type of insight revealed that some of our interviewed employees acknowledged the inherent complexity of sustainability and the consciousness that sustainability is difficult to achieve and subject to various understandings. Anna, for example stated that sustainability is *“very complicated”* and a *“very nuanced”* topic. Also Dylan accepted that *“different parts of sustainability are stressed differently within the different parts of the company – and should be, of course.”* However, he rather regarded that as something

positive. For him, those positions do not end in conflicts, but in discussions, which may add to problem-solving processes.

*“We acknowledge that there are different opinions in regards to sustainability in Big Company as such. I wouldn’t say it ends in conflicts, I would say it ends in discussions. And this means that the way we are producing energy today is a bridge – we will stop it when we find it appropriate, when it is feasible from a number of perspectives” (Dylan).*

The insights we gained from our interviewees to us translate into different findings: firstly, it seems that some employees showed a strong personal drive to promote sustainability and apply it within Big Company. Also, across our interviewees it became apparent that the term sustainability is riddled by complexity, as highlighted by a number of our participants.

#### **4.2.3 Skepticism Regarding Sustainability**

Under the theme of skepticism, we gather insights that reveal that some employees do also see unbeneficial sides in sustainability and take a skeptical stance towards the practicality of the concept and towards the term itself. We discovered that some employees perceive sustainability as a concept that lacks clarity and substance which, according to them, translates into difficulties in its application.

This skepticism becomes apparent from several statements of our interviewees. Particularly Chris’ skeptical question highlights his critical stance:

*“Where does sustainability relate to?”*

Similarly, Klas was confused about the substance of sustainability and claimed that he would not know what it in fact means, as it could cover basically everything:

*“Sustainability covers more than that. It covers (...hesitating...), I guess it covers everything.”*

Klas then continued to elaborate that for him, the term lacked a clear definition and implication. For him, the term could not encapsulate the various interests and positions regarding the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability:

*“Sustainability, what does it mean? [...] You always have conflicting targets. [...] So there are many issues conflicting. But I don’t think that is only difficult for Big Company” (Klas).*

Jessica supported his statement when she told us that *“there are different understandings and there are different views.”*

Moreover, a number of participants displayed skepticism towards the widespread integrative model of sustainability, which stresses the alignment of the three sustainability dimensions, namely the economic, environmental and social pillars. For instance, Jessica assumed that it is extremely difficult for the employees to balance those three pillars of sustainability:

*“I don’t think that the employees today have enough knowledge to do it, but I am convinced that the more we talk about this, the more they understand these parts – and then they will be able to apply it to their daily work. But we are far from there right now.”*

At Big Company, she added, balancing the three pillars of sustainability not only means balancing social, ecological and economic concerns, but also balancing interests of various people. This showed us that decisions regarding sustainability are also decisions that affect people and their agenda within a company and may result in clashes:

*“For us, it’s always about balancing different interests, and of course, then you have clashes. But if you only look at something from one point, you sometimes have difficulty understanding the full picture” (Jessica).*

Lastly, on that note, some participants not necessarily perceived the balancing act of the three sustainability aspects positively. As Ethan critically noted:

*“What do you get out of balancing it out?”*

Additionally to the difficulty and skepticism surrounding the presumed balance of the sustainability aspects, interviewees again critically mentioned the challenge of relating their daily work to the concept. Ethan highlighted that he is normally focused on one specific task at work that relates to a very specific aspect of sustainability, namely the economic aspect. By doing this, it is not easy for him to understand and to overlook the full picture and

consequences of his actions. He further found that he was generally not directly touched by sustainability in his work:

*“I wouldn’t say directly [...] it means what sort of things I need to check when I am designing a feature, for example – how should it work, what’s the most efficient way of doing this, and how do I sustain it – because if it is costing us more than it gives us from a financial point of view, then that is not sustainable, right?”*

Similarly, Chris told us that he does not quite see how his work fits into the organizational context of Big Company, namely its needs and goals. His uncertainty of finding correlations between his work and the overall organizational sustainability direction is illustrated by the following:

*“It is very difficult and especially for me, as I have not been with Big Company for even one year. It is really difficult to say” (Chris).*

Further, some interviewees critically voiced that sustainability has become some *“sort of a buzzword”* (Ben). Ben even got slightly upset and said that sustainability is something everybody now talks about and wants to be part of. With an ironic tone, he cynically pointed out that *“everything needs to be green now.”* For him, sustainability was not a clear direction or concept, but it is rather a trend, lifestyle or kind of an inspiration:

*“For me, let’s be honest, that is a concept or a way of living that we need to do – a lifestyle, a kind of inspiration [...] it’s a kind of goal that we want to move forward to” (Ben).*

Klas indirectly pointed into the same direction by ironically claiming that *“before it was environmental issues”* but now it is called *“sustainability problems.”* The perception of sustainability being a trend and the difficulties in dealing with the concept adequately, lead to Ben proposing that *“not everything needs to be sustainable.”*

For some of the interviewees, sustainability was not a principle that Big Company needs to establish and every employee needs to believe in, but rather another type of customer demand that needs to be fulfilled to the extent that it is being asked for. As Ben exemplified:

*“If a customer wants a sustainable product or just a grey product, it doesn’t matter, we need to offer what the customer wants.”*



This was a hint for us to assume that for some of the employees, sustainability is a customer demand that needs to be fulfilled – but not more and not less.

Given all the complexities and skepticism relating to sustainability, some of the employees highlighted that it is important to let loose from the theoretical conceptualization of it, but rather use “*common sense*” (Nils) to translate sustainability efforts into actions that are practically feasible, as Nils states:

*“You have to use your common sense, because there is no guiding principle in the world that you could just rely on when it comes to how do we create a sustainable workplace, or how do you work sustainably. It’s something that you need to understand and you can’t just go to the summary of principles and just say check, check, check, I did it” (Nils).*

From these past three themes we may conclude the following: it seems to us that sustainability is something that can vary depending on the organization’s or single employee’s understanding and perception. This, in our opinion, could influence the pursuit of sustainability within the organization in multiple ways, for instance: (1) the organization’s communicated goals and visions could be interpreted differently, as employees may put different weight on the aspects of sustainability, which may ultimately lead to varying behavior within one company – an example could be that the firm’s economic performance could be hampered through giving importance to solving environmental challenges; and (2) the substance behind the term could lose its grip, if the term is overused or used without a clearly defined meaning; eventually (3), people may then attribute, as our case displays, positive ideals or situations to the term – thus attributing ‘buzzword-like’ aspects to it – while further perceiving it as something vague and unclear.

Overall, we suggest that an organization should be aware of this displayed inherent complexity of sustainability and the resulting varying understandings and perceptions of the term. Being faced with this vagueness and complexity, we see need for the organization to reflect which implications this could have.



### **4.3. The Themes of Corporate Entrepreneurship (CE)**

In this section, we focus on the perceptions and understandings described by our interview participants regarding our second phenomenon of research – corporate entrepreneurship (CE). Through analyzing the interviews, we found three dominant themes in the talk our participants engaged in: the practice of CE is perceived as being hampered by organizational structures and culture, the drive for demanding CE is inherently dependent on single individuals, and lastly, the meanings of CE and being entrepreneurial are viewed uneasily and skeptically. Surprisingly, when relating to the phenomenon of CE in the interviews, our interviewees tended to focus their talk on the perceived challenges in and barriers to practicing CE within Big Company; the topics regarding the essence of CE and what it actually ‘is’ were given less priority. We assume that this may relate back to the insecurity and difficulty in grasping and phrasing CE, while employees further seemed to find security in defining the impediments to CE and how they personally can relate to and were affected by those hindrances. In the following, we elaborate further on these themes and highlight that the concept of CE is apparently indeed inherently plagued by complexity and subject to numerous interpretations.

#### **4.3.1 *Impediments and Barriers to CE***

This first theme hence encapsulates the inquiry regarding the integration of CE within the organizational setting of Big Company: to what extent interviewees perceived CE as present and how the degree and practice of CE is affected. The analysis of our responses reveal that entrepreneurial activities take place within Big Company to a limited extent, however, they are not perceived as an intrinsic part of the corporate environment. This becomes obvious from Anna’s exclaim that, although she was able to introduce an innovation initiative at Big Company, “*that, I was doing outside of my work. [And] finding a balance between daily corporate work and then entrepreneurship is a challenge, of course.*” Anna’s brief statement illustrates an observation we made across multiple interviews, showing a separation between daily corporate work and entrepreneurial activities, as she frames the latter as an extra, external component that is difficult to combine with her work setting. Hence, it seems that entrepreneurial activities are being welcomed and embraced by the organization, as long as they do not impede the daily corporate work performed by the employees. Yet, the organizational structures and processes do not actively push for initiatives or foster out-of-the-box thinking.

Overall, two significant barriers to CE became apparent and were strongly associated with this perceived lack of entrepreneurial activities at Big Company, namely (1) the nature of the organizational structure, and (2) an absence of a supportive culture.

As articulated by Nils below, participants accentuated the general complexity of the corporate structures and the challenge of combining the nature of entrepreneurship with that environment:

*“Maybe the biggest challenge would be for me, to really be able to work as an entrepreneur in this big company and get as much as possible out of the strength of having a big company backing us up, avoiding big corporation problems, stopping us and hindering us from realizing our new ideas and so on.”*

In line with Nils’ general reflection on the complexity of the structures of a large-scale organization like Big Company, a number of interviewees communicated the impediments of the corporate structures in more detail. For instance, the influences of hierarchy, power, politics and available budget became evident. Especially, employees outlined how hierarchy hampered the execution of entrepreneurial ideas. One participant, Michelle, even compared Big Company to a *“slow dinosaur”*, indicating the deadlocked structures of the organization that limit individual freedom. Yet, this freedom seemingly is a question of hierarchy, power and politics; unsurprisingly, the statements of employees regarding the factor hierarchy were then traversed by signs of frustration:

*“Big Company is very hierarchical. If you don’t have a title which contains ‘Manager of’ then it is very hard to get listened to, even if you have good points [...] It can be very frustrating” (Fabienne).*

*“If you don’t stick high enough in the hierarchy, it’s difficult” (Olivia).*

Another common barrier related to the corporate structure, and closely tied to hierarchy, was that of bureaucracy:

*“And also there is a lot of bureaucracy, so you have to find other ways of doing things, where you can sort of [...] leave some room for experimentation without all the bureaucracy and the hierarchy. So, a little bit of leeway for the employees to be creative” (Anna).*

Yet, despite this inherent bureaucracy and the corporate hierarchy, Anna's expression indicates that she sees potential for individuals at Big Company – and eventually the company as a whole – to be entrepreneurial. The interviews made apparent that multiple participants regarded the traditional industry environment, company size and the heritage of Big Company as the factor mainly responsible for the current state of structures and the perceived minimal degree of CE. The context of Big Company and the influence thereof will be discussed further in a different section.

As outlined previously, also culture was expressed to hinder – or at least not actively foster – CE. This was strongly exemplified in two cases. Firstly, due to the organization's sensitive products as well as the industry, one interviewee expressed that a culture where you could *"fail fast, try often"* (Ben) for long was not possible. Yet, Big Company seems to slowly accept that certain business areas, processes, or tasks may actually benefit from a more entrepreneurial, risk-taking stance, as Ben pointed out:

*"That's a total mindset change and we are still in the middle of that"* (Ben).

Secondly, interviewees brought attention to the general difficulty of creating a unified corporate culture within a geographically-dispersed large organization. One participant outlined, how such companies then are not only plagued by the influence of various national cultures, but also are prone to the emergence of multiple subcultures within the different departments; thus, integrating a more entrepreneurial spirit into these cultures was perceived as immensely difficult:

*"Building a strategy for innovation already within one company is so difficult. [Now] you have various subcultures, multiplied by multiple nationalities. That is a big task"* (Chris).

Nonetheless, when asked to examine the efforts Big Company already currently undertakes, these were not perceived as sufficient by many of our interviewees, signifying a culture that, in the eyes of our interviewees, is not fostering and supporting CE adequately:

*"I would definitely say that Big Company could use more entrepreneurs and that people could use more encouragement, of course"* (Anna).

*"This type of support really doesn't exist, I would say"* (Olivia).

This lack of support was either looped back to a shortage of organizational members seeing the need for CE, or explained by missing stimuli within the corporate reward system and setting. To an extent, this ties in with the previously criticized hierarchy and bureaucracy, as participants criticized how entrepreneurial thinking was not rewarded at Big Company and the execution of ideas depended on (managers’) KPIs or overall organizational targets:

*“The thing is that here, your ideas are not promoted – you are not rewarded. I know some young people who said ‘hey, here we have an idea that would save literally millions of money on certain projects’ – so they went to their boss. But because it is not within the KPI dashboard of the boss, things are not implemented, because they are not rewarded for it” (Ben).*

On a final note, most interviewees called for a more entrepreneurial environment and CE-supporting structures and culture; none regarded CE as an intrinsic, integral element in the setting of Big Company. While the vast majority of participants acknowledged a change into that direction by the organization, albeit slowly, these efforts were viewed doubtfully as not being viably structured or as ‘pulling the right strings’. To close out this section, Ben’s following quote highlights that skepticism, while stressing again how the degree of existing CE is perceived differently by different people within the organization:

*“I know there is quite a lot of colleagues who think we do great things – and on one hand I agree with them, but on the other hand, I don’t think it’s enough and that we need to go a lot faster, have a lot more budget for it and have a lot more people on it – and all that in a more structured way [...] Again, I think you need to stimulate that internal motivation, and if people then have ideas, let them try to more or less develop that idea [...] And we didn’t find a method yet how that could work for us.”*

#### **4.3.2 The Intrinsic Drive for Entrepreneurship**

Another prominent theme we identified from our analyzed data relates to the perceived origin of corporate entrepreneurial activities at Big Company; the vast majority of our interview partners held that the drive and the initiative for entrepreneurial thinking (need to) come from the employee. Accordingly, our interviewees’ responses implied that entrepreneurial activities at Big Company are initiated and driven by single employees and their conviction, passion and

enthusiasm. As shown below, this perception was consistently articulated by a number of participants:

*“At this moment, entrepreneurial thinking at Big Company is still dependent on the enthusiasm of the people” (Ben).*

*“Some people work to earn the money and leave Big Company at 5 (o’clock). Other people stay until 10 o’clock in the evening and think about opportunities” (Chris).*

*“Here I can be very honest – I am really driving it and I am also encouraging other people to drive it” (Anna).*

It appears that CE thus is a phenomenon that at Big Company largely depends on bottom-up acceptance, involvement and commitment, as addressed by the majority of interviewees.

Further, CE and entrepreneurial thinking within this form of understanding were related to being a possibility to essentially changing corporations for the better and improving ways of working. It caught our eye that participants especially drew on positive associations regarding (corporate) entrepreneurship, referring to changing something to the better, reaping business opportunities through being critical, learning or being creative:

*“I believe that in order to solve today’s problems, we need to use new solutions, like not the old solutions that caused today’s problems; and then we need to be innovative, we need to find new ways of working” (Anna).*

*“It is something my parents have taught me: look at things in a critical way, think about it. Should you change it, should it be in that way? If I look at business opportunities within Big Company or startups we are working together with, I am always looking at it from a very personal side. I like to think about business ideas and I like to think about the whole process” (Chris).*

*“So in the sense of entrepreneurship, start-ups know how to find me, I talk to them because I like it, I feel I can learn from them [...] I try to push the business to do this kind of thing [...] I try to really push people forward” (Ben).*

*“Yeah, like I am a very creative person [...] I think that through a person like me, other people can feel that Big Company is innovative [and] that there is room for entrepreneurship” (Anna).*

Moreover, the interviewees mostly linked that positive notion to their personal level and personal entrepreneurial attitude, illustrating how they themselves aided in transforming Big Company into something ‘better’. It may even be argued that the actual motivator for being entrepreneurial subsequently stems from the individual’s intrinsic motives (i.e. the ambition to learn, enjoying creativity and experimenting, critically analyzing complex processes and improving efficiency etc.), instead of the goal of simply accelerating the business. Again this proposes that the personal perception of CE and the outwardly expressed drive and push for CE in a corporate setting therefore seemingly are very much connected. Interviewees who attributed positive notions towards CE were also the ones who strongly related themselves to being (corporate) entrepreneurs, suggesting a positive relationship between intrinsic drive and a personal positive attitude towards CE.

Overall, our study suggests that within the corporate context of Big Company the presence of entrepreneurial thinking is mostly attributed to (single) employees, their mindset and compassion, as summed up by Hector:

*“People – this is all about people. If you have people who are passionate about a certain topic, they will drive it – no matter whether they get the mandate for it or not.”*

Moreover, being entrepreneurial and encouraging CE was equaled with positive implications and results – a standpoint that others saw skeptically, as the following section highlights.

### **4.3.3 *Uncertainty and Skepticism Around CE***

#### *Uncertainty surrounding the concept of CE*

Despite a majority of our interviewees claiming a passion for entrepreneurship and feeling to some extent entrepreneurial in their daily work, uncertainty surrounding the corporate entrepreneurship phenomenon was an omnipresent and overriding theme from the interviews.

Uncertainty was made apparent in numerous ways; most obviously, it occurred in instances when interviewees were asked to articulate in their own terms what it meant to be ‘entrepreneurial’ or a corporate entrepreneur. The vast majority of interviewees found it problematic and difficult to define what it means to be a (corporate) entrepreneur. Often, this uncertainty resulted in individuals hesitating, pensively repeating the question or verbally struggling to precisely define the phenomenon, as the following example shows:

*Challenging Assumptions of SCE – Exploring the Complexities Beneath the Surface*

*“Ehmm... how do you define an entrepreneur?” (Michelle)*

*“Who is an entrepreneur?” (Klas)*

Few interviewees then even evaded answering the question by claiming not to have a definition or not being an expert of the entrepreneurship area:

*“I don’t have a definition” (Michelle).*

*“That is not my area of expertise” (Dylan).*

While seemingly this behavior provides the interviewee with some security – as one evades the insecurity and avoids giving a ‘wrong’ answer – it also suggests that: (1) the interviewee does not know the concept CE; and/or (2) the concept CE and the implication of being ‘entrepreneurial’ in an organization are indeed too complex and ambiguous to capture; and/or (3) the interviewee is not touched by CE in their corporate environment. This third assumption may be further developed by participants voicing insecurity around the question whether they themselves feel like an entrepreneur in their daily work. Typical statements underlining this insecurity and uncertainty included:

*“Sometimes. Not every day maybe” (Laura).*

*“I think I am [an entrepreneur]” (Klas).*

Despite the initial uncertainty, once interviewees began to speak about CE and were prompted to elaborate on entrepreneurial influences in their daily work, particular views emerged and took shape. Yet, various views and fragmented definitions around what it means to be (corporate) entrepreneurial became apparent, once again reflecting the complexity and broad meaning of entrepreneurship. For instance, one participant framed the ‘ownership’ of tasks as entrepreneurial while further linking CE to the size of his department:

*“Because [my] department is not that big. And every small thing you do affects. You see the change directly. So, imagine, I talk to today and shape the contract of tomorrow’s wind farm, so I own it” (George).*

Others stated that being entrepreneurial means challenging and disrupting the old ways and creating something ‘new’:



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*“We need to think new and to think new is, of course, the essence of entrepreneurship” (Laura).*

*“We should challenge the current way of doing things” (Klas).*

*“So I think it’s about being open to doing things in a different manner and so on (Jessica).*

Yet, although these last responses depict somewhat unitary themes in how the individuals spoke about CE, these views were quite vague and no clear description of what it *actually* means to be entrepreneurial was given. Another interviewee also regarded driving change, although making no declaration of what kind of change, as an entrepreneurial activity:

*“Not inventing new business models, but using our knowledge or estimation of what is going to happen, you could say. [...] I guess, through driving change you cannot be stuck in the old models” (Dylan).*

Dylan’s statement makes apparent, though less obviously, that the complexity of CE led to contradictions within the talk of some interviewees, as they – the more they progressed to elaborate on CE – frequently framed and described CE and what it means to be entrepreneurial differently than in their initial conceptualization. Initially, Dylan did not see the ‘invention of new business models’ as entrepreneurial; yet, later on in the interview, he disproved that assertion by framing that change – which he deems entrepreneurial – allows to ‘not be stuck in old business models’. This kind of contradiction and resulting internal fragmentation will be discussed further in another section of this analysis chapter.

*Skepticism towards the concept of CE*

Whereas the previous themes have mostly focused on the quest of defining what it means to be a corporate entrepreneur, the barriers towards being one as well as the drivers for CE, a few skeptics of our interview partners took an alternative line of thought: here, the prominent call for more CE and the attributed benefits of CE were questioned.

Some interviewees displayed skepticism about the notion of CE as being a viable concept, and thus, had a critical attitude towards its effectiveness within the organization. CE was perceived as a concept that should not exist in an organization-wide, all-permeating manner. Rather, entrepreneurial activities should be left to certain organizational areas or individuals, as an



organization-wide entrepreneurial spirit may lead to unfavorable results for the company as a whole:

*“I don’t want every employee at Big Company to be entrepreneurial. It would be chaos if you had all those running the nuclear plants being entrepreneurial – that would never work” (Jessica).*

*“If everybody thinks you can save the world and does not focus on the daily business, then all would turn into a crazy house. It is good to have various types on your team. Some are very entrepreneurial and some more down to earth with a critical attitude” (Chris).*

Taking this standpoint a bit further, others argued that entrepreneurial thinking cannot simply be ‘implemented’ into organizational processes, voicing that it much depends on the individual’s mindset, talent and traits whether individuals actually embrace CE or even can be entrepreneurial. Hence, our interviewees suggested that CE rather is a notion that naturally emerges or not, depending on the intrinsic commitment of employees:

*“Of course, at one point there is a limit. Not everyone is an entrepreneur, not everyone is a lawyer and not everyone is a doctor” (Chris).*

*“Being innovative means that you don’t like standard stuff, you want to do a change. Not everyone wants to do a change. Not everyone is good in keeping business active or healthy. So, you need to have a bit of a talent and a bit of knowledge and a little bit of a drive [...] It doesn’t work to only believe in it” (George).*

Further, individuals expressed moments of skepticism about the nature of entrepreneurship and its translation into corporate contexts. Here, *“being entrepreneurial just for the sake of trying out new things” (Hector)* does not suffice and was not regarded as meaningful. Instead, in order for CE to work and be viable in large organizations, an entrepreneurial approach must be much more structured and is in need of a business case:

*“You need the right people and you need the business case, because you always have to connect basically ‘buzzword-topics’ to a concrete business problem. Because only then you can – in the best case – make a difference and create impact. If you just try out something, okay, you can burn a lot of money and maybe create some insights and*

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*learnings, but I don't think any company has the money to do something like that anymore" (Hector).*

This view demonstrates the notable paradox between the actual articulated nature in the discourse of entrepreneurship, which implies that ('start-up') entrepreneurship is based on trial-and-error and freedom to experiment, and the translation of that understanding into corporate contexts. In line with that, another participant further outlined how CE may not always be as beneficial as displayed in its discourse, also suggesting that any innovation stemming from CE may not automatically lead to organizational success. As the interviewee emphasized, certain parameters must be considered – for instance, timing and readiness of the market for the specific innovation are crucial:

*"You need to be realistic. Sometimes we had ideas that were too revolutionary or too radical or too long-term. One important thing is to have the right timing. I can give heaps of examples where we were too early [...]. And, then we have been frustrated, because we've been pushing the business unit, 'why don't you do this, you need to change, you should do this now'. Looking back on that, I mean, we were wrong. We were not wrong that this would happen, but we were too early, because, if the business unit would have listened to us and really tried to the change, then the market was not ready" (Klas).*

Thus, these skeptics viewed the utilization of CE, its purpose as well as the discourse around it as lacking real substance and practical understanding for a realistic baseline; some even described it as more of a branding and PR tool than a genuine practice of work:

*"I think it's more for internal branding perspective, than really being really serious" (Olivia).*

This suggests that the common vision of CE as being 'good' and beneficial is somewhat dictated by a prominent discourse within the management literature and assumptions based on concepts (such as 'start-up entrepreneurship') or fashionable notions that cannot simply be translated into other contexts – ultimately creating a vision and expectations that lack meaning and insights into the actual perceptions of organizational members and the implications of a larger organizational reality.

#### **4.4. The Complex Link between Sustainability and CE**

The following part will illustrate how employees portrayed the relationship between sustainability and CE. From their answers we can draw two important findings: firstly, the relationship between sustainability and CE was portrayed as being important and positive. Secondly, when asked in detail how this relationship or balance should look like, the complexity became evident as interviewees gave different weight to the three pillars of sustainability and/or gave different places of order to CE and sustainability.

Generally, the link between both concepts was described as quite complex. Several employees needed quite some time to answer the question how they perceive the link between CE and sustainability. Chris' answer *"I need some time to think about that. It's not easy"* quite adequately describes the struggle in which several employees saw themselves.

Some of the interviewees explained that they would describe the relationship positively, as the following underlines. Dylan, for example, stressed that *"you cannot launch anything that is at least at a good-enough level in regards to sustainability."* He furthermore highlighted that *"if you combine sustainability with innovation, then you become attractive as an employer."* Fabienne confirmed that CE and sustainability *"need to go hand in hand."* Similarly, Hector portrayed the relationship between concepts as very strong and also Laura agreed that there is a *"very strong correlation"* between CE and sustainability. Also Nils was convinced that sustainability and entrepreneurial thinking are not a contradiction, and therefore go hand in hand not being separate entities. He framed that in today's context in which innovation and sustainability are needed this connection is a condition that needs to be met:

*"New business models have to be innovative and sustainable" (Nils).*

Others saw the relationship between CE and sustainability more critically. Laura, even though she proclaimed that there is a strong connection between CE and sustainability, admitted that *"of course, when you make a decision, you are always going to have to sometimes prioritize"* and therefore a balanced relationship is not always wanted or possible. Likewise, Ethan skeptically questioned if a balance between sustainability and CE is possible, voicing that the relationship is dependent on the situation at hand:

*"The question is: do you want to balance it out? So it depends a bit on the context where you try to evaluate the two."*

Further, we have previously demonstrated how interviewees perceived the term and substance of sustainability as complex. It became obvious that employees interpreted the concept differently as they portrayed different convictions and ideas regarding sustainability. This leads us to assume that the sustainability understanding further shapes the perception of how people then relate sustainability to CE. Chris, for example, placed the economic aspect of sustainability higher than the social and environmental aspect, as Big Company is a profit-oriented company, he declared. Klas, on the other hand, naturally ranked the social aspect higher than the environmental and economic aspects. Hence, depending on how interviewees distributed the weight among the sustainability aspects, the relationship between sustainability changes its attributes and nature. Using the example of Klas, where the social aspect of sustainability is ranked higher than the environmental or economic elements, then the relationship in a stronger form would consequently be called ‘social entrepreneurship’.

During the interviews, the elaboration on the nature of the link between sustainability and CE resulted in another debate regarding the construction of this relationship and the reciprocity of the concepts in this said relationship. For Chris, sustainability was a *“kind of goal that we want to move forward to”* and *“entrepreneurship is rather a way to do that.”* He further explained that in order to become more sustainable, technical breakthroughs are needed. Those technical breakthroughs could be achieved by innovation and entrepreneurship, he stated. In short this suggests the following: sustainability is the overall goal that can be reached through innovation, which is achieved through entrepreneurship. Jessica, Dylan and George agreed with Chris and stated that sustainability and CE should go hand in hand, but sustainability needs to be at the core.

*“Since sustainability means being able to hold a balance between the social, environmental and economic aspects, you need to be innovative to actually strike that balance [...] I think that sustainability is the thing that needs to be at the core. And then having an entrepreneurial culture and viewpoint is then enabling that to happen”* (Jessica).

Overall, these viewpoints create the impression that in the process of linking sustainability and CE, the ‘application’ of one notion may lead to reaching the other – namely, innovation and CE may ultimately lead to sustainability.

#### 4.5. The Impact of the Organizational Context

In the following part, we will display how the context in which Big Company operates was perceived by the employees to be shaping the attitudes and understandings regarding CE and sustainability. We are hereby going to reveal which factors of the organization's context the interviewees portrayed as being influential.

Overall, the context which surrounds Big Company was believed to have a strong influence. Ethan explained to us that Big Company operates at different levels of the value chain and is therefore subject to a multiplicity of factors affecting the organization:

*“Because I think the environment influences us a lot as a company that operates on different levels of production.”*

Most obviously, most employees drew on how Big Company's heritage and industry impact the presence, practice and nature of CE and sustainability in the organization. For instance, as outlined previously, particularly Big Company's corporate culture was expressed to hinder – or at least not actively foster – CE. By drawing on the example of nuclear power, Ben declared that it created a culture where being entrepreneurial and making mistakes was for a long time no option. For him, this was one of the reasons, why an entrepreneurial culture is difficult to emerge within Big Company, as nuclear power generation still marks a prominent position in the organization's product portfolio. As he viewed entrepreneurship in the sense of *“fail fast, try often”* (Ben), subsequently a conflict arises between a corporate environment and product where failure is no option and the nature of entrepreneurship implying exactly this necessity. Jessica also stressed that she sees room for a more entrepreneurial culture, stating that its current *“compliance- and quality-driven”* stance is *“due to products and heritage [...] with all the nuclear plants.”* Hector explained to us that Big Company is part of a *“really old-fashioned industry”*, which – according to him – is not creating an environment that stimulates innovation. Similarly, Klas pointed out that:

*“We are an old company, being there for almost 100 years. And we are in an extremely traditional business. [...] So, I would say that the majority of Big Company doesn't have the natural entrepreneurship.”*

Another factor that especially influences the aspect of sustainability and CE seems to be the national and supranational legislation. Chris told us that in relation to sustainability there is

“just no other way to do it, due to EU regulations”, referring to the percentage of energy that needs to be coming from renewable sources. Dylan talked about the importance of targets, expressed by the EU, which supported Chris’ argument:

*“Yeah, yeah, of course! You have a number of targets expressed by the EU” (Dylan).*

Also others mentioned how regulatory measures are changing the industry environment of Big Company. “It is not like it was 30 years ago”, when Big Company was “the one big producer” or a “monopoly”, Hector pointed out. For him, “the stimulation for the change and to become more innovative is coming simply from the fact that the monopoly has been broken down and there is more competition now.”

The aforementioned statements give us reason to believe that the implementation of ‘green’ energy targets and the changes in the competitive landscape may be some of the factors which gave a strong momentum to sustainability as part of Big Company’s agenda and the conviction that innovation is needed.

Another factor that the employees talked about is Big Company’s ownership structure. However, its influence was seen differently and interviewees seemingly struggled with defining the degree of influence that the owners imply. Chris told us that this is “a difficult question. You need to take a lot into account.” Ethan, for example, did not see a direct relationship, but admitted that this is dependent on the context and from which perspective you look from.

Dylan, Jessica and Fabienne expressed that the owners put pressure on Big Company to act as a role model in terms of sustainability that should lead the way for the country and society, which Fabienne supported through stating “we need to be best in class.” For Chris, the ownership structure was a source of “confidence” which could influence both sustainability and CE. George, on the other hand, was one of the employees who saw the influence of the owners as weaker, voicing that he was not quite sure of their influence. Dylan, on the contrary, did not think that “they push that much on innovation or entrepreneurship.” Fabienne, speaking about CE and innovation, also did not express that the owners push the company to be more entrepreneurial. Jessica even claimed that the ownership structure rather “hampers” than “enhances” entrepreneurship.

All those statements create a fragmented picture. The ownership structure for some is influencing sustainability and CE, but others see no influence. That could enhance the degree of uncertainty that surrounds those concepts – if it is not clear how the owner relates to sustainability and CE, it may become difficult to develop and promote both topics within the organization.

New technologies that are believed to offer new pathways in terms of business opportunities and organizational settings were further factors employees talked about. Ben explained that technology is nowadays not a problem anymore and there are new opportunities and ways of working:

*“Because of technology. Let’s be honest, nowadays technology is not a problem anymore, it’s how we work with it. So, I am looking at how we could we change our organization.”*

Dylan highlighted that technology is getting *“cheaper and more affordable, and that, of course, drives change.”* Jessica also talked about the fast changes in the digital landscape that together with society shape the environment in which companies operate:

*“Well, I think a lot of that comes from the much faster changes in the surroundings and in the digital landscape and in society as a whole – everything is becoming quicker and you have the entire digitalization and so on. So, I think, it is really the push from the outside.”*

For Ben, this led to a situation where *“the outside world now goes a little bit faster.”* Hector warned that Big Company could be *“disrupted by some small garage company that you don’t see. Just because they are smart people thinking outside-the-box.”* All of that to us suggests that technological developments seem to push innovation and create new competitors that may do both boost Big Company to develop but also constitute a threat, as they are perceived to be ‘faster’ and at the forefront of innovation.

Another factor that employees elaborated on was the change in customer demands, which Big Company needs to follow:

*“Our customers are asking for more sustainable solutions, so then we need to come up with sustainable solutions” (Michelle).*



Some employees further framed that this change in customer preferences may be a due to the perception that *“most trends today are moving in the way of sustainability”* (Anna). For others, it was the culture and the preferences of the people within the country which shape the customer demand for sustainability. Particularly, Hector and George were convinced that the country’s culture accounts for a big proportion of the company’s drive towards sustainability.

*“And people from Country XY, by definition, they are very much sustainably aware. [...] so I think it has to do with the overall culture of society”* (George).

From all the statements presented before, we conclude that the context seemingly strongly influences Big Company and the resulting presence, practice and nature of sustainability and CE. Our interviewees highlighted a multiplicity of influential factors, such as heritage, industry and product, (governmental) policies, ownership structure, technology and customers. Further, looking at these factors and their origins, we assume that Big Company is rather plagued by reacting to their influences rather than proactively being able to control and shape them. Overall, we propose that the vast number of influences, the combination of them and their high degree of uncontrollability altogether create a multifaceted and complex organizational context for Big Company and shape the way the organization operates.

## **4.6. Two Levels of Fragmentation**

Thus far, this chapter has depicted how the overall inconsistent framing of the concepts sustainability and CE reflected their inherent theoretical ambiguity, yet allowed for a certain degree of order; it became evident that our findings are not completely irregular and sporadic. While we were able to group certain elements in the so fragmented perceptions of our interviewees into empirical themes, other inconsistencies in our interviewees’ talk and subsequent observations cannot be included into those configurations. Particularly, we commonly witnessed two levels of fragmentation: (1) externally across all interviewees and their perceptions and understandings, and (2) internally within the talk of individuals.

### **4.6.1 Fragmentation Across Our Interviewees**

As illuminated by the various themes, our study uncovers high levels of dissonance. Particularly, this dissonance became noticeable from our interviewees’ contrasting perceptions and understandings regarding the concepts of sustainability and CE. In essence, different



individuals perceived sustainability and CE differently than their fellow Big Company workers, leading to a fragmentation across our interviews. These inconsistencies and differences occurred across the outlined empirical themes in terms of how individuals defined sustainability and CE, how they translated those perceptions into their daily work, and how they viewed Big Company's organizational context. Interestingly, while this fragmentation most obviously occurred in the way individuals understood the term sustainability, the majority of interviewees conveyed awareness and a reflective acceptance of this external fragmentation and that the term is understood and used differently by different people across the organization:

*“It is very complicated because we have all different views” (Anna).*

*“Depending on whom you talk to, of course, they going to have different views on it” (Laura).*

*“Definitely, there are different understandings and there are different views” (Jessica).*

Contrarily, while the term CE noticeably also is plagued by complexity and different perceptions, acceptance of these varying perceptions became less evident; rather, people voiced frustration regarding the lack of unified understanding around what it means to be a corporate entrepreneur and their importance in organizations. This is briefly shown by the following:

*“I know in what way I would like to go to solve [a problem], but then I have to explain my ideas to groups of people or management and convince them. [...] It can be very frustrating” (Fabienne).*

At last, these fragmentations suggest that both concepts lack a unified meaning, equal appreciation of their implications and cohesion in use. Ultimately, as different employees related to the varying notions of the concepts in contrasting ways, the concepts may also be translated and applied differently in one's daily work, leading to varying behavior and unpredictable results for the organization as a whole. One employee concluded the controversies created by such complexity and dissonance for an organization like Big Company, where sustainability and CE are part of the strategy and values, and where particularly the term sustainability is widely used:

*“It’s always about balancing different interests, and of course, then you have clashes”*  
(Jessica).

#### **4.6.2 Fragmentation Within Our Interviewees**

Fragmented views also became apparent within individuals themselves and their talk about sustainability and CE. We observed this internal fragmentation of individuals presenting varying views throughout their interview across the majority of our interviews – although to variable degrees. Interviewees who demonstrated clearly defined views on sustainability and/or CE displayed this internal dissonance the most. Often, these interviewees initially presented fairly strong definitions of the concept(s), but then adopted a mix of elements from our empirical themes and displayed inconsistent perceptions, definitions or examples compared to their previous, clearly-defined stance. Typically, the responses of our interview partners showed internal fragmentation when they were framing sustainability and/or CE against diverse situations and contexts, or when separating between their personal context (e.g. how they personally understand the term sustainability) and an organizational context (e.g. how they understand sustainability in relation to Big Company and their daily work). On the basis of Anna’s interview, we will outline prominent examples of this internal fragmentation in the following.

Initially, when directly asked to give a definition of sustainability, Anna showed little uncertainty by adopting a view that, according to our previous themes, we would categorized under the *enthusiasm theme*, as she emphasized the three pillars of sustainability:

*“The mission of sustainability [consists] of economic, social and environmental pillars and using today’s resources and developing the world today without compromising the future. That’s my view of sustainability.”*

However, as the interview progressed, Anna did not continue to relate sustainability to the full three pillars again, but rather replied to indirectly sustainability-related inquiries by focusing on single aspects of sustainability. For instance, at times the social aspect was referred to and at other times the environmental aspect:

*“We want to deliver energy to people in a sustainable way. [...] it is about helping people to live a climate-friendly life.”*

*“I mean if you work all the way back to society and making sure that everyone who is working with the sourcing and all the material we use, that all this is done in a sustainable way as well. And then it is more a social factor, I guess.”*

This behavior of highlighting only one aspect of sustainability may stem from the urge to create a sense of security, clarity and simplicity in regards to the complex, far-reaching and ambiguous concept sustainability.

Further, Anna repetitively demonstrated changes of perspective, as exemplified by the following: when we posed a question about the company’s attitude in regards to sustainable energy production, she replied by stating *“for me this means [...]”*, thus providing her personal view on the issue; vice versa, she referred to the company’s strategy and standpoint (and seemingly gave a corporate answer) when being asked about her personal view on the same topic:

*“It is not hidden that we reduced our CO<sub>2</sub> emission from I think like 113 tons to 50 tons, or something like that. That was something that was discussed whether it was a wise decision [...] But in the end of the day, it was in line with our [ideals].”*

Not only does this switching of perspectives indicate the difficulty and complexity in defining sustainability – or in this instance, defining sustainable energy production – it also suggests that her personal perceptions of sustainability potentially differ from the corporate understanding. Further, this dissonance may even hint towards a potential identity struggle between her personal and corporate role and values, again highlighting the intricacy of sustainability in practice and organizational contexts.

To conclude, these brief snippets from Anna’s interview serve as exemplary case for the overall difficulty we observed in our participants in pinning down sustainability into an easily definable term. The often loose nature in which our interviewees talked about sustainability depending on the context illustrates how its inherent ambiguity influences people’s perceptions and understandings and underlines the intricacy and fragmentation of the concept. While Anna’s interview radiated around sustainability, other interviewees exemplified similar fragmented views towards CE.

#### **4.7. Recap: Summary of Our Findings**

Despite its complexity and fragmentation, the empirical material and insights that we gained at Big Company allowed us to group certain findings into themes.

Regarding the concept of sustainability, we revealed that (1) the concept was understood and perceived differently, and particularly seems to be encircled by uncertainty; (2) some interviewees showed strong enthusiasm and personal conviction for sustainability, while employees also highlighted a general importance of sustainability matters; whereas lastly (3), again others regarded the concept and a balance between the environmental, social and economic dimensions rather skeptically, questioned whether sustainability has become a ‘buzzword’ or took a critical stance when referring to sustainability’s practical application. Nevertheless, none perceived it as an unimportant matter.

Summing up our findings regarding the concept of CE, we found that (1) an entrepreneurial spirit does not seem intrinsic to Big Company and participants perceived the organizational structures and culture to hamper the practice of CE; (2) some interviewees claimed that CE is inherently dependent on the drive of single individuals; lastly (3), others were quite skeptical of CE and its meaning, some questioning further whether CE as a firm-level, organization-wide approach is beneficial.

Further, also the relationship between sustainability and CE was perceived differently; depending on how the employees portrayed sustainability and/or how they explained the reciprocity between CE and sustainability, the character of this relationship altered. Additionally, sustainability was rather described as a ‘pull factor’ for CE and innovation, meaning that CE and innovation may eventually lead to sustainability.

Overall, the context in which Big Company operates was described as heavily influencing sustainability and CE within the organization; here, participants particularly drew upon the impacts of Big Company’s heritage, industry and product, as well as on influencing factors like (governmental) policies, ownership structure, technology and customers.

## 5. DISCUSSION

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This thesis set out to gain empirical insights into the feasibility of the emergent model SCE, a concept linking the notions of sustainability and CE. As the conceptualization of SCE is still in its infancy – yet has already captured the attention of scholars and practitioners (Miles et al., 2009) – our approach towards this research subject has been threefold, as presented in the previous chapter: firstly, the previously presented material has shown the various and fragmented perceptions and understandings of organizational members relating to the phenomena sustainability and CE; secondly, an exploration of the interpretations of a proposed link between these two concepts, sustainability and CE, was made; and thirdly, we took a close look at the alleged influences of the organizational context thereupon. Now, taking into account and combining these three streams of insights with our literature review we aim to challenge five assumptions underlying the theory and model of SCE – thus, undertaking a critical perspective to already existing literature and ultimately allowing for better insights to conceptualize the SCE research as the integration of sustainability and CE continues.

While the underlying assumptions of SCE were overall outlined in the *Literature Review of SCE* (chapter 2.3.2), we critically challenge:

- (1) the model's assumption that organizational members have a common understanding and perception of the concepts of sustainability and CE;
- (2) the model's assumption that this common understanding is then in line with the definitions as presented in SCE, namely sustainability as defined by Placet et al. (2005) and CE as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011);
- (3) the model's assumption that the three sustainability aspects – environmental, social and economic – can be balanced;
- (4) the model's assumption that a link between sustainability (as defined by Placet et al. (2005)) and CE (as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011)) is feasible; and,
- (5) the objective of the model, depicting that sustainability will eventually lead to CE and innovation.

The following discussion will be structured according to the five assumptions above, and will exhibit in more detail the respective assumption while critically questioning these based on our empirical findings and personal interpretations.

### **5.1. Common Understandings Are Rare**

As presented in *Taking a Closer Look at Sustainable Corporate Entrepreneurship (SCE)* (chapter 2.3.2), the conceptualization of SCE, as based on Miles et al. (2009) model, seems to be rooted in the authors' postulation that all organizational members have knowledge and a common understanding as well as perception of the concepts sustainability and CE.

Although this assumption is not explicitly stated within literature, it becomes implicitly apparent through the concept's framing of the theoretical basis of SCE. We see a common attitude – resulting from common understandings and perceptions – towards organizational goals as crucial; therefore, we assume that common understandings and perceptions within the model of SCE are also sought for and provided. Although varying perceptions and understandings at times can be inspirational and beneficial, in the case of SCE – which deals with fundamentally impacting concepts (sustainability and CE) – a non-common attitude towards these matters can be hindering. As Miles et al. (2009) do not expand on how a joint understanding and perception of sustainability and CE may be achieved – or *was* achieved – within an organizational setting in the first place, they create the impression that this common understanding and perception has 'somehow emerged' or 'somehow exists'.

Yet, our empirical findings suggest otherwise: in the previous chapter we presented our interviewees' various perceptions, understandings, convictions and thoughts regarding sustainability and CE. Even though our interviewees touched upon a wide range of aspects and showed different – and at times opposing – opinions, one verdict basically surrounds and embraces all their statements: sustainability as well as CE are complex concepts that unfold in various perceptions and understandings as well as challenges for the employees and the company. Subsequently, we critically question Miles et al.'s (2009) assumption of organizational actors sharing a common understanding of what is meant by the terms sustainability and CE. Based on our empirical study, we will therefore firstly elaborate on the difficulty and complexity of the concept of sustainability, followed by a discussion on the intricate concept of CE.

*Sustainability – One Word, Many Meanings*

Our findings demonstrate widespread fragmentation concerning the meaning and substance of sustainability. During the interviews, a number of employees literally communicated the vagueness of the concept or admitted their uncertainty and/or lack of knowledge frankly; others did not state their felt uncertainty ‘word by word’, but the way they talked about sustainability or their displayed hesitation showed that they often were quite unsure what it meant or how the term could be grasped. Some of these said participants further demonstrated their insecurity around putting sustainability into words through either completely evading the question and abruptly changing the topic, responding to the question superficially without in fact answering it, or starting to paraphrase around their definition of sustainability. Moreover, various employees used the term ‘sustainable’ or ‘sustainability’ seemingly without having a (personal or corporate) understanding of the term and its substance.

As we revealed in our *Literature Review*, sustainability researchers largely acknowledge that a multitude of understandings and approaches to sustainability exist (Provasnek et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the ‘integrative’ perspective, portraying sustainability as the social, economic and environmental dimensions, has gained wide acceptance; however, even this approach and grasping the substance of these aspects is subject to various specifications and perspectives (Morrish et al., 2011). While some employees initially illustrated sustainability according to these common three pillars of sustainability, they often later focused on only one aspect when expanding on examples; again, others directly associated sustainability to the environmental aspect only. This finding of fragmented definitions of sustainability within Big Company corresponds to discussions in research where scholars claim that thousands of organizations have adopted ‘sustainability strategies’ but internally often lack an understanding of what they mean with sustainability (Bateh et al., 2013). Others argue similarly and point to the difficulties of ‘navigating’ through the many different “concepts, methods and tools” to achieve sustainability (Missimer et al., 2017b, p. 33).

Overall, our discoveries raised the assumption within us, that sustainability has become some sort of a ‘buzzword’, being used as an overarching term that is somehow understood (although differently) by everyone. We gained the impression that sustainability was used by interviewees if they wanted to express certain feelings or associations which they had in mind. Particularly, we identified that various participants used the term to describe situations or



actions which they have a positive association to or attribute positive feelings to. Developments, such as technical advancements and digitalization, as well as future goals or ideal states, internally and externally to the organization, which were perceived positively and identified as beneficial by the individual were portrayed as being ‘sustainable’ as well. This impression is in line with scholars criticizing the “trivialization” (Missimer et al., 2017b, p. 32) of sustainability and claiming that the term has become some sort of a “buzzword” (Bateh et al., 2013, p. 397) that is used to express “politically-correctly [several things] everywhere and in any context” (Ben-Eli, 2012, p. 1). We therefore question how sustainability, if lacking substance and grip, should provide “a stimulus for corporate entrepreneurship” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 65)?

From that, we conclude in regards to sustainability that the concept itself and its substance are not self-explanatory, distinct or obvious to people, even if they work in an organization that is touched by its influences and seemingly has incorporated sustainability into its daily operations, strategy and corporate targets. Rather, sustainability apparently has become a term that allows society to express positive ideal states, goals or situations, thus, receiving ‘buzzword-like’ attributes and usage. Further, as elaborated, we discovered dispersed understandings of sustainability, differing in various degrees across the interviewees.

#### *CE – And What Is Meant By That?*

Also, as shown in our *Empirical Material and Analysis* chapter, we were subjected to a multiplicity of perspectives regarding the perception of what it means to be a (corporate) entrepreneur. This multiplicity and fragmentation in interpretations ultimately derived from uncertainty surrounding the substance of the term entrepreneurship and the subsequent translation of entrepreneurship into corporate contexts, thus forming CE. The fragmented and vague responses of our interviewees revealed that ambiguity not only plagues the theoretical definition of CE, but also translates into interpreting and working with entrepreneurship in organizational practice. Hence, our participants’ recognitions of the difficulty of grasping the substance of CE are in line with the widely acknowledged complexity of the term in (corporate) entrepreneurship research and literature (Audretsch et al., 2015; Ferreira, 2002; Gautam and Verma, 1997). Correspondingly to the overall lack of coherence across research,



our empirical analysis confirms the confusing nature of the CE construct and the absence of a clear delineation of the attributes of the term (Miles and Covin, 1999).

### *Wrap-up*

To conclude, in this section we critically challenged the assumption underlying SCE that organizational actors have a common understanding and perception of sustainability and CE. We see this assumption critically, as the case of Big Company has revealed that perceptions and understandings of its employees are fragmented and diverse. Consequently, we suggest that practitioners need to be aware of this complexity, as this diversity of perceptions and understandings may not only be a source for opportunities but also a threat, as it may impede organizational success. Consequently, we identify a need for organizations to provide orientation about the meaning and implications of sustainability and CE in the specific context of the organization, in order to provide a common understanding, perception and clear direction for all organizational members.

## **5.2. Definitions and their Deviations**

Additionally, not only must organizational actors know what the phenomena sustainability and CE mean for them and share a clear, mutual understanding of those, SCE further assumes that these understandings then are in line with the underlying definitions as described in the model of SCE: through depicting sustainability according to Placet et al.'s (2005) definition and viewing CE according to Morris et al. (2011), SCE theory takes these specific understandings as baseline.

As elaborated, we discovered dispersed understandings of sustainability, differing in various degrees across the interviewees and thus diverging from the concept of SCE. A number of participants did not even refer to the integrative model of sustainability – meaning the environmental, social and economic dimensions – but rather related sustainability to only one of these aspects or attributed other meanings to the term. Again others could not explain their understanding of sustainability, while some interviewees even perceived the concept of sustainability skeptically, stating that not everything ‘needs to be sustainable’ and depicting it as a trend or ‘buzzword’ – ultimately revealing that their understandings fundamentally differ from Placet et al.'s (2005) definition.

Further, while the definitions and explanations of our interviewees regarding CE were riddled by uncertainty and broadness, few commonly stated characteristics became apparent. These revolved around individual's drive and intrinsic passion for entrepreneurial thinking, creativity and opportunity-seeking and the initiatives of single organizational members within Big Company. These features were portrayed by scholars as traits of 'intrapreneurs' (Pantry and Griffiths, 2000; Pinchot, 1985; Sayeed and Gazdar, 2003), a CE stream of thought that postulates that 'entrepreneurial' individuals within larger organizational settings are the drivers for a firm to be innovative and entrepreneurial (Chan, 2016; Haller, 2016).

Further, from our interviews we noticed that Big Company's structures and an absence of a supportive corporate culture were mentioned as major challenges affecting the practice and emergence of entrepreneurship. Based on this we assume that our interviewees drew so much upon the role, commitment and drive of single employees – thus, highlighting intrapreneurship – as the corporate structure and culture do not provide a setting for more firm-level CE.

If we now take this finding that CE rather takes place in form of 'intrapreneurship' and transfer it to the assumptions underlying SCE, a misaligned becomes evident. As outlined, according to Miles et al.'s (2009) theoretical construction of SCE, an organization must be corporate entrepreneurial on a firm-level, thus displaying an 'entrepreneurial orientation' that permeates the whole organization (Shan et al., 2016). However, we have rather seen a focus on the individual and 'intrapreneurship' perspective in our interviews, which thus reveals a gap between how CE is understood at Big Company and theory of what kind of CE is 'needed' for SCE.

### *Wrap-up*

Overall, our findings and analysis thereof allow us to put forward that the understandings of Big Company's employees regarding sustainability and CE only show traces of the definitions as outlined by Placet et al. (2005) and Morris et al. (2011). However, we critically question SCE theory to precisely demarcate certain definitions as baseline: through explicitly formulating that baseline and spelling out the 'needed' framing that SCE desires, the authors thus create the impression that the two concepts are indeed definable and pose that their chosen definitions seemingly describe sustainability and CE most suitably. Thus, through

choosing certain definitions, the complexity of the concepts is implicitly disregarded, presenting the reader and practitioner with an ostensible straightforwardness.

### **5.3. Balancing Sustainability – Mission Impossible?**

As touched upon previously, the SCE framework regards sustainability as defined by Placet et al. (2005), which – in theory – implies a balance between the three pillars “environmental stewardship, social responsibility and economic prosperity” (p. 32). According to them, an organization can only then be characterized as sustainable, if those three aspects are present and kept in a “constant balance” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 69). However, regarding this claimed balance, our findings and insights suggest that we need to be critical towards this idea. Several employees stressed the difficulties that exist in reaching a balance between the three aspects of sustainability. Some claimed that balancing these aspects is not possible, while others even critically questioned if a balance would actually be beneficial. Particularly, some of those who found this balance difficult to achieve, suggested that one aspect could be more important than another; for example, a profit-oriented company striving for economic performance may naturally prioritize the economic aspect of sustainability. Corresponding to our interviewees’ skepticism, scholars have pointed at this exact challenge and claim that “managing the trade-offs between the three legs of sustainability remains a challenge” and that there is “to date no precise management framework that provides for the linking of these fundamental, yet seemingly disparate pillars of sustainability and for reconciling traditional financial performance with environmental and social contributions” (Jamali, 2006, p. 812). Furthermore, we would like to highlight that not only the overall term sustainability, but also its individual components, like the social sustainability element, are interpreted differently. This additionally turns the balancing act into a challenge (Missimer et al., 2017b).

Staying within the three goals of sustainability, Placet et al. (2005) – and subsequently SCE theory – further suggest that environmental stewardship, social responsibility and economic prosperity are interrelated and supportive of each other. Also our empirical findings suggest a connection between these three pillars, as exemplified by some interviewees who framed that the economic performance could be hampered by environmental efforts. However, as the previous example indicates, the notion that the three goals will be supportive of each other needs a careful reflection. Progress within one area of sustainability may happen at the expense of

another. At Big Company, for instance, the support of ‘green’ energy could lead to a situation in which employees need to be laid off, if e.g. coal mines or other non-environmentally-friendly power production facilities are shut down. This would then not be a supportive link between the three sustainability elements, even though here both aspects – the environmental and the social aspect – are interrelated.

#### *Wrap-up*

To sum up this section, our case findings have shown how difficult the presumed balance between the three sustainability aspects may be, thus doubting that assumption of SCE. We furthermore put forward that a model dealing with the three sustainability aspects needs to take into account this difficulty and complexity and further provide some guidance for practitioners on how to approach such a proclaimed balance.

#### **5.4. Sustainability and CE – A Difficult Relationship**

As the previous sections have accentuated, both sustainability and CE are inherently riddled by complexity, and thus, are subject to a multiplicity of interpretations, eventually creating vagueness, ambiguity and broadness when it comes to grasping the actual substance of the terms. This complexity, of course, therefore also heavily influences the act of linking sustainability and CE, as our empirical material has demonstrated. Nonetheless, SCE theory – through situating itself as concept with managerial implications – presumes that a link between sustainability (as defined by Placet et al. (2005)) and CE (as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011)) is feasible.

Our analysis of the three precedent challenged assumptions has suggested the following: (1) employees do not share a common understanding and perception of sustainability and CE; (2) their understandings are further neither in line with the sustainability definition of Placet et al. (2005) nor with Morris et al.’s (2011) demarcation of CE; and (3), balancing the three aspects of sustainability – as outlined by Miles et al. (2009) – is perceived as being rather challenging. Based on these analyses and insights, we regard the linkage between sustainability and CE, as outlined in the SCE model, as rather problematic and not as simply achievable as portrayed in SCE literature (Miles et al., 2009).

In addition to these above findings, also our interviewees expressed quite differently to what extent the two concepts sustainability and CE in general may go hand in hand and be linked: while some regarded the connection as obvious and inseparable, others viewed it more skeptically and questioned its practicability. Interestingly, advocates of the more skeptical stance were much more able to provide examples of why they questioned the link to function in practice. These critics often pointed towards the difficulty of balancing the three sustainability aspects, and that this consequently would hamper the linkage between sustainability and CE. Regarding this insight, we even put forward that, due to this complexity and difficulty, research has resulted in the streams of thought where (corporate) entrepreneurship is only linked to *one* sustainability aspect. Examples are, as outlined in the *Literature Review*, ‘ecopreneurship’ (Berle, 1991; Blue, 1990), ‘enviropreneurship’ (Menon and Menon, 1997), or ‘social entrepreneurship’ (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002).

#### *Wrap-up*

Overall, we critically question how it shall be possible to combine and somehow balance two concepts into one (like SCE), if both individually are subject to so many different perceptions and often even contradicting understandings? Consequently, we suggest that such a link may be beneficial in certain situations and only when the notions of sustainability and CE are precisely defined and explained (i.e. exactly explicated what actions and outcomes this entails for the actors involved).

### **5.5. Sustainability – The Ultimate Driver**

Looking back at Miles et al. (2009) proposed model of SCE (as shown on page 20): SCE theory asserts ‘innovation’, as achieved through CE, as the core of the construct; sustainability, then, encircles the various declared possibilities to achieve innovation (product, process, strategy, business model, domain). This structure illustrates SCE researchers’ assumption that within the practice of SCE sustainability acts as “stimulus” (p. 71) to ultimately lead to the corporate ideal state of being more innovative (Miles et al., 2009). Hence, SCE accentuates the assumption that achieving innovation (and thus CE) is the focal point of SCE activities, as innovation is proclaimed to result in competitive advantage. However, our findings lead us to critically question whether sustainability leads to CE (i.e. innovation), or whether rather CE (i.e. innovation) leads to sustainability.

While our interviewees' responses were fragmented in many aspects, one commonly expressed perception became apparent which strongly challenges the current SCE construct: when elaborating on the perceived connection between sustainability and CE, participants stressed the opinion that *sustainability* is the ultimate goal, while CE and innovation are ways to achieve sustainability. Hence, contrasting Miles et al.'s (2009) assumption, not innovation and CE are seen as the goal, but sustainability is framed as the 'pull' factor that needs to be at the core as the ultimate end state. Our analysis further undermines this claim, as our findings regarding the influences of Big Company's organizational context propose that indeed sustainability is one of the main factors driving the paradigm change within the energy industry: not only are customers more and more demanding 'green' energy, also an increase in national and supranational obligations require energy enterprises to provide a range of environmentally-friendly products; further, as outlined, previous monopolistic positions of businesses in the utilities industries are more and more broken down, and additionally, technological breakthroughs allow the entrance of new competitors. Overall, these influences – most finding their roots in sustainability challenges – are perceived to heavily push Big Company to turning towards CE and the need of being more innovative.

A more micro perspective also underlines that innovation may not be the ultimate ambition of organizational members. This becomes apparent from our interviewees' expressed goals of why they wanted to be corporate entrepreneurs. Our participants' insights show a tension between our interviewees' personal goals of practicing CE and the goals of CE in SCE theory. This becomes evident when examining how interviewees framed their personal drive for entrepreneurship. While some of our interviewees are in accordance with how management literature (Atiq and Karatas-Ozkan, 2013; Miles and Covin, 1999) frames CE as leading to innovation – which then by them was equaled to organizational success and a superior financial position – others exemplified different perceptions. These employees rather focused on their personal need of being entrepreneurial, as they liked working autonomously, being critical towards current structures and wanting to improve one's surrounding. Hence, the theoretical ideal of CE ultimately leading to innovation and organizational success was often not stressed, or even neglected, in our interviewees' talk about the goals of CE. Again, this finding challenges the theory of SCE, as its abstract construction is based on the assumption that innovation, the result of CE, shall be the ultimate goal and at the core of SCE (Miles et al.,

2009). Rather, we put forward that for most interviewees CE was framed as a method to exhibit their strong drive for, e.g. autonomy, creativity, critical thinking or improvements, and to ultimately satisfy this intrinsic passion.

### *Wrap-up*

To conclude, we found that at Big Company innovation and CE were not the accepted ultimate goals of neither CE itself, nor within the linkage between sustainability and CE. Rather, sustainability was framed as the pulling factor, thus *requiring* CE to reach the ideal of being sustainable as an organization. Hence, we cast doubt upon the objective of SCE which claims that sustainability may ultimately lead to innovation.

## **5.6. Reflection: Complexities Beneath the Surface**

When first elaborating on the substance and nature of SCE in the *Literature Review*, we illuminated that various assumptions – which give rise to questions – lie beneath the framed ‘straightforwardness’ of the SCE conceptualization. Our empirical material has allowed us to problematize the feasibility of SCE and critically examine five of these assumptions that underlie the model of SCE. First of all, based on our findings, we could confirm the complexity that scholars attribute to the concepts of sustainability and CE. The complexity of both concepts in turn strongly affects these five assumptions that need to be met in order for SCE to be “adopted” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 69). The empirical material we gathered and analyzed yet allowed us to question certain assumptions, cast doubt upon their feasibility and regard them as problematic in our specific case.

Nonetheless, SCE presents itself as a notion that is attractive and desirable through, for instance, framing the implications in a prognostic style or highlighting that SCE may lead to competitive advantages; yet, these desirable claims distract the reader from the potential pitfalls which the underlying assumptions and complexities thereof may imply. We therefore advice thoughtfulness and caution when being confronted with models that are based on complex concepts but draw simplistic conclusions in a prognostic and promising way – as in the case of SCE, where Miles et al. (2009) proclaim that “SCE can offer an alternative path for value creation and competitive advantage” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 68). An unaware scholar could initially be attracted by the straightforwardness that the model suggests, before further



research reveals the hidden complexities. A manager could be attracted by claims such as: “[SCE is] the critical strategic choice for managers to make” (Miles et al., 2009, p. 75), before being confronted with the various perceptions and understandings of organizational members that influence the implementation.

We carved out how the organizational context shapes an organization such as Big Company and therefore critically assert that it is missing in the current conceptualization of SCE. As some organizations are geographically-dispersed and often act on an international level, the organizational context can differ and influences arise in various forms. Additionally, we concur with Tsai (2011) stating that contexts, structures and particularly organizational culture “give meaning to the situations that [employees] encounter [and] can influence the attitudes and behavior of the staff” (p. 1). It seems a bit paradox to us to neglect such influences in the construction of a model that, if taking the model into practice, is so heavily dependent on supportive structures and culture. Our findings have revealed that some employees regard CE and sustainability quite critically, challenging that they are *per se* beneficial; and therefore, scholars and practitioners should take this into account and be prepared for potential forms of resistance. On a last note, the definitions of Placet et al. (2005) and Morris et al. (2011), only superficially explain what is meant by CE and sustainability and how to ‘achieve’ them. The straightforwardness that they imply, to unaware practitioners and scholars, could be deceptive and we urge that such definitions require further explanation in order to look beyond their explicit surface.

Overall, our research contribution – challenging five underlying assumptions behind SCE – urges to be careful when confronted with concepts that offer straightforwardness and prognostic claims, especially when they deal with notions that elsewhere are portrayed as complex and ambiguous.



## 6. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

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Sustainability and corporate entrepreneurship (CE) have both, individually of each other, been researched and explored extensively. Yet, the liaison of the two elements has only emerged recently, leading to numerous conceptualizations – one of them being sustainable corporate entrepreneurship (SCE), the subject matter of this thesis.

This study originated from our very own interest in and passion for the topics sustainability and CE and our awareness towards the increasing trend of linking these two notions within business. After firstly delving into the research on these two concepts, we realized that a multiplicity of definitions and theoretical conceptualizations exist for both notions, yet surprisingly little research seeks to capture a deeper understanding of how a relationship between sustainability and CE may be perceived and interpreted by organizational members. Particularly, as we were interested in the linkage between these concepts, we came across SCE, a concept that aims at leveraging the linkage between sustainability and entrepreneurship at a corporate level. As SCE comprises a theoretical construct in quite a nascent stage, literature is predominantly explanatory and lacks perspective – thus, we found the need to explore its feasibility based on an empirical exploration. We therefore aimed at providing more holistic insights into the theoretical construct SCE, through gaining in-depth understanding of employees' perceptions and understandings regarding sustainability, CE and their linkage, as these elements form the foundation of SCE.

As we were seeking a deep understanding of the two topics and also aimed at exploring their combination, our object of research needed to be an organization where both sustainability and CE seemed to be known and practiced. This led us to studying Big Company, an enterprise in the energy sector, which appeared particularly interesting given its ownership structure and industry potentially resulting in an organizational context that is plagued by (often conflicting) influences from numerous stakeholders. We engaged in abductive, qualitative research, taking on an interpretative perspective, to scrutinize the understandings of organizational members concerning sustainability and CE, highlighting the different themes embedded in their perceptions.

Based on the novelty of SCE and an absence of qualitative insights into this said concept, we required empirical questions that would guide us through the process of understanding how

the elements of SCE, namely sustainability and CE, were perceived and understood in organizational reality. We therefore designed the following two research questions:

1. *How do employees perceive and understand the notions of sustainability and CE?*
2. *Which relationship between the elements sustainability and CE do employees see?*

## **6.1. Main Findings**

In this thesis, we analyzed the perceptions and understandings of organizational members regarding sustainability and CE as well as their linkage, which (1) led us to identify the complexity of these concepts in organizational contexts, and (2) allowed us to consequently challenge five assumptions underlying the theoretical conceptualization of SCE.

### *The Complexity of Sustainability*

Although different perceptions and attitudes towards the concept were displayed, sustainability was generally regarded as an important matter by our interviewees; no one portrayed it as something neglectable – even when the concept was viewed critically.

The concept of sustainability is subject to vagueness and complexity, which unfolded in three main findings: (1) the interviews revealed that there are different degrees of sustainability-knowledge, perceptions, definitions, opinions, understandings, meanings as well as drivers for sustainability; (2) sustainability is portrayed by some as a highly important concept and as a matter that should be on the organization's agenda; (3) it seems to be very difficult to align the three dimensions of sustainability – namely the social, economic and environmental aspects – within the organizational context, and pursuing such a balance was even perceived skeptically a times. Further, 'sustainability' at times was used as a 'buzzword' to ascribe different meanings and descriptions, yet always with a positive spin, to developments, goals, ideals, processes or products. It seems furthermore to be unclear where Big Company stands in relation to sustainability and how the individuals' daily work fits into the overall sustainable development strategy of the organization.

### *The Complexity of CE*

Similarly, the concept CE seems to be riddled by complexity, as a multiplicity of understandings and widespread fragmentation in perceptions became apparent from our study. The fragmented and vague responses of our interviewees revealed that ambiguity not only

plagues the theoretical definition of CE, but also translates into interpreting and working with entrepreneurship in organizational practice. Three dominant themes in the talk of our participants emerged: (1) the practice of CE is perceived as being hampered by organizational structures and culture and an entrepreneurial spirit does not seem to be intrinsic to Big Company; (2) the drive for demanding CE is inherently dependent on single individuals and their mindset and compassion for being entrepreneurial; and lastly, (3) the meanings of CE and being (corporate) entrepreneurial were viewed uneasily and skeptically, with some even questioning the benefits of a firm-level, organization-wide entrepreneurial attitude.

#### *Challenging Five Assumptions Underlying SCE*

Taking into account the nature and framing of the SCE conceptualization as a management concept, we interpreted the model after Miles et al. (2009) to postulate numerous assumptions that theoretically underlie its conceptualization; five of these assumptions are:

- (1) SCE presumes that all organizational members have a common understanding and perception of the concepts of sustainability and CE;
- (2) This common understanding is then in line with the definitions as presented in SCE, namely sustainability as defined by Placet et al. (2005) and CE as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011);
- (3) The three sustainability aspects – environmental, social and economic – can be balanced;
- (4) The link between sustainability (as defined by Placet et al. (2005)) and CE (as demarcated by Morris et al. (2011)) is feasible; and,
- (5) SCE adopts the objective that sustainability will eventually lead to CE and innovation.

Yet, grounded in our empirical findings and analysis thereof we took a critical stance towards these five theoretically-based assumptions, thus overall problematizing the feasibility of SCE in organizational practice. We argued the following:

- (1) Sustainability and CE are complex concepts that unfold in various understandings, perceptions as well as challenges for the employees and the organization. Subsequently, we critically question Miles et al.'s (2009) assumption of organizational actors having a common understanding and perception of sustainability and CE.

- (2) As understandings were so fragmented, they were also often not in line with SCE's postulated definitions. Further, we challenge SCE as – through postulating a clear sustainability and CE definition – Miles et al. (2009) create the impression that these two concepts are indeed definable and best defined according to their chosen definitions. However, this act of postulating certain definitions implicitly disregards the intricacy of the concepts and leads to SCE appearing as straightforward.
- (3) The presumed balance between the three sustainability aspects seems rather difficult and complex. We therefore suggest that a model presuming such a balance needs to take this difficulty into account and provide guidance on how to approach such a balance.
- (4) The inherent complexity of the concepts sustainability and CE also heavily influences the act of linking sustainability and CE and we thus regard the creation of a link between sustainability and CE as difficult to achieve in organizational reality. We critically question how it shall be possible to combine and balance two concepts into one (like SCE), if both individually are subject to so many different perceptions and often even contradicting understandings.
- (5) While SCE theory asserts 'innovation', as achieved through CE, as the core and objective of the SCE construct, when elaborating on the perceived connection between sustainability and CE, participants stressed the opinion that *sustainability* is the ultimate goal, while CE and innovation are ways to achieve sustainability.

## **6.2. Practical and Theoretical Implications**

From this standpoint, we may reflect on several implications our discussion and critical review may have for both scholars as well as practitioners.

### **6.2.1 Working With SCE**

Taking into account our findings as well as presented discussion around the aforementioned assumptions underlying SCE, at this point, we want to further illuminate our study's implications for practitioners. Most obviously, the ambivalence and complexity of the notions of sustainability and CE became apparent, thus adding a layer of vagueness to the SCE concept and creating a difficulty to implement SCE based on its current conceptualization. For

practitioners being confronted with sustainability and CE and/or seeking to pursue SCE this results in the need to be aware of those complexities and diverse interpretations and that SCE is far more multifaceted than it seems at first sight. Hence, based on our findings, we assume that it takes a multiplicity of conditions, such as common understandings of the notions of sustainability and CE, matching corporate structures and settings to practice both notions and awareness for the influences and implications of contextual influences to approach SCE.

Furthermore, we propose that the creation of orientation may be a decisive factor in this regard. For practitioners, this provision of orientation may translate into: (1) a clear vision and mission statement, outlining the overall strategic direction of the organization in relation to sustainability and entrepreneurial activity; (2) a clarification of how sustainability and CE are understood by the organization; however, this shall not be a ‘sovereignty claim’ within the field of broad definitions of terms, but acknowledge that diverse (personal) understandings exist; (3) this may be translated into concrete elements for the individual within the broader operations of the organization. These elements could encompass, e.g. suitable settings, structures and processes, guidelines and KPIs that provide for a road to follow. Overall, everyone in the organization should be aware how their work can or should contribute to the approach towards SCE. Subsequently, a solid and transparent communication strategy is crucial to ensure the awareness and internalization regarding the aspects above, in order to give guidance and reduce uncertainty among organizational members.

### **6.2.2 Theorizing About SCE**

First of all, we suggest that scholars researching on and theorizing around SCE need to take into consideration the findings that caused our critique on the assumptions. Particularly, the question of how to incorporate the uncertainty and complexity of SCE’s underlying concepts, namely sustainability and CE, into the SCE conceptualization may be further expanded on. Within the integrative perspective of sustainability, the balancing act of its economic, social and environmental dimension seemingly depicts a major challenge. Therefore, further research on the perceptions of how such a balance of three, at times contrasting, dimensions may reveal which consequences such a balance causes in organizational reality. In line with our interpretative approach, we additionally suggest that further research is necessary to explore how the relationship between CE and sustainability and its reciprocity are perceived,

understood and interpreted by employees. Building on this, scholars could explore which implications these perceptions, understandings and interpretations cause and how an organization may account for them. As our study illuminated, the organizational context may strongly influence the presence, practice and nature of sustainability and CE, and therefore their relationship and SCE. Yet, the current SCE conceptualization disregards this influence, and we thus suggest further research in this regard and the development of the SCE model to incorporate such influences. Lastly, we strongly encourage research on the question how and to which extent SCE “can provide a basis for competitive advantage” (p. 74) as claimed by Miles et al. (2009).

### **6.3. Reflections**

When we first stumbled across the concept of SCE we were caught by its appealing straightforwardness and clear visualization. Looking back on our study and critically reflecting on our engagement with the research matter SCE, we acknowledge the benefits of such straightforwardness, as it may provide inspiration and a stimulus to reflect upon and research the relationship between sustainability and CE and its opportunities. Nonetheless, we believe that the concept’s straightforwardness and simplicity also constitute a weakness, as the concept’s presented straightforwardness and desirability cover up the complexities that actually lie beneath that attractive surface. These complexities hereby not only relate to the notions of sustainability and CE, but also to the assumptions behind SCE and the organizational context. We suggest that accounting for the organizational context is decisive, as we outlined how it influences Big Company’s stance in relation to sustainability and CE.

Furthermore, we would like to highlight that definitions at first sight provide a sentiment of straightforwardness, but can later raise further questions. We suggest that authors should provide some guidance on how they are supposed to be understood – particularly if they relate to some sort of practical application. As we carved out how influential assumptions may be, we propose that they should be mentioned in conceptualizations in order to be accounted for in research or practice.

The study at hand furthermore demonstrates the amount of aspects that need further in-depth research and which difficulties need to be accounted for when approaching SCE. Overall, we acknowledge that some frameworks may require certain simplicity, however, we stress that a

critical stance and a look beneath the surface are vital when a framework or model intends to capture and process far-reaching and complex concepts – especially, when the reader then is confronted with ‘prognostic’ and promising prospects, as in the case of SCE according to Miles et al. (2009). We therefore believe that further research into the nature, diffusion and impact of such frameworks not only would be compelling but also beneficial for researchers and practitioners alike.

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