When hope messages become the discursive norm: how repertoires of hope shape communicative capacity in conversations on the circular economy

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Environmental communication research often conceptualises hope as an internal state of mind, suggesting that messages focused on hope can be used in strategic communication to foster environmental engagement. In this paper, we critique this individualising approach and instead explore hope discourse as an emergent social phenomenon, focusing on how it is constructed and managed in inspirational meetings about the circular economy. Using critical discursive psychology as a methodology, we identify three interpretative repertoires through which hope is constructed: stronger together, change for real, silver lining. We explore what is accomplished by their use, and discuss the social implications within the meetings and beyond. The repertoires facilitate a positive meeting experience and solidarity amongst participants. However, hope discourse also relies on abstraction which prohibits disagreement, critique, and talk about concrete actions.

Keywords: critical discursive psychology; circular economy; environmental communication; hope discourse; inspirational meetings

1. Introduction

Environmental communication research and practice often suggest that communication on environmental issues should focus on messages of hope. The apocalyptic discourse that has long dominated environmental discourse is now being criticised for framing human agency to act against climate change as limited or even non-existent (Foust and O'Shannon Murphy 2009) and for being ineffective in motivating climate change action (e.g. Merkel *et al.* 2020; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009). There is, therefore, an increasing demand to abandon pessimistic future-orientations in favour of messages that emphasise hope for a better future (Cassegård and Thörn 2018).

Hope is, however, a contested concept and encompasses many different theories and definitions (see, e.g., Webb 2013). Some take a pragmatist approach to hope discourse and argue that it is futile to assume an agreed upon definition since the meaning of a hopeful statement is highly context dependent (Herrestad *et al.* 2014). Even so, environmental research overwhelmingly views hope as a strategically important

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feature in persuasive communication aiming to foster pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour. It explores the effectiveness of hope messages in promoting environmental engagement and overall concludes that there is a positive correlation between feelings or attitudes of hope and pro-environmental behaviour (see Schneider, Zaval, and Markowitz 2021).

In this paper, we complement environmental research on hope by exploring how the social preference for hopeful formulations shapes the shared communication competence. If we want to understand the role of hope in promoting environmental engagement on a broad societal scale, we need to recognise that psychological issues are also discursive issues, and explore language in use (Potter and Wetherell 1987). We therefore examine how hope features discursively in social situations and how it is constructed and made normative. More specifically, we examine how hope discourse is constructed and managed in inspirational meetings where the circular economy is portrayed as the solution to society's sustainability issues (Rödl *et al.* 2022). Our aim is to explore the communicative procedures that constitute hope discourse and analyse the social implications of the procedures for the local interaction situation. We study the local implications of hope discourse with the purpose of discussing how it shapes the communicative capacity of the participants to investigate, not only the possibilities, but the potential challenges to a circular economy transition, as well as disagreement on what such a transition entails.

The circular economy concept has, over the past decade, gained increased influence and support as a promising approach to create sustainability (Corvellec *et al.* 2020). It aims to replace linear models of production and consumption, and to bridge the longstanding conflict between sustainability and economic growth (Korhonen *et al.* 2018). The anticipation of a circular economy as *the* new sustainability solution that brings growth and new business opportunities overwhelmingly features in the meetings, rendering them an appropriate case for studying the role of hope discourse in the sustainability transition.

In this paper, we view communication as constitutive for social interaction and recognise the foundational and formative role of communication in all things social. Thus, communication is a social process that "produces and reproduces – and in that way constitutes – social order" (Craig 1999, 128). Accordingly, we view hope as socially constructed rather than an intrinsic emotional or cognitive state. In order to study communication in this way, and how it produces and reproduces hope, we adopt the analytical framework of critical discursive psychology (CDP) (Edley 2001). We view discourse as constructed as well as constructive and as situated within social, cultural and historical settings. We examine discourse by identifying interpretative repertoires, which are coherent sets of ways of talking or writing about an issue. We also highlight how subjects are positioned in discourse through the use of such repertoires. CDP enables us to highlight the subtle and complex ways in which hope discourse is constructed, since it goes beyond explicit discourse and grammatical variations of the word "hope" to include a wide range of communicative procedures.

In what follows, we review some of the literature on hope discourse and communication before moving on to the method section where we describe our material and analytical procedure. We then present our analysis, focusing on three interpretative repertoires we have identified in the meetings. Finally, we discuss our findings and present our conclusions on the social implications of hope discourse.

2. Background: the role of hope discourse in the sustainability transition

2.1. *The potential of hope messages in the promotion of environmental engagement*

A growing body of research has explored whether messages of hope, which evoke feelings or attitudes of hope in individuals, are effective in promoting environmental engagement, and therefore should shape communication on environmental issues. The majority have found that hope messages, indeed, are effective in promoting pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour (see Schneider, Zaval, and Markowitz 2021). Hope messages are, for example, effective in environmental education and communication activities aimed at fostering feelings of hope among students have been found to increase environmental engagement (Li and Monroe 2019; Ojala 2012). Hope communication is also an effective strategy in green business marketing and is "a better sell" (Lee, Chang, and Chen 2017), and increases individual motivation to act against climate change (Chadwick 2015).

However, some research has found a weak correlation between hope and environmental engagement. Ettinger *et al.* (2021) tested the effects of climate change videos and found that while videos with a hope frame successfully elicited emotions of hope in participants, they were not more likely to change their behaviour or to engage in climate activism. Similar conclusions were drawn by van Zomeren, Pauls, and Cohen-Chen (2019) in their paper on climate change action where they suggest that while hope increases individuals' motivation to act against climate change it does not translate to increased collective motivation and action. Some research even suggests that hope messages may have a negative effect and that it limits motivation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Hornsey and Fielding 2016).

Thus, it is debatable whether hope is effective in promoting pro-environmental behaviour (Hornsey and Fielding 2020). However, regardless of whether hope increases individual motivation, if we want to expand our knowledge on environmental communication and hope, we need to also investigate what the consequences of a discursive preference of hope do with the communication procedures. While previous research contributes to a better understanding of the role of hope in strategic communication, it is limited to an intra-subjective view of hope, considering hope an internal state that can be objectively measured and manipulated through different interventions. It focuses on the instrumental properties of communication and studies hope as an enabling rhetoric device in persuasive communication. Communication is, however, more than a means of persuasion: It is a constitutive process through which we create and negotiate meaning. (Craig 1999; Cox and Pezzullo 2018).

2.2. *Hope as discursively constructed in social interaction*

Qualitative research has been conducted aiming to understand the social dynamics of hope and the different ways it features discursively in naturally occurring social situations. The social, pragmatic, and context-dependent aspects of hope have been a great topic of research in the field of healthcare (Herrestad *et al.* 2014). Counselling studies have explored hope as a social construct and discussed how the role of hope might be understood in therapy sessions. This research suggests that hope is part of dynamic social processes in which the concept of hope is co-constructed (Larsen, Edey, and Lemay 2007). Thus, even if the counsellor is the one asking questions focused on hope, the client is an active co-creator of the hope discourse (Weingarten 2010).

It appears that the interaction in which accounts of hope are constructed are important for how hope is attributed (Eliott and Olver 2002).

Previous research has studied the social dynamics of hope discourse in more depth and highlighted some of the discursive properties of hope. Eliott and Olver (2007) explore how hope features in interviews with cancer patients and demonstrate the social implications of hope discourse for patients and clinical practice. They found that different grammatical uses of the word hope perform different social actions. When employed as a noun, e.g., "there is hope," hope is attributed to the situation and positions the patient as passive in their recovery and as having limited agency. In contrast, hope as a verb, e.g., "I hope that," construes the patient as active and as having agency. Moreover, hope as a verb can be used both to assign moral responsibility to the speaker as well as to avoid it. The latter is evident in how patients tend to end interviews by saying "I hope it's been a help," which is an expression of support that does not hold the patient responsible for the outcome. This example also demonstrates how hope discourse can be used in ways that "signal goodwill" and to denote solidarity and a positive interaction (Eliott and Olver 2007, 146).

Healthcare research directs our attention to the social implications of hope discourse. It shows the value of going beyond the instrumental perspective on hope and of exploring the constitutive aspects of environmental communication, whereby it is understood as symbolic action and as the co-construction of meaning (Cox and Pezzullo 2018). Our analytical focus on hope as co-constructed social action complements the dominant perspective on hope communication and serves to increase our understanding of the naturally occurring situations in which people engage in hope discourse.

3. Method

3.1. *Empirical material*

In order to examine how hope discourse is constructed and managed in social interaction, we apply a discourse analytic approach and view discourse as constructed, performative and situated (Burr 2015). We analyse hope discourse in inspirational meetings where the circular economy is promoted as a key component in the sustainability transition. In previous work, we identified that highly optimistic statements about the present and the future are prominent in these meetings (Rödl *et al.* 2022). The starting point of this work was an investigation into how actors in the Swedish food sector foster a transition to a circular food system. We explored how the ambiguous concept of circular economy is performed and were surprised to see that the predominant approach was to arrange inspirational meetings to promote the concept. Moreover, the explicit purpose of the meetings (as stated in the meeting invitations) is to promote a transition to a circular economy. Thus, when actors in the Swedish food sector *do* circular economy, they do inspirational meetings, which is why these specific meetings were chosen for closer examination in this paper. There are many other types of inter-organisational meetings which may be radically different from meetings of an inspirational character and different sectors may approach the circular economy transition using a different approach than inspiration. Whether these are also characterised by a discourse of hope is not explored here and is thus a limitation of our paper. We identified the meetings online and through memberships in circular economy advocacy organisations. The meetings were arranged by private organisations, such as

consultancies, agencies, and NGOs, with an interest in promoting the circular economy. They were conducted *via* online meeting platforms in Sweden during 2020 (with the exception of one meeting held in person in 2019) and largely open to the public, but primarily targeted at actors in the food sector. Invitations to the meetings typically state that participants will learn about the circular economy and be provided with good examples of circular practices. The expressed purpose is to promote the circular economy and to inspire participants to adopt principles of circularity in their business. Meeting activities include lectures, panel discussions and group discussions.

The meetings were typically 1 to 2 h long with roughly twenty participants, invited speakers, and one or two moderators. We attended the meetings and used recordings made available online by the organisers as our empirical material. In total, our material included 18 inspirational meetings, resulting in roughly 35 h of recorded material, of which we analysed around 5 h in seven meetings in more depth (see Rödl *et al.* 2022 for an overview of the corpus). This choice of material means that the findings resulting from this study are specific to inspirational meetings on circular economy in Sweden. Nevertheless, we suggest that the insights we develop on hope discourse in this paper are relevant to social situations where people inform, inspire, or educate about ambiguous or contested concepts (cf. Rödl *et al.* 2022).

In line with Swedish law, ethical approval was not required as no sensitive personal data were collected or processed. We pseudonymised participant names in the meeting excerpts with letters following the alphabet in order of appearance in the article (skipping the letter "I" for readability).

3.2. Analytical procedure

Our analytical interest lies in how hope discourse is constructed and managed, as well as the social implications of this discursive practice. We understand hope as the expressed anticipation for a desired future outcome characterised by uncertainty or set against the backdrop of great obstacles. Hope discourse is then found in affirmative expressions of optimism that focus on positive outcomes. Our corpus includes the use of the word "hope" as well as socio-linguistic constructions that seem to have similar functions as such explicit hope constructions. Explicit hope constructions are rare in our material and we go beyond the focus on its explicit use (e.g. Eliott and Olver 2007) by exploring how hope is socially constructed in ways that are subtle and implicit.

Our analysis builds on critical discursive psychology (CDP), a form of discourse analysis that views discourse as constructed and constructive and as having implications for both local interaction and broader societal context (Edley 2001). Accordingly, we examine what is accomplished in the immediate conversational context of the meeting while also considering how participants simultaneously engage with a wider cultural and historical context, which enables and constrains what can be said and done. We utilise two analytical concepts from the CDP toolbox (see Locke and Budds 2020); interpretative repertoires and subject positions.

The first stage of our analytic procedure involved multiple readings of the material. This was followed by an inclusive coding of all sequences that in some way relate to hope, using our previously stated understanding of hope as a guide, while continuously building on the notion of hope as contextually and situationally dependent (Webb 2013). We also included borderline cases as well as sequences in which hope discourse

is countered. This resulted in roughly 150 sequences being coded and 22 excerpts transcribed in more detail, including emphasised words (underlined) and pauses in speech (transcribed as (.)). We discerned *what* was being constructed, *how* and *when* in the interaction and then explored what the participants accomplish by using those constructs in the specific interactional context. Based on this initial analysis, we identified discursive patterns of hope discourse; that is, we identified a number of possible interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

An interpretative repertoire is a "recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterizations of actors and situations" (Edley and Wetherell 2001, 443). They are discursive resources that people use in their various constructions of "reality" and thereby draw on already established discourses (Edley 2001). Interpretative repertoires make different positions or identities discursively available, which means that participants are positioned by discourse while also positioning themselves and others (Locke and Budds 2020; Davies and Harré 1990). Thus, in addition to the *what*, *how*, and *when* of discourse, there is a *who* to be considered. Different "ways of being" are produced and, depending on the cultural context, some are more available than others (Edley 2001). We explored what the subjects constructed *can* and *should* do, in what position they are to act and *who* is going to do *what*.

We identified three repertoires that are most typical of how hope discourse was constructed in our material. These, and the subject positions produced within them, are treated extensively in the analysis section, exemplified with excerpts from the material.

4. Analysis

We have identified three patterns of hope discourse: the *stronger together repertoire*, the *change for real repertoire* and the *silver lining repertoire*. In this section, we present how they are constructed and employed and what is accomplished by their use in the immediate interaction, as well as how they draw on wider discourses. We also highlight how participants position themselves and others in discourse.

4.1. *The stronger together repertoire*

The *stronger together repertoire* is a pattern of talk found in the various ways in which collaboration is portrayed as crucial for implementing a circular economy in the Swedish food sector. The repertoire mainly consists of active verbs that in different ways refer to collaboration, such as "working together," "helping each other," "having a close dialogue," and "joining arms." It also consists of nominalisations, such as "coordination," "collaboration" and "networking," which portrays collaboration as a product rather than a process (Halliday 1978). Neither the use of nominalisations nor active verbs includes specifying the process of collaboration and *who* is doing *what*. The verbs do, however, position actors as interdependent. For example, "joining arms" implies a physical closeness and a dedication that is not necessarily implied by collaboration. Similarly, to "help each other" appeals to a willingness to collaborate and frames collaboration as a matter of altruism, positioning participants as having shared responsibility. Thus, such appeals seem to serve the social function of establishing a sense of community (Rödl *et al.* 2022).

The following excerpt demonstrates how appeals for collaboration are typically constructed to serve this function. The excerpt is from a meeting that focuses on innovation in a circular economy and which provides "inspiring examples" of circular projects. A panel of four speakers discussed the potential obstacles for innovation and repeatedly returned to collaboration as the answer. The moderators A and B provide a summary of the meeting and again emphasise the importance of working together, which is met with agreeing responses by panel participant C.

Excerpt 1

A: […] and finally (.) I believe that it is important that we help each other here and not see one another as competitors because […] there are businesses that are pretty big in the food sector that say open innovation (.) but close the door as soon as they have an idea

C: mm

A: and I think that (.) there we probably need to help each other and get up and help each other (.) for real (.) everyone so in conclusion (.) we are going to do this together

C: mm

Setting up a contrast between collaboration and competition, and between helping each other "for real" as opposed to for show, works to strengthen A's argument in favour of the former. By putting emphasis on the word "together," and having it be the concluding statement, A's argument for "real" collaboration is strengthened. Using "together" in this manner seems to serve the interactional function of engaging participants, aligning with a recurring pattern in which moderators emphasise that participants are not alone in the endeavour of realising a circular business, but part of a larger movement (Rödl *et al.* 2022).

Participant B performs a positive assessment of the meeting, suggesting that it has been "wonderful" and energising. This metacommunicative account works to promote a shared positive experience, which further supports the collective identity that A constructs. Such accounts are a common feature in the meetings and this particular example demonstrates how performing a positive meeting experience is made a priority.

An example of the unusual activity of talking about collaboration in more concrete terms is found in excerpt 2. In this meeting, participants discuss how circular models can create new business opportunities. Participants were divided into groups to discuss what conditions are lacking to bring about a transition to the circular economy. D summarises their group discussion and shares their concerns regarding collaboration. Moderator B also participates in this meeting.

Excerpt 2

D: […] then we talked about if whether it is the case that (.) other actors that sort of will realise these (.) systems collaborations that a previous speaker mentioned (.) who is this then? who is going to lead this and is it (.) so what competencies does this person need to be perceived as legitimate by the different parties (.) and this thing about creating a feeling of trust and that (.) we all sort of benefit from this that we are sort of not really there yet but […]

B: wonderful many thanks for (.) for all thoughts it yeah it is very valuable for us to gather this so thank you so much […]

Participant D raises a series of questions regarding potential obstacles for successful collaboration. D shows that their account may be heard as negative by using minimisations such as" sort of," which downplays the potentially negative in their account (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith 2012). The moderator B does not elaborate on the unaddressed obstacles for collaboration. Instead, B comments with the positive adjective "wonderful," which confirms that D's account has been well received. This is another example of a metacommunicative account that promotes a positive meeting experience, here also functioning to create an inclusive atmosphere where all accounts are welcome – even the potentially negative ones.

Rather than addressing how to collaborate, e.g., by identifying concrete activities and by jointly investigating potential challenges, the *stronger together repertoire* is used to emphasise that as long as we work together things will work out. In addition, the argument that more can be accomplished by the collective positions of the individual actors as having limited agency relative to the collective – they are dependent on the collective for greater success. However, what collaboration entails for the actors involved, and how it may affect their agency, is not addressed. Talk about collaboration overall tends to stay at an abstract level.

The strong emphasis on collaboration can be traced to broader discourses of environmental management. Collaboration is often considered a pillar of contemporary environmental management, and as a solution for a wide range of managerial and organisational issues (Hardy, Lawrence, and Phillips 1998, 66). Collaboration is seen as key for overcoming issues of competition and silo-thinking, which is what led to the environmental crises in the first place (Westley and Vredenburg 1996). Moreover, it is implied to be a more pragmatic way of addressing environmental issues, shifting focus away from conflict to "less disruptive strategies" for addressing environmental issues. (Prasad and Elmes 2005, 857).

Collaboration is also key in the win-win narrative of circular economy discourse. What is argued to make the circular economy so appealing is its promise to deliver a win-win outcome by shifting the common focus on "trade-offs and constraints" to "synergies and opportunities" (Völker, Kovacic, and Strand 2020, 116). Lazarevic and Valve (2017) even suggest that a circular economy is expected to "carve out a common future where only winners exist" (67). This win-win narrative is very much reproduced in the meetings and in a manner that departs from the more formal, technical and managerial language that is typical of a circular economy discourse (Kovacic, Strand, and Völker 2019), in favour of a discourse of community and solidarity.

4.2. *The change for real repertoire*

The *change for real repertoire* is found in the different ways in which participants stress that some action or event will lead to actual change. It is most pronounced in instances in which participants use the words "for real." It is also evident in talk of circular economy as doing things radically different than other sustainability initiatives, and that circular economy projects perform better than "regular" ones. That something is to be done "for real" implies that current attempts have not been able to meet expectations. What those attempts are is, however, not specified by the participants. Moreover, they refer to greater shifts in society that they claim will improve conditions for the food sector, emphasising that the food industry "actually want to do something

differently" and that its importance "has now been realised and it will get the recognition it deserves."

The next excerpt is an example of how the *change for real repertoire* is constituted by a "we–circular" versus "them–linear" duality (Rödl *et al.* 2022). It is from a panel discussion on the possibilities and obstacles for realising circular food production. The conversation has moved on to talk about obstacles and panellist E argues that there is "very good hope" for overcoming them and highlights the great potential of the circular economy.

Excerpt 3

> E: […] that is a common <u>misunderstanding</u> around circular concepts that this is about recycling only we can continue linearly and then we make a small twirl at the end […] and then we are actually still as linear only a <u>little</u> better (.) as sustainability we are a little less <u>evil</u> (.) but circular economy is about doing <u>good</u> and it is <u>that</u> aspect that <u>allows</u> this to <u>spin</u> that there is an <u>economic pitch</u> on circular business models that make business <u>see</u> that there is an economic value in this […] and <u>that</u> (.) can be the key in (.) in actually making this a reality otherwise we will not get much further than we do today and then we will see what happens but we what was it that you said? we are
>
> F: [inaudible]
>
> E: you had an expression (.) a little you said have childhood faith (.) maybe that is what is needed?

Participant E explains that it is common to mistake circular economy for recycling with "a small spin at the end," which does not lead to real change. By arguing that recycling only makes us "a little less evil" E positions "us-circular" against "them-linear," invoking a "good guys"-"bad guys" narrative (Hardy, Lawrence, and Phillips 1998). By invoking the morality of evil and goodness, E makes a strong case for circular economy by positioning people supporting it on "the good side," the side that will actually bring change. E also invokes issues of accountability by positioning those who misunderstand what a circular economy is as accountable for reproducing a linear economy. In contrast, those who belong to the circular side are positioned as having a responsibility to realise a circular economy, and thus "doing good" in the world.

Invocations of accountability and responsibility are central features of the *change for real repertoire*. Some actors – primarily actors described as "linear," but also more specific actors such as different supervisory authorities and lawmakers – are portrayed as being accountable for preventing change and are to blame for slow progress. Participants tend to assign a collective "we" the responsibility and agency to make "real" change, however, they do not specify who they are.

E contrasts circular economy against an uncertain future by stating that if we do not transition to a circular economy "we will not get much further," an alternative that will have unforeseen consequences. E does, however, soften this potentially bad news by positing that maybe what we need is "childhood faith," a suggestion made earlier by panellist F. This implies that we risk finding ourselves in a situation that would be so unpredictable that naïve faith is needed to manage it. E portrays this as the alternative to putting one's faith in a circular economy. Moreover, they orient to a norm stipulating that accounts with negative connotations should end on a positive note, possibly attending to an expectation to uphold a positive meeting experience.

Deviating from the common line of argument in the *change for real repertoire*, there are a few instances in which participants are less optimistic about the possibilities for change. The following excerpt is from the same panel discussion as the previous excerpt, taken from the start of the discussion. A presentation round is led by the moderator G, and F is the last panellist to present himself. After having described their circular business, F talks about past and current delegations founded to support the national transition to a circular economy. F refers to the concept of "eco-cycle" [Swe kretslopp], which was used in Swedish public and policy discussions in the 1990s and which preceded the circular economy concept (Johansson and Henriksson 2020). "The eco cycle delegation" [Swe kretsloppsdelegationen] was the name of a former policy committee that produced policy proposals to the Swedish government.

Excerpt 4

F: […] now things are starting to speed up and that is <u>incredibly</u> gratifying and
    then there are things (.) I will probably be a bit sharp here today and sit and be
    this old uncle that has seen everything already (.)

Audience: [laughter]

F: how many of you remember how revolutionary the eco cycle delegation was in
    your <u>life</u> (.) or all the other delegations that have appeared <u>and</u> disappeared
    when politics gets tired of an old concept like <u>waste</u> then they create a new con-
    cept and think (.) shit (.) this feels <u>fresh</u> and <u>revitalising</u>

Audience: [laughter]

F: nothing happens […] we have not regulated <u>shit</u> (.) […] so there is reason to
    be a bit sharp and dreary towards all delegations but we have childhood faith so
    I of course believe in this

G: now we should probably add that the delegations <u>are</u> not present in the panel
    here today

F: not even that

Audience: [laughter]

G: yeah but (.) yeah we will follow up on that so (.) they have participated

F: you can turn off my mic there is probably some technician here

Participant F acknowledges that things are starting to change but emphasises that there is still reason to be sceptical. F argues that policy delegations have come and gone and suggests that politics is to blame for this because it tends to go for what is considered "fresh and revitalizing." Thus, F portrays politics as incapable of creating change and encourages the participants to be critical of political initiatives. While F argues that "nothing is changing" they show that this is a potentially problematic opinion by positioning themselves as an "old uncle" who is "a bit sharp." F chooses to formulate their disclaimer by making a joke, which is an acknowledged way to mitigate disagreement (Osvaldsson 2004). F resists the subject position of an agreeable participant and acknowledges that there is a norm to be agreeable and to strive for consensus (Rödl *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, and in line with a pattern in the material overall, F chooses to end on a positive note by stating that we have "childhood faith" and that they, therefore, believe in the circular economy project. Issues of agency are evident in the way F positions circular economy practitioners as having limited agency and places the blame on the delegations. It is, thus, an external agent who limits the agency for people running a circular business. F do, however, reclaim some agency by saying that, despite this, they believe in the circular economy project.

The moderator G responds to F by emphasising that the delegations are not present to respond to F's account, implying that the delegation would probably dispute F's account. G also adds that the issues posed by F will be followed up on another occasion. G's response to this potential disagreement is in alignment with a conversation procedure recognised in a paper by Hallgren, Bergeå, and Westberg (2018) that promises future elaboration to avoid articulation of potential disagreements. G's promise of a future elaboration, in combination with F positioning themselves as a troublemaker that no-one has to listen to, solves the interactional tension.

With ecological modernisation and incremental change process at the core of the circular economy concept (Niskanen, Anshelm, and McLaren 2020), it is no wonder that participants place emphasis on adjusting business models. While the circular economy offers a critique of linear economic relations, it does not profess systemic change. Instead, businesses are typically encouraged to adjust their business models and increase collaboration (Temesgen, Storsletten, and Jakobsen 2021). In the circular economy narrative, environmental "problems" become "opportunities," and since the circular economy is framed as a win-win policy, criticisms are generally hard to voice (see excerpt 4). (Kovacic, Strand, and Völker 2019). Central to this narrative is the overall framing of the business case (see excerpt 3), which is portrayed as "the main rationale for the pursuit of circularity" (Kovacic, Strand, and Völker 2019, 41). Thus, change is to be done by businesses, which is often the "we" referred to in the meetings. This invokes a neoliberal discourse about the responsibility of businesses and the incapability of states and governmental actors, as well as promises of sustainable growth through privatisation (Kinderman 2012). As evident in excerpt 4, the *change for real repertoire* is used to profess a political inability to foster a circular economy, with responsibility for circularity instead being assigned to individuals and entrepreneurs (Johansson and Henriksson 2020).

4.3. *The silver lining repertoire*

The *silver lining repertoire* is enacted whenever participants describe some event in negative terms while also accounting for the different ways in which it has brought, or will bring, something positive. It emphasises that seemingly negative situations can bring something positive. Participants often refer to the then ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting its far-reaching negative consequences while also emphasising its positive outcomes. They argue that the pandemic has benefitted the environment and led to the recognition that the food sector has a critical function in society. Setbacks are effectively reframed as possibilities for positive change.

Excerpt 5 is from the start of a panel discussion taking place in a meeting where participants were invited to learn more about the circular economy and its possibilities. The moderator H provides an introduction to the panel discussion and invites the panel participant J to answer the first question.

Excerpt 5

  H: […] food has ended up <u>very</u> close to the epicentre in the corona crisis (.) we
      have become crucial in society (.) we who work with food (.) we see death and
      <u>misery</u> but we actually also see healthier air and a lessened impact on the cli-
      mate (.) due to less travelling and less production but we also <u>know</u> that there
      is <u>one</u> production that we <u>must</u> keep <u>going</u> (.) and <u>that is</u> food because one can
      imagine (.) the <u>complete hell</u> that would have been if we got a food crisis on

> top of this so (.) with that background we know that we <u>have</u> to transition […]
> how are we going to increase production while simultaneously transition-
> ing? […]

J: yeah (.) that is of course a crucial issue but (.) I actually do not think (.) actually
   I think we should also remember that we use (.) considerably less arable land
   than we did (.) only fifty years ago so we can utilise more land but I also
   believe that we can utilise the land in a better way

Moderator H argues that the pandemic has brought positive changes in the form of
cleaner air and a lessened impact on the climate. Moreover, the food sector has
become recognised as crucial for society – alluding to greater opportunities for this
sector, which is great news for the meeting participants. H makes these positive claims
against the backdrop of "death and misery" and "complete hell," which works to
emphasise the importance of the food sector and the need for transitioning to a circular
economy. By referring to this backdrop, H adds credibility to their argument that the
food sector will now get the recognition it deserves, since it demonstrates the serious
context in which this issue deserves to be placed. J responds by describing H's ques-
tion as central but chooses to remind everyone that we are actually using less land
than we used to. Thus, J argues that the situation of the food sector was not that bad
to begin with, which downplays H's contrasting account (Locke and Horton-Salway
2010), and contributes to a more hopeful account.

The final excerpt is from the same meeting as the previous one, now mid discus-
sion, where the COVID-19 pandemic is portrayed as an opportunity to learn and to
promote a circular economy. It is assumed that we can learn from bad experiences and
facilitate continued development, rather than repeat past mistakes. Moderator H
presents the last question and panellist K is the first to answer, followed by panellists
L and M.

Excerpt 6

H: […] how can the corona crisis' resource mobilisation and changes and insights
   be used to favour a circular bioeconomy? (.) what do we learn now? (.)

K: we probably learn (.) it is probably a small wake up call for everyone that we
   need to (.) think more about (.) how we (.) the state of food and (.) the supply

H: thank you

K: I think

H: yeah mm

L: food (.) <u>business</u> (.) food production it is (.) <u>means for life</u> (.) it is completely
   vital to <u>really get</u> that insight to sink in in <u>all of us</u> and that we can live (.)
   <u>smaller lives</u> (.) but have a greater life experience

H: <u>sounds</u> fantastic […]

Participant K suggests that the pandemic is a "wake up call" for everyone to pay
more attention to food – implying that we have been asleep until now. However, K
minimises their account with "probably" and "small," making the metaphor of the pan-
demic being "a wake-up call" seem less serious. This enables K to avoid being posi-
tioned as an alarmist, while at the same time using a strong statement that may even
be heard as going to the extremes (Edwards 2000). In addition, by finishing their
response with the hedging "I think," K allows for some room to retract her account
(Goodman and Burke 2011). By hedging and minimising their response, K manages
accountability by distancing themselves from any particular stance. Moreover, the

"we" constructed here is an inclusive and unspecific "we." It is also a passive "we," and it is not made specific what "we" should do, other than to "think more about" food and food supply, an activity that does not necessarily involve action.

Participant L continues to refer to this inclusive and unspecific "we" when arguing that we should realise how important food is. Even though it is an unspecific "we," L conveys a "sense of an authoritative consensus" (Horton-Salway 2001, 253) about the societal role of the food sector, urging us to realise that food is vital. The pandemic has the potential to bring about this vital understanding. H expresses support for L's utterance and invites more comments. Participant M responds to H's question by emphasising how quickly things can change "if we are open, constructive, creative, and collaborate and […] help each other to transition." M finalises their account by adding that this is what they "hope for" (not in excerpt).

While the *silver lining repertoire* is mainly used to refer to the Covid-19 pandemic, it draws on wider discourses. Overall, the repertoire relates to hope discourse more broadly as something that enables the speaker to acknowledge the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes while privileging the former (Eliott and Olver 2007). In a similar fashion, the acknowledgement of the negative renders the ecological crisis, and the circular economy as a response to this, as a question of risk (Beck 1992): Choosing a measurable and predictable circular economy future over the uncertainties of the status quo, is essentially what participant E suggests to naysayers when saying "then we will see what happens" (excerpt 3). Participants' acknowledgement of a potential environmental and food crisis, as seen in apocalyptic environmental rhetoric (Foust and O'Shannon Murphy 2009) and in their accounts of "death and misery" and "complete hell" (excerpt 5), highlights the increased multiple responsibilities that businesses have in tackling the complex and interconnected issues of contemporary society (Berglund and Werr 2000). Moreover, such apocalyptic framing portrays the change that is now going to happen "for real" as all the more needed or anticipated. Here, the pandemic is being turned into a pivotal moment that has highlighted the vulnerability of the food system. Promises of self-improvement await through an advance of control and resilience that continue the anthropocentric trajectory (Fremaux 2019, 85–117) through the circular economy.

5. Discussion

We have explored three interpretive repertoires that constitute hope discourse in inspirational circular economy meetings: *stronger together*, *change for real* and *silver lining.* In this section, we discuss the implications of these repertoires for the meetings and beyond.

In the meetings, the *stronger together repertoire* is used to encourage participants to work together, and it seems its main social function is to establish interpersonal ties and solidarity between them (Eliott and Olver 2007). Thereby, participants create a positive meeting experience in which a hopeful orientation towards the circular economy is maintained. While an emphasis on the great potential of collaboration may be appealing, the complexity of collaboration – such as substantial time requirements and establishing dialogue across different institutional languages (Kovacic, Strand, and Völker 2019; Fadeeva 2005) – is overlooked. Instead of addressing such issues, participants maintain an abstract or vague discourse and when potential challenges to collaboration are raised they are not elaborated on. Thus, emphasis on community and

togetherness seems to occur at the expense of constructive conversations about obstacles, differences and disagreement – conversations that are necessary for advancing environmental planning and management (Hallgren, Bergeå, and Westberg 2018).

Abstract or vague language is also characteristic of the *change for real repertoire*. Here, hope is constructed in the tension between the promise of "real" change and the often unarticulated risk of hypocrisy, failure and greenwashing evident in sustainable development discourse and practice (Cho *et al.* 2015; Higgins, Tang, and Stubbs 2020). While space is not created for deliberating why something is changing for real – and what is then implied to be inauthentic or simulated – such claims are made with an implicit reference to insincere or broken promises of the environmental movement. Maybe as a response to this, participants construct a responsible and actionable collective "we" that are going to create real change. However, rather than promoting action by clarifying *who* is responsible for *what*, such claims seem to function as a discursive device the main function of which is to engage people. Moreover, the responsible and actionable "we," is contrasted to "them-linear," to whom participants assign responsibility for reproducing a linear economy. They employ a "good guys" – "bad guys" narrative (Hardy, Lawrence, and Phillips 1998, 70), arguing that "circular economy is about doing good," which effectively portrays circular businesses and actors as the "good guys."

Participants use the *silver lining repertoire* to highlight formative moments and the great potential for change that desperate situations bring. The repertoire builds on an assumption that society is continuously developing in the right direction – even though there are setbacks along the way. Such setbacks can create momentum to accelerate change and societal hardship is turned into pivotal moments that reinforce a responsibility to act on those moments. Thus, the responsible and actionable "we," who will bring real and good change, find themselves at a fruitful time in history. While it may be valuable to identify formative moments, it is also important to acknowledge and explore potential challenges and obstacles, and actively address any related negative emotional response to hardship. Otherwise hope may result in denial of the gravity of the situation and lead to inaction (Ojala 2012). We see no such explorations in the meetings. Instead, we see a social expectation to highlight the silver lining, which reproduces a positive one-sidedness. Consequently, talk of challenges and obstacles are avoided, which may preclude genuine conversations where discourse is open to conflicting ideas and interpretations.

Meetings constitute a key ingredient in environmental planning and management processes as a means to communicate on complex issues of sustainability (Cox and Pezzullo 2018). The meetings explored here are a case of such meetings and considering that the interpretive repertoires identified here are patterns of discourse that draw on established broader discourses they are likely to feature in other settings – and in relation to other sustainability concepts than circular economy. Our exploration of hope discourse is an important addition to studies of hope. We add to previous research on hope as an individual project, where it is considered a rhetorical device in instrumental communication, by shedding light on hope as a collective project and on the co-construction of hope. This is an important contribution considering that we have shown that investigations of differences or tension are rarely made, and when they are, they are being closed down in favour of a positive meeting experience and a norm to maintain hopeful discourse.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored hope discourse as it is co-constructed and managed in inspirational meetings about the circular economy. Overall, a responsible and actionable circular economy collective, that is able to create "real" change, is constructed. Participants also highlight that societal hardship provides them with momentum for change. However, investigating the social implications of such hope discourse – in the meetings and beyond – we found that this narrative stays at an abstract level, not specifying *what* actions need to be taken by *whom*. While previous research has shown that hope messages foster environmental engagement, we have demonstrated that when hope appears as a general discursive preference or norm it obscures the communicative capacity to address problems, ambiguities and contestation in environmental management (Hallgren 2016). Thus, inspiring and encouraging as such discourse may be, it risks staying at a positive meeting experience, perhaps building community and solidarity among meeting participants, but overlooking discussions of commitment and concrete action. Therefore, we conclude that hope discourse, and the three interpretative repertoires it is expressed as here, limits participants' capacity to acknowledge potential obstacles that a circular economy collective faces.

We argue that environmental communication researchers and practitioners should pay attention to both instrumental and constitutive aspects of communication and consider *when* and *how* hope discourse can facilitate environmental planning and policy production, and when it hampers such processes. We claim that considerations of the social implications of hope discourse can be used to increase the constructiveness of sustainability initiatives. Inspirational meetings need to be accompanied by other forms of collaborative approaches that actively address concrete action and raise potential challenges and tensions. We suggest that the findings of this paper are used to inform a more nuanced discussion about the role of hope discourse in environmental communication.

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