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Constructive disagreement and harmful hope in environmental communication for sustainability transition

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ABSTRACT

We investigate how disagreeing is performed in conversations about circular economy futures, and how it is disturbed by discursive norms of hope. Disagreement is recognised as an interactive process essential for knowledge development and democracy. However, conducting democratic investigations of differences becomes difficult when interaction norms prioritise hopeful expressions. Drawing on 11 h of recorded meetings on the circular economy, we analyse how disagreement is interactively performed and link these observations about the constraining effects of 'harmful hope' to ideas of radical democracy and expectations surrounding hopeful environmental communication. We identify four discursive procedures of hope—*community*, *appreciative coordination*, *concept innovation*, and *underlying disagreements*, and demonstrate how these regulate and limit processes of agreeing and disagreeing, thereby influencing the conditions for constructive disagreement essential for democracy. Ultimately, we demonstrate how conversations about futures become dominated by norms of hope, which come at the expense of communicative capacity to constructively examine disagreements necessary for advancing sustainable transitions. This dynamic is evident even when the desired future involves radical transformations of production and consumption systems, as in the circular economy. Our study offers insights into what and how these discursive structures should be challenged in conversations about sustainability futures.

1. Introduction

Public debates on environmental and sustainability issues have long been characterised by notions of threat, responsibility, and shame (Pak, 2011). However, recently, it has been argued that adopting an optimistic tone may be an effective way to achieve societal change (Chadwick, 2015; Mauch, 2019; Ojala, 2012). Some propose that if messages about the importance of solving environmental problems are formulated with hopeful tropes, audiences will be more willing to listen, motivated, action-oriented, and equipped to contribute to change (Chadwick, 2015; Ettinger et al., 2021; Kelsey, 2017). Nevertheless, are there other unintended consequences of hope becoming normative in conversations about the future? In this study, we investigate the changes in communicative capacity to disagree, and democratically and creatively use the constructive potential in disagreement when conversations about sustainable futures are normatively hopeful.

As discussed in future research and theory, anticipating and planning for the future means engaging in uncertainty, dilemmas, and

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knowledge contestation (Höijer et al., 2006; Mercer, 1996; Rosen, 2025). Conversations to coordinate changes in society occur in many formal, political, and informal contexts. Conversations about the future are important because, in a conversation, one can anticipate and visualise different scenarios and compare validity claims about the goals and means (Livingston et al., 2024; Selin et al., 2015; Townend et al., 2025). Sustainability studies often emphasise the importance of dialogue, conversation, and coordination among social actors (Ramirez et al., 2019; Stevenson, 2002). All future planning and anticipatory practices contain, to different degrees, some conversation and communication where participants test and challenge each other's perspectives and validity claims, and create knowledge and ideas through interactive and mutual perspective-taking (Conway, 2022).

Conversations about the future are constitutive of imaginaries, scenarios, decision making, and sequences of actions and, by itself, influence what will happen. Thus, what the interlocutors do in these conversations can be considered as managing the future. Here, conversation refers to multimodal communication in which interactive construction and representation of meaning occur with speech, gestures, text, images, and the physical environment. We claim that the quality of these conversations is decisive for the possibility of making decisions about actions around potential futures, and ultimately, the future. An important aspect of conversations about society's management of future work is the norms of interaction that regulate these conversations. These refer to commonly shared ideas about conversations and regulate what can be done in a conversation (Barraja-Rohan, 1997). Thus, norms of interaction also regulate what may be said about the future and how and which future will be prepared for in conversations.

Disagreement is a key factor in managing the future in conversation (Krüger, 2022; Lundgren, 2023; Stevenson, 2002). This presupposes the common ability to notice that conversation participants or interlocutors make different interpretations of a validity claim (Angouri, 2012; Angouri & Locher, 2012; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Hallgren et al., 2018). When this difference is noticed, they investigate the reasons why the participants interpreted the claims differently. In political philosophy, there has been a longstanding interest in the constructive potential of disagreement (Lundgren, 2023; Mouffe, 1996b, 2011; Rancière et al., 1999; Rescher, 1995). However, studies about conversations at both the micro- and meso-levels show that investigating disagreement in conversations is challenging in many contexts due to norms about how participants relate to each other, what is said, and where agreement or consensus is sought (Angouri & Locher, 2012; Hallgren et al., 2018; McKinlay & McVittie, 2006; Osvaldsson, 2004). We contribute to the literature on how conversations about the future function as resources for democracy and discuss how certain norms of conversation hinder the joint investigation of disagreement.

In this study, we discuss the hope norm, a particularly prevalent interaction norm, and its impact on the conversation's capacity to make and take advantage of productive disagreements for managing the future and future issues.

Optimism and hope are interrelated concepts. Optimism refers to a positive perspective and interpretation of something and expectations about the future. It can also be described as confidence in the future and the success of something. To this end, hope also adds different degrees of uncertainty and intentionality; here, the speaker considers that the expressed view is not taken for granted, but intentionally sought. Hope has been elaborated in different ways, including emotion (Bruininks & Malle, 2005), cognition (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004), and message construction (Chadwick, 2015; Ettinger et al., 2021). We treat hope as interactively performed by conversation participants. As an interaction norm, hope is expressed in a mutual expectation and preference for hopeful statements and positive, sometimes excessively positive, assessments of both what happens in the conversation and the discussed future.

In this study, we use two concepts, 'hope norm' and 'hope discourse'. Hope norm refers to the intention of actors to act in hopeful ways and to orient themselves to the expectation that they and other interlocutors are hopeful. This allows them to speak reflectively about the importance of being and acting hopefully, but the norm also shapes actions unconsciously. The hope norm is performed in the hope discourse. Hope discourse is the verbal expression of a particular way of relating to uncertainty and ambiguity about the future by emphasising potentially positive or optimistic aspects. This reduces the complexity of future alternatives, which is the focus of this study. The hope discourse refers to the structure, procedures, and resources in language. These are ways of organising responses and expressions that indicate and reproduce hope. These language structures are not necessarily available for reflection by interlocutors but have an impact on actions. Hence, hope norms and discourses operate and interact together. However, empirically differentiating between them is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, we use both concepts to emphasise that we pay attention to hope both as an agency and structure, and as something that is produced and interactively performed.

Here, we discuss how hope discourse affects conversations' other functions, especially the ability to disagree, when the function of the conversation itself is to maintain and strengthen shared hopefulness. We present an analysis of conversation sequences from empirical situations in which there is an expectation of good communication to maintain hope and positivity. We examine the pragmatic aspects of disagreement and reason regarding how the repertoire of hopeful discourse, which characterises some conversations, may affect the shared ability to disagree. We focus on conversations about the special future aspects connected to the circular economy, where the norm of hope prevails.

The circular economy is an idea about the future that is increasingly being discussed in diverse social arenas (Blomsma et al., 2023; Corvellec et al., 2020; Ritzén & Sandström, 2017) as crucial for sustainability transitions. In this study, a circular economy serves as a conceptual idea for the future with the promise of contributing to the sustainability transition. Conversations are arranged in different contexts to motivate actors to contribute to the implementation of the idea of a circular economy (Rödl et al., 2022; Schulz et al., 2019). Its proponents suggest that the production and consumption of goods and services should be organised differently from those within the current economic system. They believe that products and production processes should be designed such that material flows at the societal level become endlessly circular. They further believe that the current form of economic organisation and distribution favours raw material extraction and waste disposal, which is undesirable due to its negative externalities and welfare losses to society. Instead, the design of goods and services and the organisation of production and consumption should create systems where raw materials are not extracted and deposited, but reused endlessly (Blomsma et al., 2023; Neves & Marques, 2022). In this discourse, the circular economy is occasionally considered as a radical change in production and consumption systems, and sometimes as a relatively

effortless change in which both producers and consumers win (Ekman Burgman, 2022; Savini, 2023; Simamindra & Rajaonarivo, 2024). Its proponents believe that the large-scale implementation of this system is constrained by production technology, product design, and insufficient knowledge and understanding in society (Neves & Marques, 2022). Thus, implementing a circular economy requires more actors to be motivated to implement changes in their own organisations (Sampedro-Beneyto et al., 2024). While the circular economy concerns large-scale system change, it is also discussed as an opportunity for businesses to create and capture new market niches (Bocken et al., 2016; Ritzén & Sandström, 2017). Existing participants promoting and working to implement the circular economy are typically dedicated non-governmental organisations, business consultants offering circular economy adaptation services (e.g. Ramboll, WSP, and AFRY), production companies, and state agencies with policy development responsibilities. The representatives of these organisations meet in different constellations to talk about and coordinate actions towards the future implementation of the circular economy. Many digital and in-person meetings have labels, such as inspiration, knowledge development, and networking. A typical setup is a breakfast meeting with an 'inspiration' talk from an expert, panel discussion, small-group conversation, and plenary discussion (Rödl et al., 2022).

The circular economy is an idea for future production and consumption system designs. However, the term is also used to denote conversations, courses, meetings, training, lectures, and breakfast seminars where interested actors meet and discuss how societal change should generally be achieved. These conversations are essentially about the future. Typically, and of importance for this study, these conversations are characterised by a norm of hope with a hope-oriented conversation procedure and language (Åhlvik et al., 2024). This hope concerns different aspects: that the circular economy is a solution to contemporary sustainability problems, it can and will be implemented, and the conversation happening during the meeting and individual contributions are productive themselves and for the transition to a sustainable future (Rödl et al. 2022). Here, we discuss how disagreement occurs and how it is used in these meetings as a resource for dealing with the future, where hope has a detrimental or inhibiting effect on discussions about the future.

Specifically, we investigated how disagreement is interactively created in conversations in meetings characterised by hope norms and discourse. Disagreement is an important resource for managing the future and a prerequisite for pluralism, democracy, and creativity (Lundgren, 2023; Rescher, 1995). To build a theoretical base for this discussion and analyse the disagreement and impact of hope on the collective ability to disagree, we combined several different sociological literature streams. First, we discuss disagreement and hope from a political-philosophical perspective, especially radical democratic theory, to value disagreement as a social phenomenon. To understand disagreement as something performed in socially interactive practice, we turn to studies on ethnomethodology and pragmatics. To connect these two areas, we lean toward Jürgen Habermas and universal pragmatism, stating that disagreement requires a basic form of agreement and a constitutive expectation regarding which concepts and conversational procedures are to be used. Another research stream deals with the role of hope in motivation for transition and how this discussion is mirrored by professional reflection in communication practices. Finally, in our empirical cases of implementing the circular economy, we show how a normed discourse of hope can limit the communicative capacity to disagree in conversations about the future.

2. Literature review and theoretical foundation

2.1. Disagreement: a productive resource in democracy

To examine the hope discourse and disagreement, we must establish a theoretical connection between disagreement and democracy. Two such competing connections are theories of deliberative democracy (Polletta & Gharrity Gardner, 2018) and agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2011). Deliberative democracy is based on Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas et al., 2005). It proposes that the future can and should be managed through a shared and mutual evaluation of rational arguments in conversations free from power (Habermas, 2001). It assumes that the evaluation of arguments can continue until consensus about their validity and the desired future is achieved. Through democratic deliberation, disagreement can be replaced with consensus. Conversations can be free from power and communicative rationality, that is, oriented toward mutual understanding (Habermas, 1996b) if: 1) everyone concerned about a question has equal opportunities to make validity propositions; 2) everyone can question validity claims by asking questions about intelligibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity; and 3) validity claims are excluded from further mutual investigation only under a consensus on their invalidity (Habermas, 2001; Polletta & Gharrity Gardner, 2018). Democratic deliberation occurs when the conditions above are satisfied. Habermas calls obstacles against the communicative rationality as a 'systematic distortion of communication' (Habermas, 1996a), which is when social structure (e.g. social hierarchy, interaction norms, and language) disturbs the mutual and sincere investigation of validity claims (Habermas, 1996a).

An important critique against deliberative democracy is presented in the literature on agonistic pluralism and radical democracy. Various authors argue that the prerequisite for democracy is disagreement. Mouffe (1996a) articulated agonistic pluralism as 'envisaging the diversity of conceptions of the good, not as something negative that should be suppressed, but as something to be valued and celebrated'. (p. 8). Ranciere (1999) further proposes that 'if the invitation to debate is to bear any fruit, the encounter must identify its point of 'disagreement'' (p. x). Mouffe (1992), (1999) argues that consensus is an exclusion of pluralities, and thus a hidden power relation or systematic distortion of communication. Something is by necessity lost in discourse, and a power relation is reproduced when someone gives up their perspective for consensus. Referring to Carl Schmitt, Mouffe (Mouffe, 1992, 1999) proposed that consensus necessarily implies exclusion and discursive closure. From this perspective, eliminating differences involves excluding identities and pluralism and, hence, a hidden exercise of power. Thus, communicative rationality under the pre-assumed conditions cannot be achieved. Instead, Mouffe proposed that disagreement is constitutive of societies and should be treated as a resource for democracy and not as something that can be replaced with consensus.

In critiques of communicative rationality and deliberative democracy, scholars have devoted substantial attention to consensus and

its impossibility. Here, consensus is assumed to be the main aspect of the deliberative theory (Karppinen et al., 2008; Mouffe, 1999; Ott, 2012). We argue that this is a misinterpretation of the theory. Furthermore, if consensus is assumed to be the final goal of communicative rationality, the theory does not propose that the disagreement-to-consensus transition occurs swiftly. Our understanding is that what Habermas describes in the criteria of communicative rationality is a communicative situation in which the process of disagreement is performed through mutual contributions from several participants. Here, the pluralism of perspectives and disagreement can be maintained, while every detail of the validity claims can be investigated until the foundations of and reasons for the differences are clarified (Habermas, 2001).

We argue that connecting pluralism and agonism with communication, and doing this differently from the common polarisation between pluralistic agonistic pluralism and deliberative democracy, is important (Karppinen et al., 2008). If pluralism appears in disagreement, it needs to be performed in interactive procedures similar to those of communicative rationality; that is, a continuation of investigating the epistemological, ontological, axiological, and emotional foundations and reasons for differences in perspective. If the difference between disagreement positions remains unexplored, then the constructive productivity of disagreement will remain unreleased. The combination of the theory of pluralistic agonism, with its appreciation of the creativity of conflict, and the theory of communicative action and universal pragmatism, with the emphasise on the joint effort of making understanding, is necessary for distinguishing constructive disagreement from on one hand disagreement for the sake of disagreement, and on the other hand, consensus orientation which reduces pluralism and generate de-politization in future oriented questions. This leaves us with a crucial question about the procedures of disagreement, and what structural and agential conditions decide how disagreement is interactively performed.

2.2. Disagreeing: an interactive process

As described above, agonistic pluralism considers disagreement as a necessary process for the democratic elaboration of futures. However, these politico-philosophical discussions have largely disregarded the procedures of disagreeing. Disagreement can be understood both as a relationship between different competing claims of validity and ethics, focusing on the content of the disagreement, and as an interactive performance, focusing on the disagreement's form and procedure (Angouri & Locher, 2012). If disagreement is to result in constructive pluralism, competing positions must be expressed in ways that allow comparison. However, studies on the procedures of disagreement reveal that they often do not support such an investigation, but rather hide or close the different perspectives of the disagreement (Georgakopoulou, 2001; Osvaldsson, 2004; Sifianou, 2012).

We argue that understanding the interactive process underpinning disagreement is important for understanding pluralism and deliberation. Therefore, we combine these theories of democracy with the theory of talk-in-interaction, including turn-sequence organisation. The most fundamental turn-sequence which performs disagreeing is when one speaker makes a validity claim ['X is A], another speaker rejects this and proposes a different validity claim ['No, X is B′], and finally, the first speaker rejects the second speaker's proposal and insists on their original proposal, perhaps even adding a meta-communicative comment ['No, you are wrong, X is A′]. Understandably, the performance of disagreement can be more complex, and subtle (Angouri & Locher, 2012). Studies on talk-in-interaction in both everyday life and institutionalised settings show that disagreeing is a complex and collaborative activity mutually performed by disagreeing parties (Angouri & Locher, 2012). In some contexts, disagreeing is a - perhaps surprisingly - demanding type of social interaction. For example, formulations of assessments in colloquial conversations are sequentially organised in ways in which expectations of agreement in the assessment are built into the discursive procedure. An initial assessment is produced, which is to be followed by an agreeing assessment from the initial assessment's recipient (e.g. A: 'The weather is fine, isn't it?'; B: 'It is gorgeous'). Disagreeing responses to an assessment are interactionally dispreferred and demand more linguistic effort than agreeing. They often contain some hesitation or disclaimer (e.g. delayed response, or 'yes, but…'(Pomerantz, 1985). Thus, language and standard conversational procedures shape how disagreements are performed in talk-in-interaction. Disagreeing's linguistic form contributes to face-aggravating, face-maintaining, and face-enhancing effects (Angouri & Locher, 2012). However, even in institutional settings where disagreement is the starting point (and maybe even the purpose) of the encounter, as e.g. in an art jury, disagreement is difficult and often circumvented (McKinlay & McVittie, 2006). Hallgren et al. (2018) identified different discursive procedures, such as making jokes or ironically formulated questions, that hide disagreement when participants are aware of and intend to express disagreement.

In summary, constructive disagreement is important for democracy and simultaneously demanding to perform in interaction. Our scope was to explore how the joint capacity to disagree relates to hope discourse, characterising certain conversations about the future. Next, we provide more context regarding why hope is such a guiding principle for communication in a sustainability transition.

2.3. Environmental communication: from fear to hope

The role of hope as an emotion and a message frame in environmental communication engages both scholars and communication practitioners. There are diverging opinions concerning whether sustainable transitions are enhanced by hope and hopeful rhetoric. This debate is important as a background to the hope norm in conversations on the circular economy that we analyse here. Environmental communication practices, with their roots in acknowledging human-induced environmental crises and articulating cumulative problems emerging from an irresponsible society, have a history of dystopian and alarmistic rhetoric. Classic examples are Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' (Meyer, 2021) and Al Gore's 'An inconvenient truth' (Johnson, 2009). However, environmental communication practices have gradually pivoted towards a preference for framing environmental issues and future solutions within hopeful rhetoric (Kelsey, 2017). This is reflected in the amount of literature on hope message framing (Chadwick, 2015).

In the literature on hope in environmental communication, there are three strands of research. One strand focuses on the persuasive aspects of hopeful message framing, examining how hopefully framed messages are more motivating and interesting to listen to and gain more public attention than those that acknowledge problems by building on blame or shame. The relationship between hope-related message frames, the emotional experience of hope, and motivation has been studied in experimental intervention studies. However, the results of these studies are complex and indicate different directions (Bury et al., 2020; Chadwick, 2015; Ettinger et al., 2021). The importance of this to the current study is that despite the variations in identified causalities, hope remains being treated as a positive resource. For example, Chadwick (Chadwick, 2015, p. 609) concluded the study with *'Although there is much more to be done regarding hope appeals, we are one step closer to adding a potentially powerful strategy to our persuasive communication toolbox that, unlike much of persuasive communication, focuses on positive, rather than negative, emotions*'.

Another strand of research focuses on assessing how individuals' experiences of environmentally related hope, fear, and hopelessness make them feel and act. This research suggests that hopelessness is neither motivating nor a good emotional state for individuals (Ojala, 2012, 2015). This result makes Ojala (2012, p. 638) conclude that society *'needs to encourage young people to see positive aspects that can activate hope, a feeling that can transform worry into a constructive motivational force'*.

A third strand of literature, with roots in the philosophy of pragmatism and history, recognises hope as a necessary and constitutive condition of society. In his book *'Hope in place of knowledge'*, Rorty (1999a) suggests that the hope of maintaining conversations about problems, difference, the future - the hope to 'keep the conversation going' - and the hope that this is meaningful, is constitutive of society and humanity (Cooke, 2004): *'Hope – the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past – is the condition of growth'* (Rorty, 1999b, p. 120). In the essay '*Slow hope'*, Christof Mauch (2019, p. 37) highlights the importance of hope for society: '*… in order to reduce the destructive human impact on the natural environment /…/ [w]e need narratives and stories that can provide hope. /…/. We need ideas that will find their way through the mesh of an ever-tighter net of path dependencies. And we need people who will dare to cut apart some of the meshwork.'* Hope is thus argued to be a fundamental momentum-giving force in society that motivates change.

The conclusion from a substantial amount of studies on hope-framing messages and hope as an emotion for change is that the persuasive and motivational effects remain unclear. Interestingly, the recognition of hope as a positive rhetorical feature and constructive emotional state can impact communication practices in contexts where both the environment and future are at stake, and the conversation topic. In line with this, Derber (2015) recognised the development of an environmental-related 'hope industry' and focus group data from an unpublished study of professional environmental campaign makers indicate that they emphasise the importance of a balance between hope and fear to avoid message rejection. Collectively, the vivid academic discussion on hope, motivation, and attention to hope in environmental communication practices indicates a favourable context for hope norms and discourse. In this study, we investigate how this hope discourse is manifested in conversations in inspiration meetings about the circular economy and what the consequences might be for the communicative capacity to disagree. Here, it is worth noticing that the philosophical and historical accounts for hope as constitutive for society elaborate on hope in ways where hope is integrated in the communicative capacity to disagree, and not a hope that supresses disagreement. Likewise, Mauch's formulation to 'cut apart some of the meshwork' and Rorty's focus on maintaining the conversation independent of the outcome, emphasis the ability to disagree as significant for hope.

3. Data collection and analysis

In this study, we demonstrate how the hope norm and hope discourse appearing in conversations influence disagreement procedures about futures and different perspectives in conversations about circular economy. We examined the extent to which normative hope influences the capacity and procedures to disagree constructively. For this purpose, we scanned transcripts of meetings about the circular economy that we had observed, as we expected that such meetings would include sequences of interactive talk influenced by hope norms. We also expected participants to have different perspectives on their desired futures and assumptions regarding interventions which could facilitate change and could be expressed as mutual, interactive disagreement. By analysing meeting transcripts, we investigated the influence of hope norms on the communicative capacity to constructively disagree and investigate differences.

The framing of these meetings was expressed as generating inspiration and motivation to implement the ideas of the circular economy at the business and administration levels. The corpus comprises 11 h of recorded talk from five meetings. Crude transcripts were coded deductively according to predefined codes and inductively with codes developed during the coding based on episodes that stood out from the material as typical and surprising. Subsequently, analytical attention was directed to the material in the categories 'disagreement' and 'hope', and we revisited and further analysed all coded sequences. Accordingly, we identified different kinds of discursive procedures for the intersubjective treatment of disagreement and hope.

Our analysis focused on the quality and patterns of procedures. We did not count the number of sequences of hope-influenced disagreements or compare them to other conversational procedures. We claim that in the analysed sequences, hope discourse and the management of disagreement are related.

We focus on how the procedures for disagreeing are performed in interaction in conversations about circular economy futures and how this is disturbed by discursive norms of hope. Our interactionist perspective presupposes that what happens in a conversation is the result of several interlocutors responding to each other's actions. The organisational principle underpinning the conversation is the sequential development in which one speaker makes an utterance to which the next speaker responds with a subsequent utterance, displaying how the first utterance is understood (see Sidnell & Stivers, 2012 for an exhaustive overview of the principles of conversation analysis). Through interaction, interlocutors show each other how they understand what has been said and thereby set the

prerequisites for the next turn. Thus, things develop sequentially and interactively between several interlocutors through a collective process. The outcome, the conversation, is not the result of one party's efforts alone. Furthermore, utterances are produced as part of a discourse and not primarily considered manifestations of speakers' attitudes. The hope norm makes certain utterances and responses preferred, and thereby maintains the hope discourse. When speakers align with this, their actions are acknowledged. The opposite is true for non-hopeful utterances. Such utterances or responses are dispreferred, and to perform these, speakers need to perform more severe interactional work in terms of preparing and moderating an utterance. This generally results in speakers adopting less cumbersome ways of talking, which, as our analysis shows, entails closing down potential discussions of disagreement.

We cannot provide the date, place, or name of the participants in the recorded meetings due to confidentiality promises made as a condition of consent to record these conversations. However, we refer to Rödl et al. (2022) for a general presentation of the empirical material.

4. Results

In this analysis of hope discourse and procedures for disagreement, we account for four categories of interaction characterised by hope and disagreement. In the first category, *community at the expense of difference*, we collected examples of how the hope norm is manifested in the expressed desire for cooperation, community, and shared identity. Second, in *discursive closure through appreciative coordination*, we collected positive and evaluative endings of each other's conversation contributions. We discuss how these expressions of hope norms close, to some extent, the joint investigation of disagreement. The third category, *concept innovation closing down polarity*, deals with how innovative and charismatic concepts are used to create hope around the solution to paradoxical or conflict-loaded dilemmas, and how these innovative concepts function as discursive closures. Finally, in *uninvestigated underlying disagreements*, we collected examples where disagreements are expressed but not further investigated. We consider these four categories as four *discursive procedures*.

4.1. Community at the expense of difference

A recurring theme in the analysed conversations was an expression of the need for collaboration and community between actors to materialise the desired changes. Community and collaboration are often emphasised in response to identified dilemmas and presented as hopeful and sometimes as reasons not to examine disagreement.

In sequence (1), Participant A optimistically framed the topic of a circular economy and systemic societal change. Phrases like 'all the solutions are out there somewhere' suggest that solutions are attainable and just need coordination. The use of 'many cogs turning' emphasises cooperation and the idea that all parts (or people) must work together in harmony to achieve success. This implicitly discourages disagreement because the cogs in a machine must align perfectly to function. Next, 'collaborative structures are the key' reinforces the norm that collaboration and consensus are essential. This norm can suppress differing opinions, as expressing disagreement might be seen as disruptive to necessary cooperation. By suggesting that solutions are already 'out there somewhere', it implies that the path forward is defined, known, and agreed upon. This limits the possibility of questioning existing assumptions regarding potential solutions.

(1)

Participant A: It's like the circular economy, we're talking about the system, change of society really, and it feels like all the solutions are out there somewhere and we have a lot of cogs spinning in a lot of different places, we need to put together one big machinery that turns and is powered when spinning together. And then I think that these collaborative structures were the key for being able to arrive at these questions.

In sequence (2), Participant B argued that risks and conflicts of interest are built into the circular economy. They highlighted differences between actors and the issue of distributing responsibility. Subsequently, Participant C emphasised the need to move forward together via collaboration and understanding. In their answer, they used the word 'each other' [Swe varandra] no less than three times: to listen to, talk to, and understand each other. We interpret Participant C's response as bridging the gap that Participant B articulated by emphasising the parties' joint work and the community they comprise. Paradoxically, this encouragement for joint discussions closes the discussion on circular economy-related risks and uncertainties in the current situation. Hence, the joint investigation of the difference is discursively closed by escalating the question to a meta-level, where the value of discussing differences is expressed, but not practised. The value of working together is declared (Åhlvik et al., 2024), which is appreciated in conversation situations and is socially difficult to argue against. Apparent unity was created to counterweight these differences. This looming difference is embedded in hopefulness, which can be harmful in the long term.

Participant B talked about the problem that Participant C had brushed over and closed the discussion. Participant C talked about the here and now in the meeting and how parties need to act. Participant A also spoke about cooperation with residual flows. The different forms and levels of collaboration, cooperation, and communities can be confusing.

(2)

Participant B: Then, the question is about how to perceive risks in connection with innovations and develop them because it was heavily on smaller actors or single persons. How can the risks, economic risks be spread or shared throughout the food value chain?

Participant C: (...) back to my previous answer, I think it is important that we listen to each other, and that we talk to each other and understand what the driving forces are, and that we cannot continue, as we have

done before. We need a new way to produce new products or new opportunities for collaboration, new ways to produce food that reaches consumers, and to eat the right food and so on, but that is dependent on having forums and we have opportunities to understand each other and actually start from there.

In sequence (3), we can see how the participants' emphasis on hope in collaboration resulted in a fast transition from addressing a problem to addressing a solution. Facilitator (A) posed an open, broad, and crucial question about the future of food production during a sustainability crisis. Participant D responded, but instead of answering the question, they assessed the question and confirmed its importance but also that the problem is solvable. Therefore, the response marks this as a question that, in itself, is commented on instead of discussing and investigating the problem, to which there might be different solutions. Their account continues by expressing hope that the problem can be solved by encouraging farmers to collaborate. Participant E expressed that the needed change will take a long time, thereby aligning with what might be implicit in the opening question from the facilitator and highlighted transformation of protein production and consumption as crucial. They continued to formulate potential in the proposed solution and to display optimism. With the formulation 'I think you have to think that there is incredible potential' a sense of community is created, and an encouragement to see the potential in the proposed solution. Such encouragement is socially hard to argue against, and the created community closed the investigation of differences despite its formulation with displayed uncertainty and its formulation as a suggestion for how to consider it. Facilitator A closed the conversation with an assessment of "the wiseness" of these two responses, and a confirmation of the importance of community and collaboration.

(3)

Facilitator A: How can we cope with the increasing food production at the same time as we transition?

Participant D: Yes, of course, it's a key question, but I think it really isn't (…) I think we can use the land in a better way (…) and I think it's possible, I think new regulatory systems are needed to encourage the farmers who themselves, and why not really at a time to some kind of new village community together with several nearby farms to work in a circular way (…) Here, someone cares about circularity, we care that there should be sustainable solutions that provide enough food for future generations.

Participant E: (…) it is clear that it is a business that takes a long time to transform the production of animal protein (…). But there we have a huge potential to start eating grains directly ourselves and also protein - Beans and peas. I think you have to think that there is incredible potential.

Facilitator A: Thank you so much. That was wise answers I think. We have to transition to a different production and we have to do it simultaneously.

These examples are selected to show instances where differences and disagreements concerning the uncertain future are at the table: The participants express positive attitudes in general, and more specifically, about the collaboration and community that is possible and aimed for. Thus, the first discursive procedure results in the community being advocated for, at the expense of participants being encouraged to express diverging opinions.

4.2. Discursive closure through appreciative coordination

The conversations reported here take place in the format of a moderated discussion, where a moderator distributes the speaker's order by introducing the person whose turn it is to speak and marking when a speaker has come to an end and when it is time for the next person to speak. Moderated discussions have occurred in many contexts. As part of what we call hope discourse, we note a phenomenon in which participants mark the end of someone else's speech with a positive evaluation of what was said or the way it was said. Sequence (4) is an example of this.

(4)

Facilitator B: Thank you. Very well presented, I think. For me, it was crystal clear. Fantastic.

These positive endings can also take the shape of responding to what has been said by adding one's own confirming example, or in other ways, confirming the appreciation of what has been said. The different variations in what we call positive endings also mean that other participants in the conversation are invited to agree with or rejoice at the positive evaluation of what was said. A side effect of positive endings is that the reasoning that the speaker has carried out is concluded with a positive assessment instead of the conversation being carried out in an investigative direction. The positive ending is related to the hope discourse in that it creates and maintains hope in that whatever is said and done in the meeting is of value for the task at hand, and implicitly for its contribution to the anticipated mission concerning sustainability transition. As seen in (4) and (5), the positive ending is hopeful, but also functions as a discursive closure.

(5)

Participant F: That's a societal challenge, that we have to take care of the nutrients, we have to make sure that it doesn't leak out, (…) then, as pointed out earlier, there has to be an economy in it all (…) but there is a small positive message in the whole thing that this reduction in the Baltic Sea has still happened and will get better, but slowly. But there are very clear connections from this large scale to how to implement this, to which I hope that this project can contribute.

Facilitator C: Thank you very much! And it also shows exactly what we think or believe in this initiative, that we need to do a lot more, and I heard that underlined here [in Participant F's presentation], so great, thank you very much.

Thus, the positive ending is a combination of thanking someone, expressing a positive assessment of it, marking that the conversation has been completed, and closing down further discussion of the topic. This might not be a unique feature in relation to a

circular economy, but a typical part of interaction norms in meetings in this format.

In some sequences, another participant without a designated conversation leader function initiates their own speech by making a positive evaluation of what the previous speaker has said or by creating a consistent position in relation to what the previous speaker has said. Thus, the hope norm is confirmed and connected to a culture of consensus. In these conversations, based on the participants' use of disclaimer markers, less communicative work seems to be required to agree with a statement than to report a dissenting opinion.

Sequence (6) comprised a combination of positive endings, hesitation, and disclaimer markers. The hesitations and disclaimers show that there is potential ambiguity and uncertainty that can be investigated, but the format of the positive ending closes these possibilities. Participant G emphasised the things the participants have in common. However, they mentioned that there are differences: there are disclaimers as in 'think', 'probably', 'essentially', and 'relatively.' Additionally, they acknowledged things by valuing them as 'very good' (twice), 'very simple!' They started the last comment with the word 'but', which indicates that there is a counter story here, something they try out with some hesitation: 'would probably', 'essentially', indicating that there is room for opposing views concerning their conclusion that the participants should be in strong agreement. In this manner, an overarching layer of interpretation is enforced, indicating that everyone agrees, which is also a typical way to conclude and end on a positive note.

(6)

Participant G: I probably also think fundamentally that we have a relatively similar view [about what innovation is]. I thought [Participant X] said something very good. You said 'it is something new that creates value for someone and has also reached someone'. I actually even wrote it down because I thought it was very good, very simply described (…) But I would probably say that we are essentially probably in agreement about it.

Sequences (7) and (8) show attempts to summarise the group discussion and WordCloud results. In the first example, Participant H chose to highlight only the parts where the group members' statements correspond with each other, which was responded to in the typical positive manner described above. In the second example, Facilitator D assessed the WordCloud results positively without considering the diversity of opinions reflected in them. Facilitator D put positive views here, in contrast to what it normally looks like in other constellations, thereby emphasising the positive side of this.

(7)

Participant H (summarising group discussions): We talked about finding common denominators in different vocabularies, and then communication becomes very central. There were many incredibly interesting, I was overhearing those who were still here in the meeting and there was a lot that corresponded between the groups. Super fun.

Facilitator D: Wonderful. A great thank you, Participant H. So, 'finding common denominators' we bring from here.

(8)

Facilitator E: So, thank you so much for that, you could say. All of them are positive, while I know from experience that there are a lot of people who regard the change as something awkward and heavy going forward.

The discursive procedure, Discursive closure through appreciative coordination, fulfils the dual function of coordinating the turns of the conversation so that the interlocutors know when one speaker has finished speaking and when the next can begin and shows the speaker that what they say has had a positive influence on the conversation. From the perspective of conversation coordination, appreciative coordination is fraught with a problem: the hope norm means that marking the end of a speaking turn must be positive, hopeful, and consensus-oriented. Thus, the speaker's contribution to the ongoing conversation was valued as complete and closed, and no invitation was made to continue investigating the relevance and validity of the statement. When the norm of hope prevails, it becomes difficult to further examine the previous speaker's claims because they are already closed by appreciative coordination. We believe that the normative expectation of hope includes marking that the ongoing meeting gives hope for the future and that the meeting must therefore be considered successful.

4.3. Concept innovation closing down polarity

Sometimes an interlocutor introduces an innovative concept as a solution to a dilemma, paradox, or conflict, and the concept thereafter becomes widely and mutually used in conversations. The concept overcomes, but also hides, paradox and disagreement so that it does not need further investigation. The innovative concept is used in a hopeful way, as if the dilemma were solved, and in some cases, such a concept can represent the solution. However, the innovative concept may also be given the construction and function of an empty signifier in addition to being attractive in its novelty. An empty signifier is a concept that functions such that it can have different meanings in the same conversation without uncertainty and misunderstandings arising, or a clarifying repair of the concept's meaning being required. When a disagreement is closed using an empty signifier, it is clear that the informational value that was embedded in the disagreement is lost from the conversation. Not all empty signifiers must be innovative (compared to the concept of the circular economy itself in these settings). However, when introducing an innovative concept that qualifies as an empty signifier, the effect of filling in or bridging the polarity between the two positions is amplified.

In sequence (9), the question of at which different production-consumption scales a circular economy can be expected to arise is discussed. We can recognise this question from other discussions on the circular economy. The question is about the scale at which production and consumption take place: Should one imagine actors in the circular economy as small producers in local markets with small volumes, or does the circular economy include mega-industries in international markets with international distribution and economies of scale? Here, a participant introduced the concept of 'smart-scaling', claiming that it was unnecessary to disagree with the

scale. Instead of comparing large and small scales, actors in the circular economy transition are encouraged to agree on a 'smart-scale', meaning an optimised scale that is pragmatic in its context.

(9)

Participant I: Globally, you don't know the big producers who will solve the crisis, but smallholders. It pulls one away from actual sustainability and instead it just becomes grandiosity. And then you set large-scale against everything small-scale. But what we need is smart-scaling to develop the small-scale so that it becomes more productive, not hobby farming but neither going too big.

Facilitator F: That was a good word, I think. I haven't heard that before. I will bring that, that we work with smart-scaling.

Facilitator F explicitly commented appreciatively on the innovative concept, following the hopeful appreciative pattern that we interpreted in the section on positive endings. The facilitator was not only appreciative of Participant I's use of the word, but also confirmed that they will continue using the concept of 'smartscaliness'. About 30 min later, in the same meeting, in sequence (10), another participant also used 'smart-scale' to solve a dilemma with scale:

(10)

Participant J: It's not like one scale fits all and unfortunately it has been shown in this hype that too much has been given of the really global or the really local which is best and then you're happy to get a system that actually works and can deliver so to think smart-scale in the future I hope we learn from this crisis.

As shown in (9) and (10), the introduced concept, 'smartskalighet' in Swedish, rendered mutual attention and was mutually used both with a sense of joke and with a sense of hope. 'Smartskalighet' was used as an innovative way of challenging issues about scale by adding the aspect that something smart exists, which is not necessarily possible to place on the one-dimensional scale between 'small' and 'large'. This concept can be considered as a word game constructed using a combination of Swedish words. The Swedish word 'smartskalle', a literal translation to English 'smart-head', is used both to express appreciation for someone's brilliance and as an ironic autonym, to indicate that someone was not as brilliant as expected. The Swedish word for scale, 'skala', is spelt similarly to the head, 'skalle', except for the double 'll'. The Swedish word for large scale, 'storskalig' and small scale, 'småskalig', also have a similar shape and sounds. Thus, 'smart-scale' and 'smart-head', though different in meaning, look and sound alike, creating a playful dynamic when used in those situations for those who perceive it. Together, the wittiness, the double meaning and the solution to scale issues make 'smartskalighet' a charismatic concept which when used avoid articulation of disagreement.

Another charismatic expression that became important in one of the meetings is 'let a thousand flowers bloom', an expression of appreciation for pluralism in proposed solutions and that circular economy can mean different things in different contexts, and that different solutions can fit differently depending on local conditions. The expression was used by one speaker and followed up and reused by several subsequent speakers.

(11)

Participant K: That is also what you said: to let a thousand flowers bloom and that is the challenge because there is no solution to this, and I think that one thing that could stimulate is diversity, and much so because it is difficult to say what the solution is.

(12)

Participant L: How do we get together to let flowers bloom, and how do we get the activities and innovations to place and become a system linked to circularity?

In these examples, we see how a dilemma regarding the future and transition to the future are resolved with the help of a charismatic and innovative concept that is constructed as an empty signifier. Previous studies have identified both the circular economy and sustainability as empty signifiers (Von Groddeck & Schwarz, 2013). Thus, they fulfil a similar function in the social debate as 'smart scale' and 'let a thousand flowers bloom' do in these local conversations. However, there are also differences between well-established concepts that function as empty signifiers and the conceptual innovations used in meetings. Compared to the already known empty signifiers, the function of innovativeness is added, a pleasure of novelty that enables the concept to be tested and can be given different meanings, and where the concept's ambiguity becomes an asset in that it enables meaning shifts and expansions. Another interactive characteristic of innovative concepts is that an objection to the concept also appears as an objection to the person bringing forward the signifier. Therefore, it is even more difficult to raise an objection to an innovative concept than to object to a widespread empty signifier which, in a speaking situation, is not connected to a person.

4.4. Uninvestigated underlying disagreements

In the conversations we analysed, actors had different perspectives on the future. Disagreements have arisen in the attempts to articulate these differences. Here, we have collected examples of such interactive situations where the articulation of disagreement indicates that there are related underlying differences in perspectives that are not articulated or investigated further.

In sequence (13) below, participant M expressed disagreement with the design of the meeting, suggesting that the guiding question of the discussion should be formulated differently. Facilitator G and another participant, N, agreed with M, and nothing more was said about the problem addressed by M. However, M, G, and N also seem to relate to the deeper (or wider) question indicated by M's statement, but this has not been investigated further. That bigger question seems to concern ambiguities about what the implementation of a circular economy means and entails, and who is included in, excluded from, and responsible for such implementation. Participant M pre-announced breaking of the hope norm when classifying the answer as 'boring'. M commented in a follow-up discussion about the result of a mentimetre-opinion poll in which the meeting participants answered the question, 'who should be

involved for a successful implementation project?'. M suggested that the answer to the question 'who should be involved, is dependent on the answer to another question, that is, 'what should we collaborate about'?

(13)

Participant M: I want to give a boring answer. It is not possible to answer who until you have answered what you are to collaborate on. That is the answer to who needs to join. But I also wrote because I think that the triple helix is an important point of departure, where, regardless of orientation, it might be a slightly more constructive answer.

Facilitator G: You're absolutely right – it's hard to know who when you don't know what, but that's what we assumed.

Participant N: Yes, I fully agree with Participant M, it was extremely important.

This type of question, 'who should be involved', potentially contains an edge, because the work to point out who is included and who is not can focus on and clarify differences and demarcations that reinforce differences. Therefore, it can be used to address fundamental issues. Participant M, framed their answer by presenting it as 'boring'. M's way of doing so also takes the form of an apology, disclaimer, or warning that what is to come will break the norm of hope. Thus, M announced a disagreement with the facilitator concerning the appropriateness of the task ahead. Instead of answering the question of who should be included, another answer came from M, suggesting an alternative: what to collaborate on. It is possibly a less divisive question as it was phrased here, as it may invite several possible answers. Hence, the disagreement consists of whether to continue analysing persons or first identify questions about collaborations. They then formulated the answer depending on what to collaborate on, but did not put forward any proposal of their own in response to that. Instead, they proceeded and presented something else, which they immediately framed as a 'slightly more constructive answer'. We see here how an underlying disagreement is not examined when the opportunity arises because the person registering the disagreement is keen to be constructive, which is a positive and hopeful thing, prioritised here at the expense of investigating and scrutinising the disagreement. This was further reinforced by subsequent agreement between the moderator and next speaker.

In sequence (14), which is from the same meeting as (13) and in the same discussion about a mentimetre opinion poll among the participants, Participant O first expressed disagreement with the meeting organiser and the way the question was formulated and then suggested a national strategy of circular economy implementation to be more important than collaboration between actors. Participant O suggested that 'we should dare to look at Finland'. We find the formulation 'dare to look at' interesting since it seems to indicate that it is fear that prevents the Swedish circular economy community to take advice from Finland and that this fear could be overcome with courage. Obviously, M may be using a common expression, 'to dare to do something', which might only mean that doing something one currently does not do, demands courage. However, we think that expressions matter, and that together with Participant O's articulation of the disagreement about the relevance of the task to identify collaborators and Participant O's suggestion that national strategy is absent and should be prioritised, 'to dare' is an indication of an implicit disagreement, a resistance towards learning from experiences in Finland. The facilitator assessed Participant O's proposals as interesting and closed the discussion by inviting Participant P to talk. We believe that this sequence illustrates that disagreements in the conversation can relate to and make indications of unarticulated and more fundamental disagreements, which the meeting fails to bring about through open investigation.

(14)

Participant O: [...] I think exactly as Participant M said. I think maybe it started at the wrong end. It is great that collaborators collaborate, but I also think that we must have something more concrete to collaborate around... national strategy that we can break down... (...) We have to dare to look a little bit at Finland and Holland and feel like this, can they be the best at circular economy who maybe have a little worse conditions? Shouldn't we be the best for the circular economy who have all the prerequisites? But I'll stop there for now.

Facilitator H: Hm, interesting, thanks. Participant P, you raised your hand?

We suggest that the expression 'we have to dare to look at Finland' appears as an indicator of an otherwise unarticulated disagreement. Another expression which is sometimes used by participants in our corpus and in this particular sequence above (14) is when a speaker ends an utterance in a plenary discussion with the formulation '….I stop here/there'. Typically, the speaker provided arguments for their opinion, which can be a critique of another position or a proposal of a perspective different from what the speaker claims is the common view. After providing these arguments the speaker ends the utterance with '…I stop there'. Obviously, this discursive feature provides information to other speakers that the speaker will not continue talking and serves as an invitation for listeners to assess the relevance and validity of what has been said. However, it also indicates that the speaker could continue and that the speaker claims to be aware of not having said all that could be said and not yet provided all the arguments that could be provided, but that the speaker thinks what has been said ought to be enough for the needs of the discussion and may indicate that saying more, if relevant, might threaten interaction norms. In very general terms, 'I stop here/there' indicates unarticulated and uninvestigated disagreements. Note that the expression 'I think I stop here' has a famous history as it was uttered by well-known mathematician Andrew Wiles in the end of his lecture series on Fermat's theorem at the Isaac Newton Institute, Cambridge, 1993 (De Jong & Andeweg, 2008). When this expression was used in Swedish circular economy meetings in 2020, we did not know whether the speaker was aware of their paraphrasing of Wiles, if they used a common Anglicism, or if they intentionally indicated that they related to hidden conflicts. What we know is that, in this contemporary discourse, it has been indicated, made available to everyone who engages in the discourse, that argumentation has ended prematurely.

In our last example, from which we, due to space constraints, present limited data, the facilitator made the differences of the keyword innovation become the topic of the conversation towards the end of a digital panel debate.

(15)

Facilitator I: I will blend in some of the questions that were asked before in connection with the registration for all of you who have participated as presenters. You don't really have the same meaning in the word innovation between you, then you can think about it. (…)

Participant R: But I think it's an interesting question, and I think it's fun that I was able to dig into what the concept really means and what it means differently on functions in different individuals. I believe it is important. For me, innovation is (…), and that is my experience from all the lectures I have heard here today. (…) I think this diversity is something positive at the same time that it is challenging.

Participant S: Yes, I agree, and our definition is that we work from the idea of (…), so to answer your question [Facilitator I] about having different definitions, I think we can perhaps agree with [Participant R's] definition (…).

Participant T: I also think, in essence, that we have a relatively equal view. I think [Participant S] said something very good…

Participant U: I build on a bit (…). I also agree that there does not need to be the same idea of what innovation is, and it becomes particularly relevant when we innovate together, and then you have to have your own definition of innovation… the possibility of actually implementing my innovation.

Facilitator I: Thank you for that. Are there any questions in the chat?

Facilitator J: No, none at the moment.

Facilitator I: Then, I will land and summarise the two questions asked when you signed up.

This example illustrates how the potential for pluralism is constrained by prevailing hope norms. The facilitator I pointed out that differing interpretations of the word 'innovation' among participants might impede the ability to collaborate on innovative solutions. They finished by posing a few questions to the (panel) participants. Although many participants, particularly Participant R, who answered first, supported the diversity of definitions and understanding, this diversity was neither acknowledged by the facilitator nor discussed further. The first respondent started in positive terms and acknowledged the question as 'interesting'. This was followed by several positive statements about how fun the possibility of digging deeper into its meaning has been, how important plurality is, and that plurality is positive and at the same time challenging. The challenge has not been developed, and the claim that the difference is important is neither motivated nor expanded. The next speaker, Participant S, took over and expressed a general agreement, but did so with the disclaimers that they 'think we can agree perhaps'. The subsequent speaker, Participant T, expressed agreement, but their formulation also displays limitations to their agreeing: 'in essence' and 'relatively' but without clarifying what the hesitation in agreeing is about. The last speaker, Participant U, similarly presented themselves as one of those who agree (that is, agreeing on the need for plurality, disagreement), underscoring the significance of plurality in collaborative efforts. After the exchange, the facilitator closed the topic by thanking the panel participants, asking if there are any (other, new) questions in the chat function of the digital meeting, and when that is not the case, immediately switching to the next question.

The fourth and final discursive procedures show how differences are displayed in interactive discourse; however, a potentially deepened discussion does not appear. Differences may arise, which are most explicit in the last example (15), where they are even introduced as the topic itself. However, instead of this leading to differences being investigated and potential disagreements being addressed, the participants jointly found ways to agree in the general praise of plurality. Participants expressed their support for plurality, but appreciation of plurality in itself closed down the investigation of plurality.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The circular economy describes the future and political transition of society, which undoubtedly includes several questions that proponents of circular economy can disagree. Here, we describe four discursive procedures through which disagreements are hidden or closed. We argue that these procedures appear as manifestations of hope norms in conversation. We also suggest that hope discourse is a response to the recognition of hope as a more motivational and appropriate approach in conversations about the future and sustainability, contrary to the previous alarmistic articulation of environmental concerns. The hope norm involves creating expectations and ideas about what a good meeting about a future with a circular economy is and should be, and how to act as a legitimate and competent in-group participant in such meetings. We recognise that the hope norm is embedded both in formal and explicit procedures in meetings, such as agenda-setting, proposed discussion topics, or a breakfast meeting's setup, and in informal and implicit procedures, such as how participants ask and respond to questions. Our theoretical point of departure is to view disagreement as constructive, productive, and necessary for society's management of complex and ambiguous futures. When an investigation into disagreement is interrupted, democratic deliberations on a sustainable future are hampered. We show how this occurs in settings characterised by the best of intentions, such as when the hope norm is cultivated. Our four discursive procedures were *community, appreciative coordination, concept innovation* and *underlying disagreements*. Next, we elaborate on how each procedure contributes to understanding how the hope discourse can be harmful to deliberative discussions about the future.

Community refers to discursive procedures in which community, togetherness, group coherence, shared hope, and hope in sharedness are manifested at the expense of the articulation of difference, identity differentiation, and disagreement. The shared identity connected to these collaboration proposals includes the hope that collaboration will solve problems. However, collaboration also demands adaptation to coherent group goals and exclusion of differences. Thus, this discursive procedure counteracts the importance of investigating different perspectives, as advocated by Mouffe and others. Articulating and investigating disagreements and pluralism is difficult when hope is associated with increased collaboration and group cohesion.

Appreciative coordination refers to talk coordination combined with a positive evaluation and affirmation of what another interlocutor has said. This appreciative coordination confirms the hope of the meeting's contribution to the future after each speech. However, investigating the significance of validity claims is difficult when the investigation is concluded with a positive conclusion or assessment. When hope is achieved through appreciative coordination, the conversation is interrupted, instead of being used as a means for joint investigation. Thus, a positive assessment has a paradoxical effect. Consequently, hope becomes harmful to conversation and thus to society's development. When hope threatens the joint examination of differences, it also threatens society's communicative capacity.

Concept innovation refers to a discursive procedure wherein problems are first mentioned and then momentarily solved by introducing an innovative concept which generates mutual fascination and repeated appreciation. This innovative concept is used as an empty signifier, and serves as a proxy for all types of problem solutions. Owing to the concept's emptiness and charisma, it is difficult to further investigate solutions and their impact on diverse interests. Additionally, the innovative nature of the concept implies that, if criticised, the speaker risks being criticised for being so closely related to it.

Finally, *underlying disagreement* comprises examples when immediate and locally situated disagreements are articulated and immediately closed, indicating that other more fundamental disagreements are also present but left unarticulated and uninvestigated. The articulation of situated disagreement acts as a proxy for more foundational disagreement. However, when immediate disagreements are resolved through consensus proposals, the opportunity to investigate deeper disagreements also disappears. The presented examples of discursive procedures show four ways in which a disagreement is closed.

It did not turn out to be a problem for the tasks at hand, as the participants encouraged and cultivated the hope norm. We suggest that the hope discourse is embedded in the language and other setups of such meetings and that these structural, normative, and discursive cultural conditions force meeting participants to maintain the hope norm and discourse to perform the meeting. This makes the meeting characterised by a hopeful sense of doing important things together for a sustainable future and the positive implementation of a circular economy. However, it also limits opportunities to make democratic and creative use of differences in perspectives, pluralities, disagreements, and incompatible interests. The normative and structural demand for making inspiration meetings positive, optimistic, appreciative, and hopeful comes at a high price. It harms and hampers the ability to investigate and develop knowledge and ways forward. For societies to address complex issues regarding coordination in uncertain futures and sustainability challenges, such a community focusing on hope must be balanced by sincere investigations of different understandings and alternatives, where disagreement will be a component. We have demonstrated different ways in which the hope norm is played out in conversations and how it closes the potential discussions necessary for a serious investigation of differences. Thus, we present how deliberative democracy is performed in a setting where pluralism and consensus-seeking operate in competing ways, and where the analysis is based on the interaction as it unfolds between the participants. We contribute to the debate on deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism by analysing empirical data in which normative hope acts as a systematic distortion of communication. We show how a joint investigation of disagreement can be distorted in such situations, despite the atmosphere in the conversation being appreciative, enthusiastic, and cultivating communality. This obviously impacts the anticipative procedure in these meetings and potentially in society as a whole. We recognise that hope discourse can have a positive effect on motivation and engagement, while simultaneously having a negative effect on deliberative and anticipative capacity. How this dynamic works and whether there are constructive ways which allow hope discourse to simultaneously generate motivation and deliberation are questions which demand further investigation.

At this concluding moment, we need to make a disclaimer; we do not mean to say that any interlocutor has consciously avoided investigating differences or closed discourse in the example sequences we have analysed. Nor do we suggest that it would be easy for any individual participant to change the procedure and conduct a constructive investigation of disagreements. Rather, we limit our claims to the hope norm and discourse as cultural phenomena and acknowledge their impact on conversational procedures and anticipative and democratic capacity. It might be tempting to propose that hope discourse, with its negative impact on deliberation and pluralism, is a strategy introduced and maintained by interests that benefit from empty conceptualisations and depoliticisation of the circular economy and the future. However, we do not make any conclusions or suggestions concerning this issue, since our data do not qualify for identifying the responsibilities and intentions of people under the influence of political interests or paradigms. What we want to emphasise is how a meeting and conversation culture, which is under the impact of hope norms and hope discourse independently of the potentially varying degrees of sincerity in relation to hope for a circular economy, produces situations in which the investigation of disagreement becomes awkward and difficult. In these situations, socially preferred behaviour aligns with the hope discourse as our four discursive procedures demonstrate. We show how hope norms and discourse are manifested in and consequential to these conversational sequences.

Disagreements are interactively performed in different ways in different cultural communities and domains in terms of topics. The conversations analysed here occur in the Swedish language and cultural context, and of course, this is of importance for how disagreement is made and closed. Few studies have compared the interactional procedures of disagreement in different cultural contexts. The Swedish version has a reputation of being consensus-oriented. This may explain the tendency not to investigate disagreement but rather to search for, prefer, and unite hope and positive, non-confrontational procedures. A comparative study showed that Swedish speakers deal with disagreement with less engagement than Spanish speakers do. Among Spanish speakers, the sanctioned behaviour was paying attention to potential differences instead of closing the discussion (Gille, 2001). This is a relevant cultural aspect of the procedures for avoiding the disagreements that we report on in this paper. However, we argue that these procedures are also products of hope discourse and norms that appear in cultures of inspiration meetings and the circular economy. The presented data originate from conversations about the circular economy, an international concept with positive and hopeful connotations. Meetings are presented as inspirational, often with positive framing (Rödl et al., 2022). The meeting design features of

inspiration talks, panels, and breakfast meetings follow international business meeting procedures, and shape what can be done and how. This 'culture' of inspiration and hope also creates expectations on how to behave and seems to, together with Swedish language patterns, contribute to the closing of disagreement. It is important to investigate whether the procedures of hope related to discursive closure also appear in other language cultures.

Communication is fundamental in both formal and informal settings for addressing future complex issues. Organising meetings is a crucial element of the change processes. In this study, we revealed the downsides and shortcomings of the hope norm in situations where it simplifies and ceases investigations, such as in primarily inspirational meetings. In conclusion, we comment on the consequences and lessons for readers who organise similar meetings and discussions. Cultivating hope and believing that there are things that we can do may be necessary for persistence. While organising conversations about the future, one needs to be attentive to the impact of hope norms and facilitate conversations in ways that can cope with hope norms. We urge organisers and participants to consider discursive procedures, especially in settings where hope norms operate. Recognising them and paying attention to disagreement as a resource to make change might be the best antidote and resource for challenging discursive procedures, thereby decreasing the risk of fruitful investigations being closed down.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Lars Hallgren: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Daniela Kreber:** Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Hanna Bergeå:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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