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Storytelling to save the planet: who gets to say what is sustainable, who tells the stories, and who should listen and change?

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In the last decade, storytelling has been popularised as a method for societal sustainability transformations. With this growing popularity, there has also been a rapid increase in those identifying as storytellers. Perhaps because storytelling for sustainability has an innocent ring to it, it has not yet been studied from a power perspective. However, as it is fast-spreading and has explicit change purposes, it is important to clarify assumptions about knowledge, power and change. This article offers a first step towards understanding and evaluating the wide variety of applications behind the label of storytelling for sustainability. We perform a frame analysis of how storytellers describe their storytelling for sustainability. Our findings demonstrate that the label of storytelling for sustainability encompasses fundamentally different ideas about whose knowledge counts. The article raises critical questions that can help assess the legitimacy and appropriateness of different applications of storytelling for sustainability.

Keywords: storytelling; sustainability; power; reification; stories

1. Introduction

Despite increasingly alarming reports about the state of the planet, societies are failing to implement the radical changes needed for the environment and climate. Producing better information and knowledge about climate change, through for example the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, is hoped to instigate such radical societal change. But change remains slow, and it has become increasingly clear that scientific knowledge does not in and of itself make people and societies change (Sundqvist 2021). Hence, scholars argue, we need to shift focus from information provision to storytelling (Veland *et al.* 2018). They call for stories that can help people and societies make sense of sustainability and imagine and implement change. Telling and sharing stories about sustainability is understood to, among other things: 'pre-empt material changes and direct social change' (Veland *et al.* 2018, 45), aid collective processing of climate grief and promote collective worldmaking (Eisenstein 2013; Palamos 2016; Hopkins 2019).

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In recent years civil society organisations, governmental organisations and companies (e.g. https://futureofstorytelling.org/; https://www.holdingtheocean.org/; https://storytelling.greenpeace.org/; https://en.viablecities.se/storytelling) have implemented storytelling to advance their engagement and profile with the general public about environmental issues. Academics have also studied and worked with storytelling for sustainability, whilst having high expectations for its transformative power (e.g. https://www.climaginaries.org/; https://suco2.com/sustelling/; https://storytellingacademy.education/).

We, the authors of this article, are also convinced of the power of stories, narrative and discourse. And this is exactly why we here take a look behind the label of storytelling for sustainability and pose 'power questions' to the different applications of storytelling. While storytelling for sustainability has an innocent ring to it, it is of course meant to be 'powerful', i.e. storytellers tell stories with the motive to guide or open-up people's thinking, feeling and doing towards more sustainable paths.

Any storytelling for sustainability is based on assumptions about who gets to say what is sustainable (scientists, planners, everyday people, etc.), who should tell the stories (a communication officer, people together, etc.), and who should listen and change (specific groups with high environmental impact, etc.). That sustainability is a floating signifier, i.e. without exact definition (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Joosse *et al.* 2020), makes these relations more opaque. Storytellers seldom explain what they understand sustainability to be, and why. These assumptions about sustainability, knowledge, power and change, form the basis of the stories and remain implicit. Yet, they are vital to clarify, because under the label of storytelling a variety of practices are developing, spreading rapidly and being used by companies, governments and NGOs, with explicit change purposes.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to offer a first step for understanding and critically evaluating storytelling for sustainability.

2. The call for better stories for sustainability

> Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves. (Okri 1996, 21)

The problem is not, according to proponents of storytelling for sustainability, that we have too few stories about sustainability. Our society is flooded with stories: sustainability influencers' social media posts; stories as central components of sustainable marketing campaigns; and dramas, films and documentaries on sustainability (examples from 2021: Seaspiracy, Burning, Don't Look Up, Meat Me Halfway, River's End, They're Trying to Kill Us, Eating Our Way to Extinction, Milked). Rather, they argue that we need different stories. For example, De Meyer *et al.* signal a 'poverty of stories' (2021, 2), where the available stories about sustainability crises only raise concern or feelings of urgency and danger (O'Neill *et al.* 2015) and do not help people to make sense of sustainability nor their role and responsibility in relation to it. Others highlight that stories should, but fail to, connect sustainability and climate change to the varying interests, values and identities of citizens (Corner and Clarke 2016), and neglect to portray the kind of radical (Gorman 2016) and/or collective action needed for societal change (Hopkins 2019), thereby making such action unimaginable and thereby impossible. Amitav Ghosh (2018) famously put this idea forward in his non-

fiction book 'The Great Derangement', writing that the popular individual-hero story discourages people from imagining collective action for the environment, thus, creating collective passivity.

The call for better sustainability stories is based on the idea that stories influence the scope of action, thinking and feeling (Stone in Lidskog *et al.* 2020). Lakoff (2010) explains this idea as follows: many of us intuitively think of our reason as 'conscious, unemotional, logical, abstract and universal' (Lakoff 2010, 72), and our language as appropriate to describe those reasoned ideas to others and ourselves (Lakoff 2010). However, Lakoff writes, we often reason unconsciously, based on emotion, based on neural circuits, and – important for our argument here – using the 'logic' that stories and metaphors trigger for us (Lakoff 2010). Those stories are produced and reproduced, creating habits of feeling, thinking and acting. New information and insights (e.g., about societal change to mitigate the climate crisis) need to make sense within these habits of thinking to make sense for people. If not, this information may easily be rejected. From this point of view, changing our societies, as Ben Okri says in the quotation at the start of this section, starts with changing the stories we live by.

Several studies have investigated sustainability stories (e.g., Frank 2017; Arnold 2018; De Meyer *et al.* 2021), and scholars in folklore studies and linguistic disciplines have studied storytelling and power (e.g., De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011; Salmon 2017). But to our knowledge storytelling for sustainability has not yet been studied from a power perspective. We argue that such an assessment from a power perspective is meaningful because sustainability stories do not in and of themselves exist or travel the world (Moezzi, Janda, and Rotmann 2017) but are actively constructed and adjusted by people with particular goals.

3.   Understanding power in storytelling

To understand storytelling for sustainability from a power perspective, we use frame theory (van Hulst and Yanow 2016) and the concept of reification (Haugaard 2003).

Frame theory is a broad theory and includes a diverse set of tools and methods for understanding human sense-making (Entman 1993). Central to all frame theory is the word 'frame', which is used as a metaphor to highlight how actors (un)consciously draw on more or less coherent sets of ideas (frames) to interpret the world. Just like a picture frame, a frame is a boundary, with what to see and what to focus on inside, excluding the rest. A frame includes only certain features of reality, and thus, guides specific interpretations; it provides 'a model of the world – reflecting prior sense-making – and a model for subsequent action in that world.' (van Hulst and Yanow 2016, 98).

In our frame analysis, we analyse how problems are formulated, but also what solutions are made to appear logical as solutions to these problems (Rein and Schön 1996; van Hulst and Yanow 2016). In this way, we explicate different sets of ideas that guide the ways in which storytelling for sustainability is done, and we will show how the label of storytelling for sustainability encompasses a diversity of sustainability problems and solutions outlined through stories.

We use a specific strand of frame theory that has been developed to analyse governance processes (van Hulst and Yanow 2016). This approach fits our study because it enables a power-sensitive analysis: it focuses the analysis on social actors' concerns/interests when framing (Dewulf *et al.* 2009; van Hulst and Yanow 2016). The verb 'framing' highlights that frames do not exist by themselves but are produced and reproduced

(un)consciously by actors who make certain features of a situation salient and draw these together into a coherent understanding. This strand focuses on three topics to construct the frames: *the issue*, *process*, and *actors and relationships*.

In power-sensitive frame theory, *issue* framing is important because powerful actors are understood to frame the issue according to their interest. As we focus on storytelling for sustainability, the issue that storytelling for sustainability addresses is sustainability. We analyse the framing of the issue – sustainability – through investigating how, in the frames, the following question is answered: why is our current society not more sustainable?

Process framing is of general interest since the way in which social processes are understood has implications for the interplay between actors. More specifically, in our study the frame topic *process* focuses on storytelling as an action to influence social processes. We analyse the framing of the process – storytelling – through investigating how, in the frames, the following question is answered: how can storytelling make societies more sustainable?

The topic *actors and relationships* helps us to analyse how storytelling for sustainability presupposes actors' identities and their relationships with one another. We analyse which subjects are constructed and how they are placed in relation to each other, what role they are assumed to play in storytelling for sustainability and what degrees of power they thereby are understood to have. We investigate the framing of actors and relationships through investigating how, in the frames, the following question is answered: who does what to whom? Frame theory, and more specifically the frame topic of *actors and relationships*, provides us with a basis for analysing storytelling for sustainability from a power perspective.

For this power-sensitive analysis, we need to qualify the kind of power at work. To this end, we use the concepts of *power over* and, more specifically, *reification* (Haugaard 2003, 2018). Following Haugaard (2018), we use these two concepts, not to capture the full complexities of power relations, but as lenses onto the specific aspects of power that are relevant for our interest in storytelling for sustainability. While we acknowledge that power is a relational property, we methodologically focus on the exercises of power: the form of power that is most often referred to as *power over* in the literature. The concept *power over* is helpful for an actor-centred understanding of power. Even if contemporary power analysis most often emphasises the systemic nature of power, we follow Clegg and Haugaard (2009) by acknowledging that power is also actor-based. *Power over* is the ability to 'influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others' (Forst 2015, 112–117). And, to be a subject of *power over* is, "to be moved by reasons that others have given me and that motivate me to think or act in a certain way intended by the reason-giver" (Forst 2015, 112). But, how does this work in storytelling?

We propose *reification* to understand the exercise of *power over* in storytelling for sustainability. To reify is to make arbitrary social structures appear as real to social actors. Reification stabilises social relations by making actors believe that conventions and norms are real, natural and inevitable, and hence, must be followed (Haugaard 2003, 2018). Storytelling can be seen as an act of reification as it presents the world in a specific way based on certain sets of understandings, actions and subject positions. Hence, storytelling can structure the field of action and stabilise social relations. Storytelling 'makes up' basic subject positions (Cashmore *et al.* 2015) such as

'storyteller' and 'story-listener' and justifies how they relate to each other, providing them with varying degrees of power based on underlying assumptions about what is desirable and reasonable, and implying that certain actions must be taken by certain actors.

Taken together, frame theory and reification enable us to highlight the assumptions about whose knowledge counts (and whose does not) in the different storytelling applications.

4. Methodology

4.1. Focus of the study

Storytelling has a long history and has been studied extensively from a variety of disciplines. For this explorative study, we narrow and clarify the focus of the study as follows:

- We focus on storytelling for sustainability, i.e., storytelling with the purpose of contributing to sustainability.
- We limit the study to storytelling that the proponents themselves label as storytelling, and which they explicitly say has the purpose of contributing to sustainability or the environment. Thus, we exclude implicit and hidden uses of storytelling, but this limited selection fits the purpose of this article: to offer a first step in analysing storytelling for sustainability from a power perspective.
- We analyse how the storytellers talk about their storytelling but do not analyse the stories they tell.
- The study is text-based, and focuses on how storytelling is talked about, not how it is done and/or experienced. To enable the text-based frame-analysis, we only include storytelling for which we can find descriptions.
- The study is interpretative: we do not work from a fixed definition of storytelling for sustainability, but study how actors understand it. This open and interpretive approach is appropriate, as we want to study the diversity behind the label of storytelling. Thus, we use storytelling for sustainability as an umbrella term (see also Moezzi, Janda, and Rotmann 2017; De Meyer *et al.* 2021) for all applications that are labelled as such.

In the following, whenever we say storytelling, we mean storytelling for sustainability.

4.2. Process and materials

The study is based on a collaborative research process within the research programme 'Mistra Environmental Communication' hosted by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Uppsala University in Sweden. This four-year programme brings together researchers from different disciplines as well as non-academic actors in the field of sustainability.

The process diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates the research process. In two programme-wide workshops, we jointly explored different applications of storytelling for sustainability and identified questions worth posing and answering in a further enquiry. Then we formed a project team from within the programme, including a representative
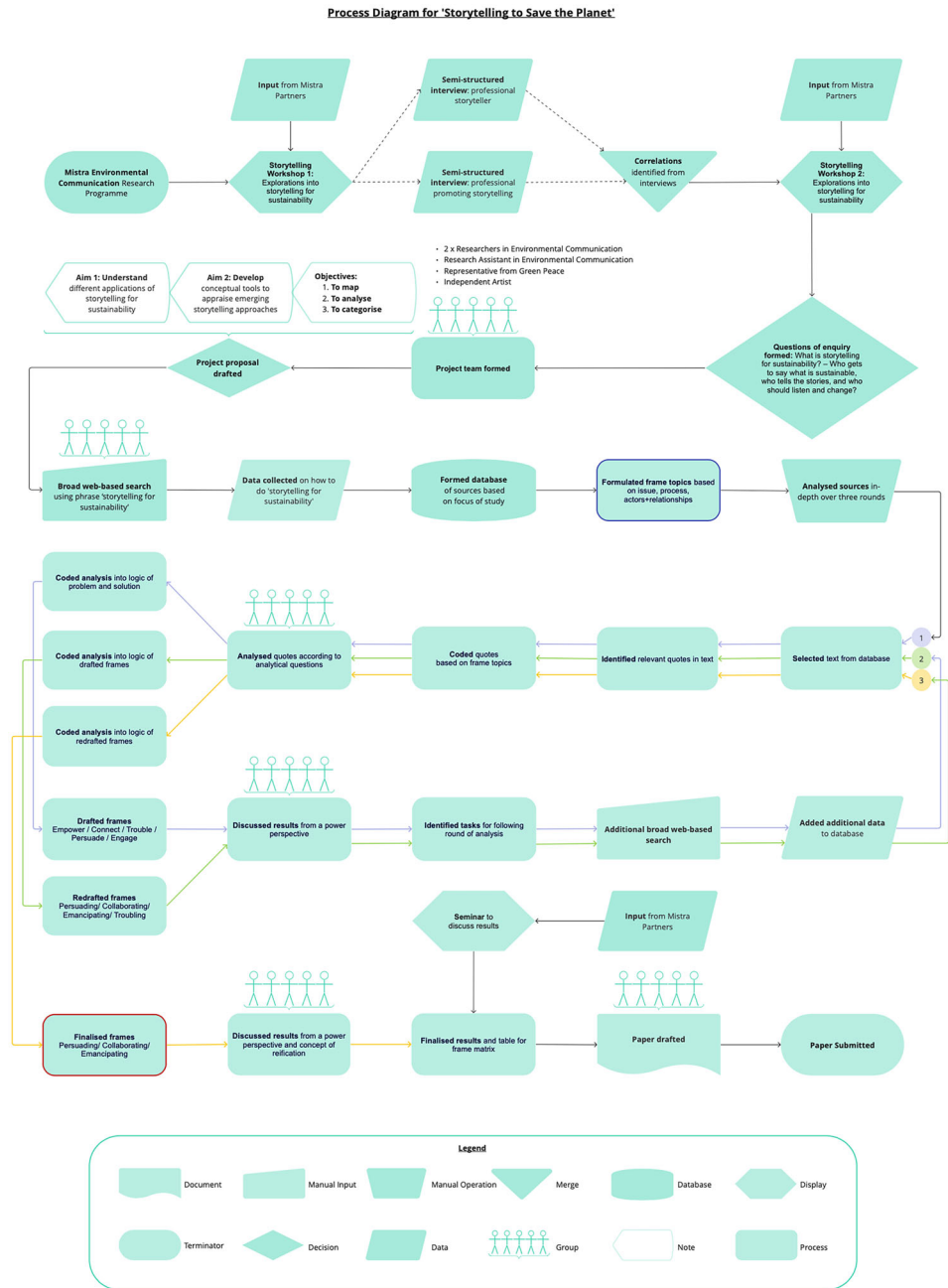
Figure 1. Diagram of the research process.

from Greenpeace, an independent artist, two researchers, and a research assistant – the authors of this article – and continued the investigation. Towards the end of the investigation, we organised a programme-wide seminar to discuss the analysis.

In the investigation, we first interviewed two people working professionally with storytelling. Based on these interviews, we conducted a broad web-based search

on 'storytelling for sustainability', including articles, books, interviews, podcasts, speeches, and websites about storytelling for sustainability. Using different sources is key to our study, as we are interested in storytelling in current sustainability action, which takes place in and outside academia. And in the case of storytelling, these worlds are rather entangled (people read the same books, storytellers work at university, storytellers collaborate with researchers, etc.).

We collected 60 sources on how to 'do' storytelling for sustainability. We aimed for a wide variety of storytelling applications and selected, based on our criteria (see Subsection 3.1), 26 sources to analyse in more depth.

We conducted the analysis in three consecutive rounds, in which we read the texts, selected quotes and analysed them in relation to the frame topics. We searched for the features made salient, analysed the metaphors and narratives, identified what was omitted, and reconstructed how different *problems* made certain *solutions* logical. As part of the analysis, we wrote reports of our interpretation of the framing of each topic, which we discussed within the project team to inform the next round of analysis. After three rounds of analysis, we formulated the frames presented in this article – *persuading*, *emancipating* and *collaborating*. The titles for these frames were selected based on the primary action that was encouraged by the storytelling. These actions were distilled by looking for answers in the analysed documents to three analytical questions: *why is our current society not sustainable?*; *how can storytelling make our society more sustainable?*; and *who does what to whom?*

5. Analysis

In the following, we first introduce the analysis and present a summary of the three frames we constructed in Table 1. This analysis is subsequently worked out and presented for each frame in the Subsections: 5.1 Persuading storytelling, 5.2 Emancipating storytelling and 5.3 Collaborating storytelling. In each of these descriptions, we use quotations selected from the analysed documents listed in Table 2.

Table 1 presents the three storytelling frames. We chose these three frames because they were well-represented in the material and form three distinct logics in storytelling for sustainability. The identified frames are ideal-typical logics rather than that they capture the full complexity of storytelling.

All three storytelling frames share the idea that change is needed urgently to mitigate the various sustainability crises. They also share the idea that the stories we tell and hear, influence our thinking, feeling and action, and all view storytelling as a useful method for change. The frames also differ greatly, as we will now describe.

5.1. Persuading storytelling

The second column in Table 1 summarises the results of the dominant frame of storytelling for sustainability, the *persuading frame*. In this frame, the storyteller's task is to persuade people to act on scientific facts, by translating facts to attractive stories about sustainable everyday practices. The problem for the storyteller to solve is that the scientific language – in the form of graphs, tables, figures and academic texts – is too specialised, too complex to relate to and empty of emotions.

Table 1. The three storytelling frames presented based on the frame-topics.

Frames → Frame topics: analytical questions ↓	Persuading	Emancipating	Collaborating
Framing sustainability: why is our current society not more sustainable?	People do not act according to scientific facts about sustainable behaviour.	The stories of our current economic system make people think and act unsustainably.	People act unsustainably based on destructive stories, because there is a lack of collective action and positive imagination.
Framing storytelling: how can storytelling make societies more sustainable?	Scientific facts should be made relevant for, and translated to, people's everyday life. Stories should be told so that they appeal to people's emotions.	People should learn how to critique stories underlying the current economic system and develop better ones that lead to sustainable actions.	People should mobilise their communities to develop positive imaginaries of sustainability and to act collectively to achieve these.
Framing actors and relationships: who does what to whom?	*Scientists* provide the facts. *Storytellers* (in some cases the scientists themselves) translate the facts to persuasive stories. *People* will – with the help of the stories – start feeling, thinking and acting sustainably.	*Expert storytellers* help their students or participants to critique and develop stories, so as to emancipate them. *Emancipated people* become storytellers themselves. They critically deconstruct stories and craft more sustainable ones for themselves and others to live by. *People in general* follow stories provided, and now have better stories to choose to follow.	*Members of local communities* together define what sustainable action in their community is. They both listen to and (collaboratively) tell stories to change modes of feeling/thinking and acting in their communities to more sustainable ones. *Communities* share inspiring stories of their sustainable practices to inspire other communities and induce sustainable action.

> Too often we who come from the science world think 'okay let's lay out the facts and tables and everyone will do the right choice […] we are not logic human beings, we are, I don't know, we are much more like monkeys: driven by our emotions that we get every second to do something differently. […] Whenever we talk about climate change it is all about the graphs, facts and figures and all that, but it is not that much about 'how does it feel to be in a climate neutral tomorrow'.

In *persuading storytelling*, the scientists define sustainability and the storyteller translates these scientific facts into compelling, relatable and emotional stories.

Table 2. The analysed documents.

	Title	Format	Source
1	Sustainability storytelling: creating a narrative that matters	Blog Post	Schwartz (2013)
2	Manifesto for living in the anthropocene	Book	Gibson, Rose, and Fincher (2015)
3	Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by	Book	Stibbe (2021)
4	Storytelling for earthly survival	Movie	Terranova and Haraway (2016)
5	The mythos we live by: uncolonising our imagination	Published interview	Du Cann and Shaw (2017)
6	Storytelling: little acts of love for our earth	Book chapter	Rodrigues-Pang (2017)
7	Using stories, narratives, and storytelling in energy and climate change research	Academic article	Moezzi, Janda, and Rotmann (2017)
8	The stories we live by	Video	Stibbe (2017). https://www.storiesweliveby.org.uk/
9	Using story to change systems	Online article	Saltmarshe (2018)
10	Libraries and the sustainable development goals: a storytelling manual	Storytelling manual	International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions IFLA. 2018
11	Storytelling: ein Ansatz zum Umgang mit Komplexität in der Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation?	Book chapter	Fischer and Storksdieck (2018)
12	Narrations of sustainability: how to tell the story of the socio-ecological transformation	Academic article	Fischer, Schäfer, and Borner (2018)
13	Narrative matters for sustainability: the transformative role of storytelling in realizing 1.5C futures	Academic article	Veland *et al.* (2018)
14	Using storytelling to combat climate change	Podcast	Werman and Grankvist (2019)
15	Personal website	Website	Shaw (2019). https://drmartinshaw.com Accessed 13 May 2022
16	Run for your life	Academic article	Kaijser and Lövbrand (2019)
17	Sustainability storytelling is not just telling stories about sustainability	Book chapter	Bernier (2020)
18	Storytelling in sustainability communication	Website	Fischer, Fücker, Selm, Sundermann (2020). https://elearning.sustelling.de/en/landing-page-english Accessed 13 May
19	Transforming the stories we tell about climate change: from 'issue' to 'action'	Academic article	De Meyer *et al.* (2021)
20	Cold science meets hot Weather: Environmental threats, emotional messages and scientific storytelling	Academic article	Lidskog *et al.* (2020)
21	Future of storytelling	Podcast	Gore (2021)
22	Storytelling and ecology	Book	Nanson (2021)
23	Storytelling for sustainability	Podcast	Curtis, Shabb, and Grankvist (2021)

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (*Continued*).

	Title	Format	Source
24	Rob Hopkins on the power of imagination and storytelling	Video	Hopkins (2021)
25	Rob Hopkins – Imagination taking power	Website	Hopkins (2022). https://transitionlopezisland.org/rob-hopkins-on-imagination-and-storytelling Accessed 13 May 2022
26	Dark Mountain Manifesto	Website	Kingsnorth and Hine (2022). https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/ Accessed 13 May 2022

> How can this story be told in a way that takes the insights of this great scientist and his colleagues and simplify it into a language that I can understand and therefore, might be able to use to convey the same story to others.

The core assumption is that scientists know what sustainability is and that achieving sustainability is about getting people to do what the scientists and their facts stipulate. The storyteller should tell stories that are tailored to different groups, so that the stories fit their perspective. In our material, these storytellers often tell stories that encourage small changes in everyday practices for sustainability, with the idea that more radical changes will scare the 'story listeners'.

> What does a normal day look like for someone living in Malmö? So they might take a bike to drop off their kids at the kindergarten, […]. And that's sort of the life that I am imagining. That we will still have a high quality of life, we still do some of the sort of stupid things that we love that gives a richness to our lives. […] If you talk that much about carbon and what not: then suddenly it sounds like: 'I am going to take your car away, I'm going to steal your steak and you can never go to Hawaii again'.

While not all *persuading storytelling* needs to be about small changes, it is so in our material. Moreover, this frame's focus on meeting target groups in their everyday – with current norms and habits – also means radical change is logically difficult in *persuading storytelling*. In this sense, *persuading storytelling* fits well with the idea of ecological modernisation, i.e., that the capitalist organisation of our society and its political, economic, and social institutions, together with technological innovation, are able to mitigate environmental crises (Mol and Spaargaren 2000).

Overall in this frame, there are limited possibilities for storytelling to work with system critique. Instead, the focus is on stories that are relatable and appeal to emotions to persuade people to change their everyday life in small steps.

> (…) neurosciences confirm what wise men and women have long tried to teach me. And that is that people make up their minds with largely emotions and then sometimes the logic … rational comes later (…).

The persuading frame grants power to scientists, and storytellers. The legitimation of this power is based on the expert knowledge that both scientists and storytellers are considered to have: the scientists know the facts, but not how to tell them in an attractive way;

and storytellers know how to persuade people to think/feel/act based on the scientific facts. This construction of power relations relies on the assumption that scientists and storytellers are seen by members of society as the makers of the truth and hence provided with power. They have to walk a line here between facts and stories: "scientists face a complex balance in shaping persuasive storylines that involve normative guidance and emotional appeals but do not cause scientists to lose their epistemic authority" (Lidskog *et al.* 2020, 125).

The other two frames, *emancipating* and *collaborating* storytelling, differ from the persuading frame on two important points. First, while *persuading storytelling* is about convincing people of scientific facts about sustainable practices, *emancipating* and *collaborating storytelling* encourage an own (collaborative) assessment of sustainable practices. Second, while *persuading storytelling* is typically based on the assumption that small adjustments in people's everyday life will bring about a sustainable society, *emancipating* and *collaborating storytelling* are instead based on the assumption that systemic changes are needed for a sustainable society.

5.2. Emancipating storytelling

In *emancipating storytelling*, the emphasis is on critiquing destructive stories that encourage people to think, feel and act unsustainably.

> We live in a society based on stories. But when we look around us, we can see that some of the stories are not working. Our society is becoming more and more unequal. In the world a billion people are overweight, while a billion people starve. Climate change, pollution and the destruction of the natural world are threatening our future.

The emancipating frame stresses the importance of people developing their ability to critique destructive stories and uncover the values upon which these are based. Building on that critique of the dominating stories, people can develop better stories to 'live by' (Stibbe 2021).

> If the stories society is based on aren't working, then I like to explore ways of using language that tell new stories that work better.

Emancipating storytelling is all about making people reflect, critique and act to change the unsustainable values of modern life.

> Yet for all this, our world is still shaped by stories. Through television, film, novels and video games, we may be more thoroughly bombarded with narrative material than any people that ever lived. What is peculiar, however, is the carelessness with which these stories are channelled at us – as entertainment, a distraction from daily life, something to hold our attention to the other side of the ad break. There is little sense that these things make up the equipment by which we navigate reality.

According to the emancipating frame, the current 'stories we live by' (Stibbe 2021) do not provide us with what we need to make sense of, and act towards, sustainability. The solution in the emancipating frame is that people should critically scrutinise dominant stories. Based on this critique, people themselves can craft new, better stories to help them live more sustainable lives. A central assumption is that this criticality will lead people to craft not just any kind of stories but stories that are more sustainable.

> Storytelling is not about using shame and guilt to persuade anyone into any kind of behaviour, but inspiring people to think critically and creatively to perceive their context and to reach their own conclusions about the world.

While some applications of *emancipating storytelling* emphasise the importance of analysing language and deconstructing destructive stories and, based on such deconstruction, develop more sustainable stories, other applications instead emphasise that it is important to gain personal experience of the natural world to tell better stories and lead sustainable lives.

> In focusing attention on the actuality of the here and now, storytelling helps instil a sensual connection with the environment and provides a channel by which nature can speak to modern society. It builds bridges between people's imagination and the perspectives of other times, other cultures and other beings. It nurtures a perception of landscape as enchanted, even sacred, and of other creatures as conscious and worthy of our compassion.

The emancipating frame suggests that people should learn how to uncover and critique the core values of modern societies.

> […] give a toolkit to revealing the stories we live by, questioning those stories and contributing to the search for new stories to live by.

Emancipating storytelling reshuffles the power relationships in terms of whose knowledge counts. Instead of the expert scientist and storyteller from the persuading frame, regular people are encouraged to take power by evaluating available stories and telling their own stories. Here, the storyteller is an emancipator who helps others to learn to deconstruct destructive stories and tell better ones.

This frame fits with the idea that relations of power ought to be critiqued by argumentation and deconstruction (see Forst 2017; Haugaard 2018). In power theory, power relations are understood to be reproduced through taken-for-granted understandings. Therefore, a strategy to resist these power relations of status quo is to provide arguments explaining why and how power relations could be transformed.

As an example of powerful destructive stories, Stibbe (2021) takes stories of growth and consumption. He argues that these stories are so deeply embedded in contemporary culture that people consider these stories to be true and 'live by them' in their everyday life. Such socially embedded stories 'are therefore not immediately recognisable as stories [and] need to be exposed, subjected to critical analysis, and resisted if they are implicated in injustice and environmental destruction'.

In *emancipating storytelling*, the assumption is that if people learn how to critique and deconstruct destructive stories they can make informed choices about the kind of stories to 'live by' (Stibbe 2021). The idea is that people develop "their own set of philosophical principles they use to judge stories against, reflecting their own values and priorities […]" (Stibbe 2021, 12). But, in order to ensure that storytelling is 'for the planet' and leads to more sustainable ways of life, emancipating storytellers need to steer the individual philosophies to some degree: "all [philosophies] will have in common a consideration of the interactions of humans with other organisms and the physical environment" (Stibbe 2021, 12). The emancipating frame relies on the assumption that people have the time, competence and desire, to engage in critiquing stories and their underlying assumptions about power, change and sustainability.

5.3. *Collaborating storytelling*

Collaborating storytelling – like emancipating storytelling – is based on system critique. But, while critically assessing the system is the first step in emancipatory storytelling, *collaborating storytelling* prioritises action.

> While the scripting of climate change as a planetary emergency perpetuated by global injustices serves an important function in the politics of climate change, we argue that it is in situated stories of environmental connection that climate change gains personal meaning. Here, kinship and solidarity are articulated, opening up for progressive social change.

The underlying idea in this frame is that the societal discussion about sustainability is locked into a doom and gloom mode without hope for change, leading to disconnect and despair. In order to avoid despair, this frame calls for action: people need to act collectively and locally in their communities, communities need to inspire each other and, through collaborating storytelling, people and communities come together for positive action. This frame critiques the idea that societal change starts with influencing people's attitudes and beliefs, and that actions will follow from there. Instead, the starting point is action, and attitudes and beliefs will follow.

> The problem is that in the absence of an action-based conceptualization of climate change, many creative storytelling and arts projects themselves fall prone to an issue-based conceptualization.

Through collaborative storytelling, people and communities share positive imaginaries and hopeful best practices, inspiring further creative action.

> We do have the capability to effect dramatic change, Hopkins argues, but we're failing because we've largely allowed our most critical tool to languish: human imagination. As defined by social reformer John Dewey, imagination is the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise. The ability, that is, to ask What if? And if there was ever a time when we needed that ability, it is now.

As such, the distinguishing feature of this frame is its emphasis on positive and collective storytelling for action for sustainability.

> Imagine we were standing on top of a mountain, and the guides at our side were pointing out to us the dark and dangerous-looking storm clouds heading rapidly in our direction. For some of us, we are happy to accept the guides' advice. They're the guides after all, right? They know this mountain. We trust their advice. For a lot of people though, that doesn't seem to be working. I wonder then if a better strategy might be to tell the stories of the valleys that await us when we get down, the lower grassy slopes, and the warm firesides, delicious meals, fine wines, comfortable beds and dry socks that await us when we get there. Then our work becomes not that of trying to convince people with facts and figures, but rather to cultivate longing for a low carbon future, and that is the work of imagination and storytelling.

As people tell stories together, the boundaries between the storyteller and the story-listeners are blurred.

Thus storytelling can be construed as a kind of conversation. Although one person is doing most of the talking at any given time, a dialogue of non-verbal communication continues throughout and the situation may provide listeners the opportunity to speak, or to tell stories themselves, while the storyteller may in turn become a listener.

From a power perspective, the collaborating frame allocates power to the local communities. The idea is that by sharing stories, communities will creatively imagine and together formulate and move towards an imagined future of sustainability.

6. Discussion: power and storytelling

In this section, we use the concept of reification (Haugaard 2018) to analyse power in the three frames. Reification "is the process whereby what is conventional is made to appear beyond convention" (Haugaard 2018, 105), stabilising social relations by making actors believe that social conventions are real, instead of socially constructed and arbitrary. In essence, storytelling for sustainability aims to break open this reification as storytelling, alongside symbols, values, practices, etc., is the way in which people come to ''imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations'' (Taylor 2004, 23). Therefore, by telling new and 'better' stories, storytellers aim to unmake the habits, norms or structures that currently hinder individual and/or societal change, and to open, normalise and enable new paths towards sustainability. But, paradoxically, when doing this, storytelling for sustainability becomes an act of reification in itself. Indeed, the intention is to influence the way that people think, feel and act, by telling stories that change to a greater (in the emancipating and collaborating frames) or to a lesser extent (in the persuading frame) the social conventions including normalising certain orientations to the planet and therefore specific ecocultural identities (Milstein and Castor-Sotomayor 2020). This reification concerns both the different understandings of sustainability (what it is and how we can work towards it), and, strongly related, who the important/powerful actors should be in sustainability transformations.

Persuading, emancipating and collaborating storytelling reify in different ways. *Persuading storytelling* constructs scientists and storytellers as truth-makers. The justification for this is the assumption that the scientific method provides society with robust, and true, knowledge about the world. At the core of scientific knowledge production are principles of open scrutiny, discussion and reflection, as well as institutionalised forms of social interaction between researchers within scientific fields and disciplines (Oreskes 2019). It is those principles and institutions that, in this frame, entitle scientists to define sustainability and reify those definitions. The way in which *persuading storytelling* reifies, raises both pragmatic and normative questions.

A normative question is: which science and scientists play a role in this frame? Persuasive storytellers regularly refer to science and scientists, as if science is one body of knowledge. However, there are diverging insights in science, which begs the question who gets to pick what science is told? Another pressing issue is that this focus on 'science' may hide that there are different ideas about which paths can be taken based on science. In our analysis, we found that the persuasive frame results in a focus on the role of technology and small incremental steps in everyday life for sustainability transformations, fitting an ecomodernist pathway. But scientists also work

on other scenarios and pathways for more radical transformations. These seem not easily represented in this frame.

Therefore, a related pragmatic and normative question is: what kind of change is storytelling able to support? The persuasive frame results in our selection were based on the idea that the stories should normalise and promote smaller lifestyle choices, such as travelling by public transport or bicycle. This frame does not want to scare or worry people, but instead inspire and reassure them that post-carbon life is not so different from their current life, and only demands small changes from themselves. These small steps are often actions that can already be witnessed in society, which encourages others to also adopt these actions in order to add or reaffirm a 'sustainable' self-identity. Therefore, more radical changes are difficult to fit within this persuading frame. In terms of reification this small-step persuasion storytelling could 'lull' us into thinking it is sufficient to only make minor adjustments to our current society.

Emancipating storytelling seems to solve the problem of reification by promoting open scrutiny, discussion and critical reflection. By supporting people's capacity to deconstruct destructive stories and craft better, more sustainable stories (see Stibbe 2021), *emancipating storytelling* balances the powerful position of the storyteller. Such an approach fits well with proposals for methodologies for engaged environmental pedagogy (Castro-Sotomayor *et al.* 2018). The basis for people to perform deconstruction and reconstruction is an ecosophy, a personal philosophy that individuals develop about their place in and with nature. The use of ecosophy in this frame invites a variety of understandings, but also delineates the field of action because an ecosophy is based on considerations of the interrelations between humans, other organisms and the physical environment. This allocates the role of defining sustainability per se onto a complex and ever evolving set of interrelations, and power with those able to perceive, interpret and create whilst being part of the interrelations. While elegant, there are limits to this frame and some questions to raise. First, who will be the emancipated storytellers? It is likely that these initiatives mostly reach certain groups, who are able to engage with this (time, space, capacity, network, interest), and not others. What does it mean to give the tools for deconstruction and reconstruction to some and not others? Are there ways around this? Second, can the emphasis on individuals and their reflection induce concerted action for sustainable transformations? And, with this frame's focus on deconstruction – to counter reification – to what extent will the new stories told be able to encourage and convince people and groups to live differently? And third, how many stories will there be?

Collaborating storytelling posits storytelling as a practice of making sense and acting together for positive change. Where the emancipating frame focuses on individuals and reflection, this frame instead focuses on communities and action. Even more clearly than in the other frames, the way *collaborative storytelling* is performed is very important, and the relevance of the questions we raise here depends on the process of storytelling. First, with the emphasis on action rather than reflection, we wonder what idea of sustainability forms the basis for the actions taken and the stories told. As with the persuading frame, this frame may conceal that there are different pathways and priorities to choose in sustainability transformations; the focus on action may preclude such fundamental discussions. Unreflected action is likely to reproduce the existing status quo through the mechanisms of reification (see Haugaard 2003). This may be amplified when focus is on the collective, and when not participating or questioning may be seen as breaking the norm of collaboration. Conversely, *collaborative storytelling* may be performed such that it is the vehicle through which the communities

explore what sustainability is for them. Second, the focus on community runs the risk of hiding the heterogeneity in communities, where strong voices may get the most opportunity to steer sustainability. And, in communities where norms conflict, how can *collaborating storytelling* engage people who subscribe to norms that do not fit this frame? Third, the focus on the local community may encourage NIMBY ('not in my backyard') and narrow thinking based on locality.

The persuading, emancipating and collaborating frame each 'make the world' in ways that omit and include different understandings of sustainability, without always disclosing the purposes behind a selected understanding. As such, storytelling is the use of *power over* to influence people's thoughts, feelings and behaviour. The frames position the actors within storytelling in different relations to each other and thereby structure the field of action in different ways, each frame raising particular power questions.

7. Conclusion: the role of storytelling

Storytelling has become increasingly popular as a purposive attempt to influence our feeling/thinking/acting for sustainability. At the start of this article, we write about the 'innocence' of storytelling. Storytelling perhaps makes us think of bedtime reading and campfires, and may seem like merely pleasant entertainment. However, stories – including those read at bedtime – are, and have always been, carriers for morals, norms, identity-creation, etc.

We argue that storytelling for sustainability, with its explicit change purpose – to influence the field of action for sustainability – is powerful. We highlight the paradox of reification in storytelling for sustainability: on the one hand, storytelling wishes to break down (some of) the ideas that block societal change for the environment and that are (re)produced in our culture; on the other hand, the very act of storytelling for sustainability is one of purposeful reification to influence people's thinking, feeling and acting. Yet, the ways storytellers aim to structure the field of action remains implicit.

In this article, we offer a first step for understanding and critically evaluating storytelling for sustainability from a power perspective, by highlighting the assumptions about knowledge, power and change. The analysis reveals three frames that are used in storytelling for sustainability, namely the persuading, emancipating and collaborating frames. These frames are not exhaustive, but are meant to illustrate the variety of frames that influence storytelling and that those frames raise various questions about power. Next to the frames, which we hope are useful for understanding the basic logic in storytelling, we also propose the following descriptive power questions to start an assessment of a storytelling: who gets to say what is sustainable, who gets to tell the stories, and who should listen and change? While these questions are simple, they can provide first insights into the logic behind storytelling.

We made several methodological choices that focus and limit our findings. First, our analysis focused on how proponents of storytelling *talk/write about* storytelling for sustainability; we did not study how they actually *do* storytelling for sustainability. Such a study would be interesting, specifically to see how the assumptions underlying storytelling for sustainability play out in practice; to see what storytelling for sustainability – from the three different frames – does.

Second, we only included self-identified storytellers for sustainability, for which descriptive texts like 'handbooks'/guidance were available. Consequently, we missed out on less institutionalised ways of storytelling that are, nevertheless, relevant and

important. We find this warranted for this first step but call for more inclusive inquiries into storytelling for sustainability and alternative eco-futures.

While we cannot include it in our findings, we think it useful here to say some words about a recurring logic that we found in our exploration. We gave this the working title 'the troubling frame'. Troubling storytelling seldom has the expressed purpose of effecting change for sustainability; instead the point rather seems to be to poke, question, draw-attention-to and get people thinking and feeling about themselves in relation to the planet, without giving concrete answers about where or how to go next. We predominantly find artists in this group of storytellers. Troubling storytelling shares with the emancipating frame the wish to get people to think and feel critically.

As we finish this article, it is important to stress that the purpose of this article is to raise critical questions that can help clarify the legitimacy and appropriateness of different reasonings behind storytelling for sustainability. Yet, the positive connotations to *storytelling* and *sustainability* can impede criticality: during a seminar our findings provided inspiration for the potential of storytelling for sustainability but did not amplify enough the different power perspectives that storytelling for sustainability can enact.

This article may give the idea that we think there is by definition something wrong with using storytelling to wield power. To be clear, nothing need be wrong with wielding power; power is generative and needed for change. But, in times of urgency and crises it is important to critically reflect upon and understand what power relations are enabled in the governance strategies used, and when these are legitimate and appropriate. We hope this article provides encouragement and some tools for others to also look for assumptions about power, change and knowledge in the storytelling for sustainability they create and/or witness.

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